

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF EXPERIENCE IN MIDDLE  
SCHOOL HONORS MATH AND LANGUAGE ARTS COURSES AND  
STUDENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS  
FOR SIMILAR HIGH SCHOOL HONORS AND ADVANCED  
PLACEMENT COURSES

by

Melissa L. Butler

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

CONSTANCE PEARSON, Ed.D., Committee Chair

MICHAEL PATRICK, Ed.D., Committee Member

MELISSA TRAVILLIAN, Ed.D., Committee Member

SCOTT WATSON, PhD, Associate Dean, Advanced Programs

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate student and teacher perceptions concerning the impact of honors middle school language arts and mathematics courses on preparedness for similar ninth through twelfth grade classes at a high school in northwest Georgia. The questions that guided the study focused on examining the perceptions of students and teachers who had experienced this phenomenon and their notions of the impact that participation in middle school honors mathematics and language arts courses had on preparedness for non-gifted students enrolled in similar accelerated high school courses. A transcendental phenomenological design was used to discover the essence of experience in middle school honors mathematics and language arts classes. Student interviews, student surveys, and a teacher focus group contributed to the study in order to increase trustworthiness through triangulation of data. Horizontalization and clusters of meaning were utilized to identify common themes that depicted the essence of the experience. Almost all of the participants expressed the belief that middle school honors courses significantly contributed to increased feelings of preparedness and confidence for the challenges and rigor of similar high school honors and Advanced Placement courses. Both student and teacher participants shared mostly positive experiences regarding the phenomenon of middle school honors math and language courses and perceived the early exposure to these classes to be beneficial in preparing high-achieving students for success in subsequent high school honors courses.

*Keywords:* middle school, honors courses, perceptions, preparedness, accelerated curriculum, rigorous instruction

## DEDICATION

I would first like to thank my heavenly Father for the opportunity to pursue this degree. I pray that I will use it to glorify Him in all of my future endeavors and thank Him for providing me with the strength, perseverance, and ability to complete this task.

I want to dedicate this study to my family. Justin, your support and love were what got me through many days of this process and helped me reach the finish line. I love you and appreciate that you always believe in me. Natalie and Luke, you are two of the best children a mother could ask for. Thank you for being so patient and understanding when I had to be writing instead of playing.

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## List of Abbreviations

**Advanced Placement (AP)**- A national program geared toward preparing high school students for the demands of college courses. Classes are meant to engage students in the learning process and to help them become critical thinkers. Collegiate credit is awarded to students who meet a satisfactory score according to the regulations of their college of choice on the end of the year AP test for a particular subject.

**Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)**- The state of Georgia's standardized test which measures student achievement in grades first through eighth.

**Georgia End of Course Test (EOCT)**- The state of Georgia's standardized test which measures student achievement in grades ninth through twelfth.

**Infinite Campus (IC)**- The largest American owned student information computer system. The program stores records for behavior, attendance, grades, demographics, and other vital student information.

**National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)**- The largest national assessment of what students in the United States can do in the subject areas of mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history. The overseer of this assessment is the commissioner of educational statistics who is also in charge of the National Center for Education Statistics.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

Honors and advanced placement (AP) courses at the secondary level have been suggested by prior literature as an effective means of preparing students for future academic endeavors. Research has shown that participation in more rigorous coursework provided benefits such as increased academic achievement, college preparedness, and quality of work performance (Long, 2012). Due to the reported success of these advanced curriculum choices for high achieving students in grades nine through twelve, some middle schools are beginning to adopt similar honors programs (Testa, 2010). Unlike the systematic practice of tracking students, which began to dissipate in the 1970s, middle schools are currently embracing homogeneous ability grouping based on subject-by-subject performance as a way to differentiate instruction and meet the needs of all student learners (Worthy, 2010).

Middle school students are developmentally, socially, and academically different from their adolescent peers in high school (Testa, 2010). Although much research has been conducted to endorse the implementation of advanced courses in high school environments, there remains a need to evaluate the effectiveness of honors programs at the middle school level. These pre-adolescent to adolescent students have specific needs that vary from their high school counterparts (Testa, 2010). Particularly in the area of mathematics, students who did not receive accelerated instruction early on in their academic career rarely participated in advanced courses as they progressed through high school and college (Ma, 2010). It is imperative to address these needs while taking into

account student perceptions of the benefits provided through participation in a middle school honors program.

The purpose of an honors program in middle school is to better prepare non-gifted students for the rigorous instruction associated with AP and honors classes in high school (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). Teacher perceptions of middle school honors programs are also vital to understanding their effectiveness on students' academic readiness, confidence, and performance in high school honors courses (Testa, 2010).

Administrative and teacher involvement in vertical alignment for middle school honors courses, especially those with the anticipated curricular challenges of high school honors and AP, have shown to be critical to the success of such a program (Friend, 2007).

This study investigated the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding experience in middle school honors programs and their subsequent effects on preparedness for the challenges and rigor of high school honors and AP courses. The study focused on the content areas of language arts and mathematics since these are the two core subjects which generally guide curricular decisions for all other fields.

#### Situation to Self

I currently work as a middle school language arts educator, and I have taught high school English in the past. I am dedicated to finding the best and most effective means of preparing my students for whatever lies ahead in their educational future. I strive to meet the needs of the diverse array of students that walk through my classroom doors each day, and this often means adapting the structure of my lessons for individuals or groups of children that perform differently than their peers. Sometimes this involves modifying the

material for those who do not understand, and at other times it means requiring more of those students who excel and demand a more challenging task.

As a mother of two precious children who fall at each end of this educational spectrum, I see the importance of this content adaptation in a new light. Through my son, I realize the critical need to meet the needs of our lowest achieving students. I feel that, over the past few decades, we have made great strides in providing these children with every opportunity to excel in the least restrictive environment available. Through the educational experiences of my daughter, who is a high-achieving student, I realize that we have often neglected to focus on meeting the needs of our highest achieving learners through the provision of rigorous and challenging curriculum. My desire is to see each of my own children, as well as my students, strive to meet expectations that are challenging and rigorous, regardless of ability level.

This study was important to me as an educator because I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how we can meet the educational needs of all students, including those who are high-achievers. The middle school where I currently teach recently implemented an honors program to serve students who have the ability to succeed when provided with accelerated and academically challenging course material. As a researcher, I wanted to better understand the perceptions of high school honors and AP students and their instructors regarding the effectiveness of participation in middle school honors courses as a means of preparation for the curricular demands of rigorous high school courses.

## Problem Statement

A void in current research existed on the effectiveness of middle school honors courses and their relationship to adolescent student and teacher perceptions of preparedness for high school honors programs. Testa's (2010) study found the following:

The number of middle schools in the United States that have adopted an honors program has increased, yet research on the programs at this level has lagged behind. The need for research specific to middle school honors programs is imperative due to the social, physical, and mental developmental differences between the adolescent student and the collegiate student on whom current honors program research centers (p.3).

School districts must rely on research that has been conducted regarding early college student success from high school AP courses to measure the benefits of implementing accelerated programs at the middle school level (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009).

Through homogeneous grouping of high achieving, non-gifted students in these accelerated courses, educators have the ability to provide an environment conducive to enhancing their creativity, independence, ability, and motivation at a young age (Testa, 2010). This is true in all subject areas, but is especially critical in math which continues to be an area of concern as the United States struggles to raise national mathematics standards (Lastra-Anadon & Peterson, 2010). It is critical to address the gap in the literature regarding students' and teachers' perceptions of this type of homogenous middle school grouping in order to fully understand its effectiveness in preparing students for high school honors and AP courses.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions of preparedness of high school honors and AP students who had participated in a non-gifted middle school honors program. For the purpose of this research, perceptions of preparedness were defined as students' observations of whether or not the middle school honors courses that they experienced led to a change in their perceived notion of confidence, ability, and overall readiness for a similar high school course. The study also examined the perceptions of the high school honors and AP teachers who instructed these students and their impressions of the effectiveness of the middle school honors program in preparing students for similar high school courses.

## Significance of the Study

Middle school honors programs are developed to vertically align with honors and AP high school content and to provide curricular experience in preparation for the challenges that students will face when beginning honors or AP courses in high school (Friend, et.al, 2007). Districts, school administrators, and teachers must understand the significance of how participation in these honors classes offered at the middle school level impact long-term student success. Vertical alignment of content and instructional methods can significantly affect students' preparedness for subsequent courses (Gilmer, 2010; Long, 2012). Mathematics courses in particular build upon key principles, and a firm foundation of knowledge is critical for students (Leow, et. al, 2004). Although research has suggested that increased rigor and accelerated curriculum are beneficial (Long, 2012; Matsumura, et al., 2008), this study looked specifically at the perceived significance of high achieving students' participation in middle school accelerated

courses on their levels of confidence, performance, and preparation for similar high school courses.

This study investigated whether the implementation of rigorous and demanding curriculum at the middle school level had significant effects on student perceptions of achievement and preparedness for high school honors and AP courses. This study helped to satiate the void in current literature regarding the effectiveness of exposing advanced achievers to honors courses in middle school. The results are available for use by school officials to aid in making curriculum choices for middle school students.

#### Research Question(s)

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study:

1. How does participation in a middle school language arts honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
2. How does participation in a middle school math honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
3. How do high school honors and AP teachers perceive the impact of a middle school honors program?

#### Research Plan

A transcendental, phenomenological qualitative design was used to conduct this research. “The basic purpose of a phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, pg. 58). This was an appropriate design choice because I was seeking to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences in a middle school honors program and to understand the “essence” of those experiences (Creswell, 2007). By doing so, I was able

to find common themes amongst individual voices and to better understand the complexity of the issue.

A transcendental, phenomenological study allowed me to identify universal themes related to student and teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of experience in a middle school honors program on students' subsequent academic career, while bracketing out my own experiences to achieve a more accurate description of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). This study allowed high school students and teachers the opportunity to describe the effects of participation in middle school honors courses using their own words through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The results contribute to the literature regarding the effectiveness of implementing such a program before the high school years.

#### Limitations

This study was conducted at a suburban high school in North Georgia. There were approximately 1,350 students enrolled at the research site in grades nine through twelve at the time of the study. The middle school associated with the research site worked very closely with the high school. It was difficult to generalize these results to a metropolitan area or a school community that does not have a strong vertical alignment of middle and high school curriculum. I was also interested solely in the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the middle school honors program for the purposes of this qualitative study, and the results do not quantitatively justify the effectiveness of implementing such a program.

## Delimitations

For the purposes of this research study, students who qualified as gifted were eliminated from the study. These students would have participated in gifted math and language arts classes at the middle school level rather than having experience in a traditional honors placement. I ensured that the selected participants were enrolled in the middle school math or language arts classes for sixth, seventh, and/or eighth grades, and then went on to take honors or AP courses at the high school level. This non-randomized selection allowed me to analyze the perceptions of students who experienced the honors courses during middle school.

The particular school chosen for this study was selected because of the structure of its middle/high school honors program. The high school which served as the research site was located across the street from the middle school feeder which offered the sixth through eighth grade honors math and language arts courses, and a vast majority of students attended grades six through twelve on the extended campus. Transfer students and students who entered ninth grade from another middle school were eliminated from the study. The school system associated with the research site was comprised of only three middle and three high schools, and secondary educators met annually to plan for the vertical alignment of curriculum. Vertical alignment of curriculum was critical in understanding the perceptions concerning the relationship between the middle school honors courses and preparedness for similar courses at the high school level.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on an ontological assumption and led to my decision to investigate the perceptions of both students and teachers who have been associated with middle school honors mathematics or language arts courses. The teacher and student participants involved in the research have experienced a similar phenomenon; however, they each contributed their own perceptions and viewpoints. My goal was to discover common themes in their voices as I tried to better understand the nature of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

This chapter presents a systematic and comprehensive discussion of current and relevant literature related to the research topic. Theories that were significant to the research study were identified and synthesized in order to construct a firm theoretical framework. As the researcher, I addressed a gap in the literature regarding perceptions of the impact that participation in honors mathematics and language arts courses at the middle school level have on preparedness for high school honors and AP courses. By reviewing and synthesizing known literature and related theories, I was better equipped to understand the impact of middle school honors courses.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the research of a variety of theorists who have studied high-achieving students or had contributed research that relates to the social learning and grouping of individual learners. These theories provide a foundation for the current research.

## **Albert Bandura**

Bandura's social cognitive theory focused on the impact that others around an individual have on his/her learning (Bandura, 1994) and the cognitive processes by which individuals observe others and reflect on those observations by self-regulating their own thoughts and behaviors (Burney, 2008). Four main principles define this theory (Bandura, 1994). First, people learn through their observations of others and not only through their own experiences. Secondly, learned behaviors are not always applied and individual choices are usually based on perceptions or consequences from behaviors. Thirdly, individuals are more likely to model the behaviors of someone they come in frequent contact with and can identify with. Finally, self-efficacy is critical to a person's ability to learn or successfully complete tasks (Bandura, 1994). Bandura defined self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p.2).

This theory of social learning can be related to the current research concerning homogeneously grouped classes of high-achieving, yet non-gifted, learners. Bandura believed that individuals learn from the behaviors of those around them and strive to emulate the actions of others who model behavior with which they can identify. By placing high-achieving, non-gifted students in a classroom comprised of similar peers, they will learn from not only the teacher but from one another. Students who are academically talented but lacking in motivation or self-efficacy will be exposed to classmates with whom they can identify early in the middle school years. Advanced learners should thrive in an environment where they can observe and interact with socially and academically like-minded peers.

According to Bandura's theory, this exposure to a group of academically similar, high-achieving classmates will increase students' perceptions of their own abilities and cause them to imitate those around them (Bandura, 1994). Even though the students in this particular study are not labeled as gifted, they are academically capable of successfully completing accelerated and challenging coursework. Their perceptions of their own abilities may be altered at a critical and early stage in their academic development due to the environment in which they are placed thus positively affecting their performance and self-efficacy for the remainder of their academic career.

### **Virginia Burney**

Virginia Burney applied Bandura's social cognitive theory to gifted education in 2008. Burney discussed how high-achieving, gifted students want to do better and strive to emulate those around them because of the extrinsic motivation of observing their peers (Burney, 2008). Although her research involved students who were labeled as gifted, her research can be applied to learners who are advanced in a particular content area.

Social cognitive theory applies to learning in general, not just the learning for those of advanced academic potential. However, educational opportunities available to gifted children may not be designed with sufficient challenge to foster the development of learning strategies needed for advanced learners (Burney, 2008, p.130.)

Burney's theory provides for a connection between Bandura's social cognitive theory and the homogeneous grouping of non-gifted students in middle school honors math and language arts classes (Burney, 2008). This theory supported my assumptions that placing high-achieving middle school math and language arts students in a

homogenously grouped classroom supplemented with rigorous instruction and accelerated curriculum will impact student perceptions of preparedness and success in future high school honors and AP courses. Burney's research adds significance to the inclusion of Bandura's theory of social cognitive theory as a critical rationale for homogenously grouping high-achieving students in order to help them reach their full academic potential.

### **Jacquelynne Eccles**

Thirdly, I examined the expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation. Eccles (1983) conducted research specifically based on mathematics achievement but the theory can be related to student learning in general. Figure 1 below illustrates Eccles's idea that expectancy value directly influences students' performance and choices in the classroom (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). As noted in the chart, factors such as a child's perception, previous achievement related experiences, the beliefs and behaviors of others who socialize with the child, cultural stereotypes, and expectations of success all affect a child's achievement-related choices.

This theory supported my idea that identifying high-achieving students at the middle school level and equipping them with the necessary confidence in their ability and knowledge for the demands of AP and honors courses at a young age will increase their odds of being successful in high school. This theory provided insight into this study's proposal that students will strive toward higher academic achievement if program value and expectations are instilled early during the formative middle school years.

Figure 2.1. Expectancy-Value Theory

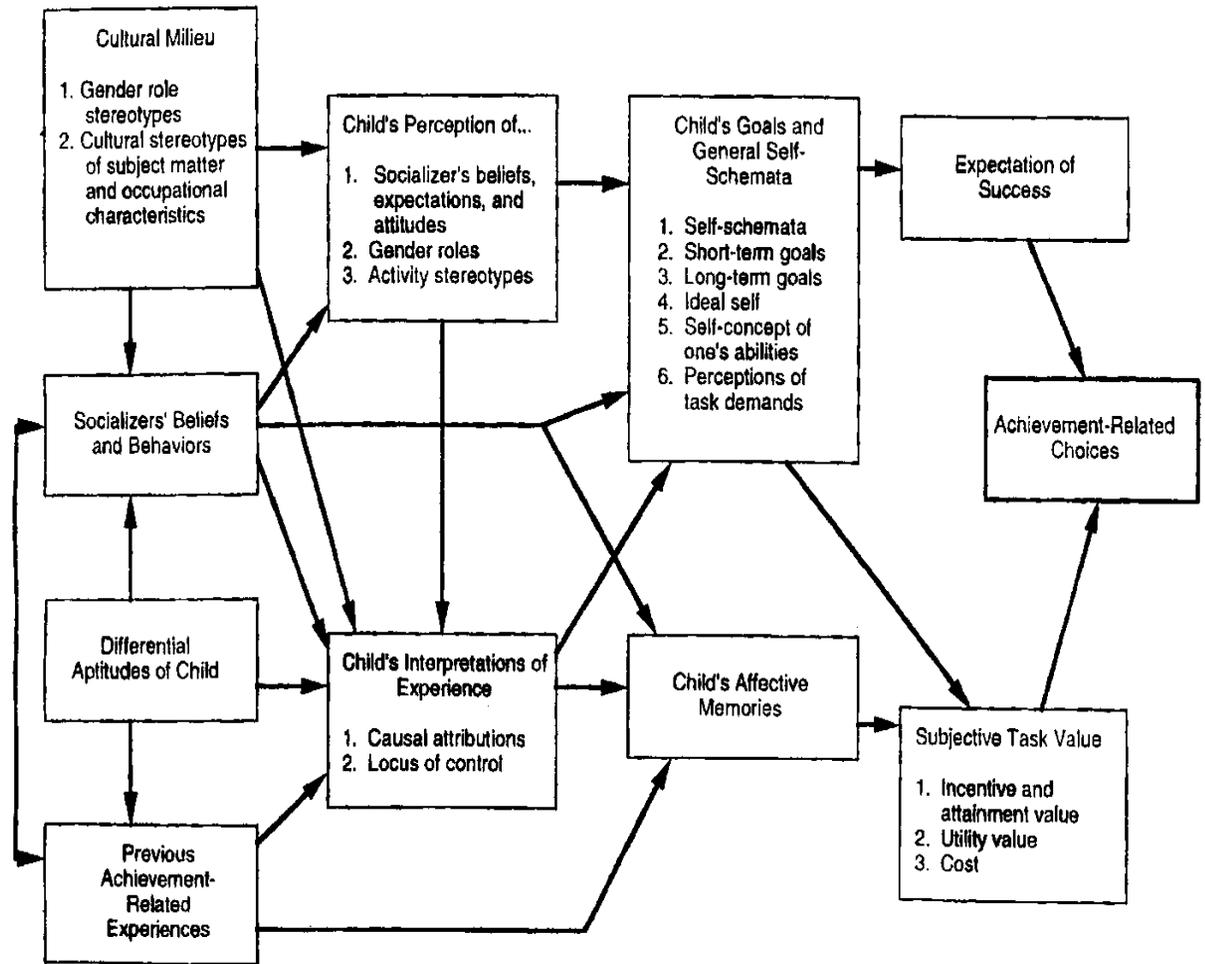


Figure 2.1. Eccles, Wigfield, and colleagues' expectancy-value model of achievement motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p.69).

## Review of the Literature

### The Decline of Tracking

In the early 1990s, the widespread educational practice of tracking secondary students based on their IQs and career aspirations began to decline (Loveless, 2009). The three distinct academic paths of college preparatory, general, and vocational tracks began to diminish as experts argued that this system contributed to a climate of inequality for

minority and underprivileged children (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, J., 1985). Goodlad and Oakes presented a grim picture of tracking that led to a national decline in the practice of grouping students according to ability. Tracking students was said to reduce the self-esteem of lower achieving children and decrease their opportunities to be successful, contributing members of society (Petrilli, 2011). Oakes (1985) described tracking students as an antiquated tradition that sorted students into similar groups and drew attention to differences for the mere convenience of creating easy instructional settings for teachers.

The national educational mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) also contributed to the dissipation of tracking in schools across the United States (Loveless, et al, 2008) by promoting the equalization of education for all students. As cited in Jolly and Makel (2010) from the U.S. Department of Education's website, the NCLB legislation was comprised of well-intentioned goals set to "ensure that all children had a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (p.35). To further complicate matters, states were then given the leeway to define critical terms such as "proficiency" and "challenging" which led to national confusion on acceptable academic achievement (Azzam, 2008; Jolly & Makel, 2010). Rather than maintaining focus on improving the academic performance of all student ability groups, as a nation, educational leaders further centered curriculum decisions on students who were below the proficiency bar which had been established by individual states (Jolly & Makel, 2010).

## **Lagging Progress for Advanced Achievers**

After the practice of tracking became a thing of the past, school systems nationwide began to see an increase in achievement scores among students in the tenth percentile (Loveless, 2008). This was particularly true for mathematics (Loveless, 2008). Funding and resources were allocated to aid in bringing the lowest students to a higher academic level (Jolly & Makel, 2010; Loveless, 2008). However, there was a drawback that is becoming more noted in current research. The implementation of NCLB did have a correlational effect on the scores of low achieving students from 2000-2007 (although a causal effect cannot be attributed to the success of the mandates), but in contrast the mathematics and language arts scores of the highest achieving students began to level off (Loveless, 2008). Again, this is evident in both mathematics and language arts/reading but most noticeable in mathematics. Figures 2.2-2.7 below illustrate the notable discrepancy found by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationally representative report card on private and public school progress (Hanushek, Peterson, & Woessman, 2011), between math and language arts/reading scores amongst the tenth and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles during the NCLB era. Figures 2.2.- 2.3. illustrate the gains made by students in both 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics and 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts before and after the implementation of NCLB in 2002. Mathematics scores in figure 2.2 show a notable leveling off after the national mandate, while language arts scores remain stable but show no notable increase. Figures 2.4-2.7 show a more detailed breakdown of scores reported for each content area in both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. In mathematics, the lowest tenth percentile consistently showed greater increases than the highest tenth percentile regardless of the grade level. In language arts, the 4<sup>th</sup> grades scores illustrated

significantly greater gains. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores showed no change for the top tenth percentile of students and a three percentage point decrease for students in the lowest tenth percentile.

Figure 2.2 8<sup>th</sup> Grade NAEP Math Scores 1992-2007 90<sup>th</sup> percentile

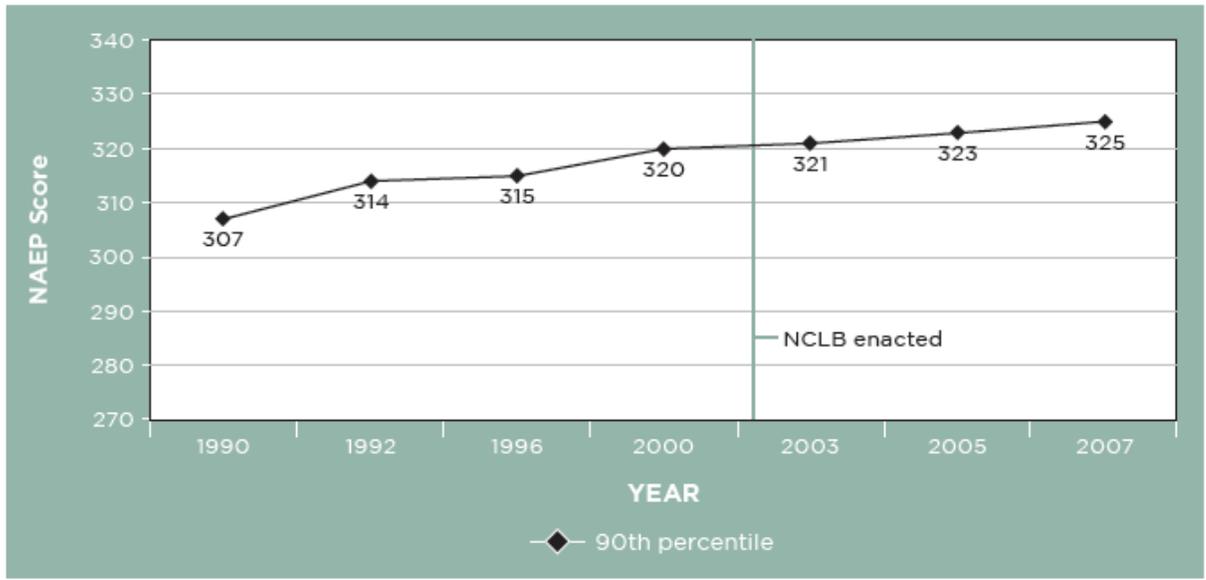


Figure 2.3 8<sup>th</sup> Grade NAEP Reading Scores 1992-2007 90<sup>th</sup> percentile

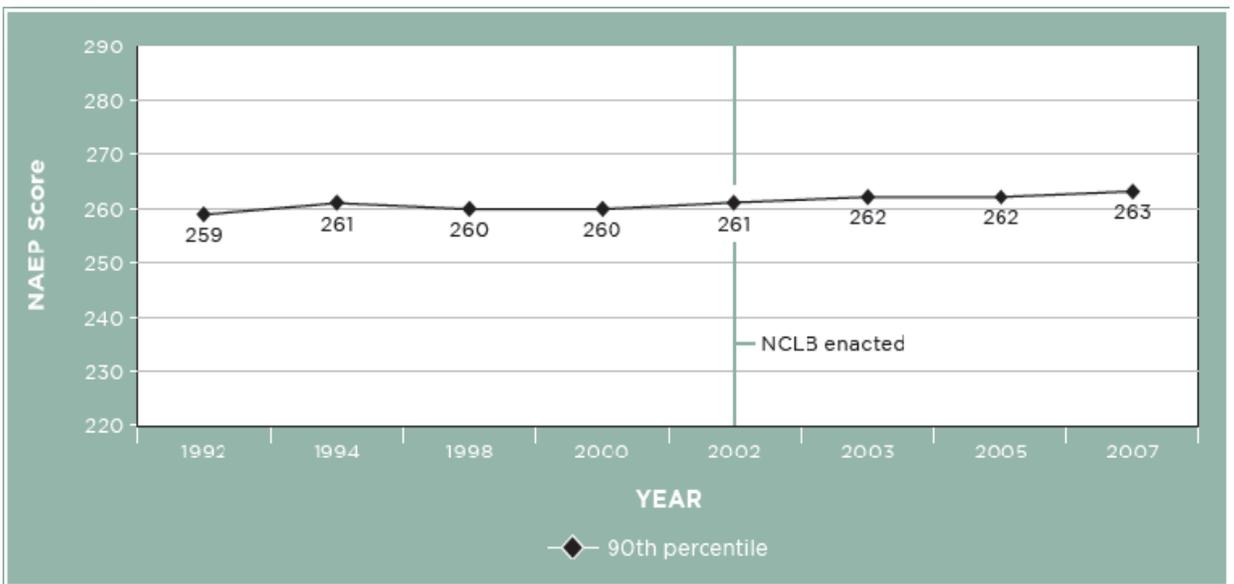
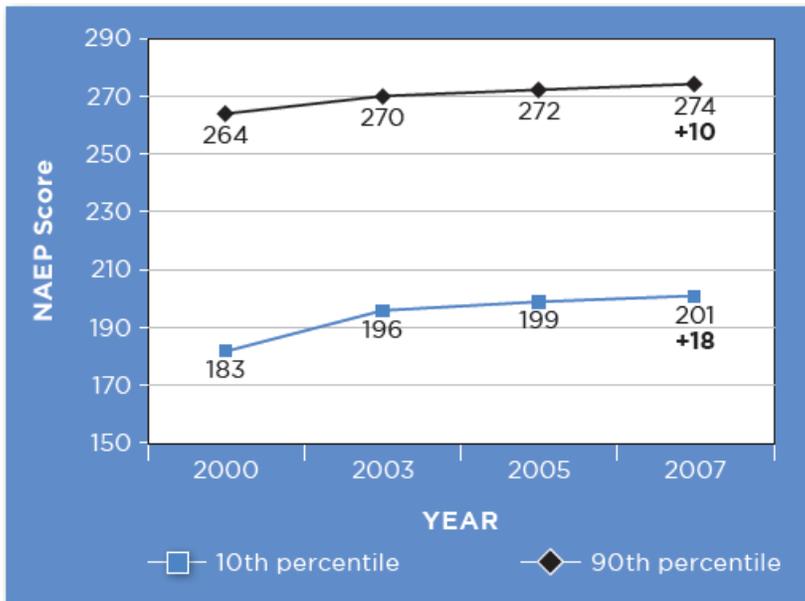
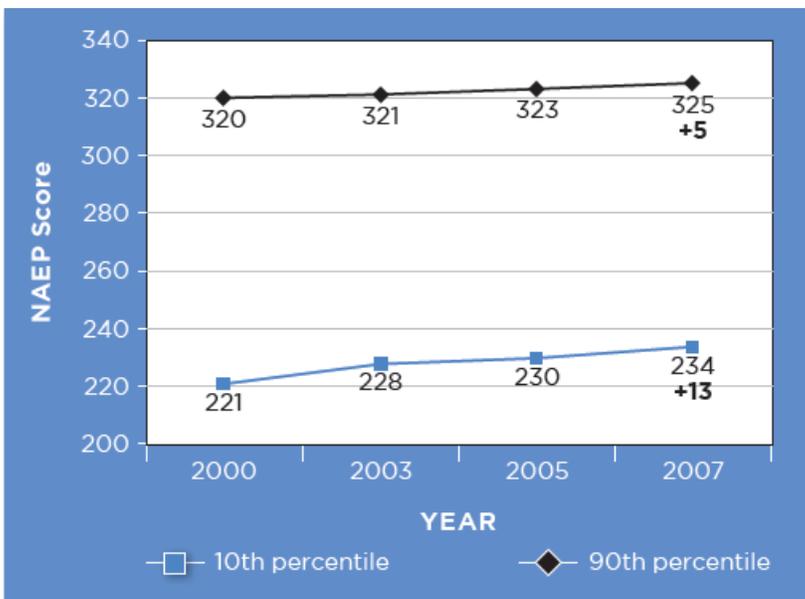


Figure 2.4 Comparison of 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Math NAEP Scores from 2000-2007, Tenth and 90<sup>th</sup> Percentiles



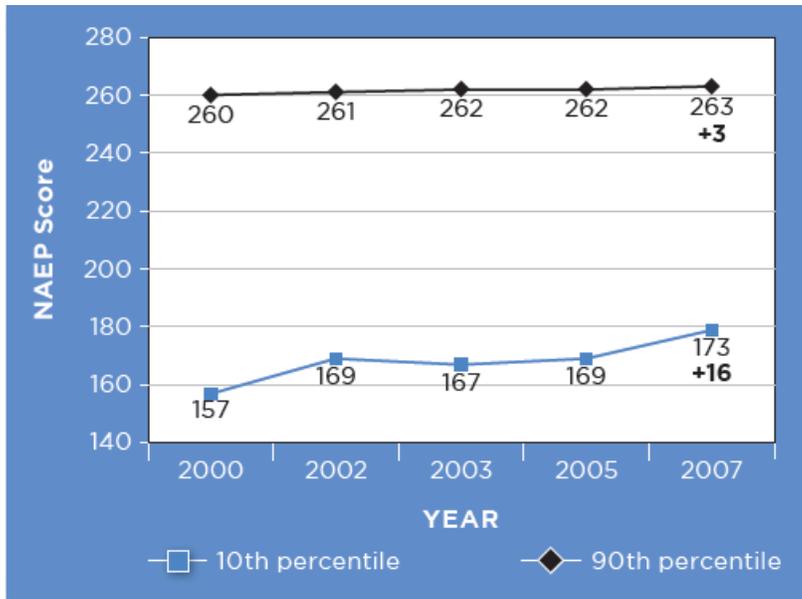
*Note:* National means: 2000=225, 2007=241, a change of +16  
*Source:* Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

Figure 2.5 Comparison of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Math NAEP Scores from 2000-2007, Tenth and 90<sup>th</sup> Percentiles



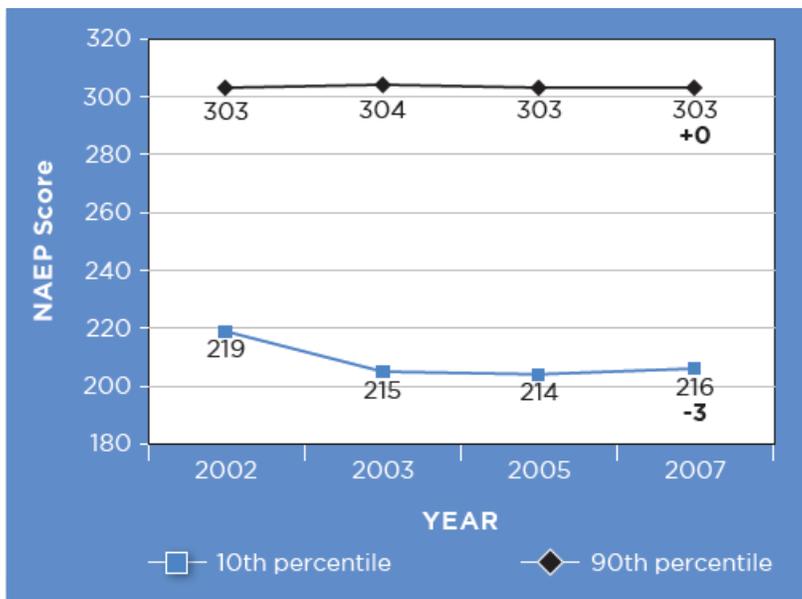
*Note:* National means: 2000=225, 2007=241, a change of +16  
*Source:* Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

Figure 2.6 Comparison of 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading NAEP Scores from 2000-2007, Tenth and 90<sup>th</sup> Percentiles



*Note:* National means: 2000= 215, 2007=222, a change of +7  
*Source:* Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

Figure 2.7 Comparison of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading NAEP Scores from 2000-2007, Tenth and 90<sup>th</sup> Percentiles



*Note:* National means: 2002= 265 and 2007= 264, a change of -1  
*Source:* Main NAEP data explorer, National Public sample

The data from NAEP gives credence to the idea that progress is lagging in secondary education for students who are advanced achievers. The discrepancy between the lowest tenth percentile and the highest tenth percentile seems to be more notable during the late elementary years for reading/language arts and during the middle school years for mathematics (Loveless, 2008). This discrepancy is addressed in a recent study that focused on the neglect of high achieving students in our nation (Azzam, 2008). A survey of educators reported that eighty-one percent believe that “struggling students” get one-on-one attention from teachers while only 5% believe that “academically advanced” students get the same type of attention on a regular basis (Azzam, 2008). Although good-intentioned, NCLB’s focus on narrowing the achievement gap has contributed to the establishment of a national bar of underachievement for high-ability learners (Loveless, 2008).

NCLB and its legislative focus have fostered an educational environment that is unyielding in its mission to meet minimum expectations through the use of curriculum driven by standardized testing (Hockett, 2009). Prior research studies that have focused on any educational reform efforts, not just NCLB, which impose common standards for the purpose of meeting minimal student performance goals have historically boded poorly for high achieving students (Jolly & Makel, 2010; Renzuli and Reis, 1991; Gallagher, 2004). When the majority of attention and funding is allocated to meeting the needs of low performing students who are on the bubble of proficiency, programs for high ability students are generally among the first cuts (Jolly & Makel, 2010). A recent study by McMurrer and Kober (2011) recommended that greater attention needs to be

given to meeting the needs of high-achieving learners as well as those that are low-achieving.

Research shows that gifted students learn differently from their classroom peers. These differences include being able to process more information over a shorter period of time, thinking in an abstract and complex manner, learning information for the first time (making re-teaching and repetition unnecessary, liking and seeking intellectual challenge, and already knowing 50 to 60% of the curriculum at the beginning of the school year (Jolly & Makel, 2010, p.36).

One method of meeting these needs is to provide access to more challenging and rigorous curriculum through educational course offerings such as honors and accelerated classes, even as early as the middle school years.

### **Honors and Advanced Placement Courses**

The association between high school honors and AP courses and student preparedness for postsecondary education has been the topic of numerous research studies (Klopstein, et al, 2008; Long, et al, 2012). Most findings have indicated a positive correlation between enrollment in advanced courses and success in postsecondary academic endeavors. These courses tout a plethora of opportunities for increasing student collegiate readiness such as increased skills, knowledge, and preparation as well as exposure to curricula that is more academically challenging and rigorous in nature (Long, 2012).

The rigor and challenge offered in AP and honors courses are the most beneficial factors when determining the effectiveness of these types of classes. Recent research studies which were designed to control for the likelihood that more academically and

motivationally capable students tend to enroll in AP courses have shown benefits other than increased achievement scores in early college for high school students who participated in Advanced Placement courses (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Sadler and Tai, 2007; Dougherty, et. al, 2006). Klopfenstein and Thomas found that the first year retention percentages were lower for students who participated in high school AP economics than their academically compatible peers who did not (2009). Caucasian students who were enrolled in the AP course had a 2.68 lower percentage of being retained their freshman year and African American students who were enrolled in high school AP economics had a 4.34 lower percentage of freshman retention when compared to students who were similar in every other aspect (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Clark, Scafidi, & Swinton, 2012). Dougherty, et al. (2006) found a positive correlation between an increased number of high school AP students and an increased percentage of high school graduates who go on to successfully complete college. Sadler and Tai (2007) reported a modest increase in collegiate science courses for students who completed a science AP course when compared to academically similar students who did not. All of the previously mentioned studies reported that high school AP courses had a positive effect on the success of students who went on to enroll in college when compared to academically similar peers who did not participate in the high school AP courses (Clark, Scafidi, & Swinton, 2012).

Research concerning honors, or advanced, high school courses has suggested similar benefits to those associated with AP courses when examining the relationship between participation and collegiate success. Leow, Marcus, Zanutto, and Boruch (2004) reported that advanced course-taking is consistently associated with higher achievement

by using propensity score analysis to measure the effects of advanced course taking on math and science achievement while controlling for background variables. Long, Conger, and Iatarola (2012) found considerable differences in achievement outcomes for 10<sup>th</sup> grade standardized test scores, enrollment in college, and success in postsecondary endeavors for students who participated in advanced courses or accelerated courses in high school. These findings indicate value in offering advanced, honors, or AP courses at the high school level.

In contrast, there are studies that dispute the argument that increased success in collegiate academics can be attributed to enrollment in secondary honors and AP courses. Klopfenstein and Thomas (2008) conducted a study that investigated the link between AP experience and success as an early college student. Their findings questioned the practice of requiring AP courses to be offered at every school and argued that participation in an AP program did not share a causal relationship with collegiate success (Klopfenstein, et al, 2008). The researchers noted that students who generally took AP courses were more naturally prone to thrive in college regardless of their AP course history in high school. Despite their uncertainty concerning the benefits of the AP program, the study did find math and science experiences to be a significant factor in postsecondary success.

It would be more efficient for postsecondary institutions to focus on the years of high school science and math studied as math and science experience consistently emerge as strong predictors of college and labor force success, and there is much stronger evidence of a causal link between math and science training and life success (Klopfenstein, et al, 2008, p.888).

Although this study contended the effectiveness of participating in an AP program as a primary means of increasing college readiness, the researchers did not question the advantages of exposure to increased mathematics curricula at the secondary level. The stimulating and challenging instructional methods that are often employed in honors and AP courses indicate the true value of advanced course participation. This is a practice that can be beneficial even at an early adolescent age, when AP courses are not available, through the implementation of pre-honors courses in the middle school.

### **The Benefits of Increased Rigor**

Increased academic rigor for the purpose of this study can be defined as curriculum that is rooted in the goal of deep understanding, emphasizes student outcomes, moves students toward content expertise while maintaining a balance between breadth and depth, promotes integration of learning across content areas, and challenges students based on developmental appropriateness (Hockett, 2009). When this level of instructional rigor is attained, students will begin to develop skills that ameliorate their ability as a critical thinker and lifelong learner, as well as contribute to their educational knowledge of a particular subject. Students are also exposed to complex ideas, topics, and discussions that engage them as learners and aid them in understanding content material in a way that goes beyond basic comprehension of information on a page when instruction is presented in a way that challenges them to go beyond minimum requirements (Matusumura, et al, 2008).

While the definition of challenging curriculum is similar for all subjects, Matusumura, Slater, and Crossen (2008) provided clear characteristics of what rigorous instruction in particular content areas should resemble.

In mathematics, rigorous instruction also is characterized by students engaging with high-level mathematical tasks that support the development of connections between mathematical ideas and different representations of those ideas throughout a lesson (Matsumura, et al, 2008, p.296).

Mathematics is a subject that is difficult for many learners. Struggling students often require a large percentage of a teacher's time and effort, leaving the high-achieving learners in a mixed abilities classroom to reach a goal far below what they might be capable of reaching (Azzam, 2008). While educators are meeting the needs of some learners effectively, the gap between high-achieving students and low-achieving students is closing with adverse effects on those who are talented mathematics students (Loveless, 2008).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education released a bleak report outlining the dire situation regarding mathematics achievement in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). The report found that three out of every ten college freshmen are immediately placed in remedial math courses and community colleges spend \$1.4 billion annually on costs associated with mathematics remediation alone (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). Rigorous and challenging coursework prior to college is essential for reducing the remediation costs and better preparing students for both postsecondary education and the workforce (Ma, 2010). Opportunities for early acceleration in mathematics could be an effective means to prepare middle school students for the rigor and challenge of participation in high school and college advanced mathematics courses. A study by Atanda in 1999 concluded that students who were enrolled in formal algebra as eighth graders were much more

likely to reach a high-level math course such as trigonometry or calculus in high school and apply to a four year institution. However, there is still little research regarding the academic and motivational benefits of enrolling high-achieving mathematics students in honors or accelerated courses that provide opportunities for exposure to rigorous and challenging curriculum during the formative middle school years.

A definition for rigorous curriculum concerning language arts is also provided by Matusumura, Slater, and Crossen (2008).

In reading comprehension, rigorous instruction exposes students to texts that contain ideas that are complex enough to support meaningful writing topics and discussion and engages the students in activities that require them to construct meaning beyond what is represented on the page (p.296).

For students who excel in written expression and comprehension, there is a dire need for teachers to push them toward developing strong analytical skills that will prove advantageous as they proceed through their educational career and enter the workforce (Matsumura, Slater, & Crossen, 2008). Tasks that require students to go beyond basic comprehension of a text and questions that require higher order thinking skills challenge high-achieving students to deepen their understanding of what they read and are critical in helping them to reach their highest reading potential (Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008). This type of instruction has proven significant for all students (Grier, 2002), but learners who are talented in this content area are again often overlooked in a classroom with mixed ability students due to the high demand for the teacher's attention from the lowest pupils (Azzam, 2008).

Especially in light of the recent implementation of the Common Core Curriculum as the first nationally aligned educational standards in the United States, emphasis on providing all students with a challenging and rigorous curriculum is at the forefront of educational decisions (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Policy makers and leaders in education are focused on addressing the declining rank and mediocre performance of American students in comparison with other nations. An enriched and differentiated curriculum design has the potential to be beneficial for all types of learners (Grier, 2002), but may be particularly effective with homogeneously grouped high-achieving students who usually respond well to enriched and differentiated instruction (Reis, 2009).

### **The Rise of Homogenous Grouping**

After Oakes's study (1985) led to the dissipation of tracking in United States educational institutions, a new practice of homogeneous grouping among student populations began to gain favor (Reed, 2008). This type of classroom ability grouping differs from tracking in that it is not as permanent or extensive as its predecessor. With homogeneous grouping, students are placed in courses that expose them to a more rigorous academic climate based on annual evaluations in each subject area. Placements are decided by a student's performance in each subject area rather than an overall I.Q. and may change as needed. These types of ability placements in recent years have helped to alleviate some of the complaints from those who were critical of the abolishment of tracking that took place in the early 1990's and have created new, more flexible course levels for different subjects in many of America's high schools (Duflo, Dupas, & Kramer, 2009). A major challenge to educators and school leaders has been the difficulty of

determining the long-term impact that these homogenously grouped classes have had on student achievement. Several studies have attempted to understand the connection between homogenous grouping and student achievement but most research has been done at the high school level (Reed, 2008; Reis, 2009; Kulik, et al, 1992; Duflo, Dupas, & Kramer, 2009).

Studies conducted to assess homogeneous grouping in high school students have shown little to no, or even negative, effects on lower performing groups of students; however, higher to average ability groups have shown positive effects in regards to academic achievement (Reed, 2008; Reis, 2009; Kulik, et al, 1992). Kulik and Kulik found that high and middle achieving students placed in homogeneously grouped classes of like students demonstrated increased academic achievement when compared to similar students in classes with students of mixed ability (1992).

One recent study that did examine homogenous grouping of middle school students concluded that ability grouping for English/language arts showed no statistically significant academic achievement difference, however an increase was noted for mathematics (Tracking Benefits, 2010). Schools that offered only one math course in eighth grade reported a lower number of advanced students based on state standardized test scores (Tracking Benefits, 2010). With each additional curricular track level for mathematics, researchers reported a three percentage point gain in the number of students scoring in the advanced category on the state standardized test (Tracking Benefits, 2010).

In recent years, many schools have returned to the practice of tracking but have approached the issue with the insight of how students were inappropriately labeled in the past and the desire to create appropriate groups based on ability to better meet the needs

of all learners (Nevi, 2002). Inappropriate tracking of the past assumed that lower achieving students did not need a challenging and rigorous curriculum. Nevi suggested that appropriate tracking must be centered on providing high quality knowledge to all students but at an instructional level that is based on their abilities and will allow them the opportunity to display academic growth and experience success (2002). “Tracking is not appropriate when the intent is to provide the lower-track students with an alternative curriculum that does not lead to the high-status knowledge” (Nevi, 2002, p.26).

However, homogenously grouping high-achieving middle school students based on their ability to excel in a particular content area could be an effective and efficient means of better preparing students to meet the demands of high school and postsecondary curriculum as well as equipping them for a globally competitive workforce (Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008).

### **The Middle School Student**

“Early adolescence is a critical transition period for the maintenance of academic achievement” (Veronneau & Dishion, 2011, p.99). A recent study by Veronneau and Dishion (2011) found that the achievement, motivation, and performance of peers surrounding a student served as an indicator of how successful a student might be in school . Little research has been conducted on the influence of friends’ characteristics concerning the academic achievement of students. The middle school years are a time when adolescents begin to discover their self-identity and how they fit into the social network around them. They define themselves academically, behaviorally, socially, and personally during this significant period of self-discovery (Cleary & Chen, 2009).

Prior research has determined that the use of ability grouping for high school students is an effective means to differentiate instruction for high-achieving students. There is however, a lack of research on this topic at the middle school level (Testa, 2010).

Middle school is a very important transitional stage for students to develop into more advanced and independent learners. Being equipped with the right learning strategies enables them to improve learning efficiency and to be better prepared for more advanced intellectual challenges (Liu, 2009, p.319).

Recognizing the strengths of students who have successfully mastered curriculum in a particular subject and equipping them with the skills necessary for a rigorous course schedule early in their academic career has been suggested by prior research as an effective means of preparing academically gifted children for the challenges that lie ahead (Liu, 2009; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008).

Early adolescent students who seem to naturally excel in certain areas of their education still need to learn strategies and be provided with challenging material in order to fully develop to their potential (Willis, 2007). High-achieving students who are academically successful due to natural ability need to encounter material that will be challenging for them during the middle school years in order to be prepared for high school. Research has shown that middle school students often experience a decline in motivation and self-efficacy during this transitional period in their academic journey (Usher, 2009). If educators present highly capable students with enriching, demanding, and accelerated instruction during these critical developmental years, students will have the opportunity to develop skills such as critical analysis, organization, prioritizing,

deduction, induction, creative problem solving questioning, and other higher cognitive functions which will aid in their later high school and postsecondary achievement (Willis, 2007).

Research studies of ability grouping based on academic performance in a particular content area rather than on an overall I.Q. have shown positive results for high-achieving students (Hallinan, 2000; Terwel, 2005). Students have been found to very seldom go beyond the minimal task requirements presented by a teacher for an assignment (Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008). By grouping students according to their ability in a particular content area in which they excel, high-achieving students are exposed to challenging instruction and higher expectations that require them to go beyond what might be expected in a heterogeneously grouped academic environment in which the teacher has little time to differentiate assignments based on the needs of the top performing students.

In the area of mathematics, students who do not receive accelerated instruction early in their academic career rarely participate in advanced courses as they progress through school (Ma, 2010). A 2006 study that investigated the characteristics of students who were most likely to benefit from rigorous mathematics instruction found that “students who were self-regulated, had strong mathematical backgrounds, and had low levels of frustration benefited more from high-quality instruction (Jones & Byrnes, 2006, p. 328). All students who fit this description do not fall into the gifted category but may benefit from accelerated mathematics curriculum options.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report in 1983 entitled *A Nation at Risk* that was one of the first indicators of insufficient mathematical

achievement in the United States (Ma, 2010). This concern has grown across the nation as educational leaders struggle to find methods to increase math achievement among graduates who are entering the postsecondary educational system and workforce with insufficient knowledge of mathematical concepts (Ma, 2010). Ma's study on the effects of early acceleration of students in mathematics on taking advanced mathematics coursework in high school (2010) suggested that keeping high-ability students in regular mathematics classrooms significantly decreased their probability of participating in advanced mathematics courses in high school. With middle school and early adolescence proving to be such a critical period in academic achievement (Veronneau & Dishion, 2011), the implementation of accelerated math honors courses during this time should provide high-achieving math students the opportunity to receive advanced instruction at an early stage which will increase their likelihood in successfully participating in future demanding math courses (Ma, 2010).

Students who are high-achieving in language arts could also benefit from receiving accelerated instruction early in their academic career.

In reading comprehension, rigorous instruction exposes students to texts that contain ideas that are complex enough to support meaningful writing topics and discussion and engages students in activities beyond what is represented on a page (Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008, p. 296).

By exposing students early in their academic career to rigorous literary standards, educators are given the opportunity to strengthen skills which will aid high-achieving students in future accelerated language courses. The United States has been proven to be a global competitor in literacy scores up until the fourth grade, but by the tenth grade,

students' reading comprehension scores fall significantly when compared with those of other developed nations (Snow & Moje, 2010).

There is an enormous push for schools to increase students' reading skills in the primary grades; however that priority lessens as students enter the middle and high school years (Snow & Moje, 2010). This has been found to be due to a shift in the focus from teaching all students to read to primarily working with low level readers who struggle to keep up with their peers (Jolly & Makel, 2010; Loveless, 2008). The allocation of resources and funding that is given to the lowest percentile of readers requires teachers to neglect the high-achieving students who have mastered many of the goals that are being re-taught (Jolly & Makel, 2010; Loveless, 2008).

By providing rigorous instruction based on ability level and encouraging high-achieving students to continue increasing their reading comprehension and mathematical skills throughout middle school, educators are equipping students with appropriate academic proficiencies and confidence in their abilities to aid in better preparing them for the rigors of advanced coursework in high school (Liu, 2009).

### **The Impact of Perceptions**

Research studies have suggested that exposure to the type of rigorous and accelerated instruction previously discussed in this review of related literature may better prepare students academically for the demands of advanced coursework in high school honors and AP mathematics and language arts courses (Liu, 2009; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008; Hallinan, 2000; Terwel, 2005; Hockett, 2009). An additional and significant factor that may increase student success in honors and AP mathematics and English courses at the high school level are the perceptions of preparedness that students

have regarding their inclusion in honors courses during the middle school years. As a foundational part of his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) thought that “unless people believe they can produce desired outcomes; they have little incentive to act” (Usher, 2009, p.275).

Usher applied this theory to middle school student self efficacy specifically regarding mathematics in 2009 by investigating the relationship between the beliefs students hold about their academic abilities and their actual achievement in mathematics. The results suggested that instructional methods, course placement, and students’ exposure to self-regulated learning were all critical factors in improving the self-efficacy, or belief in academic capabilities, of middle school mathematics students (Usher, 2009). This study reinforced Bandura’s idea that mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasions, and physiological states affect one’s self-efficacy, and most importantly student perceptions that they will be successful in challenging academic coursework due to prior experience which contributed to increased self-efficacy (Usher, 2009).

Self-efficacy, which will be defined as one’s belief in his or her academic capabilities for the purpose of this study, is a critical factor in measuring success. Effort and ability alone do not determine an adolescent’s success but are only pieces of a complex social and academic puzzle. Wang and Holcombe conducted a 2010 study which measured the impact of middle school students’ perceptions of school characteristics and environments on their future academic achievement. The study reported that the seventh grade students’ perceptions of their school environment and characteristics both directly and indirectly influenced their academic achievement in the

eighth grade (Wang and Holcombe, 2010). This research suggested that the way students perceived their classroom surroundings and instructional methods impacted their academic performance and allowed them to develop confidence in their ability to achieve positive results (Wang and Holcombe, 2010). Providing early adolescent students who already demonstrate an inclination to be talented in a particular content area with an instructional environment which is conducive to building those talents should enhance their perceptions of preparedness, and subsequently their levels of success, in future coursework of a similar nature.

Another influential aspect of student perceptions regarding middle school honors courses is the impact of friends on academic achievement (Veronneau and Dishion, 2011). “Early adolescence is a developmental stage during which peers can powerfully influence youngsters’ long-term developmental trajectories (p. 100). A recent study involving 698 sixth through eighth grade girls found that high-achieving students with academically engaged friends were found to have higher than expected academic achievement by the eighth grade (Veronneau and Dishion, 2011). In contrast, low-achieving girls with friends who were high-achieving were found to have lower than expected academic achievement scores by the eighth grade. This study suggested that high-achieving girls benefit more by being surrounded by other high-achieving students than students who struggle academically in a content area (Veronneau and Dishion, 2011).

Veronneau and Dishion’s study gives credence to the theory that ability grouping for high-achieving students is beneficial, while simultaneously addressing the common negative complaint concerning the impact this type of grouping will have on lower-

achieving students (2011). The findings could be partially attributed to the notion that students who struggle in a subject often exhibit higher levels of frustration when surrounded by students who are self-regulated and have stronger skills in an area such as mathematics (Jones and Byrnes, 2006) or reading comprehension. In contrast, students who exhibit high-ability in a content area may thrive in an environment where rigorous and challenging curriculum is offered and preparation of the skills necessary for success in high school and collegiate advanced courses is encouraged.

If middle school students who are content specifically talented are grouped with peers at an early adolescent age who are equally capable of successfully mastering challenging coursework in mathematics or language arts, educators may be better equipped to prepare these high-achieving students for similar courses in high school. Taking advantage of the malleable early adolescent years when peer relationships are most influential, self-discovery and self-identity of students is at a peak, and life-long perceptions of confidence and self-efficacy are being developed in children is essential in helping high-achieving students reach their full academic potential.

### Summary

“When students are both willing and able to take advantage of learning opportunities, they are said to have the propensity for domain-specific achievement” (Jones & Byrnes, 2006, p. 329). This statement addressed the critical need for research regarding the impact of middle school honors courses that promotes challenging instruction for students who are high-achieving in a specific content area. Much research has been conducted regarding the benefits of granting high school and collegiate students with the opportunity to participate in advanced coursework which will help them reach

their academic potential level in areas of strength (Reed, 2008; Reis, 2009; Kulik, et al, 1992; Duflo, Dupas, & Kramer, 2009). However, research is lacking in the area of middle school honors courses regarding early exposure to accelerated and advanced curriculum and its impact on student achievement and perceptions of preparedness for similar challenging high school and college courses (Testa, 2010).

The current study sought to better understand the perceptions of both high-achieving, non-gifted mathematics and language arts content specific students who have participated in middle school honors courses and their high school honors and AP teachers regarding the impact of these accelerated middle school courses. The current research was founded on the theoretical framework of Bandura's social cognitive theory which suggested the intrinsic human nature to emulate those around us, and the expectancy-value theory of Eccles that student performance is directly related to the level of expectation that is presented. Based on these theories of student achievement and the influence of peer interaction, it was my belief that by placing high-achieving middle school mathematics and language arts students in classroom settings with other students who were similar in ability, and then facilitating rigorous and challenging instruction, educators may have a unique opportunity to lay a strong foundation of skills that will help students excel in future academic endeavors.

## **CHAPER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### Introduction

Honors and AP courses have been suggested by research to provide numerous benefits in preparing high school students for success in their post secondary educational endeavors (Long, 2012); however research studies to determine the effectiveness of honors courses offered in a middle school environment are lacking (Testa, 2010). Qualitative studies such as this one are critical for the purpose of understanding the meaning behind a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

This study sought to investigate the perceptions of high school students regarding their preparedness for high school honors and AP math and English courses based on participation in a middle school honors program. It also examined teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of middle school honors courses in preparing students for the rigors involved in high school AP and honors programs. The study was designed to determine whether or not the implementation of honors courses in middle school was advantageous in preparing students for AP or honors courses in high school by examining the voices of those who had first-hand experience with the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2007). This chapter explains the research design and guiding questions, identifies the site and participants, describes the research procedures, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations, and provides details concerning the researcher's role in the study.

### Design

A transcendental phenomenological qualitative research design was used for the purposes of this study in order to give a voice to those who had experienced the

phenomenon and to better understand the essence of that experience (Creswell, 2007). This design approach was appropriate because the researcher was investigating the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the effectiveness of content specific honors courses at the middle school level in preparation for similar courses at the high school level. Perceptions are a key component in phenomenological research because the researcher is attempting to understand the cognitive subjective perspective of the participants (Flood, 2010). By utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, the researcher was able to investigate the issue of middle school honors courses in a manner which allowed new insight into the phenomenon through investigative reporting based on open-ended guiding questions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Through the examination of the perceived preparedness of students and teachers who were directly involved with the experience of participation in a middle school honors math or language arts program, the researcher was able to construct shared meaning from the information gathered throughout the study (Budd, 2005).

Specifically, a transcendental phenomenological design was most appropriate in reporting the voices of those who had first-hand experience with honors courses in middle school language arts and mathematics. According to Moustakas (1994) and as cited in Creswell (2007), the procedures for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study include “identifying the phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s own experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 60). For this study, I employed these methods by bracketing out my own experiences, collecting data from participants, and developing textual and

structural descriptions of the participants' experiences to report the overall essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study:

1. How does participation in a middle school language arts honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
2. How does participation in a middle school math honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
3. How do high school honors and AP teachers perceive the impact of a middle school honors program?

### Participants

The study examined the perceptions of high school students from the site population who were enrolled in accelerated courses for math or language arts during their sixth, seventh and/or eighth grade years. These accelerated courses were referred to as honors for the purpose of this study and were not associated with the gifted program in any way. The course work that the participants were exposed to during these middle school honors courses was accelerated and rigorous in nature with the intention of better equipping students to be successful in high school honors and AP courses. The study also examined the perceptions of high school teachers regarding the effectiveness of the middle school honors math and language arts courses in preparing students for advanced curriculum in grades nine through 12.

In order to investigate student perceptions of preparedness for high school honors and AP classes based on experience in middle school honors courses, I used non-

randomized criterion sampling to select the participants for the surveys. This type of sampling requires the selection of participants based on a predetermined criterion of importance set by the researcher and is not random (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling was the best method of identifying participants who met the necessary criteria for this study and provided quality assurance (Creswell, 2007). I first gave a researcher-created survey to students enrolled in high school math or language arts honors and AP courses. These surveys served as the first method of data collection. I eliminated any surveys of students who did not participate in honors middle school courses for the particular content area being examined. I also eliminated any students who were labeled as gifted.

From the survey pool, I randomly chose eight students who experienced accelerated honors courses in mathematics and eight students who experienced the same phenomenon in middle school language arts for the student interviews. I ensured that four from each content area were male and four were female to gain an understanding of the perceptions from both genders. I included students from various honors and AP courses in grades 9-12 for each content group to better understand how the middle school honors courses affect students throughout the high school experience. Pseudonyms were given all interview participants.

The teacher participants were involved in the third method of data collection. Teachers were selected for the focus group based on their current course load and were all teaching honors or AP math and language arts courses at the time of the study. I asked a series of open-ended guiding questions which allowed me to see their perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing accelerated and rigorous course material for high-

achieving, non-gifted students at the middle school level in language arts and mathematics.

#### Site

The high school that was used for this study is located in northwest Georgia. It is located in a suburban area and is part of a small school district. There are three clusters of schools within the county, all of which have multiple elementary schools that feed into one middle and one high school. For the purposes of this study, the pseudonyms of Harris High School and Harris Middle School were used for the selected site and middle school feeder. Harris High School was selected for this study because of the unique relationship between the middle and high school regarding the accelerated course offerings that begin in the sixth grade. The majority of students enrolled in the high school honors and AP courses for language arts and mathematics participated in the corresponding honors courses at Harris Middle School. The middle and high school mathematics and language arts teachers plan together at least once a year to vertically align the curriculum. The close relationship between Harris Middle School and Harris High School made this an ideal site to conduct a study investigating the long-term perceived effectiveness of offering accelerated curriculum in mathematics and language arts beginning in the sixth grade.

Harris High School has an enrollment of 1,324 total students. There is little ethnic and racial diversity in the school with only 8.61% of the student population being classified as non- white from a non-Hispanic origin. There is near equality in genders for the overall population of the school with 681 males and 643 females. The middle school feeder, Harris Middle School, has very similar demographic information and an overall

enrollment of 1,042 students. Neither the site school nor the middle school feeder were considered Title I schools, although the percentage of students participating in the free and reduced lunch program was near the number needed to qualify for this program.

The school offered a variety of honors and AP courses for students in the areas of mathematics and English (referred to as language arts at the middle school level). The Advanced Placement and honors courses were taught by teachers employed by the school district. For the 2012-2013 school year, the English honors/AP course options were: four sections of ninth grade honors literature, four sections of tenth grade honors literature, four sections of honors American literature (eleventh grade), and two AP literature courses (twelfth grade). For math, the honors/AP course options were: four sections of accelerated coordinate algebra (ninth grade), three sections of accelerated math II (tenth grade), two sections of accelerated math III (eleventh grade), and 3 AP courses (AP statistics, calculus AB, and calculus BC). The school followed a block schedule with courses changing each semester, and these courses were evenly distributed in the fall and spring semesters. There were also a few advanced courses offered to juniors and seniors that were instructed by local professors from community colleges and offered the opportunity to gain a college credit in high school, but these classes were not included in the data collection for this study.

### Procedures

I completed necessary paperwork and submitted the proposal to the school district for permission to collect participant data at the site school. I also successfully completed a proposal defense with my committee and submitted the proposal, along with a permission letter from the site's school district, to the Liberty University Institutional

Review Board (IRB). The study did not begin until the IRB granted approval. I secured IRB approval before collecting any data from the school district where the study took place.

After permission from Liberty University, the IRB, and the school district involved in the study were granted, I began to collect data for the study. I first sent home the parental agreement letter (Appendix A) for students who were currently enrolled in AP and honors English and math courses at the site school to participate in the research. I allowed time for these to be returned and only included students who brought them back due to the fact that most of the students are minors. I then gave a student survey with questions regarding the research topic to those students who returned the parental agreement. These surveys were administered by the classroom teacher. The surveys were collected and sorted by grade and gender for each content area. Surveys from students who did not participate in middle school honors courses for the subject of concern, who did not attend Harris Middle School, or who were enrolled in middle school gifted courses were eliminated from the study. I randomly chose eight participants from each content area. For ethical reasons, I eliminated any surveys from students who were enrolled in my one sixth grade honors language arts course.

After randomly choosing participants from the purposefully selected surveys that remained, I conducted interviews using a series of guiding questions for the sixteen interview participants. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for the audit trail. I also conducted a teacher focus group interview with any math and English honors and AP instructors who were willing to participate in the study at the site school. I recorded

and transcribed the focus group meeting as well and had the teachers sign a consent form before the data was collected.

After all research was collected, I began to look for common themes in the data in order to establish an essence of the phenomenon being studied. I reported my findings in chapter four and provided an analysis in chapter five.

### The Researcher's Role

I am a sixth grade language arts teacher and have taught this grade level and subject for six years. I also taught high school English and journalism for four years prior to teaching at a middle school. I am interested in discovering the most effective methods of challenging all students, including those who are often overlooked because they do not qualify for a gifted program but need to be academically challenged in order to meet their full potential. I am dedicated to finding the best and most effective means of preparing my students for whatever lies ahead in their educational future.

This study is important to me as an educator because I would like to gain a deeper understanding of how we can meet the educational needs of all students, including those who are high-achievers. The middle school where I currently teach has implemented honors math and language arts courses over the past four years to serve students who have the ability to succeed when provided with accelerated and academically challenging material. I am a language arts teacher in the middle school building, and I do teach one section of sixth grade honors language arts out of nine offered in the building. I will ensure that student interview participants were not on my team or in my class in the sixth grade so that there is no prior relationship between the researcher and the participants that may affect the reliability of results.

Before I began this study, my beliefs were that honors middle school mathematics and language arts courses are an effective means of preparing students for the rigors of AP and honors classes in ninth through twelfth grades. I understood that bracketing would be critical for this study due to my preconceptions regarding this phenomenon. I used a transcendental phenomenological design so that I was merely reporting the experiences of the participants rather than interpreting their experiences and thus eliminated my researcher bias concerning the topic of study (Creswell, 2007).

### Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized multiple methods of data collection in order to increase the trustworthiness and integrity of the results. In conjunction with careful site selection, purposeful sampling, and the unbiased reporting of data, appropriate collection methods were critical in establishing credibility for the study (Creswell, 2007). The use of student surveys, student interviews, and teacher focus groups each contributed to the research in order to triangulate the data and understand the phenomenon being studied through a variety of related perspectives (Thurmond, 2001).

### Surveys

The first method of data collection for this study was the use of student surveys (Appendix B). “The survey is a systematic method of gathering information from a sample of entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which entities are members” (Groves, 2004, p.4). They are a useful tool in qualitative studies as researchers try to discover emerging themes within a population and have been used in a multitude of prior studies (Carter, 2002; Kane, 2008; Janson, 2010; Steinus & Cunningham, 1972). Research supports the use of surveys and

recommends that qualitative surveys be used for exploring meanings and experiences (Fink 2003).

For this study, researcher-created surveys were given to ninth through twelfth grade students who participated in middle school honors language arts or mathematics classes, were currently enrolled in high school honors or AP math or English classes, were not classified as gifted students, and who returned the parent/guardian permission letter (Appendix A). Data from the student surveys was used to formulate questions for the more in-depth interviews and teacher focus group.

**Face validity.** Survey questions were based on the foundation of prior literature and the gap in current literature addressed in chapter two of the research study. Question one was merely to gather information regarding participants who qualified for the study based on their participation in the middle school honors program that was vertically aligned with the site school's curriculum. Questions two, three, seven, and eight were also for informational purposes and helped to ensure that only participants that met the criteria of the current research were included in the study's data. Questions five and ten addressed the perceived challenges associated with more rigorous and accelerated coursework in honors/AP courses which studies have shown is an effective means of educating high-achieving high school students (Reis, 2009). Questions six and 11 were intended to allow the participants to voice their opinions regarding their perceptions concerning the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of middle school honors math and language arts courses in preparation for the curricular challenges associated with similar accelerated high school courses (Long, 2012). Question 12 allowed students to add any additional comments they wished to share regarding their experiences.

**Content validity.** To ensure content validity of the surveys, I recruited two middle school teachers to review the instrument and check it for clarity. Both of the teachers were familiar with the middle/high school honors and AP programs. After reviewing the survey, the teachers were asked to provide feedback related to the relevance of the questions to the current research and the clarity of the questions as intended for a student reader.

Table 3.1

*Student Survey Questions*

---

1. Please write the name of the middle school where you attended during sixth, seventh, and eighth grades?

*Experience with middle school honors or advanced mathematics courses*

2. Did you participate in middle school **advanced math courses at Heritage**

**Middle School** in:

6<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

7<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

8<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

3. Please provide information concerning your **math class for the current school year** including the course title, teacher, and a brief description of the course.
4. Were you a part of the gifted math program (Horizon) in middle school?
5. What challenges have you faced with your current mathematics course?
6. How do you feel that your participation in an advanced middle school mathematics course prepared you for these challenges?

Check any of the following that apply:

**Because I participated in middle school advanced math,**

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more prepared for the expectations in honors/AP high school math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I have more knowledge of math content.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I have a deeper understanding of math vocabulary.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was exposed to more difficult math content in middle school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more capable of being successful in honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was more likely to enroll in high school honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I developed a good work ethic in middle school advanced math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more successful in high school honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel better prepared to handle the work load of honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more capable of keeping up with the fast instructional pace in  
honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was grouped with peers who challenged me to do better.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like the friends I made in middle school honors math encouraged me  
to sign up for high school honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like middle school honors math challenged me more than regular  
middle school math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like my teachers believe I am a good math student.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please Explain)\_\_\_\_\_

---

*Experience with middle school honors or advanced language arts courses*

7. Did you participate in middle school **advanced language arts courses at Heritage Middle School** in:

6<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

7<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

8<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

8. Please provide information concerning **your English class for the current school year** including the course title, teacher, and a brief description of the course.

9. Were you a part of the gifted language arts program (Horizon) in middle school?

10. What challenges have you faced with your current English course?

11. How do you feel that your participation in an advanced middle school English course prepared you for these challenges?

Check any of the following that apply:

**Because I participated in middle school advanced language arts,**

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more prepared for the expectations in honors/AP high school language arts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am a better writer.

**Because I participated in middle school advanced language arts,**

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am a better reader.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was exposed to more challenging English content in middle school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more capable of being successful in honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was more likely to enroll in high school honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I developed a good work ethic in middle school advanced

language arts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more successful in high school honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel better prepared to handle the work load of honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more capable of keeping up with the fast instructional pace in  
honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was grouped with peers who challenged me to do better.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like the friends I made in middle school honors math encouraged me  
to sign up for high school honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like middle school honors language arts challenged me more than  
regular middle school language arts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like my teachers believe I am a good English student.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please Explain)\_\_\_\_\_

12. Other comments regarding math or language arts advanced courses:

## **Interviews**

For the second method of data collection, I used purposeful sampling to choose sixteen students from the survey pool to participate in student interviews. The surveys were divided by content area and gender so that varied interview participants would be selected in order to achieve a purposeful sampling of the student population being studied. Sixteen survey participants (eight male and eight female, eight with middle school honors math experience and eight with middle school honors language arts experience) were then randomly selected from the divided surveys.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study to provide a more in-depth look at the questions that were introduced in the student surveys. “The semi-structured interview involves prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses” (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.246). The flexibility and effectiveness of semi-structured interviews make them one of the most popular and widely used qualitative data collection methods (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). For the current study, the students were asked approximately ten open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of how prior experience in middle school honors math or language arts courses has affected their preparedness, readiness, and success in similar content area high school honors and AP classes.

As the researcher, I used the literature review from chapter two of this study, my guiding research questions, and themes that emerged from the student surveys to develop the questions for the student interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied and to better identify student

perceptions of the long-term impact of honors courses offered during the middle school years.

### **Focus Groups**

The third method of data collection for this study was a focus group for high school teachers who instruct honors or AP math and English courses at the research site. This data collection method is commonly utilized in qualitative research and centers on interactions observed during group dynamics (Farnsworth, 2010). Focus groups are a useful qualitative collection method because they allow the researcher to explore the phenomenon being studied by examining the perceptions of multiple participants simultaneously (Kitzinger, 1995). Group discussion is particularly valuable when the interviewer presents a series of open-ended questions to the participants and analyzes their responses as they communicate candidly and interact with others who have experienced a similar phenomenon (Kitzinger, 1995). The social forum that is created for participants to voice their perceptions with this method often leads to new issues regarding the phenomenon that the researcher has not considered (Morgan, 1997).

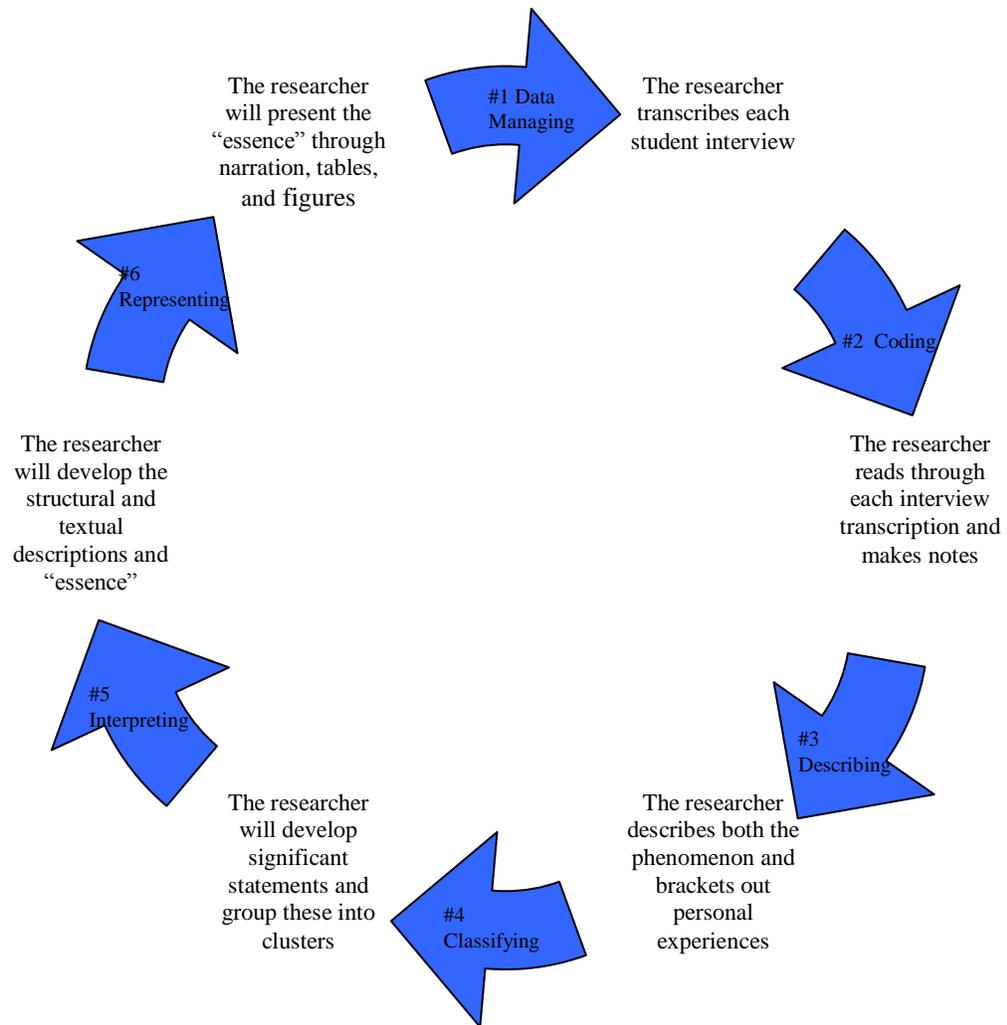
The questions for these content area teacher focus groups were derived from the literature in chapter two as well. I focused on open-ended, guiding questions that were similar to those used in the student interviews but looked at the phenomenon from a different angle. Themes that emerged from the student surveys were used to assist in the development of the focus group questions. The questions were intended to gain insight into high school honors and AP teachers' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of student experience in honors courses at the middle school level in preparation for the challenges of accelerated high school coursework in math and language content specific

areas. Participants were encouraged to share experiences and opinions openly, and all interactions were transcribed for future review and auditing purposes.

### Data Analysis

Phenomenological qualitative data analysis requires the researcher to inspect, organize, and transfer the collected research into a narrative description that portrays the “essence” of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research focuses on perceptions, feelings, and thoughts of those who actually experienced the phenomenon and researchers must describe both the essence of the experience as well as the participants’ reactions (Connelly, 2010). Researchers must also carefully bracket out their own experiences related to the phenomenon so as not to include their own biases in the descriptive reporting of the data and decrease the trustworthiness of the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Phenomenological researchers must spend a substantial amount of time examining the data in order to fully understand the experience of the participants being studied (Connelly, 2010). Reading through transcribed interviews, identifying the significant statements, clustering the meanings into common themes, and describing the findings in narrative form are critical data analyses methods that a phenomenological researcher must follow in order to maintain credibility and trustworthiness for the study (Creswell, 2007). The figure below shows Creswell’s interpretation of the steps involved in a reliable phenomenological study (2007).



*Figure 3.1 Steps in Phenomenological Data Analysis (Creswell, 2007, p.27)*

Through the use of a variety of analytical methods, I was able to achieve increased trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability through triangulation of data analysis. I used horizontalization, clusters of meaning, textual description, member checks, and an essential, invariant structure to gain an understanding of student and teacher perceptions regarding the middle school honors mathematics and language arts courses (Creswell, 2007).

**Horizontalization.** Upon completion of the research, I highlighted significant statements from the surveys, interviews, and focus groups by color-coding them

according to common themes found within the data. By closely examining the data to identify key information based on the participants' experiences, I was able to recognize general themes that aided in addressing the research questions and understanding the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

**Clusters of Meaning.** As the researcher, I grouped the significant statements found during the horizontalization of the data into phenomenological themes. This allowed me to cluster the data into "meaning units" and remove unnecessary or repetitive classifications from the analysis (Creswell, 2007, p.235).

**Textual Descriptions.** As the researcher, I then composed a narrative description of the participants' experiences based on the themes that evolved during the research. I explained both the experience itself and the participants' perceptions concerning the experience in order to gain an overall understanding of the "essence" (Creswell, 2007).

**Essential, Invariant Structure.** As the researcher, I presented the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). I wrote "a brief creative close that speaks to the essence of the study and its inspiration in terms of value of the knowledge and future directions" (Moustakas, 1994, p.184).

### Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness for this qualitative phenomenological study was critical to ensure that the research was credible, dependable, transferable, and confirmable. As cited in Creswell (2007), Polkinghorne (1989) defines trustworthy qualitative research as that which provides "an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections manifest in the examples collected" (p.59). I used several

validation strategies in order to address the issue of credibility for the study and make certain that the data collection process was trustworthy in design.

**Triangulation of Data.** As the researcher, I chose three different sources for data collection for my research so that the participants' perceptions could be evaluated from a variety of angles and merged into an overall essence of the experience concerning perceptions of experience in middle school honors courses (Creswell, 2007). I employed the use of student surveys, student interviews, and a teacher focus group in order to achieve triangulation of data for the study.

**Member Checks.** To increase the reliability of the study, I provided each participant with a transcribed copy of their interview. The students were asked to review the transcription for accuracy and provide any comments regarding corrections that needed to be made or clarification that needs to be addressed (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

**Clarify Researcher Bias.** As the researcher, I identified any researcher bias at the beginning of the study related to my preconceived notions of the middle school honors courses. The reader was also made aware of researcher biases so that they could understand my position as the researcher and my prior assumptions. I bracketed out my own experiences concerning the research topic to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007).

**Detailed Descriptions.** As the researcher, I provided very detailed descriptions about the participants, setting, and other relevant factors so that readers could determine whether or not the results could be generalized or transferred to other populations (Creswell, 2007). The site for this study was located in a suburban school with little

demographic variance amongst the student population, and it was important to provide these detail descriptions so that the study could be replicated in a different setting.

**Audit Trail.** As the researcher, I kept accurate and detailed records of all interviews, surveys, and teacher focus group interactions (Creswell, 2007). This ensured that all reports were valid and trustworthy.

The purpose of this study was to report the data collected in a non-biased, credible, and honest presentation. I made every attempt to bracket out my own experiences and provide an accurate account of my findings through true reporting of the students' and teachers' perceptions throughout the research.

#### Ethical Considerations

I needed to ensure that I relinquished any preconceived notions concerning the effectiveness of the middle school honors courses through bracketing in order to accurately report participants' experience without bias. As a sixth grade language arts teacher at Harris Middle School, it was critical that I eliminated any students from the study who had me as their teacher so that data was not skewed by a prior influence of the researcher. I also guaranteed that all participants' information was anonymous so that they would feel free to describe their experiences without the hindrance of being connected to the answers.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Restatement of the Purpose

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the impact that honors math and language arts courses at the middle school level had on student and teacher perceptions of preparedness for similar high school AP and honors courses. To better understand this phenomenon, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How does participation in a middle school language arts honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
2. How does participation in a middle school math honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
3. How do high school honors and AP teachers perceive the impact of a middle school honors program?

The data was collected using student surveys, student interviews, and a teacher focus group to achieve triangulation. The survey participants were purposefully chosen based on their current and past course experiences. All students who were currently in honors English or mathematics courses in grades 9-12 at the site school were invited to participate in the survey; however, the researcher only used survey results from those students who returned the signed parental consent and met the requirements of the study, and who had not been in the researcher's classes in middle school. The interview participants were selected randomly from the survey pool, and their audio-recorded responses were used to provide the researcher with a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The interviews were based on guiding questions but were conversational

in nature. The teacher focus group was comprised of those who instructed high school honors/AP math or English courses at the site school. All nine teachers who taught these courses were invited. Five agreed to attend, but only two participated in the focus group due to unforeseeable circumstances that arose for the remaining three on the day of the meeting.

### **Student Surveys**

Parental consent and recruitment letters were sent home with all students who were enrolled in a 9th-12th grade honors/AP English or mathematics course at Harris High School during the time data was collected. 90 students returned the parental consent and were allowed to complete the student survey. I separated the survey results into two stacks since the first page concerned experience in middle school honors mathematics and the second page concerned experience in middle school honor language arts. I then eliminated any survey results for students who were enrolled in gifted middle school math, students who did not take honors middle school math/language arts, students who had me as a teacher in middle school, and students who did not attend Harris Middle School. Of the 90 total honors/AP high school survey participants, 32 mathematics students met the study qualification of non-gifted students who had participated in middle school honors/advanced courses and 33 students qualified for language arts. Some students qualified in both areas, however many of the participants only qualified for one subject. The survey contained open-ended questions along with a checklist of perceptions they could choose from which indicated their feelings regarding their middle school honors participation. I tallied the checked items for each subject area survey and the results are illustrated in Table 4.1

Table 4.1

*Student Survey Findings*

	<b>Mathematics (n=32)</b>	<b>English/Language Arts (n=33)</b>
<b>Feel like I am more capable of being successful</b>	46%	73%
<b>Feel like I am more successful</b>	41%	58%
<b>Feel like I was more challenged than students who took a regular class</b>	78%	66%
<b>Feel like honors classes helped me develop a good work ethic</b>	72%	61%
<b>Feel more capable of keeping up with a fast instructional pace</b>	63%	70%
<b>Feel like I was exposed to more challenging math/English content</b>	59%	48%
<b>Feel like my teachers believe I am a better student</b>	72%	82%
<b>Feel like I was more likely to enroll in honors/AP high school courses</b>	65%	76%
<b>Feel like the friends I made in middle school honors classes encouraged me to sign up for high honors/ AP classes</b>	37%	36%
<b>Feel like I am a better reader</b>	-	66%

<b>Feel like I am a better writer</b>	-	66%
<b>Feel like I have more knowledge of math content</b>	84%	-
<b>Feel like I have a deeper understanding of math vocabulary</b>	37%	-
<b>Feel more prepared to handle the work load</b>	46%	79%
<b>Feel more prepared for the expectations</b>	68%	82%

The above data was color coded using a highlighter to help identify clusters of meaning or recurring themes in the research and used in conjunction with the student interview and teacher focus group data to find common themes in participant perceptions and experiences. I also read the open-ended questions on the student surveys and highlighted any significant statements. These were also used with the interview and focus group findings and previous survey results to identify common themes that emerged from the data collection.

### **Student Interviews**

The student surveys that qualified for the study were sorted into two stacks (one for math and one for English). I randomly selected eight students from each stack to participate in the student interviews. The original parental consent forms were then checked to ensure that the interview participants had permission to be interviewed and audio-recorded. I scheduled the interviews through the guidance office at the high school related to the study. Students were given a letter with brief information about the interview and an appointment time. The interviews were conducted during the students'

lunch hour in a small, private office in the guidance office over the course of three days. Each student was asked their name and the honors/AP courses they were taking as soon as the recorder was turned on. I documented this information in my notes but did not include it in the transcriptions so that pseudonyms could be used and the students would be unidentifiable in the study. Interviews lasted from three to eight minutes, and transcripts can be found in Appendix G. After the interviews were transcribed, I sent the participants a sealed copy of their interview with information on how to contact me if there were any concerns with the transcription.

I listened to and read each interview numerous times and highlighted significant statements on the transcription. I used different colors to code like information and developed a list of common themes. These themes were evident in all three forms of data collection and were subsequently discussed in this chapter.

**Participant Profiles.** *Clint* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in accelerated math II. He took advanced math in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Clara* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 10. She took advanced language arts in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Noah* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors Algebra II. He took advanced math classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Lane* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in accelerated math II. He took advanced math classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Wes* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 10. He took advanced language arts classes in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

*Wendy* was an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors American literature. She took advanced language arts classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

*Rylee* was a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in AP statistics. She took advanced math classes in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Emily* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 10. She took advanced language arts classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Addison* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 10. She took advanced language arts classes in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

, *Grant* was a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 9. He took advanced language arts classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Richard* was a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 9. He took advanced language arts classes in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Sam* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in honors English 10. He took advanced language arts classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Brad* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in accelerated math II. He took advanced math classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Kayla* was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in accelerated math II. She took advanced math classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Hailey* was a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in accelerated coordinate algebra. She took advanced math classes in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

*Anna* was an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student who was enrolled in accelerated math III. She took advanced math in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **Teacher Focus Group**

After collecting the student survey data and conducting the student interviews, I developed a list of open-ended guiding questions to ask high school honors and AP teachers in a focus group which was designed to gain a different perspective on the phenomenon. The list of questions was loosely followed; however, the setting was conversational in nature and questions were changed based on the dialogue between the participants.

The nine AP/honors math and English teachers at the site school were invited to participate in the focus group and were provided with information regarding the purpose of the meeting. Two dates were provided for the meeting, and teachers were asked to respond with the one that they would be able to attend. I chose the date that worked for the majority of the teachers who responded. Five of the nine teachers who qualified for the study responded that they would attend the focus group on the selected date. On the day of the meeting, three teachers had unforeseeable circumstances that arose and prevented them from attending the meeting. Although the number of participants was small, I continued on with the meeting because both the areas of math and English were represented with the two participants who were able to attend.

**Participant Profiles.** *Ms. Lewis* was an English teacher at the site school who taught 10<sup>th</sup> grade honors English and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, college preparatory English which was not an honors course. This gave her a mixture of honors and non-honors students throughout the day. She had taught for many years within the school system and planned to retire at the end of the next year.

*Mrs. Foster* was a math teacher at the site school who taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade accelerated (honors) coordinate algebra, 11<sup>th</sup> grade accelerated (honors) math III, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade AP Calculus. She was the mathematics department chair and only taught honors and AP courses throughout the day. She had taught regular and remedial classes in the past.

### **Themes**

After all data was collected and transcribed, I reread each document several times. I developed a list of common themes that had emerged from the data. I color coded each theme and went back through all three data sources to highlight significant statements and color coded them according to the appropriate theme. I then cut out all of the significant statements and pasted them on a board with the labeled themes so that I could sort through the data and better understand my findings.

**Perceptions of Preparedness.** The majority of participants, both students and teachers, felt that middle school advanced classes increased student preparedness for the expectations of subsequent high school honors and AP courses. 68% of honors high school math students who participated in the survey at the site school reported that they felt more prepared for the expectations of high school honors math. 82% of high school honors English students who had participated in middle school advanced language arts reported the same perception. The teachers in the focus group reported that there was an extremely noticeable difference in the abilities of students who came from the honors/advanced middle school courses and those who had participated in regular math and language in grades six through eight.

Ms. Foster shared that she was “just grateful that we do offer it [advanced courses in middle school]” (personal communication, May 7, 2013). She also stated that “the

more we can give them the better,” (personal communication, May 7, 2013) especially in light of the new math curriculum associated with Common Core standards. She voiced her opinion that the expectations for all students were increasing and that she believed the advanced courses gave students who strived to achieve a good foundation for the expectations that would be required of them in future courses of an accelerated nature. Ms. Foster also shared her personal experiences regarding the honors courses with her own children. She had a daughter and son who were both eighth graders at the middle school. Her son had taken some advanced courses, along with some gifted classes, and her daughter had been in all regular classes. Ms. Foster felt that her son had an advantage.

When my daughter comes here, she’s going to come out of the low-end class, and I’m putting her in honors all the way. And I guarantee you that she’s going to struggle because she doesn’t have the foundation that my son has having been in those gifted and advanced classes. He’s had teachers who have given him much higher expectations. His workload has been tenfold more than my daughter’s workload has been, and he is well prepared to come here and be in honors. She is not well prepared to come here and be in honors. And she will struggle and you know, it will be a heart ache for us, but I feel like in the long run, she will have a better education for having been there in those classes (personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Kayla, one of the student interview participants, stated the following about her experience in the middle school honors/advanced math classes and the importance of the increased workload connected with these accelerated courses:

I felt like I was more prepared [for high school honors math courses]. Well, just the amount of work we did in middle school prepared us for what the work was like in high school. It made it to where it wasn't as hard as it could have been (Kayla, personal communication, May 2, 2013).

Several other students also said that the middle school advanced classes positively affected their preparation for similar high school honors courses. Anna said, "I think I was ready . . . that I was prepared. It wasn't as scary to say I was taking honors because I had already taken an accelerated math class" (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Lane also shared that he "learned a lot, and it prepared me for high school accelerated math" (personal communication, April 26, 2013).

Rylee, a senior who was taking AP math courses, had an interesting viewpoint concerning the advanced middle school courses. She was new to the school system in middle school and stated the following about the advanced middle school math class that she was moved to after attending regular math classes for a few weeks:

I really liked it. Since I was new to the school system, I started out in a regular class and then they moved me into it. I really got a lot out of it, and I think those classes prepared me for high school (Rylee, personal communication, May 1, 2013).

Overall, there were no negative comments from students or teachers regarding the impact of middle school honors math or language courses on perceptions of preparedness for similar honors/AP high school courses. Participants believed that the middle school honors/advanced courses contributed substantially to students beginning their high school honors/AP courses with the perception that they were well prepared to handle the

expectations and more rigorous curriculum associated with those accelerated high school courses.

**Student Confidence in Ability.** Student participants also reported increased feelings of confidence in their abilities in both high school honors English and math because they took honors/advanced classes in middle school. 46% of high school honors/AP math participants and 73% of high school honors/AP English students reported that they felt more capable of being successful in their current courses due to their participation in similar middle school honors classes. 41% of math students and 58% of English students in high school honors/AP courses felt that they actually were more successful because of the middle school honors/advanced courses that they had previously taken in preparation.

Kayla stated the following about the middle school honors classes that she had participated in: “They made me feel like I would be more successful because I took it [middle school honors classes], so it made me be able to move toward the choice of taking high school honors classes” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Lane reported that the high school honors course that he was enrolled in was “easier than it would have been if I didn’t have the advanced middle school classes” (personal communication, April 26, 2013). The early foundation of being involved in middle school honors courses increased students’ overall confidence and perceptions that they could be successful in similar high school honors/AP courses.

In addition to feelings of increased confidence in general after taking middle school honors courses, students also indicated that they felt more confident in their ability to succeed in particular areas related to math and English content. 66% of high school

honors/AP English students surveyed said that they felt like both a better reader and writer because they had taken advanced language arts in grades six through eight. Two students, Wes and Wendy, specifically mentioned the amount of time that middle school advanced teachers had devoted to essay writing as a major factor in increasing their confidence in high school honors English. 84% of high school honors/AP math students said that they felt like they had more knowledge of math content because they had taken advanced math in middle school. 37% stated that they felt like they had a deeper understanding of math vocabulary because of the advanced math classes that they had taken in grades six through eight.

Student participants in both subject areas reported confidence that they went into their high school honors course knowing that they could do the work because they had been successful with an honors workload in the past. Wes explicitly stated his perception that “If I had stayed in the regular classes then I wouldn’t have been as prepared for honors ninth and tenth grade language as I would have been” (personal communication, May 1, 2013).

**Teacher Influence on Student Confidence.** The data collected from all three methods indicated that teachers were extremely influential in increasing student confidence and impacted student perceptions of preparedness for high school honors/AP math and English courses. Eighth grade honors/advanced teachers had a particularly strong influence on students’ feelings of confidence for high school honors courses. Numerous interview participants noted that their eighth grade teacher encouraged them to take honors classes in high school which was a critical factor in their perception that they would be able to be successful in those courses.

When asked if taking middle school honors/advanced language arts affected her decision to enroll in high school honors English, Emily said, “I think it did because my teacher kind of encouraged it. I think she prepared us” (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Richard stated that although his peers in middle school advanced classes had a little influence on his decision to enroll in high school honors, he thought, “The teacher had more influence . . . like the most influence” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Noah stated the following about his eighth grade advanced math teacher:

She got us ready for it [high school honors math] because she would always prep us up for what we were going to be doing. She was telling us like this is what we were going to be doing in high school and if you take honors you are going to have to know this for, I guess, to just to do better, be more prepared for honors, or making good grades (Noah, personal communication, April 26, 2013).

We also discussed how his eighth grade honors/advanced language arts teacher told him that she thought he could do honors and he decided to enroll in ninth grade honors English because she was confident that he could do it and be successful. Rylee expressed her gratitude that she had been placed in middle school honors advanced math and discussed how she still used some of the things her eighth grade math teacher had taught her.

I’m just really grateful that they put me in it [middle school advanced/honors math]. I mean, it really helped me to be ready to take all of these advanced classes [in high school] like AP calculus this year and I still use some of the stuff. Like my eighth grade teacher taught us a song and I still use it today to help me

remember how to do formulas. It was really helpful (Rylee, personal communication, May 1, 2013).

The first thing that came to Anna's mind when asked about her middle school advanced math experience was that "It was tough, but my teacher was really, really good so she helped us through everything. If we had questions, she answered them. And so, um, there wasn't anything that I came out not understanding" (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Hailey noted that she had more confidence in her math ability because she felt that her teachers had very high expectations for her, and she did not want to let them down.

**High School Honors Enrollment.** When asked if participation in middle school advanced classes affected their decision to enroll in high school honors courses, 65% of high school honors math students and 76% of high school honors English students who had previously taken middle school honors/advanced classes said that they felt more likely to enroll in high school honors/AP because of that history. Friends that they made during those middle school advanced classes did not seem to be the cause of most students' decision to continue with high school honors. Only 37% of math students and 36% of English students said that they felt like the friends they made in middle school honors classes encouraged them to sign up for high school honors/AP. Many students reported that their increased likelihood of enrolling in high school honors courses was based on the intrinsic motivation and confidence that participation in middle school honors/advanced courses had given them. The teachers in the focus group both agreed that the middle school honors/advanced courses were beneficial and increased enrollment in similar high school honors courses. Ms. Lewis stated that "they wouldn't even know

anything about those and they would be afraid of them” (personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Hailey stated, “I figured, if I have been doing this for three years then I didn’t want to go to regular math and lose my progress” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Anna added the following about her decision to enroll in ninth grade honors math, “I felt more prepared since I had already had an accelerated class. So I felt that I could take on an accelerated class in high school” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Brad also felt that his prior experience in middle school honors influenced his decision to take high school honors math courses. He said, “Well, since I was already in those classes then it kind of led me to be in the classes in high school” (personal communication, May 2, 2013).

These students, along with others all felt that they would not have been as likely to enroll in high school honors courses if they had not taken honors classes in middle school. Noah, Clint, and Sam all explicitly stated that taking middle school honors made them more likely to take high school honors courses. Lane said that he would not have enrolled in high school honors math classes had he not taken middle school honors math. Clara felt that the middle school honors language arts classes made her feel confident that she would be able to keep up with her peers in high school honors English and influenced her decision to sign up for those accelerated courses. She said, “I knew because I already understood things that I wouldn’t be behind. I would be caught up with everyone else” (Clara, personal communication, April 26, 2013).

A few students said that they probably would have taken honors/AP courses in high school anyway but still reported that the middle school honors classes made them

feel more confident in their decision. Rylee stated, “I was pretty sure that I was going to be taking honors classes but it definitely made me more comfortable with choosing to take those classes. I felt more prepared for it” (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Addison said, “I was probably already going to do it, but it helped me in the sense that I was like, well, I’ve already had some things to prepare me” (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Overall, there were no students who reported that they felt the advanced middle school math/language arts courses did not impact their decision to enroll, or at least increase their confidence in making the decision to enroll in high school honors courses of a similar nature.

**Curriculum Expectations.** The importance of increased rigor and exposure to challenging curriculum was a common theme that emerged from analysis of the participants’ experiences. 78% of high school honors math students and 66% of high school honors English students who had taken advanced math/language in grades six through eight felt like they were more challenged than students who took a regular math or language arts class in middle school. Grant said, “We were doing things similar to what college students would be doing because she wanted us to be prepared for a lot harder stuff in the future” (personal communication, May 1, 2013). When asked about the types of these done in class that made her feel more prepared, Rylee stated the following:

Just the curriculum. My teacher got through the material we needed and then started working on what we were going to need for high school in those [middle school] advanced classes. So we kind of had a basis for what we were going to be working with (Rylee, personal communication, May 1, 2013).

Sam shared, “We read books that were on a higher reading level than our grade and stuff like that so I was learning high school stuff in middle school” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). These statements indicated that there might be a ripple effect that benefited students in the future due to an early foundation with rigorous curricular expectations for the high achieving students who took advanced classes in middle school.

Several participants mentioned the importance of learning to keep up with a fast instructional pace. 63% of high school honors math students and 70% of high school honors English students said they felt more capable of keeping up with the fast pace that was encountered in high school honors courses because of their prior middle school honors experiences. Noah stated, “I don’t think we ever did the same stuff as the other kids. We would always do stuff further ahead” (personal communication, April 26, 2013). Kayla shared, “I think I would have actually gotten bored [in regular middle school honors math classes]” and was grateful for the faster pace of the honors/advanced math classes in middle school (personal communication, May 2, 2013).

The faster pace associated with the honors/advanced middle school courses also contributed to students’ perceptions regarding their work ethic. 72% of high school honors math students and 61% of high school honors English students felt that middle school honors courses helped them develop a stronger work ethic. Kayla said that the middle school honors/advanced classes “challenged us and made us work harder so that when we did get to high school, we were more prepared for what was to come in honors classes” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Several student participants stated that they actually wished there had been more reading and writing assignments outside of class. They thought this addition to the middle school honors language arts curriculum

would even better prepare students for the work ethic necessary to be successful in high school honors/AP English.

The survey statistics decreased when students were asked if the advanced math/language middle school content itself was more challenging. 59% of high school honors math students and 48% of high school honors English students said they felt like the advanced/honors middle school content was more challenging. One notable observation was that in the area of language arts/English there were fewer students who reported the perception of increased curricular challenge in the middle school advanced classes than in similar math classes. Most of the previous survey statistics found that the English students were more confident, but this data indicated that they felt less challenged in the middle school advanced/honors language arts classes than the advanced/honors math students.

Some students indicated that the increased challenge was primarily in the way the content was taught. The word “in-depth” was frequently documented in the data by the participants when they voiced their experiences. Brad described doing math that was more in-depth. Clara stated, “I thought it [middle school honors/advanced language arts] helped me a lot because we were always ahead of everyone and we went more in-depth. Now I understand things that I didn’t” (personal communication, April 26, 2013). She also mentioned that “We would read a book and we would try to get more in-depth and understand it and that helps me now on tests and stuff” (personal communication, April 26, 2013). Anna believed that the middle school honors teachers “made us think for ourselves but we had to do that in high school too so we were ready to think on our own and not be spoon fed the material” (personal communication, May 2, 2013).

The teachers reinforced the perception that the expectation is higher in advanced classes. They both stated that if given the choice, they would place their own children in an advanced/honors middle school class to expose them to the more rigorous curriculum even if it meant they would make a lower grade. They also expressed their frustration with the fact that parents and students frequently become upset when their child makes anything other than an A in honors/AP high school courses. Ms. Foster said that “It’s an accelerated class but that doesn’t mean that everyone in here is an A student and everyone is going to get an A in an accelerated class” (personal communication, May 7, 2013). She said it is something she struggles with each year and wished that more people would understand the value in being exposed to advanced curriculum. Ms. Lewis stated that she “found the same thing to be true. They think that they have to make an A or they have failed. And that’s not so” (personal communication, May 7, 2013). They both stressed the importance that exposure to a more rigorous and challenging curriculum was of greater importance than keeping a high grade in a regular class. Clara actually acknowledged this issue and said, “I had to keep my grade up because it was harder work and so I had to work harder than they did” (personal communication, April 26, 2013).

Sam made the only negative comment concerning the curriculum in the advanced middle school language arts classes. He said that “even though we were doing more advanced topics, it wasn’t online with what we have learned so far in high school” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). This statement reinforced the need for a strong vertical alignment of curriculum for middle school honors/advanced courses and high school honors/AP courses.

**Classroom Environment.** Student and teacher participants mentioned the strong, positive impact that the classroom environment in honors classes had on perceptions of preparedness. Hailey said, “They [middle school honors teachers] had a higher expectation for staying focused and getting our work done and not goofing off during class” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Addison agreed and said, “It was kind of good to be with people on the same pace as you and people who actually wanted to sit down and do their work versus not” (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Rylee also thought that a classroom environment with students who wanted to learn was a beneficial aspect of middle school honors classes.

They were all really good students. They all really wanted to work and it was really great to be in an atmosphere where everyone wanted to learn instead of some people just sitting there like they didn’t care. That really helped me to just keep going in my studies and stay with it like they did (Rylee, personal communication, May 1, 2013).

Most participants thought the middle school honors class environment had a positive impact on their preparation for high school. Anna reflected that most students made A’s and B’s, came to class with good attitudes, and were ready to learn. She also shared her opinion about why she saw the classroom environment in an honors middle school class as an advantage when she thought about the things that prepared her for high school honors courses.

It [middle school honors math] definitely gave me an advantage because I knew when the bell rang we were ready to work and we weren’t sitting around waiting for the teacher to tell us to get started. We know what things to pull out and have

ready so we don't waste the first ten minutes of class waiting for the teacher to tell us. We know to sit down and it's class time not recess (Anna, personal communication, May 2, 2013).

The teachers agreed that there was a notable difference in the classroom environment in the honors classes and suggested that this atmosphere contributed to the preparation of those students for future academic endeavors. Ms. Foster again related her opinion to her own children, especially her daughter who was enrolled in regular math and language arts classes at the middle school.

I promise you that if you gave me the choice to put my child in an accelerated [honors] class, I would put her there in a heartbeat. Because in my opinion, those teachers expect more. They teach my child more. They have fewer discipline problems in there. And I get that when you have a room full of kids and there are a bunch of discipline problems that you as the teacher begin to be beat down and beat down and beat down and you struggle to maintain discipline and order (Mrs. Foster, personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Addison also agreed that discipline issues took less of the instructional time in honors middle school classes. She admitted that students still goofed off sometimes, but not nearly as often as in regular classes which contributed to her perception that the classroom environment in an honors/advanced middle school class was more effective in preparing her for high school honors. Hailey was the only student who mentioned a negative aspect of the middle school honors classroom environment. She stated that although the class was more difficult, she felt the students were more talkative and the teacher complained about that a lot.

Overall, student and teacher participants thought that the classroom environment in honors/advanced middle school language arts and math classes was a significantly influential factor that contributed to their positive perceptions about the courses. They felt that the more focused and driven atmosphere allowed students and teachers to concentrate on content that would prepare the students for similarly rigorous and challenging courses in high school.

**Peer Motivation.** In addition to classroom environment as a whole, study participants frequently commented about the impact of peer interaction within the honors middle school math and language arts classes. A common theme was the ability of the students to motivate one another toward being the best student that they could be. Hailey stated that one advantage to being in the honors/advanced middle school math class was that “it’s easier to motivate yourself if you know that the people around you care about what they are doing and the grades they are getting then it motivates you to get good grades and work hard” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Noah and Kayla stated that their advanced class peers made them do better because their friends pushed them to their work and refrain from goofing off. Clint said, “They pushed me to do the best I could do and they all helped me” (personal communication, April 26, 2013).

Several students also mentioned the importance of competition in their advanced classes. Sam stated his desire to keep up with his peers and said, “There were always smart kids in the advanced classes so they definitely encouraged me to do better and stay on a level with them” (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Clara shared that she felt more challenged because “you knew that they understood it so you would want to understand it so you don’t get behind and they would just think that you’re stupid at

getting things” (personal communication, April 26, 2013). Emily said that being surrounded by others who made her want to do better influenced her “determination level” (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Lane felt that the honors/advanced math courses were beneficial because the students were able to rely on one another to help work through problems themselves and made them become more critical thinkers.

Wes stated the importance of being surrounded by others who wanted to be in the gifted classes but there wasn’t enough room. He discussed how the honors/advanced classes made him feel smart and he liked being in a classroom with other students who learned at the same pace even though he wasn’t able to take gifted language arts in middle school due to a lack of room in those courses. Teacher participants also saw the honors/advanced courses as an opportunity for non-gifted, high-achieving students to take a class together that would aid in preparing them for future courses where they would have to compete with students from the gifted program. Ms. Foster stated that the classes “give them the opportunity to achieve” (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Ms. Lewis stated that the students in the honors classes were more “self-disciplined” (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Both felt that the expectation was greater in middle school honors/advanced courses and the environment was more conducive to pushing students with academic strengths to excel.

**Impact of Teacher Perceptions.** The final theme that emerged from the data was the impact of teacher perceptions on high school honors/AP students who had experienced middle school honors/advanced math or language arts classes. 72% of high school honors math students and 82% of high school honors English students felt that their current teachers believed that because they had taken honors/advanced courses in

middle school they were a better student. Most student participants and the teacher participants felt that there were higher expectations for students who emerged from these accelerated courses in grades six through eight. Wendy described how she believed teachers viewed students who had taken middle school advanced courses.

I think they kind of expect more from you because you have been in accelerated language for so long that they look at your work and say well, they've been in advanced and they should know this by now (Wendy, personal communication, May 1, 2013).

Rylee thought her teachers expected her to be more prepared for honors and AP courses and be ready to move at a faster pace because they had experienced that in the past. Anna agreed and said, "They probably see them as more prepared, more ready to think and work through things instead of just sitting there and staring at the page, not knowing what to do" (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Wes stated that he thought his teachers believed he was going to do well in high school before he even met them because of his past experience in honors middle school classes. Grant said, "I think she looks at the people who had advanced language arts in middle school and expects them to do a little bit more than the others" (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Anna felt that she had to hold herself to a higher standard because of what she believed were her teacher's expectations of her as a student who had previously taken honors/advanced classes.

You know you are held to a higher standard so you have to work a little bit harder even if it's on your own time so that you can compensate if you don't understand

something. You can compensate so that you can be held to that higher standard and achieve that expectation (Anna, personal communication, May 2, 2013).

Brad noted that being in those honors/advanced classes made him feel like his high school honors teachers thought he was at the top of his class. Kayla stated that her teachers “believe we can do better” because of being in advanced middle school math classes (personal communication, May 2, 2013). Emily said that because she came into high school honors with the perception that her teacher knew she had taken middle school honors math, she felt more confident and it made her feel like she knew what she was doing.

Teachers admitted that they really did have more confidence in the abilities of students who came to high school honors English or math having previously taken honors middle school language arts or math. Ms. Lewis said, “We have higher expectations for them than we do the others” (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Ms. Foster discussed how she felt like they were intimidated at first, but she was confident that the students who had taken honors/advanced math courses in middle school came to her with a stronger foundation than the ones who had taken regular middle school math.

Addison was the only student interview participant who did not necessarily feel like her high school honors teachers perceived her to be a better student because she had taken honors courses in middle school. She said, “I don’t know if they really look at that or not” (Addison, personal communication, May 1, 2013). Most participants shared that they felt there was the common perception that teachers had more confidence and higher expectations for students who had taken honors math or language arts in middle school. Student participants generally felt that their perception of how teachers viewed them due

to their middle school honors experience influenced their performance in the high school honors classroom.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

The final chapter of this dissertation was meant to summarize the findings of the study by addressing the guiding research questions, to discuss implications of the study's findings, and to provide recommendations for future research on the phenomenon of middle school honors math and language arts classes.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions of preparedness of high school honors and AP students who had participated in a non-gifted middle school honors program. For the purpose of this research, perceptions of preparedness were defined as students' observations of whether or not the middle school honors courses they experienced led to a change in their perceived notion of confidence, ability, and overall readiness for similar high school courses. The study also examined the perceptions of the high school honors and AP teachers who instructed these students and their impressions of the effectiveness of the middle school honors program in preparing students for similar high school courses. In an effort to better understand student and teacher perceptions regarding the phenomenon of honors middle school math and language arts courses and the impact they had on future courses that were of similar rigor, the following three research questions were developed to guide the study:

1. How does participation in a middle school language arts honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?
2. How does participation in a middle school math honors program impact student perceptions of preparedness in similar high school courses?

3. How do high school honors and AP teachers perceive the impact of a middle school honors program?

Three methods of data collection were used for this study to assure reliability and validity through triangulation of data: student surveys, student interviews, and a teacher focus group. The student surveys contained a series of questions meant to examine the students' perceived impact of middle school honors course experiences on their preparedness for high school honors and AP courses. Some questions were open-ended while others were a checklist. The student interviews provided a more in-depth examination of the phenomenon and allowed me to better understand students' feelings regarding their experiences in middle school honors courses and how they felt those experiences impacted their readiness for the rigorous nature of similar high school AP and honors courses. The teacher focus group was used to address research question number three and provided me with a different view of the impact of middle school honors courses by allowing me to look at the phenomenon through the eyes of the high school teachers instructing the students who had experienced the middle school honors classes.

Overall, the data indicated that student and teacher perceptions of the middle school honors math and language arts courses were positive in regards to preparing students for honors and AP math and English classes in high school. Few negative experiences were related to me through the data collection, and both the students and teachers felt that the middle school honors classes prepared them for the expectations, work load, and curricular challenges of similar high school advanced courses. A detailed

discussion of my findings regarding each of the common themes that were noted throughout the study was included in the following section.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

I grouped the common themes that emerged from the data analysis in chapter four to organize the discussion of the research findings according to the corresponding research question. This discussion section was meant to provide answers to the study's guiding questions and to confer the findings from the themes that were discovered.

**Student Perceptions of Preparedness.** The first and second guiding research questions were related to student perceptions of how middle school honors math and language arts classes prepared them for similar high school honors and AP courses. Students in both subject areas overwhelmingly felt that the middle school courses were effective in helping them feel prepared for the challenges and expectations of honors and AP math and English classes in high school. The first two themes that emerged from the analysis of the high school student participants' shared experiences were a sense of preparedness due to middle school honors course participation and a feeling of increased confidence in their ability due to early exposure to increased content rigor in middle school. Most students perceived that their past experiences with middle school honors courses were beneficial in helping them feel more prepared and ready for the challenges of high school honors courses and thus made them more successful.

One of the aspects of participation in middle school honors courses that contributed to students' perceptions of increased preparedness and confidence was exposure to curriculum that was more challenging and rigorous during the formative middle school years. Students felt that the coursework and workload that they

experienced in the honors courses in grades six through eight better prepared them for what would be expected in high school honors classes than if they had remained in a regular middle school math or language arts class.

They also felt that the classroom environment was more conducive to meeting their needs as high-achieving students. Their peers challenged them to strive to meet higher standards and there were fewer discipline problems or distractions in the learning environment. Burney discussed this factor when she applied Bandura's social cognitive theory to gifted education and the needs of high-achieving students in her research (Burney, 2008). She said that high-achieving students want to do better and strive to emulate those around them because of the extrinsic motivation of observing their peers (Burney, 2008).

The classroom environment, rigor of instruction, and increased expectations all contributed to students' perceptions that they were more prepared for honors/AP high school English and math courses due to their experience in similar middle school honors classes. These findings were indicative of past studies that researched the importance of perceptions and self-efficacy. Usher's (2009) results from a study that investigated the relationship between the beliefs students held about their academic abilities and their actual achievement in mathematics found that instructional methods, course placement, and students' exposure to self-regulated learning were all critical factors in improving their belief in their academic capabilities. The current study also found this to be true. The majority of students shared that they felt their experience with honors math or language arts courses in middle school made them feel like they were more capable of being successful in high school honors/AP classes. This positive student perception of

the impact of the middle school honors courses was largely due to the participants' beliefs that they were well-prepared for the high school classes in advance and had greater confidence in their content abilities due to their experience in early accelerated courses in grades six through eight.

The middle school honors math and language arts courses gave the students a heightened sense of confidence and a belief that they were able to tackle the more difficult courses at a young age. The courses provided these high-achieving students with a classroom environment that was conducive to meeting their specific needs and instruction that was differentiated to their abilities. The feelings of accomplishment and confidence that many students gained from participation in middle school honors classes remained with them as they continued into high school honors courses and those acquired beliefs positively impacted their perceived images of themselves as students.

**Teacher Perceptions.** The third research guiding question addressed the perceptions of teachers regarding middle school honors classes. The impact of teacher perceptions regarding students who had taken middle school honors courses was a critical part of this study and helped me to better understand the phenomenon of perceptions regarding middle school honors courses. Almost all of the student participants noted that they worked harder and pushed themselves further because they felt their teachers had higher expectations due to their experience in middle school honors. The impact of teacher perceptions was evident throughout the data analysis. Students felt that their teachers thought they were smarter, harder workers, and more prepared for the demands of high school honors courses because they had taken middle school honors courses.

Many student participants shared that their middle school honors teachers were a significant part of the reason they even enrolled in high school honors courses. They felt that their middle school honors teachers instilled confidence that they were capable of being successful in high school honors courses, and therefore the students knew that the expectation was that they would continue to participate in the honors/AP courses as they progressed through high school. Eighth grade math and language arts teachers had an especially strong influence on student enrollment choices for high school. Several students noted that they would not have even considered high school honors courses without the influence and encouragement of their middle school honors teacher. The students' perceptions that they would be successful, based on the influence of their middle school honors teachers, often altered the path of their high school course enrollment decisions.

The high school teacher participants also felt that they held the honors students to a higher standard. They felt that the students who had participated in middle school honors courses were capable of great success and pushed them to meet more challenging expectations. The teachers shared that they provided a more demanding learning environment that differentiated instruction for the highest achievers because they believed that the students could meet those demands. These findings supported the theoretical framework of Eccles's expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation and her idea that students would rise to meet the expectations that had been set before them (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

## **Implications of the Research**

**For School Administrators and District Leaders.** The data from this study indicated that early exposure to honors math and language arts classes at the middle school level was beneficial in helping students feel prepared for similar honors and AP courses in high school. School administrators and district leaders who make curriculum decisions should take this information into account when planning course offerings in middle school. Research has shown that ability grouping is a beneficial and effective means of differentiating instruction for high achieving students in high school (Testa, 2010). This study has shown that the same is true for the middle grades and school administrators should take steps to ensure that challenging and rigorous courses are available for high-achieving students who are not able to participate in a gifted program.

Middle school is a crucial time to recognize the strengths of students who have successfully mastered curriculum in a particular subject and equip them with the skills necessary for a rigorous course schedule in the future (Liu, 2009; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008). By offering honors courses at a critical and early age in middle school, high-achieving students will gain confidence in their abilities and be more likely to continue with advanced courses in high school. School administrators and counselors should seek to find high-achieving students who may not realize the importance of early exposure to honors courses in middle school and encourage them to participate in the classes. Middle school leaders should also monitor the type of instruction taking place in honors courses at their respective schools and ensure that the expectations are challenging and rigorous so as to better prepare students for honors and AP courses in high school.

**For Teachers.** Teachers who instruct middle school honors courses should be aware of the impact they have on student perceptions and confidence. The results of this study showed that teachers have a strong influence on students' perceptions that they are capable of being successful in honors courses. Teachers should set high expectations and facilitate a rigorous and challenging learning environment for students in order to prepare them for high school honors and AP courses (Matsumura, Slater, & Crossen, 2008).

They should also encourage students in their honors middle school classes to enroll in honors courses in high school. Effort and ability alone are not the sole indicators of adolescents' academic success and perceptions are a critical aspect of the complex puzzle (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Many student participants in this study reported that they would not have taken high school honors math or English classes if their middle school teacher had not told them they were a good candidate and should continue to do honors classes in ninth grade. The importance of teacher influence on student perceptions of preparedness and confidence in their ability was a key factor in students' beliefs that they would be successful in later courses of a similar and challenging nature.

**For Students.** Middle school students should recognize the importance of participating in curricular choices at an early age that will challenge them and provide a good foundation for their educational career. High-achieving students are often overlooked in a regular classroom environment (Loveless, 2008; Jolly & Makel, 2010; Renzuli & Reis, 1991; Gallagher, 2004) and these children should enroll in honors courses whenever available to better prepare themselves for the future and increase collegiate readiness (Long, 2012). Teacher participants in the study stated the importance

of being exposed to challenging curriculum and being in a learning environment where students take their education seriously. These findings support Bandura's social cognitive theory which focused on the impact that others around an individual have on his/her learning (1994). Although it is often difficult to think about high school at the beginning of the middle school years, students should try to make every effort to participate in honors courses at the earliest time possible to reach their full academic potential.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study examined the experiences of high school honors and AP students and teachers and sought to better understand how honors middle school math and language arts impacted their perceptions of preparedness for similar high school courses. The study was conducted at a suburban high school in North Georgia. There were approximately 1,350 students enrolled at the research site in grades nine through twelve at the time of the study. Most students were from middle class, Caucasian families, and there was little diversity within the student population. The school system was relatively small and had only three high schools and three middle schools. These demographic factors made the results difficult to generalize to a large metropolitan area or one with a diverse student body.

The small size of the teacher focus group was also a limitation of the study. Only nine teachers qualified based on the study requirement that the teacher participants must be an active math or English AP/honors instructor. Of the nine who were invited to attend, only two were able to come to the focus group. A greater number of teacher

participants may have revealed different perceptions regarding the impact of middle school honors courses in the two subject areas being investigated.

The use of purposeful sampling from the pool of current high school honors/AP math and English students was effective in locating a majority of students who had taken honors middle school courses in those subjects, but other possible participants who were not enrolled in math or English honors/AP courses at the time of the study may have been excluded. I chose to use the students who were enrolled in honors/AP high school math and English courses as the means of locating students because going through those courses did include most students who had taken the honors classes in middle school, but a minority of the middle school honors participant population may have been left out of the data collection.

Finally, as the principal investigator, I was also a teacher at the middle school that fed into the high school used in the study. I was aware of the possible conflict of interest and made great efforts to remove any student participants from the study that may have been influenced by my presence during their interviews due to my past relationship as their teacher. I also realized that any preconceived notions that I had concerning the impact of the honors classes at the middle school level could have been a limitation. I made a conscious effort throughout the study to view the data through the lens of a researcher rather than a teacher.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was a transcendental, phenomenological qualitative study of the perceptions of students who had experienced middle school honors math or language arts courses and their high school honors and AP teachers. The data was collected from a

single school in a relatively small suburban school district which had little diversity and was not necessary reflective of other demographic areas. While the experiences that were related throughout this study were primarily positive, more research could be done in another school district which varies in size, location, or demographic makeup of the student population. A difference in these factors may render different results and should be investigated further.

The study was qualitative and sought to better understand the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the impact of middle school honors math and language arts course experience on their feelings of preparedness for high school honors and AP courses. The study focused on the participants' feelings and did not look at quantifiable data to support the perceptions that were shared throughout the study. A similar quantitative study should be done to determine the effectiveness of these middle school honors courses on student success in high school honors and AP classes. A quantitative study could examine data such as student grades, standardized test scores, and work completion percentages for high school honors students who participated in corresponding math or language arts middle school honors classes and those who did not. This quantitative research, in addition to the current qualitative findings of this study, would provide a well-balanced understanding of the overall effectiveness of middle school honors courses as preparation for high school honors/AP courses.

Lastly, although the study examined high school participants' perceptions of their middle school honors course experiences, the study was done over a short period of time. Additional research should examine the long-lasting effects of early participation in rigorous and demanding curriculum through honors courses by following students for a

longer time period. Researchers should design further studies that evaluate the impact of early exposure to accelerated courses in collegiate student success and perceptions of preparedness.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### **PARENTAL CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION**

*An Investigation of Experience in Middle School Honors Math and Language Arts Courses and Student and Teacher Perceptions of Preparedness for Similar High School Honors and Advanced Placement Courses*

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study about their perceptions concerning the effectiveness of middle school honors (advanced) courses. Your child was selected because he/she participated in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade advanced math or language arts classes. In order for your child to participate, permission needs to be obtained from a parent or legal guardian.

This study is being conducted by a researcher from Liberty University.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of offering honors (advanced) mathematics and language arts courses at the middle school level.

- *Catoosa County Schools has granted permission for the researcher to conduct this study.*

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to allow your child to be a participant in this research, we would ask him/her to do the following things.

- *Complete a brief survey containing open-ended questions that explain his/her perceptions concerning their preparedness for honors and AP courses based on experience in middle school classes that were accelerated and rigorous in nature.*
- *The survey will be given at school and will take no more than 30 minutes to complete.*
- *Heritage High School has agreed to participate in the study and your child's teachers will administer and collect the surveys.*
- *Sixteen students will be chosen from these surveys to collect more in-depth information through short 15 minute interviews during their lunch hour.*

#### **RISKS and BENEFITS**

- There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.
- Although there are no direct benefits, the information gained will contribute to knowledge regarding middle school honors courses.
- There is no compensation for participation in the survey.

**PRIVACY**

- *The researcher will ensure that students’ privacy is protected at all times.*
- *Only the researcher will have access to student names, and participants will remain anonymous.*
- *No student names will be used concerning survey data and the site of the study (Heritage High School) will be given a pseudonym for the purposes of reporting data.*

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation is voluntary. There is no penalty if you choose not to allow your child to participate or if your child chooses not to participate. You are free to withdraw your child from the research at any time and your child is also free to withdraw at any time without penalty. In the case of withdrawal from the study, data collected from that participant will be destroyed and not included in the research analysis and results. [Note that a subject cannot withdraw once an “anonymous” survey is submitted; however, a subject may choose not to complete the survey.]

**CONTACT and QUESTIONS**

The researcher conducting this study is Melissa Butler. If you have any questions, you may contact her at [mbutler.hms@catoosa.k12.ga.us](mailto:mbutler.hms@catoosa.k12.ga.us). 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 24502 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read and understand the information above and I give my permission to allow my child to participate in this research study.

Student’s Name (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Student’s Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**IRB Code Numbers:** 1560.031113

**IRB Expiration Date:** March 11, 2014

## Appendix B

### TEACHER CONSENT FORM

*An Investigation of Experience in Middle School Honors Math and Language Arts Courses and Student and Teacher Perceptions of Preparedness for Similar High School Honors and Advanced Placement Courses*

Melissa Butler  
Liberty University

You being asked to participate in a research study about perceptions concerning the effectiveness of middle school honors (advanced) courses. You were selected because you teach honors/AP high school math or English classes. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of offering honors (advanced) mathematics and language arts courses at the middle school level.

- *Catoosa County Schools has granted permission for the researcher to conduct this study.*

### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be a participant in this research, we would ask you to do the following things.

- *Participate in a teacher focus group which would meet only one time for approximately 30-45 minutes.*

### **RISKS and BENEFITS**

- There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.
- Although there are no direct benefits, the information gained will contribute to knowledge regarding middle school honors courses.
- There is no compensation for participation in the survey.

### **PRIVACY**

- *The researcher will ensure that participants' privacy is protected at all times.*
- *Only the researcher will have access to names, and participants will remain anonymous.*
- *The site of the study (Heritage High School) will be given a pseudonym for the purposes of reporting data.*

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation is voluntary. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the time when the focus group is conducted.

**CONTACT and QUESTIONS**

The researcher conducting this study is Melissa Butler. If you have any questions, you may contact her at [mbutler.hms@catoosa.k12.ga.us](mailto:mbutler.hms@catoosa.k12.ga.us). 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 24502 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read and understand the information above and I give my permission to allow my child to participate in this research study.

Participant's Name (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**IRB Code Numbers:** 1560.031113

**IRB Expiration Date:** March 11, 2014

## Appendix C

### Student Survey Questions

*Participant Name:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Student Survey Questions*

1. Please write the name of the middle school where you attended during sixth, seventh, and eighth grades? \_\_\_\_\_

#### ***Math Experience***

2. Did you participate in middle school **advanced math courses at Heritage**

**Middle School** in:

6<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

7<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

8<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

3. Please provide information concerning your **math class for the current school year** including the course title, teacher, and a brief description of the course.

4. Were you a part of the gifted math program (Horizon) in middle school?

5. What challenges have you faced with your current mathematics course?

6. How do you feel that your participation in an advanced middle school mathematics course prepared you for these challenges?

Check any of the following that apply:

**Because I participated in middle school advanced math,**

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more prepared for the expectations in honors/AP high school math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I have more knowledge of math content.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I have a deeper understanding of math vocabulary.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was exposed to more difficult math content in middle school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more capable of being successful in honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was more likely to enroll in high school honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I developed a good work ethic in middle school advanced math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more successful in high school honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel better prepared to handle the work load of honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more capable of keeping up with the fast instructional pace in honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was grouped with peers who challenged me to do better.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like the friends I made in middle school honors math encouraged me to sign up for high school honors/AP math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like middle school honors math challenged me more than regular middle school math.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like my teachers believe I am a good math student.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please Explain) \_\_\_\_\_

***English/Language Arts Experience***

7. Did you participate in middle school **advanced language arts courses at**

**Heritage Middle School** in:

6<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

7<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

8<sup>th</sup>      yes    no

8. Please provide information concerning **your English class for the current school year** including the course title, teacher, and a brief description of the course.

9. Were you a part of the gifted language arts program (Horizon) in middle school?

10. What challenges have you faced with your current English course?

11. How do you feel that your participation in an advanced middle school English course prepared you for these challenges?

Check any of the following that apply:

**Because I participated in middle school advanced language arts,**

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more prepared for the expectations in honors/AP high school language arts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am a better writer.

**Because I participated in middle school advanced language arts,**

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am a better reader.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was exposed to more challenging English content in middle school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more capable of being successful in honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was more likely to enroll in high school honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I developed a good work ethic in middle school advanced language arts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I am more successful in high school honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel better prepared to handle the work load of honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel more capable of keeping up with the fast instructional pace in honors/AP English.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like I was grouped with peers who challenged me to do better.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like the friends I made in middle school honors math encouraged me to sign up for high school honors/AP English.

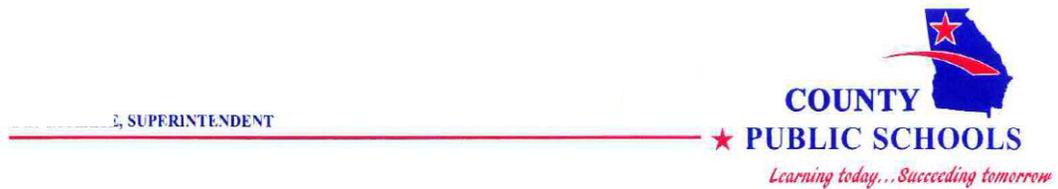
\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like middle school honors language arts challenged me more than regular middle school language arts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel like my teachers believe I am a good English student.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please Explain)\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Other comments regarding math or language arts advanced courses:



December 10, 2012

Ms. Melissa Butler  
41 East Court  
Ringgold, GA 30736

Dear Ms. Butler:

Based on my review of your research proposal, the system grants you permission to conduct the study entitled "A Phenomenological Investigation of Experience in Middle School Honors Math and Language Arts Courses and Perceptions of Preparedness for Similar High School Honors and Advanced Placement Courses" within the County Public Schools organization, specifically Middle School and High School. This permission is granted on the basis that the school principals will establish procedures to ensure that the privacy of students and staff is maintained. Specifically, test data cannot leave the school building in any form that could lead to personal identification. As Georgia educators, we are also all required to follow the standards established in the Georgia Professional Standards Commission Code of Ethics. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission of the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Sincerely,

Assistant Superintendent  
County Public Schools



ity

The Graduate School at Liberty Univers

March 11, 2013

Melissa Butler

IRB Approval 1560.031113: A Phenomenological Investigation of Experience in Middle School Honors Math and Language Arts Courses and Student and Teacher Perceptions of Preparedness for Similar High School Honors and Advanced Placement Courses

Dear Melissa,

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.

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

Sincerely,

*Professor, IRB Chair*  
**Counseling**  
**(434) 592-4054**



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1. Tell me about your feelings of being in middle school advanced math classes at HMS. You can tell me about positive or negative experiences or feelings that you have.
2. Do you think your past experience in middle school advanced math courses affected your choice to participate in HHS honors or AP math classes?
3. Do you feel as though you are more prepared for honors and AP math classes at HHS because you participated in middle school advanced math classes early in your academic career?

If you felt more prepared, what types of activities, lessons, or instruction think contributed to those feelings?

If you didn't feel more prepared, what could your advanced middle school math teachers have done differently to make you feel more prepared?

4. Describe how you think your teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school.
5. Does the way your teachers perceive your ability as a math student make you feel more confident?
6. Describe your peers in middle school advanced math. Discuss the kind of students that were in your classes and any impact they may have had on you as a math student.
7. How do you feel that being grouped with other students who excelled in math gave you an advantage or disadvantage in your high school honors/AP math classes?
8. Do you feel like you were more, less, or equally challenged than students who took regular middle school math?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your middle school advanced math experiences?

**Student One- Clint** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Accelerated Math II)

**April 26, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me about any feelings you have about being in the middle school advanced math classes at HMS?*

**Clint:** I thought it prepared me well for ninth and tenth grade accelerated math. *Okay. Do you think your past experiences in middle school advanced math classes affected your choice to participate in honors or AP math classes at HHS?*

Can you repeat the question?

*Sure. Do you think that your past experience with advanced classes in middle school made you want to take honors or AP classes at the high school level?*

Yes, I do.

*Okay. Do you have anything else to say about that?*

Um, no. I don't.

*Do you feel as though you were more prepared for your honors and AP math classes because you participated in middle school advanced math classes?*

Yeah, I feel more prepared for it because I got more experience with it. I was in more advanced classes than I would have been.

*If you had not taken them in middle school?*

Yeah.

*And how do you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school?*

They look at them as if they are more advanced. They have a better outlook on them than they do on the students in their non-accelerated classes.

*So you are talking about their abilities or the things they have been exposed to?*

Yeah. They look at them better than they do their other students.

*Okay. Describe your peers in your middle school advanced math class and discuss the kind of students that were in those classes and what kind of impact you think they had on you as a math student.*

My peers? Like the other students I had?

*The other students in your advanced math classes at the middle school.*

They were mainly my friends. They gave me... They pushed me to do my best and they helped me with my work and all. They pushed me to do the best I could do and they all helped me.

*And do you feel that would have been the case if you hadn't taken advanced math?*

No. I do not.

*Do you think those students wouldn't have challenged you as much or made you challenge yourself as much?*

Right. I do not.

*Okay. And then do you feel like you were more, less, or equally as challenged than students who took regular middle school math?*

I think I was more challenged than those who took regular math.

*Okay, is there anything else that you would like to share about your middle school advanced math experiences?*

No, not really.

*Well, thank you so much.*

You're welcome.

**Student Two- Clara** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors literature)

**April 26, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me any feelings that you may have whether they be positive or negative about your experience in middle school honors or advanced language arts?*

**Clara:** Um, I thought it helped me because I had it all three years. I thought it helped me a lot because we were always ahead of everyone and we went more in-depth. Cause I understand things now that I didn't.

*Okay. Do you think, um, that your past experience in middle school language arts advanced classes affected your decision to enroll in AP or honors English classes at the high school level.*

Yeah, for sure. I knew because I already understood things that I wouldn't be behind. I would be caught up with everyone else.

*Okay, so do you feel like you were more prepared maybe?*

Yeah.

*That's my next question actually. Do you feel as though you were more prepared for honors and AP English classes here at the high school because you took the advanced middle school classes?*

Yes.

*I guess you kind of answered that already that was just my next question... sorry. What types of activities or instruction do you think contributed to your feelings of being more prepared?*

Like things that we studied?

*Yes, or things that you did, things that your teacher did to make you feel more prepared.*

Um, well we did like diagramming sentences and things and we do that now so that was good. And how we would read a book and we would try to get more in-depth and understand it and that helps me now on tests and stuff.

*Okay. And those were things that other classes did not do as much?*

Yeah.

*Alright, how do you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school?*

They probably expect more of us because we understand things and they know what we've learned so far.

*And can you talk about, just for a minute, your peers in your middle school advanced language arts classes and what kind of impact you think being grouped in a class with those particular peers had on you?*

Well, I think it challenged you more because you knew that they understood it so you would want to understand it so you don't get behind and they would just think that you're stupid at getting things.

*Okay, do you feel like you were more, less, or equally as challenged as students who took regular middle school language arts?*

I think you were more challenged because you had the motivation and they didn't really... they just kind of glided through and didn't do anything. But I had to keep my grade up because it was harder work and so I had to work harder than they did.

*And you knew that you could lose the privilege to take those classes?*

Yeah, for sure.

*Is there anything else that you would like to share about your middle school advanced language experience?*

No, not really.

*Okay... thank you so much.*

You're welcome.

**Student Three- Noah** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors Algebra II)

**April 26, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me about any feelings or perceptions that you have about the middle school advanced math classes that you took? They can be positive or negative.*

**Noah:** Um, it depends on what teacher you had. Some teachers enforce advanced a little more than others. I had Mrs. Smith\* and she really enforced advanced and I don't think we ever did the same stuff as other kids. We would always do stuff further ahead.

*And that was 8<sup>th</sup> grade, correct?*

Yes, ma'am. Now other advanced teachers, like I had advanced in 7<sup>th</sup>, you couldn't really tell a difference. I mean, you would do some other things that were different but not completely different. I guess they wouldn't go like way ahead... they would try and keep us like in the same group of things. I guess it all just depends on what teacher you had.

*So do you feel because you participated in those advanced math classes you were more or less likely to enroll in honors or AP math classes here at the high school.*

Yes, ma'am I do.

*You feel like you were more likely?*

Yes, ma'am I do.

*Okay, do you feel like you were more prepared for your honors and AP math classes here?*

Well, for Mrs. Smith\* I think she got us ready for it because like she would always prep us up for what we were going to do. She was telling us like this is what we were going to be doing in high school and if you take honors you are

going to have to know this for I guess, just to do better, be more prepared for honors, or making good grades... stuff like that.

*So she really talked to you about honors?*

Yes, ma'am.

*And she was 8<sup>th</sup> grade?*

Yes, ma'am.

*How do you think that your teachers here at HHS feel about students who have taken advanced middle school math?*

I don't think... well, I'm not sure they know. I don't know if they tell them or anything so I'm not really sure.

*Okay. Alright and how do you feel about your peers you had in your advanced middle school math classes? Do you think that they impacted you as a student?*

Yes, ma'am. It depends on if your friends are like the ones that you goof with or like the other ones that are trying to push you to do work and everything. Most of the time they made me do better and stuff.

*Okay, so do you feel like you were more, equally, or less challenged than students who took regular middle school math? I guess you kind of answered that already.*

Yes, ma'am.

*We'll just skip that one. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your middle school advanced math experiences?*

No, ma'am. I think that's pretty much it.

*Alright, well, thank you so much.*

Thank you.

**Student Four- Lane** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Accelerated Math II)

**April 26, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me anything about your feelings, whether they are positive or negative, about advanced middle school math?*

**Lane:** They were positive because I learned a lot, and it has prepared me for high school accelerated math.

*Do you think that your past experience in middle school advanced math courses impacted your decision to enroll in advanced or honors/AP high school classes?*

Yes, I did.

*So you don't think you would have taken honors math classes if you hadn't taken middle school advanced math?*

No, I wouldn't have.

*Do you feel as though you were more prepared for your high school honors math classes because you participated in those advanced classes early on?*

Yes.

*Can you tell me any specific things that you did, types of instruction, or what your teachers did to make you feel more prepared?*

They just helped me throughout the whole thing and taught it to where I understood it.

*Can you describe how you think your teachers view students who have taken middle school advanced classes in math?*

They help you but they think you should know it already... which I mean I do but it's easier than what it would be if I didn't have the advance middle school classes.

*Do you think they look at students differently who have taken middle school advanced math classes?*

I don't think they look at them differently, they just know that you already know it.

*Do they have higher expectations?*

Yes.

*How do you feel that being grouped with other students who excelled in mathematics gave you an advantage? So discuss your peers.*

I mean they help me a lot. We have all been through the middle school accelerated math program so we help each other.

*So the students you are with now are a lot of the same students you were with in your middle school advanced math classes?*

Yes.

*Do you feel like you were more, equally, or less challenged than student who took regular middle school math classes?*

We were more challenged. We had harder problems.

*Is there anything else that you would like to share?*

No, that's fine.

**Student Five- Wes** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors English 10)

**May 1, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me anything about your feelings about advanced middle school language arts classes at HMS? They can be positive or negative.*

**Wes:** I think they helped... um...just get the kids ready for honors language because like I think that if I had stayed in the regular classes then I wouldn't have been as prepared for honors ninth and tenth grade language as I would have been.

*Do you think that your experience in middle school language arts advanced classes affected your*

*decision to enroll in high school honors English classes?*

Probably, just because my teacher... You know they have those people that they choose to recommend for honors language and I was one of them.

*Do you feel like you were more prepared, you kind of answered this already... but more prepared for your high school honors English courses?*

Probably. Yes.

*And what type of activities, lessons, or instruction do you think contributed to your feelings of being more prepared?*

Um, I don't know.

*Like what do you think you did to make you feel more prepared?*

Well, we did a lot more work with essays and that helps.

*So a lot more writing?*

Yes.

*And what do you think they could have done to prepare you more?*

Um, worked on a harder level. Like when we would read books they would just be like using stuff and I think it needs to be more in depth. Like higher level.

*Describe how you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school.*

They probably think more of them because... I don't know... like obviously they did better in middle school and tried harder than the average kid. And they are more than likely going to do better in high school.

*Tell me about your peers in advanced middle school language arts. Can you tell me what kind of students were in your classes and what kind of impact they had on you as a student?*

A lot of them were just kids like me. Just you know... people that wanted to be in the gifted program but there wasn't enough room so we were all kind of the same... at the same learning rate and it just kind of flowed very easily.

*Okay, so do you think they impacted you or challenged you more?*

Probably more than they would have in a regular class.

*Alright. Um, is there anything else that you want to share with me about your advanced language arts classes?*

No, not that I know of.

**Student Six- Wendy** (11<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors American Literature)

**May 1, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me anything about your feelings about being in the middle school advanced language arts classes at HMS? They can be positive or negative.*

**Wendy:** Um, I like them. I thought I did well in them.

*Do you feel like they prepared you for your high school honors classes?*

I do.

*Can you tell me some of the ways that they made you feel more prepared?*

A lot of the daily grammar practice that we did I felt really helped and we wrote a lot of essays which I also thought helped.

*Do you think they challenged you more than if you had been in a regular class.*

I do. And I also think that you know it's all set up... You gradually increase in what you know. And this year...especially this year... that it's been even better because I had such a good foundation for it.

*Okay. Great. Do you think that your teachers... How do you think they view students who come from middle school advanced classes?*

I think they kind of expect more from you because you have been in gifted (accelerated) language for so long that they look at your work and say well, they've been in advanced and they should know how to do this by now.

*So you came into your ninth grade honors class thinking, "My teacher expects more of me."*

Um, hmmm. I did.

*How do you feel about your peers that you had in advanced middle school language arts? What kind of students were they and what kind of impact do you think they had on you as a student?*

Um, I thought they were all really good students. And since we've all done advanced language, you know we've all become better friends because of that.

*Do you think they have challenged you in ways that might not have happened if you weren't in a regular class?*

I think so because you are surrounded by people who still really know what they are talking about where in a regular class you probably wouldn't be surrounded by those types of people.

*Okay, do you think there is anything that your middle school language arts classes could have done to prepare you more?*

Not that I know of... There is nothing that I can point out. I think they did a pretty good job with everything.

*Is there anything else that you would like to share about your middle school language arts classes?*

I don't think so.

*Thank you so much for coming today.*

**Student Seven- Rylee** (12<sup>th</sup> grade/AP Statistics)

**May 1, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me anything about your feelings about advanced middle school math classes at HMS? They can be either positive or negative.*

**Rylee:** I really liked it. Since I was new to the school system, I started out in a regular class and then they moved me into it. I really got a lot out of it and I think those classes prepared me for high school.

*What types of things do you think you did in those advanced math classes that made you feel more prepared for high school?*

Just the curriculum, like my teacher really got through the material we needed and then started working on what we were going to need for high school in those advanced classes. So we kind of had like a basis for what we were going to be working with.

*And do you think participating in those advanced math classes in middle school affected your decision to enroll in honors/AP math classes at the high school?*

Um, I don't know that it affected it. I was pretty sure that I was going to be taking honors classes but it definitely made me more comfortable with choosing to take those classes... I felt more prepared for it.

*How do you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school?*

Probably like they are more prepared. Like they have had teachers who have expected more out of them and have taught them more so that they are ready to move at a faster pace and to get through stuff because they know that they should know it already.

*Think about your peers in your advanced middle school math classes. What kind of students were they and what kind of impact did they have on you as a math student?*

They were all really good students. They all really wanted to work and it was really great to be in an atmosphere where everyone wanted to learn instead of some people just sitting there like they didn't care. That really helped me to just keep going in my studies and stay with it like they did.

*Is there anything that you can think of that your middle school advanced classes could have done to prepare you more for honors/AP math classes in high school?*

Well, when I came here, I had Mrs. Nelson. And she's just a really fast-paced teacher so it may have just been like a teacher difference, but that was the biggest difference... having to go from a slower pace to a really fast pace in math.

*Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your middle school advanced math experience?*

I'm just really grateful that they put me in it. I mean, it really helped me to be ready to take all these advanced classes like I ended up taking AP calculus this year and I still use some of the stuff like my eighth grade teacher taught us a song and I still use it today to help me remember how to do formulas...So it was really helpful.

*Okay, well thank you so much.*

**Student Eight- Emily** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors English 10)

**May 1, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me anything about your feelings of being involved in the advanced language arts classes at HMS?*

**Emily:** I felt like we did more.

*Do you think that taking those classes affected your decision to enroll in ninth grade honors English?*

I think so. I think it did because my teacher kind of encouraged it. She said it wouldn't be like... I don't know. I think she prepared us.

*Okay, so you did feel more prepared because you took those advanced middle school language classes?*

Yes.

*And what types of things did you do in those advanced middle school language classes that made you feel more prepared?*

Definitely like writing and essays and stuff. I think that what advanced me...writing...

*So you did more writing or different writing?*

Yeah. I think I learned how to write better.

*Okay, how do you think your middle school advanced language arts classes could have prepared you more for your honors English classes in high school?*

I don't really know. More...

*Can you think of anything that you could have done in those classes that would have better prepared you?*

Maybe like reading more.

*How do you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school?*

Um, probably that they should know a little more maybe.

*And do you think the way you believe your teachers view you as a math student affects your confidence as a math student? Does it make you feel more or less confident?*

I think so. It makes me feel like I know what I'm doing.

*What about your peers in your middle school advanced language arts classes... Do you feel like they had an impact on you as a student?*

Yeah, I think so. Maybe as far as making me want to do better.

*And that changed you as a student?*

Yes, maybe in my determination level.

*Okay, do you feel like you were more, less, or equally as challenged as students who took regular language classes in middle school.*

I don't know. More to equally I guess. I know really know what they learned.

*Do you have anything else that you want to share about how middle school language classes prepared you for honors in high school?*

No, I don't think I have anything.

**Student Nine- Addison** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors English 10)

**May 1, 2013**

**Butler:** *Tell me about your feelings of being middle school advanced language arts classes. They can be either positive or negative.*

**Addison:** It was kind of good to be with the people on the same pace as you and people who actually wanted to do their work versus not.

*So do you think you felt more or less prepared for your high school honors English classes because you took those middle school language arts classes?*

Yes, I think we were able to focus more on things we needed to do. Partially because it was a little bit of a smaller class size and um, I guess the pace... We were able to focus on the stuff that we needed to be able to focus on.

*And if you felt more prepared what activities or types of instruction do you think that you did to prepare you for those honors English classes?*

More probably just extra activities on top of what we were already doing, although we probably didn't really like them, it did help us prepare for the bigger workload of high school and um, we did plenty of Writing to Win and that sort of stuff.

*Okay, do you think that your experience with middle school advanced language arts affected your decision to participate in high school honors English classes?*

I was probably already going to do it but it helped in the sense that I was like, "Well, I've already had some things to prepare me."

*And how do you think your teachers view students who have already taken advanced classes in middle school?*

Um, in high school?

*Yeah, your high school teachers.*

I don't know if they look at that or not.

*Okay. What about your peers in your advanced middle school language arts classes...*

*What kind of students were they and what kind of an impact did they have on you as a student?*

Well, there's other students who definitely wanted to succeed and that helped along with the process. There were people you could rely on to help study and stuff like that versus regular classes where a lot of times people are goofing off... not that that doesn't happen in the advanced classes but it happens less.

*And do you feel like you were more, equally, or less challenged than students who took regular language arts classes?*

Definitely more challenged.

*Do you feel like there is anything that your middle school advanced classes could have done to better prepare you?*

Well, specifically with the language arts... Thesis. We kind of worked on it some, but it's like we came into this year and we are having to do all of this work on a thesis because we are kind of behind on that. So thesis and writing...

*Is there anything else that you would like to share about your middle school advanced language arts experiences?*

We went through several different books and did questions with them and stuff like that. I think that reading really helps with writing and all other scholastic activities because it helps build your vocabulary and stuff like that so I thought it was really good that we took the time for that.

*Okay, well thank you so much for taking the time to come.*

**Student Ten- Grant** (9<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors English 9)

**May 1, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me anything about your feelings about being in advanced middle school language arts classes at HMS?*

**Grant:** Actually I kind of felt like everything that I did in the classes was actually... I was a little bit more advanced because I understood everything pretty thoroughly and I felt that I was little bit more advanced than certain people in the class so I was pretty comfortable.

*Can you tell me about any experiences that you had that were positive or negative and affected how you are doing in high school?*

Um, we had like these book report things that we did and we had a paper bag project where you put things in a bag about a story that we read and then we had one that was like a tri-folding book sleeve and you had to practically made you own... On the book sleeve I made a pretty bad grade because I didn't understand the directions thoroughly and I had a little bit of trouble with that one but the... during that project I kind of had a bad turn with my teacher because she said I was being rude and I don't know...

*Okay. Do you think that your past experience in middle school language arts classes affected your choice to enroll in high school honors English?*

I actually do because I've always been accelerated very highly in language arts... I've always been expected to make a good grade in there so I felt like it wasn't as if I was going out on a limb when I signed up for it.

*So do you think you would have signed up for honors English classes in high school had you not taken advanced language arts classes in middle school?*

Um, I might have but I probably would have switched out of it because we're doing... Well, at the beginning of my class this semester, we were doing things similar to what college students would be doing because she wanted us to be prepared for a lot harder stuff in the future but now it's kind of slacking a little bit so we have a little bit more ease.

*If you did feel more prepared, what kind of activities, or lessons, or instruction do you think contributed to those feelings?*

Um....

*What do you think your 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade advanced language arts teachers did to help you feel more prepared?*

Well, we did a lot of research and biographical papers. In my 7<sup>th</sup> grade class we did a lot of stuff including poetry and we studied Edgar Allen Poe and Robert Frost and very complicated things. We also read a novel called *A Separate Peace* and we had to do a biographical experimentation.

*Are any of those things that students in the regular language arts classes did not have to do?*

They did it inside of class together and we did it in class and outside of class.

*Okay. And do you feel like you were more, less, or equally as challenged as students who took regular middle school language arts classes?*

In language arts I have more creativity when it comes to writing than others. We all were equally challenged in the class but I happened to be one of the few people in there who could actually articulate projects that we got sat up.

*Um, how do you think your teachers view students who have taken advanced language arts classes in middle school?*

They actually think they expect them to do a bit more work than others and my current teacher... every time she walks by you and you have a little bitty sliver of something written down on your paper, she'll be like, "Remember, you are in an honors class." She'll just encourage you to do more so that you get a better grade. I think she looks at the people who had advanced language in middle school and expects them to do a little bit more than the others.

*What do you think your middle school advanced language arts classes could have done that might have better prepared you?*

They definitely taught me more social skills and how to use my words through a story, but my current teacher feels that I've found a couple of pieces of papers that I've written where it doesn't flow 100%. But I feel that I've been well prepared with phrases, parts of speech, and knowing definitions.

*Do you think there is anything that could have been done in those advanced classes to better prepare you?*

In 5<sup>th</sup> grade we were studying *The Prince and the Pauper* at the end of the school year and what we did was we were trying to see how the author made the story flow more fluently but we didn't get to finish the book because we had the clause kind of stuff and we didn't get to finish our studying on that.

*Well, thank you so much. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences in advanced middle school language arts classes?*

When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, it was a lot easier than I expected. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, it was really similar to my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. And in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, it was a big bump up from elementary school. And from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to now it's a lot more bump up and I feel like my class is more equally challenged to my standard.

*Well, thank you so much.*

**Student Eleven- Richard** (9<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors English 9)

**May 2, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me your feelings about being in the middle school advanced language arts classes at HMS? They can be positive or negative.*

**Richard:** They helped to an extent but it seemed that whenever we would start to read a novel or something that was out of class to prepare us more for high school, we didn't finish it or it wasn't more elaborate and we didn't talk about it enough.

*Do you think those advanced language arts classes in middle school prepared you more for high school honors?*

They prepared us more than regular classes, but I don't think they prepared us enough.

*So what do you think they could have done to prepare you enough?*

More outside reading, more talking about thematic significance and things like that.

*Do you think that participating in the middle school advanced language arts classes affected your decision to participate in high school honors English?*

Well, yes because the recommendation that the teacher gives on whether you should take honors or not is what influences me and my grades.

*So your 8<sup>th</sup> grade advanced teacher recommended that you take it?*

Yes.

*How do you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in high school?*

As a higher level and that they are able to think on a more advanced level than other people in their grades.

*Alright, what about your peers in those advanced language classes that you had? What kind of students were they and what kind of impact do you think they had on you as a student?*

Um, well, your friends that you hang around with always influence you.

Everyone in there was smart to an extent, but I think the teacher had more influence... like the most influence. The peers in there really didn't do much like to sway you to learn different things or to take high school honors or not.

*Did you develop friendships in those classes that you still have today.*

Yes, ma'am.

*Do you have anything else that you would like to share about your advanced language arts experiences?*

Um, just that I think they should do more outside reading at home and then when you come back the next day talk about it or incorporate it into the next day's learning.

*Because that is what you have to do in high school?*

Um, hmmm. I mean we've done three novels and research papers outside of class in high school and we didn't really do any of that in middle school.

*Alright, well thank you so much.*

**Student Twelve- Sam** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Honors English 10)

**May 2, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me about any feelings you have about being in the middle school advanced language arts classes at HMS? They can be positive or negative.*

**Sam:** Well, I haven't had a problem with honors English classes in high school, and I think that was really because I took the advanced English in middle school. I can't really think of anything negative about it because we did pretty much the same amount of work that we would have done in a regular English class but just the students that were in there and the way the teacher taught us... I think I got more out of it because in middle school you could only take two gifted students so all of the smarter kids who couldn't take gifted took advanced.

*So do you think those classes prepared you more for your honors English classes?*

Yes, I do.

*And what types of things do you think you did in those classes that prepared you more?*

Definitely like the way that we learned diagramming sentences and we wrote several book reports and things... And we read books that were on a higher reading level than our grade and stuff like that so I was learning high school stuff in middle school.

*And do you think you were more, equally, or less challenged than if you had taken a regular language arts class in middle school?*

Definitely more challenged.

*Do you think that being in those advanced language arts classes in middle school affected your decision to enroll in honors English in ninth and tenth grades?*

Yes. Yes, I do.

*Did your teachers have anything to do with that decision?*

Yes, they were like if you've enjoyed taking this class then you definitely need to take honors in high school because you'll get more out of honors than if you just take regular.

*So your middle school advanced language arts teachers encouraged you to take those courses in high school?*

Yes, they did.

*Describe your peers in your advanced language arts classes in middle school. And what kind of impact do you think they had on you as a student?*

There are always more of the smarter kids in those advanced classes so they definitely encouraged me to do better and stay on a level with them.

*What do you think your middle school advanced language arts teachers could have done to better prepare you for high school honors English?*

I think if they had taught more on line with what we are learning now. Because even though they were doing more advanced topics it wasn't online with what we have learned so far in high school.

*Do you have anything else that you would like to tell me about your middle school language arts experiences?*

I really enjoyed it and I've enjoyed high school although I don't think I've enjoyed high school as much as I enjoyed middle school. High school has been a little more focused on learning than you know... Middle school you had some time to goof off and other things but in high school you just have to do this. I

think that's based on the fact that we are only taking each class for two nine weeks instead of the whole year.

*Okay, well thank you very much.*

**Student Thirteen- Brad** (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Accelerated Math II)

**May 2, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me about any feelings you have about being in the middle school advanced math classes at HMS? They can be positive or negative.*

**Brad:** Well, since I was already in those classes then, it kind of led me to be in the classes in high school. So I guess it just improved my work ethic.

*So do you feel that you were more prepared for honors and AP math classes at HHS because you participated in those advanced math classes at HMS?*

Yeah, I think it really helped a lot.

*And what types of things do you think your teachers did to prepare you?*

Like more in-depth math. Each year we would kind of move on to the next one.

And then just like I said ...work ethic.

*Can you think of anything they could have done to prepare you more?*

Um, no. I think they did a pretty good job.

*How do you think your teachers view students who took those advanced classes in middle school?... your teachers now.*

I guess most of us would be like the top of the class I guess you'd say.

*Can you talk for a minute about what kind of peers you had in your advanced middle school math classes and what kind of effect they had on you?*

They were all like good students and everything like that. They just made me keep up with them I guess. We all were advanced.

*Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your advanced middle school classes?*

No, not really.

*Well, thank you.*

**Butler:** *Can you tell me about your feelings regarding being in middle school advanced math classes? They can be either positive or negative.*

**Kayla:** I think they challenged us and made us work harder. So that way when we did get to high school, um, we were more prepared for what was to come in honors classes and stuff.

*Do you think they affected your decision to enroll in honors math classes in high school?*

Yes, I do. They made me feel like I would be more successful when I took it so it made me be able to move towards the choice of taking those classes.

*Okay. How do you think that your teachers view students who have taken advanced math classes in middle school?*

I think they view us as hardworking and like we want to succeed in what we are doing in class and stuff.

*And does your teacher's perception of your ability as a math student make you feel more competent...if they perceive you to be a better math student?*

Yes, it does. It makes us feel like even if we don't get something right then they'll teach us how to do it and it'll be okay because they believe we can do better and stuff.

*What about your peers? Can you tell me about your peers in those middle school advanced math classes? What kind of students were they and what kind of impact did they have on you?*

In the advanced classes, you didn't have to worry about people who were slacking off or distracting you. You have people who are going to push you and make you want to do the best you can do and get your work done also.

*Do you think you were more prepared for your advanced math classes in high school, and if you do, what types of things made you feel like you were more prepared?*

I feel like I was more prepared. Well, just like the amount of work we did in middle school prepared us for what the work was like in high school. It made it to where it wasn't as hard as it could have been.

*Do you think you would have been as challenged if you had taken regular math classes in middle school?*

No, I don't think I would have been. I think I would have gotten bored actually.

*Is there anything that you can think of that your teachers could have done to prepare you more in those middle school advanced math classes?*

The only thing I can think of is time which I know is a limiting factor.

*Okay. Is there anything else that you can think of that you want to share about your middle school advanced math class experiences?*

I just think that they should keep the classes there and try to get more kids in it if they can.

*Well, thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to come today.*

**Student Fifteen- Hailey** (9<sup>th</sup> grade/Accelerated Coordinate Algebra)

**May 2, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me about any feelings you have of being in the middle school advanced math classes at HMS? They can be either positive or negative. Just anything that you want to share.*

**Hailey:** Well, one thing I always thought was that it was really talkative classes.

Like I

would always be in a really talkative class and the teacher would always be complaining about that. Um, but I liked it, I didn't think it was too hard, but I didn't think it was too easy like all the other classes I had to do.

*Okay, so do you think they prepared you for your honors and AP math classes that you are taking in high school?*

Definitely, yeah.

*And what types of things do you think they did to prepare you more?*

They just had a higher expectation for staying focused and getting our work done and not like goofing off during class.

*Do you think that taking those advanced middle school math classes affected your decision to enroll in high school honors math?*

Yes, because I figured if I have been doing this for three years then I didn't want to go to regular math in high school and lose my progress.

*Okay, describe how you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school?*

They probably consider them to be more hardworking and...

*When that is your teacher's perception of you, do you feel like that affects how confident you feel in the math classroom?*

Yes, if they expect high of you then you don't want to let them down.

*What about your peers in those advanced middle school math classes? You talked about them a little bit but could you tell me some more? What kind of students were they and what kind of impact did they have on you as a student?*

Usually they were the... like they were usually people who pretend like they aren't very smart, but they actually are so they get placed into these classes and then they are like, "I don't know why I'm in here." But I'm like, "Yes, you do. Stop pretending that you don't."

*And do you think they impacted you as a math student in any way?*

I guess I didn't want to sound like that and I didn't want to pretend that I wasn't... I didn't want to be like that and pretend like I didn't know anything just to be cool I guess.

*Do you feel that being grouped with those other students who excelled in math gave you an advantage or a disadvantage in your current high school honors math class?*

Probably an advantage because it's easier to motivate yourself if you know that the people around you care about what they are doing and the grades they are getting then it motivates you to get high grades and to work hard.

*And is there anything you think those advanced math classes in middle school could have done to better prepare you for honors math classes in high school?*

Um....

*Do you think there is anything your teachers could have done differently or taught differently?*

Um, I don't know, but sometimes they kind of gave a lot of busy work so I would say not to do that as much and give more hands on ways of getting your work done.

*Okay, and is there anything else you want to share about your middle school advanced math experience?*

No.

*Thank you very much.*

**Student Sixteen- Anna** (11<sup>th</sup> grade/Accelerated Math III)

**May 2, 2013**

**Butler:** *Can you tell me any feelings that you have about the advanced math classes that you took in middle school? They can be either positive or negative.*

**Anna:** It was tough... But my teacher was really, really good so she helped us through everything. If we had questions, she answered them. And so, um, there wasn't anything that I came out not understanding.

*Do you think being in those classes affected your decision to enroll in advanced math classes in high school?*

Yes, I do think so. I felt more prepared since I had already had an accelerated class. So I felt that I could take on an accelerated class in high school.

*And what types of things do you think that your advanced middle school math teachers did to prepare you more?*

Even as far as not taking bathroom breaks during class, they were like, they won't let you do that in high school. But as far as the courses, they made it tough... They made us think for ourselves but we had to do that in high school too so we were ready to think on our own and not, um, be spoon fed the material.

*Do you think that you were more challenged than if you had been in a regular class?*

I do think so. It was a faster pace and so we had more work each day.

*Is there anything that you think they could have done differently to prepare you more?*

Not that I know of. Not right off hand. I think that we were pretty well prepared.

*Okay, how do you think teachers view students who have taken advanced classes in middle school?*

They probably see them as more prepared, more ready to think and work through things instead of just sitting there and staring at the page...not knowing the next step... not knowing what to do.

*And when you feel that your teachers perceive you that way, how does that make you feel as a student?*

You know that you are held to a higher standard so you have to work a little bit harder even if it's on your own time so that you can compensate if you don't understand something... You can compensate so that you can be held to that higher standard and achieve that.

*What about your peers in those middle school advanced math classes... What kind of students were they and what impact did they have on you as a math student.*

Most of them were really good students as far as grades. They made high B's or A's and they had good attitudes and they were ready to learn. We knew that when class started to sit down and we would sit down and start working. There wasn't any throwing paper airplanes or anything like that.

*Which is typical of middle school students (laughter)?*

Um, yes.

*How do you feel like being grouped with those students gave you an advantage or a disadvantage in your current honors math classes?*

It definitely gave me an advantage because I knew when the bell rang we were ready to work and we weren't sitting around waiting for the teacher to tell us to get started. We know what things to pull out and have ready so we don't waste

the first ten minutes of class waiting for the teacher to tell us. We know to sit down and it's class time, it's not recess.

*Do you think that because you took those...did I ask you this already?...because you took those advanced classes in middle school did it affect your decision to take honors math classes in high school?*

Yes, I think we might have went over this before, but it's okay. I think I was ready. That I was prepared. It wasn't as scary to say I was taking honors because I had already taken an accelerated math class.

*Is there anything else that you want to share about your middle school advanced math classes?*

I don't know. We covered a lot of material. It was very fast paced but we understood it. It wasn't like we sat there and struggled for thirty minutes or anything like that so, um, it was good as far as how much we covered. I think I scored high on the CRCT or whatever those tests are called at the end. So I was ready and I knew the material.

*Alright, thank you so much.*

## Appendix H

## Teacher Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. What challenges do you feel your AP and honors students face in high school?
2. Do you feel that your high school AP and honors students are prepared for those challenges? Please explain what makes them prepared or unprepared.
3. What could be done at the middle school level, specifically in advanced classes, to better prepare students for honors and AP math/English courses?
4. How do you think the implementation of advanced (honors) courses at Heritage Middle School has impacted student preparedness for your course?
5. How would you define increased rigor as it relates to your course?
6. Do you feel that students who have taken advanced courses in middle school are more prepared for the increased rigor in your specific honors/AP classes? Please explain.
7. Do you think advanced courses in middle school have an impact on the number of students who enroll in high school honors/AP courses? If so, how?
8. Do you think that early exposure to increased rigor during the middle school years matters concerning student perceptions of their own preparedness for high school honors/AP courses? Please explain.
9. Do you think students believe that you have more confidence in their abilities because they took advanced classes in middle school?
10. Can you see a significant difference in student preparedness for your honors/AP courses based on participation in middle school advanced (honors) classes?
11. Do you have any other thoughts or concerns regarding middle school advanced (honors) courses that you would like to share?

**Ms. Foster** (Honors/AP high school math teacher)

May 7, 2013

**Ms. Lewis** (Honors high school English teacher)

**Butler:** *What challenges do you feel that your AP and honors students face when they come to high school?*

**Ms. Lewis:** Well, mine don't know how to write.

**Ms. Foster:** Time management.

**Ms. Lewis:** Yes, definitely.

**Butler:** *Do you feel like they are prepared for those challenges at the middle school level?*

**Ms. Foster:** I feel like the freshmen who come to me from the accelerated program are very prepared. Very prepared.

**Ms. Lewis:** And I can say the same about the kids who come from that program.

Ms. Blake is phenomenal. I have told those kids over and over that they should give her a hug and kiss her feet. She's fantastic. But they don't all come from her so there's this mix of kids... some who know, some who don't and that's a problem.

**Butler:** *So you are both talking about the gifted or the Horizon classes and not necessarily the advanced classes.*

**Ms. Lewis:** Right.

**Ms. Foster:** Right. Yes, ma'am. The horizon classes.

**Butler:** *What do you think specifically in the advanced classes that are offered at the middle school could be done differently with those children? Because those are the students who aren't in Horizon classes, who don't qualify for gifted, but they are high-achieving and are placed in those advanced classes. What could be done to better prepare them?*

**Ms. Foster:** I'm not saying the accelerated kids don't come up here and do well also, but you know the gifted kids are the gifted kids. They are going to do well and they are going to achieve... they are going to achieve without me. The accelerated kids, they are pretty good but what I find is that they get upset or their families get upset because they're used to making straight A's. And I'm like, "This curriculum is hard... It's very hard." I struggle with that yearly. Because they come in and their parents want them to make an A because they are taking this accelerated class and I'm like, "It's an accelerated class but that doesn't mean everyone in here is an A student and everyone is going to get an A in accelerated class." So I struggle with that because they probably would get an A if they were taking regular math. Does that make sense?

**Butler:** *Yes. Yes, it does.*

**Ms. Lewis:** I have found the same thing to be true. They think they have to make an A or they have failed. And that's not so.

**Butler:** *So it's all about the grade?*

**Ms. Foster:** Yes.

**Ms. Lewis:** Yes, it seems to be all about the grade for them, especially the parents.

**Ms. Foster:** Well, I'll give you a for instance. Honor graduates... You have to have a 90. You have to take a minimum of six AP and honors classes yet some kids will take 20, 17, 15, 12... And yet they won't get to graduate with honors because they made one little B. And yet these other kids who didn't take nearly as many AP and top classes graduate with an honors degree. And I have an issue with that...

**Ms. Lewis:** Me too.

**Ms. Foster:** I don't know how you make that equitable. I'd like to see them give a point differential for each kid that takes another class. But those kinds of things are issues for me as a teacher because I'm thinking, "You are a really high-achieving child. You are taking classes way above and beyond these other people, and you're not being rewarded for it because you're not making an A. Does that make sense?"

**Butler:** *Yes.*

**Ms. Foster:** There's some struggle there.

**Butler:** *Do you think that offering the advanced classes at the middle school impacts the number of students who enroll in your accelerated or honors courses when they come to high school?*

**Ms. Foster:** Yes, ma'am. Very much.

**Ms. Lewis:** Oh yeah, because they wouldn't even know anything about those and I think they would be afraid of them.

**Ms. Foster:** Um, hmm.

**Butler:** *That kind of goes with my next question too. Do you think that early exposure to that increased rigor during those early middle school years impacts student perceptions of their preparedness?*

**Ms. Foster:** I do.

**Ms. Lewis:** Absolutely.

**Ms. Foster:** Yeah, they come confident.

**Butler:** *(Laughter) Well, you all are great... That is the next question. You said they have more confidence in their abilities, but do you think they perceive that you as the teacher have more confidence in their ability?*

**Ms. Lewis:** Yeah, I think they do. I think they know that we expect ...we have higher expectations for them than we do others. What do you think Mrs. Foster?

**Ms. Foster:** If they think *I* think they can do it?

**Butler:** Because they've taken those early advanced middle school classes.

**Ms. Foster:** I don't know. I think they... at least at first anyway are very shy...

**Ms. Lewis:** Well, see I get them in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade so they've had a year to...

**Ms. Foster:** Well, I think they come to me very shy and they are timid and think that if they say the wrong thing I'm going to go, "No!" (Laughter) And that's not what happens, but that's what they think. They're just afraid they are going to say the wrong answer.

**Butler:** So they are intimidated?

**Ms. Foster:** They are thinking well you know I can't be thinking that correctly and I have to say, "Yes, you are! Just tell me what your brain thinks."

**Ms. Lewis:** Well, okay, I guess I could see what you are saying. They are at first reluctant to give their opinions or to discuss a particular piece of literature because they think they are going to have the wrong answer, so I see that I guess. I'm on the back end of it now...

**Ms. Foster:** And sometimes there is no wrong answer.

**Ms. Lewis:** That's true.

**Ms. Foster:** Just tell me the way that you went about it and not necessarily the way I would have went about it.

**Ms. Lewis:** Right.

**Butler:** *Okay, and then just kind of in summary, can you tell a significant difference in the students who are in your honors classes and took middle school advanced classes and those who did not?*

**Ms. Foster:** Yes, way different.

**Ms. Lewis:** Yes, big time

**Ms. Foster:** Way different.... But I think that if you stuck all those kids in the same class: the gifted kid, the accelerated kid, and the regular kid...you'd notice the difference in them. You know... whose mama is pushing them really hard over here and whose mama wants them to do well over here? And then whose parents are probably not so involved? I think that has tenfold to do with it. I'm just grateful that we do offer it. I think the more we can give them the better, because while I may not agree with everything in the new math curriculum... the way it's taught... I don't necessarily agree with the order that things are taught.

But I know that kids need to know more math today as a freshman than they did five years ago when I taught the freshmen. Does that make sense?

**Butler:** *That's interesting, yes.*

**Ms. Foster:** I think the math they know is way beyond what they did know.

**Ms. Lewis:** I can't say that on the English side. They don't read like they used to. And I think five years ago knew more on the English end of things. They don't write as well, and it's because they don't do it often. It's not a fault of the middle school....

**Ms. Foster:** No, technology...

**Ms. Lewis:** That's it! They sit in front of a computer, or they text, or they play video games... that's what they live to do. So a book... What's that?

**Ms. Foster:** That's true. That's true.

**Butler:** *Well, in conclusion, do you have any other thoughts, or concerns, or other observations that you want to make about the middle school honors or advanced program offered at HMS?*

**Ms. Lewis:** I wish there were more Ms. Blake's!

**Ms. Foster:** I think... Here's what I think about that. I think that when they come to high school, they have the choice to take honors classes or whatever. Give them that choice at the middle school. And I say that because I've had one who is in the gifted program at the middle school and one who isn't in anything, even the accelerated classes...just in regular classes. And I promise you that if they gave me the choice to put my child in an accelerated class, I would put her there in a heartbeat minute....Because, in my opinion, those teachers expect more.

They teach my child more. They have fewer discipline problems in there. And I get that when you have a room full of kids and there are a bunch of discipline problems that you as the teacher begin to be beat down and beat down and beat down and you struggle to maintain discipline and that order and you finally say, “Forget it. Just do your little one, two, three and I’ll be happy. We’ll just get you out of here.” I understand and have empathy for that whole range where you just feel like you are beat down day after day. Everybody needs some bright spot in their day. You can’t just say, “You get all the low dregs, and I’m going to take all the glory.” There has to be a bright spot and I think that those kids, if I have the opportunity as a mama, I’m going to put my kid in the advanced classes.

**Butler:** *And they are just placed in those classes so you don’t have a choice at the middle school level?*

**Ms. Foster:** That’s right. So I think they should give them choice. And hold the expectation. Which is what we say, but come fall when you say you don’t want to work that hard, you’re not getting out. You’re stuck. So you may flunk it if you decide you don’t want to work that hard. So know up front that yes, it’s going to be hard. Yes, I’m going to be here and I’m going to help you, but if you have to make the choice to flunk it or pass it. Does that make sense?

**Butler:** *Yes, it does.*

**Ms. Foster:** That gives them the opportunity to achieve. And when my kid comes here, she’s going to come out of the low-end class and I’m putting her in honors all the way. And I guarantee you that she’s going to struggle because she doesn’t have the foundation that my son has been in those gifted and advanced

classes. Do you understand what I'm saying? He's had teachers who have given him much higher expectations. His workload has been tenfold more than my daughter's workload has been and he is well prepared to come here and be in honors. She is not well prepared to come here and be in honors. And she will struggle and you know, it will be a heartache for us, but I feel like in the long run, she will have a better education for having been there in those classes.

**Ms. Lewis:** Well, I have grandkids who are now in the same situation. My grandson, who is now in the tenth grade, was in the accelerated program over at the middle school and he is gifted, he excels...well, he would probably succeed in a barrel (laughter). But then I've got his sister coming up, and she's smart but I don't think she's in any honors classes that I am aware of. She misses the gifted score by just a little bit. And her daddy's already enrolled her in the honors classes here and she's going to struggle bit, but he says it's time now to step it up.

**Ms. Foster:** Well, I would rather my kid have a B or a C...

**Ms. Lewis:** Oh, absolutely...

**Ms. Foster:** If a C is the best she can do and she's in that honors class then I would rather her be there.

**Butler:** *Because the expectation is higher?*

**Ms. Foster:** Yeah, because the expectation's higher, the curriculum is going to be more... and there will be less discipline.

**Ms. Lewis:** You know I just don't put up with as much of the silly stuff in my honors classes. And I hate to say that we put up with it...It's not exactly that we put up with it. It's just the way it is.

**Ms. Foster:** Well and they're just more disciplined... I never have a discipline issue...

**Ms. Lewis:** Self-disciplined. You don't have all those problems...

**Ms. Foster:** Those issues.

**Ms. Lewis:** That's right.

**Butler:** It's just a different type of student in regular classes?

**Ms. Foster:** Yes, I have empathy though because I've had those types of classes. I don't have them anymore and I'm very grateful.

**Ms. Lewis:** I have had years when I didn't have any of the lower levels and then years when I've had all lower levels. And now I have a balance. And I like the balance. You know if I had them all gifted, I certainly would not turn that down. But there are several of us who have the gifted certification, so I don't have a problem with it. I do like that bright spot like you were talking about. Everybody needs a bright spot in his or her day. So that's really nice or otherwise you do feel beaten down.

**Ms. Foster:** Yeah, it's like, "Oh no, not again."

**Ms. Lewis:** Exactly.

**Butler:** Well, thank you very much ladies. I really appreciate you coming.