AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION
PLANS: A STUDY OF LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES AND MIDDLE
SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A Dissertation
by
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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION
PLANS: A STUDY OF LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES AND MIDDLE
SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA

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The transition to middle school is increasingly becoming an important milestone

for adolescents. This study explored if North Carolina school systems had a targeted,

formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle

school that was based in middle grades research. All 115 LEAs were initially scanned to

discover if such district wide transitional plans existed. Once respondents were

determined, 15 faculty were interviewed using a structured interview format: six from a

school system in the Piedmont of North Carolina, five from a suburban community

outside of a University within North Carolina, and four from a coastal school district

along the North Carolina Atlantic shore.

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: *existence, elements,* and

communication. This research study found that there is a shortage of formal, purposeful

implementation of transitional best practice research within North Carolina middle schools and LEAs. This study also explored how systems theory was carried out within LEAs and middle schools to accomplish the task of creating, implementing, and sustaining their middle school transition plan. This research study used systems theory in an attempt to examine the actual and perceived communication styles that each LEA and middle school used. The systems theory models of communication (system-wide thinking, open-systems thinking, and process systems thinking) were not uniform within a LEA or middle school involved in this research. Many versions of systems theory are evident at various stages within schools and LEAs. Implications from the findings and suggestions for further research are presented.

Keywords: Middle School transition plans; systems theory

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A transition is defined by Webster's Dictionary (2010) as a movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, or concept to another. Transitions of all kinds require us to seek out and navigate for the purpose of safety [of self], information [needed to know], and connection [with environment] which are relative constants among other possible transitional components. For every transition we go through in life, no matter the magnitude, these three elements seemingly make repeated appearances (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008). Educationally, the term transition, as it relates to schooling, has a variety of interpretations that define the process differently. For example Akos, Queen, and Lineberry (2005) define it as a one-time set of activities. Arowsafe and Irvin (1992) indicate an adjustment phase that last as long as half the school year, and Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) reveal a process that involves all students moving from one level to the next. Each of these educational examples addresses [in varying degrees] components of the three overarching transitional needs: safety, information, and connection. Regardless of the focus of the definition, transitions are increasingly being recognized as critical periods for students who move through the various stages of public education in the United States of America (Queen & Algozzine, 2005).

Middle grades schools have been hailed as one of the most important institutions within which to recapture the millions of American youth who, often because of difficult social conditions, are more likely to show poor achievement and motivation to learn. They have also been noted to have poor conduct and affiliations with negative peers, mental health problems, or different combinations of these problems and others simultaneously during the early adolescent years (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Behaviors, 1989, 1995). The middle school (elementary/intermediate school to middle school and middle school to high school) transitions can be difficult for both boys and girls resulting in disconnectedness of students identified as both academically successful and at-risk (Hirsch & Rapkins, 1987). Students can exhibit signs of extreme stress, low self esteem, and increased levels of depression according to research reported by Robinson, Garber, and Hilsman (1995). Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French (1996) identified that attendance problems and low scholastic achievement are linked to transition problems for middle schools. In fact, Reyes and Hedeker (1993) noted that a student's inability to make the transition to different school levels has proven to be a predictor of a future high school dropout. An unsuccessful transition can exacerbate an already difficult situation. These possible effects cut across gender and ethnicity lines but one common factor is poverty and environmental life stressors (Seidman et al., 1996).

In attempting to examine the full nature of middle school transitions, I explored different levels of factors present in transitions [student, school, team, and teacher] that can influence how successfully students move from one level to another. Each of these transitional factors plays an important role in the entire process of moving students from one grade level to the next, one building to another building, or within the school house.

Schools can have a very positive or negative impact on transitioning students into their next level of education (i.e., middle school). In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development proclaimed, in their publication *Turning Points,* lists of practices cited by a variety of practitioners as important components of the middle school. Some of the cited practices involved "creating a community for learning, ensuring success for all students, reengaging families in the education of young adolescents, and connecting schools with communities" (p.7). These practices were placed into the following categories: organization, school climate, curriculum, and teaching methods (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; George & Anderson, 1989). Jackson and Davis (2000) provide us with a similar blueprint for what middle schools should be in *Turning Points 2000.* This tenet of middle school literature is given as a call to action for middle school reform as well as providing best theorized practices for educators to use with all students in middle school. These recommendations have become a major philosophical and pedagogical foundation for middle schools in the United States. However, just as any recommendation exists, so does the degree of interpretation and implementation that makes some schools dynamic and others ordinary or underperforming.

When schools or districts create a comprehensive transition system that provides for safety, information, and connection of some kind, students reportedly are not only guided toward success in that transition, but in the ability to handle later and likely more significant transitions down the road. Furthermore, providing students with the means to have successful transitions can change an entire school culture from disjunctive and frightening to supportive and welcoming (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008). To create and

implement an effective and comprehensive transition program, there needs to be a common understanding of the basic components and in some cases a mind shift in the commonly held beliefs about what those components mean and how they are best integrated into the transition process (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008).

In keeping with the basic skills of effective middle school transition planning, schools should continue focusing on a dual mission of providing the environments that address developmental needs of all students and providing support for high-risk students through the areas of safety, informational access, and connection(s) to others within the school. To do this, teachers need to be open to the interests and prior knowledge of their students so they can craft lessons that touch meaningful life events, experiences, and questions that occupy adolescents in their everyday lives (Dewey, 1990). School district and school level administrators need to ensure the creation of a caring school climate and proper staff development for teachers to be able to fulfill their role in the appropriate development of adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000). It will be very important to do this even with additional mandates from state education officials as well as curriculum expansion (i.e., 21st Century Learning) and revision (i.e., Common Core Standards) that is being required of us all.

Statement of the Problem

This study focused on the successes, failures, and challenges that selected school systems and middle schools in North Carolina experience when designing, implementing, and sustaining their middle school transition programs. In doing this research, I anticipated being able to unearth the insight that there is not a gap in the knowledge about

what makes ideal transitions between elementary schools and middle schools, but that there is a shortage of formal, purposeful implementation of research-based best practices within school systems and middle schools in North Carolina.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze the transition plans that have been produced by local educational agencies/school districts (LEA) and middle schools in North Carolina. Included in this study was a scan of all 115 LEAs in North Carolina to determine if each school system has a formal, written, procedural transition plan between elementary schools and middle schools. Many districts have processes in place for administrative information transfer, but this study focused on programmatic details, events, timelines, opportunities provided to families/parents/students, and teacher buy-in to the process. This study examined and analyzed the results of the scan to determine which LEAs in fact did have a formalized transitional plan. From a list of LEAs that have formalized transitional plans, three were selected for the study. The scope of the study reviewed information from the superintendent (or designee), principals, and classroom teachers.

The goal of this research was to examine and analyze if the abundance of research on what transitions should look like, feel like, sound like, and produce was actually being implemented systemically by North Carolina LEA personnel at the central office, school, and classroom levels.

Research Questions

In terms of this study of middle school transition programs, the focus was on examining and analyzing programs that were designed for the school district and how they were perceived and implemented at the individual schools by administrators and teachers. It is important for educators to determine the successfulness of an implemented program for their students by asking the philosophical question, *"Are we doing the best for our students based upon what we know today about their needs, their learning, and our teaching?"* This preceding question provided the philosophical guidance from which the following scanning and research questions emerged. The initial scanning question that was the impetus for this research was *"Do school systems in North Carolina currently have a targeted, formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is based in middle grades educational research?"* The following were the research questions that emerged:

1- In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?

2- In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district.

3- To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the overall school level?

4- In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the classroom teacher(s) in the school?

5- To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the individual school classroom level?

Significance of the Study

In an attempt to maintain a system of continuous improvement in education, the following philosophical question, "*Are we doing the best for our students based upon what we know today about their needs, their learning, and our teaching?*" should be routinely reflected upon. This question became the basis for examining and analyzing the transition plans within school districts at any and all levels. The question also allows for exploration to what degree transitional plans address the safety of its students, information communicated to educational stakeholders, and the level of connection students make with the new school. If schools are left to their own accord, are all implications of good and bad transition planning really understood? Do school districts consider addressing transition needs before looking at academic issues? Are personnel thinking of transitions when developing vertical alignment communities or Professional Learning Communities?

Understanding these questions and how to keep students engaged, remaining in school, and avoid dropping out when they reach available age or high school are issues for all public schools. Information gleaned from this examination of transitional plans can be available to other LEAs and middle schools with similar issues in order to better understand where their needs may lie. This study can help superintendents, directors, principals, and teachers pick out specific strengths and weaknesses identified in the plans studied to fit their possible program and allow them to get ideas on their own program implementation.

Overview of Methodology

        I initially scanned 115 LEAs in North Carolina and subsequently identified three to participate in this study. I examined and analyzed the transitional practices of the three participatory LEAs in North Carolina and two middle school principals and two sixth grade teachers from each LEA. The LEAs were varied in student populations, geographic locations, and economic stability. Data sources included the following: LEA written transitional plan [copy], school written transitional plan [copy], student services information (student discipline incident numbers, guidance referral numbers, and academic grade failures), and interviews with LEA and school level personnel.

Definition of Terms

Transition- A movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, or concept to another; a one-time set of activities that move students to a new grade level or building; an adjustment phase that last as long as half the school year; a process that involves all students moving from one level to the next (Akos et al., 2005); a process requiring one to seek out and navigate for the purpose of safety of self, attainment of needed information, and the opportunity to make a connection to a new environment (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008).

Middle School- grades 5-8, 6-8, 6-7, 7-8, 6-9; a graded school between elementary and high school.

Adolescence- a transitional stage of physical and mental human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood. This transition involves biological, social, and psychological changes (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000).

LEA- local education agency; school system; school district.

School system- a collection of the following but not limited to: pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high schools that serve students in a specified community.

Team- shorthand for Interdisciplinary Team Organization. It represents two or more teachers who represent the core academic subject areas- language arts, social studies, math, and science- who share the same students and same schedule, having common planning time, and who usually have their rooms in adjacent spaces (Arnold & Stevenson, 1998).

Superintendent- the leader of a school system, school district, or LEA.

At-Risk Student-   a young person who, because of a wide range of individual, personal, financial, familial, social, behavioral, or academic circumstances, may experience school failure or other unwanted outcomes unless interventions occur to reduce the risk factors (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/alp/develop/implementation/definitions).

Triangulation of data- using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings as a procedure for establishing validity (Merriam, 1998).

Ontological- the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of existence or being as such (http://www.dictionary.reference.com) .

Qualitative Research- an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that helps to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. Other terms often used interchangeably are *naturalistic inquiry, interpretive research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study, and ethnography* (Merriam 1998).

Scan- a quick look at or through something (Encarta Dictionary, 2010).

PBIS- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; this language comes directly from the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). PBIS is used interchangeably with SWPBS, which is short for "School-wide Positive Behavior Supports." (http://www.pbis.org/pbis_faq.aspx).

Honor School of Excellence- Schools in North Carolina that have 90 percent or more of their test scores at or above grade level, show at least expected growth, and meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2009-10/execsumm.pdf).

School of Distinction- Schools in North Carolina that have met at least expected growth and have 80-89 percent of their student test scores at grade level or above (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2009-10/execsumm.pdf).

School of Progress- Schools in North Carolina that have met at least expected growth and had at least 60%of their students' scores at or above grade level (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2009-10/execsumm.pdf).

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In an educational context, transitioning students from grade to grade and between buildings has a variety of interpretations that define this process differently. To some, transitions reflect a one-time set of activities undertaken by programs, families, and children at the end of a given year (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005). Others define transition as the manifestation of developmental principles of continuity; that is, creating pedagogical, curricular, and / or disciplinary approaches that transcend and continue between programs (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) found that transition was a persistent theme for middle school students and the adjustment phase took as long as half the school year. Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) defined transitions as the process that all partners experience as students move from one level to the next, rather than a single event that happens to a child. All schools, regardless of the level, have a vested interest in improving the transitions of students both into and out of the institution. Yet few schools offer more than a single transitional event for incoming and outgoing students (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). It has been documented that the more transitions a student encounters, the more likely the student is to have academic difficulty and to drop out of high school, regardless of the type of transition (Alspaugh, 1998; Queen, 2002).

Successful or unsuccessful adjustment over the transition from elementary to middle school can be a result of (or lack of) interconnectedness in several arenas: "community and family cultures and educational and social values; the environments and resources of sending and receiving schools; the social, cognitive, emotional, and physical needs and resources of students; and the economic conditions of their lives" (San Antonio, 2004, p. 249). Regardless of the focal point, transitions are increasingly being recognized as critical periods in the movement through public education in the United States (Queen & Algozzine, 2005).

Transitional factors are plentiful as described previously. Regardless if the context is educational, social, or physical, there are broad classifications of factors that potentially differentiate individual experiences. Whether the concern is over personal safety, needed information, or potentially connecting with others or an organization, we all will experience these anxious emotions. From an academic perspective, students at all levels of education can be affected by student, school, team (potentially), and teacher level transition factors that play a part in how students adjust to their new environment. This review of literature examines each of these four areas of concern listed above, the implications for practice are reviewed, and a conceptual framework for the proposed study is presented.

Student level transition factors

The transition to middle school most typically represents an adjustment to a bigger and more diverse environment (San Antonio, 2004). In the early research on the phenomenon of transitions, academic declines were such a focus that many studies put a spotlight on the voices of students who felt intimidated, nervous, or excited about the

12

transition to middle school. Students voiced concerns about navigating the larger

building and getting lost, being late to class, being victimized by older students, meeting

higher academic expectations, making new friends, and following new rules (Akos, 2002,

2003; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle, 1995). Even so, these studies and others have

differed as to what types of concerns are most important to students. Arth (1990)

revealed seven middle school transition concerns that were acknowledged by 25% or

more of a sample of 1,068 students in four states. In order of endorsement, they were the

following: academic failure, drugs, giving a presentation in front of classmates, being

sent to an administrator's office, being picked on, unkind people, and keeping up with

assignments. This academic emphasis [fear of failing] highlights that students, schools,

and perhaps districts may differ significantly in terms of student needs (Akos et al., 2005)

For many, the early adolescent years are a time of exciting explorations in identity

and the process of becoming comfortable with a maturing physical body; of continued

closeness with a nurturing family, deepening mutuality with close friends and opposite-

sex peers; and of continued engagement with school (Roeser et al., 2000). As a result,

middle grades schools have been hailed as one of the most important institutions within

which to recapture the millions of American youth who, often because of difficult social

conditions, are more likely to show poor achievement and motivation to learn. The

Council also notes that poor conduct and affiliations with negative peers, mental health

problems, or different combinations of these problems and others simultaneously occur

during the early adolescent years (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Behaviors, 1989,

1995). In fact, adolescence can provide disturbing trends that cannot be ignored. An

estimated 25%-50% of all young people in the United States between the ages of 10 and

17 are at-risk for curtailed educational, economic, and social opportunities due to their

engagement in high risk behaviors and activities that include violence, skipping school,

and failing school (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Behavior, 1989, 1995). Students'

positive self-perceptions related to learning and motivation often decline while

psychological difficulties (i.e., depressive symptoms, school truancy) often increase

during adolescence (Midgely, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002). In supportive and

inclusive environments, students can enjoy deeper and more meaningful connections with

peers and non-familial adults, a sense of gratification in being able to handle new

situations well, and a greater sense of competence (San Antonio, 2004). Currently,

however, the challenges to successful adolescent development are serious, and millions

of U.S. young people are at serious risk for unsatisfying and unproductive lives (Roeser

et al., 2000).

These all-too-real concerns and fears for safety of self, information needed to be

successful, and making a connection with others often result in student losses in academic

achievement and/or social-emotional well-being (Richardson, 2002). Specifically,

Mullins and Irvin (2000) reported that student motivation decreased with the transition to

middle school, as did academic achievement in English, math, science, and social studies.

Students who were chronic truants or aggressive and disruptive in elementary school

became even more so after the transition to middle school. Diemert (1992) surveyed a

heterogeneous group of students and teachers in central Virginia and discovered that

students' perceptions of the quality of school life in general declined after the transition

to middle school. Fenzel (1992) purported that relatively young girls of lower

socioeconomic status whose parents have relatively little education are even more at risk

for "school strain" problems during the transition from fifth to sixth grade. Certainly, the transition from elementary school to middle school can be a negative turning point for children (Akos et al., 2005).

Safety

Simmons and Blyth (1987) related that girls and boys experiencing pubertal changes and school transition at the same time are at-risk for high truancy rates, behavior problems, and long-term negative motivational school mismatch difficulties. Hirsch and Rapkins (1987) stated that students accustomed to being the oldest, biggest, and most knowledgeable in elementary school experience transition difficulties because now these same students are the youngest, smallest, and least knowledgeable in the new middle school. Entwistle (1988) called this phenomenon "Top Dog," stating that stress comes from the traumatic move to middle school where these same students immediately become the "Bottom Dog."

Robinson, Garber, and Hilsman (1995) examined direct and stress-moderating effects of attributional style and global self worth on depressive and other symptoms in nearly 400 students in sixth grade and then again in a year later in seventh grade. Their research suggested that students making the transition from elementary school to middle school exhibit signs of extreme stress, especially students with a negative attribution style (attributing failure and success to fate, luck, destiny, or societal forces beyond their control) and low self esteem. They concluded that school transition can increase levels of depression in these types of students. Kazdin (1993) stated that problems such as adolescent depression and eating disorders, mostly among females, may have beginnings in difficulties associated with school transition. Kazdin concluded that attempted and

completed suicides rise to high levels during adolescence and have been linked to problems begun in the transition or adjustment to middle school.

Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, and French (1994) related that the transitional effects of entering the first year of middle school cuts across gender and ethnicity lines, with the determinant factors being poverty and urban environmental life stressors. Mosley and Lex (1990) illustrated that students who are affected the most by school transition difficulties are low income, urban, racially varied, and have already experienced a number of stressful life events. Cauce, Hannan, and Sargeant (1992) revealed that minority students from poor neighborhoods experience greater stress levels during the transition to middle school. Seidman et al. (1994) concluded that urban students who received free or reduced lunches can be an embarrassing stress factor.

Harter, Whitesell, and Kowalski (1992) conducted two longitudinal studies designed to examine students' responses to educational transitions. They investigated the relationship between student perceptions and academic competence, affect, anxiety, and motivation during school transitions in early adolescence. They noted that students' self-perception of academic competence changed at the transition to middle school. Perception of academic competence correlated positively with both academic motivation and general affect toward school. Declining perceptions of academic competence were related to a trend toward extrinsic motivation noted in the middle school environment. Additionally, students' anxiety was negatively correlated with the perception of competence. It was observed that a decline in feelings of competence was associated with an increase in anxiety levels.

Booth (2011) reported from her three year longitudinal study that her students expressed a clear desire to have school buildings that were safe places. Almost one fourth of the students in the study expressed the need to improve their schools' physical structure when they started sixth grade and by the time they left eighth grade that number rose to one half. The structural issues indicated were serious enough that they prevented students from experiencing an enjoyable school climate and not fearing for their safety each day. Booth also found a significant finding in how students viewed the transition into the middle school. Students voiced their concerns about their conversion process being hurried, not well planned, and produced overcrowded classrooms and hallways.

Information

In a study of 196 students transitioning from fifth to sixth grade, Richardson (2002) reported that emotional intelligence was negatively correlated to the variable of transition trauma (student concerns and role strain). Analysis indicated that at least to some degree, emotional intelligence played a part in easing transition trauma more for girls than for boys. The patterns of emotional intelligence levels did not vary much over the transition period, and girls seemed to indicate higher levels of emotional intelligence than boys. He reported that emotional intelligence made a contribution to academic performance for girls even when prior achievement and socioeconomic status were taken into account. This indication suggests that transition trauma may become manifested in students, and how they cope during the transition experience may depend on the impact of emotional intelligence (Richardson, 2002).

Schunk (1991) makes the distinction between self-efficacy and self-concept. Though related constructs, self-efficacy relates more directly to the student's perception

17

of ability to perform tasks, comprising one component of the more global self-concept. The link between self-efficacy and academic motivation and achievement is demonstrated in Schunk's research (1991). Students [who perceived themselves as capable] experienced feedback reinforcing that perception which persisted longer in academic areas and tasks and demonstrated greater achievement. As many early adolescents enter the school transition period with limited feelings of competence, many are doomed to failure. The success or failure that early adolescents experience during critical transition periods must be an essential factor in the design and evaluation of instruction and assessment (Schunk, 1991).

Gutman and Midgely (2000) investigated transition effects on African American students and found significant achievement losses from elementary to middle school. Research suggests that grade declines may be more severe for African American students than for white students (Simmons, Black, & Zhou, 1991). These authors discovered that African American students showed greater decreases in GPA and more dislike for school after the transition to middle school.

Mac Iver (1990) stated that large school populations contending with increasing numbers of students living at or below the poverty level, designated by free or reduced lunches, do not have extra funds to pay for programs that could help ease school transition, thus the student problems continue to increase. Dodge (1983) contended that students learn from peers either positively or negatively and for too many low-income minority children, it is the latter which makes school transition difficult due to group conformity pressures that would suggest academic concerns and connecting with another group of peers are considered to be lower in priority. Quinton, Pickles, Maughan, and

Rutter (1993) related that minority children living in negative environments categorized as poor and at-risk have spent the majority of those years around peers of the same nature, and the move to middle school does not create an atmosphere for positive changes in behavior or attitudes. They concluded that, if anything, adolescence plus peer pressure causes behaviors, good or bad, to increase because at that developmental level group conformity is crucial.

Ramey and Ramey (1994) related that children from families living in poverty experience more difficulties with school transition. Cauce et al. (1992) stated that for too many minority students, the middle school climate itself is distant and not supportive. According to Ramey and Ramey (1994), problems are increased as children get older and more aware of personal environments and limited life choices. The authors concluded that as children get older, an awareness of one's individual life circumstances can create anger, frustration, and school disengagements that unfortunately may also last a lifetime.

Booth (2011) expressed that the students in her longitudinal study consistently expressed a desire to learn. The ability to gain information from their teacher and school also played a role in how they perceived their sixth grade year. By the end of the sixth grade, 55% of the students had included academic reasons for either liking or not liking their school. There was also a need expressed for students to have a better variety of courses to attend to broaden their academic options and selections. Students also expressed frustration about wanting their education to be interesting and engaging and not more of the same routines.

Connections

The non-academic dimensions in San Antonio's study (2004) revealed that students were universally concerned with making new friends and keeping old friends as they approached middle school. Positive, consistent, and meaningful peer relationships are so vital in the lives of adolescents that when this essential ingredient is missing, successful adjustment to middle school is threatened (San Antonio, 2004). Marsh (1989) notes that self-concept is multifaceted and can be effectively analyzed in terms of individual dimensions. Overall self-concept may be examined as academic and non-academic. The academic dimension may be further compartmentalized by subject area, grade, and sex. Marsh's study and extensive review of the literature on self-concept indicate a curvilinear decline in self-concept during early preadolescence and early adolescence (approximately grades one to three to six respectively) leveling off through middle adolescence, followed by an increase in self-concept developing through adulthood. While Marsh cautions that the bottoming out of self-concept is not necessarily caused by the school transition, it is highly correlated to the transition period.

Hirsch and Rapkin (1987) added that middle school discontentedness is common whether a student is academically successful or not. The middle school transition is difficult for both boys and girls. Midgely and Feldhaufer (1987) stated that students leaving elementary school and expressing a fondness or comfort level having one teacher and one classroom for many years began to feel uncomfortable, confused, and stressed with several teachers and classrooms when making the transition to a new middle school. Midgley and Feldhaufer also related that students in a new middle school environment felt inhibited by the following factors: whole class instruction, ability groupings [usually

for math], less freedom, stronger discipline, and little or no individual help from the teacher.

Rutter (1987) revealed that the adjustment to a new school can cause upsetting misalignments or mismatches between students and schools. Midgely, Feldhaufer, and Eccles (1989) noted that the transition to middle school can have serious long-lasting effects on low-achieving students. Testerman (1996) communicated that at-risk transition students not succeeding academically or socially tend to do one or two things: go unnoticed by the teacher or misbehave with increasing severity until noticed. Midgely et al. (1989) concluded that these students may have already experienced too many failures in the elementary grades from a possible lack of connectedness with peers, adults, and the school institution and the new school environment difficulties and failures could become a duplicate self-fulfilling prophecy.

Seidman et al. (1996) revealed that attendance issues and low scholastic achievement are linked to transition problems for both middle and high schools. The authors conclude that the [aforementioned] transition problems occurring when students enter middle school are more traumatic than at the high school level. The authors added that these transition problems, if not resolved, can lead to increased rates of high school dropouts, teenage crimes, adolescent drug usage, and suicidal ideations or completions. They further stated that school transition problems can bring disorder and possible destruction to the self-system, peer and family relationships, as well as a lifestyle that is harmful and sometimes inescapable. The authors concluded that middle school is all too often the negative beginning for too many vulnerable students that have problems connecting with others or organizations.

21

Tomlinson (1995) warned that educators must not be fooled by the quiet students, many of whom also go through extreme transition difficulties and academic struggles because of inabilities to read, write, and compute on grade level. He concluded that students at-risk or at remedial levels will continue along these same negative life paths, but quiet may no longer be the descriptive word as the move is made to middle school. Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, and Austin (1997) presented that increasing numbers of students are administratively promoted with intellectual deficits in the academic basics; lack higher-level thinking skills; have no sense of moral, social, or ethical obligation to enhance individual growth as future voting, democratic citizens.

Reyes and Hedeker (1993) reported that a student's inability to make the transition to different school levels has proven to be a predictor of a future high school dropout. Maughan and Rutter (1986) reported that students with poor attendance and/or low grades, two indicators of transition problems into middle school or high school, begin to take negative turns toward dropping out and for some, the turn is irreversible. Eccles, Lord, and Midgely (1991) articulated that when students do not experience a successful school transition, the results include the risk of lowering self-esteem, as well as grades, which can lead to academic failure and an adult life with few career choices.

The combined results from these researchers demonstrate that the transition period is a volatile time for students, particularly students who approach competence. Many of these students experience decreased feelings of competence, increased anxiety, and declines in motivation and engagement at school. Clearly, the problems associated with school transitions are significant for early adolescents and the professionals charged with managing their education (Gallagher, 1994). Relying on the opportunity for

students to be afforded a new connection with a school, peers, and staff is critical in forming new relationships that can support and help all students. In brief, the failure to establish articulation practices for students transferring from the elementary level to the middle school level causes stressful situations for both staff and students at the new middle school and the feeder elementary schools (Higgins, 1993).

Campbell and Jacobson (2008) recognize that "the more connected students are in school, the netter they will do in all measures that are important in tracking their success: grades, testing, attendance, and discipline. All these measures are positively affected when students are connected" (p.11). Some students may connect to the rigor of a certain subject while others feel connected to a tradition alive within a particular group. "While the 'what' may change, the 'who' never does. The authors note "students and teachers and parents and administrators, no matter our age or situation, all seek connections" (p.11). The task for schools to conduct is to build structures and systems that allow students to create multiple connections at different levels with peers, teachers, administrators, and their community. According to Campbell and Jacobson (2008), these connections then have the potential to be as deliberate and available as the safety and information that should be provided each day to students.

School level transition factors

Depending on the leadership style, transitional research knowledge base, and educational values that drive a principal or school leader, the school can have a very positive or negative impact on transitioning students into the school and onto the next level of education. Several authors have developed lists of practices cited by practitioners as important components of the middle school concept. These practices can

be placed into the categories of organization, school climate, curriculum, and teaching methods. George and Anderson (1989) listed the following assumptions commonly associated with in the middle school philosophy for educators to carry out.

1. Need for a caring climate in response to the emotional upheaval experienced by middle grade students.

2. Purposeful accommodation for the erratic physical development patterns in learning environments and athletic development.

3. Need for increased awareness and involvement of students, parents, teachers, and community regarding needs of adolescents.

4. Consideration for innovative transitional designs maximizing differences in learning rates and styles.

5. Need for balance between cognitive and affective education.

6. Involvement of faculty members in school decisions.

7. Frequent and sustained contact between teachers and students.

A similar list of recommendations was also cited in the 1989 report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents. Each of these seven assumptions can be correlated and connected to the overarching components of successful transitions in general; safety [of self], information [needed to know], and connection [with environment].

Many middle grades educators have also been exposed to the *Turning Points* literature (original and/or 2000 editions) that has critiqued the roles, outcomes, and issues that plague middle schools. In their *Turning Points 2000* edition, Jackson and Davis (2000) emphasized that middle grades education is to promote young adolescents'

intellectual development. The middle grades should enable every student to think

creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, to communicate and work well

with others, and to develop the base of factual knowledge and skills that is the essential

foundation for higher order capacities (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

The original *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development,

1989) report offered eight principles or recommendations for improving middle grades

schools and to ensure success for every student. In *Turning Points 2000*, a similar blue

print for what middle school should entail is given as a call to action for middle school

reform and best theorized practices. They are the following:

- Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for

    what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of

    adolescents and based on how students learn best . . . (p.23)

- Use of instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve

    higher standards and become lifelong learners . . . (p.23)

- Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young

    adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional

    development opportunities . . . (p.23)

- Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual

    development and a caring community of shared educational purpose . . .

    (p.24)

- Govern democratically through direct or representative participation by all

    school staff members, the adults who know the student best . . . (p.24)

- Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens . . . (p.24)

- Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development . . . (p.24) (Jackson & Davis, 2000)

These recommendations have become a major cornerstone of middle school philosophy and pedagogical practices. These are ideals that middle grade educators should attempt to accomplish and are considered indispensable in order to provide, sustain, and allow learning to actively flourish. These guidelines can also be reflected onto effective theoretical transitioning practices for all sixth grade teachers, school level administrators, and LEA personnel to follow as they too address the need for safety, information, and connections when transitioning individuals to a new environment. These outlined practices in *Turning Points* are purposefully broad to allow for middle school philosophy to be extended outside of the classroom and into the broader school environment, mission, and vision for programmatic planning, implementation for best practices, and connecting in all areas.

    Breaking Ranks in the Middle (2006) is a publication of the National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) that stands to promote effective leadership in the nation's middle schools. This text gives educators more strategies that can be used in a quest for school improvement including transitional events. Leadership within the LEA and middle school provide structure for gaining [quality] information through multiple opportunities, establish relationships with a variety of individuals on a regular basis, promote a sense of belonging and community, and allow for current behavioral,

emotional, and social practices to reflect the importance of safety for all individuals involved. The following nine cornerstone strategies are presented:

1. Establish the academically rigorous essential learnings that a student is required to master in order to successfully make the transition to high school and align the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.

2. Create dynamic teacher teams that are afforded common planning time to help organize and improve the quality and quantity of interactions between teachers and students.

3. Provide structured planning time for teachers to align the curriculum across grades and schools and to map efforts that address the academic, developmental, social, and personal needs of students, especially at critical transition periods (i.e. elementary to middle, middle to high)

4. Implement a comprehensive advisory program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to meet with an adult to plan and assess the student's academic, personal, and social development.

5. Ensure that teachers assess the individual learning needs of students and tailor instructional strategies and multiple assessments accordingly.

6. Entrust teachers with the responsibility of implementing schedules that are flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively.

7. Institute structural leadership systems that allow for substantive involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community, and that support effective communication along these groups.

8. Align all programs and structures so that all social, economic, and racial/ethnic groups have open and equal access to challenging activities and learning.

9. Align the school-wide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the personal learning plans of staff members with the requisite knowledge of content, instructional strategies, and student developmental factors. (NASSP, 2006)

Examining these targets, NASSP authors cite the last one as the most important one to accomplish if the rest are to be successfully utilized. Accordingly, for middle schools to effectively transition any new student, sixth grade or otherwise, it is imperative to all educators within that building to be well versed in the latest information pertaining to their role.

According to researchers (Eccles & Midgely, 1989; Roerser et al., 2000), the negative changes in self-perceptions, affect, and behavior can be explained by the lack of fit or "developmental mismatch" between adolescent needs and the opportunities afforded them by their academic leaders and environments. This claim suggests that healthy development results when changes in individual needs align with changes in opportunities with the environment. For most adolescents, this alignment occurs and healthy development results throughout the elementary and secondary levels of schooling; however, somewhere between 25% and 50% of adolescents do not experience this alignment and are at great risk for educational and social difficulties (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

It is important to consider why secondary schools, particularly middle schools, might have these characteristics. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development

(1995) suggests the size and bureaucratic nature of secondary schools limit their effectiveness. Specifically, lack of connection to the community, departmentalized teaching, ability grouping, normative grading, and large student load can undermine the motivation of both teachers and students to willfully engage in appropriate relationships that would connect them in a different manner which potentially affects anxieties regarding their own safety and learning. The negative stereotypes surrounding adolescents that exist in our society also may exacerbate the problems experienced by students in secondary schools (Eccles et al., 1991).

As evidenced by the previously mentioned recommendations, the transition phenomenon is one that researchers report should be approached through a team model of teaching. Teacher teams can give students advisory opportunities, communication, assistance, and a sense of belonging. The school leader can successfully impact the team model through many dimensions of administration. According to Arnold and Stevenson's (1998) *Teacher's Teaming Handbook: A Middle Level Planning Guide*, first and foremost, the principal must be an advocate for the young adolescent student. They proposed that principals possess a desire to be an on-going learner and continuously focus on research and information of which educators can take advantage. Principals should also recognize that shared decision making with teachers and students is advantageous to the democratic and responsible school climate created with effective teaming. School administrators are responsible for seeing that teams reflect the school's overall philosophy and that teams put it into practice (Arnold & Stevenson, 1998).

Team level transition factors

The concept of team teaching is viewed by educators as a major tenet of the middle school concept (Schurr, 1989). Alspaugh (1998) correlated the assumption that middle school educators have long recognized; relationships matter as an essential part of an adolescent's education. He also noted that for young people, relationships with adults form the critical pathways for their learning and that teaming increases student involvement and decreases disassociation with the school through smaller, more focused groupings. This implies that students placed in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time tend to experience more desirable educational outcomes (Alspaugh, 1998). Simply put, education happens through relationships. This is part of the basis for the importance of some variation of an advisory program within middle schools. Educators want students to be known by at least one adult in the school and ideally by many. To ensure this close relationship has a chance of occurring, the team structure is key. Teachers teaming together to instruct, lead, and coach students is an important foundational component of the middle school movement. Even the original *Turning Points* literature recommended that middle schools include an opportunity for students and teachers to be able to join a small, ethical community in which adolescents and adults get to know each other well to create a climate of intellectual development and a community of shared educational purposes (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Jackson and Davis (2000) defined a team as consisting of two or more teachers and the group of students they commonly instruct. Together, teachers on a team teach all the core academic subjects. The manner in which teams are assembled, the boundaries in which they are given to work, and the resources which they are given are important to

30

consider when those in a supervisory role judge effectiveness. This is true for transitions and day-to-day operations throughout the year. Within the team, it is possible for each student to receive both the attention of a group of concerned adults and the individual attention of one teacher whose aim is to become the school "expert" on that particular student. This happens when teachers on the team agree that each of them will take special care to know and act as advocates for a subset of students on the team. Teaming teachers should also create a team plan that will identify goals for student learning, strategies and realistic timelines for implementing the team members' roles and responsibilities, and the materials, professional development, and other resources that the team will require to reach its goals for their students. Teachers should make ongoing adjustments and improvements in their approach to students to reflect the individual needs of learners in the classroom. (Jackson & Davis, 2000)

Susan Wheelan (2005) reported in her text, *Creating Effective Teams,* that there is a relationship between internal team processes, productivity, and performance standards. She has identified a number of characteristics of high performance teams that are associated with productivity. These results could be extrapolated to serve as a basis for the importance on effective teaming when productivity is measured by the positive or negative outcomes of the transition process students proceed through. Some characteristics to highlight are the following:

- The team gets, gives, and utilizes feedback about its effectiveness and productivity
- The team uses effective decision-making strategies
- The team implements and evaluates its solutions and decisions

- Team norms encourage high growth, performance, quality, and success.

- Team members have sufficient time together to develop a mature working unit and to accomplish the team's goals.

These team characteristics and processes are important to analyze and mention when discussing how effective transition practices are at the varying locations. There are guiding principles of communication that are considered an absolute according to Arnold and Stevenson (1998). Their book, *Teachers Teaming Handbook: A Middle Level Planning Guide*, described that communication is vitally important not only within the team but also within the school and between parents. Established communication mechanisms are especially important so that all aspects of team operations are understood by all stakeholders and so that all students have the potential to participate fully in the middle school experience. Giving the students important information about their involvement is significant in making them feel attached to something within the team and possibly the school.

Arnold and Stevenson (1998) also discussed the importance of establishing important interpersonal relationships- not only with the students but also other staff. Taking time to teach new students these skills, they report, will inevitably make the transition to the new room, school, and social group easier and less stressful. Creating a warm and accepting sense of community should be a team's first order of business because a basic need of young adolescent youth is to belong to a meaningful group. It is important to take time to discuss mutual respect, goodwill, and an attitude of cooperation. These are seen as the bedrock of teaming and of personal growth and development. Active listening is also essential for students to be taught and allows students to

understand that showing interests in others' views through attentiveness to body language, as well as the spoken word, communicates respect. Other areas in which to help students early on within the team process are taking responsibility for one's problems, how that shows individual maturity, how conflict is inevitable, and the right way to handle conflict.

Another consideration for the team environment, according to Arnold and Stevenson (1998), is teacher behaviors that promote either a negative or positive response from their students. These adolescent responses can be linked into (in)effective transition by-products. The teachers or other adults who interact with the transitional students must realize that inconsistency, biases, and certain failures can do more to tear down trust from a student which can make their transition more difficult. It is important to set high expectations for academic performance from the start by using appropriate instructional materials and techniques. The students also must feel connected and need a strong teacher-student interpersonal relationship that is rooted in valuing the students' contributions. Also, teachers and other adults must not appear biased within grouping, counseling, and discipline practices and procedures. Failure to treat all students as individuals who are equally important and failure to be honest with all stakeholders will do more long term damage and make it difficult to connect throughout the year.

Through teaming, advisory groups are forged. According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's initial report entitled *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989), "…every student should be well known by at least one adult. Students should be able to rely on that adult to help learn from their experiences, comprehend physical changes and changing relations with family and peers, act on their

behalf to marshal every school and community resource needed for the student to succeed, and help to fashion a promising vision of the future" (p.40). When students make a lasting connection with at least one caring adult, academic and personal outcomes improve. Significant adults who provide support and direction during difficult times are important factors in helping students avoid academic failure and a variety of other problems. Among youth at-risk from health or behavioral problems, family dysfunction, poverty, or other stresses, the most important school factor fostering resilience may be the availability of at least one caring, responsible adult who can function as a mentor or role model (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000) further illustrated the significance of having a caring adult help a student be introduced to a new environment is paramount in emotional, psychological, and behavioral development. Middle grades students need continuing assistance in comprehending, analyzing, accepting, and coping with the various emotional and social components of their lives. They need help in getting to know themselves and sustained support in making relationships with peers and adults both in and out of school. These opportunities within the team model, as well as the school model, help students gain emotional strength, self-knowledge, and social skills through peer interaction and the acceptance and personal affirmation of trusted adults (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This illustration is reflective of respected middle grades teaming practices that further connect best educational practices not only occurring for academic gain, but for the affective development of individuals and their ability to demonstrate a deeper connection to their environment.

Teacher level transition factors

In the text *Creating Effective Teams* (2005), Wheelan conveyed that upon entering the sixth grade for the first time, teachers and students begin the year with a time of getting to know each other and new peers within the class and team. This practice is common among most grades K-12, but it is how this time is structured, interwoven throughout academics, and practiced over time that makes the difference in a good teacher and a skilled communicator. Transition issues have been around since transitions existed. The skill in effectively dealing with such issues is in how effective the teacher is at creating proactive opportunities for students and adults to share a space together for 180 days (Wheelan, 2005).

Typically middle schools are larger and more impersonal than elementary schools serving greater numbers of students (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). There tends to be greater emphasis on teacher control, discipline, whole-class tasks, lower level cognitive skills, and social comparison (Cheek, 1992). These typical structures and practices contribute to a classroom environment and school climate that are quite different from new middle school students and what they have experienced in elementary school (Gallagher, 1994).

The decline in achievement frequently experienced by early adolescents in middle school may be related to elements of support present or absent in the classroom environment (Midgely et al., 1989) after the school transition. Students report less of a personal connection with staff after the transition from elementary schools. This change in the quality of interpersonal relationship with teachers may contribute to decreased academic motivation and achievement. At a time when close personal relationships are

essential, social networks are disrupted (Berndt, 1987) and teachers may have a tendency to distance themselves from their students.

Realizing that students have to feel comfortable with their surroundings and each other, an effective teacher will use a variety of assessment strategies to check for student understanding and willingness to engage further with the group. Such strategies are questioning, interpreting body language, and listening to the questions students ask, as well as formal approaches such as testing (Stronge, Tucker, & Hindman, 2004).

An effective teacher finds areas that can be meshed together and allow for teaming to occur within team and/or class. There are best practices for teaching that can be utilized in order to help students feel sure of them and improve self-doubt and self-esteem about harder academic expectations. In the *Handbook for Qualities of Effective Teachers,* Stronge et al. (2004) suggested that effective teachers focus on providing feedback to students that enables the student to grow in knowledge and skills. This type of feedback includes verbal and nonverbal exchanges that occur between student and teacher continuously to check for understanding and clarity. Feedback is an important part of the ongoing dialogue between the teacher and the learner that informs both parties on the degree to which the intended outcomes have been attained. Effective teachers give regular feedback and reinforcement (Stronge et al., 2004).

Outstanding teachers also respond to student needs, abilities, and learning styles. Realizing that the class is not one group but rather a collection of individuals who learn and act differently is essential to making the classroom experience meaningful for each and every student. Being able to respond appropriately to Individualized Education Plans, Federal 504 plans, behavior plans, gifted plans, English as a second language

36

plans, and/or other educational supports involves the teachers' ability to differentiate

instruction and ability to respond (Stronge et al., 2004). Making students feel

comfortable receiving the information and being able to report it back in a manner of

their choice allows students the opportunity to not be labeled as different from their

peers. This simple opportunity makes a huge impact on the student's psychological,

behavioral, ethical, and intellectual development.

Implications for Practice

Safety

From an adolescent's middle school point of view, the previously mentioned

research has great implications for the design and practice of middle grades educators. In

keeping with 21st Century practices, schools need to continue focusing on a dual mission:

(a) providing classroom and school environments that address the developmental needs

of all students and (b) providing a "hub" for additional support services needed to ensure

that high-risk students get on track academically toward a successful future (Adelman

and Taylor, 1998). These provisions highlight the need to contemplate implicit and

explicit school practices, including feedback and recognition practices, which emphasize

students' relative successes in a variety of areas within middle school (Midgely et al.,

2002).

Information

To make a successful transition, students need the what, where, how, and when to

aid in their journey. In schools, this translates into students needing to know what classes

they have to take, where those classes are, what rules are important, what opportunities

are available, and where they have to be when (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008). Once

management routines have been established in the classroom, results from the Roeser et al. (2000) examination of academic and social-emotional development suggest the importance of teachers' ability to find ways to include students' voices in the learning process and to provide them with some choice and control over learning.

Connection

In every transition any person experiences, there is a need to feel a sense of connection to the new situation. This is true whether we are connecting to a new job, a new child, or a new reality in our own lives. The more connected students are to their new school, the better they will do in all the measures that are important in tracking their success: grades, test scores, attendance, and discipline. All these measures are positively affected when students are connected (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008). To assist in this effort, teachers should understand the interests and prior knowledge of their students so they can craft lessons that touch meaningful life events, experiences, and questions that occupy adolescents in the everyday lives during this exciting period in the life course (Dewey, 1990).

It is also recommended for administrators to inquire into the silent and overt practices of discrimination in schools that may disenfranchise members of a particular group of adolescents (Fine, 1991; Tatum, 1997). This may require staff development and a commitment to care in the school as a whole. The creation of such a caring school climate requires adults who are compassionate and who define and defend truths, trust, and fairness; and forums in which school leaders enlist the help and commitment of students to act in a caring way toward one another (Noddings, 1992). This commitment

to connect then becomes personal for students, teachers, parents, and administrators (Campbell & Jacobson, 2008).

San Antonio (2004) recommended from her research of thirty middle school students how social class influences the adjustment to middle school. Several recommendations arose as "students struggle for voice during this time" (p. 261). She calls for teachers, principals, and LEA officials to do the following:
1- Consult students and teachers about policy and practice decisions in order to gain better understanding of the conditions of their lives and to inform educational policy and practice. 2- Study issues in larger, more diversified populations as to not draw incorrect assumptions to larger system. 3- Document resilience and strength using creative methodologies in order to collect information on how people thrive from less known communities. 4- Collect and analyze specific data on educational outcomes such as drop out rates, college enrollment and completion, standardized test results, and course selection in an attempt to gather population-specific information in order to appropriate resources and implement useful programs to overcome deficits (San Antonio, 2004).

San Antonio's research also called for more policy and practice evaluations. Reviewing policies and practices in order to promote equity supported her findings. She cited that policy development in schools must be better informed by actual data, and less influenced by the political pressures exerted by a small, vocal group of people who wield more than their fair share of power. Also cited was the need to initiate district-wide diversity committees. This was especially important in her findings in predominantly white communities. There was also a charge to recognize and promote resilience in youth. She suggested her research was similar to that of Emmy Werner's (1990) research

on the resilience of children. They both report that children who were more stress-resistant at school shared a number of common traits. They were well liked by peers and adults; they were reflective rather than impulsive; they believed they were capable of influencing their environment positively; they employed creative coping strategies to overcome adversity (San Antonio, 2004). Other recommendations to school personnel was to prevent negative outcomes for vulnerable children commenting that all children need to feel a sense of security and connection; build and sustain alliances with parents; continue heterogeneous grouping; and show how we all benefit from diversity.

According to the National Middle School Association publication *This We Believe…And Now We Must Act* (2001), in order for a middle school to reach effectiveness for young adolescents as aforementioned, all the stakeholders- students, teachers, administrators, board of education members, central office personnel, and community members- must collaboratively develop a common vision that can guide the ongoing development of middle schools. This shared vision becomes the foundation on which a successful middle school is built. Without a vision that is understood and supported by the stakeholders, middle level reform efforts will be seriously flawed from the onset.

Fundamental changes built upon what we know about the unique needs and characteristics of young adolescent learners, will not happen overnight. Whereas demographic and other 'factors' are important to recognize in predicting certain outcomes based on research, they are by no means the main or even the strongest predictors of youth outcomes. Social contexts matter and schools are a central context affecting adolescent development. By supporting the art and craft of teaching in middle

grades school through reforms, leadership, and organizational support, educational and community leaders also support the art and craft of learning in students. Unfortunately as reported previously, many youth now leave the middle school grades unprepared for what lies ahead of them. In fact, [un]successful transition to middle school has been linked to high school retention (Reyes & Hedeker, 1993). A fundamental transformation of the education of young adolescents is needed, and this requires successful adult development and reshaping to meet the needs that adolescents have in today's new century. (Roeser et al., 2000)

One of the critical times for educators to be sensitive to the socialization of students is during the transition from elementary to middle school. In this age of accountability, educators must not compromise the need to equip students with the motivation and skills to continue learning beyond the walls of the school. This window of opportunity for such instruction lies heavily during the transitional period between elementary and middle school. Educators must continue to redefine and expand their roles as they shape young people to meet the needs of tomorrow's world. (Akos et al., 2005)

Conceptual Framework

The manner in which researchers view reality helps to determine what kind of approach will better answer one's research questions. "The ontological belief that tends to accompany qualitative research approaches portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing" (Glesne, 2006, p.6). Maxwell (2005) states "qualitative research derives primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific

situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers" (p.22). "Qualitative researchers tend to ask how *x* plays a role in causing the *y*, what the process is that connects *x* to *y*" (p.23). Glesne (2006) states "qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes" (p. 29). Because I was interested in understanding the details of school system planning, school level plans, and classroom planning within the greater systems at hand, qualitative methods were appropriate to gather the data that was needed to answer the study's research questions and link the insight gained to the need for individual safety, information gathering, and connecting to a greater network. Systems theory provided an effective conceptual framework.

Systems Theory

Owens (2004, p.119) described the systems theory as an organization being an integrated system of interdependent structures and functions:

> An organization is constituted of groups and a group consists of persons who must work in harmony. Each person must know what the other is doing. Each one must work in harmony. Each one must be capable of receiving messages and must be sufficiently disciplined to obey…

Thus the importance of examining how the LEA and school personnel work together as a system focused on successfully transitioning students into the secondary level of schools while answering the underlying needs for safety, gathering information, and connecting with new surroundings.

To understand what middle schools are doing to make the transition experience more successful, it was beneficial to understand how the conceptual framework of the systems theory breaks down into 1) system-wide thinking, 2) open systems thinking, and 3) process thinking (Senge, 2000).

System-wide thinking

       System-wide thinking is the process of enacting change through an organization in which the entity is working to improve. Evaluation of the system-wide thinking process can occur by descriptions given by the staff, and taking into account how well the staffs work together (Senge, 2000). It was the goal of the researcher to critically examine how closely the superintendent's perception of the middle school transitional plan equates to district yearly measurable goals. After evaluating the dynamic of the district plan, attention was focused on how the vision from the district level correlated with what was being carried out at the school level. Also, examination of the level of classroom implementation was important in order to gauge system-wide execution. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the design and structure of elements used to symbolize one common version that individuals may engage upon when reviewing or acting on needed improvement.
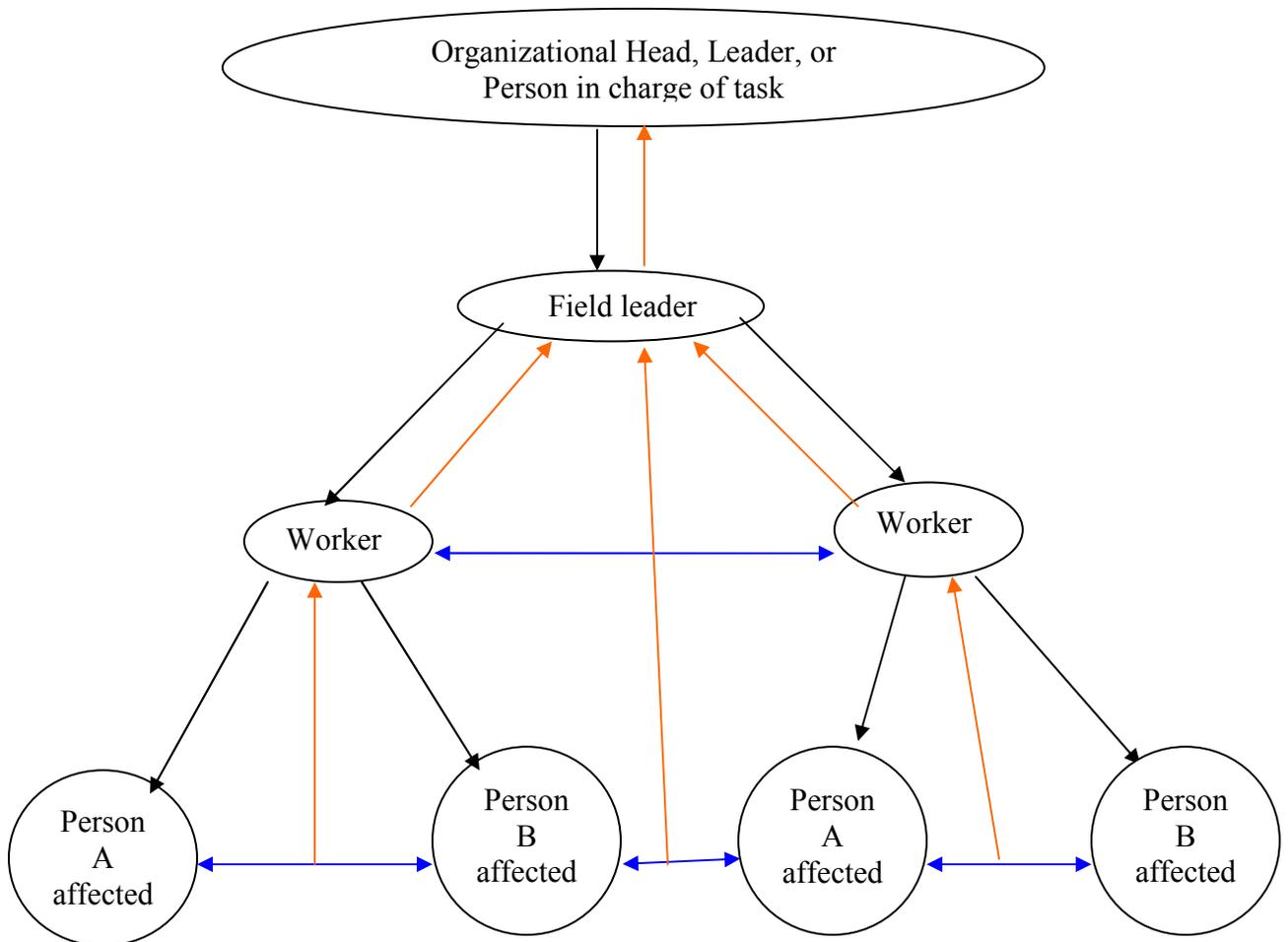
Figure 1
System-wide thinking illustration

Black lines indicate a "top-down" issuance of a task or plan for others to implement at various levels within the organization.
Blue lines indicate conversation, discussions, collaboration within like roles to work on task or plan as presented.
Orange lines indicate feedback to various levels- some being able to speak to their direct superior and others able to go more towards the source.

Open-systems thinking

Open-systems thinking is the process of seeking to understand a system through its inputs, outputs, and boundaries (Senge, 2000). This process captured each [selected North Carolina] school system (LEA) and/or each school's decisions concerning plans for action within the organization. It was the goal of the researcher to fully identify the

level of input various stakeholders (district office personnel, principals, teachers, parents, students) were given in the development, implementation, and monitoring of their district's middle school transitional plan. Figure 2 represents a visual representation of the design and structure or elements used to symbolize one common version that individuals may engage upon when reviewing or acting on needed improvement prior to this study.
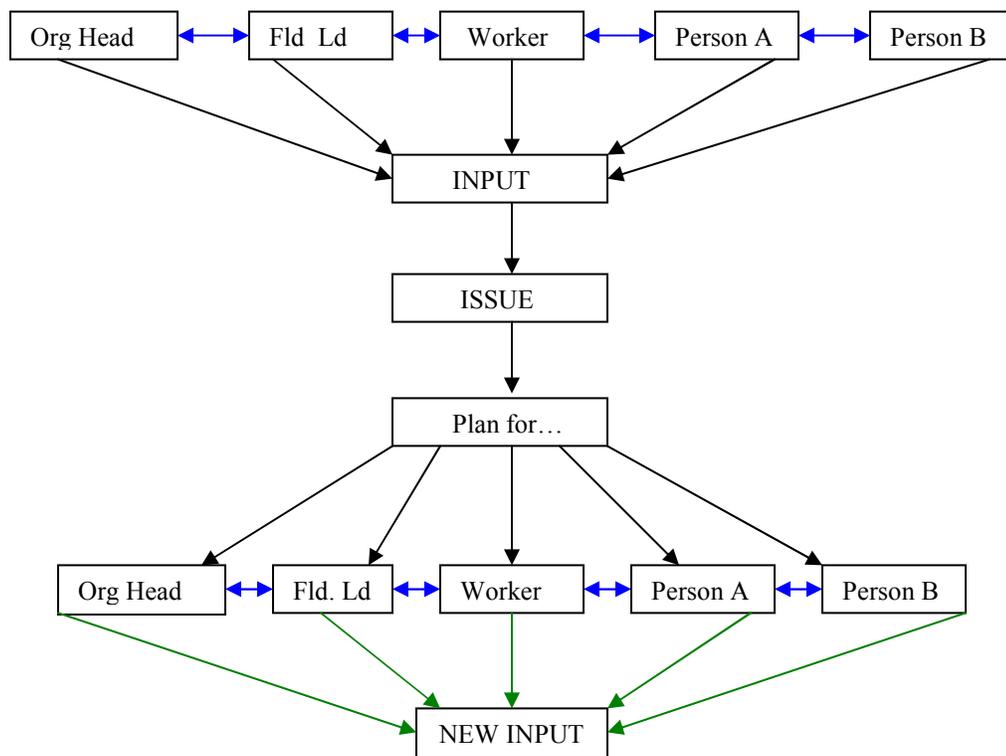
Figure 2
Open-systems thinking illustration

Black lines indicate each representative's potential ability to give input regarding issue.
Blue lines indicate each representative's potential ability to communicate within structural unit(s) regarding said topic.
Green lines indicate each representative's potential to have new input based on an older generated output.

Process-systems thinking is a process that realigns the communication structures

that will effect change in patterns of behavior within the organization. This process is the

basis for true long-term change (Senge, 2000). In conducting such process thinking

examination, the researcher wanted to gain insight regarding frequency of revisiting plan,

changes implemented, and basis for such changes. The communication structure for this

system can be purposeful, involving, and collaborative and would surely make for a great

example for other LEAs. Figure 3 illustrates how the process-systems illustration

showcases the communication structure that is purposeful, involving, and collaborative.
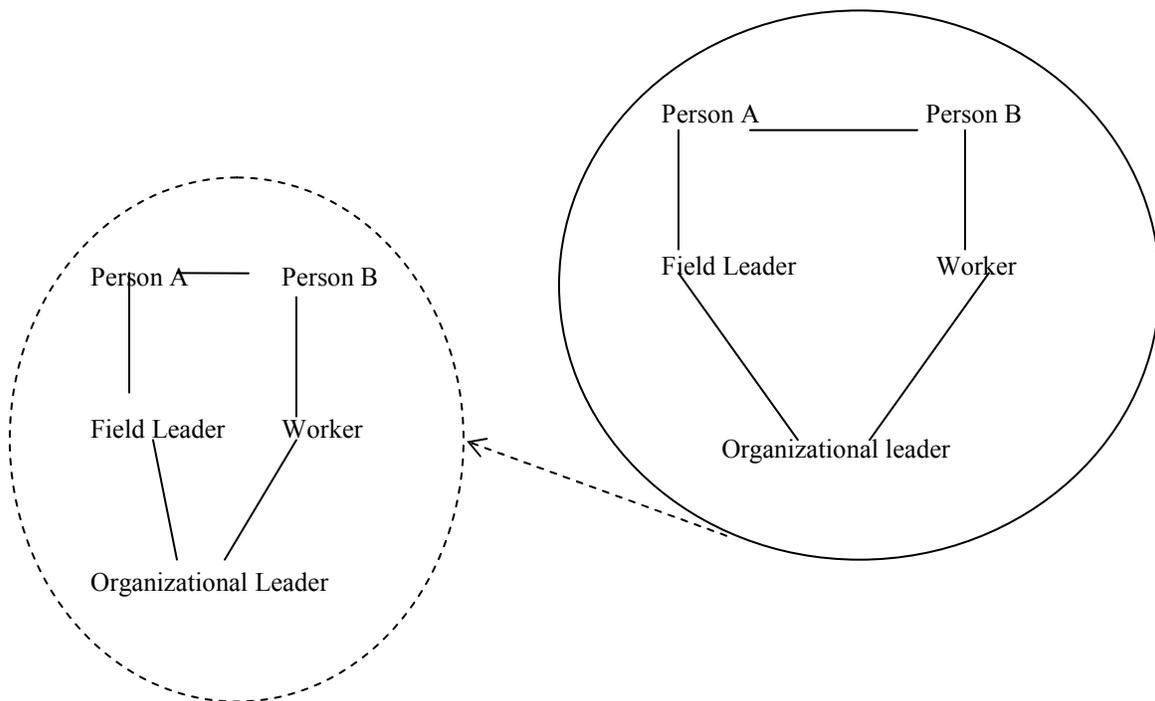
Figure 3
Process-systems thinking illustration

Dashed circle illustrates a NEW process/procedure that arises from the complete circle
illustrating continuous working together and work through task at hand.

46

In terms of this study of middle school transition programs, the focus was on evaluating programs that were designed by the school district to address specific needs of students and how they are perceived and implemented at the individual schools by staff. Attention was also given to the ability of the LEA, school level, and classroom level systems to relate positively or negatively in relation to district vision, mission, and perception. Since middle grades are a critical period as described from the previous literature, it is imperative for educators to determine successfulness of programs implemented for their students. We must continually strive to answer the rhetorical question "*Are we doing the best for our students based upon what we know today about their needs, their learning, and our teaching?*" This philosophical question became the basis of examining and analyzing the transition plans within school districts at any and all levels. The question also allowed for exploration to what degree transitional plans address the safety of its students, information communicated to educational stakeholders, and the level of connection students make with the new school. If schools were left to their own accord, were all implications of good and bad transition planning really understood? Do school districts consider addressing transition needs before looking at academic issues? Are personnel thinking of transitions when developing vertical alignment communities or Professional Learning Communities? These questions and others related to them, all depend on the level of implementation of information given and received through the vast research base at educator's disposal. The potential exists to show research and theory regarding system's work, transitional best practice, and middle school design being put into an actual form and describing the personal outcomes that could happen to similar school systems when implementing purposeful system's work to

achieve a desired result. Having a vested interest in my own research because of my current occupation, I was deeply connected to the phenomena that I chose to study.

Because qualitative research often leads us to places that might necessitate new questions, require adjustments in methodology, or call for further data collection, one can only tentatively structure the methodological approach (Maxwell, 2005). Consequently, the methods that I used varied as I continued the research process.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

This study focused on the successes and challenges administrators and teachers experienced when designing, implementing, and sustaining their middle school transition plan and programs. Descriptions of each middle school transition plan are included in order to gain insight into the development and design of the transition program(s) and their ability to meet the needs of its incoming school population. This study provided a greater understanding of the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with transitioning middle school students into a new environment. This study also explored the barriers faculty experience in their interactions with supervisors, colleagues, parents, and students.

This chapter presents the rationale for using a qualitative research design from the case study perspective. The specifics of the research study including the participant and site selection, data collection process and data analysis are discussed. Finally, trustworthiness and delimitations are addressed.

Research Questions

The importance of transition programs is paramount when planning for a new group of individuals. In terms of this study of middle school transition programs, the

focus was on examining and analyzing programs that were designed for the school district and how they were perceived and executed at the individual schools by administrators and teachers. It is important for educators to find guidance and even inspiration by reflecting on an overarching question such as: *"Are we doing the best for our students based upon what we know today about their needs, their learning, and our teaching?"* This guidance and accompanying reflection enabled me to pose the following scanning and research questions: The initial scanning question that served as the impetus for this research was *"Do school systems in North Carolina currently have a targeted, formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is based in middle grades educational research?"* The following were the research questions that emerged:

1- In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?

2- In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district?

3- To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the overall school level?

4- In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the classroom teacher(s) in the school?

5- To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the individual school classroom level?

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach

"Qualitative research methods are used to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions" (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). Qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (Glesne, 2006). The goal of this investigation was to understand, describe, discover, and generate issues by examining a small, nonrandom, purposeful sample. This investigation is considered inductive by the researcher as he became the primary instrument for data collection and analysis by working through interviews, observations, and reviewing documents to build a holistic, descriptive, and comprehensive finding (Merriam, 1998).

In this study, a qualitative research approach was used to examine the middle school transitional process [research based] that occurred in various LEAs across the state of North Carolina. The qualitative approach was chosen primarily for its applicability to real life situations and experiences. School system administration and middle school faculty in North Carolina have personal and professional experiences in their careers which have meaning and inform the planning, implementation, and fulfillment of appropriate transitional programs.

Through listening to stories and experiences of such faculty, a deeper understanding of the educators experience was attained. The qualitative approach provided a conduit for dialogue through which such faculty provided insights into their vision, perceptions and experiences with transitioning middle school students into their buildings. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) emphasized the importance of the participant as an

individual with a unique perspective. In this study, this unique perspective was used to

create meaning through the stories and lived experiences of educators interacting with

each other and middle school students within their LEA in North Carolina.

Rationale for a Case Study

Yin (2009) stated a two-fold technical definition of case studies as being "…an

empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its

real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are

not clearly evident" (p.18).

> The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which
> there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result it
> also relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a
> triangulating fashion…in order for the prior development of theoretical
> propositions to guide data collection and analysis (p.18).

In essence, a case study tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were

taken, how they were implemented, and with what result (Yin, 2009).

Glesne (2006) showcased "…a case study is not a methodological choice by a

choice of what is to be studied" (p.13). Various methods and methodologies can be

employed to do case study research. In qualitative studies, data tend to be gathered

through the ethnographic tools of participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The

write-up may be more holistic than some other qualitative approaches; however, in that if

several cases are studied, each is written up into a context-situated case study and then

cross-case analysis is carried out to look for patterns across cases (Glesne, 2006).

This study used a multi-case study approach in an attempt to gain a deeper

understanding of administrator and staff experiences when working with middle school

students during their transitional time period from fifth to sixth grade. For this study, an initial scan of all 115 LEAs in North Carolina produced a target group on which to focus the multi-case study approach. I sought to inquire if LEAs produced a written transitional plan for middle schools in their system and if said plan was based on national middle school best practices and research. From the information shared by the middle school directors or other LEA administrative personnel in each of the 115 LEAs, the initial screening question could be addressed: *Does your school system in North Carolina currently have a targeted, formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is based in middle grades educational research?* Of the 89 LEAs (77% of LEAs in North Carolina) that responded to the scanning question, only three LEAs (2.6% of LEAs in North Carolina) reported they had such a plan. I requested a copy of the LEA plan for review. It was the intention of the researcher to be able to select from an array of LEAs from across the state of North Carolina. However, when only three LEAs were recognized for meeting the selection criteria, purposeful selection was not an option. Fortunately, the respondent LEAs represented varied geographical placement within the state of North Carolina, varied size in relation to student population served, and current economic status of the counties were at different levels when compared to each other.

Once transitional plans (LEA and school level) were reviewed for correlation to national middle school best practices and research, contact was initiated with the superintendent to gain access to LEA personnel and middle school data. Interviews were conducted with the superintendent or designee, two middle school principals, and two classroom teachers. Upon LEA acceptance into the study, the superintendent selected an

individual to serve as my LEA contact and interviewee. Based upon my gatekeeper letter

to gain entry into the LEA, I asked the superintendent or designee to assist in identifying

school level personnel who had at least three years experience in school administration

and/or teaching at their current school. If a system had more than two middle schools

that would qualify, the LEA provided me with contact information, and I simply

proceeded with the first two administrators that willingly replied. This was the case for

two LEAs involved in the study. The third LEA contained only two middle schools. The

sixth grade teachers were selected by the principal and LEA representative by following

stated requirements (i.e. worked with sixth grade students in the present school for more

than three years) in the initial letter to the superintendent, as well as considering the level

of involvement in the school transitional programs and plan.

All interviews were to be conducted in the same manner; however, there was a

change in protocol twice due to scheduling incidents beyond the interviewer's control.

Qualitative coding was conducted with the transitional plans while also examining raw

student demographic, performance and discipline data of sixth grade students as a whole.

Once information was shared by all parties, analysis was conducted by looking at patterns

and themes to make meaning from the participant interview responses and examination of

"research-based" plans. Coding was conducted by hand using the interview

transcriptions and transitional plans from both the LEAs and middle schools.

Role of the Researcher

When using a qualitative methodology, the researcher's role is complex due to the

possible intrusion of the researcher's personal biases, values, and judgments (Creswell,

1998). As the researcher, my role was to state my biases, assumptions, and beliefs at the beginning, as well as throughout the entire process. As a researcher, I became conscious of my verbal and nonverbal behaviors more than usual and became attuned to my behavior and its impact. I also had to be attuned to my role as a learner. As a researcher/learner, I also recognize that I was a curious student who came to learn from and with research participants as I listened [and recorded] (Glesne, 2006). This potential subjectivity was important to recognize and monitor in an effort to provide the reader with the necessary information to credibly report the findings. When subjectivity is monitored throughout the research process, the researcher increases awareness of the ways it might distort but also increases the awareness of its virtuous capacity. This subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than to exorcise (Glesne, 2006).

Principal I

My role as a school administrator provided me with a principal perspective. This experience did not influence my perspective about faculty and their roles and responsibilities towards transitioning middle school students within their district and school. My experiences with middle school students have taught me that staff [at all levels] have a tremendous influence over students and can play a vital role in their academic, emotional, and social well being.

According to Glesne (2006), tracing one's subjective lenses shows points on a map of the individual. These points do not create a complete map because no research evokes all of one's subjectivity. Being aware of such subjectivities can minimize the potential for skewing or distorting data to prevent the qualitative researcher from seeing what is not there (Glesne, 2006). As a researcher I approached my study with an

55

awareness of my subjectivities as I searched for the meaning implicit in the experiences of the LEA staff participants.

Ethical Considerations

Regardless of the tradition of inquiry, a qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports. I have protected the anonymity of the informants and did not engage in deception about the nature of the study or participation. Full disclosure of the purpose of the research was given with minimal personal experiences related from the researcher (Creswell, 1998).

The rights of the participants for this study were protected in the following ways. The LEA and middle school faculty participants were given an introduction to the study and their role in the process in writing and verbally (Appendix B). LEA and middle school faculty participants were asked to sign a written consent form detailing their participation and their ability to withdraw at any time from the study (Appendix C). Each interviewee was identified with a pseudonym. During the transcription of the interviews and presentation of the results, pseudonyms continued to be used to ensure anonymity for the participants and the institution. Faculties were also aware of their ability to withdraw from participation at any time regardless of the reason. Approval from the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought and received before the study was undertaken.

Data Collection

Site Selection

Three North Carolina LEAs were selected for this study. These LEAs were varied in total student population size, geographically distinct, and economically diverse. Within each North Carolina LEA selected, no more than two middle schools were examined for the quality and consistency at which the LEA transition vision is executed. Contact was made with the superintendent based upon my gatekeeper letter to gain entry into the LEA. Based upon their acceptance, I asked the superintendent or their designee to assist in identifying school level personnel who had at least three years experience in school administration and/or teaching at their current school. If their LEA had more than two middle schools that would qualify, I asked they provide me with contact information, and I proceeded with the first two administrators that willingly replied. This was the case for two LEAs involved in the study. The third LEA contained only two middle schools. The sixth grade teachers were selected by the principal and LEA representative by following stated requirements in the initial letter to the superintendent, as well as considering the level of involvement and participation in the school transitional programs and plan.

These participatory LEAs and middle schools were determined after an initial scan of all 115 LEAs in North Carolina via an email questionnaire. This email questionnaire addressed the original scanning question stated in previous chapters: *Does your North Carolina school system currently have a targeted, formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is research based?* Dependent upon responses, I requested a copy of the plan for review. I initiated

up to three attempts to continue contacting remaining LEAs that did not respond initially as to get as many of the 115 LEAs to participate as possible.

Gaining Access

The North Carolina Middle School Association President allowed me to have direct contact with all 115 North Carolina LEA superintendents and middle school directors/contacts. Through this opportunity, I contacted personnel directly involved in preparing such a transition program/plan for their district to explain the focus of my research study and my interest in potentially interviewing faculty at their institutions (Appendix A). After receiving approval by the Institutional Review Board at Appalachian State University (See Appendix F), I again e-mailed the LEA designee asking for their assistance in contacting related personnel within their district.

Selection of Participants

The sampling strategy to select participants was purposeful sampling as described by Creswell (1998). This multi-site case study revealed different perspectives on the value of middle school transitions that are purposeful, written, research based plans. The notion that district size, district wealth, and district locale may make a difference in developed and executed plans make the selection that much more purposeful.

The data collection was extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information such as interviews, document reviews, and student service information (discipline referrals, and grades). Yin (2009) recommends obtaining six types of information: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. These documents may not be able to be produced at each level of participant selection, but when examined holistically, the analysis will be that of the

entire case or an embedded analysis of a specific aspect of the case. For this study, I was

able to obtain documentations, archival records, interviews,

For this multi-site case study, no more than five participants from one LEA were

chosen. The criteria for faculty participants were: the superintendent or designee, one or

more middle school administrator(s) that have been at their present middle school for at

least three years, and one or more teacher(s) that have been present at their middle school

for at least three years.

Contacting Participants

Once I received a list of names and e-mail addresses from the superintendent or

designee, I contacted each faculty member by electronic mail to explain the purpose of

the study and invite their participation (Appendix B). When an affirmative response was

received, the faculty participant was sent a confirmation letter through e-mail explaining

in more detail the purpose of the study and logistical information regarding the interview

process (Appendix D). Faculty participants were also asked to provide me with their

resume for demographic and career documentation. Arrangements were then made to

meet with the participants at an agreed upon location. The interviews were audio taped

with the written consent of the participants. After participants were provided an

Informed Consent document and agreed in writing to be interviewed (Appendix C), I

assigned them a pseudonym which was used throughout the data analysis process.

Study Participants

A total of 15 educational professionals were interviewed for this study; three

superintendents/designees, six middle school principals, six sixth grade middle school

teachers. For the three LEAs that were examined and analyzed for this study, each varied

in LEA size, LEA/county economic status associated with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, geographic location within North Carolina, and community demographics.

Rationale for Selecting Interview Data Collection Method

From the case study perspective, interviews and document reviews prepare a convergence of evidence that Yin (2009) describes as allowing an investigator to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues. Yin also purported that the most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry, a process of triangulation and corroboration. This allows any case study finding or conclusion to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information.

The Interview Guide

The purpose of the interview questions was to elicit views, opinions, and experiences of educational professionals and to gain insight into each educator's 'lived' experience. Understanding the educator's experience through a greater depth of inquiry can only increase the ability and potential success of other middle grades transition programs and how they correspond to LEA initiatives and state/federal goals. The questions were also framed in such a way as to enable the researcher to address and answer the established research questions. The interview questions were derived from the conceptual framework and literature review discussed earlier in this study.

There are three variations in case study interview instrumentation according to Yin (2009): in-depth interview, focused interview, and survey. This study used a combination of survey and focused interview. The purpose of an interview guide, a

predetermined list of questions, is to ensure that the same questions are asked of each participant (Yin, 2009). For a further exploration of answers given, the interviewer probed by asking additional questions for clarification or depth of answer. This combination was deemed an appropriate choice since the interviewer desired structured, open-ended questions of the standardized open-ended interview that were guided by the survey responses.

The basis for formulating the questions in the survey and the interview guide arose from the transitional themes reported by Campbell and Jacobson (2008); safety, information, and connections. The other component involved in formulating questions were related to the processes in place within the LEA and school level that allowed for the creation, implementation, and sustaining of such a district [and school] plan. Using systems theory as the basis for exploring the processes, it was important to try and ascertain the successes, barriers, and foci that each LEA plan and planning process underwent.

The interview questions were validated with an outside non-participant school of education graduate faculty member serving a university within North Carolina. The professor made recommendations to clarify purpose of questions, clarity of purpose and understanding, and for depth of information gained. These questions were also reviewed for their ability to correlate with the general topics related to the outcome of transitions; safety, information, and connection. While able to answer these areas, the intent of the questions was for exploration and correlation into the national middle school best practice recommendations. Minor adjustments were made to the questions as needed during the validation process to clearly align intent of the researcher and objectives of the study.

Such adjustments related to how the questions were asked of the participants, wording adjusted to clearly directed intent behind the question, branching off of other questions that made it easier for the interviewee to answer one thought at a time, and a chance for participants to have more of an open-ended response to questions versus an affirmative or declining response.

Interviews began with the signing of the consent form. The interviews were conducted with each participant for approximately 45 to 75 minutes in duration and an interview protocol was used as a guide (Appendix E).

Recording

Interviews were audio taped using a digital recording device to decrease the chance that a malfunction would cause the information from the interview to be lost. In addition to mechanically recording the interview responses, the researcher also took written notes during the interviews. Audiotapes were accurately labeled with the previously identified pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Creating Database

According to Yin (2009), the lack of a database creation for most case studies "has been a major shortcoming of case study research" (p.119) but is one that markedly increases the reliability of the entire case study. There are four components to creating a case study database: notes, documents, tabular materials, and narratives.

Case study notes- These are the most common component of the database. The case study notes are produced from interviews, observations, and/or document analysis. These

notes are stored in a manner such that retrieval at a later date can be efficiently handled. They are organized by major subjects according to my case study protocol.

Case study documents- These artifacts consist primarily of the middle school transition program plans that exist in a LEA in North Carolina. Such documents are stored electronically and are readily retrievable for later inspection or perusal. These documents were the basis on extending an interview to educators in such an LEA.

Tabular Materials- These materials include survey data, observational counts, and/or archival data. These data are retrievable for later inspection or perusal.

Narratives - This reflects a practice that allowed for composition of open-ended answers to the questions in the case study protocol. This process is actually an analytic one and is the start of the case study analysis. The main purpose of the open-ended narrative is to document the connection between specific pieces of evidence and various issues in the case study (pp.120-121).

Resumé

Demographic information was confirmed through the participants' résumés. These documents were informative regarding the educators' educational and professional careers. The résumés identified information regarding the educator's professional and educational pursuits.

Summary

In summary, data collection included individual interviews with 15 educators from three LEAs in North Carolina and documents, artifacts, records and resumes. Data were collected through audio recording, written field notes, resumes, survey information, and database collection. The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim and the

transcripts were checked for accuracy using the audio recorded interviews as a guide.

The following section describes how the data has been analyzed.

Data Analysis

Glesne (2006, p. 147) suggests:

> Data analysis in qualitative inquiry involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read do that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with the data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link your story to other stories. To do so, you must categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret the data you have collected.

Research data analyzed for this study involved utilizing audio recorded interviews, typed transcripts, resumes, field notes, and a database. The transcript text was read while listening to the audiotape to verify the correctness of the transcripts. The interview transcripts were also read again to identify patterns of thinking and topics. These words and phrases were written in the margins of the transcript text and became coded categories. These codes are explained further in chapter four of this study. The interview data were coded, which is an analytical process where labels for assigning units of meaning to the interview text are compiled and given meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As part of the data analysis process, answers to each interview question were chunked together so that all responses to individual interview questions could be analyzed. This process was used to compare the codes developed with each data set and to ensure that all data were included in the analysis process. The codes from these interviews were refined throughout the entire data analysis process.

Following the development of a coded data scheme, patterns matching logic was attempted in order to build an explanation on the elements of the coding. These

components were useful in producing a logic model that deliberately stipulates a complex

chain of events over an extended period of time. The events were staged in repeated

cause-effect-cause-effect patterns, whereby a dependent variable (event) at an earlier

stage becomes the independent variable (causal event) for the next stage (Yin, 2009). By

using this logic model, the researcher hoped to:

> …demonstrate the benefits of developing programs collaboratively- that is, when evaluators and the officials implementing a program being evaluated work together to define the program's goal. The process can help such a group [LEAs in North Carolina] define more clearly its vision and goals, as well as how the sequence of programmatic actions (in theory) will accomplish the goals (Yin, 2009, p.149).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the findings are accurate, valid, and

believable. Yin (2009) proposed three principles of data collection that will support and

help to validate a multiple-case study: using multiple sources of evidence, creating a case

study database, and maintaining a chain of evidence.

Triangulation is known as an approach to individual sources of evidence used

collectively to recommend a trend (Yin, 2009). Patton (2002) discussed four types of

triangulation in doing evaluations- the triangulation 1) of data sources, 2) among different

evaluators, 3) of perspectives to the same data set, and 4) of methods. The first of these

four types was used in this study to encourage collection of information from multiple

sources but aimed at corroborating those same facts.

Creating a way of organizing and documenting the data collected for the multiple-

case studies is a practice that is common in many research fields. This common practice

consisted of two separate collections: 1) the data or evidentiary base and 2) the report of

the investigator. A case study database markedly increases the reliability of the entire

case study. Every report should contain enough data so that the reader of the report can draw independent conclusions about the case study. The entire set of answers collected can be considered part of the case study (Yin, 2009).

Another principle to be followed to ensure trustworthiness and to increase reliability of the information in a case study, is to maintain a clear chain of evidence. This principle allows an external observer to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions. The external observer would be able to trace the steps in either direction (from conclusions back to initial research questions or from questions to conclusions). In the end, a reader should be able to move from one part of the case study process to another, with clear cross-referencing to methodological procedures and to the resulting evidence (Yin, 2009).

In conclusion, efforts were made to address the trustworthiness of the data analysis for this study. The data analysis process was continually reviewed in light of any themes that emerged. Themes were identified and clarified throughout the analysis of the transcripts, field notes, and discussions with a peer debriefer. Data collections and analysis were thoughtfully executed to ensure the educator's experience with transitioning middle school students.

Delimitations

Delimitations are used to narrow the scope of the study. This study only included interviews from educational professionals in three LEAs in North Carolina.

This study's participants were limited to superintendents/designees, middle school principals, and sixth grade teachers in middle schools in North Carolina. The principal(s)

and teacher(s) needed to have at least three years of experience in the school presently assigned to work. This study did not observe the faculty of the school district or individual school interacting with students or each other in the classroom.

Another delimitation of this study was the review of the transition from fifth to sixth grade within a (6-8) middle school. There were some respondents to my initial scan of North Carolina LEAs who did not have a formalized transitional plan because their students were enrolled in K-8 schools. This does limit to generality of findings, and if the study was compared to transitional and best practices in K-8 schools, different results may occur.

Also, this study examined LEAs in three distinct regions of the State of North Carolina. The LEA size ranged from ten schools/approximately 4,000 students in CSD, thirteen schools/approximately 7,300 students in GUSSD, and 24 schools/approximately 9,200 students in PSD. School systems much larger and much smaller across all regions of the state did not report that they currently had a transition plan. This does limit the findings to North Carolina LEAs but could be comparable to similar sized LEAs in other surrounding states with similar geographic and economic status.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research methodology for exploring the implementation of research-based middle school transition programs within North Carolina. A rationale for utilizing qualitative methodology in this study was presented, and the role of the researcher and a research plan, including methods of data collection

and analysis, were discussed, and methods to enhance trustworthiness were identified.

Finally, delimitations were discussed.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

This study was conducted to examine the successes and challenges administrators and teachers experience when designing, implementing, and sustaining their middle school transition plans and programs. Included in this study was an exploration of the attitudes and roles of faculty, current practices used by district and school level staff with a focus on the communication style used in creating, implementing, and sustaining each unique transition plan. The barriers as perceived by the faculty in their efforts to meet the transitional needs of sixth grade students in their school [district] were also examined.

Research Questions

The initial scanning question in this study was: Does your North Carolina school system have a targeted, formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is based in middle grades research?

The research questions were:

1. In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?

2. In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district?

3. To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the overall school level?

4. In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the classroom teacher(s) in the school?

5. To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the individual school classroom level?

Data analysis focused on emergent themes that were culled from the various LEAs and school level participant interviews, LEA transitional plans, and school system data. Results of the analysis of the data are presented in three sections. The first section contains demographic and descriptive information related to the institutions and participants chosen for the study. The second section describes the faculty interview process and presents participants' responses with a focus on their perceptions of the transitional programs/plans as well as their experiences creating, executing, and sustaining the transitional programs/plans. The third section discusses the major themes and sub-themes that emerged during the data analysis. The last section reveals the answers to the original research questions. In keeping with qualitative research protocol (Yin, 2009), pseudonyms are used for the names of the institutions and the research participants in order to maintain anonymity.

Demographic and Descriptive Information Related to Chosen Institutions

Coastal School District Institutional Description

Coastal School District (CSD) is situated approximately on the Atlantic Coastal shore near a metropolitan area with military connections. This LEA has 10 schools; four elementary schools (PK-5), two elementary schools (PK-6), two middle schools (6-8), one high school (9-12), and one early college high school (9-12). The county community

is one rooted in the tourism industry and is a bedroom community to a nearby, large military base. The general ethnic breakdown for the county as well as CSD is 90% white, 8% African-American, and 2% Hispanic/Other. This county also has an unemployment rate of 5%, which is considered, at present, the lowest in the state of North Carolina.

The two middle schools that were examined both serve students in sixth through eighth grades. Central Middle School (CMS) enrolls approximately 380 students with an average class size of 24 students in sixth grade and has 30 classroom teachers. CMS met all 13 subgroup targets as determined by their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and in 2009-2010 had an overall academic performance composite on the North Carolina State End of Grade (EOG) testing of 86.4% in reading and 92.1% in math thus making this school a NC Honor School of Excellence with expected growth. The sixth grade EOG reading scores led the school with 88.1% of these students showing proficiency. Sixth grade math results were third within CMS but were above the LEA average and significantly above the state average in math testing. CMS has a teacher turnover rate of 10% and as a staff, 50% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years.

North Middle School (NMS) enrolls approximately 515 students with an average class size of 22 students in sixth grade and has 36 classroom teachers. NMS met all 17 subgroup targets as determined by their AYP and in 2009-2010 had an overall academic performance composite on the NC EOG testing of 87% in reading and 93.6% in math thus making this school a NC Honor School of Excellence with high growth. The sixth grade EOG reading led the school with 88.8% of these students showing proficiency. Sixth grade math results were third within NMS but were above the LEA average and

significantly above the state average in math testing. NMS has a teacher turnover rate of 3% and as a staff, 56% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years.

Coastal School District (CSD) Study Participants (Principal, Teachers, and Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction)

Valerie has been a school administrator for 10 years; the last four years has been at NMS. Prior to entering school administration, she taught secondary students for nine years in another state. Valerie holds degrees in elementary education, a master's degree in school administration, and an educational specialist degree in school administration and supervision. She has also been selected as Principal of the Year in CSD.

Susan has been a teacher for the past 10 years; the last six years has been at NMS. She attended a college in another state and holds a degree in elementary education and holds a K-6 license. She and her teammate make up a team at NMS where she teaches two subjects. She is very interested in educational technology and incorporates it in her lesson planning.

Jane has been in various positions at the district level for the past eight years; most recently serving as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction since 2008 for CSD. She holds a degree in elementary education, a master's degree in school administration, a curriculum instructional specialist certification, and an educational specialist degree in administration and supervision. She taught elementary school for 14 years in North Carolina and another state.

Tina has been a teacher for the 19 years; all of those in middle school and the last two years serving sixth grade students. She holds a degree in middle grades education specializing in English and History in grades 6-8 at CMS.

Table 1
Participants at Costal School District

Name	Years as Educator In CSD	Total Years in Education	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area
Valerie	10	19	Ed.S.	School Admin
Susan	10	10	B.S.	Elem. Ed
Jane	16	24	Ed.S.	School Admin
Tina	19	19	B.S.	Middle Gr. Ed

Table 1 presents a graphic display of demographic information of research participants at CSD. The number of years as an educator within CSD, the total number of years in K-12 public school education, the highest degree earned, and the content area specialty are indicated.

Greater University Suburban School District Institutional Description

Greater University Suburban School District (GUSSD) is nestled in a hearty higher education community of North Carolina, as well as near within a network of communities making up a metropolitan area. This LEA has 13 schools; seven elementary schools (PK-5), three middle schools (6-8), two high schools (9-12), and one alternative school (7-12). The county is split between rural and suburban communities that are increasingly being surrounded by University sprawl, commuters, and 21st century companies. The general ethnic breakdown for the county as well as GUSSD is 66% white, 18% African-American, 16% Hispanic/Other. This county also has an

unemployment rate of just over 6%, which is one of the lowest in the state that is at or hovering around 9-10%.

The two middle schools that were examined both serve students in grades six through eight. Accomplished Middle School (AMS) enrolls approximately 500 students with an average class size of 20 students in sixth grade and has 37 classroom teachers. AMS met 19 of 21 subgroup targets as determined by their AYP and in 2009-2010 had an overall academic performance composite on the EOG testing of 74.3% in reading and 81.4% in math thus making it a NC School of Progress with high growth. The sixth grade EOG reading scores led the school with 82.7% of these students showing proficiency. Sixth grade math results were third within AMS and were below state averages. AMS has a teacher turnover rate of 13% and as a staff, 54% of the teachers have taught less than 10 years.

Shadow Middle School (SMS) enrolls approximately 570 students with an average class size of 24 students in sixth grade and has 38 classroom teachers. SMS met 20 of 21 subgroup targets as determined by AYP and in 2009-2010 had an overall academic performance composite on the NC EOG testing of 81% in reading and 84.5% in math thus making it a NC School of Distinction with high growth. The sixth grade EOG reading led the school with 85.1% of these students showing proficiency. Sixth grade math was third in SMS but were ahead of the LEA and state averages in math testing. SMS has a teacher turnover rate of 9% and as a staff, 55% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years.

Greater University Suburban School District (GUSSD) Study Participants (Director of Secondary Instruction, Principals, and Teachers)

Wes has been a classroom teacher, school administrator, state-level curriculum specialist in two states in the South, and currently serves GUSSD as its Director of Secondary Instruction. He served as the Superintendent designee for this LEA participation and served as the filter of information for the purposes of this study. Wes holds a degree in elementary education, a master's degree in educational administration, and is currently enrolled in post-graduate courses in education. He has been in education for the past 13 years.

Jack has been a school administrator for nine years; the last four years he has been at AMS. Prior to entering school administration, he taught business education to middle school students. Jack holds degrees in business education, a master's degree in school administration, and is currently enrolled as a doctoral candidate at a regional university.

Hope has been a teacher for 10 years; the last five years has been at AMS as a language arts teacher. She holds a degree in middle grades education, a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, and is a National Board Certified educator in English/language arts. Hope is also a K-12 reading specialist and an academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) certified instructor.

Rita has been in various positions within GUSSD for 24 years. She has been a teacher assistant, middle school and high school classroom teacher, district office director, and a school administrator. She has served as principal at SMS for the past three years. She holds certifications in history in grades four through nine, a master's degree in

middle grades education, curriculum and instruction licensure, and another master's degree in school administration.

Tammy has been an educator for the past 14 years. She has served SMS as a career and technical education instructor for the past four years. She holds a degree in family and consumer sciences and serves students in grades six through eight.

Table 2
Participants at Greater University Suburban School District

Name	Years as Educator In GUSSD	Total Years in Education	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area
Wes	4	13	M.S.	School Admin
Jack	9	13	M.S.	School Admin
Hope	10	10	M.Ed.	C & I
Rita	24	35	M.S..	School Admin & Middle Grades
Tammy	4	14	B.S.	CTE

Table 2 presents a graphic display of demographic information of research participants at GUSSD. The number of years as an educator within GUSSD, the total number of years in K-12 public school education, the highest degree earned, and the content area specialty are indicated.

Piedmont School District Institutional Description

Piedmont School District (PSD) is located in the central piedmont region of North Carolina. The county is largely rural and located approximately 30 miles outside of a metropolitan region in any direction. This LEA has 24 schools; five elementary schools

(PK/K-5), 10 elementary schools (PK/K-8), three middle schools (6-8), four high schools (9-12), one early college high school (9-12), and one alternative school (6-12). This county community is largely out of business textiles and rural farming. The general ethnic breakdown for the county as well as PSD is 75% white, 13% African-American, and 12% Hispanic/Other. This county has an unemployment rate of 9%, which is considered one of the highest in the state of North Carolina.

The two middle schools that were examined serve students in grades six through eight. Urban Middle School (UMS) enrolls approximately 410 students with an average class size of 17 students in sixth grade and has 34 classroom teachers. UMS met 20 of 21 subgroup targets as determined by AYP and in 2009-2010 had an overall academic performance composite on the NC EOG testing of 62.3% in reading and 85.6% in math thus making this school a NC School of Progress with high growth. The sixth grade EOG reading led the school with 66.2% of these students showing proficiency. Sixth grade math results were third within UMS but were above the state average in math testing. UMS has a teacher turnover rate of 5% and as a staff, 53% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years.

Rural Middle School (RMS) enrolls approximately 418 students with an average class size of 24 students in sixth grade and employs 29 classroom teachers. RMS met all 17 subgroup targets in sixth grade as determined by AYP and in 2009-2010 had an overall academic composite on the NC EOG testing of 83.6% in reading and 92.5 % in math thus making this school a NC School of Distinction with high growth. RMS has a teacher turnover rate of 19% and as a staff, 45% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years.

Piedmont School District Study Participants (Principals, Teachers, Administrative Intern, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction)

Sabrina has been a school administrator for the past five years. She is the principal at RMS and also served as the assistant principal at this school while it was called a different name for two years prior to being named principal. Prior to school leadership, she taught for three years and operated as a literacy facilitator for the school system. She has been an educator for 11 years so far in education after coming to teaching later in her career; all years of service have been with PSD. She holds a degree in elementary education and a master's degree in school administration.

Julie has been a middle grades educator for 24 years; all in PSD. She holds a degree in middle grades education and teaches math. She is a leader within the sixth grade faculty at RMS and is viewed and respected by her colleagues as a master teacher.

Don has served PSD for the past 10 years. He has taught secondary history for six years and has been in various levels of school administration for the past 10 years. He holds a degree in history and science, a master's degree in school administration, and is currently a doctoral candidate. He is the principal at UMS.

Joe is currently serving UMS as a principal intern for this school year. He is a veteran educator of eighteen years; all in PSD. He holds a degree in middle grades education and is a National Board Certified educator in mathematics. He has taken the lead in creating, implementing, and monitoring the school level transitional plan at UMS. He and Don have worked closely creating the transitional components, but the continuation of effort has come from Joe since it is his internship project to complete his master's degree in school administration.

Meredith has served as a classroom teacher for 16 years; all in PSD. She instructs middle grades science and social studies and is the grade level chair within UMS. She has taught at UMS for the last six years.

Tabitha has been in various positions within PSD and surrounding counties. She is currently the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and served as the LEA contact for this research. She was responsible for the initial creation of the system-wide transitional plans at various grade level benchmarks. She has served at the district level for the last seven years. She served as a school administrator for seven years and instructed elementary and middle grades students for nine years. She holds degrees in mathematics (4-9), master's degree in school administration, and a doctorate in educational leadership. She has served PSD for 18 of her 23 years in education.

Table 3
Participants at Piedmont School District

Name	Years as Educator In PSD	Total Years in Education	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area
Sabrina	11	11	M.S.	School Admin
Julie	24	24	B.A.	Middle Grades
Don	10	16	M.Ed.	School Admin
Joe	18	18	B.S.	Middle Grades
Meredith	16	16	B.A.	Middle Grades
Tabitha	18	23	Ed.D.	Leadership

Table 3 presents a graphic display of demographic information of research participants at PSD. The number of years as an educator within PSD, the total number of

years in K-12 public school education, the highest degree earned, and the content area specialty are indicated.

Research Participant Interviews

The following section will describe the interview experience. A narrative of the participant interviews will be presented in chronological order. After the initial description of driving to the respective school districts and schools (also in chronological order), I describe the important or notable aspects of the faculty participants, physical building impressions, and district assumptions gained by the researcher during the interview process. Interviews were conducted in the following order: Wes (GUSSD), Jack (GUSSD), Hope (GUSSD), Rita (GUSSD), Tammy (GUSSD), Sabrina (PSD), Julie (PSD), Don (PSD), Joe (PSD), Meredith (PSD), Tabitha (PSD), Valerie (CSD), Susan (CSD), Jane (CSD), and Tina (CSD).

GUSSD is about a three hour drive, all interstate, from my home. Driving to the first interview, my mind wanders to what I may experience through these interviews. I am excited to be able to experience another middle school environment and see what other LEAs are able to provide for their students, staff, and schools. In light of the recent budget implications on local North Carolina school systems, this information could conceivably be of the utmost importance to LEAs in providing experiences for their students that should prove powerful. As I drive to a local school in GUSSD to meet my LEA contact, I am experiencing anxiety as this represents my first real interview and worry about how the experience will turn out. I am about to embark on my first of fifteen interviews over the next three weeks.

Interspersed between the faculty interviews in GUSSD, I also begin my data gathering with educators in GUSSD. As I approach and enter the first school, AMS, I am struck by the design of the building. It is a relatively new structure that is impressive to see in such a rural area of the GUSSD.

Participants in the study, in spite of their unique situations, locations, and level of education service, have common experiences. All are educators in North Carolina, have at least three years experience in their LEA, and all share a dedication to the success of their students.

Participant 1- Jack (AMS, Principal)

Participant 2- Hope (AMS, Teacher)

Wes is waiting for me in the office at AMS and is friendly with his welcome to GUSSD and AMS. He updated me on the agenda for the day since he arranged times, locations, and interviewees for me in preparation for this visit. The first two interviews have to be merged due to circumstances with one of the principal's timeline for the day and his need to participate in something else, as well, this day. Wes informed me that I will interview the principal (Jack) and sixth grade teacher (Hope) together. This was a change in initial protocol but under the circumstances, I complied and adjusted as needed. In this revised setting, I was anxious regarding the engagement of both parties and the influence each may have on the other's answering and subsequent commentary. This loss of participant independence could influence results gained from this interview and study. Not knowing this ahead of time and with limited alternate arrangements, this became a potential limitation of information.

Wes escorted me to a conference room off of the media center. I am impressed with how the facility looks, smells, and feels. There is an evidence of pride within the school and is good to see in such an impressive facility. I also encountered framed posters highlighting various AMS staff and what they enjoy reading. Literacy is an evident focus for AMS, and it is shown by having all faculties pose with their favorite reading material to model the importance and joy of reading to middle school students. This is a positive way to make a stress free connection with students that can lead to a deeper bond with adolescents with the same interests. I also noticed that all interior office or classroom doors are decorated with college and university material related to the educator's alma mater. This allows students to connect in another fashion with AMS staff. The intent is to encourage AMS students to routinely think about college as a natural occurring event instead of a long shot option. I get a sense that the culture of AMS is one rooted in literacy development and academic promotion. I absorb it all in hopes of taking components back to my school to mimic.

Jack and Hope join Wes and me in the conference room off of the media center. As Wes makes introductions, I prepare my paperwork and technology to commence with the interview. Wes excuses himself as he leaves to go observe classroom teachers during this interview. Both Jack and Hope sign the consent forms and I proceeded with clarifying the purpose of this interview. I take some time to read through all paperwork and reiterate what I included in my email correspondence with Wes as to the intent and structure of this research. I reassure them both that there is no right or wrong answers and that their experiences, knowledge, and perspectives are valuable. I proceed with my first interview question.

Jack is the principal of AMS and has middle school teaching experience as well. He is very confident in his answers and feels that AMS and the staff can do as they desire since they have the testing results to back up their practices. He feels strongly that his staff drives AMS and not the district office leadership. Hope teaches language arts to sixth grade students and has been in education ten years. She holds National Board certification for education and is considered a teacher leader (according to Jack) within the sixth grade as well as AMS.

Participant 3- Wes (GUSSD, Secondary Schools Director)

In our email conversations, Wes instructed me that he would arrange all details of my visit to GUSSD. After my interview was complete with Jack and Hope, Wes became available. He shared that his office is actually in one of the high schools in GUSSD since the LEA office was so small and was in a historic building downtown and renovation to that structure was not an option. He spoke that he enjoyed being based in a school to still be able to experience the daily operation of school business and to see students thrive in their educational placement. Wes came to GUSSD from a North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) curriculum specialty area. He arrived at NCDPI from a similar position in another state. He has been a classroom teacher but has not been a school level administrator yet in his career. After our interview concluded, Wes escorted me to his favorite local diner for lunch, and we continued our informal discussion on education. Wes spoke very highly of what GUSSD was doing in many other areas outside of the transition component. He articulated the successes and challenges that the LEA has experienced being in a greater university community and the opportunities that are available to them that are not readily available to other parts of the state.

Participant 4- Rita (SMS, Principal)

At the conclusion of my lunch with Wes, he directed me to follow him as he would lead me to my next destination. When we arrived, Wes informed Rita that we had arrived. At this particular time, she was deeply involved in a situation involving a student and items that should not have been on campus. As a middle school principal, I can relate to trying to lay out plans for the day and having them trashed when a student makes a bad decision. While Rita concluded this incident, Wes escorted me around the school. Upon entering SMS, I found this school facility to be quite opposite of AMS; much older, surrounded with trees, hidden from street view, and considered more of a city school. SMS also sits directly behind its corresponding high school. The view of the other school is a constant reminder to the students of where they will transition to in only a few years.

As we toured the school facility, Wes introduced me to several faculty members and allowed me to informally gather information about the school, programs, resources, and daily routine to better get a sense of the school dynamics and culture. Later, I met Rita in the front lobby as Wes excused himself to return to his office. Rita welcomed me into the school and her office for the interview and explanation of the morning's events. As I prepared the paperwork and technology needed, we informally talked about how long she had been in education and different aspects of her school that I noticed. Rita came into the principalship of SMS by mid-year appointment 2 years ago. She previously served as a teacher assistant, history teacher, assistant principal at the neighboring high school, and most recently was the director of student services for GUSSD. The Superintendent asked her to serve as the interim for the remainder of the

school year, and she loved it so much that she stayed on to continue leading the SMS students and staff. She is a product of this GUSSD community and cultivated her career, family, and personal endeavors through this culture. Rita has her finger on the pulse of the school and greater community and has been successful in leading this population.

Participant 5- Tammy (SMS, Teacher)

At the conclusion of my interview with Rita, I was led to a conference room to prepare for my interview with a teacher from SMS. Tammy joined me in the conference room upon the conclusion of her classes. Tammy is a career-technical educator, and she teaches elective courses to all students in grades six through eight at SMS. She was a part of the summer program at SMS, and Rita felt she could provide unique insight into sixth grade transitions. Tammy was previously employed in a neighboring LEA but has been an instructor at SMS for the past four years. As the interview proceeded, it became noticeable that Tammy did not know much of the background knowledge related to the SMS transition program. She was honest when she did not know an answer but unsure if she wanted to present herself in this manner. She kept apologizing for not "having good enough answers" and for repeatedly answering "I don't know". I reassured her that her answers were fine, I wanted honesty, and there were not right or wrong answers. She still presented herself with some apprehension as we concluded the shortened interview.

Participant 6- Sabrina (RMS, Principal)

Participant 7- Julie (RMS, Teacher)

I traveled to PSD exactly one week after completing interviews in GUSSD. PSD is an hour and a half drive, half interstate, and half two-lane scenic country roads. I initially made contact with Tabitha, the Associate Superintendent of PSD. She helped to

arrange contact with the school staff and helped to facilitate my entry into RMS and UMS. The extra assistance I received from Tabitha in initiating contact was extremely helpful since PSD has multiple grade configurations (PK-5, K-5, PK-8, 6-8, 7-12, and 9-12) within the county. These grade designs are very much tied to the culture of the distinctive areas within the county. It represents identity, customs, and heritage to those born and bred in the area. The availability of true middle schools was few and so I welcomed any assistance in expediting my information and contact with educators.

Driving to my first destination in PSD, I am reminded of a community where I once worked; very rural, off of the heavily traveled paths, slower lifestyle, and peaceful. My first stop in PSD is RMS which is located in the northwest corner of the county.

I am struck by the attention to detail evident at the entrance to RMS. As I arrived and entered the driveway, I meandered around a winding path that was recently altered to accommodate a different traffic pattern. The front of the school was fantastic; clean, fresh looking, and inviting. The entrance of the school was open, airy, well lit, and spacious. Student work was displayed, announcements posted, and evidences of student engagement were visible well into the hallway. I met Sabrina in the office, and she welcomed me back to her office. We were joined by the sixth grade teacher she selected; Julie. This again was different from my original plan, but they requested the change in protocol in order to accommodate a meeting Sabrina had to make after our interview. In this revised setting, as the case in GUSSD, I became anxious regarding the engagement of both parties and the influence each may have on the other's answering and subsequent commentary. This loss of participant independence could influence results gained from this interview and study. Once again, not knowing this ahead of time and with limited

alternate arrangements, this becomes a potential limitation of information. Of course, I welcomed the addition to the interview and had the ladies complete the necessary paperwork as I prepared for the session.

I proceeded with my introductions about the research and the intent of the interviews. Sabrina explained that the current school is only two years old. The building facility was originally an elementary school (K-8) and then was turned into a 'choice' middle school and students elected to attend here. This service configuration was phased out two years ago and that is when the school changed names, intent, and function within PSD. Sabrina has been a school administrator at the building itself when it was an elementary and choice middle school and worked with the staff over the last five years. She previously served as an elementary teacher and literacy facilitator prior to becoming an administrator.

Julie has been a teacher at this campus for many years and serves as a teacher leader within RMS. She is very direct, forthcoming, and honest in her answers to my interview questions. Julie has great insight into what makes RMS so successful, the sixth grade even more successful, and how practices within their building and grade level are expectations by all staff that are carried out in a meaningful manner.

Participant 8- Don (UMS, Principal)

When I had completed my session at RMS, I made the trek across the county to UMS. These schools are only fourteen miles apart geographically, but the differences are as great as night and day. The clientele of the student body, increased security measures noticed upon entry into the school, and physical placement of the school in the crossroads of 'downtown' traffic were in stark contrast to RMS. When I arrived at UMS, I was

drawn to the noticeable entrance to the school and the façade of the school. This is a school that is only eight years old and was designed to be a middle school unlike RMS. After being buzzed into the building, I made my way to the office. There I waited for about 30 minutes for Don, the principal at UMS. I came on what was described as an 'atypical day' and that the office was heavily populated with discipline and unruly students. Discipline seemed to be on the menu for the day. I waited patiently for him since my other interviews were three hours away and I felt I had plenty of time to give.

Don welcomed me back to his office that was a hub of activity even after I sat down and readied my materials for the interview. Don is a current doctoral candidate as well and has been a school administrator for ten years; the last two at UMS. He reports to me that he had depended on the work of two staff members who are completing a year long internship this year and one of these interns has taken the lead in developing the UMS transition plan. As the interview proceeded, we are interrupted by phone calls, staff interruptions, student incident issues, and a grade level meeting. At the conclusion of my interview, Don escorts me to Joe; the school administration intern who has taken the lead in developing and implementing the UMS program.

Participant 9- Joe (UMS, School Administration intern and teacher)

When introduced to Joe, he was on his way to take his students to the cafeteria for lunch. He arranged for someone else to escort his class, and we transfer into the teacher workroom for his hallway. He and I are able to have a modified interview during his lunch break where he gives me a lengthy history of the school, the LEA, merger of the former LEA and current LEA, and the student body performance concerns. Joe was

helpful in understanding how the school reached its position today and what some of the challenges are each year to reach students and make an impact.

Once Joe's lunch break is over, I found my way down to the classroom that is hosting the sixth grade staff meeting. This meeting is what cut my interview with Don short, but he prepared for me to meet with a sixth grade teacher at the conclusion of their meeting. Due to this arrangement, I did not know what to expect. As I waited, I informally assessed the building surroundings, student life, and teacher interaction. UMS enforces 'Spirit Wear' (i.e. uniforms) with its students, and the reported impact on the students has been favorable. This does present a different look from what I am accustomed to seeing on a daily basis. The students who I observed were mannerly, slightly loud, neat appearance, and showing typical adolescent behaviors. They looked like my middle school students except I could not tell who was considered a disadvantaged student. I can see where and how uniforms have their place in some communities.

Participant 10- Meredith (UMS, Teacher)

When I met Meredith, she was eager to go from her grade level meeting. She teaches science and social studies for sixth grade and has taught for PSD for sixteen years; the last six years at UMS. The interview with her was cut slightly short due to the students being released from their elective courses. She also brought background knowledge of the county and at-large community since she had experience working in other regions of PSD. Her insight into the grade configurations, [lack of] economic development throughout the county, and status of the transition program was valuable. Meredith was also able to speak from the parent perspective since she had a middle

school child currently enrolled and experienced the components of the transition programmatic details.

Once the students returned to Meredith's classroom, I excused myself and found my way back to the office. My intention was to stop in and try to follow up with Don on a few more questions, but it was apparent he was fully engaged back in student discipline issues that were still unresolved from my arrival to UMS. After waiting for thirty minutes to see him, I finally resolved to ask the receptionist to thank him for allowing me to visit, and I needed to leave to get to my next interview at the district office. I asked the receptionist for assistance with directions. She reluctantly responded to me that she did not know exactly where the LEA office was located, and she could not be of assistance. This stood out to me; that the main person the community has first contact with and she cannot tell me where the district hub for educational services is located. I hope other visitors to the school would be assisted more than I.

Participant 11- Tabitha (PSD, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum)

Once I finished my interviews at UMS, I found my way only a few miles down the main street to the district education offices. The county government agencies all shared a complex next to the hospital. This LEA office blended into the backdrop of a large complex and was not easy to locate as I drove around the building a few times until I was certain of the entry. I was contacted earlier in the morning and told that I could move my interview time up sooner with Tabitha since her commitments took less time than she anticipated throughout the morning. I let the receptionist know who I was and that I was her to interview the Associate Superintendent. Tabitha met me and welcomed me into the district office. I was struck at the open air warehouse feel that this office had;

cubicles, few walls, noisy, and very monochromatic. When we reached Tabitha's office she was one of the few that had some privacy. As I readied my materials, she probed about my experience within PSD and how my research was coming along. After informal, vague answers (as to not convey any answers yet from her staffers) she filled out of the appropriate forms and prepared herself for the questions about PSD's transition programs.

Tabitha revealed to me that she created the framework and central components of the PSD transition plan herself as indicated by the SACS/CASI renewal committee recommendations. The plan was designed to be comprehensive, flexible, and meaningful and she admitted, not perfect in its infancy. The plan was only assembled and enhanced by the various school levels the summer prior to the 2010-2011 school year. Schools were technically still tweaking plans, examining programs, and deciding what has worked and not worked within their distinctive school community and level. Tabitha has been in her LEA role for seven years and served as an elementary/middle school teacher, director, and school level administrator for many years before assuming her current role. She has spent eighteen years in PSD and knows the community and its resources very well. She has experience working in many of the zones that divide PSD into the many grade configuration patterns previously mentioned.

Participant 12- Valerie (NMS, Principal)

Another week passed before I embarked on my final interview trip. CSD is an eight hour drive on interstate roads from my home. Of the three LEAs to interview and examine, I was most excited about this trip as it required me to stay overnight for two days in order to complete all interviews and account for the distance from home. I love

this region of our state and take advantage of any opportunity to visit and vacation when presented.

The long drive gave me time to process the previous two LEAs and systematically dissect parts of the experiences into what were emerging themes and what I could take away and introduce in my school. As I entered the county I was drawn to observing the landscape without all the tourists and traffic. This county is picturesque, quaint, and large; seventy miles from top to bottom. With the vastness of territory to cover, this LEA has unique challenges that others in the state may not even think of experiencing. With the size of the county, the ebb and flow of tourism driving the economy, and sparse homes off of the coastal roads, there are not that many schools to serve its population; 10 total. The CSD has four elementary schools (PK-5), two elementary schools (PK-6), two middle schools (6-8), one high school (9-12), and one early college high school. The geographic sprawl of each school zone is great; I experienced this while driving from one school to the other.

My first interview in CSD was at NMS. This school was only a few miles from the county line and is situated on the edge of a booming housing development that holds nearly one thousand homes. To the north of this county is a large community with an accompanying military base. The northern part of the county inherently is a bedroom community for the military families and commuters. The school sits alone on a desolate two lane road after traveling miles from the largest city within the county limits. The physical plant of the campus is impressive and is rather new to this end of the county. I entered the school with a few students who were late to school that morning and proceeded to the NMS office to check in.

Valerie, the principal of NMS, met me at the front office and escorted me to her office to conduct the interview. This was my first contact with Valerie. In preparing for this last set of interviews, the LEA contact, Jane, became the point person in gaining access and arranging interviews. Jane had contacted her principals and teachers and made the arrangements for me according to what would work for CSD. Valerie reviewed necessary procedures and paperwork and signed the required forms.

Valerie was very short and to the point with her answers, and I had to draw her out with a few of the questions. Her demeanor in the interview was serious, and I got the impression she is a direct and to the point leader. Valerie is one of two interviewees who previously worked in another state before assuming her current role with CSD. She reflected on her experience in both states as well as at various education grade levels. She also revealed to me that many of the families of NMS community are not as dependent on the tourism industry as their counterpart middle school further south. This helps with the stability of the student population and economic indicators.

Amongst the conversation about the many things the staff is doing at NMS, Valerie made a comment that she did not know what was actually on the CSD transition plan. She knew it existed but could not tell me about it in specifics, and she had not reviewed the plan for about three years. Valerie made it clear that her staff used research-based practices in their classrooms and that neither she nor her staff was focused on a program- just good solid teaching and leading of students. She was frank in her comments and her apparent lack of commitment to the execution of the CSD transition plan to sixth grade. She felt that the school, community, and system naturally placed more effort and focus on the transition to high school from the eighth grade. This is

unfortunately the reality since the perceived focus of going to high school is job and college preparedness.

Participant 13- Susan (NMS, Teacher)

Like Valerie, Susan was from another state but had been employed in CSD for ten years. She taught in another school in the LEA for two years prior to coming to NMS to teach sixth grade. After my interview with Valerie was complete, I made my way to Susan's room and introduced myself. I was struck right off with the presence of educational technology and evidence of its use within the classroom. The room also was configured differently; no rows. She had a classroom with nearly thirty students and had to get creative with seating; she brought in her lawn furniture to add more available seating. In our interview she brought up the fact that she hates rows and does not find them effective in her classroom. She is a big proponent of collaboration and group assignments and finds that traditional student desks and chairs are not conducive to those types of activities. She was very upfront, honest, and to the point during her interview.

As I reviewed the procedures of the interview process and reviewed the paperwork for her to sign, she asked me, "Does [LEA] have a plan?" I, of course, offered to her that the [LEA] did have a plan and that is why I was present to interview her. She was a little embarrassed and did not want this to reflect poorly on her or the county. After calming her fears of any such repercussions, she was full of direct, to the point answers and painted a good picture of the school, community, culture, and processes in place for improvement. She also spoke highly of the district office level staff and spoke to their direct involvement in the schools [personally] and how they knew the names of

94

teachers, information about them, and that she felt she could call on them directly if needed.

As I left her room our conversation turned to her use of classroom technology and how she was able to utilize it in such a large classroom. I left her room excited as she introduced me to her proactive, transitional activity that she was conducting through Skype. She and a fifth grade teacher had set up contact each week through Skype for the fifth graders to ask questions about middle school and allow students to see old connections and to slowly introduce middle school throughout the year and not wait until the cursory tour of the campus in the spring of the school year. She was excited as she described how it has been received on both ends, the level of engagement, the leadership demonstrated by her students, and the feeling of responsibility that her students were taking in preparing their friends for middle school next year. This is a great use of educational technology that teaches students in a plethora of ways that can and can not be measured by a test.

Participant 14- Jane (CSD, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum)

After I concluded my interviews at NMS, I had some time before I needed to meet Jane for our interview. I ventured north to the larger metropolitan community to inspect the variety afforded families in the northern part of this coastal county. The resources, options, and availability of conveniences were much more commercial than they are in the central to southern end of the county. With this being said, the demographics for the two middle schools are pretty similar as well as student overall performance; almost identical in the sixth grade.

Once I made my way to the district office of CSD, I was pleasantly surprised that the district office occupied an historical home that was significant to the county in the early part of the twentieth century. The preservation of such a structure is unique as well as the reality of splitting up the district departments and resources in multiple sites/buildings to preserve history. I was greeted by the receptionist in the foyer of the historic home and browsed around the bottom floor to inspect the items representative of the LEA; student art work, commendations from the state for schools within the LEA, testing results recognition, student life photos, and much more that painted a very important picture for visitors to CSD. I got the impression that students succeeded here, CSD was on to something, and that they were centered on the child.

Jane descended the rickety stair case and welcomed me to CSD. We returned to her upstairs office for the interview. I enjoyed the opportunity to see early twentieth century architecture and marvel at the beauty of this building. As I sat down at Jane's desk our conversation informally started and never stopped. It was very natural and free flowing, and I hated to have to interrupt that flow for me to give the official speech about the purpose, etc. and to get her signature. Once the procedural events were handled, we picked back up with the questions that she had not answered or addressed in our conversation. Jane is very knowledgeable and forthcoming with the plans CSD has in place; the transition plan being only one of many. She was rather surprised that there were so few LEAs in North Carolina that reported to having a plan. She took it for granted that more did since they have had one for many years; in fact, she thought it was an expectation from the State that each LEA have one.

Jane has spent most of her educational career in CSD and has worked at all levels on the educational continuum; teacher assistant, teacher, specialist, school level administrator, and district level leader. She has led the effort to annually examine the transition programs and plans for each area and supervises the outcome and monitoring of the plan. When I asked her if she thought teachers and administrators knew what was in this plan and what was required, she was forthright in saying that administrators should because they have to report to her different benchmark results, etc. but that she would be surprised if teachers, parents, and students knew it existed. This was a shock to me as I assumed that if the time, effort, money, and commitment were put into the creation, implementation, and sustenance of programs and plans, all stakeholders would know about the ins and outs and why things were conducted as they were. At the conclusion of our interview, Jane welcomed any feedback on how they [CSD] rated as a result of this study. They sought to improve and grow from this external research project.

Participant 15- Tina (CMS, Teacher)

On my second day in CSD, I found my way to CMS which is the other middle school serving students in grades six through eight in this coastal county. CMS sits in the shadows of the one traditional high school in CSD. As I enter the massive campus of both schools, I got a sense that the greater campus is a central hub for this community and is more than a school. As I entered CMS, I am once again amazed by the architecture. This school is dated yet well maintained and very open. As I walked through the commons area, I approached the office where I checked in with the receptionist. She was expecting me but there is a change of plans for my interviews at CMS. The day before, Jane informed me that Michelle, the principal at CMS had an unexpected death in her

family that day and would not be able to make our interview appointment. Since this was the case, I introduced myself to the assistant principal, and he directed me to the conference room where I would meet the Tina, a sixth grade teacher at CMS.

Once Tina joined me in the conference room, I explained the reason for my trip to their school, reviewed the procedures for the interview, and had her sign necessary forms. Tina informed me that she had only been teaching sixth grade for the last two years but had worked at CMS for nineteen year teaching middle grade students. She is a strong leader within the school and serves on numerous committees and groups, and Michelle thought she could give the best illustration of the school and the programs in her [Michelle's] absence.

Like Susan, Tina reported to me that she did not know that a county transition plan existed. She was under the impression that it was simply something that their school did as routine practice and did not know forms, checklists, etc. existed within CSD. She was direct, forthright, and supportive in her explanation and answering of my questions. Tina felt that the secret to the success of the sixth grade transition and the overall school success was rooted in the staff commitment to the cause and that the personnel keep track of students, their progress, and get resources when needed; this is the rule and not the exception.

Participant 16- Michelle (CMS, Principal)

I was unable to speak with Michelle due to a sudden family member's death the day of my arrival to CSD. At the conclusion of my interview with Tina, I waited for the assistant principal to become available once again to possibly interview him in the absence of Michelle. However, as I waited it became apparent that he was involved in

running the school solo that day and was tied up with administrative duties that prevented him from being available to interview. I thanked the office staff for the hospitality of the school. As I made my way out of the school, I walked through the halls and informally noticed the displays showcasing their academic success within the ABC state testing model. This is a high performing school in a high performing LEA with a descriptive population that statistically should not perform as high as they do. I wondered what their secret was. Could it be the planning for transitions? Could it be the monitoring? Could it be the dedication from personnel to live and work by best practice? Anyone or all of these ideas could be the answer. By my impressions, this is a school system to watch and as a principal, I want to know more about how they get 'it' done.

Major Themes

The themes elicited from the experiences of faculty with the sixth grade transition plans and programs to middle school resembled a tapestry of threads- parallel, perpendicular, overlapping, and intersecting. When analyzing the data, some threads were more vibrant, bold, and integral to the unity of the tapestry. The following themes in this study emerged from an analysis of the data via the faculty responses to the interview questions and data reported from NCDPI using a cross case analysis matrix (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Three major threads or themes emerged: *existence, elements,* and *communication*. Table 4 provides a brief synopsis of the three themes.

Table 4
Major Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes

Existence
Support/Barriers
	• Role of personnel
	• Research base familiarity
	• Length of plan existence
	• Evolution of plan
	• Inhibitors toward plan goal
	    1. Planning of
	    2. Implementing of
	    3. Sustaining
	• Evaluation of plan

Elements
Components Addressed
	• Student needs
	    1.Safety
	    2. Information
	      a. Academic needs
	    3. Connections
	      a. Social needs

Communication *Systems Theory into Practice*	• Intra-school • Intra-school system

Existence focuses on the supports and barriers as related to the particulars about

each LEA and school transition plan. These particulars include personnel roles, research

referenced materials, length of time the transition plan has existed, the evolution of

[LEA] transition plan, inhibitors faced in executing transition plan each year, and how

LEA and school level officials evaluate each year's plan. *Elements* refers to the

transition plan components that each LEA and school address that recognize student and

parent needs such as safety, information, and the ability to make connections with peers

and adults within the school building. *Communication* relates to the process of how the

LEA and school engage stakeholders in dialogue [system theory] for the sake of

planning, implementing, and sustaining their transition plans. Using the voices of the

educator respondents and current research literature, the following section provides a

more in-depth discussion of the three themes.

Existence

For each examined LEA included in this study, the transition plans that are in

existence are implemented in various stages in accordance to the purported vision.

According to the NMSA publication *This We Believe- Keys to Educating Young*

Adolescents (2010),

> Vision has been viewed as an acute sense of the possible. Research and
> exemplary practice over the past four decades have provided middle level
> educators with a strong sense of what is, indeed, possible in the education of
> young adolescents. Idealistic and uplifting, the resulting vision reflects our best
> knowledge and lights the way toward achieving a truly successful middle level
> school for every young adolescent. It reveals how research and practice can work
> in harmony to create a school in which every student experiences success. While
> a school leader has a personal vision of what the school can become, it is
> important to build the school's vision collaboratively around a set core of beliefs
> that are understood, owned, and supported by the larger school community (p.
> 27).

It is important to note that simply having a transitional plan is not enough. A plan

without a vision for what is to be accomplished or achieved will result in an ill-formed

intent to address a need. The collective school/LEA collaborative vision is a key to the

measurable outcomes that are seen as successful or needing to be improved. The larger

public perception of a school/LEA is in its academic outcomes measured by standardized

testing. A well executed transitional plan, which started with a vision of an end in mind,

can provide supports to students' need for safety, access to information, and connecting

to a larger group. This inevitably can result in improved academic measures that are the

by product of subjective outcome measures. Each LEA representative spoke to how their

plan was linked to their LEA goals. GUSSD presented the clearest association to a larger

vision for what their transition plan would do for their student population. CSD approached their vision and transitional planning from the research base but did not clearly communicate that vision to its stakeholders. PSD had the weakest connection to a greater vision since it was assembled based upon the SACS/CASI recommendation and not fully embodied into LEA overall function.

Role of Personnel

Using NMSA's statement regarding vision as our guiding principle, examining various supports and barriers each LEA and school face in an attempt to plan, implement, and sustain a system-wide transition plan, becomes multilayered. The role of personnel in each stage of the middle school transition plan is varied at the educator level within the greater system: LEA and school. Of the three LEAs examined for this study, PSD presented a transition plan that was year one in existence, CSD reported that theirs was three years old, and GUSSD's was more than three years old. With these plans at different levels of implementation, cultural awareness, and systematic progression, the role of education personnel was quite different; even at the comparable job category. The three district level appointees (Wes, Tabitha, and Jane) described themselves as facilitators for various group dialogue, gatekeepers of money, the leader of change toward the initial creation of the transition plan, and a coordinator of LEA staff. Each of these descriptors illustrates a function that is relevant to leading and managing change throughout any organization.

Principals linked to these LEAs had similar responses in describing the role they play in implementing and managing the school level transition plans. Even within the same LEA, some school leaders are on different paths. Jack and Rita serve GUSSD and

reported different levels of implementation, sustaining, and staff /community buy in.

Jack commented:

> I feel like the puppeteer, the one that kind of throws the vision out there, and we will have customer service. These kids feel accepted, and the teachers run with it. I just push them in a certain direction, and teachers take control.

Rita felt that she led as needed and that SMS has transition plan foundation work to be stronger before they can implement various extensions of the GUSSD transition plan.

Rita commented:

> I have pretty much free reign as long as it is good for the system…and for the school, then do it. Last spring I developed a school pamphlet…for incoming sixth graders and it was just a little thing we use here at school…all the parents were just thrilled to get it because it put something in their hand they could see; concrete. It let them see that this is what my child will be walking into when they come…I think parents want communication, and they want to see something the school is doing that they can hold in their hand so I try to give it to them.

Both schools have experienced the summer programs and during the school year events led by the LEA, but the staffing at each school have responded differently and culturally and are on different levels.

For CSD and PSD the role of the school leader is still varied. When asked what she saw her role in developing the transition plan, Valerie shares," I think that if I saw a big, gaping hole in it or something and brought that up, it would be looked at." Her response is one of providing feedback for the LEA plan and reveals to me from the rest of the interview that the existence of formal dialogue and discussion within NMS is lacking comparatively to what the LEA feels should be the norm. Sabrina shared that even though the PSD transition plan is in its infancy as a LEA plan, the teachers at RMS have led the way for some time.

> I think I go to the teachers and say 'What is working in your classroom, what is not? What can we improve on; do you have any ideas, suggestions?' I am all

about teacher input because they are the ones in the classroom… They know the kids, they know what their kid needs…I am not going to make decisions without them telling me what they need to do.

Sabrina's response spoke accurately of how the teachers and administration had a collective vision of what they wanted to be an end result for their students. This level of involvement was quite different from that of Don. In his school, UMS, Don conveyed that the staff needed more guidance in how to follow through with the PSD plan and that not all were on the same page on different issues and ideas. He reported that his major task this past summer and fall was to create the structure within the building to execute the LEA plan within the school's design. He mentioned that the district provided the framework and the schools were allowed to develop their plan based on those special interests each school had since they are all unique in location, demographics, and community support.

The reported role of each of the classroom teachers was very similar in all districts. They each saw themselves as one that gives input, suggestions, feedback, and communicates with parents and students. Meredith felt that within PSD and UMS, she can communicate freely and her comments generally reflect and summarize the sentiment of the other teachers.

> Well… I feel like a lot of suggestions that I come up with are heard, and I feel like, even when I talk with [Tabitha], she used to be my principal at one point, I feel comfortable talking with her, and whether it be somebody at the county office or my principal here at school, or the assistant principal, I feel I can talk with any of them about a program we need to start or something we need to do, and it is heard. Yeah, I just think it is all in the person you feel comfortable in giving input, and I do…

Research Base Familiarity

As the roles are defined, digging deeper to explore the 'why' of conducting such a plan, I unearthed something I did not expect. When asked about the role of national research base(s) used and referenced when designing LEA and school level plans, I found that a majority of the interviewees could not communicate or did not know any research used to construct and execute the middle school transition plans. GUSSD used a program called WEB (Where Everyone Belongs), and they trust that the research used by the parent company is valid and reliable. Other than this program described to me by Wes, the other respondents in GUSSD either reported that they use anecdotal, trial and error, and relationship building as the basis for their planned execution of transitioning middle school students.

The new plan within PSD was created out of a recommendation from a reaccredidation visit as one of the actions needed within the renewal cycle. The LEA is approaching the end of that cycle and needed to put something together addressing transitions at all levels within the PK-12 spectrum. Tabitha worked at creating the structure and framework on her own, all the while not citing specific research practices and leaving the meat of the plan to each school level. This was a purposeful action since PSD has so many grade configuration schools that one set plan would not be conducive to their needs. However, as a district administrator, she created a plan that was rooted in her prior knowledge and actions without objectively evaluating it against said research. It is interesting to note that with the given school level flexibility within PSD, RMS staff consulted the NMSA, NCMSA Schools to Watch program, and regional best practices workshops to compile the basis and support for how they conduct their sixth grade

transition. UMS principal Don reported that they did not consult any specific research when designing their elements.

The most detailed of the three LEA transitional plans, Jane reported that they referenced research provided them by the NCDPI. The CSD plan, like the other LEA plans, encompasses all grade spans at all levels. CSD used benchmark grades to focus attention to the transition between PK-K, second to third grade, elementary to middle grades, middle school to high school, and high school to college or career. CSD cited research for these specific grade spans as they prepare 'Transition planning for 21st century schools'. This information was summarized for the intentions of each goal and sub goal CSD stated in the comprehensive transitional plan. As much invested time and detail that the CSD plan revealed, when I approached this question with school level educators, they were weakly aware of the existence or components of their middle school transition plan. Valerie revealed she was unaware of any research base that was used in the LEA plan or any research she used in implementing the plan in NMS. Both teachers (Susan and Tina) were unaware that a transition plan even existed. When initially asked about her role in developing the plan, she asked me if she could see my copy of the CSD plan before she answered my question. She reviewed it and made comments about the structure, content, etc. and expressed "I just have not seen this, but then again, a lot of paper work passes in front of us, and maybe… when was this done? And who created it? I feel so horrible that I answered it this way". I assured her that there was nothing wrong with her answer- she was being truthful. As she continued to examine the document, she commented

> …I have not seen this; however, looking at this for example, we have the AIG coordinator meet with us, we meet regularly as a team for planning and

collaboration…I do surveys…get feedback from parents all the time…OK, so xyz's and abc's, OK. So, I mean, that is kind of how all this has evolved and has turned into something, so yes, we do this. Have I read it- NO…? Have I seen it- NO…? Do we do this stuff- YES?

Similar responses were provided by Tina as well from CMS. These revelations from these veteran teachers in CSD showcased the breakdown in communication. However, when asked about research that the teachers use in their part of the transitional plan, they were able to inform me what they use and why they use different strategies, programs, and routines. They both expressed how much AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) has changed their classrooms and school. The structure that this program philosophy and practice provides, they feel, allowed for their students to be successful in their transition year.

Length of Plan Existence/Evolution of Plan

As stated earlier, implementation of each LEA transitional plan has spans from the first year to more than three years. Since each plan is at different levels of understanding, refinement, and cultural commitment from each school/staff, it is important to see the evolution of thought and practice in executing the current form. Starting with the infant plan, PSD was refining their LEA transitional plan as the year progressed. Since the core of the plan was developed by Tabitha, the growth of the transitional plan was left up to the individual school levels. Sabrina reported that their transitional practices as a faculty have evolved with the addition of student led conferencing as an addition to RMS' former routine of showcasing student knowledge and information. They also have introduced a behavioral level system that was new to the sixth grade students coming from their feeder elementary schools. This level system allows for certain rewards, freedoms, and special events that students can earn with

107

appropriate learned behaviors. This addition to their school wide discipline plan is something new to the many transitional practices already in place before the LEA formed the system plan. Julie felt that as a teaching group at RMS, the sixth grade teachers have grown more accustomed to examining holistic student data more so than simply NC EOG scores. Don conveyed that UMS has not had time to evolve with their transitional plan due to the infancy of the idea within their school staff. As a result of the plan creation, Don feels that communication has already increased and been improved with parents and students coming from the feeder elementary schools. Meredith also echoed Don's sentiment that parent and student communication has been better in regards to informing both groups what their middle school has to offer.

As PSD continues to construct the transitional plan that they envision, CSD is in their third year of implementation of district wide practices at their two middle schools. Jane proclaimed that AVID has been a huge component of their evolution as a LEA and being able to focus on vertical articulation K-12 in the summertime has allowed for a more streamlined approach to content material as to not overlapping resources, time, and information. However, when I asked Valerie how the transition plan has evolved in CSD, she felt that it had not evolved; that they were stagnant in their routine practices. She also admitted to not knowing the specifics of the plan and that she did not know if she [or NMS] did everything that the transitional plan called for doing. At first this comment surprised me during my interview days with CSD but as I continued to interview teachers, their unbeknownst attitude toward the existence of such a plan allowed me to create the impression that having a written plan is not enough; your 'field workers' must know what is called for in order to get the desired results. When asked

this same question, Susan felt that the integration and use of instructional technology has

evolved in their implementation of transitional activities and practices. This may have

been her translation and not that of her grade level at NMS, but from my professional

experience, the exposure her students reportedly receive, would be a step up from the

average elementary classroom use. Tina echoed the sentiment of Jane in reporting that

AVID philosophy and practices have become institutionalized within their grade level

and that has led to the upper grades using the same practices as the students accelerate

through the middle school. Tina is a member of CMS' AVID team that reviews daily

classroom practices, student results, and teacher questions that drive the AVID

philosophical implementation school wide. Both as a LEA and school, AVID practices

have made a marked impression on the culture of education in this coastal community.

Through these interviews, I realized that the same question can elicit different

ideas and thoughts even when reviewing the same document. The interpretation of the

GUSSD transitional plan was varied and insightful. Wes commented:

> The plan we have now is about four years old depending on the school, but it has
> evolved a lot differently at each school. It has not remained superintendent top
> down principal to teacher. It has become more principal and teacher driven with
> the school by analyzing the students in their school, seeing what the students
> need, seeing where the gaps are between elementary and middle school. For
> example, you will interview a middle school principal, and he will tell you they
> have gone above and beyond outside of their summer program. Now, they have a
> summer reading program and a summer math program to help students with their
> skills…they make it fun; the kids don't even know it is educational. The teachers
> are front loading students with the skills and strategies that they need to be
> successful…exciting things are going on and now we are beginning to branch off;
> it is much more than just the basics, and it is really starting to get into coping and
> transitional skills.

Once I had the chance to ask the same question of Jack and Hope at AMS, I was

anticipating a 'blow-me-away' answer since Wes did such a good job of painting the

picture for success at this school and specifically within the sixth grade. Hope began her

comments first:

> I think it started when we wanted to make sure our rising sixth graders felt
> comfortable at AMS so some of the things we do during in the sixth grade
> academy are to make them feel comfortable the first day of school, learn how to
> open their lock, which for some are very nervous and anxious about that…to build
> some relationships with each other and some of the adults in the building. I think
> it has just evolved each year. We've just added things to it.

Jack interrupted her with the following:

> Well, the transition piece, also, for us has been a little bit more grass-roots. We
> visit the elementary schools often. That has evolved from the first year where I
> was visiting the elementary schools working with the kids, and I probably visited
> the elementary schools maybe three times during the course of the school year…
> Then the third year it evolved into us taking summer reading books to the kids
> and then we were taking our current sixth graders back to the elementary schools
> to do presentations to the elementary schools they transitioned from…it has
> gotten quite better…Our sixth graders are going, now chorus is going, now our
> band is going, we still have teachers and the principal, and counselors going…it is
> really big…and the elementary kids look forward to it.

To clarify, I asked both of them if the programs themselves have changed or were the

things you had in place, still in place? Hope responded that

> I think so… as Jack said, the summer reading program has changed from the
> beginning so we don't want the kids to have to go out and purchase books so
> therefore, we take them to the kids. You know, cost is an issue so here are books
> to choose from to read over the summer. I think we've added things but the basic
> program is in place where we want kids come into the building and feel
> comfortable and get to know the adults and other kids in the building.

This collective answer to the evolution of their standard for transitioning students

impressed me that this school knew their community and students more so even before

the students became enrolled in their building for sixth grade. This also impressed on me

that AMS has developed a special culture that does not happen overnight or by only a few

staff; it is school wide from top down.

In comparison, Rita and Tammy conveyed a work-in-progress plan evolution that also answered the call from the greater school community but was evident that the school staff buy-in still needed much attention. Rita admitted that her school's plan had not evolved in her time since taking over the principalship nearly three years ago. And the realization that Tammy did not know that such a written district or school plan existed, indicated that the staff has a long way to go. Also something that caught my attention was the fact that for various unknown reasons, the summer program at SMS had to be conducted by elective/lab teachers instead of sixth grade academic teachers as is the case at all of the other schools involved in this study. Also other SMS support staff was less involved with the WEB program which is supposed to drive the school year functions for the transitional activities and monitoring. With staffing concerns, Rita has many more barriers that prohibit the school culture from changing. She and a few staff are fulfilling their roles but with a lack of support, real transitional evolution becomes hard.

Inhibitors toward transition plan goal(s)

As previously referenced, even the best laid plains can equate to mixed results if barriers and other inhibitors are not removed. This has been the case in each of our LEAs thus far. While collectively planning for various components within each plan, the LEA and school have to also consider factors that may inhibit the planning, implementation, and sustaining of their [well] laid out intentions. The response to planning inhibitors was fairly similar in all LEAs and levels within. Time was the most recognized barrier to the creation of such plans. When I asked this question, Jane conveyed what I feel sums up a level of frustration within education in North Carolina:

> Time…time is always going to be a factor because – well, there are so many
> things that are circulating right now that need our attention… when you have to

deal with new curriculum designs, we've gotten new assessments plans that are coming down [from NCDPI], and trying to prepare our teachers for teaching in a different way…There are just so many things pulling at us as educators, that it is just time – how do you fit it all in and how do you continually go back to the plans you have in place and pull people back together. It's human resources too because there's so many people that … we're trying to coordinate all of our planning and all of our efforts towards making sure that one thing can be a strategy for something else, and we're not just identifying little things in silos that we have to do…because then it becomes extremely overwhelming, not just to the people that are trying to oversee the projects, but the people that are trying to implement it, and then they start seeing these things as disconnected one from the other. I don't think any teacher would argue…but I don't think they would argue that all of this is important. But to see how this leads to the outcome of successful students, not just in 6th grade, but when they leave us in 8th. I think that they wouldn't argue that that's it, but how does it fit in with everything else I have to do. So time is really an issue, and I don't know where you get more time.

Once the plan is created, then the task of implementing the components becomes an issue of managing, manipulating, and monitoring. Overall the respondents conveyed a connection between implementation success and personnel consistency, commitment, and trust. Jack faced a unique challenge of opening a new school, merging staffs from two former schools and new additions to education, and implementing the GUSSD transitional plan. Even through all of these first year hurdles, the lessons he conveys are truly relevant to any school level staff no matter what the year. His dialogue with Hope and their response to implementation barriers is:

> I think the previous culture, the culture that Hope and some of the other teachers came from, inhibited our planning to a certain degree. I think my perception of what the culture should be like and their perception of what the culture should be like, clashed at first…but they all love me now. Because it was just that initial hurdle –because when you see a new school - this was part of my ignorance… you think, great! Start everything fresh, everything new, but what I didn't anticipate or realize was that everybody was bringing their own culture here, so now what we have was – we just had a hodgepodge of culture…so it took trust. Trust, trust, that's the biggest issue. It was just trust…and fears. I mean even now, there are some things in this upcoming transition program I would like to try out so I'll start having this conversation with teachers come February or March, but there is going to be that fear and it will be-"Oh no, there is Jack and he wants to try out something new".

Hope interrupted by adding:

> …because there is that trust and our relationship now, I think it is mutual. If I have an idea of something I want to do with kids, I tell Jack, and more than likely, I can do it, and it's very open now …

This resulting comfortable banter back and forth between Jack and Hope came at an expense. The expense took investment of time, discomfort, commitment, courage, and trust for it to pay dividends.

Whereas time and trust were overwhelming, the main components for planning and implementing said transitional plans to middle school, sustaining the efforts of the detailed plans needs a certain personnel commitment; willingness to serve. Some respondents used terms like leadership, teacher buy-in, using resources in the right way, outlook of personnel, and getting the right teachers involved. These qualities needed in personnel to create the possibility of sustaining such programs are best conveyed in the collective interview with Sabrina and Julie from RMS in PSD.

Julie stated:

> The biggest part for me is making sure that you can get everyone that's on your team to buy into what we have, what's working…we work with a bunch of young people, and I'm tickled to death about it because they do have a lot of new ideas and a lot of new ways of looking at things. We can't do every one of them on day 1, but you can sort of get those in if they feel like what they have to share can be implemented in some way, then they can buy into it a lot better.

Sabrina added:

> I think that's very much a positive in our sixth grade. They are very willing to try new things and do things where I think some of the other grade levels are not quite as open as…not quite as…

Julie responded:

> Some of that, I think, is the age of the student because, I think you see that more as you progress even into high school. I think it is less and less of a team – I think

113

that is why we work… because overall, we are a team, and we're not going to change that – not as long as I'm here.

Sabrina concluded:

You can see they are babies at sixth grade; seventh graders are trying to figure it all out – they're that middle child. Our discipline plan gets a little bit tougher at seventh and eighth grade. So you can tell they are coming to their own, their bodies are changing; they're big to be social. Eighth grade, you know, big kid on campus type deal. You know, they've matured, they're more responsible. You can see the change from sixth grade to eighth grade so I think you are right. It's just the make up of the grades and the kids.

Whether it is adults or children, the make up of any team or group has to have willing participants. Getting staff to give a commitment of time, trust in each other, and surrender support when needed is the challenge that each of us face in any job situation daily. This right combination of factors and personnel make the secret ingredient in producing seemingly successful practices; transitional or otherwise. RMS was the best showcase of a transition plan/practices that were being sustained over time within an organization. This was overall a weak area demonstrated by the other middle schools and LEAs examined. There was little evidence outside of RMS of practices that resulted in sustaining plans, programs, strategies, or ideas. A systems thinking model was not displayed in regards to actions needed for sustaining the plan which was not systemic; it was person dependent.

Evaluation of transitional plan

At the conclusion of each school year, as educators we evaluate the successes by examining NC EOG scores, academic student growth, discipline referrals, budget outcomes, and staff accomplishments. These factors that I routinely examine during and at the conclusion of each year are the same factors reported by the interviewees when asked what they used for their criteria for transitional success. However, the level of

holistic viewing of success varied greatly from the district level to the classroom. All

district administrators reported evidences such as School Improvement Plan goals met,

testing results, academic failure rate percentages, drop out rate, and feedback from the

community at large. School level administrators seemed to focus on concrete data as

well; discipline, testing, attendance, and summer program participation. The teacher

respondents presented the most contrast to the previous answers given. Their answers

included those stated by others, but they also saw more intangible qualities in children

become more noticeable. Julie mentioned

> I think it's probably grade specific, but when you see them coming in as fifth
> graders and seeing how much they grow and just mature in their thinking. You
> know, they start out too shy to even raise their hands, but by middle of the year,
> they're leading their group. When you walk around and listen to the
> conversations when they're working on math problems, you can see leadership
> changing a lot of times. Something maybe they still won't share out loud, but
> when they are with a smaller group, they step it up a lot, and that's good. I really
> like – that's why I really like group work or partner work – just giving them a
> chance to shine in a different set of circumstances.

Meredith stated:

> I guess I look at it when the students come in the fall…and they're in my class,
> and they say, "Oh, I remember when you were doing this in your class when I
> visited last spring," and just the fact they were interested makes you believe
> they're comfortable… you could also look at academics for the first nine weeks
> and then any kind of discipline… by Christmas is when we normally see a big
> change in our students because they mature and they have a really good
> understanding of what we expect of them in sixth grade and in middle school.
> You tend to see a change in the students. I think they are handling things very
> well with transition to middle school.

Hope added:

> I look at the kids academically… so their performance as far as how they do on
> the EOG's …are they successful, did they show growth, their performance in the
> classroom. I look at socially and behaviorally, I mean, do they come in ready to
> learn, are they getting along with each other, are they being respectful, are they
> forming new friendships. I think all three aspects, I kind of look at formal data, or

just informal observations to see if this is paying off, is it worth our time. I think it has been.

These teachers' responses allow for the front lines to see the intrinsic changes that may not be visible to a principal or district level administrator. It is an important level of input that paints a holistic picture of the successes (or shortcomings) that each plan evokes from year to year.

Elements

Student Needs

Faculty participants defined and described components identified in their transitional plans and practices that meet the concerns of adolescents: safety, information, and connections. The existence of these components was acknowledged, and they reported on how their plans, programs, and practices fit into these categories. The respondents also identified which of the three components they seem to address more so than another. The research that Booth (2011) provided substantiates the faculty respondents' opinion. Booth found that adolescents primarily had concerns regarding physical needs (connections), safety needs (safety), academic needs (information), and the need for esteem (connections).

Safety

Booth (2011) was able to confirm through her longitudinal research with other research from Roeser and Eccles (1998) that adolescents' perceptions of disorderliness in schools are linked to their beliefs that adults in the school lack concern for their well-being and safety. In examining the answers regarding how transitional plans directly address student safety concerns, they were as varied as the respondents themselves. There was not one job alike group or even within a LEA group that all regarded safety in

116

the same manner. In fact, seven of the fifteen interviewees ranked safety third on their

list of three choices. Each felt it is addressed and integrated into summer programs,

during school year plans, and teacher activities, but it fell prey to other needs being

addressed more so.

Information

Information is closely tied to academic performance and needs. The desire for

parents and students to stay informed is a challenging task for school officials to manage

and produce. In regards to the transitional plans for middle school, delivery of

information was seen as the most important by six of the fifteen respondents and ranked

second with six others. A majority of the respondents conveyed that information was tied

closely to connections and that they really go hand in hand. The more a student and

parent feel connected, the more information they seem to attain and vice versa. Jane

advised that from her district level position, information is essential to making sure

parents know the right material:

> Some of these parents have never had a child go into middle school. They don't
> know what to expect and our parent advisory groups, you know, when we tried to
> talk about parent involvement and that being a focus of discussion – so many of
> these things we do to collect feedback come up with topics and feedback from our
> stakeholders - it's not all about bringing the people together to talk about
> transitions. It's about what are some things we can do to help you? So when
> parents tell us that one of the involvement pieces would be to provide us with
> more information about what to expect of a teenager, you know, what to expect
> when they get to middle school - some of it being social with their social
> development and what happens in their brain kind of triggers all of that
> adolescence. So parents want that kind of information so we tried to provide an
> opportunity for them on that and so part of it is information, and the other side of
> it is kids being at the center of a big transition where they are coming together
> with kids they have never been to school with, and that's a huge part of it just
> seeing you're all in the same boat, and we're going help you all, and so helping
> them feel comfortable, connected and build those relationships when they get to
> the middle school with the staff as well with their peers.

Based on good communication, this ability to bring families together with practices and procedures is what helps to make any transition a success.

A component of the information category is also addressing specific academic needs to the incoming sixth grade students. When this question was addressed, two of the three LEAs involved were mostly in agreement of their greatest academic sixth grade need; literacy. From the district office to the classroom in GUSSD and PSD this was the overwhelming response. CSD varied in their answers yet still were issues that schools face; writing, organization, and use of educational technologies. However, being able to communicate a need and showing how the need is being addressed are completely different. The strategies, programs, and supports implemented into middle school transitional plans and practices were visible in all interviews except for one; Don's at UMS. Every interviewee felt that their actions and plans directly related to addressing their greatest reported academic need. Don confessed:

> As of right now…that's one of the things that's a part of the plan that we haven't concentrated as much on. It's the – OK, what's our biggest needs, what do we need to do, I mean, as we're putting this plan together, we're kind of going and seeing what we need to do but we haven't had that discussion. It's mainly our discussions have been – let's talk about discipline, and let's talk about what the needs of the sixth graders in discipline, let's be sure our mentor gets with those students who are struggling because we trust teachers in the classroom, but as far as the academics, the specific academics, we haven't done anything as far as the transition plan to address they need to be more organized. We let the teachers do that in the individual classrooms in which they do, but in our – as it evolves, as our plan evolves, we'll get into that. Right now, pretty much what we've concentrated on is discipline and getting them to not to pick and play around…

His confession of not directly confronting his perceived greatest need of literacy is also in conflict with his ranking of addressing safety concerns last throughout his transition practices. By his own statement, he spends more time addressing safety, discipline, and mentoring and relies on the teachers to handle academic needs. This [interpreted] lack of

inspection toward academic needs and goals has been lost in the midst of dealing with student behaviors.

Taking a closer look at CSD and their apparent conflict of opinion of what their greatest academic needs are, their actions continue to be aligned with their perceptions. Jane referenced that writing skills were weakest with the sixth graders and yet she identified practices, opportunities, and staff development that are being made available to staff to help address this need. Valerie stated that organization is a monumental challenge for sixth graders and yet she could identify specific AVID skills and PBIS opportunities for students to gain practice and become better organized; even without reviewing the LEA transition plan in quite a while. Teachers, Susan and Tina, felt that organization was low as well and also cited AVID and PBIS strategies as key material in instructing their students; without even knowing the plan existed.

According to Booth (2011), adolescents exhibit a complex understanding of effective teaching and learning practices. They seem to have an inherent appreciation for constructivist approaches to learning, as they asked for more hands-on, creative instruction that would help them make connections to real life and involve them in the learning process. Students also reported they want to participate in opportunities that are more directly relevant to their lives. When asked of the respondents, what other strategies they used to address academic needs in other courses outside of their main weakness, only Jack and Hope were able to give programs, plans, and opportunities only allowed for the incoming sixth graders. They mentioned that the media center at AMS is open during the summer for students to meet, read, and exchange books and that they had started a book club over the summer to get/keep students reading. This is directly tied

into their literacy goal to focus on with incoming sixth grade students. Other programs and activities mentioned are very good and research based but is offered to all students and staff within their middle schools and is not considered unique to the transition process.

Connections

Arnold and Stevenson (1998) discuss the importance of establishing important interpersonal relationships- not only with the students but with the staff. Taking time to teach new students skills, they report, will inevitably make the transition to a new room, school, or social group easier and less stressful. It is important to take time to discuss mutual respect, goodwill, and an attitude of cooperation. These are seen as the bedrock of teaming and of personal growth and development. Active listening, taking responsibility for one's problems, individual maturity, and handling conflict are other areas that teaming helps to teach. However, simply putting teachers together does not make a team. The students must feel connected and need a strong teacher-student relationship that is rooted in valuing the students' contributions. Teachers and other adults also must treat all students as individuals that are equally important (Arnold & Stevenson, 1998). This ideal is best showcased from Hope who teaches in AMS within GUSSD. Hope expressed:

> …students come from some areas… and cultures that are very different. I do think the things we've put in place here have made a difference with the kids and with the staff. I think the staff feels more buy-in. They want to make sure the kids are successful and know they are cared for in this school…from day one we set the tone that tells the kids what our culture is, how we operate at AMS… I think it tells them from the beginning this is a respectful environment…Our kids come from the poorest communities within our county and come from the lowest performing elementary schools in our LEA…I think we do a good job on the front end, and it tells them how our school works so we can spend our class time with instruction. The kids come in the classroom, they sit down, and we get ready to

work. There's not a lot of time spent on managing behavior or social issues, I guess that would indicate that something is working… the data shows that… they want to be here. There's a few that don't want to be here, but those are few. The kids just feel it. It is kind of hard to explain.

Hope felt connected to her students and according to Wes, she is representative of the staff at AMS. Tina portrayed a different level of Arnold and Stevenson (1998) findings. At CMS, due to staffing issues this year, the school disbanded the teams within sixth grade and created essentially one team or simply a grade level within sixth grade. Tina teaches nearly 125 students a day now compared to 50 in previous years. The sheer volume of this assignment made it very difficult for middle school teachers and students to make meaningful connections to transfer into student valued contributions. She expressed the following:

> Information is hard because of going and coming from the volume of parents. They want to know on a daily basis [while their child is] at elementary school and on a weekly basis how their child is doing now that they are in middle school, and that's a difficult thing when you have 125 students to get that information, that communication. Definitely, the connection, you can see the kids wanting to connect with you, and I think we incorporate that as we can… Last year I taught [on a two person team]… and had the same group of 50 kids all day long so that connection was really there with the way the schedule fell. I felt like having the same 50 kids…was a good transition for my 6th graders because instead of having six different teachers… it didn't give them too many different teachers at one time. Some of them were coming from elementary schools where they… had one teacher all day long. That helped…me get to know my students so much faster … and was pretty powerful…

Wes also offered up a feature that is unique to our interview groups and follows along with the research on the importance of making connections. He proudly comments [as a father and an employee]:

> I definitely think that the peer mentor has helped people feel connected. My son is an eight grader at one of our middle schools. He benefited back a couple years ago when he was coming out of elementary school… He got a phone call from an 8th grade girl saying "Welcome to the school, I can't wait to meet you. When you come to Middle School 101 [summer program], my friends and I will be waiting

to meet you." That does great for a kids' self-confidence… Now my son's an eight grader. This summer I heard him on his personal cell phone, in his bedroom and talking to a kid. When he got done, I asked who he was talking to. He said, "I was just calling somebody giving them a welcome to the school the way an eight grader did for me when I was in 6th grade. Now it's my turn." I thought this is a complete turn around… He was proud to have somebody else to come in as a sixth grader. He was proud to pay back what somebody had done for him.

This simple, free added feature with student involvement and engagement from both ends is putting the research into practice.

Allowing students to connect to other adolescents or adults within the school can be accomplished by addressing academics and safety, but all of these schools are able to spend time connecting the students to their new environment. This area was seen the most similar by job alike descriptions. When asked this question, five of the six teachers involved in this study placed connections at the top of their list. The acknowledgement of their transitional practices being heavier with connection type of opportunities speaks to the task assigned to teachers. They bring together students from feeder schools, different ability levels (both physical and mental), and merge personalities within the scope of their year together. The ability to assist students in maturing in behaviors, social boundaries, and responsibilities is seen just as important as teaching them content material related to their subject areas. Susan commented:

> Connections are important because, like I said, teaching them how to do things – how to work with one another, how to get along with one another. You know, we do a lot of parent contacts also and get a lot of feedback. I live in the community…you know, you can't go to the grocery store without seeing someone you know… I think the communication and connecting with families helps with the information and that feedback is consistent. So connections first…it doesn't matter if it is in transition or not.

Julie added:

> We do have numerous clubs that students can get involved with. We are very service oriented, as well. We have can drives; we have a toy drive right now.

Student Council went to the Community Table, which is, in our county; they can go and have a free meal. The kids went to that – helped serve. There's something for everybody. If it's the athletic person, if it's the service oriented person, if it's drama, chorus, hunter safety, student council. They are going to start a math club soon also. We have dances and ball games which they consider social time. We have HAC time which is Happy Active Child where they walk daily, of course that is time when they walk and talk. This is at different times for different grade levels and that is part of our behavior system as well… sit out at picnic tables…free lunchroom seating…reward time on Friday…

The social opportunities that Julie mentioned are all great opportunities that all students generally get to experience within a traditional middle school. Through the scope of these interviews, Wes was the only respondent to describe something unique to their middle school transition plan:

…One thing we've worked with, we've had a lot of success with, is this book, *Who Moved My Cheese for Teens*, based on the book that was originally written for businesses. This books helps kids talk through: I'm scared of this, I'm scared of change…of having a new teacher… of going to a new school… of a new principal. It helps them work through the change and let them know there are thirty of us in here, and we are all scared of the same thing. They start to build on the cohort - Let's stick together. Use socialization and use what we know as strength to help them overcome some of their fears. So that book in itself, we don't sit down and have them all read the book, we'll have copies of the book …and help them apply the principles in the book. Another thing we do is we have teachers and students who have peer mentees…that has been a positive impact in our schools.

These social needs of students are nothing new to middle level educators. In fact, they have become more complex with communication needs, safety concerns, and academic pressures. The interviewees were asked to describe to what extent they were able to monitor the social development of students while in their transition programs. Just as in the case of evaluating overall success of the middle school transition plans, the responses were similar most along job alike categories. The LEA personnel focused on concrete data such as test results, discipline data, course failures, attendance, and student services referrals (i.e., guidance, social worker, mental health). The school principals also were

123

interested in similar data with some emphasis on parent feedback both formally and informally. The classroom teachers showed concern and interest in monitoring cultural awareness, evidence of maturity in behavior and academic thinking, increased awareness of self, and a decrease in having to manage behaviors and social issues. All of these responses though were not isolated to only the sixth grade; there were LEA and school wide benchmarks used at all levels.

The notion of continuous improvement was presented by CSD and GUSSD in relation to modifying social strategies used within the various LEA and school transition planning. Jane referenced that CSD has a more coordinated approach to student services, and they have streamlined coordinating, personnel roles, services available, and monitoring of data to better assist all students in handling social/behavioral needs. Wes referenced that GUSSD restructured its summer programs to better accommodate parent request and issues with work, child sitting, and coordinating events in the summer. They also committed to funding bus transportation for the summer programs so as many students as possible can come early, connect with new peers and adults, and experience what the transition plan allows for. Rita from SMS, who relayed that her program had not evolved and was stagnant, revealed that she has adjusted relations with the minority community, students, and parents by simply listening to their concerns. She has started a parent involvement group called the Socrates group that is a sounding board to Rita but is also a coordinating group dedicated to supporting students at SMS by coordinating mentor opportunities. The school's gym and home economics room is open on Saturdays for mentors and mentees to have a place to meet, bond, and work together on making connections that benefit all involved. Rita also has found success in her peer mediation

program that is helping students make appropriate social choices and understanding consequences. Rita may be a little too critical of her transition planning; she is evolving with her practices and opportunities for her school community that benefits all students.

Communication

Intra School and Intra School System

School system faculties do not function in isolation and are part of an academic system that relies on all of its functioning parts; school [system] faculty benefit from the support and collective voice of the LEA administration, school administrators, classroom teachers, parents, and students. Often some parties may have expectations about others involved that are not met. In addition, as identified in Szymanski , Hewitt, Watson, and Swett (1999) there are barriers experienced by staff and other educational participants when trying to address the needs of students.

Educational participants in GUSSD, PSD, and CSD discussed their expectation of other educational stakeholders and the manner in which decisions affecting middle school transition plans and programs have been made. Using the systems theory (Owens, 2004) as an organization being an integrated system of interdependent structures and functions, the respondents were asked to classify how their LEA and school initially designed, determined, and monitored their middle school transition plan. Interviewees were presented with three graphics and explanations referencing systems-wide thinking, process-systems thinking, and open-systems thinking as described by Senge (2000). Systems-wide thinking is described as the process of enacting change through an organization in which the entity is working to improve. Evaluation of the system-wide thinking process can occur by descriptions given by staff, and taking into account how

125

well the staffs work together. Process-systems thinking is a process that realigns the communication structures that will effect change in patterns of behavior within the organization. This process is the basis for true-long term change (Senge, 2000). The communication structure is purposeful, involving, and collaborative. Open-systems thinking is the process of seeking to understand a system through its inputs, outputs, and boundaries (Senge, 2000). It is the goal of the researcher to fully identify the level of input various stakeholders were given in the development, implementation, and monitoring of the specific plan.

Communicating within any of these systems is an expectation and boundaries, roles, and members involved must be specified for advancing progress to be made. One item stood out to me during these interviews. I placed titles and roles of certain educational positions in the name places on the systems graphics. It was evident in all LEAs that depending on how advanced each LEA plan is, the level of the district office involvement diminished greatly and was absent in the most of the graphic schemes of communication.

In its first year of formally having a middle school transition plan existence, PSD respondents were split between system-wide thinking, since it was created by the SACS /CASI recommendation to the district level, and open-systems thinking since schools were given the opportunity to make the plan fit the needs of their specific educational community. CSD's transition plan has been in place for three years and no clear communication scheme is evident in regards to the middle school transition plans. Each respondent confessed their belief that their plan evolution has emerged from combinations of system-wide thinking, open-systems thinking, and process-systems

126

thinking; no clear answer from any respondent in CSD. GUSSD presented a unique

combination of views. Wes felt that their plan was a product of system-wide thinking.

Rita and Tammy also agreed with Wes since they were following only the district

planned WEB and Middle School 101 program activities. SMS followed what was told

of them and nothing more. Jack and Hope relayed to me that they felt the process-

systems thinking, minus the district office involvement on my graphic, represented AMS

the best. Jack commented:

> I kind of feel that here are the teachers and administrators coming up with a
> transition plan and the only support we get from central office will be funding for
> our sixth grade academy, but they have absolutely no input on how we run it. I
> think it is teacher driven and administration driven here -our transition piece for
> our kids.

Hope responded:

> I don't think it is a hierarchy –as a teacher, if I have a suggestion and I talk to you
> and other teachers about it, and it is reasonable, we can implement it. We don't
> have to go through central office, parents, or students.

Jack concluded:

> Now, with that said, I agree with you. I do take the parent and student input and
> bring it back to the teachers. I mean the parents and students talk to me and I
> bring it back to teachers and the teachers formulate a plan which works best…

While all parties mentioned may not have equal levels of input and time, Jack did

reference that parents, students, teachers, and school administrators compose their

process-systems model at AMS. With the information presented by Jack and Hope, I felt

this was an appropriate selection with evidence of long term change and purposeful,

collaborative, and involving communication structures for reflecting on design,

implementation, and sustaining programmatic events at AMS.

Reflecting upon strategies, practices, and transitional standards, communication must take place in order to refine specific actions to meet the needs of a changing population. When further examined, respondents stated how they interpreted the changing of strategies to improve academic success of its sixth grade students. Once again, PSD has not had much time to reflect on the first year's happenings, but did feel that so far they have experienced open-systems thinking model of communicating what has worked and not worked so far within their schools and system plan. This is good to understand since some feel overwhelmed with the new practices. They feel as though a system is in place to support staff during this change.

Also, GUSSD expressed again from all levels that the district office staff had little to no involvement in working on changes to the middle schools' transition plans. Since each school produced wide ranging plans, each school reported to approach changing components differently. AMS conveyed that open-systems thinking was a good representation of how they took feedback, criticism, and input into revisions of their school transition plan. SMS agreed with the systems-wide thinking model but reflecting more of a school hierarchy rather than a district one. Rita felt confident and ready to take on leading this charge and the staff trusted her to lead them through the research, jargon, and struggles.

CSD was split in their interpretation of how addressing academic needs has changed through the use of the transition plan. Jane spoke that the LEA started three years ago with systems-wide thinking but feels that they have moved toward process-systems thinking currently. When Jane spoke of this, I asked her about the involvement of outside school personnel; parents, community members, students. In their written

plan, it had columns that were representative of the community at large and within the

school system; students and parents were included on the checklist. One thing I noticed

on the checklist was that CSD gave different positions within the educational community

a component role and very few, if any, student and parents boxes were checked. I asked

Jane if she had any input into any of these. She responded:

> Not at this time. At that time when we pulled that together, it wasn't something that we looked at to provide the students with some say into what works for them. Since that time, we've started a –well, we've just taken - our new leadership has taken us in a different approach. We added student members to our board of education…We also did a two year strategic planning session which then became a five year plan for this next cycle, and we had students part of that. So we've taken on more student driven feedback, and I believe that is going to speak out to what we are going to do there too. You are very observant.

The remaining CSD staff interviewed all responded differently. Valerie relayed that

systems-wide thinking best represented NMS but with different positions in the headings;

teachers, counselors, and administration. Absent were students and parents. Our two

teachers from CSD were split as well. Tina reported process system thinking as the

model for CMS and Susan felt open-systems thinking worked for NMS. She even went

further to say that "…the school, grade level, and team all work this way… maybe not

our county but our school definitely does." Her reaction from the ground up speaks to

the level of non-communication within CSD at least in relation to transition practices.

Similar to the previous question about handling change of academic supports, I

also asked the respondents about how they determined which social strategies would

meet the needs of their sixth grade students. Interestingly enough, all respondents within

GUSSD and PSD selected the open-systems thinking model. GUSSD once again

diminished the district level involvement and thrust parents and students into having

more input into this section of planning. PSD respondents also lessened the district level

opportunity for involvement while increasing the ability of the school leader and staff willing to try things as long as it did not break any laws. CSD was once again split. Jane and Valerie referenced process-system thinking since it reflected a continual process of feedback; mostly from administrators, support personnel, teachers, students, and minimal involvement from the parents. The teachers, Susan and Tina, were also at odds by one selecting system wide thinking and the other open-systems thinking that only involved teachers, parents, and students. I am not surprised by the discrepancy within CSD since once again; the communication lines are not clearly open from top to bottom in the LEA.

Summary of Themes

Three themes emerged from the interviews and data analysis of LEA and middle school transition plans. The themes of *existence, elements, and communication* were identified and discussed.

Existence, or the supports and barriers as related to middle school transition plans, is critical to understand why these systems and schools worked on creating a plan when so many LEAs within the state of North Carolina did not. Many school staff participants questioned the value of a written plan if you don't know that it exists and if you are not continuously monitoring the progress made toward its goals. Participants were conflicted with their views both within the LEA, middle school, and job alike categories.

Elements encompass the transitional plan components that each LEA and school address that recognize students and parent needs. Safety, information, and connections were the main components found to be in any transitional activity or time that were addressed accordingly by the LEAs and middle schools. Academic and social needs were addressed as sub-goals to information and connections. A closer look at what supports

and strategies were put into action to address specific academic and social concerns for each year was offered.

Communications references the faculty expectations of the LEA and school level administration in relaying information, concerns, ideas, and plans to all stakeholders within and outside the school community. A closer examination of what systems-theory mode of thinking and planning went into the planning, implementing, and sustaining of each particular middle school transition plan. The examples drawn from the interviews showcase the nexus of communication resulted between the principal and teacher level. This micro-system worked well in a majority of the settings with the macro-system of LEA to school communication showcasing a low level of cooperation.

The three major themes or threads of the complex tapestry of educator experiences with each other regarding middle school transition plans, programs, and functions incorporate facets of the educator's experiences that share a common thread. The following section attempts to continue exploring the themes and sub-themes as they help to guide our answers regarding the original research questions for this study

Initial Scanning Research Question

Do school systems in North Carolina currently have a targeted, formalized, written transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is based in middle grades educational research?

The scan of all 115 LEAs within North Carolina revealed 89 respondents (77% of LEAs in North Carolina) via email to the researcher. Of these 89 responding LEA contacts, only three confirmed that such a plan existed within their LEA (GUSSD, PSD, and CSD) and middle schools (AMS, SMS, RMS, UMS, NMS, CMS). From the

remaining 86 LEA representatives that responded, many of them added explanations or inquisitive comments with their declining response. Here is a sampling of the responses:

- We have a transition program but it is not written and formal

- I would be interested to read your research once finished

- Each school formulates their own

- We have a combination of school configurations (K-8 and 6-8)

- Title 1 schools address transitions from elementary to middle school in their Title 1 plan

- Internal practices with schools that work

- Only three schools in our district. No need to have a plan

- Nothing more than transferring of records, PEPs, information

- PK-8 or K-8 only schools

- Done in feeder patterns only- not district wide

- Procedures only- nothing research based and formal

- Sounds like a really great idea but we don't have a plan

- We have a written plan, but I would not call it strongly research based

- Not formalized and written. We work with a program called Unlimited Success for our middle schools and high schools.

Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?

2. In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district?

3. To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the overall school level?

4. In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the classroom teacher(s) in the school?

5. To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the individual school classroom level?

Table 5 summarizes the components of the answer to the five research questions, presents the findings of the questions, and indicates the related themes previously identified.

Table 5
Research Questions

Research Questions	Findings	*Related Themes*
In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?	• GUSSD • *Goal- Outstanding student achievement and success.* • 6th grade at both MS are top performing in reading EOG results, both met AYP, AMS was high growth and SMS was expected growth • *Goal- Excellence in communication and collaboration* • Not clear communication revealed between LEA and school; evidence of collaboration within schools. • *Goal- Strong and active community relationships.* • Appears to have different examples of strong community input at school level. • PSD • *Goal- Provide social, emotional, and academic support for students as they transition from one grade*	***Elements*** *Student Needs* *Information* *Academics* ***Communication*** *Intra sch. system* ***Existence*** *Program evolution* ***Elements*** *Student Needs* *Safety*

133

	to the next.	*Information Connections*
	• At-risk students are assigned a mentor- but the volume is large for 1 person to effectively monitor. At RMS, students appear to be emotionally and academically engaged. UMS seems to still be focusing on discipline and safety more so than anything else. UMS appears disjoined in their approach to many areas.	
	• CSD	
	• *Goal- Implement district plan*	***Communication*** *Intra sch system*
	• Seemingly implemented but not known about/of by all stakeholders who have responsibilities assigned to carry out at the school level. Perceived poor monitoring of plan.	
	• *Goal- Collaborate with community and LEA stakeholders with goals and strategies for transition.*	***Existence*** *Role of personnel*
	• Not all stakeholders listed on plan were actively involved- parent and student participation is missing.	
	• *Goal- Build and sustain supporting relationships*	***Elements*** *Student Needs Connections*
	• These relationships have been established and are active	
	• *Goal- Plan Prof. Develop. for staff related to supports and barriers to transition*	***Existence*** *Sustaining prog.*
	• Strongest point of plan in relation to academic development related to transitioning students	
	• *Goal-Provide financial assistance*	***Existence*** *Sustaining prog.*
	• Nothing to dispute the fulfillment of this goal.	
In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district.	• GUSSD	***Communication*** *Intra sch system*
	• LEA has incorrect impression of summer program outcomes in regards to academic assistance. Regards AMS very high in transition practices that the school has instituted above the district plan.	***Existence*** *Sustaining inhibitor*
		Communication

	- PSD - LEA created skeleton plan for schools to add individual extensions to. Since 1st year of existence, low expectations from LEA at present. RMS is operating well above the expectation of LEA with current plan and transition practices. - CSD - LEA plan exists with little to no monitoring for building accountability.	*Intra sch system* ***Existence*** *Sustaining inhibitor* ***Communication*** *Intra sch system* ***Existence*** *Sustaining inhibitor*
To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the overall school level?	- GUSSD - Plan implemented at school level. AMS is doing more than it calls for, SMS is doing what plan calls for only with some monitoring struggles and follow through - PSD - Plan is implemented at school level. RMS is doing more than it calls for, UMS is doing what plan calls for only with some vision, goals, and monitoring struggles - CSD - With a seeming disconnect between LEA and schools, school plans do cover what LEA plans call for.	***Existence*** *Personnel roles* *Prg evolution* ***Communication*** *Intra school* ***Existence*** *Personnel roles* *Prg evolution* ***Communication*** *Intra school* ***Existence*** *Personnel roles* *Prg evolution* ***Communication*** *Intra school*
In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the classroom teacher(s) in the school?	- GUSSD - *AMS- high relationship* - *SMS- struggling to get staff on board and perform monitoring* - PSD - *RMS- high relationship* - *UMS- unclear relationship and unclear expectations for classroom teachers. Seems more of role in placed on one person to monitor 'at-risk' students.* - CSD	***Communication*** *Intra school* ***Existence*** *Evaluation* ***Communication*** *Intra school* ***Existence*** *Evaluation* ***Communication*** *Intra school*

	• *NMS- Principal unclear of what plan calls for. Equates to teacher's not knowing plan existed.* • *CMS- Teachers did not know plan existed.*	***Existence*** *Evaluation*

To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the individual school classroom level?	• GUSSD
	• *AMS- highly implemented*
	• *SMS- mildly implemented*
		Existence
		  Personnel role
		  Evaluation
		Communication
		  Intra school
		  Intra sch system

	• PSD
	• *RMS- highly implemented*
	• *UMS- weakly implemented*
		Existence
		  Personnel role
		  Evaluation
		Communication
		  Intra school
		  Intra sch system

	• CSD
	• *NMS- highly implemented but poorly realized*
	• *CMS- highly implemented but poorly realized*
		Existence
		  Personnel role
		  Evaluation
		Communication
		  Intra school
		  Intra sch system

Research Question 1

In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?

In GUSSD, the perceptions of the LEA developed program by the district office representative generally lined up with LEA goals established at a December 2009 Board of Education meeting. The goals of outstanding student achievement and success, commitment to excellence in communication and collaboration, and serving students, staff, families, and community with strong and active relationships seemingly line up with the created transition plan for all levels of concern within GUSSD; specifically middle school transitioning. In reviewing test data from previous years, the sixth grade at

both AMS and SMS led their school in reading achievement as measured by the NC EOG results. AMS showcased high student growth for sixth grade and SMS met expected academic growth as measured by the North Carolina testing program. Also, both middle schools met their AYP status for the year. The schools appeared to work in unison with community relations and support from outside groups. The one area that is lacking for GUSSD is its communication practices between the district office level and the school level administration. Communication also appeared on shaky ground at SMS between the principal and certain pockets of teachers and staff. However, AMS appeared to have solid practices within the building that helped them continue to create a culture of collaboration, growth, caring, and support. Jack referenced that the system that they have in place must be working because at the time of the interview, there had only been five reported out of school suspensions thus far in the year. This is remarkable in any school; much less a middle school in a high at-risk community with low performing feeder schools. Whereas discipline referrals do not paint the entire picture, it provides a good snapshot of what has been created in AMS since its construction in 2004.

In PSD, progress upon the LEA goals was split. Like AMS in GUSSD, RMS has created a culture within their building and community that is unlike its counterpart in PSD. The administration and sixth grade teachers at RSD appeared to have the students emotionally and academically engaged resulting in high performance results. RMS reported that they are meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of its students and has gone above and beyond the initial design of the PSD plan. They have implemented practices and procedures that support the LEA goal as stated. On the other hand, UMS presented its efforts in a random, top down initiative that does not include

many staff to monitor, support, plan, and evaluate the effectiveness within their school. The focus of the UMS staff seems to be on discipline and safety as attempts at academic gains are made.

The CSD plan is the most comprehensive of the three LEAs involved. It has the most descriptive research base of any plan and is aligned into the LEA yearly measurable goals. The plan is very thorough in its assignments of personnel but is seemingly a document that the district level personnel use with some assistance from principals and very little generated support from classroom teachers in the literal, targeted execution of the plans and practices. This LEA plan showed the most attempts at gaining all educational community stakeholders involvement but was unsuccessful at getting members outside of the school building involved; parents and students. The system reportedly spent a lot of time working on vertical alignment of curriculum, targeted professional development on routine sixth grade academic weaknesses, and collaboration throughout the summer in planning activities that were academically related to content and grade level. An effort is currently being made to examine all 'programs and plans' to streamline actions, personnel roles, monitoring, service, and implementation of initiatives in order to improve communication to all stakeholders and monitoring of goals through real actions. This effort is in its infancy at the time of this interview, but processes were shown to be in place for this to conceivably continue from the district level.

Research Question 2

In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district.

The LEA and principal participants in GUSSD are on different levels of understanding of what actually occurs before, during, and at the conclusion of the

transition program time. At his own admission, Wes admitted that his role has diminished to that of a gatekeeper of money, facilitator of resources, and support. Wes was able to give his impression of how the district plan works through his dual role of father of a middle school student and a Director within the LEA. He appears to have loftier hopeful outcomes of the summer program, MS 101, than are actually being produced with the school run programs. Jack at AMS confesses that his runs just fine without the district office getting involved more than simply providing him funding. Rita appears to have more of a working relationship with the LEA since she was transferred to the SMS principalship after working as a Director for many years within the LEA. She seems to possess a different tolerance for district level involvement and was instrumental is attaining the WEB program that schools use during the year while she served as a Director. Rita's perspective is different from Jack's but, Jack has also been leading his school longer and has established procedures and routines that are now a part of his school climate. Rita is still working on establishing these procedures and practices so therefore, her semi-tight following to the district plan is more of a safe practice for her professional role at this time.

In PSD, the LEA created a skeleton plan for schools to use this year as a basis for adding components that their individual sites could benefit. RMS staff chose to adopt standard processes and procedures that were proven to work in the past and that were known to their staff. UMS stayed close to the skeleton plan the LEA developed and at the time of the interview had not added other components. This plan for UMS was developed by a principal intern and was being monitored by him as well. The principal at UMS was disassociated with the plan after the summer LEA planning. Occasional

monitoring was identified but the essentials of the program/plan were left up to one staff member; the intern who was an 8th grade teacher. This lack of principal monitoring showed in his lack of knowledge to some of my questioning.

CSD district staff admitted to me that teachers probably would not know this plan existed, but principals should be aware of the components. Even though I was only able to interview one principal and two teachers from the school level staff, both schools represented (NMS, CMS) showcased a lack of knowledge about the plan itself but later revealed the practices that were entrenched in their standard practice, were items included in the LEA transition and were in fact completing the tasks asked of them. The teachers were glad to know this but still would have preferred to know expectations of them in this role as a transitioning agent.

Research Question 3

To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the overall school level?

In GUSSD, the plan has been implemented at the school level as stated. AMS has conducted more programs, activities, assemblies, and support for its sixth grade students that what the LEA plan asks them to do. SMS has followed the plan as stated with some weak areas identified in the monitoring of the WEB component and effective use of staff in the MS 101 summer program.

In PSD, the plan is implemented at the school level as stated. RMS added components that have routinely been successful for their students in the past when they were a K-6 and also an alternative middle school. UMS is doing what the LEA plan asked; however, the school's vision and goal for this program is not clearly known within administration or staff and the monitoring component is weak.

In CSD, the plan is implemented in the schools but without the prior knowledge of what the plan called for conducting. Principal was not sure of the components and teachers were not aware of what was asked of them. The researcher had to show them the plan and their roles. This caught the researcher off guard as it was assumed that if the time, effort, money, and commitment were placed into the creation, implementation, and sustenance of the plan, all stakeholders would be aware of the components and why they were included to be addressed.

Research Question 4

In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the classroom teacher(s) in the school?

In GUSSD, the perception from the principal of the middle school transition plan translated differently at the two schools. Jack at AMS has a good relationship with his staff, a good working knowledge of the transition practices, programs, and plan for his school and staff. He leads a cultural phenomenon at AMS that speaks well to the dedication of its staff and community. Rita has struggled lately to get her staff on board with implementing and sustaining the LEA plan in their MS 101 summer program as well as their WEB classroom program throughout the year. She has also experienced monitoring issues but has found the ability to make great strides in connecting with parents and students and off sets some of her staffing issues with her high level of communicating pertinent information to families on a consistent and varied basis.

In PSD, the perception from the principal of the middle school transition plan also translated differently at the two schools. Sabrina at RMS has a trusting understanding that her staff knows what the students need and she follows their lead in adding to the LEA skeleton plan. She removes barriers for the teachers to be able to implement these

practices into their classroom routines. Don, on the other hand, appears to have not led the efforts of translating the LEA plan into classroom teacher practices. The issues with monitoring and understanding of personnel roles and functions have seemingly been lost in this first year of implementation.

In CSD, Valerie at NMS was unclear of the components and particulars of the CSD transition plan. It is reasonable to conclude that if she is unclear; her staff will be unclear of what is required of them as well. This was, in fact, the case as her teacher representative, Susan, was unaware of any plan- school or otherwise. Tina was my only contact with CMS and had a similar response as Susan. These teachers were unaware of the practices asked of them but in reflection of the plan, realized that the components were being addressed indirectly by using middle school best practices. This concluding result may have more to say about the staff and students at these two schools; as they are very high performing schools as assessed on the NC testing program.

Research Question 5

To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the individual school classroom level?

In GUSSD, the LEA transitional plan was highly implemented by the staff and administration at AMS. The plan was mildly implemented by the staff and administration at SMS due to the role of several key personnel.

In PSD, the LEA transitional plan was highly implemented by the staff and administration at RMS as they voluntarily took on actions they considered to be best practice amongst middle schools. The plan was weakly implemented at UMS by the staff and administration due to apparent perceived more important reactive issues to address.

In CSD, the LEA transitional plan was highly implemented in NMS and CMS but poorly realized by the leader and sixth grade teachers by their own admission. This was even referenced by Jane when she commented "… [she] would be surprised if teachers, parents, and students knew this plan existed."

CHAPTER 5

Discussion of Findings

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the experiences of educational stakeholders and components of LEA written, formalized middle school transition plans. A multi-case study design was used in an attempt to describe an understanding of administrator and staff experiences when working with middle school students during their transitional time period. When viewed through a systems theory perspective, understanding and addressing the needs of LEAs, schools, educators, and ultimately sixth grade students benefits educational faculty, parents, and students. Three themes emerged from the educator participant narratives regarding their experiences in planning, implementing, and sustaining their LEA and/or middle school transition plan. The three themes were *Existence, Elements, and Communication*. This chapter will provide an overview of this study, a discussion of the findings, and a revised conceptual framework. Following, the implications for LEAs, schools, and ultimately students will be discussed and recommendations for further research will be presented.

Overview of Study

The overarching construct informing this study is the multi case study experiences of each LEA and middle school staff who have dedicated time, energy, money, and knowledge into creating, implementing, and sustaining formalized, system directed,

middle school transition plans. These LEAs and middle schools have constructed unique

experiences for students and educators as reflected in the research literature. In

particular, this study was guided by the initial screening question:

Do school systems in North Carolina currently have a targeted, formalized, written

transitional plan for students traveling from elementary to middle school that is based

in middle grades educational research?

The research questions were:

1- In what ways do the perceptions of the program from the Superintendent (or

designee) equate or correspond with school system's yearly measurable goals?

2- In what ways do the perceptions from the district office [personnel] compare or

contrast with that of the middle school principal(s) in that district?

3- To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the

overall school level?

4- In what ways do the perceptions from the principal translate to that of the

classroom teacher(s) in the school?

5- To what degree has the LEA transitional plan implementation occurred at the

individual school classroom level?

Discussion of Study Findings

Successful or unsuccessful adjustment over the transition from elementary to

middle school can be a result of the interconnectedness in several arenas: Community,

family, educational, and social values; environments of sending and receiving schools;

the social, cognitive, emotional, and physical needs and resources of students; and the

economic conditions of their lives (San Antonio, 2004). These processes and plans that

are produced each year by school agencies can be a collective or isolated creation that may or may not have research upon which to base its claims. Also the manner in which plans and programs are produced signals the level of involvement in all stakeholders within each educational community. Examining these processes and products, I approached this study through systems theory perspective.

This research is original and unique because it focuses on the successes, failures, and challenges public school educators directly involved in planning and implementing effective transitions into middle school in North Carolina experience with each other, students, and the research using a qualitative approach and a systems theory perspective. This research study sought to understand why there is a shortage of formal, purposeful implementation of said research and best practices within North Carolina middle schools and LEAs. The conceptual framework of this study uses systems theory as a lens to focus and clarify the impact of educational stakeholders interactions and experiences with each other, the school, and LEA. To understand what middle schools are doing to make this transition experience more or less successful, I have provided table 6 which identifies and summarizes the new knowledge derived from this research project.

Table 6
Summary of Findings

Concepts and Themes	Findings
I. Conceptual Framework: Systems Theory	Systems theory is used to describe an organization being an integrated system of interdependent structures and functions. Findings show the importance of communicating within the school and LEA unit in order to convey desired and intended results.
II. Emergent Themes	This research study identified three themes which emerged from the educator participant narratives regarding their experiences in planning, implementing, and sustaining their LEA and/or middle school transition

	plan. The three themes were *Existence, Elements, and Communication*.
A. *Existence*	Faculty knowledge of their middle school and/or LEA transition plan to sixth grade is insufficient. There is a lack of understanding of research based transition practices, personnel roles, ideas to offset inhibitors to the planning, implementation, sustaining, and evaluation of the plan.
B. *Elements*	Faculty summarization of their middle school and/or LEA transition plan to sixth grade is diverse in interpretation of how safety, informational, academic, and social needs are being honored.
C. *Communication*	Faculty seeks a delineation of personnel / educational area roles in engaging stakeholders in the planning, implementing, and sustaining of each middle school transition plan.

With the wealth of research regarding transitions at any time in our life, the challenge is for educators to use the research on plans, programs, and initiatives that can directly and indirectly impact the perceived and real image of the LEA and middle school. Since the implementation of high-stakes testing and a continuously rising dropout rate, educators continue to face a dilemma: focus efforts on passing the state and national tests or on providing a meaningful student learning experience? When middle schools [LEAs] focus on non-academic features (i.e., class change, lunches, summer programs, assemblies, elective classes, discipline plans, etc.) as much as accountability areas, students and school community members sense a greater vision for the development of the whole student. This vision can be articulated with a proactive plan that is built on research based principles dealing with educating (and transitioning) the holistic child in mind.

This research study used systems theory in an attempt to examine the actual and perceived communication styles that each LEA and middle school use in the

development, implementation, sustaining, and evaluation of the transition plan to sixth grade. The research results adds new knowledge to the current literature by identifying three themes that impact and influence the educator and student experience in regards to the transition process. The three themes elicited from this study are interwoven with the literature relating to [middle school] transition planning. The themes of *existence, elements,* and *communication* are discussed in tandem with an emphasis on how they relate to and influence the transition plan [outcomes]. In particular, these results highlight how this research project ascertained specific findings concerning transition plan research knowledge, use, and implementation as well as how the skillful or breakdown of communication within a system can create a dichotomy of results.

In reviewing the research literature on effective middle school transitioning, many of the studies considered to be major tenets of the middle school movement (i.e., *Turning Points*, and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle)* were verified with thematic representation of these findings. Reflecting on the recommended practices from *Turning Points* (1989), the middle schools involved with this study, to some degree, are successful in meeting these practices. However, two of these middle schools stand out above the rest in this regard; RMS in PSD and AMS in GUSSD. They revealed a solid practice of governing democratically through representative participation. Through the scope of my interview with Sabrina and Julie and reviewing their style of governing, I found there to be a great deal of this style of teacher and principal leadership alive within the grade level and building. Also, Rita from SMS in GUSSD explained her grassroots effort to hear more of the collective minority community surrounding SMS through the creation of the 'Socrates group.' This manifested itself out of a need to have the community voice

concerns regarding their children's education, polices and practice in place, and pursuing more for their children. She also opens the school to community mentors for her minority males and females each weekend to have a safe, sheltered, dependable place to gather and form relationships. This above and beyond chance to involve parents and the greater community stands out in this study.

Examining the targets mentioned by NASSP in *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006), the authors of their publication cite the most important goal to accomplish if the rest are to be successfully utilized is "Aligning the school-wide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the personal learning plans of staff members with the requisite knowledge of content, instructional strategies, and students developmental factors" (p.8). Accordingly, for middle schools to effectively transition any new student, sixth grade or otherwise, it is imperative to all educators within that building to be well versed in the latest information pertaining to their role (NASSP, 2006). Through the scope of this study, none of the LEAs or middle schools examined successfully completed all of these tasks relayed by NASSP. There were some middle schools that stood out more so than others in their ability to achieve more overall criteria success through the scope of this study; RMS in PSD and AMS in GUSSD. In both of these middle schools, the teachers were the ones who knew the research behind the practices, the administrators developed and oversaw effective communication within the building, and were able to create multiple and varied opportunities for connecting, learning at high academic levels, and creating a sense of active calmness and security within their campus.

Perceived by many to be a major identifier of a middle school, the academic teaming of teachers for a resulting small learning community, purportedly allows for relationships to be formed. Research has indicated that for young people, relationships with adults form the critical pathways for their learning and that teaming increases student involvement and decreases dissociation with the school through smaller, more focused groupings. Educators want students to be known by at least one adult in the school and ideally by many. This was best represented by a comment Wes made about Jack [in GUSSD]. Wes commented that Jack will tell the teachers to pick out one or two students in the hallway who seem not to fit in the first couple weeks of school and intentionally go after that student; and when they do, constantly ask them how's your day, are you in a club yet, what kind of hobbies do you have? Jack expresses that you have to constantly get to learn more about that child. Pretty soon that student figures out that he or she is connected and that somebody in this building recognizes me. AMS presents a culture that resonates 'instead of saying that kid is a drifter, we find the drifters, and we go after them'.

This is important in the scheme of good communication with multiple stakeholders. Jack recognized a silent and overt practice of allowing the silent and 'blend-in-to-the-background' student the chance to disengage and possibly become disenfranchised as a member of the school body. Jack has created [by example] a caring school climate that requires adults who are compassionate and who define and defend truths, trust, and compassion. This commitment to connect then becomes a personal thing for students, teachers, parents, and administrators just as Campbell and Jacobson (2008) reference in their research findings.

According to the NMSA publication *This We Believe…And Now We Must Act* (2001), in order for a middle school to reach effectiveness for young adolescents as aforementioned, all the stakeholders-students, teachers, administrators, board of education members, central office personnel, and community members- must collaboratively develop a common vision that can guide the ongoing development of middle schools. This shared vision becomes the foundation on which a successful middle school is built. San Antonio (2004) cites that policy development in schools must be better informed by actual data, and less influenced by the political pressures exerted by a small, vocal group of people who wield more than their fair share of power. Without all stakeholders involved along the process, essentially important components will be excluded. Senge (2000) connects learning to connections in his text *Schools that Learn.* He writes

> …furthermore, all learners construct knowledge from an inner scaffolding of their individual and social experiences, emotions, will, aptitudes, beliefs, values, self-awareness, purpose, and more…Increasing students', teachers', and other people's awareness of these connections strengthens the process of learning. Disconnecting them weakens the scaffolding and, consequently, the knowledge.

Without a common shared vision that is understood and supported by all stakeholders, middle level reform efforts will be seriously flawed; including middle school transition planning. RMS and AMS were fantastic examples of staff and students connections that made their transition planning and programs stand out within the study. From my perspective, these staffs are executing best practice research for middle schools and for transitioning into the sixth grade.

Examining the data from this study, through the systems theory lens, communication is the area of most concern within the LEAs examined. The systems

theory models of communication (system-wide thinking, process-systems thinking, and open-systems thinking) are not uniform within a LEA or middle school involved in this research. Dialogue is absent between the LEA and classroom teacher; partially due to principal disengagement with the district office. Many versions of systems theory are evidently present at various stages in the development, implementation, sustaining, and evaluation of any new program, plan, or action within schools. However, the perception and unbeknownst understanding of communication within a direct group is also disjointed. This could be due to personnel role misunderstandings, appropriate staff involvement, time restraints on multiple levels within the group system, as well as other unknowns. Sadly, educators tend to make their jobs not only more difficult but probably less effective as well (Senge, 2000). Parker Palmer (1993) is quoted as saying "Good [educators] bring students into living communion with the subjects they teach. They also bring students into community with themselves and with each other." Good communication intra-staff [LEA and school] and inter-staff [LEA] is paramount and is not consistently expressed within the LEAs and middle schools involved within this study.

As our educational society continues to shift to understanding information, emphasizing process over product, and valuing relationships over differences, educators have had to take on new roles. With these new roles, another layer of responsibility is added to an already overflowing plate for many educators at all levels that ultimately simply takes time. This was eloquently verbalized by Jane in CSD. Her analyses of all the compounding factors that are placed on the LEA from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction tend to override this transition initiative sought within the study.

She expressed that no one would argue that transition planning is not important, but the challenge to a LEA is to make it fit in with everything else LEAs are required to do. Her point was practical in that LEAs and schools must get to the point where they are institutionalizing these best practices and allowing a single act to accomplish multiple desired outcomes. This requires planning and communication; both of which require time.

However, with a breakdown in communication within the school and LEA as well as an unwillingness or inability to engage all stakeholders, this is ultimately handicapping the ability for the active stakeholders within a school and LEA to accomplish its vision. In these cases, the communication montage presented negatively affects the ultimate goal of each school and LEA- to make its students the most successful students possible by focusing on more than academic outcomes in a reactive manner rather than a proactive style.

Summary of Research Findings

This study attempted to explore the following rhetorical philosophic question, "*Are we doing the best for our students based upon what we know today about learning, teaching, and the needs of society?*" This question became the basis for examining and analyzing the middle school transition plans within school districts within North Carolina. The question also allowed for exploration to what degree transitional plans addressed the safety of its students, information communicated to educational stakeholders, and the level of connection students made with the new school.

This study found that simply having a written, formalized, 'research-based' transition plan was not enough. The three LEAs reviewed for this study showcased

different developmental levels of a middle school transition plan that was currently being executed in a variety of ways at the school and classroom level. The schools that seemingly found overall student success were those schools and classrooms that stressed fostering and working on establishing a meaningful relationship for students within the building. Those relationships could have been with other students and/or staff. Important to note, that the perceived most successful school (AMS) cultivated academic, social, emotional, and motivational relationships for students with **all** staff; not just teachers and administrators- custodians, teacher assistants, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, etc. All staff was showcased to all students in various capacities that enabled the collective staff to establish a culture where students perceived genuine care and love by adults. In fact, Jack, the principal is often known to end the day not just with announcements but with a final closing of "I love you [AMS] students. Remember that!"

Also another important fact about the two schools that found the most success (AMS, RMS) was their dedication to research best practice for middle grades instruction. The teachers were the conveyers of their source of information for current trends and strategies in educational research. The teachers were the ones to carry out any plan that a school or LEA may have and what a pleasure it is to find faculty that take professional development seriously and to heart.

Barriers experienced by the other schools were varied and different; ranging from unknown information and roles to communication breakdowns within the school and LEA. The most common inhibitor mentioned is time. With so many federal, state, and local mandates being delivered and expected to be implemented, many LEAs may feel the pressure and need to shift priorities around in order to accommodate the more

154

immediate issues. This could possibly lead to LEAs and schools reacting to issues in place of seeking opportunities to proactively address concrete data results at levels pre and post middle school; i.e. attendance/drop out rates, discipline issues, course failures, testing data, and staff development/communication.

Lack of LEA and staff communication also is revealed as an inhibitor of transitional success when referencing a holistic view of a transitioning student. There was the instance in CSD where academic achievement remained high even without knowledge of transitional expectations of staff and input from community members. However, data examples previously mentioned were not readily available to this researcher to gauge other information about students aside from academic proficiency.

The themes that emerged from the interview data describe the many facets of the middle school transition experience for LEA and school level staff. The answers to the research questions have illuminated the themes in the context of existing supports and barriers, elements to address regarding student needs, and communication systems utilized in the creation, implementation, sustaining, and evaluation of each program.

Limitations

There are potential limitations in every study (Creswell, 1998). The recognition of limitations assists the qualitative researcher in framing the context of the study, assessing the study methodology, and determining the usefulness of the findings (Creswell, 1998). One limitation of this study was the comparison of transitional plans at different stages of implementation within LEAs and middle schools. Although this allowed for developmental and communicative evolution to be examined, the comparison

155

of plans available to LEAs and/or schools with similar initial beginnings may provide different results.

Another limitation of the study was due to interviewee requests to combine the interviews of a principal and teacher at the same time. This occurred at AMS in GUSSD as well as NMS in PSD. In this revised setting, the researcher cannot be certain that the information gained from each individual was not influenced by the presence and the subsequent commentaries. This loss of participant independence could have adversely affected the outcome, but it could have also enhanced the outcome of each interview session. The researcher was not aware of this scheduling situation ahead of time or able to control this series of events.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

Findings from this study have implications for systems theory. Systems theory includes the operating principle that each system component is interactive with other elements of the system. In the context of educational stakeholders (district officer personnel, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students), each element is in a constant state of interactive exchange. Findings from this research on system-wide thinking, open-systems thinking, and process-systems thinking show the important role that various educational stakeholders can play to enhance the experience of the middle school transition process for others and themselves.

System-wide thinking is the process of enacting change through an organization in which the entity is working to improve. Evaluation of the system-wide thinking process can occur by descriptions given by staff, and taking into account how well the

staff members work together. Figure 4 presents a visual representation of the design and structure of elements used to symbolize one common version that educational stakeholders engage upon when reviewing or acting on needed improvement. The terms have been adjusted to reflect an educational system; however, the relationships among and between the people represented by the circles is the same.

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        ┌──────────────────────────────────────────┐
        │  Superintendent/District Office Personnel │
        └──────────────────────────────────────────┘

                        ┌───────────┐
                        │ Principal │
                        └───────────┘

        ┌─────────┐                        ┌─────────┐
        │ Teacher │◄──────────────────────►│ Teacher │
        └─────────┘                        └─────────┘

   ┌─────────┐   ┌────────┐      ┌────────┐   ┌─────────┐
   │ Student │◄─►│ Parent │◄────►│ Parent │◄─►│ Student │
   └─────────┘   └────────┘      └────────┘   └─────────┘
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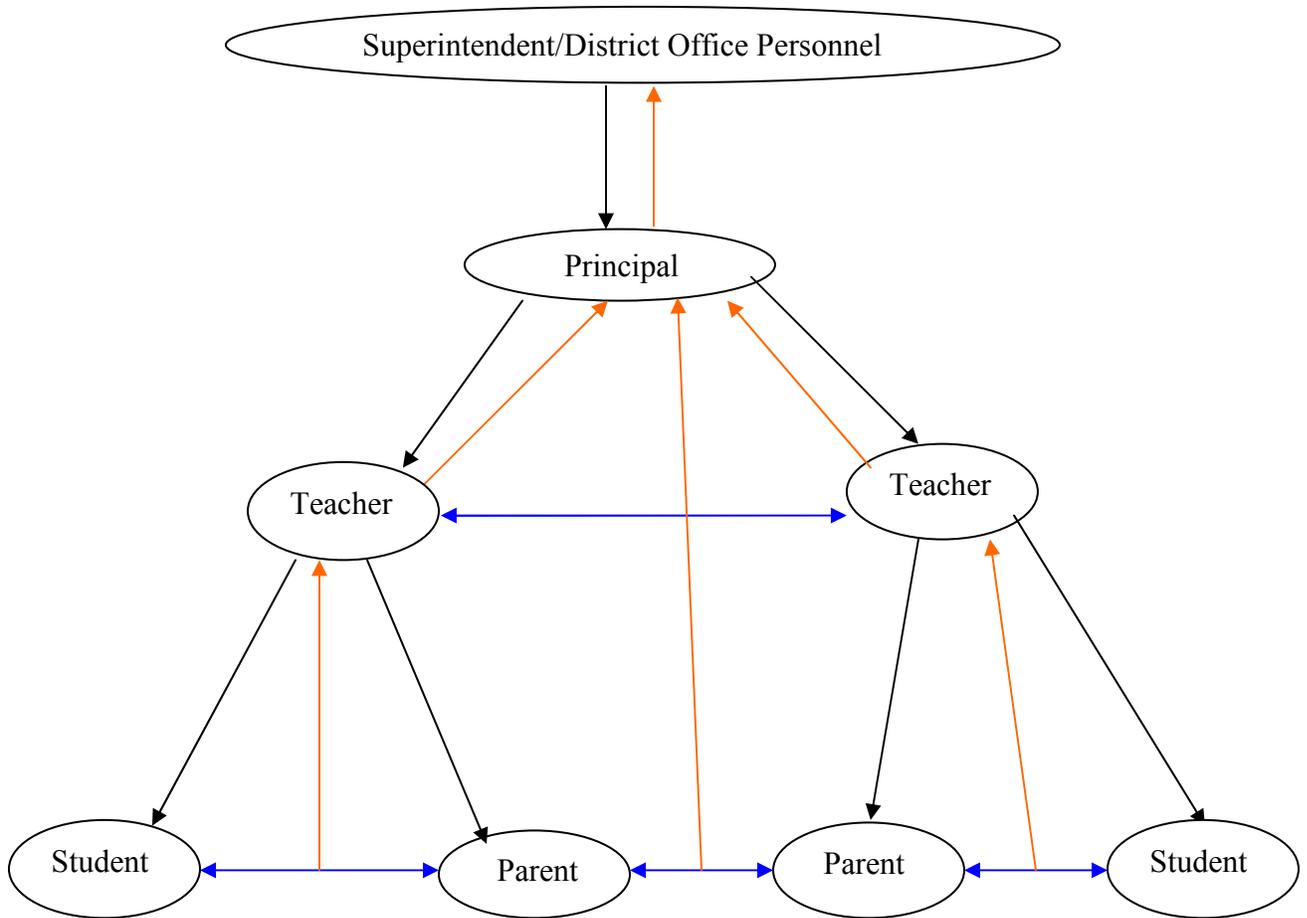
Figure 4
System-wide thinking illustration

Black lines indicate a "top-down" issuance of a task or plan for others to implement at various levels within the organization.
Blue lines indicate conversation, discussions, collaboration within like roles to work on task or plan as presented.
Orange lines indicate feedback to various levels- some being able to speak to their direct superior and others able to go more towards the source.

Based upon the results of this study, this depiction of system-wide thinking must be altered to reflect stronger and less powerful relationships that were evident from the interviews. Each participant middle school had its own variation depending on the stage of development and implementation of their transitional plan. However, a few common strands were evident; overall weak parent involvement, minimal student involvement, stronger than average communication between principal and teacher, and average to below average communication between principal and the district level. This representation is depicted in figure 5.
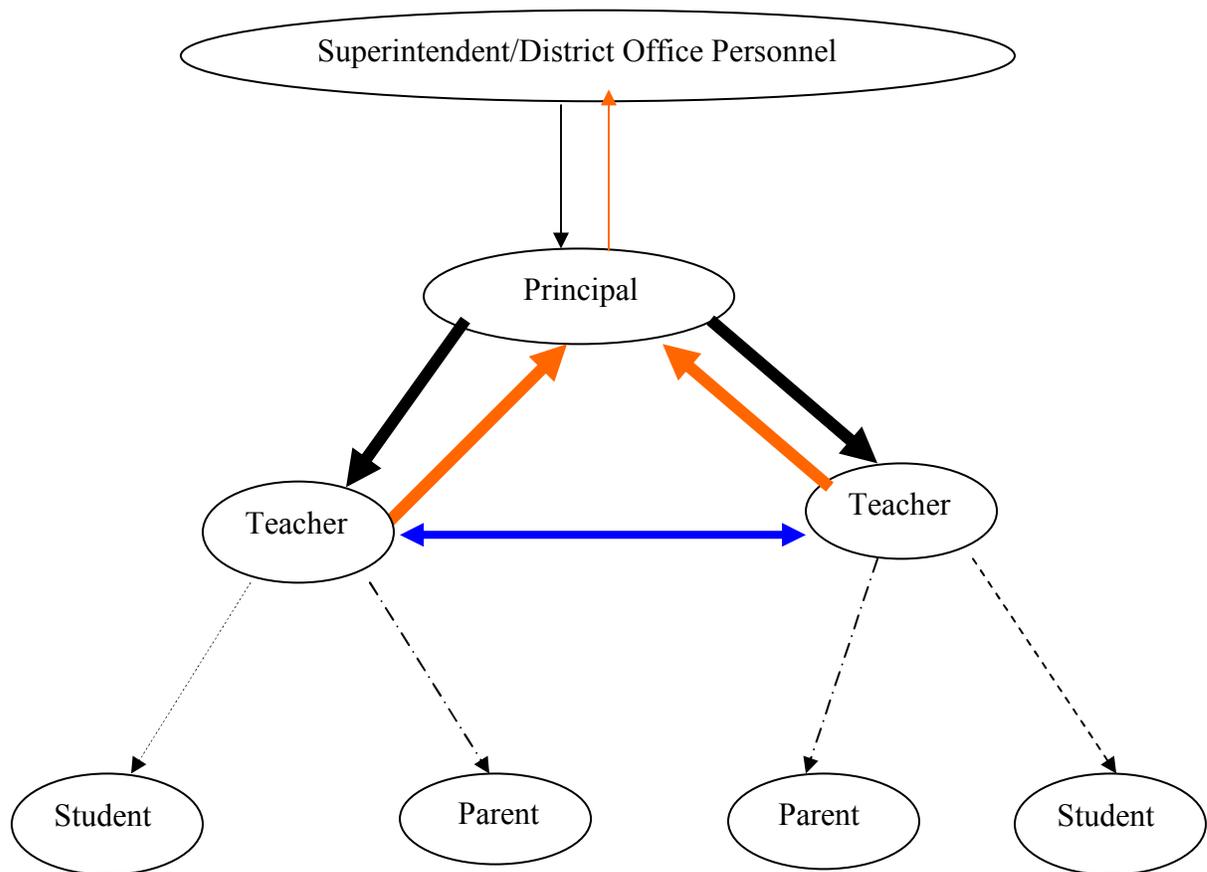
Figure 5
Revised **system-wide thinking illustration**
Bold and thick- this represents stronger than average communication.
Single line- this represents average to below average communication.
Thicker dashed line- this represents overall weak involvement in communication and input
Small dashed line- this represents minimal involvement in communication and input.

Open-systems thinking is the process of seeking to understand a system through

its inputs, outputs, and boundaries (Senge, 2000). It was the goal of the researcher to

fully identify the level of input various stakeholders are given in the development,

implementation, and monitoring of a specific plan. Figure 6 presents a visual

representation of the design and structure of elements used to symbolize one common

version that educational stakeholders engage upon when reviewing or acting on needed

improvement. Respondents that chose this graphic did so with the understanding that this

represented communication prior to this study.
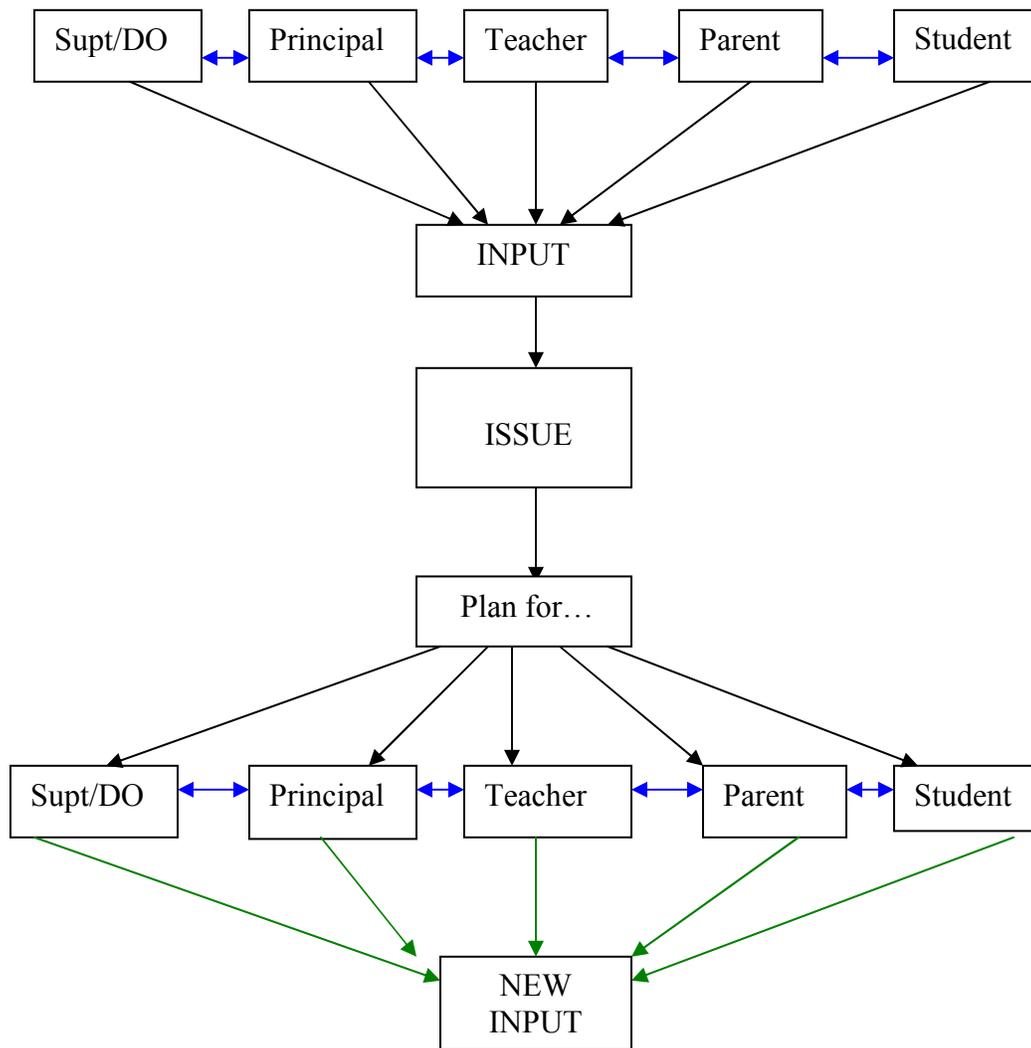
Figure 6
Open-systems thinking illustration

Black lines indicate each representative's potential ability to give input regarding issue.
Blue lines indicate each representative's potential ability to communicate within structural unit(s) regarding said topic.
Green lines indicate each representative's potential to have new input based on an older generated output.

Within the scope of this study's findings, several respondents requested to remove the Supt/DO element from the chart and the rest would be accurate. Based upon the results of this study, this depiction of open systems thinking had to be altered to reflect the successful relationships that were evident from the interviews. The two middle schools that were viewed as successful in their transition plan and process displayed a common open-systems thinking model. This is represented in figure 7.

This revised representation may be considered a mutation of system-wide thinking and open-systems thinking as it incorporates elements of both to reach of perceived level of accomplishment from within the institution and this research. Some lines of communication are stronger than others while others are void of input. This new level of input into creation, revision, and feedback conveys a controlled level of input that distorts true open-systems thinking because the system is not open to all stakeholders in equal capacities.
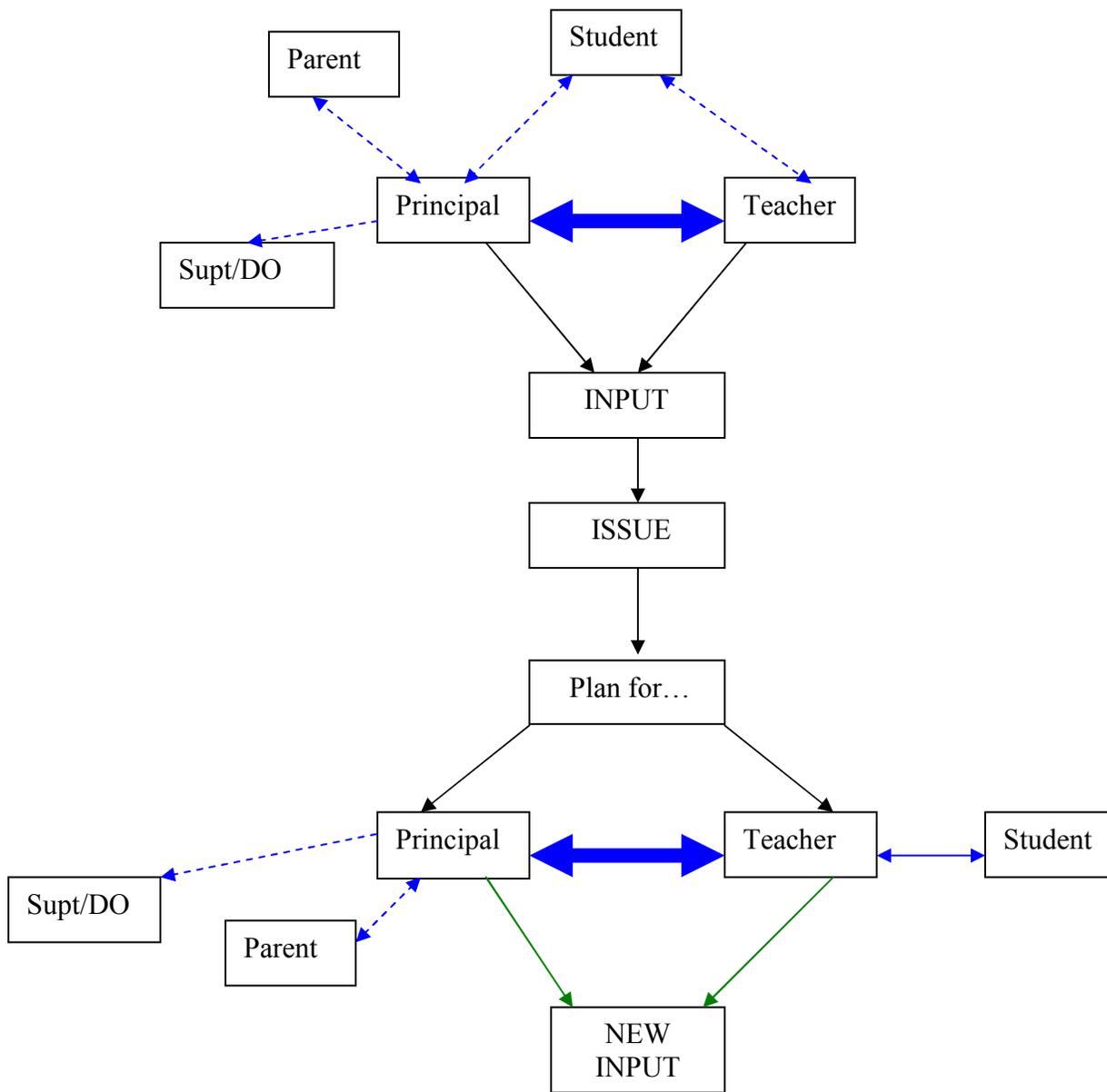
Figure 7
Revised **Open-systems thinking illustration**

Black lines indicate each representative's ability to give input regarding issue.
Blue lines indicate each representative's ability to communicate within
structural unit(s) regarding said topic. The dashed blue lines represent weak and minimal
communication between parties. The solid blue lines represent strong communication
and feedback. The solid bold blue lines represent stronger communication paths that
portray connections and reciprocal appreciation for input.
Green lines indicate each representative's potential to have new input based on an older
generated output.

Process-systems thinking is a process that realigns the communication structures that will effect change in patterns of behavior within the organization. This process is the basis for true long-term change (Senge, 2000). Figure 8 illustrates how the process-systems illustration showcases the communication structure that is purposeful, involving, and collaborative.
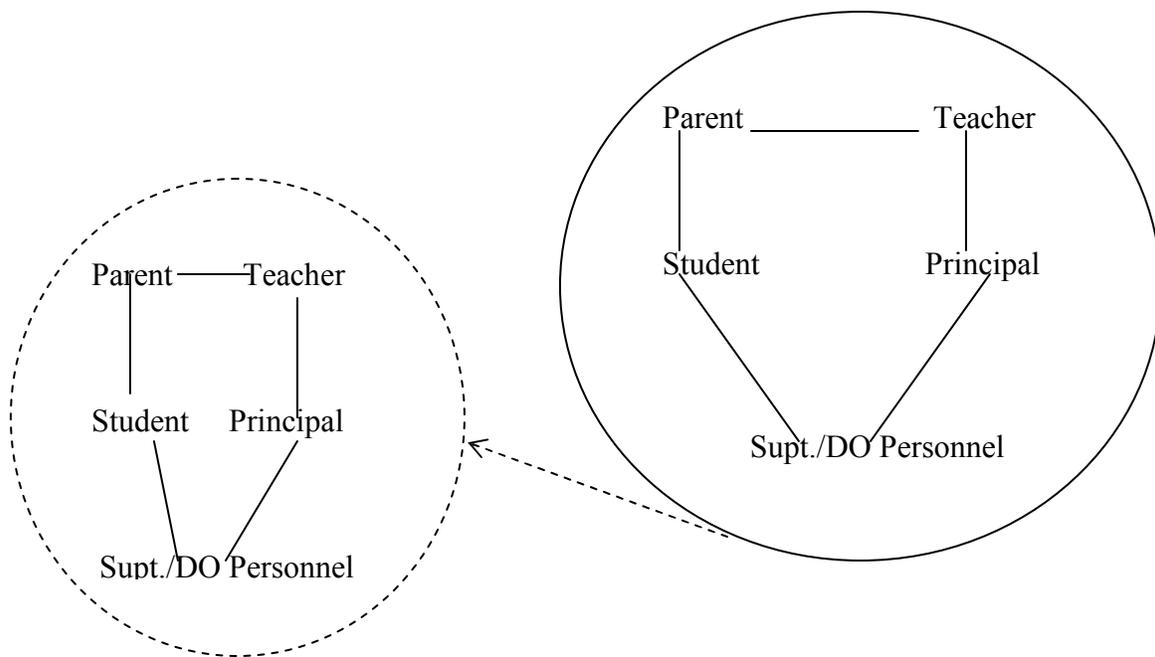
Figure 8
Process-systems thinking illustration

Dashed circle illustrates a NEW process/procedure that arises from the complete circle illustrating continuous working together and work through task at hand.

This higher tier evolution of communicating is an implication of transitional and communicative success within this research study. With process-systems thinking being representative of where organizations need to strive in their style of communication, middle schools that enacted this understanding, they experienced success with their plans and programmatic components. Engaging theoretical knowledge and connecting it with a

practical reality revealed in the analysis a strong connection between successful systems theory implementation and transitional components. The following are summarizations of a particular LEA and/or school that have theoretically attained this long range benchmark achievement:

- Jack and Hope from AMS in GUSSD selected process-systems thinking to best illustrate the level of dialogue and responsibility as it relates to the planning of each year's middle school transition plan.

- Sabrina and Julie from RMS in PSD selected process-systems thinking to best illustrate the level of dialogue and communication as it relates to addressing academic needs and concerns of their sixth grade students throughout the school year.

- Jack also selected this graphic in relation to addressing academic concerns with his staff.

- Hope chose to not select any of the three graphics all the while stating that the level of dialogue shifted between all the systems theory graphs presented during the interview. She felt that at different stages within the profession, the school, the grade level, and/or department different representatives may flow in and out depending on the topic and group assembled.

- Jane and Valerie from CSD selected this graphic as representative of their system when examining social change within the group [LEA, school, or team] that needs to be addressed.

The illustration in figure 8 did not change as a result of the data. Whereas some personnel felt they communicated through process-system thinking as noted above, the

end results revealed that they had not reached this level of systemic input and/or continuous improvement either as a LEA or middle school. No one school or LEA, in this research study, fully incorporated all stakeholders equally in the creation, implementation, or sustaining of their middle school transition plans and/or programs. However, those instances noted above reveal that those middle schools are entering the cultural shift of organizational behaviors needed to show true long term sustainability and continuity independent on the personnel involved within the organization.

Implementation of systems theory, as represented by middle school transition planning, can allow for other close relationships to form within related educational realms. Effective use of such systems theory yields effective processes in multiple areas within a school and/or LEA. When effective communication occurs, systemic shifts are ultimately fueled and driven by the process and dialogue. The findings of this study imply that the role of faculty can be expanded at various levels of understanding of topic, prior knowledge of stakeholders represent, and even the amount of and which stakeholders are included in addressing the actions of a transitional plan, pedagogy and content addressed, and opportunities for interaction with the classroom, school, and LEA community. These findings show that the frequency of the dialogue, the content of the dialogue, and the relationship between the stakeholders allows for a successful formation of a desired outcome. Without these components working in tandem and/or unison, the greater system will not be as efficient, effective, or productive and miscommunication then becomes the presented product.

Another finding that was revealed in this study regards the nature of control. Many of the interview participants voiced their responses with an "I" response to the

questions. While examining the systems theory models, responses naturally can be singular in nature but should evolve to plural in affect through the continuing evolution from system-wide to open-systems to process-systems thinking. The measure of true change in any organization is the amount collective growth and ownership in regards to the stated problem or situation. The seemingly successful middle schools regarded their transition planning and programs through a "we" lens and considered their approach related to more of a cultural phenomenon rather than the work (or lack thereof) by one or two individuals. There was also evidence that the LEA plans showed disconnect between the efforts of the LEA personnel and the school personnel. None of the three LEAs examined were viewed by their parties as being fully representative of all stakeholders within that educational community. Just as in any effort, educational or otherwise, until all individuals or groups involved in an outcome can operate on the same informational level, the potential will be more than the reality. Stakeholders must move past speaking in "I" and incorporate "we" in these important issues that affect our students.

In the LEA system, the role of the subsystem of educators and parents is altered depending on which level of implementation a school or LEA is operating [in regards to their degree of implementation of their transition plan]. From the voices of faculty members in this study, it is evident that the role educator's play in systems theory is twofold: to discuss the issue within the pertinent school staff and to appropriately and judiciously involve parents and students in the planning, reviewing and reflecting process in order to have an overall successful transition experience to middle school.

Implications for Practice

Middle Schools

The results of this study can help middle schools reflect on how communication takes place within the building and between stakeholders as well as recognize the wealth of research that is presently available to utilize in regards to middle school best practices for teachers, parents, and administrators. Even when middle schools had an active transition plan in place, communication between the administration and teachers was uneven. There is also a great deal of communication, input, and feedback from parents and students that is missing in present level communications between school and home. The impact that these two stakeholder groups have can mean the difference in an average to below average transition plan and program to one that embraces children and allows them to flourish during the transition period to middle school. When this level of connectedness between staff and parents occurs, theory equates into positive outcomes for all; when it is not implemented accordingly, students suffer.

A related implication for middle schools is the relationship of efficacy between the knowledge of and application of systems theory as it related to the implementation of middle school transition planning and programs. The relationship can exist in any programmatic implementation within the organization if communication is ideally handled using systems theory knowledge. There is evidence of a strong connection between understanding systems theory and appropriately acting upon it that enables one to help the organization and/or individuals do a more effective job. This ultimately results in better service, assistance, and education for our students.

LEAs

The results of this study showcased two major areas for LEAs to consider; [lack of] having a transition plan and application of theory into practice. This research can assist LEA administration in the creation, implementation, and monitoring of a district wide transition plan and program. Communication between what is desired to be achieved with such a plan versus what actually is accomplished is highly regarded to accurately connect research theory into best practice. More direct connection with the schools via progress monitoring, evaluation, surveys, etc needs to be implemented to ensure long term success and buy-in from the staff executing the transition plan each year. There is also a need to showcase and regularly review the transition plans within the district each year.

Another LEA implication for transition planning is that all stakeholders need to be educated on why a transition plan is important. Inadvertently, middle schools more than likely have elements of transition practices being conducted each year and those schools and LEAs may find academic success in various forms. However, if a LEA were able to bring in elements from all areas together from multiple schools, the framework for expanding success to all schools begins to transform building and system level results for students, staff, and community stakeholders.

Some LEAs and middle schools may feel that a level of success is already present in their institution and may not feel the need to focus on transition planning [for schools]. However, in North Carolina, the public and educational arenas draw conclusions about school and LEA success more so by one aspect; student achievement outcomes (i.e., NC EOG/EOC scores) which lead to school and LEA labels such as School of Distinction,

167

High Growth, etc. A concern is, for the schools and LEAs with such labels of success, that apathy may settle into that stakeholder population and a sense of system well being may be misinterpreted because that one measure of success does not address the transitional concerns showcased in this research: safety, information, and connections. The transition plans and programs provide a safety net for students to be able to perform better in that one media driven measure of success. The need exists to still pay attention to the components of transition planning and the extent to which those components are considered and implemented.

University Preparatory Programs

College and University preparatory programs can use this research to spotlight the lack of implemented transitional practices to middle school. Whether through school administration or middle grades education, undergraduate and graduate students need to have the knowledge of research based practices that was lacking and needs to be understood regarding its importance to the educational profession as well as to yielding quality results. Being able to communicate the reason behind the actions that we take in developing programs, lessons, presentations, etc must be understood and appropriately applied to ensure quality results.

The implicit results of this study showcase that those individuals that had middle grades education training during the university career were the ones that could relay the research base from which they worked. Those individuals that did not have a background in middle grades training revealed a weaker awareness of best practice research for middle level education and how that equated into best transitional practice for their students. Institutions of higher learning may need to examine what their graduates are

receiving by way of grade span knowledge, implications for administrator preparation in areas they do not have a background in, and how different configurations of grades/schools/students can impact how school based programs are developed and understood. University programs may need to examine this in their master, specialist, and doctoral degree programs.

Suggestions for Further Research

One suggestion for further research is to review the Title 1 plans for LEAs that were not included in this study. Those LEA contacts that responded to the initial scan with a 'no' but we have it in our Title 1 school plans could be contacted to be able to review such plans for their various components and reference to research based strategies for transitioning. The researcher could also examine the systems theory structure that is used in the creation of the Title 1 plan.

Since this study was qualitative, another recommendation for further research is to create opportunities that focus on the success of students deemed 'at risk' by the state standards and investigate their transition to middle school. Evidence could be gathered through examining attendance habits, discipline trends, course performance, testing results, and leadership potential within the team or grade level.

Future research using a case study on AMS, its staff, students, and community would be interesting to see how they get multiple elements to intertwine and create a culture unlike many schools I have experienced. The focus could be on the students or parents within the school community since those stakeholders were not examined in the scope of this study.

Also another possible future research option could be to seek out the LEAs that responded no but had schools to formulate their own within the feeder patterns. Using the same criteria and systems theory lens, one could examine how the transition plans, programs, and practices compare to those that are directed by the LEA level with school system-wide focus.

In reference to systems theory, further research could be utilized to help define the role of the LEA administrator, school leader, sixth grade teacher, support personnel, students, and parents in supporting and increasing the focus on the academic, social, and physical concerns of incoming sixth grade students into middle school.

An unanticipated result of this study and the research put into it was the disparity middle school transitions face when compared to the intensity that PK-K receives as well as middle school to high school. The research is plentiful in both of these arenas and has literally hampered, delayed, or squelched attention given to the obvious importance of the transition to middle school and sixth grade. Further research could explore the disparity in available programs, financial and physical resources provided to each, and various stakeholder emphases directed to each of the transitional options.

An examination could also take place into higher education programs that prepare administrators and middle grades educators. Are the colleges and universities doing enough to properly encourage such thoughts and actions amongst their graduates? Are they planning differentiated plans and programs or simply assisting them in creating programmatic events that could be called transition activities that may or may not truly assist the students in need? Using the same systems theory lens, one could examine programmatic components explored such as teaming, advisor-advisee, exploratory

programs, etc. and critically tabulate the amount of emphasis on transitional planning and practices.

Conclusion

LEA and middle school staffs in North Carolina are encountering increased numbers of tasks, decrees, and mandates that continuously occupy the time stakeholders could potentially have with one another in robust dialogue regarding our educational community needs. Given this phenomenon, an overall healthy research market exists for educators to reference and commit to practice in their daily, monthly, quarterly, or year long plans. In short, research on the stakeholder experience regarding transition planning is abundant; however, there is an apparent lack of formal implementation of said research into written policies, measurable practices, and informal data collection within North Carolina. Therefore this research study investigated, in specific detail, the stakeholder experiences when encountering the planning, implementing, sustaining, and evaluating of middle school transition plans. I also sought to understand how the dynamics of a group of stakeholders were being successful in their perception as well as in their reality. In particular, this research study pursued educator stakeholder answers to questions about their 'lived' experiences regarding middle school transitions.

Findings were grouped in the following three thematic categories: *Existence, Elements,* and *Communication.* Critical findings are presented below:

- *Existence*- barriers and supports experienced as related to LEA and middle school level transition plans and programs. These included a closer look at personnel roles, length of program, the use of research referenced materials,

evolution of plan components, inhibitors faced in executing the plan each year, and how LEAs and middle school officials evaluate each year's transition plan.

- *Elements*- the components that each LEA and middle school addressed regarding student needs such as safety, need for information, and the opportunity to connect with peers and adults within the school.

- *Communication*- the process of how the LEA and middle school engage educational stakeholders in dialogue regarding middle school transitions. Using systems theory as our guide, a closer examination was conducted on how the planning, implementing, sustaining, and evaluation of the transition plan took place.

The results of this study showcase a prevailing shortfall in implementation of middle school transitional research in North Carolina public schools [systems]. Furthermore, the participant LEAs showcased a varied level of communicating through systems-thinking; a best practice that LEAs are not responding to. For the participant LEAs, it was found that there was a lack of connectedness and failure of consistent theory application. Most of the responses were centered on a singular person rather than a collective common representative stakeholder group. There were middle schools that stood out in this study and revealed that when research is implemented correctly and fully, success can occur in relation to your desired outcomes. As mentioned previously, getting LEAs and middle schools to embrace the plethora of transitional research is key not only to the success of sixth grade students the next school year but can boost other key student centered statistics throughout their public school career. The impetus lies with the LEAs and middle schools to take appropriate action to develop an appropriate

transitional plan and programs to support this important move within a student's

educational career. The research is well known that when implemented [correctly]

quality results are the experienced norm.

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APPENDICES

Appalachian State University
Reich College of Education - Department of Educational Leadership

Appendix A
(Letter to Gatekeeper to gain entry to site)

July 31, 2010

Dr. A.B. Cee, Superintendent
Carolina County Schools
130 Street A
Somewhere, NC 55555

Dear Dr. Cee,

My name is Aaron D. Allen and I am a doctoral student at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. My dissertation focus is on the middle school transition programs that exist within our middle schools in North Carolina. My goal is to explore the central office, school administrator, and teacher successes and challenges experienced when designing, implementing, and sustaining their middle school transition plans and programs. As you are aware, there are many varieties of transitional phenomenon that are labeled comprehensive, transitional, or programmatic that are not the case. I hope to gauge how school districts use National Middle School Association research and best practice when designing a transition program from fifth grade to sixth grade. By interviewing you or your designee, principals, and teachers within your district, I hope to understand more fully the role that each plays in contributing to the success and sustainability of such a program.

I am writing you to ask if you would assist me in identifying school level personnel who have at least three years experience at their current middle school either in administration or teaching in the classroom. These employees would be contacted through email and a phone call to request their participation. Faculty interviews will last around 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at a convenient time on campus for the participant.

Your assistance would facilitate selection of the participants for this study. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky and Dr. Ken Jenkins. Dr. Killacky can be reached either by email killackycj@appstate.edu or by phone 828-262-3168. Dr. Jenkins can be reached at jenkinskd@appstate.edu or 828-262-7232. I can be reached with by email, adallen@clevelandcountyschools.org or by phone 704-476-8340. Please contact me to discuss this request more fully.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Aaron D. Allen, Ed.S.
Doctoral Student

Appalachian State University
Reich College of Education - Department of Educational Leadership

Appendix B
(E-Mail Solicitation of Faculty Participants)

July 31, 2010

Dear Faculty Member,

My name is Aaron D. Allen and I am a doctoral student at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Your name was recommended by your Superintendent, Dr. A. B. Cee, I am writing to ask if you would participate in a study on exploring the central office, school administrator, and teacher successes and challenges experienced when designing, implementing, and sustaining their middle school transition plans and programs. This research will explore the faculty perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of National Middle School Association research and best practices when it comes to transitioning students into sixth grade for the first time. It is hoped that your experience will inform the understanding of what it is faculty need to better meet the needs of students entering middle school.

I will be conducting interviews at your school during the week of _____ and would like to schedule an interview during that time. I anticipate the interview, at a convenient location to you, will take no more than 45-60 minutes of your time. For demographic purposes, I would also like a copy of your resume. In exchange for your participation, I will provide you with a summary of my findings at the completion of this study.

This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky and Dr. Ken Jenkins. Dr. Killacky can be reached either by email killackycj@appstate.edu or by phone 828-262-3168. Dr. Jenkins can be reached either by email jenkinskd@appstate.edu or by phone 828-262-7232.

Please let me know by return email (adallen@clevelandcountyschools.org) if you are willing to participate and I will then contact you to schedule a time for the interview. I appreciate your consideration of this request and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Aaron D. Allen, Ed.S.
Doctoral Student
Appalachian State University

Appalachian State University
Reich College of Education - Department of Educational Leadership

Appendix C
INFORMED CONSENT
Project: *Reviewing Success of Middle School Transition Plans: A Study of Local Education Agencies and Middle Schools in North Carolina*

1. Aaron D. Allen, Ed.S. (704-476-8340; adallen@clevelandcountyschools.org) doctoral student under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky (828-262-3168; killackycj@appstate.edu) and Dr. Ken Jenkins (828-262-7232; jenkinskd@appstate.edu), faculty at Appalachian State University, are requesting your participation in a research study entitled *Reviewing Success of Middle School Transition Plans: A Study of Local Education Agencies and Middle Schools in North Carolina.* The purpose of this research study is to better understand the central office, school administrator, and teacher successes and challenges experienced when designing, implementing, and sustaining a middle school transition plan and program that is based on national best practice and research. Your participation will involve an interview of about 45-60 minutes during which you will be asked questions about your perceptions and experiences with transitioning students into sixth grade and middle school.

2. This study is designed to minimize any risk to you; however, if you are uncomfortable answering any questions you are free to decline to respond.

3. The benefits of participating in this study for you personally are minimal; however, you will be contributing to the scholarly research about the development of quality middle school transition plans, and sustaining the implemented programs to align with national research models.

4. There are no feasible alternatives to the interview for this study.

5. The results of this study will be published in my dissertation however; your name, identity, or institution will not be revealed. You and your institution will be assigned a pseudonym and the pseudonym will be used in any reporting of your comments. Your name and the name of your institution will only be known to the researchers and any transcriptions of this interview will be kept in a locked file cabinet accessible only to the researchers in number 1 above.

6. Participants may become tired or have some discomfort talking about your experiences. You are free to request a break as needed or decline to respond to any question.

7. Any questions you have about the study should be addressed to the researchers in number 1 above.

8. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and will not be compensated. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may discontinue participation at any time.

Participant: Researcher:

_____   _____
                          Date   Aaron D. Allen   Date

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Appendix D

Letter to Confirm Participation

Dear Faculty Member,

      Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on faculty experiences with designing, implementing, and sustaining middle school transition plans and programs.

Interview Date _____
Location _____
Time _____

      If you need to contact me to answer questions or reschedule the interview, I can be reached by any of the following methods:

Researcher:	Aaron D. Allen
Cell Phone:	704-473-5124
Work Phone:	704-476-8340
E-mail:	adallen@clevelandcountyschools.org

      This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky and Dr. Ken Jenkins. Dr. Killacky can be reached at killackycj@appstate.edu or 828-262-3168. Dr. Jenkins can be reached at jenkinskd@appstate.edu or 828-262-7232. Please contact him if you have any questions or concerns.

      Thank you for your assistance with this research study.

Aaron D. Allen

Appalachian State University
Reich College of Education - Department of Educational Leadership

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

I will be asking you questions today about your experiences with transition programs and plans for middle school students. Research shows…
The purpose of this research study is to…

Do you have any questions?
Let's begin.

Question 1
- How did your [LEA], [school], [classroom] plan the components that support the initial design of your [   ] transition program?

Question 2
- What was your [   ] initial plan for designing a sixth grade transition program?

Question 3
- What role did teachers, administrators, students, and parents have in developing your program?

Question 4
- What national research base(s) did you reference when designing your middle school transition program?

Question 5
- How long has your program/plan existed? In it's current form?

Question 6
- What elements make up the design of the transition program? (*safety, information, connections?)

Question 7
- In general, what are your sixth grade student's greatest academic needs?

Question 8
- What strategies did your [   ] adapt to address the academic needs of your incoming sixth grade students?

Question 9
- How did you determine which strategies your [   ] would use to address the academic needs of your incoming sixth grade students?

Question 10
- What strategies do you use to address the academic needs of students in the following subjects?
    - Math
    - English- Language Arts
    - Science
    - Social Studies
    - Physical Education
    - Electives/Labs

Question 11
- What strategies did your [   ] utilize to address the social needs of your sixth grade students?

Question 12
- How did you determine which social strategies would meet the needs of your sixth grade students?

Question 13
- To what extent have you been able to monitor the social development of students in your [   ] transition program?

Question 14
- To what extent have social strategies been modified or newly adopted?

Question 15
- What factors inhibited the planning, implementation, and sustainability of your sixth grade transition program in your [   ]?
    - Planning?
    - Implementing?
    - Sustaining?

Question 16
- What criteria does your [   ] use to determine the success of its transition program?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study.

Appalachian State University
Reich College of Education - Department of Educational Leadership

Appendix F

Human Subjects Approval Form

VITA

Dr. Aaron Durant Allen was born in Shelby, North Carolina on January 6, 1974. He attended grade school in Kings Mountain, North Carolina and graduated from Kings Mountain High School in May 1992. The following autumn, he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to study Exercise Science and in May 1996 he was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree. In the fall of 1996, he accepted a graduate assistantship in Sports Medicine / Athletic Training at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA and began study toward a Master of Education degree. The M.Ed. was awarded in January 1999. In August 2001, he entered the School Administration program at Gardner-Webb University and graduated with a M.Ed. in May 2003. In June 2005, he entered the Educational Specialist program at Appalachian State University and graduated with an Ed.S. in May 2008. In August 2008, Mr. Allen commenced work toward his Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University which he received in 2011. Dr. Allen has been a high school teacher, coach, athletic trainer, athletic director, high school and middle school assistant principal, and middle school principal.

Mr. Allen is an Eagle Scout, member of many educational leadership organizations, and member of First Baptist Church- Kings Mountain. His wife is Tammie Welch Allen and his three children are Gideon, Cash, and Harper. His parents are Dr. and Mrs. Larry F. Allen.