EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FRESHMAN ACADEMY ENVIRONMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND RESILIENCE

by

Taneesha Ayahna George

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Barbara Boothe, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Judy Sandlin, Ph.D., Committee Member

Isaac Kelly, Ed.D., Committee Member

Scott Watson, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Advanced Programs

ABSTRACT

Student success or failure during the transition to high school is an accurate predictor of student success beyond the ninth grade. In an attempt to support students during this transition, many schools across the nation have implemented small learning communities called freshman academies to bridge the apparent gap in achievement between middle and high school. Research has linked freshman academies and ninth grade success in terms of test scores (Styron & Peasant, 2010). There is, however, little empirical research that examines the success of freshman academy students in terms of promoting resilience and other factors during this time of risk. Therefore, this correlational study tested the resilience and stage-environment fit theories by exploring the relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student resilience in terms of academic achievement (grade point average), socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence. Each of the research hypotheses was analyzed using Spearman's rho to relate students' perceptions of the freshman academy to each of the criterion variables. The research failed to reject the first null hypothesis, as there was not a statistically significant correlation between school environment and academic achievement. However, the research rejected the last two null hypotheses, proving that there was in fact a statistically significant correlation between school environment and perceived socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence. The researcher concluded that freshman academy success is linked more to the social aspects of the high school transition than to the academic aspects.

Keywords: risk, ninth grade students, small learning communities, high school completion

Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this manuscript to my daughters, Anaya, Ava, and Amari George. Let this dissertation remind you to never give up on anything you start. You are children of the Most High, and you can accomplish anything you put your mind to. No matter what you decide to do in life, always give it your best effort no matter what obstacles are placed in front of you. As I worked on this degree, many people doubted me and told me I was crazy for even trying. Let this be a lesson to you to never allow anyone else to tell you what you cannot do. Your drive and God's favor will see you through. Throughout this process Mommy has had to make many sacrifices. I know that time was taken away from you and your activities, finances were strained and may have prevented you from having some of the things you wanted, but in the end it was all to benefit you girls. Always remember the importance of education; it is something that no one can ever take away from you! Sometimes it may seem too difficult or even impossible. When you reach that point, remind yourself: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." – Philippians 4:13. Despite what I have accomplished here, you three are my biggest accomplishment. You are my pride and joy, and it is an honor to raise three little queens. Always dream big! I love you to the moon and back!

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother and father, Roslyn Nichols Matthews and Terry Matthews. You two have always emphasized the importance of education and supported my dreams. Now that I am a parent, I understand how tough it can be. Watching you two work so hard to make sure I had everything I needed was definitely the motivation I needed to persist through each of these degrees. Mommy, you always made sure I attended the best schools, no matter what was going on, I and I am truly grateful. Daddy, you showed me that

your past struggles do not prevent you from having future success. I hope that I have made you both proud and you see the fruits of your labor!

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List of Abbreviations

Child and Adolescent Support Scale (CASSS)

Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)

Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

Adolescence is a period of social and developmental changes that can have a positive or negative impact on the adolescent's identity and motivation (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009; Neild, 2009). Transitioning to high school presents "a period of risk for students both academically and socially" (Langenkamp, 2010, p. 1). This risk involves the possibility of ruining a student's high school career in one year. Students who struggle during their ninth grade year are more likely to fail during the following high school years and to possibly drop out (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Correspondingly, Neild (2009) stated that students who experience a successful transition to high school are more likely to succeed academically and graduate within four years.

Considering this risk, there is a fundamental need to develop programs that support adolescents socially and academically during the high school transition. Research suggests that the traditional multi-grade high school model cannot provide this type of environment (Neild, 2009). Various school districts have responded by developing freshman academies which aim to provide a small learning community that fosters a sense of security and a supportive environment (Yancy, Sutton-Haywood, Hermitte, Dawkins, Rainey, & Parker, 2008). Within a freshman academy, students generally interact with a smaller population of students than they would in the main high school building (Styron & Peasant, 2010). These academies have the potential to provide a positive foundation that promote success for all of the students' high school years. In fact Styron and Peasant (2010) found that ninth grade students that attended a freshman academy scored higher on both Biology and Algebra criterion tests than ninth grade students who attended traditional high schools. Likewise McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) reported that the Philadelphia Public School System experienced an increase in student attendance among ninth

grade students who attended a freshman academy rather than a traditional school setting. Although these studies, among others, discuss the immediate impact of freshman academies, there is an empirical gap in the literature as it relates to assessing the effectiveness of small learning communities as a reform strategy for the ninth grade transition (Ellerbrock, 2012). Although, previous research discussed the possible impact of freshman academies on freshman year dropout rates and test scores (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Styron & Peasant, 2010), Ellerbrock (2012) called upon future research studies to examine the effects of freshman academies on student resilience throughout the high school experience. This study examined the correlation between freshman academies and a successful high school transition, measured by ninth grade grade point averages, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence. These variables highlight the possible ways in which freshman academies help build resilience and prepare ninth grade students for the high school experience.

Chapter One provides background information about freshman academies and their purpose, as well the problem and purpose statements of this particular study. This chapter also explains the significance of the study, articulates the research questions and hypotheses, and defines each of the variables involved with those hypotheses. Chapter One concludes by defining the key terms discussed in this study, summarizing the research process, and listing the assumptions and limitations of the current research.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES, 2010) report, 7.4% of people between the ages of 16 and 24 dropped out of high school before earning a diploma (Chapman, Laird, & KewelRamani, 2010). The result of this statistic is a threat to the livelihood of these individuals, as well as the nation as a whole. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) suggest that high school dropouts will cost the nation billions of dollars in federal funding, lost wages, and

taxes. In addition, people who do not graduate from high school are more likely to be incarcerated, unemployed, or in need of government assistance (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

The high school dropout crisis begins with the ninth grade year. The challenges students face when transitioning to the ninth grade year often lead to significant course failures and retention (Smith, Akos, Sungtaek, & Wiley, 2008). This in turn increases students' probability of experiencing hardships as they continue through high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010), renders them least likely to graduate on time (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011), and puts them at greater risk for dropping out (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The concept of unsuccessful transitions to high school is especially relevant among Georgia high schools, where this study took place. In fact, the NCES (2014) reported that during the 2012-2013 school year, only 72% of Georgia students were on track to graduate on time.

Many of the obstacles that students face during their ninth grade year stem from the challenging transition from middle school to high school (Neild, 2009), which presents both academic and social challenges. In terms of academics, high school introduces a new structure of schooling where the curriculum is completely departmentalized and student grades count towards graduation (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Increasing demands, such as the requirement to earn a passing grade in a course in order to receive credit for it, coupled with the constant pressure to perform on standardized tests can be overwhelming for students when they first enter the high school setting (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Renda & Villares, 2015). Notwithstanding, Howard, Dryden, and Johnson (1999) asserted that there are protective factors that the school environment can offer in order to promote resilience during this time of risk.

This theory of resilience is one of the two theories that provided a theoretical framework for this study. The resilience theory examines the ways in which children persevere and adapt during periods of risk. According to Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990), there are three different forms of resilience: a) overcoming adversity, b) managing conflict, and c) recuperating from traumatic experiences. The transition to high school may require ninth grade students to accomplish each of these feats. Although this transition period has been identified as a period of risk (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Smith, 2006), Werner and Smith (1992) concluded that positive experiences and interactions have the potential to promote resilience among adolescents. This notion supports the concept of the freshman academy model, which was created to provide a sense of community among ninth grade students as they transition into the new high school environment. These academies have been put in place to support ninth grade students as they enter high school. In doing so, freshman academies aim to provide the types of positive experiences that Werner and Smith (1992) claim promote resilience among adolescents.

As students enter high school they face a set of social challenges that result from moving from one environment to another. High schools are generally larger, more anonymous atmospheres that can make students feel insignificant (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Moreover, the switch to a high school setting often causes a shift in relationships (Neild, 2009). Depending on school feeder patterns, middle school relationships may be lost if social groups are separated based on school zones (Langenkamp, 2010). In the same manner, when students leave their middle school environment, it interferes with the bonds with teachers and that have been established prior to the transition (Langenkamp, 2010). Finally, students' relationships with their parents are also affected by the transition to high school. Neild (2009) asserted that the transition

from middle to high school is marked by the shift from counting on parental support to relying on peers.

Many school districts are looking to the freshman academy model to minimize the anonymity of the large high school environment as students transition from the middle school format (Smith, Akos, Sungtaek, & Wiley, 2008). This concept supports the stage-environment fit theory, which states that transitioning from one school environment to another affects social and emotional well-being, as well as academic motivation and achievement (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, 2004).

The main construct of the stage-environment fit theory articulates the need for students to attend a school environment that meets their needs (Eccles, 2004). Ninth grade students require an environment that is suitable to their needs as they transition from one level of schooling to the next. Research suggests that large, anonymous high schools cannot provide the type of care and attention that ninth grade students need for a successful transition (Langenkamp, 2010; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Based on this research, schools have implemented the freshman academy as a small learning community within the larger school. Students who attend a freshman academy spend the majority of their time among only their freshman peers. Freshman academy students rarely have to interact with upperclassmen or older students who could present further social pressures or intimidation. Their teachers are selected specifically for the freshman academy and serve only ninth grade students as an academic team (Ellerbrock 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). In addition freshman academies attempt to utilize transition programs and creative scheduling (Ellerbrock, 2010). According to the stage-environment fit theory, such small learning communities have the potential to alleviate the period of risk if the environment matches the development of the students.

This theory, along with the resilience theory, provided the conceptual framework for this research study, which examined the possible role of freshman academies in providing a supportive environment for students to complete high school in four years. Specifically, this study examined student perceptions of the characteristics of the freshman academy and related those perceptions to student achievement, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence. These three factors address the issues that are commonly associated with ninth grade resilience and a successful or unsuccessful transition into high school (Ellerbrock, 2012; Smith, 2006). The freshman academy environment has the potential to prepare students for high school by easing that transition and fostering resilience. The data from this study represented the possible correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and fostering resilience during the high school transition. This research study also provided policy makers and school leaders with recent data concerning the benefits of freshman academies beyond the ninth grade. Schools and school districts experiencing high ninth grade failures and dropout rates should consider the results of this study in order to determine whether a freshman academy is a possible solution.

Problem Statement

The high rate of high school failures and dropouts can be attributed to an unsuccessful transition into the ninth grade (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Styron & Peasant, 2010). Bornsheuer et al. (2011) highlight the use of small learning academies as a strategy to help combat the struggles students face when transitioning to high school. This concept has inspired the rise of freshman academies. The purpose of these academies is to provide a small learning community that ease the transition to high school for ninth grade students by individualizing the school environment so that students feel supported and confident. Research in the early 2000s emphasized the

importance of the ninth grade year on future academic success in high school and beyond, and predicted the usefulness of freshman academies in terms of raising ninth grade test scores and preventing dropouts (Fulk, 2003; Smith, 2006). Since then, however, there has been a lack of empirical research available that examines whether or not the freshman academy promotes resilience among ninth grade students and prepares them for high school based on other factors (Ellerbrock, 2012). In fact, Styron and Peasant (2010) recommend further research on other possible effects of the freshman academy.

The decision to implement a freshman academy may require additional funding, school restructuring, increased teacher allotments, and creative scheduling. Therefore, before school leaders decide to embark upon such an impactful change, it is crucial to determine if freshman academies actually serve the purpose that the research suggests. Renda and Villares (2015) recognize a lack of both academic and social skills and adjustment as a major risk factor for ninth graders entering high school. Bornsheuer et al., (2011) suggests that school characteristics play a major role in students' decision to drop out of school. These authors emphasize the importance of student perceptions of the school environment and support within that environment in terms of students persisting to the next grade and not dropping out (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). In response to the aforementioned research, the current study examined the possible relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student achievement, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence. The problem is that further research is necessary to determine whether or not freshman academies are an effective strategy for easing the transition to high school and fostering resilience based on environmental, academic, and social-emotional factors (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Renda & Villares, 2015).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this correlational study was to relate the resilience and stage-environment fit theories to freshman academy students' achievement. Specifically, this study examined student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and determined the relationship of these perceptions to the end-of-year grade point average (GPA), perceived socio-emotional adjustment, and perceived school confidence of students who attended a freshman academy. The predictor variable was generally defined as student perceptions of the freshman academy environment. The criterion variables were generally defined as cumulative GPA, perceived socio-emotional adjustment, and perceived school confidence.

Significance of the Study

Research has established the fact that the transition into the ninth grade is a period "when students either gain the maturity and academic skills to succeed in high school, or fail and eventually drop out" (Hardy, 2006, p. 21). With this in mind, it is imperative for school leaders and stakeholders to focus on the ninth grade year in order to prepare a path to success for high school students in all grade levels. Moreover, in order to address the challenges that ninth grade students face during the transition to high school, schools must provide school structures that support the needs of ninth grade students (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). A focus on the ninth grade structure has the potential to increase student success throughout high school and beyond, meanwhile improving school systems and structures. Ninth grade student failures are less likely to complete high school, which makes them less likely to further their education and careers (Smith, 2006). Students who do not complete high school are likely to face more difficulty with college acceptance and completion. Consequently, failing the ninth grade can prevent students from maximizing their economic potential (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). This

growing problem has an impact that extends beyond the failing student. Each time a student fails the ninth grade, that failure affects the future of schools and the nation at large. As graduation rates decline, so do the nation's economic strength and the viability of school systems overall. Thus, this study has the potential to have a long-term economic impact on both the local and national level. It is also possible that the results of this study can benefit schools in preventing dropouts that occur as a result of ninth grade failure.

Research Question

In order to explore the possible relationships (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) between student perceptions of the school environment within freshman academies and student resilience and achievement throughout the high school transition, the research question for this study was:

RQ: Is there a statistically significant relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student resilience and achievement at the end of the ninth grade year?

Null Hypotheses

The null hypotheses for the research question were as follows:

H_o1: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), and students' grade point averages at the end of the ninth grade year.

H_o2: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment at the end of the ninth grade year, as measured by questions 1-10 of the "People in my School" section of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS).

H_o3: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), and students' perceived school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year, as measured by questions 44-48 and 58-62 the Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS).

Definitions

1. *Perceptions of the Freshman Academy Environment* – The predictor variable in this study was student perceptions of the school environment within a freshman academy. This continuous variable was measured by scores on the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI). The CSCI scores were used in attempt to identify students' feelings towards the freshman academy concept and environment (Guo, Choe, & Higgins-D'Allesandro, 2011).
2. *End-of-year grade point average* – The first criterion variable, the ninth grade GPA is a continuous, interval variable that was measured on a 4.0 scale based on the points students received for each course they took during their high school career (Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2011). The total points from this calculation were added together and divided by the number of classes taken. The final result constituted an unweighted cumulative GPA, which was recorded in students' official school records. Therefore, school records was the instrument used to determine GPA. The cumulative GPA fluctuated as students completed each course.
3. *Socio-emotional adjustment* – The second criterion variable in this study was perceived socio-emotional adjustment. Socio-emotional support refers to the way students perceive supportive factors within the school environment (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). For example, socio-emotional support relates to the way in which students perceive support

from teachers, peers, and parents, especially in times of need. This variable was measured by the use of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS).

4. *School Confidence* – School confidence refers to students' belief that they can accomplish specific tasks or maintain certain attributes (Tavani & Losh, 2003). This variable was measured through the use of the Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS). This questionnaire includes items related to students' feelings of self-confidence, importance, and outcome confidence on specific tasks or skills.
5. *Risk* – Risk describes environmental or social factors that have the potential to hinder a child's ability to flourish (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999). For the purpose of this study, risk referred to the school factors and circumstances associated with the transition to high school that cause distress and disengagement from school within adolescents.
6. *Small learning communities* – Small learning communities aim to "personalize the school environment" for students (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2007, p. 209). Small learning communities provide a learning environment that "engage students, support learning, and enhance development" (Felner et al., 2007, p. 210). Schools with small learning communities offer smaller class sizes and less anonymity within the school environment.
7. *Ninth grade students* – For the purpose of this study, ninth grade students referred only to students who were entering high school (within the freshman academy) in the ninth grade for the first time. Students who had already received high school credit and students who were repeating the ninth grade due to failed courses or lack of credit were not be included in this group. These students were experiencing their first school year with

departmentalized curriculum and grade point average requirements (Bornsheuer et al., 2011).

8. *High school completion* – High school completion refers to finishing a high school career within the expected four-year time frame. Within the four years, students must achieve satisfactory completion of all required high school course work, including, but not limited to, core courses, elective courses, and required academic testing (Fulk, 2003).
9. *Resilience* – According to Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990), the term resilience refers to the ability to adapt and persevere despite life's stressors and challenges.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This review of literature examines the possible impact of freshman academies on ninth grade transition. Current research emphasizes the importance of the ninth grade in terms of high school preparation and completion. Specifically, researchers affirm that students who experience a successful transition to high school are more likely to graduate on time (Smith, 2006). Recent studies attributed high school failures and drop-outs to social and academic challenges during transition (Langenkamp, 2010; McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010). In response to this growing problem, research has also suggested small learning communities dedicated to ninth grade students as an effective reform strategy to keep students from falling off track during transition. These small learning communities, known as freshman academies, have been linked to improved test scores for ninth grade students (Styron & Peasant, 2010). However, further research is necessary to determine whether or not freshman academies suit students' needs in terms of preparing them for high school challenges and fostering resilience.

This chapter begins by outlining the resilience and stage-environment fit theories, the theoretical frameworks that undergird this study. This is followed by a review of empirical literature regarding the importance of the ninth grade and the need to implement strategies to ease the transition to high school. Also, the relationship between school environment social and academic issues is discussed in terms of potential benefits for freshman academies. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research connecting the literature review to the research variables.

Theoretical Framework: Risk and Resilience in Adolescence

Risk in Adolescence

Howard, Dryden, and Johnson (1999) described the term risk as any environmental or social circumstance that could hinder a child's ability to flourish. These authors added that, in most cases, the home and school environments are the most crucial areas that can create risk in a child's life. Some of the negative outcomes these authors list in terms of risk in children are school failure, criminal activity, negative relationships, drug abuse, and poor health (Howard et al., 1999). This study highlighted one of those school-related risks that children face as a result of environmental factors.

Children have historically been considered to be the most vulnerable in terms of challenging circumstances due to their lack of maturity and experience (Howard et al., 1999). Despite this vulnerability, Werner and Smith (1992) insisted that children have the capability to persevere and become fully functioning adults. Howard et al. (1999) acknowledged that students are now entering the school setting with a number of challenges that schools are not prepared to handle. Most of these challenges stem from unstable home situations that place children at risk. The number of children who come from homes that receive government assistance has increased tremendously over the years. This means that there are increasingly more homes that may not be able to provide the resources that students need for their health, development, and school needs.

In addition to the economic challenges that modern families face, there are also social and structural strains on the household (Howard et al., 1999). Single parent families are becoming increasingly common. Within these settings, there is one parent that bears all of the burdens of the household. This type of stress can create an emotional strain on the head of the household, which trickles down to the other members in the home, especially the children. A

negative tone within a household can have adverse effects on the children living in that home, which can influence their ability to function in school as well as their overall motivation. These types of social challenges place children at risk in the school environment.

Other risk indicators include the education level of the parents within a household (Langenkamp, 2010). With the rising number of teenage parents comes an increase of households with limited education. This lifestyle has the potential to create a cycle in society. Studies have found that parents with college degrees and beyond are more likely to produce children with high education levels (Langenkamp, 2010). Likewise, parents with higher education levels are more likely to promote academic motivation within the household.

Although the aforementioned risk indicators have been identified as common challenges schools are forced to address, there is another risk factor that can affect any and all students, despite their home situation—transition. According to Smith (2006), school transition has the potential to place any child at risk. The change from the known to the unknown is one that is difficult for anyone, but especially children. Children are more susceptible to this type of change due to their general apparent vulnerability to environmental features and constructs (Luthar, 1991).

In addition to environmental threats, children and adolescents have to balance developmental changes as well. As a result, school transition can be considered a "negative life event" (Luthar, 1991, p. 601), especially if the transition requires separation from familiar peer groups and adults. This is especially relevant during adolescence, when social support and acceptance are vital aspects of everyday life (Martinez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszack, & Nellis, 2011). Moving from one school to the next may require adolescents to recreate or restructure their peers groups, which could lead to a decrease in peer acceptance. In fact,

Martinez et al. (2011) asserted that peer relationships are a consistent indicator of how well adolescents adjust to new environments. This transition can therefore cause stress that hinders a student's ability to perform or succeed in the school environment. Transition then places them at risk of failure and further vulnerability.

Resilience Theory

Considering the plethora of research that emphasizes the importance of the high school transition and labels the ninth grade year as a period of risk for adolescents, it is crucial to determine how to promote resilience among ninth grade students (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Ellerbrock, 2012). According to Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990), the term resilience refers to the ability to adapt and persevere despite life's stressors and challenges. Such obstacles begin in the early childhood years and continue throughout adolescence and adulthood. Masten et al. (1990) described three different forms of resilience: a) overcoming adversity, b) managing conflict, and c) recuperating from traumatic experiences. Although children are considered to be vulnerable to stressful situations, Werner and Smith's (1992) research suggested that the effect of positive interactions can outweigh the elements of risk that exist in a child's life. In other words, children who experience traumatic events or trials can flourish if those experiences are balanced with positive relationships and environments.

The conditions of risk and resilience are not permanent. At various points in a person's life, the level of risk or resilience may change based upon new experiences (Howard et al., 1999). For instance, a child who began his life in a stable, two-parent household may experience a shift in his or her level of risk when his parents' divorce and choose to raise the child in separate households. Likewise, a student who has experienced academic success throughout elementary and middle school may experience a high level of risk when they transition from

middle school to high school. Although these types of experiences can increase a child's level of risk, Howard et al. argued that there are "protective factors" that can promote resilience in children (1999, p. 310). This current study explored resilience among ninth grade students in terms of keeping them on track for high school completion.

Interpersonal stress. Garmezy and Rutter (1988) described stress as "a form of stimulus (or stressor), a force requiring change or adaptation (strain), a mental state (distress), and a form of bodily reaction or response" (p. 1). Children fall victim to stress more often than they are protected from it, and not all children will respond to stress in the same manner (Garmezy & Rutter, 1988). Therefore, one student may not experience any hardship or trauma when transitioning from one school setting to another, while their peers may fall victim to the challenges that arise when entering a new, unknown environment. Garmezy and Rutter (1988) considered a change of environment to be one of the principal sources of stress in children. Edwards and Steinglass (2001) found that children rate relocation and peer acceptance among the top stressful life events. Both of these issues are relevant to the transition to high school. As students enter high school, they are placed in a new environment that sometimes creates new peer groups, depending on district context. Each of these stressors place ninth grade students at risk. Edwards and Steinglass suggested that relocation creates risk in terms of a child's psychosocial functioning. These authors specified four areas of psychosocial functioning: social adjustment, self-concept, self-esteem, school achievement, and health and well-being. Edwards and Steinglass added that adolescents are most likely to experience declines in social adjustment during relocation.

Adolescents are also most likely to struggle with developing new peer relationships in a new environment. This age group is considered to be most vulnerable to the stress of relocation

based on broken social ties (Edwards & Steinglass, 2001). Based on these findings, students are especially vulnerable at the start of their high school career.

According to Clarke (2006), coping strategies are generally correlated to the amount of control an individual has over a situation. When people experience stressors they can control, they attempt to find solutions to the problem. On the other hand, when people experience stress factors that they cannot control, they are more likely to run away from the problem, or just internalize it, without making any resolutions. The stressors that children face are generally beyond their control. This is especially true when considering relocation. When children move from one home to another, or from one school to the next, it is a choice that is made for them for various reasons. For instance, the transition from middle to high school is usually out of the student's control. School placement is often determined by district feeder patterns or specialized programs (Langenkamp, 2010). Such an uncontrollable change has the potential to increase stress in adolescents.

Clarke's (2006) research examined the relationship between active coping strategies and psychosocial functioning, such as externalizing and externalizing behavior problems, social competence, and academic performance. Clarke found that the ability to utilize active coping strategies is associated with greater social competence. This means that when students are able to cope with stressors such as a school transition, they are more likely to demonstrate psychosocial health in terms of behavior, social competence, and academic performance (Clarke, 2006). Ninth grade students are more likely to achieve active coping when the school environment supports the process. Moreover, if ninth grade students perceive a sense of control in the uncontrollable transition, they are more likely to find ways to adapt.

Life's stressors cannot be avoided. However, Luthar (1991) suggested that positive feelings help students cope with stress. Therefore, students who experience stress at school or in their homes can counteract these experiences when surrounded by positivity. Since students spend so much time in the school setting, the school has the power to act as either a source of stress or a source of strength. In fact, Garmezy and Rutter (1988) suggested that a positive school experience can outweigh the stress students may experience in their home lives. Thus, the school environment should be structured in a manner that provides opportunity for positive experiences in a stress-free atmosphere.

Resilience in school. Howard et al. (1999) recommended a series of protective processes and actions in terms of childhood resilience, such as decreasing risk exposure, reducing "chain-reactions" (p. 311) of negative experiences, encouraging self-esteem and self-efficacy, and offering positive interactions and opportunities. These processes are most useful if they take place in any of the principal aspects of childhood, such as family life or the school environment (Howard et al., 1999). Rutter (1984) asserted that the school environment can be utilized as a protective element in a child's life, especially if the home environment exposes him to risk. Students who display signs of risk can maintain resilience if they attend school in an environment that fosters positive relationships and opportunities.

Martin and Marsh (2009) described academic resilience as "a student's capacity to overcome acute or chronic adversities that are seen as major assaults on educational processes" (p. 353). The school setting, especially secondary school, is a place where challenges and expectations are an immanent reality. As a result, students are likely to experience obstacles and setbacks along the way (Martin & Marsh, 2009). However, the key to academic resiliency is the manner in which students respond to such adversity. Therefore, Martin and Marsh called upon

schools to offer protective factors that encourage resilience and academic "buoyancy" (2009, p. 354). This does not mean that schools are required to ensure that students have only positive academic experiences. In fact, Martin and Marsh suggested that academic resilience cannot be reached without facing some form of adversity. Adversity is not only a part of academic life, it is a reality for life in general. Adolescents must be equipped with the tools necessary to bounce back from adversity. This is not something that can be taught from a textbook or lecture. However, the school environment can be structured in such a way that academic resilience is demanded. Moreover, the school atmosphere should provide opportunities for buoyancy and academic growth, despite challenges and setbacks (Martin & Marsh, 2009).

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Change and development during adolescence presents a period of risk (Eccles et al., 1993). One common change that occurs during this period is the transition from middle school to high school. Ninth grade students are considered to be an at-risk group as they transition from one school setting to the next. The transition occurs as adolescents are dealing with physical, social, and emotional changes within themselves. Although these changes pose a potential risk for trauma or other negative experiences, Eccles et al. (1993) argued that this period of risk can end positively or negatively. According to the stage-environment fit theory, the outcome of this transition depends on the impact of the school environment. If the school environment supports these students and their needs as they transition, the school has the potential to help them overcome the obstacles of this difficult period of development (Eccles, 2004).

The framework that supports the stage-environment fit theory is that the educational environment must meet the needs of students as they develop (Eccles, 2004). Garmezy and Rutter (1988) urged the importance of reducing adverse experiences in children's lives within

their daily environment. Matching the school environment with the needs of its students has the potential to increase the positive opportunities for students while increasing the likelihood of success during the transition to high school. In doing so, the school also becomes a protective factor to promote resilience for students who are at risk during this transition.

Academic context. Resilience research specifies resilience as a process rather than a skill or attribute that someone already possesses (Werner & Smith, 2001). In the school context, this means that any child who enters the high school environment has the potential to be resilient, despite the challenges they may face during the transition. In the same manner, the research on stage-environment fit theory in the school setting highlights the importance of school environment on student adaptation. Students who perceive the school environment in a positive nature are more likely to perform well academically (Thapa et al., 2013). The school environment can be utilized as a protective factor for students at-risk (Eccles, 2004). Therefore, the ninth grade school setting must create an atmosphere where all students have an equal chance to learn and succeed academically. Unfortunately, high schools with large populations may not be able to adhere to the needs of students when they first transition into high school (Smith, 2006). The anonymity of such schools can cause students to feel lost and alienated, placing them at further risk to fail or even drop out (Smith, 2006).

As high school freshmen, students are faced with many challenges that interfere with their ability to focus on academics. During adolescence, students tend to focus more on peer and social relationships than on academic life (Langenkamp, 2010). When students are uncomfortable with the social aspect of their environment, it is very difficult for them to succeed academically. In fact, Langenkamp's (2010) study of academic vulnerability during the transition to high school found that students who maintained bonds with teachers and peers from

middle school were placed in advanced math courses and earned high math scores. In addition, district context had a significant effect on course failures. Students who attended the same high schools as their friends from middle school were less likely to fail courses during their ninth grade year (Langenkamp, 2010).

According to Martinez et al. (2011), the developmental and social changes that adolescents face during the junior high school and high school years contradict the academic changes that take place at that time. Although district feeder zones cannot be managed in a manner that suits all students' social needs, the school environment can be structured to meet students where they are. Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) conducted a phenomenological study that found that students who experienced supportive school programs and positive relationships with their peers and teachers reported having the most success when transitioning to high school. Moreover, an intimate school environment equipped students with feelings of confidence that encouraged academic motivation. Large high school environments were found to be less personable for students, causing them to feel overwhelmed and unmotivated. In addition, the introduction to a compartmentalized curriculum and the organizational structure of the new high school environment made students feel less connected to their teachers (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). These findings support the tenets of the stage-environment fit theory, which states that the social environment within a school must adhere to the developmental needs and changes that adolescents experience (Eccles et al., 1993). When these needs are not met, or the environment does not coincide with such changes, students experience a decrease in academic motivation (Eccles et al., 1993).

Social context. As incoming high school freshmen, students are at a "critical and unique stage of human development" (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 179). During this stage, students

experience biological changes, a need for identity, and social changes that require them to enhance their roles within their families and society as a whole. Experiencing these changes in addition to the change in academic expectations can lead to stress and isolation. Furthermore, Cohen and Smerdon (2009) suggested that these changes lead to low self-esteem and anxiety about interacting with older students in terms of social relationships.

Garmezy and Rutter (1988) consider psychosocial stress to be the result of a process of changing conditions that require adaptation. In terms of transitioning to high school, these changing conditions include many factors. As students leave middle school, they leave the familiar school setting where, in some cases, students are accustomed to attending classes in pods or traveling in groups. These students also have to let go of various interpersonal relationships. As a result of school zoning measures, they are often separated from the peer groups that they have formed (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). This series of changes acts as stressors that place students at risk for experiencing an unsuccessful transition to high school. In fact Langenkamp (2010) found that district feeder zones and patterns were directly related to ninth grade course failures. As Newman, Myers, Lohman, and Smith (2000) pointed out, when transitioning to high school, students lose familiar teachers, coaches, advisors, and routines, and move on to "more anonymous settings than middle school" (p. 444). For this reason, Howard et al. (1999) called upon schools to provide an environment that presents an absence of threat, where students can feel open to develop healthy relationships with peers and teachers. That environment should include supportive programs or strategies for students experiencing risk.

Demographic factors. Besides the peer and district contexts that create risk for adolescence as they enter high school, other factors have proven to be influential in academic success or failure. Gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) are three variables that can

have a significant impact on how students learn, cope, or behave in school settings. In addition, these variables have the potential to affect student attitudes and beliefs about school and the school environment.

Gender. The role that gender plays in student achievement, especially during transition, tends to vary. For instance, De Wit, Karioja, Rye, and Shain (2011) found that girls were more likely to experience depression and low self-esteem during the transition. However, boys were more likely to experience low self-esteem in the tenth grade. Likewise, Martinez et al. (2011) reported in a longitudinal study of socio-emotional adjustment that girls perceived a decline in support within the school setting when transitioning to high school. On the other hand, the research showed no significant change in perceived support for boys. However, Martinez et al. (2011) did report that both boys and girls experience adversity in various areas during the transition. Conversely, Benner and Graham (2009) discovered through their research that girls liked school more than boys during the ninth grade transition and felt more connected to the school during that period. Girls also articulated positive perceptions of the school climate, but reported higher feelings of anxiety (Benner & Graham, 2009). Although Benner and Graham (2009) observed more concerning behaviors in girls, the girls managed to succeed more academically than boys. These conflicting reports emphasize the importance of examining gender as a factor for success during transition.

Ethnicity. Ethnicity has also proven to be a significant factor in assessing the impact of the school environment and transition (Thapa et al., 2013; Vedder, Boekarts, & Seegers, 2003). Benner and Graham (2009) found that African American students were more likely to feel connected to their school during transition than Caucasian students. However, Caucasian students were less likely to report feelings of loneliness during transition, while African

American and Asian students reported high levels of loneliness. Likewise, Benner and Graham reported higher GPAs among Caucasian students than African American and Latino students during the ninth grade year. In terms of absences, African American, Latino, and biracial students had more absences during the ninth grade year than Caucasian and Asian students (Benner & Graham, 2009). Heck and Mahoe (2006) found that African Americans, Latino, and Native American students are more likely to fail or drop out after the ninth grade transition. Smith's (2006) research on high school transition outcomes revealed that Asian students are most likely to persist in college. In addition, Latino students, including those who were considered to be high achievers, were the least likely to graduate from the first college that they attended.

Socioeconomic status. Smith (2006) examined the impact of the transition to high school on future school transitions and found that students from low SES families who enrolled in college were more likely to withdraw than students from high SES families. In the same manner, Heck and Mahoe (2006) suggested that schools that serve families with higher SES are more likely to experience student persistence after the transition to high school. Thus Heck and Mahoe concluded that SES is a crucial element when considering high school transition. In addition students with higher SES were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school on time (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). In fact, this research implied that SES has a greater influence on high school success than ethnicity. The likelihood for high school completion for students of African American or Hispanic decent depends on their SES (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). The impact of SES on school achievement suggests many implications. For example, it is likely that students from low SES families have less access to educational resources and academic support outside of the school environment. Also, students from low SES families may be less likely to

control school choice due to district context. In other words, students whose families cannot afford to obtain housing in desirable school zones are more likely to have negative school experiences. Thus this variable can play a vital role in examining school structures and student outcomes.

Implications for transition. According to Cohen and Smerdon (2009), all students who are transitioning to the ninth grade are in a period of potential risk. In addition, Garmezy and Rutter (1988) suggested that the social structure within a school environment influences behaviors such as absenteeism and depressive symptoms for students at risk. Heck and Mahoe's (2006) research found that student behavior took a negative turn as students transitioned into high school. As a result, students became more likely to fall behind or even withdrawal from school. In order to combat this risk, the school environment must meet ninth graders where they are, to ease this transition.

Martinez et al. (2011) found that students' relationships within their school environment play a vital role in determining how well they transition into a new environment. According to Edwards and Steinglass (2001), relocation is a life stressor that makes adolescents vulnerable to a decline in psychosocial functioning, including academic achievement. Adapting to a new school environment requires socio-emotional adjustment (Martinez et al., 2011). Martinez et al. found that students who transition from one level of schooling to the next are most successful when they perceive a stable support system in the new environment. Likewise, students who perceived high levels of social support also reported having higher self-esteem and fewer behavioral difficulties (Martinez et al., 2011).

Students who do not receive the support they need early on in their transition are more likely to fail and lose any interest in continuing their high school careers. In fact, Ellerbrock and

Kiefer (2010) argued that students who decide to give up on high school do so within the first few weeks of the ninth grade year. Moreover, positive relationships and interactions with teachers and peers within the school environment ease the stress that makes transition difficult. Therefore, schools must implement protective factors that promote resilience during this transition.

Ellerbrock and Keifer (2010) specified the characteristics schools must possess in order to meet student needs during transition. According to Ellerbrock and Keifer (2010), schools must have organizational structures in place that promote personal and caring relationships among teachers and students. In addition, schools must offer transitional programs or courses that help students adapt to the new environment by building the academic and social skills necessary for a successful transition. Finally, Ellerbrock and Keifer (2010) emphasized the need for teacher buy-in in terms of supporting ninth grade students in transition. Teachers must be invested in the importance of ninth grade and the transition to high school. When teachers are invested in this process and aware of this period of risk, they are more likely to take an active role in insuring success for ninth grade students.

Review of Literature

Ninth Grade Challenges

Research over the years has highlighted the importance of the ninth grade year on future success in high school and beyond (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). The ninth grade year is the first time that many students are exposed to departmentalized curriculum and GPA requirements (Benner & Graham, 2009). Prior to the ninth grade, students have experienced a less critical system where a grades is considered to be an indicator of development rather than a graduation requirement (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). In addition, many states incorporate mandated

standardized testing for ninth grade students as a graduation requirement (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Some school systems even require ninth grade students to make decisions regarding their future career plans and create course schedules based on these goals. All of these expectations arise within weeks of a student completing his or her middle school career. This sudden change can overwhelm students early on and cause them to give up before they even begin (Fulk, 2003). As a result of ninth grade students giving up, classes and schools become overcrowded due to the need for students to repeat failed classes. Bottoms and Timberlake (2007) of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) refer to this process as "a ninth grade bulge" (p. 1), as ninth grade classrooms are forced to combine first time ninth graders with repeating freshmen. Bottoms and Timberlake also noted that this process leaves students feeling inadequate and unmotivated, causing them to conclude that there is no other option but to drop out.

Bottoms (2006) also acknowledged a recent decline in high school completion. According to Bottoms, this issue has to be addressed at the ninth grade level, as students who fail during their ninth grade year are twice as likely to drop out of high school before the four-year mark. In order to combat this problem, Bottoms suggested various strategies to keep ninth grade students on track to graduate on time. For example, the use of transitional programs can be a tool to bridge the gap between middle school and high school curriculum. In addition, high schools should utilize creative scheduling techniques to ensure that ninth grade class sizes are small and effective. Also, separating ninth grade students from upperclassmen and assigning adult mentors for each ninth grade student is a growing, useful strategy. Finally, Bottoms recommended having ninth grade students select a career choice track before entering high school, to help focus their efforts.

Need for reform. Research suggests that the issue of high school dropouts begins with the transition to high school (Smith, 2006). Since ninth grade students face so many challenges as they enter high school, further research is necessary to determine the most effective programs to provide the support that students need to be successful throughout high school. Specifically, there is a growing need to determine the best programs and/or formats for reaching and teaching ninth grade students in a way that will foster a positive transition from middle school to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2006).

The call for high school reform and the emphasis on the importance of the ninth grade year has led researchers to measure student success at the end of the ninth grade year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Studies have shown that students who experience a successful ninth grade year are more likely to graduate from high school in four years (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Ellerbrock, 2012; Smith, 2006). Students who succeed during their ninth grade year are often considered to be "on-track," and those who fail courses or fall behind are often referred to as "off-track" (Smith, 2006). Many questions remain in response to this concept. For example, what constitutes a successful transition to high school and how can schools determine whether or not a student is on-track as a ninth grade student? Allensworth and Easton (2005) of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago recognized two indicators that are effective in gauging whether or not a student is on-track. According to Allensworth and Easton (2005), students who are on-track to graduate from high school in four years will finish their ninth grade year with no more than one failing course grade and will have completed all of the courses required for promotion to the tenth grade. Prior to this research, schools and school systems would base ninth grade student estimates on eighth grade test scores and students' background information (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). However, further research

revealed that these variables were not sufficient to determine whether or not students were on track to graduate from high school. Moreover, the skills that are measured by achievement tests do not account for all of the skills necessary for success in high school. In fact, Allensworth and Easton found that close to 25% of the ninth grade students who entered the ninth grade with high test scores fell off track by the conclusion of their freshman year. Conversely, 40% of the ninth grade students who enrolled with low eighth grade test scores were found to be on track to graduate by the end of their freshman year. When students fail a course, especially numerous courses, it breaks the sequence of the high school completion plan. When students fail, they do not receive credit for the course and have to repeat the course. Repeating the course hinders students from progressing to advanced level classes, especially if the course they failed is a prerequisite for other required courses. In addition, scheduling conflicts may arise when students need to repeat courses. These conflicts may prevent students from taking the courses they need to repeat in order to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Likewise, if a ninth grade student does not earn the amount of credits required to be promoted to tenth grade, they are more likely to fall behind in terms of earning the credits needed to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Not earning the required ninth grade credits hinders a student's ability to earn the remaining credits required for graduation. Students are limited in the amount of courses that can be taken at one time. Therefore, unless a student earns additional credits during summer school, it is difficult to make up for missing credits after the ninth grade year.

Allensworth and Easton (2005) found that the fewer Fs students received in ninth grade core courses, the more likely those students were to graduate from high school in four years. More than 80% of the students who did not fail any core courses during their ninth grade year graduated in four years. Meanwhile, less than 10% of the students who failed eight or more core

courses during the ninth grade year graduated in four years. Allensworth and Easton (2005) also concluded that approximately 90% of students with seven or more credits at the end of the ninth grade year graduated from high school in four years. Conversely, less than 10% of students who finished the ninth grade year with three or less credits were able to graduate in four years.

The Relationship between School Environment, Motivation, Achievement, and Attrition

Frey et al. (2009) found that students who experience detachment from their school are more likely to develop aggressive and violent behaviors as a result of a negative perception of their school. These authors add that such a negative attitude leads to a lack of academic motivation. Heck and Mahoe (2006) attributed feelings of detachment from school to the overcrowded and departmentalized structure of high schools. Heck and Mahoe argued that school structures and policies cause students to resist engaging in school activities or academia. This is especially true during the transition into high school. Academic motivation is likely to suffer during the transition to high school (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Benner and Graham (2009) found that many students' grades suffer as a result of the transition from middle to high school, mostly due to a decrease in academic motivation. As a result, students who experience an unsuccessful transition to high school may struggle to progress academically beyond the ninth grade. Additionally, students from low SES families and minority groups are more likely to fall off track when changing from one school environment to the next (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

Social Support. Siddall, Huebner, and Jiang (2013) highlighted the importance of socio-emotional adjustment during the stressful life events of adolescence. Their research found that students who perceived consistent social support in their environment were more likely to display life satisfaction. Malecki and Demaray (2002) described social support as "an individual's perceptions of general support or specific supportive behaviors (available or enacted

upon) from people in their social network, which enhances their functioning and/or may buffer them from adverse outcomes" (p. 2).

According to Siddall et al. (2013), life satisfaction results in positive behavior and motivation. Siddall et al. stated, "Adolescents with high levels of life satisfaction display higher levels of self-esteem, peer relations, social acceptance, academic achievement, and academic aspirations than peers with lower levels of life satisfaction" (p. 108). In addition, the strongest indicator for life satisfaction for adolescents is social relationships, especially within the school environment. Witkow and Fuligni (2011) found a positive correlation between support from peers and family and high school grade point averages. Students who perceived high levels of life satisfaction within the school atmosphere were more invested in the school and demonstrated higher levels of academic motivation.

Recent research has examined the relationship between sources of social support and academic achievement. According to Wang and Eccles (2012), student-teacher and student-parent relationships play a vital role in the psychological well-being of students. Consequently, students' psychological wellbeing has a tremendous impact on their ability to learn and perform academically. In terms of transition, Wang and Eccles (2012) found that school engagement decreases as adolescents advance throughout each level of schooling. They attributed this decline to the change in social relationships that occur as students move from one school to the next. Therefore, the transition to high school must include a supportive school environment that caters to such social needs and changes (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Moreover, as students enter the high school environment, they must be provided with social support from adults and be given opportunities to foster positive social relationships with their peers.

Student-teacher relationships create somewhat of a domino effect. When students perceive supportive relationships with their teachers, they are more likely to respect those teachers. Likewise, when students feel that their teachers care about them and are truly invested in their needs, the students are more likely to abide by the teacher's rules and strive to please the teacher. This desire to reciprocate the teacher's positive behaviors will then cause the student to become more engaged and involved in the instruction that the teacher is delivering. In doing so, the student is more likely to invest time and effort into achieving the goals and completing the assignments that the teacher presents to the student. As a result the student is more likely to achieve academically (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Besides teacher connectedness, students who experience positive bonds with teachers are also more likely to feel connected to the school as a whole. Students associate teachers with the overall school environment. Therefore, positive teacher relationships lead to positive perceptions of the school environment. This entire cycle demonstrates the academic benefit of a positive teacher-student social relationship. This concept is crucial for ninth grade students who are leaving behind previous bonds with teachers and moving to a new, more anonymous school environment (Newman et al., 2000).

In addition to student-teacher relationships, student-peer relationships are also significant indicators of school engagement. As high school freshman, students are at risk of losing the supportive systems and bonds that they have established in their previous school settings. Unfortunately, when students are not able to establish secure support systems, they display negative behaviors and a loss of academic motivation as a result of feeling that they do not belong. In fact, Frey et al. (2009) found that students who experience a lack of attachment to their school viewed their school in a negative light and expressed negative thoughts and

behaviors. Heck and Mahoe (2006) stated that this type of negative outlook leads to academic failures and eventually dropping out of school.

Wang and Eccles (2012) supported the idea that social relationships are a fundamental element in adolescent development. As incoming high school freshmen, students are at a turning point in terms of human development (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). During this stage, students experience biological changes, a need for identity, and social changes that require them to "contribute to their families, communities, and society" (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 179). These changes and expectations enhance the role of social relationships, especially peer relationships (Wang & Eccles, 2012). For ninth grade students, peer relationships can be especially challenging considering that, when they enter high school in the traditional setting, they have to interact with older students. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) suggested that this type of change has the potential to cause low self-esteem and anxiety about the social contexts of the new school environment.

During the transition to high school, peer groups are often separated based on school feeder patterns and other factors (Langenkamp, 2009). Shifting peer groups is a critical notion when considering the fact that ninth grade students fall under Erikson's stage five of development, during which time they are more likely to look toward their peers for support and guidance than toward their own parents (De Wit et al., 2011; Neild, 2009). This means that peer relationships stand to have a greater influence on student choices and motivation than parental support. Wang & Eccles (2012) added that positive peer relationships cause students to feel connected to the school environment. This feeling of connectedness makes students more willing to participate in school activities and become more engaged overall. On the other hand, students who do not establish positive peer relationships are likely to resist the school

environment. These students are less likely to involve themselves with any aspect of the school, including extra-curricular activities. Students who do not form social bonds with their peers are likely to isolate themselves and lose motivation within the school environment (Wang & Eccles, 2012). As a result, school attendance may decrease, as these students may prefer to search for bonds in other places, such as their home or neighborhood. Poor attendance will then lead to course failures and possible dropouts.

Social support cannot take place without understanding the emotional needs of students. Throughout each stage of childhood and adolescence, there are life changes, developmental changes, and stressors that impact the emotional well-being of an individual (Kendal, Keeley, & Callary, 2011). The aforementioned research has supported the assertion that the transition to high school is a period of inherent risk. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that ninth grade students have emotional needs that may not exist during other levels of schooling (De Wit et al., 2011). Such needs can cause students to become disengaged from the school environment (Estell & Perdue, 2013). Sparks (2013) urged the importance of supporting emotional needs within the school setting because emotional stress is a hindrance to academic achievement. In order to justify this argument, Sparks observed and interviewed the staff of Children's Aid College Prep Charter School and Central Park East High School in Harlem, New York. After speaking with the staff at these schools, Sparks reported that the best method for addressing the emotional needs of the students was not to focus so much on the vulnerabilities and obstacles that at-risk students bring. Instead, schools should view these areas of need as opportunities to make connections to the students in order to promote growth. The need for emotional support became so apparent to the schools that Sparks researched, that they invested in life coaches to serve as mentors to the students and also provided professional development for teachers in order to train

them on how to support students' emotional needs. These schools operate under the premise that you cannot meet a child's cognitive needs if you do not meet the emotional needs first (Sparks, 2013).

These schools also employed other strategies to support their students emotionally (Sparks, 2013). For example, the school staff emphasized the importance of knowing who the students are before they come (Sparks, 2013). Although this process may seem difficult for larger school structures, it is quite feasible for freshman academies. Freshman academies, which operate using low teacher-student ratios, have the potential to research the backgrounds and needs of incoming freshman before the students attend the school. This information should not be used against the student, but as a measure to provide emotional support. For example, the aforementioned schools use this information to develop character building programs and life skills curriculum. The life skills classes and sessions are designed to help students understand their emotionality, acknowledge their needs, and articulate them for support (Sparks, 2013). The students also learn ways to cope with emotional stress, along with managing and resolving conflict. The theory behind this practice is that emotional vulnerability can hinder academic achievement. Furthermore, in order to provide effective academic education, schools must provide character education and emotional support (Sparks, 2013).

School confidence. According to Tavani and Losh (2003), several factors predict a student's academic performance. Many of these factors are beyond the student's control, especially external influences. Tavani and Losh claimed that more emphasis should be placed on the internal factors that influence student performance, rather than the external factors that cannot be controlled anyway. One major factor these authors emphasize is confidence. Tavani and Losh linked school confidence to effort and achievement. As with any aspect of life, people

tend to perform better in areas where they demonstrate self-confidence. In addition, a positive self-concept, or perceiving oneself as capable or confident, results in positive performance (Tavani & Losh, 2003). A negative self-concept or lack of confidence in one's ability can lead an individual to doubt him or herself. This experience can lead students to feel overwhelmed and want to give up in order to avoid negative outcomes or wasted efforts. Internal motivation is one of the most critical components to student performance and academic success (Eccles et al., 1993; Heck & Mahoe, 2006). No matter how many external factors play a role in a student's education, whether positive or negative, internal motivation is necessary for effective performance (Tavani & Losh, 2003). Research has shown that social support can serve as a protective factor against stressful life events, such as school transition. However, the sources of support cannot produce academic success for the student. At some point, it is up to the student to decide to perform and achieve.

Tavani and Losh (2003) also highlighted the relationship between self-confidence and expectation. Specifically, students who possess self-confidence have an expectation for success and positive performance. On the other hand, students who Tavani and Losh studied perceived academic performance, expectations, self-confidence, and motivation among freshman students. The findings yielded a moderate, positive correlation between motivation and self-confidence, and a positive significant correlation between academic performance and motivation, academic performance and self-confidence, and academic performance and student expectation (Ellerbrock, 2012; Tavani & Losh, 2003). Therefore, an increase in motivation and self-confidence results in an increase in student expectation and academic performance.

Small learning communities. School size plays a grave role in students' perceptions of the school environment (Thapa et al., 2013). Large school settings have the potential to cause

students to feel disconnected or disengaged from their schools (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Students who feel disengaged or anonymous within the school environment are more likely to fail the ninth grade, and eventually drop out of high school. Creating small learning communities within larger high schools can potentially combat this problem. Benner and Graham (2009) suggested that students who attend small schools are more likely to experience social and academic success than those who attend large schools. Therefore, Felner et al. (2007) asserted that personalizing schools is an essential component for school reform. Felner et al. (2007) recognized the importance the interpersonal relationships within the school environment as a protective factor and as an indicator of academic success. Specifically, Felner et al. (2007) suggested that incorporating small learning communities and personalizing the school atmosphere "is a critical strategy for bringing the learner in as a full and active participant in enhancing and shaping their own learning" (Felner et al., p. 210). Likewise, Supovitz and Christman (2005) reported that large schools that implement small learning communities are more likely to experience student-teacher bonds that encourage student motivation. However, the structure of a small learning community could not solely reform schools. Instead, the programs that are utilized within the small learning community are the key to success (Supovitz & Christman, 2005).

As students transition into high school, they often require smaller, more intimate environments in order to feel attached to the new school. Research has shown that high schools that implement small learning communities that assist ninth grade students as they transition have experienced increased ninth grade success (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Specifically, freshman academies offer the support and guidance students need to ease this transition.

Freshman academies. In an effort to support ninth grade students as they enter high school, various schools and school systems throughout the country have implemented freshman academies. The premise behind the freshman academy is that freshman students spend their first year of high school separated from the upperclassmen, giving them the opportunity to adjust to high school in a smaller, more personalized environment (Bottoms, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Ellerbrock, 2012). Ellerbrock (2012) described freshman academies as school communities that personalize the environment for students and teachers. According to Ellerbrock, freshman academies utilize small group settings led by teachers that are assigned only to ninth grade students. These academies also utilize specialized programs designed around the academic and social needs of the students. In freshman academies, students rarely come in contact with older students and therefore avoid negative interactions with those students in an academic setting.

This movement is in response to research that shows ninth grade students "falling through the cracks" upon entering the high school setting (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 454). McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) revealed that several school systems have reported substantial gains in student truancy since implementing freshman academies. Likewise, Allensworth and Easton (2005) suggested that school structure is extremely influential in student success and producing students that are on-track to graduate in four years. Eccles et al. (1993) emphasized the need for students to transition into new school environments that fit their developmental and academic needs.

The most common characteristics of freshman academies include interdisciplinary teaming of teachers, common planning for teachers, courses that support developmental needs, and transition programs or courses (Bottoms, 2006; Ellerbrock, 2012; McCallumore &

Sparapani, 2010). Based on the notion that a transition period is the most crucial time for a match between environment and need (Eccles et al., 1993), Ellerbrock (2012) conducted a qualitative multisite study to examine strategies for meeting the needs of ninth grade students as they transition into high school. The study included three large schools that serve an urban population. Each of the schools included in the study implemented freshman academies that utilized interdisciplinary teams. The teachers on these teams also shared a common planning period each day which was used to develop school policies and procedures, assess student needs in order to adjust instruction, and create intervention strategies. This process helped to alleviate the anonymity of large schools for both teachers and students. The findings of this freshman academy study yielded positive results in terms of supporting the stage-environment fit theory. Specifically, both students and teachers reported a personalized environment within the freshman academy, which Eccles (2004) asserts is a necessity for student success and resilience.

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) insist that freshman academies have to be more than just separate buildings, wings, or hallways. Instead, they have to utilize strategies and programs that meet students' developmental needs. In fact, McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) found that schools that implement freshman academies as a tool to help with school overcrowding are less successful based on the absence of effective programming and structuring. If the personalization of the environment does not exist, it is difficult to provide the social and emotional support that research suggests is necessary for academic resilience and achievement among ninth grade students as they transition into the high school environment.

Summary

Research has established the transition to high school as a risky period during adolescents' lives (Ellerbrock, 2012; Smith, 2006). During this transition, students move from

more familiar, intimate environments to larger, more anonymous schools. At times, district context and school feeder patterns have a crucial impact on the success of this transition. The move from middle to high school poses both social and academic risks. For instance, when moving to high school, many students may lose connections with peers and faculty members with whom they have developed strong relationships (Langenkamp, 2010). In addition, adolescents tend to place more emphasis on peer relationships than parental relationships (Miller, 2011). This causes adolescents to depend on their peers for social and emotional support. In terms of academics, ninth grade are introduced to a new compartmentalized curriculum where grades and standardized test scores count toward graduation (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). In addition, these students move to an academic setting where they are forced to interact with older, more experienced students and unfamiliar school staff. Each of these factors has led to extensive research into the impact of transition stressors on high school failures and dropout rates. Research suggests that a successful ninth grade transition keeps students on track for high school completion (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Ellerbrock, 2012; Smith, 2006).

Although the transition to high school is often referred to as a period of risk, the resilience theory states that there are protective processes and factors that can promote resilience among children (Howard et al., 1999). According to Rutter (1984), schools can provide the protective processes needed to develop resilient students. Specifically, a school environment that fosters positive relationships and experiences helps students overcome adversity, boost self-esteem and confidence, and focus academically (Martin & Marsh, 2009; Rutter, 1984). The stage-environment fit theory supports this notion, and adds that the school environment needs to match the needs of its students (Eccles et al., 1993). This includes the social and emotional

support that adolescents require during transition (Siddall et al., 2013). In addition, the environment should provide encouraging and challenging opportunities that build resilience.

The aforementioned research suggests that the best way to meet the needs of ninth grade students is through the use of small learning communities called freshman academies. These academies utilize various strategies to promote resilience during transition, such as housing ninth grade students in separate buildings, developing freshmen-only faculty teams, implementing interdisciplinary teams, creating unique instructional strategies, and undertaking creative scheduling (Ellerbrock, 2010). In doing so, freshman academies have the potential to develop resilient students by providing more intimate social support and increasing academic confidence and motivation.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Design

This quantitative study utilized a correlational design to explore the relationship between ninth grade student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and resilience as measured by the following indicators: grade point averages, perceived socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence for these students. This relationship was examined through the use of archival student data and student self-report inventory data. Student perceptions of the freshman academy environment were recorded using the CSCI (National School Climate Center, 2014). Student academic achievement was determined based on students' GPAs at the end of the ninth grade year. Socio-emotional adjustment was measured using items from the CASSS (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). Perceived school confidence was measured using the SSCS (Gresham et al., 1993). This particular study utilized correlational design because it includes nonexperimental research methods where the researcher can neither manipulate nor control the variables involved with this phenomenon, as the participants had already taken classes in the freshman academy (Warner, 2013). Likewise, the students attending this school were enrolled based on school zoning and other program specifications that were not under the control of the researcher. Alldred (2013) also used the correlational research design for a similar study examining the possible causal relationships between student self-efficacy and student achievement. The results of this study determined whether or not experimental research on this topic is warranted. Various articles have been published discussing the possible benefits of the freshman academy (Ellerbrock, 2012), but few empirical research studies exist.

Chapter Three describes the research design selected for the study, along with a research-based rationale for that design. The research questions and null hypotheses are restated, followed by a description of the study participants and setting. This chapter concludes with an explanation of the data instrumentation and procedures for the study, as well as the proposed data analysis procedures for each hypothesis.

Research Question

RQ: Is there a relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student resilience at the end of the ninth grade year?

Null Hypotheses

H_o1: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' grade point averages at the end of the ninth grade year.

H_o2: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment at the end of the ninth grade year as measured by questions 1-10 of the "People in my School" section of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS).

H_o3: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' perceived school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year as measured by questions 44-48 and 58-62 the Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS).

Participants and Setting

This study included a nonrandom, convenience sample of students who attended a freshman academy as first-time ninth graders. These students were selected from a large public high school in North Georgia. According to the most recent NCES (2015) report, this school housed 1,998 students at the time the data for this study was collected, 653 of these students were in the ninth grade. Out of the 1,998 students among the student body, 1,311 were categorized as Black, 376 were Hispanic, 227 were White, 42 were mixed with two or more races, 39, were Asian/Pacific Islander, and three were American Indian. In addition, 1,025 of the students were male, 973 were female, and 1,516 were on free or reduced lunch (NCES, 2015). The researcher used convenience sampling because some of the data being utilized, such as school level grade records information, had already been collected and the sample included was selected based on who was available and served the purpose of the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The class of students included in this sample was determined based on the timing of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The process began with identifying freshman academy students and removing students who are repeating the ninth grade, as well as students who did not attend the school for the freshman academy for the entire ninth grade year. Students who were repeating the ninth grade had already experienced the high school transition and could have skewed the findings. Likewise, the responses and grades for students who had not attended the freshman academy for the entire year could have been influenced by experiences within their previous ninth grade environment.

Based on a medium/moderate effect size and a recommended power of .80 (Rovai, Baker, & Ponton, 2013), the total sample had to include at least 128 ($N = 128$) participants (Warner, 2013). This is aligned with the recommended sample size of more than 30 for relationship

studies (Gall et al., 2007). Furthermore, "inadequate sample size can lead to low statistical power," which could have possibly decreased the chance of rejecting the null hypotheses (Rovai et al., 2013, p. 112). In addition, an inadequate effect size could have resulted in Type II error (Rovai, et al., 2013; Warner, 2013), while an adequate effect size helps education stakeholders determine whether or not there is a statistically significant relationship between perceptions of the freshman academy environment and resilience during the high school transition. This determination would be useful in examining the viability of the freshman academy as a high school reform strategy.

The data in this study was based on the archival records of a large suburban public high school in North Georgia. This school, which was referred to as Transition Academy, had implemented the freshman academy format for four full school years. The freshman academy is a small learning community within a public high school serving grades nine through twelve. Within this program, the ninth grade students are housed in a separate building or wing from the other grade levels. Transition Academy classes only serve first-time ninth grade students. Teachers within the Transition Academy setting are dedicated to teaching only ninth graders. These teachers participate in interdisciplinary teaming so that each ninth grade student remains within the same teacher team each day. The Transition Academy utilizes creative scheduling to be sure that all core classes include only first-time ninth grade students. The Transition Academy also includes support staff devoted to only ninth grade students, such as counselors and administrators. Transition Academy has a total enrollment of over 1,500 students. The school's population is 7% Asian, 69% African American, 1% Caucasian, 9% Hispanic, and 3% Multiracial (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2011). Fifty-two percent of the students at this school are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Instrumentation

In order to confirm that a freshman academy was actually being fully implemented at the target school, the researcher utilized the Scoring Rubric for Implementation of Ninth Grade Academy, developed by High Schools That Work (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005). Although this instrument was not included as a variable or data collection tool, it was useful instrument in informing the researcher of the characteristics of the ninth grade academy. The academy needed to meet at least four out of the five major indicators included on the Scoring Rubric for Implementation of Ninth Grade Academy to be considered a full freshman academy implementation for this study. This version of the instrument was condensed by the Georgia Department of Education (Appendix A). "Indicator 1" addressed the need for only first-time freshman students to be assigned to the freshman academy, with smaller class sizes than the larger campus. Ninth grade teachers were expected to teach only ninth grade students and share a common group of students as well as common planning time. "Indicator 2" evaluated the consistency with which teachers meet during common planning time in order to discuss student achievement and behavior, develop horizontal curriculum plans and goals, and evaluate student work and needs. "Indicator 4" focused on the options offered for additional support to aide students during the ninth grade transition, such as summer bridge programs, Saturday school, and tutoring. "Indicator 5" measured the role of academic, disciplinary, attendance, honorary, and extra-curricular data in the decision-making process among freshman academy teachers. There are four possible ratings available for each indicator: Level One, Level Two, Level Three, or Level Four.

The predictor variable, student perceptions of the freshman academy, was measured using the CSCI Version 3.0. The CSCI directs students to rate the climate of the school

environment. Thapa et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of student perceptions of the school environment in terms of student achievement. This instrument contains 70 items that require student responses based on a five point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For the purpose of this study, 15 CSCI items were included for the predictor variable.

The CSCI inventory items include ten school environment factors, eight of which were included in this study: Support for Learning, Social and Civic Learning, Adult Respect, Rules and Norms, Student-Student Relationships, Physical and Social Bullying, Sense of Security, and School Connectedness. The first CSCI factor, Support for Learning, includes statements such as: "My teachers help me learn best," and "My teachers show me how to learn from my mistakes." The second factor, Social Support - Adults, includes statements such as "Adults in my school are interested in getting to know students." Adult Respect, the third factor used in this study, asks students to rate the way adults respect students and other adults within the school. Student-Student Relationships, the fourth factor on the CSCI, deals with student interactions and respect amongst peers. This factor is especially important at the high school level where peer relationships play a vital role in an adolescent's sense of belonging (Thapa et al., 2013). The fifth and sixth factors, Physical Surroundings and Sense of Security, are especially relevant to this study as the researcher plans to articulate the characteristics of the freshman academy, which houses ninth grade students in a smaller, separate physical space away from upperclassmen. The Physical Surrounding items on the CSCI relate to the school building itself, as well as the resources within that building. Responses within this section have the potential to show whether or not students find the separate space helpful. The Sense of Security items allow students to rate their perceptions of safety and trust within the building.

The National School Climate Center (2014) described the CSCI as one of the most reliable, scientific inventories in terms of gauging student perceptions of the school environment. However, they do not recommend the use of this survey for the purpose of comparing schools. Guo, Choe, and Higgins-D'Allesandro (2011) reported the reliability coefficient for each of the scales that was addressed in this study; finding that coefficient to be between .73 and .90, as well as appropriate construct validity based on Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) "given *RMSEA* = 0.054, *CFI* = 0.977 and *GFI* = 0.038" (Guo et al., 2011, p. 14). The results of the CFA Therefore, this instrument is a reliable, consistent measure of school climate and school reform strategies.

The first criterion variable, cumulative GPA, was recorded based on the data from the school records. Although some researchers discredit GPA as an accurate indicator of student achievement (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006), other studies argue the opposite point of view (Stewart, 2008). Stewart (2008) examined the relationship between student and school characteristics and student achievement. The study revealed significant relationships between social environment and student achievement, as measured by student GPA (Stewart, 2008). In addition, Geiser and Santelices (2004) validated GPA as an indicator of student success during and beyond high school.

The cumulative GPA is an interval variable that is measured on a 4.0 scale based on the points students received for each course they had taken during their high school career. Each letter grade corresponds to a point value: A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, F = 0. The total points from this calculation are added together and divided by the number of classes taken. The final result constitutes an unweighted cumulative GPA, which is recorded on students' official grade record. Most high school GPAs are reported based on a four-point scale, but were weighted based on

course level for this study. In other words, students in advanced classes earned more points for each class, which may have resulted in a GPA higher than the standard 4.0.

Although school- and student-level data can be effective instruments for assessing school reform interventions (Stuart, 2007), there is an inherent risk of human error in terms of grade records. School grades and records are entered by hand, and may have incorrect or missing information. This risk could have led to a diminishing sample size or threats to validity. However, obtaining students' cumulative GPA was crucial to finding possible relationships between freshman academies and student achievement as research has identified high school completion and grade point averages as valid student achievement measurements (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bacon & Bean, 2006; Machtinger, 2007).

The remaining two criterion variables were measured using self-report student questionnaires. Perceived socio-emotional adjustment was measured based on scores from the CASSS, developed by Malecki et al. (2000). Students who perceived the amount of social support they receive positively are more likely to adjust well to a new environment (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). This is especially important when considering the crucial transition from middle school to high school. The freshman academy was designed to provide support for students and help them adjust to the high school environment. Therefore, high rankings on social support on the CASSS would reveal students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment as freshman academy students. This scale assesses perceived social support, including emotional and instructional factors. It also includes items related to the child's feelings about the people who possibly serve as sources of support, as well as the school environment.

This study used Level 2 of the CASSS questionnaire, which Malecki and Demaray (2002) deem appropriate for middle and high school adolescents. The CASSS now includes 60

items (the original version included only 40) relating to perceived social support from four possible sources: teachers, classmates, friends, and parents. These 60 items highlight four specific types of support: emotional (love, trust, empathy), informational (advice), appraisal (offering feedback), and instrumental (helping behaviors). This study utilized the questions pertaining to the sources of social support within the school environment: teachers, classmates, and friends. The CASSS requires students to respond to each statement in two categories: frequency and importance (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). This instrument calls upon students to rate frequency items based on a six point Likert scale. For these items, the student options range from 1 (never) to 6 (always). Each support source (parent, teacher, classmate, or friend) is assessed under its own subscale of 12 items. The items within the teacher subscale include statements such as: "My teacher explains things I don't understand." Subscale scores are obtained from the result of adding each of the ten ratings, and are then added together to determine the total frequency score. On the other hand, the importance ratings are based on a three point Likert scale (Demaray, et al., 2005). For these items, students rate each item between 1 (not important) and 3 (very important).

In terms of the reliability and validity of CASSS as an instrument for measuring perceived socio-emotional adjustment, Malecki and Demaray (2002) confirmed this instrument as a reliable indicator of "perceived social support in children and adolescents" (p. 12). The Level 2 version of the CASSS yielded a .95 reliability coefficient for the total scale, and the subscales (four support sources) ranged from .89 to .94. Malecki and Demaray (2002) also found "moderate to high inter-correlations among subscales of the CASSS (r = .20 to .54 for Level 1 and r = .32 to .54 for Level 2)" (p. 12). Likewise, the Level 2 scale and subscale correlation ranged from .71 to .78.

The final criterion variable, perceived school confidence, was measured through the use of the SCSS, developed by Gresham, Elliott, and Evans-Fernandez (1993). This instrument was developed in an attempt to provide student concept inventory with high reliability and validity, supported by a deep theoretical framework. Although the SSCS has been proven a valid tool for various uses, it was used in this study to "measure the self-concept characteristics of defined populations, the relationship between self-concept and other behavioral characteristics (e.g., social skills, problem behaviors, academic achievement), or longitudinal aspects of self-concept in children and adolescents" (Gresham, 1995, p. 20). The defined population, for the purposes of this study, described the freshman academy students.

Similar to the CASSS, the SSCS also includes two levels. This study used the Level 2 version for the variable as well. According to Malecki and Demaray (2002), the SSCS requires children to "rate behaviors" (p. 5) on three aspects: self-confidence (level of confidence in ability to perform the behavior or hold a specific cultural attribute), importance (importance the student places on the behavior or the attribute), and outcome confidence (confidence that performing the behavior or holding the attribute will have a positive outcome). The final product reveals a total score for self-confidence and outcome-confidence, along with scores for each subscale or domain: self-image, academic, and social.

The self-image domain contains 12 items, including statements referring to the way students view other people's perception of them as a person. This subscale assesses students' "perceptions about culturally valued behaviors or personal attributes such as self-worth, popularity, physical attractiveness, and physical skill" (Gresham, 1995, p. 20). The academic domain consists of 18 items measuring students' perceived self-efficacy, or confidence related to academic behaviors and achievement. This domain includes items that pertain to specific

classroom tasks or activities. The social domain also evaluates students' perceived self-efficacy, but in terms of social behaviors and interactions. The 20 items within this domain include statements regarding social interactions, peer groups, and making friends. For each of the items, students rate the confidence level or importance level on a three point Likert scale. For self-confidence and outcome confidence, the options range from 0 (not at all) to 2 (confident). The importance ratings are the same, with the exception of the number two rating, which is "critical" rather than "confident." In order to "screen for unrealistic levels of social desirability," the SSCS also includes Lie Scale items within each domain (Gresham, 1995, p.21). These Lie Scale statements, including, "I like everyone I know," are used to invalidate student responses that are unrealistic.

Data from the SSCS can be analyzed at any of the three levels: item level, subscale level, or composite level. Gresham (1995) recommended using the raw scores to calculate "standard scores, percentile ranks, standard error of measurement, confidence bands, and descriptive behavior levels (high, average, and low) based on raw-score cut points in the distribution" (p. 22). The SSCS validation process for secondary students utilized a sample of over 1,400 students throughout the United States. The sample included both boys and girls, students of various ethnicities (African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and other), and students with special needs (Graham, 2005). Both coefficient alpha and test-retest measures were used to calculate reliability for this instrument. The reliability coefficients for the self-confidence category ranged from .89 to 92. The coefficient alphas for the outcome confidence category ranged from .79 to .82. In addition, construct validity was assessed by evaluating correlations between the SSCS and other validated self-concept scales, developmental factors, gender, and group differences.

Procedures

Upon IRB approval (Appendix B), the researcher obtained a permission letter on letterhead from the school system superintendent (Appendix C) and the principal of the target school (Appendix D). This letter was followed by personal emails to the school secretary and clerks requesting archival data specific to grades and credits earned. The level of implementation of the freshman academy was assessed using the HSTW scoring rubric modified by the Georgia Department of Education (SREB, 2005) to make ensure that the treatment actually occurred. The rubric evaluates the freshman academy implementation level based on five indicators (Appendix A). Once the level of implementation had been determined at a level four, with the permission of the principal, the researcher distributed participant recruitment letters (Appendix H), parental consent (Appendix I), and student assent forms (Appendix J) to the ninth grade students at the school during a homeroom period. The consent and assent forms explained the purpose of the current study and ensured possible participants that their participation was completely voluntary and confidential. These forms also informed possible participants that, upon completion of the packet, they would be entered into a raffle to win a $100 gift card to the store of their choice.

Once the consent and assent forms were returned, each participant's school history was examined to ensure that he/she attended the freshman academy for the entire ninth grade year and attended a middle school within the specified school's feeder patterns, since middle school experience could have impacted the data. Once the sample was identified, questionnaire packets were distributed, which included three items: items from the CSCI assessing student perceptions of the school environment, items from the CASSS examining students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment, and items from the SSCS surveying students' perceived school

confidence. Permission to use the CSCI was obtained from National School Climate Center (Appendix E). The CSCI inventory required students to respond to each of the items on a five point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The frequency CASSS inventory items required a response based on a six point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (always). Permission to use these CASSS items was obtained directly from the developers, Christine Malecki and Michelle Demaray (Appendix F). For the SSCS items, students responded on a three point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not at all) to 2 (confident). Permission to use the SSCS was obtained from Pearson, Inc (Appendix G). The researcher then recorded student school record information, including current GPA, course credits earned, and the number of failed core courses on an excel spreadsheet. Once the data was collected, it was listed anonymously and all printed data remains in a locked file cabinet. All electronic data was stored on a password-protected computer.

The researcher ran a Spearman's rho analysis in response to each of the research hypotheses in order to determine the strength of the relationship between student CCSI scores and ninth grade GPA, CASSS scores, and SSCS scores. This analysis and its significance were assessed at a significance of $p > .05$ and a power of .80 (Warner, 2013), which was also recommended by Cohen (1988). Once these tests were completed, the researcher determined statistical significance, and whether to reject or fail to reject each null hypothesis. Finally, the results and findings were recorded and the researcher discussed assumptions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Data Analysis

A power analysis revealed that based on a medium/moderate effect size and a power of .80, the total sample for this study needed to include at least 128 participants ($N = 128$; Warner,

2013). This is aligned with the recommended sample size of more than 30 for relationship studies (Gall et al., 2007). A Spearman's rho was conducted in response to each of the research hypotheses. This research was nonexperimental and utilized nonparametric methods because of the data's mixed normal and non-normal distributions. Bishara and Hitner's (2012) study of correlational testing of non-normal data found that using Spearman's rank-order correlation "would be more valid than Pearson's test when parametric assumptions are violated (p. 5). Moreover, these authors concluded that Spearman's *r* "preserved Type 1 error rates at or below the nominal alpha level whereas Pearson's *r* produced inflated Type 1 error" (p. 9). The number of full data sets available for analysis was 151, all of which were used in the analysis.

Spearman's rhos were used to address the all three hypotheses. The first hypothesis explored the relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by CSCI scores and students' cumulative grade point averages. The second hypothesis explored the relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by CSCI scores and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment as measured by the CASSS. The third research hypothesis sought to determine the relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by the CSCI, and perceived school confidence based on SSCS scores. The continuous variables were CSCI scores, grade point averages, CASSS scores, and SSCS scores.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Research Question

RQ: Is there a relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy

Null Hypotheses

H_o1: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' grade point averages at the end of the ninth grade year.

H_o2: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment at the end of the ninth grade year as measured by questions 1-10 of the "People in my School" section of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS).

H_o3: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' perceived school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year as measured by questions 44-48 and 58-62 the Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS).

Descriptive Statistics

The predictor variable in this study was student perceptions of the school environment within a freshman academy, as measured by scores on the CSCI. Table 1 displays the mean and standard deviation obtained for this variable. The criterion variables in this study were end-of-year grade point average, perceived socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence. Table 2 displays the mean and standard deviation for each of these variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Predictor Variable (N = 151)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Low	High
CSCI – Perceptions of Freshman Academy Environment	52.67	9.46	15.00	77.00

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Criterion Variables (N = 151)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Low	High
GPA	2.52	0.90	0.00	4.00
CASSS – Perceived Socio-emotional Adjustment	39.07	10.29	16.00	60.00
SSCS – Perceived School Confidence	17.25	2.58	7.00	20.00

Results

Effect sizes for this study were measured using Spearman's rho. After obtaining the GPA, CASS, and SSCS scores, a Spearman's rho correlation was calculated between each of the aforementioned scores and the CSCI scores. The researcher determined that a Spearman's rho correlation, a nonparametric rank correlation coefficient that measures the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables, was the appropriate analysis for each of the three correlations, not a Pearson's Product Moment Coefficient, because there was not a normal distribution of the ordinal data. This distribution was confirmed by visual inspection of the histograms for each variable. This decision was supported by Bishara and Hittner's (2012) study (2012) which found that Spearman's *r* is "more powerful for mixed-normal and non-normal

distributions" (p. 8). Likewise, Spearman's correlation is not very sensitive to outliers, so it is safe to utilize this type of analysis when there are outliers in the data.

Null Hypothesis One

A Spearmans' rho was used to analyze the first hypothesis, which stated that there is no statistically significant correlation between students' perceptions of the freshman academy environment and students' grade point averages at the end of the ninth grade year. Cumulative GPA at the end of the ninth grade year was collected from archival school data. The results of the Spearman's rho revealed that there is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and students' grade point averages (r_s = -.014, N = 151, p = .87). Less than one percent of the variance (r_p^2 = .0002) of student GPAs is explained by perceptions of the freshman academy environment. Therefore, students' perceptions of the freshman academy environment did not correlate with GPA for ninth grade students. Thus, the researcher failed to reject the first null hypothesis.

Null Hypothesis Two

A Spearman's rho was also conducted in order to analyze the second null hypothesis, which stated that there was no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment at the end of the ninth grade year. The results from this analysis revealed that there was indeed a moderate positive correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment at the end of the ninth grade year (r_s = .37, N = 151, p < .001). Students who reported higher scores on the CSCI in terms of the school environment also reported higher scores on the CASSS in terms of socio-emotional adjustment. In checking for the explained variance, r_p^2 = .137, which means that 14% of the variance in

perceived socio-emotional adjustment is explained by student perceptions of the freshman academy environment. Since the moderate correlation was statistically significant, the researcher was able to reject null hypothesis two.

Null Hypothesis Three

Finally, a Spearman's rho was used to determine whether or not there is a statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and students' perceived school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year. The results revealed that there is also actually a moderate positive correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and students' perceived school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year (r_s = .34, N = 151 p < .001). The proportion of variance, r_p^2 = .1156, reveals that 12% of the variance in perceived school confidence is explained by perceptions of the freshman academy environment. Therefore, this analysis supports the notion that a positive perception of the freshman academy environment was related to higher levels of school confidence among ninth grade students. Based on these findings, the researcher was also able to reject null hypothesis three.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this correlational study was to determine the relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student achievement and resilience, as defined by students' cumulative GPA, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year. The data and research related the resilience and stage-environment fit theories to the importance of school structure for ninth grade high school students. Prior to the discussion of the findings for each null hypothesis is a quick review of the results are presented. The implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research follow the conclusion section.

Null Hypothesis One

H_o1: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' grade point averages at the end of the ninth grade year.

Null hypothesis one looked at the relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student GPA at the end of the ninth grade year. There was no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment, as measured by questions 1-15 of the CSCI, and students' GPA at the end of the ninth grade year (r_s = -.014, N = 151 p = .87). Thapa (2013) suggested that students who perceive a positive school environment are more likely to excel academically. Freshman academies are implemented in order to provide an intimate, supportive environment where students can thrive academically. These academies place students in classes with only ninth grade students, teachers, and other staff. By doing so, students are surrounded by a faculty dedicated to the success of the ninth grade student (Ellerbrock, 2012). In addition, Felner et al.

(2007) describes interpersonal relationships within the school environment as an indicator of academic success.

In response to the aforementioned research, this study attempted to determine a significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy and academic achievement. For the purpose of this study, academic achievement was measured by student GPA at the end of the ninth grade year. Despite the theoretical connection between the freshman academy environment and academic achievement (Felner et al., 2007, Ellerbrock, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010), the data from this study did not yield a significant correlation between student perceptions of the academy environment and freshman academy student GPA. Some students with higher GPAs (3.0 and above) rated the school environment poorly, just as some students with lower GPAs (below 3.0) rated the school environment in a positive manner. The contrast between the results of this study and the results from previous studies could be attributed to other student factors not included within this study, such as demographic factors. For instance, De Wit, et al. (2011) found gender to be a predictor of academic achievement during transition. Likewise, Heck and Mahoe (2006) found that students from families of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to excel academically and persist during transition.

Null Hypothesis Two

H_o2: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment at the end of the ninth grade year as measured by questions 1-10 of the "People in my School" section of the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS).

Null hypothesis two sought to determine if there was the relationship between student

perceptions of the freshman academy environment there was a significant moderate positive correlation between perceptions of the freshman academy environment and perceived socio-emotional adjustment (r_s = .37, N = 151 p < .001). Lagenkamp (2010) asserted that the transition to high school is a period of academic vulnerability. In addition, students who are not socially adjusted to the school environment are more likely to struggle academically. Likewise, Wang and Eccles (2012) reported a decrease in school engagement as adolescents move from one level of schooling to the next. Their research attributed the loss of school engagement to the shift in social relationships that occurs as students change schools. This shift is often due to school feeder patterns, school size, and school structure. The transition to high school, which has been identified as a period of risk, can be considered a stressful life event for adolescents. Consequently, Siddall, Huebner, and Jiang (2013) emphasize the need for strong social support during stressful life events and life changes. According to Heck and Mahoe (2006), the transition from middle school to high school often makes students feel anonymous and disconnected from the school environment. As students adjust to new school staff and new academic requirements, they are often more concerned with reestablishing their social network so that they can feel like they are a part of the school community (Siddall et al., 2013). Moreover, disengagement from the school setting leads to a lack of motivation (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Students who feel that they have a strong support system within the school are more likely to promote a positive perception of the school environment, which encourages academic motivation (Wang & Eccles, 2012). This study sought to determine the correlation between perceptions of the freshman academy environment and social-emotional adjustment by exploring student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student perceptions of socio-

emotional adjustment within that environment. Based on the scores from the CSCI and CASSS inventories, there is a significant moderate positive correlation between perceptions of the freshman academy environment and perceived socio-emotional adjustment. Students who perceived the freshman academy in a positive manner also reported high instances of perceived socio-emotional adjustment. Likewise, students who maintained a negative perception of the school environment reported low instance of socio-emotional support and adjustment. Siddall et al. (2013) also found that students who experience positive socio-emotional adjustment and high instances of social support with their school environment were more like to display life satisfaction overall, which would promote higher levels of perceived socio-emotional adjustment. Therefore, this study supports the previous research studies regarding the relationship between socio-emotional adjustment and school environment (De Wit et al., 2011; Eccles, 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Null Hypothesis Three

H_o3: There is no statistically significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment as measured by questions 1-15 of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) and students' perceived school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year as measured by questions 44-48 and 58-62 the Student Self-Concept Scale (SSCS).

Null hypothesis three addressed the correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and perceived school confidence. Based on the responses from the 151 former freshman academy students who completed the CSCI and SSCS inventory items, the data revealed a significant moderate positive correlation between perceptions of the freshman academy environment and school confidence ($r_s = .34$, $N = 151$, $p < .001$). Research supports the idea that ninth grade students benefit from smaller learning communities during the transition to

high school (Ellerbrock, 2012; Felner et al., 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). An intimate school environment makes students feel more of a sense of attachment to their school. In other words, the more connected students are to their school, the more engaged they are and the more confidence they have in their abilities within the school setting (Wang & Eccles, 2012). When students feel a sense of attachment to their school, they are more likely to engage in school activities and want to perform academically (Ellerbrock, 2012). Likewise, Tavani and Losh (2003) stated that confidence or positive self-concept increases a person's motivation and potential to perform. Moreover, a student's internal motivation can outweigh the external factors in life that may make effective performance difficult.

This study aimed to find a correlation between perceptions of the school environment and school confidence, which promotes academic performance. Based on scores from the CSCI and CASSS inventories, there was indeed a significant moderate positive correlation between the freshman academy environment and school confident. Students who scored high on the CSCI for school environment also reported high instances of school confidence. In other words, the positive school environment likely caused students to feel more confidence in their work and their academic abilities. These findings were directly aligned with Tavani and Losh's (2003) research which highlights the importance of external factors such as the environment in relation to internal factors such as confidence and motivation. Students within the sample of this current study who possessed a positive perception of the freshman academy environment also felt more motivated and secure in the learning process. In addition, students who rated the school environment highly were more likely to want to go to school and participate because they saw the value in their presence and felt connected to their school. These results support the

aforementioned notion that students to feel more connected to their school environment are more likely to experience a successful transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

This study aimed to bridge the empirical gap in the literature in terms of freshman academies. Prior studies linked freshman academies to a decrease in ninth grade failures and higher standardized test scores (Ellerbrock, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Styron & Peasant, 2010). However, few studies have examined the long-term impact of freshman academies or the nonacademic influence of the design of the freshman academy. This study examined factors that lead to resilience during transition: academic achievement, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence. The two significant correlations in this study, perceived socio-emotional adjustment and perceived school confidence added to the literature base regarding the relationship between the freshman academy structure and student resilience during transition. The data from this study was collected from tenth grade students who had experienced the freshman academy for a full school year, as well as a summer off from school. These students persisted to their tenth grade year, without dropping out, which supports the whole theory behind the freshman academy design (Ellerbrock, 2012). The results from this study also contribute to freshman academy literature as the instruments used within the data collection process required students to rate their perceptions of the school environment (Guo et al., 2011) rather than just basing the analysis on the implementation of the academy alone. In other words, the fact that the freshman academy (the treatment) took place was not enough to determine the effectiveness of the design. Instead, student input was collected and considered in the results of this study, rather than standardized assessments or instruments of measurement.

Conclusions

The transition to high school is often a period of great stress and risk for adolescents (Edwards & Steinglass, 2001). The ninth grade has been identified as the most crucial year of high school for adolescents. It marks the last transition in schooling before higher education. The transition to high school is often accompanied by changes in school structure, faculty, peer groups, expectations, and curriculum (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). High school transition research has found that the anonymity of the traditional high school setting makes students feel lost and disconnected from school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Students who are disconnected from their school are more likely to experience an unsuccessful ninth grade year and either fail classes, drop out, or both. Research has shown that the majority of students who experience a successful ninth grade year are more likely to graduate within four years and not drop out of high school (Smith, 2006). Likewise, students who experience a successful ninth grade year are expected to be more successful beyond the ninth grade year (Smith, 2006).

In response to research, schools have implemented freshman academies within larger high schools as a protective measure for ninth grade students during this period of vulnerability. Research has shown that the freshman academy environment has the potential to prepare students for high school by easing the transition and fostering resilience (Langenkamp, 2010). The data from this study examined the possible correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and fostering resilience during the high school transition. The results of the study support previous research in terms of socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence, but not necessarily in terms of academic achievement. The small school environment and supportive staff helped students to feel supported and encouraged. Students

also reported feeling motivated and willing to learn. Therefore, the freshman academy implementation served its purpose.

This study included a sample of approximately one-third of the freshman academy population within a large high school serving grades 9-12. That being said, if the remainder of the freshman academy students had participated in the study, the statistics may have shown that the freshman academy had a positive impact on their ability to achieve academically, just as previous studies have linked freshman academies to increased test scores and decreased dropout rates (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Styron & Peasant, 2010). Based on the results of the study, the researcher concludes that in the case of Freshman Transition Academy, perceptions of the school environment are more related to the social aspect of the transition rather than academic success.

Although freshman academies provide many supportive techniques in the transition from middle school to high school, some stakeholders may question the effect of these academies on the transition from ninth to tenth grade. The Springfield, IL school district for instance, received some resistance from parents who thought that implementing freshman academies would only baby students and simply delay the high school transition challenge for one year (Saunders, 2011). Likewise, there was a concern that freshman transition academies may offer students a false sense of reality as it relates to high school (Saunders, 2011). Over time, students will be forced out of their small learning communities and enter heavily populated building and halls (Felner, 2007; Lagenkamp, 2010). Their support systems may disappear as the groups grow to include more students and provide less adult support. This sudden loss of support could lead to low performing tenth grade students, and increase the dropout rate during or after the tenth grade year (Langenkamp, 2010). Benner and Graham (2009) address this idea as they emphasize the

importance of focusing on supporting students during the first two years of high school. Based on the results of this study, it is clear that ninth grade students felt supported and confident after completing their one year in the freshman academy. Further research could address student success and resilience among students in higher grades who have experienced the characteristics of the freshman academy.

Although the small learning communities that freshman academies offer provide temporary support for students entering high school, they may not always prepare students for entrance into the main high school setting. Therefore, tenth graders may experience a delayed achievement gap as they transition into larger classrooms with higher expectations and interact with older students (Felner, 2007; Saunders, 2011). These possible consequences however can be addressed and solved by implementing bridge programs that prepare ninth grade students for the higher grades and continuing to offer the same support systems for students when they leave the academy (Cook, 2015). Bottoms and Timberlake (2007) also emphasize the importance of implementing summer bridge programs to prepare students for next grade level. As schools and school systems consider implementing freshman academies, they will also need to consider other efforts to support students as they transition from the freshman academy to the next high school environment, as the main campus environment must also fit with the development student's needs (Eccles, 2004). Beyond the freshman academy, students still benefit from a supportive learning environment, school connectedness and confidence, and a campus that is conducive to learning, all of which are recognized as protective factors for adolescence in school (Eccles, 2004; Howard et al., 1999; Styron & Peasant, 2010). The effort that is put into the freshman academy needs to be vertically aligned with the remaining grade levels, which is why vertical teaming is useful in schools with freshman academies (Ellerblock, 2012).

When considering freshman academy implementation, it is also important for stakeholders to emphasize the importance of a freshman academy as a program, not just as another building (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). For instance, some schools have only used freshman academies as a way to manage large class sizes, which does not fulfill the purpose of the freshman academy initiative (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The freshman academy environment cannot reach its full potential if it lacks the philosophy and support needed to ease the freshman transition. According to McCallumore and Sparapani (2010), freshman academies reach their full potential when they include only first-time ninth grade students taught by teachers who work only with these students. In addition, a successful freshman academy possesses a philosophy and practices that are specific to the ninth grade students and the vision for their achievement. One of the most important factors of successful transition academies is teachers who buy-in to the program, and are committed to make it work (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Habeeb, 2013). Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) emphasize the importance of hiring teachers who are committed to the freshman academy model and providing the high levels of support that are necessary as students transition to high school. In terms of the current research study, the freshman academy operated at a high implementation level, especially with indicator 2 which examines teacher roles within the academy. Teachers were dedicated to providing extra help for students, maintained data to support instruction, and participated in vertical teaming to support student growth. Consequently, many of the students within the sample of this research study reported high levels of teacher support and encouragement. This freshman academy would not have achieved these perceptions if the teachers did not buy-in to the program or its philosophy (Habeeb, 2013; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014).

The effects of the high school transition period are not only evident through academic achievement or failure. Tavani and Losh (2003) found a positive significant between self-confidence and academic performance. Students who felt confident in their ability to succeed within their school environment were more likely to push themselves academically. In addition, Tavani and Losh (2003) attributed some aspects of school confidence to the level of engagement and appreciation a student has for their learning environment. Research shows that success or failure during the transition to the ninth grade can be linked to student behavior and social peer groups and interactions as well (Benner & Graham, 2009).

This particular study did not identify a significant correlation between the freshman academy environment and student achievement based on cumulative GPA, despite prior research that linked the freshman academy environment to academic resilience (Benner & Graham, 2009; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Ellerbrock, 2012). However, the results of this study did in fact yield a significant, moderate positive correlation between the freshman academy environment and socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence. Each of these factors influences the connection a student has to his or her school and how engaged the student will be within his or her school (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). In the same manner, the size of the school environment also affects student achievement, and large class sizes can cause students to feel disconnected or disengaged from their schools (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Disengagement from school leads to a lack of school confidence and is the ultimate cause of ninth grade failures and increasing high school dropout rates (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Freshman academies offer the support and guidance students need to experience positive socio-emotional adjustment in school during the transition to high school. The results from this study yielded a moderate positive correlation between perceptions of freshman academy environment and socio-emotional support, which

supports Ellerbrock's (2012) theory regarding the use of freshman academies as a protective environment. In the same manner, the results from this study showed a moderate positive correlation between the freshman academy environment and school confidence. These results support prior research that emphasizes the importance of isolating incoming freshman to a small learning community that fosters school confidence and resilience (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Ellerbrock, 2012). In freshman academies, students rarely come in contact with upperclassmen, therefore avoiding negative interactions with those students in the academic setting. In addition, successful freshman academies have teachers, counselors, and administrators dedicated to only ninth grade students, and include freshman parents in all aspects of learning. Prior research supports the idea that the freshman academy keeps student from falling through the cracks and staying on track academically by providing support systems for students as they transition into high school expectations and assimilate into a new, larger social setting (Bottoms, 2006). However, the data analysis from this study revealed that the perceived school environment had more of an impact on students' perceptions of socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence than academic achievement.

Implications

The theoretical implications of this study are related to the resilience theory and the stage environment-fit theory. Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) defined resilience as the ability to persevere throughout stressful life events. Studies have shown that the transition to high school is a stressful period for some students (Ellerbrock, 2012). Werner and Smith (1992) suggested that positive relationships and interactions can promote resilience in adolescents during times of risk. The freshman academy was designed to provide an environment for ninth grade students that promotes positive intimate interactions during students' transition. Previous studies have found that implementing small learning communities for ninth grade students helps prevent them

from feeling anonymous (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Within the freshman academy, students interact with a team of faculty members dedicated to the ninth grade transition, and have less interaction with upperclassmen. This study found a significant moderate positive correlation between the freshman academy environment and socio-emotional adjustment, which supports Werner and Smith's emphasis on positive relationships during periods of risk.

The stage-environment fit theory emphasizes the importance of the school environment meeting the needs of the developing adolescent (Eccles, 2004). As students transition to high school, they are developing in many ways. At this point in their lives, ninth grade students are changing physically, emotionally, and socially. These students are leaving familiar social groups and leaning more toward their peer groups, and less toward their parents, for guidance (Smith, 2006). Likewise, these students are facing new, challenging expectations and curriculum at the high school level. This can cause students to feel overwhelmed and incompetent. With this idea in mind, it important for the school to provide an environment that supports these students and promotes confidence within the school setting. Previous studies have shown that students who view their school environment in a positive manner are more likely to excel academically (Thapa et al., 2013). However, the results from this study did not yield a significant correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and academic success based on students' GPA. Conversely, this current study did find a significant moderate positive correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and school confidence. These findings are directly related to previous research. According to Martinez et al. (2011), students who perceive a socially supportive environment are more likely to have high self-esteem.

The purpose of the freshman academy is to support students as they transition from a familiar learning environment (e.g. middle school) to a new, larger school structure with increased academic rigor and responsibility, academic tracking, and sometimes less personal support (Benner & Graham, 2009; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Langenkamp, 2010). Previous studies have linked high school failures and dropouts to an unsuccessful transition into high school (Langenkamp, 2010; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Other studies have found a significant relationship between the structure of the freshman academy environment and student success (Styron & Peasant, 2010). This current study examined student perceptions of the freshman academy and related those perceptions to student achievement, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence; three factors that are commonly associated with how successful students are as they transition into high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; De Wit et al., 2011; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Ellerbrock, 2012; Smith, 2006; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Implementing a freshman academy environment has the potential to ease the transition to high school while fostering resilience. Although, the findings from this study did not yield a statistically significant relationship between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and academic achievement based on students' GPA, there was a positive significant correlation between student perceptions of the school environment and social-emotional adjustment and school confidence. Prior research supports the importance of these factors in terms of student resilience and success in school (Eccles, 2004; Lagenkamp, 2010; Marvin & Marsh, 2009; Thapa et al., 2013).

Although this study only focused on one freshman academy, the data from this research study provides policymakers and school leaders with recent data related to student perceptions of the freshman academy and the benefits of such a structure. For instance, the CSCI instrument

calls upon students to rate interactions with adults and peers within the school environment, school safety, as well as academic expectations and social support within the school environment. Howard et al. (1999) refers to these types of environmental factors as protective factors in terms of fostering resilience. Moreover, the results of this study support prior research that suggests a correlation between a smaller learning community for ninth grade students and socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence (Benner & Graham, 2009; Felner et al., 2007; Thapa et al., 2013; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). As stated in the aforementioned research, students experience a more successful transition from one school environment to another when they perceive a supportive environment, experience socio-emotional adjustment, and possess school confidence (Martinez et al., 2011; Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2010; Tavani & Losh, 2003). Moreover, students who possess high levels of school confidence and socio-emotional adjustment are more likely to excel academically (Sparks, 2013; Tavani & Losh, 2003). Therefore, socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence are critical for academic achievement and equally has important. This study supports this assertion as students who perceived the freshman academy in a positive fashion also reported higher levels of socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence. Research suggests that such factors will make these students less like to fail or drop out of high school as a result of the high school transition (Tavani & Losh, 2003; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Therefore, school and district leaders who are looking to combat high rates of ninth grade failure and dropout could utilize the results of this study when considering the implementation of a freshman academy as a possible solution.

Limitations

There were several limitations of this study. First, this study included a convenience sample from a freshman academy at one school. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be

assumed to relate to all students who attend freshman academies. The results from this study only determined a possible relationship between the freshman academy and ninth grade student resilience at one school that has implemented a freshman academy. In addition, different groups of students may have varying feelings toward the idea of transitioning from one school to another. Therefore, the transition to high school may have a different impact on one group of students than the other, based on maturity level, level of implementation of the academy, student experiences within the academy, and other social or demographic contexts (Ellerbrock, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Moreover, it is important to note that students were already aware of their end of the year grade point average, which may have impacted their survey responses. This supports previous research has linked grade point average to student attitudes (Grzimek, Marks, & Kinnamon, 2014). Student responses on the CSCI, CASSS, or SSCS may have been influenced by negative feelings regarding the grades they had received, personal situations they endured during their time within the academy, or personal opinions about their teachers or other adults within the academy.

Another limitation for the study was the use of cumulative GPA which was reported based on school reported data. Dickinson and Adelson (2015) acknowledge GPA as "the measure of achievement most interpretable by the average person," but suggest that there is a potential for subjectivity in grading as well as potential sources of variance that are not clearly linked to student achievement" (p. 8). Likewise, there is no way to determine whether or not the information was recorded accurately or the grades were given fairly and consistently. This concept is the reason why Allensworth and Easton (2005) recognize the risk of using course failures as a predictive measurement of student success.

Recommendations for Future Research

Freshman transition research emphasizes the importance of the ninth grade year on future success in high school and beyond (Fulk, 2003; Smith, 2006). Students who experience a successful ninth grade year are expected to graduate from high school within the next three years. In response to this research, schools have implemented freshman academies and have reported gains in student achievement and sense of community (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). This study even found moderate positive correlations between the freshman academy environment and students' perceived socio-emotional adjustment and school confidence at the end of the ninth grade year. If the argument however is that freshman academies give students the support they need to be successful throughout the high school years, further research is necessary to show the long-term impact of these academies. Therefore, a longitudinal study that explores freshman academy students at the end of four years, or even beyond high school, may give further insight into the extended benefits of the freshman academy model.

Longitudinal information regarding the possible benefits of a freshman academy would be most useful for district leaders to determine whether the investment and sacrifice that comes with a freshman academy is worth it. Creating a small learning community with teachers and other staff that only work with freshman can be quite a challenge in terms of funding and scheduling. In addition, school stakeholders may be hesitant to implement freshman academies due to the possibility that the academy model may only delay the challenging transition from the ninth grade year to tenth grade year, rather than eliminating it. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) suggested that the more transitions students face, the more they struggle. With this idea in mind, it is crucial to determine whether or not transitioning from the eighth grade into the freshman

academy and then from the freshman academy to the tenth through twelfth grade population is actually beneficial.

Additionally, the researcher recommends a comparative study examining the effectiveness of the freshman academy model. The current study collected data from 151 students who had only experienced the ninth grade within a freshman academy. Therefore, it would be beneficial to utilize a causal-comparative research design to explore differences in academic achievement between students who attend a freshman academy during their ninth grade year and students who attend a traditional high school as a ninth grade student. In doing so, the researcher could determine whether or not freshman academy students perceived their school environment more favorably, and therefore experienced more academic and social success during the transition than ninth grade students in the traditional high school setting.

Furthermore, research suggests that ninth grade students who transition to the traditional high school setting are often overwhelmed and do not receive the support they need within such a large population (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). A comparative study would address this issue by examining student perceptions of each school structure, as well as the rate of student achievement and perceived socio-emotional adjustment and confidence and highlight the possible cause-and-effect relationships among both school formats. The results of the current study did not yield a positive correlation between perceptions of the freshman academy environment and student achievement, but there was a moderate positive correlation between the freshman academy environment and social-emotional adjustment and school confidence.

Considering the fact that the researcher was unable to reject the null hypothesis regarding the possible correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and end of the year grade point averages, future freshman academy studies should examine student's

perceptions of the environment before students become aware of the grades they earned during their ninth grade year. Student perceptions may have been influenced by their knowledge of the grades they received. In other words, students who earned lower grades may have reported lower CSCI scores, and students who earned higher grades may have reported higher CSCI scores.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

http://connectionsproject.illinoisstate.edu/HSTWresources/20060410/slc_rubric_aligned.pdf

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 10, 2014

Taneesha George
IRB Approval 1872.071014: School Structure and the Transition to High School: Using Correlational Research to Explore the Relationship Between the Freshman Academy Environment and Academic Achievement and Resilience

Dear Taneesha,

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. 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.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

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

Sincerely,

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

1971 UNIVERSITY BLVD. LYNCHBURG, VA. 24515 IRB@LIBERTY.EDU FAX (434) 522-0506 WWW.LIBERTY.EDU

Appendix C

School District Approval

COBB COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
Empowering Dreams for the Future

P.O. Box 1088
Marietta, GA 30061
Telephone: (770) 426-3300
www.cobbk12.org

July 8, 2014

Ms. Taneesha George
352 Fenbrook Way Sw
Marietta, GA 30064

Dear Ms. George:

Your research project titled, School Structure and the Transition to High School: Using Correlational Research to Explore the Relationship Between the Freshman Academy Environment and Academic Achievement and Resilience, has been approved. Listed below are the schools where approval to conduct the research is complete. Please work with the school administrator to schedule administration of instruments or conduct interviews.

School
South Cobb High School

Should modifications or changes in research procedures become necessary during the research project, changes must be submitted in writing to the Academic Division prior to implementation. At the conclusion of your research project, you are expected to submit a copy of your results to this office. Results cannot reference the Cobb County School District or any District schools or departments.

Research files are not considered complete until results are received. If you have any questions regarding the process, contact our office at 678.581.6829.

Sincerely,

Appendix D

Principal Permission Letter

South Cobb High School

Cobb County School District

"A community with a passion for learning"

July 9, 2014

To whom it may concern:

This letter serves as official permission for Taneesha George, a graduate student at Liberty University, to conduct the doctoral study entitled: School structure and the transition to high school: Using correlational research to explore the relationship between the freshman academy environment and academic achievement and resilience. I understand that the purpose of this study is to determine a correlation between student perceptions of the freshman academy environment and three other factors: on-track status, (on track or off track to graduate in four years) which is determined based on the number of credits earned and the number of semester Fs earned by ninth grade students; student GPAs, perceived socio-emotional adjustment, and perceived school confidence.

The data collection/research may not interrupt the normal flow of the school day. Consent and assent forms must be distributed and returned by all participants. Also, student participants must not be required to include their names or contact information in any of the research documents. Ms. George is permitted to collect/analyze data including, but not limited to, student surveys, transcript information, and school feeder patterns using student numbers.

Sincerely,

1920 Clay Road, SW Telephone: 770-819-2611 Fax: 770-819-2613 Austell, Georgia 30106

Appendix E

CSCI Permission Letter

LICENSE AGREEMENT

This LICENSE AGREEMENT, is entered into as of May 2, 2014 (the "Agreement"), by and between the National School Climate Center ("NSCC"), a not-for-profit corporation with offices at 241 West 38th Street, New York, NY 10018 and Taneesha George, an individual, residing at 352 Fenbrook Way SW, Marietta, GA 30064 ("Licensee").

WITNESSETH:

WHEREAS, NSCC is the sole and exclusive owner of a Survey (as such term is defined herein below) and all intellectual property rights related thereto, including, but not limited to Copyright Registration No TX0007381469; and

WHEREAS, the parties desire to enter into this Agreement with regard to the licensing, to Licensee, the rights to utilize such Survey and intellectual property.

Now, in consideration of the mutual covenants and agreements hereinafter contained on the part of each of the parties hereto to be kept, observed and performed, and for such other good and valuable consideration, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, the parties hereto covenant and agree as follows:

DEFINITIONS

In this Agreement, the following words, when capitalized, have the indicated meanings listed herein below:

"Author" indicates the author of the Survey (as such term is defined herein below), namely, the National School Climate Center.

"Survey" indicates the Middle/High Student version of Comprehensive School Climate Inventory ("CSCI"), V. 3.0, developed by the Author. The Survey includes the instrument items and construct structure, which contains 70 questions aimed at measuring the 10 core dimensions of school climate.

"Research Project" shall mean a single academic research study and related dissertation that examines student perceptions of the school environment, at a freshman academy, to student resilience and academic achievement. The Research Project will take place under the direction of the dissertation committee, chaired by Dr. Barbara Boothe, at Liberty University's School of Education.

1. GRANT OF LICENSE: NSCC hereby grants to Licensee a personal, non-exclusive, revocable, non-transferable, limited license to use certain questions and linked factors, from the Survey, in a single Research Project. Licensee shall be permitted to reproduce, solely in connection with the Research Project, the following:

a. The fifteen (15) questions identified on Schedule "A", attached hereto; and
b. The CSCI factors linked to such questions.

Without limiting the foregoing, any use of the Survey for curriculum development, consulting or other commercial purposes is strictly prohibited.

2. CONSIDERATION: NSCC shall, at all times, be credited as the Author of the Survey, as more specifically set forth in Section 3(c) herein below.

3. TERMS OF USE:

(a) Licensee acknowledges that the Survey is a copyrighted work and that it shall retain any copyright notices contained in or associated with the Survey, as directed by NSCC.

(b) Licensee shall share the results of the Research Project with NSCC.

(c) The Survey will be properly cited in the Research Project and NSCC shall at all times be also be credited as follows: "Use of the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory, authored by National School Climate Center, was made under license from the National School Climate Center, New York, NY, USA."

4. TERM AND TERMINATION: This Agreement is limited to use in a single Research Project and shall terminate at the conclusion of the Research Project. Use of the Survey in subsequent research or writings shall require a new license. This Agreement shall terminate immediately upon written notice from NSCC if you fail to comply with any provision of this Agreement. The Restrictions set forth in the Grant of License and in Section 5 below shall survive the expiration or termination of this Agreement.

5. OWNERSHIP & RESTRICTIONS: The Survey and any and all knowledge, know-how and/or techniques relating to the Survey in whole or in part, is and shall remain the sole and absolute property of NSCC and NSCC owns any and all right, title and interest in and to the Survey. All inventions, discoveries, improvements, copyright, know-how or other intellectual property, whether or not patentable or copyrightable, created by NSCC prior to, after the termination of, or during the course of this Agreement pertaining to the Survey is and shall remain the sole and absolute property of NSCC. No right, title or interest in or to any trademark, service mark, logo, or trade name of NSCC is granted to Licensee under this Agreement. Without limiting the foregoing Licensee shall not, and shall not authorize any third party to:

- make copies of, or otherwise reproduce the Survey or any part thereof, except for the limited purpose of generating sufficient copies for use in the Research Project;
- except as specifically permitted in Section 1 herein above, modify, abridge, condense, adapt, recast, transform, create derivative works, or otherwise alter the Survey in any manner or form, including but not limited to any minor or significant change in the wording or organization of any individual question contained in the Survey;
- except as specifically permitted in Section 1herein above, distribute, sell, lease, transfer, assign, trade, rent or publish the Survey or any part thereof and/or copies thereof, to others;
- use the Survey or any part thereof for any purpose other than as stated in this Agreement;
- use, without its express permission, the name of NSCC in advertising, publicity or otherwise.

8. CONFIDENTIALITY: All and any information related to the Survey including but not limited to information concerning clinical investigations, creations, systems, materials, software, data and know-how, translations, improvements ideas, specifications, documents, records, notebooks, drawings, and any repositories or representation of such information, whether oral or in writing or software stored, are herein referred to as confidential information. Licensee agrees to hold such

confidential information in confidence and not divulge it, in whole or in part, to any third party except for the purpose specified in this Agreement.

9. GENERAL PROVISIONS:

(a) This Agreement shall be governed by, and construed in accordance with, the law of the State of New York applicable to contracts made and to be performed in the State of New York, without regard to conflicts of law principles.

(b) Each party is an independent contractor for all purposes with respect to this Agreement. Nothing herein shall be deemed to imply or create any partnership, joint venture or agency relationship of any kind.

(c) No modification of this Agreement shall be binding, unless in writing and accepted by an authorized representative of each party.

(d) If for some reason a court of competent jurisdiction finds any provision of this Agreement to be unenforceable in whole or in part, that provision shall be enforced to the maximum extent permissible so as to affect the intent of the parties and the remainder of this Agreement shall continue in full force and effect.

(e) Any failure by any party to require strict performance by the other party of any provision of this Agreement shall not constitute a waiver of such provision or thereafter affect the party's full right to require strict performance.

(f) Each party acknowledges that no representations have been made which are not contained herein and that this writing contains the entire agreement of the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof, and supersedes all prior agreements or understandings, written or oral, concerning such subject matter. This Agreement may not be modified orally.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties hereto have executed this Agreement as of the date first above written.

LICENSOR:

National School Climate Center

LICENSEE:

Appendix F

CASSS Permission Letter

Taneesha George

From:
Sent:
Cc:
Subject: CASSS request
Attachments: updated casss form 2000.pdf; DRAFT CASSS2000 Manual.pdf

Thank you for your interest in the CASSS. Please find the manual and the measure attached. The measure is free to be used for its intended purposes with no fees at this time. Please be advised that the CASSS manual is currently undergoing revisions, so it is still in draft form. However, the data included in the manual is correct and up-to-date. Please let us know if there is anything else with which we can help you.

We do ask that you consider sharing your CASSS data with demographic characteristics at the conclusion of your study so that we may add the data to our psychometric database.

Thank you for your interest and good luck with your research.

Appendix G

SSCS Permission Letter

Taneesha George

From: George, Taneesha Ayahna <tgeorge16@liberty.edu>
Sent: Monday, May 05, 2014 9:55 AM
To: Taneesha George
Subject: FW: Permission to use the SSCS

From: _____
Sent: Friday, May 2, 2014 5:55 PM
To: George, Taneesha Ayahna
Subject: Re: Permission to use the SSCS

Dear Ms George,

Permission to use a Pearson assessment is inherent in the qualified purchase of the test materials in sufficient quantity to meet your research goals. In any event, Pearson has no objection to you using the Student Self-Concept Scale and you may take this email response as formal permission from Pearson to use the test in its as-published formats in your student research as long as no test form reproduction takes place.

Finally, because of test security concerns, permission is not granted for appending tests to theses, dissertations, or research reports of any kind. You may not include any actual assessment test items, discussion of any actual test items or inclusion of the actual assessment product in the body or appendix of your dissertation or thesis. You are only permitted to describe the test, its function and how it is administered and discuss the fact that you used the Test, your analysis, summary statistics, and the results.

Regards,

Please respond only to pas.licensing@pearson.com<mailto:pas.licensing@pearson.com>

Appendix H

Participant Recruitment Letter

Date: August 4, 2014

Former Freshman Academy Parent/Guardian
South Cobb High School
1920 Clay Road
Austell, GA 30106

Dear South Cobb High School Parent or Guardian,

As a graduate student in the Graduate School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate of Education degree (Ed.D.). The purpose of my research is to determine whether or not the freshman academy environment fosters student success and resilience. I am writing to invite your child to participate in my study.

Participants must have attended the South Cobb High School freshman academy as a first-time ninth grader for a full school year. If you are willing to allow your child to participate, your child will be asked to complete a 35 question survey that will take approximately 15 minutes. In addition, your child's grades will be accessed using his/her student number only. No names or contact information will be revealed during the data collection process.

For your child to participate, please read, complete, and return the attached **blue** consent document to your child's homeroom teacher. The consent document contains additional information about my research. In addition, please have your child complete and return the **green** assent form that is attached to the consent document. If you choose to allow your child to participate, he/she will be entered in a drawing to receive a $50 Visa Gift Card. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Taneesha George
9th Grade English Teacher, South Cobb High School
Graduate Student, Liberty University

Appendix I

Parental Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

SCHOOL STRUCTURE AND THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL: USING CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH TO EXPLORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FRESHMAN ACADEMY ENVIRONMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND RESILIENCE

Taneesha A. George
Liberty University
School of Education

Your child is invited to be in a research study that will explore the way students perceive the freshman (ninth grade) academy at South Cobb High School. Your child was selected as a possible participant because of his/her enrollment at a school with a freshman academy. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Taneesha George, a South Cobb High School 9th grade English teacher and graduate student in the Liberty University School of Education.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to see if the way ninth grade students perceive the school environment within the freshman academy has any impact on those students' grades, credits earned, socio-emotional adjustment, and school confidence.

Procedures:

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I would ask your child to do the following things:

1. Record his/her local school student number at the top of the survey in order for the researcher to match with each student's school records data.
2. Respond to 35 items on a paper survey, rating his/her perception for each item (approximately 10-15 minutes required).
    a. The first section will include 15 items regarding the school environment (Comprehensive School Climate Inventory, CSCI) that students will respond to on a 5-point scale.
    b. The second section will include 10 items regarding socio-emotional support (Child and Adolescent Support Scale, CASSS) that students will respond to on a 6-point scale.

c. The third section will include 10 items pertaining to school confidence (Student Self-Concept Scale, SSCS) that students will respond to using a 3 point scale.

3. Completed surveys will be collected and matched with school data records using student identification numbers to determine the relationship (if any) between each student's responses and on-track status (whether or not they are on track to graduate in 4 years) and grade point average. Students will not be identified or contacted in reference to any of this information.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

This study has minimal risks. The risks involved with this study are no more than what is to be expected of a normal school day. Students will complete the survey in a standard classroom during a homeroom period so that no class time is interrupted.

There is no direct benefit for participants in this study. However, your child's input will be beneficial to determining the effectiveness of the South Cobb High School freshman academy. Freshman academies were established to help ease the transition to high school and minimize high school dropouts. Participation in this study will help to determine whether or not the freshman academy is actually providing the support that it should. Many students who do not have a successful transition to high school decide to drop out during or right after the ninth grade year. As you may know, research shows that high school dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated, unemployed, and/or receive government assistance, which affects taxpayers like yourself. Therefore, a focus on freshman academies can potentially benefit society overall.

Compensation:

If you decide to allow your child to be a part of this study, **his/her student number will be entered to win a $50 Visa gift card** that can be used at the store/venue of his/her choice. Three students will receive this reward! The gift cards will be disbursed by the principal once the study has been completed.

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 and only the researcher will have access to the records. The printed information will be stored in a locked file cabinet, and the electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer.

Your student's name and other identifiable information will be excluded from all of the records and survey items used in this research study. Students will only be asked to write their student numbers on the survey, and the school records will only list student numbers as well—no names. All family and household information will be removed from the records report before I see it. Also, my results will be reported in the study without identifying your student or the actual name of the school.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or South Cobb High School. Likewise, participation or lack of participation has no impact on your child's grade or class status. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he/she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Taneesha A. George. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at tgeorge16@liberty.edu. My research advisor for this study is Dr. Barbara Boothe, and she can be reached at If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Statement of Consent:

Please complete the bottom portion of this form and have your child return it to his/her homeroom teacher. If you do not consent to your child's participation, please disregard this form.

Check all that apply:

- I have read and understood the above information.
- I have no questions at this time.
- I have asked my questions (if applicable) and have received answers.
- I consent to my child's participation in this study and all data collection.

Signature of parent or guardian: _____Student Number: _____Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

Appendix J

Student Assent

SCHOOL STRUCTURE AND THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL: USING CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH TO EXPLORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FRESHMAN ACADEMY ENVIRONMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND RESILIENCE

Research Participant Assent Form

Hello! My name is Taneesha George, and I am a graduate student at Liberty University. I am doing research about freshman academies. Since you were a freshman academy student, I would like to hear about your ninth grade experience. The ninth grade year can be very risky for students. In fact, many students have a hard time changing from middle school to high school. Because this is a common issue, your school has developed a freshman academy to help support you during your ninth grade year.

As a former freshman academy student, your input is very valuable to me. I would be honored to have you participate in my research study which will determine whether or not the freshman academy gave you the support you needed as you entered high school. If you decide to be a part of this study, **you will be entered to win a $50 Visa gift card** that can be used wherever you choose. Three students will receive this reward!

Participation is completely voluntary, and none of your grades or relationships with school staff members will be influenced by this study. All you will have to do is answer 35 survey questions (during a homeroom period) and agree to have me look at your grades. Although you will have to include your student number on the surveys, you will not have to write your name or any contact information. Also, I will not see your name on your grade report, but I will see your student number. This means that no one will know which responses came from you, and no one will know which grades are yours.

If you choose to participate in this study, your parent(s)/guardian(s) must also agree. If they agree with you helping with this study, please have them sign the parent consent form attached to this letter. It is very important that you understand that you are not required to participate, and you can change your mind at any time.

Agreement

If you have any questions for me about this study, you can contact me via email at tgeorge16@liberty.edu. Please sign below if you agree to participate in the study and have your student number entered to win the **$50 Visa gift card.**

Participant Signature	Student number	Date

Researcher Signature	Date