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The Effectiveness of a Transition Program on Ninth-Grade Students Who Were Socially Promoted

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The Effectiveness of a Transition Program on Ninth-Grade Students Who Were Socially
Promoted

By
Wanda V. Little

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
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Approval Page

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Abstract

Narrative Case Study: The Effectiveness of a Transition Program on Ninth-Grade Students Who Were Socially Promoted. Little, Wanda V., 2010: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Transition Program/Social Promotion/Freshman Retention/Freshman Dropout

This study examined the impact of a newly implemented transition program on the academic achievement of low achieving and socially promoted students in a high school. The intended contribution of this study was to describe any effect the transition program might have towards academic achievement on the English I end-of-course exam and the accumulation of total academic credits to be applied towards promotion into the tenth grade.

The research questions providing a research framework for the study were: How did the target group's academic achievement compare to an earlier group who had been socially promoted but had not participated in the summer transition program? How did the target group perform on the English I end-of-course exam as compared to the Education Value-Added Assessment System prediction? What explanations were there for the performances described in Questions 1 and 2? What attitude changes toward school had students undergone in the year since social promotion? What supports were helpful in effecting academic and attitudinal improvement in the targeted ninth-grade group?

Quantitative data was gathered to answer the first two research questions. EOC scores of the non-transition program group were compared to EOC scores of the transition program group using SPSS to compute central tendency statistics of mean, median, and mode. EVAAS predicted scores of the transition program group were compared to actual achievement scores by computing central tendency statistics of mean, median, and mode using SPSS. Answers to the last three questions were gleaned through student questionnaires (with both a closed-option quantitative section and an open-option qualitative section) and focus group interviews with teachers who had taught in the transition program and students who had participated in the program. Themes from the open-ended questionnaire and the focus groups were elicited through a frequency and strength computation. Responses to the five questions were triangulated to determine the overall effectiveness of the transition program.

Data demonstrated the transition program implemented in this study was an effective one. Student participants were more successful on the English I end-of-course exam than predicted by the EVAAS system, scored at a higher level of achievement than the nonparticipating group of students, as well as accumulated more high school credits necessary for promotion to the tenth grade. Qualitative data demonstrated that student attitudes were changed in a positive manner regarding math and reading skills, organization skills, time-management skills, and decision-making skills.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nature of the Problem

Students who are not academically successful in middle school can be retained in the eighth grade or be socially promoted to high school. Retention can help sometimes, but early retention is harmful and, overall, retention is risky (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). Retaining students in first grade is surprisingly common and frequently harmful, both academically and emotionally. There is also substantial evidence that retention in kindergarten is equally harmful. Being removed from a group of peers with whom a student has just gotten comfortable seems to compound the difficulty of adjusting to school, setting the child back rather than helping him/her. Transitions are peak times for retention. Students are most commonly retained at the end of the year after the transition into elementary school, middle or junior high school, and high school (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

Retaining students, regardless of the grade at which they are retained, increases the likelihood that they will drop out of school. For each high school dropout, it costs a state approximately \$3,000 to \$5,000 per year. The cost to the individuals who drop out are likewise disadvantageous. Dropouts lose \$10,000 each year in income after age 25 (Bottoms, 2003). Still, the consequences of high school dropouts span far beyond the state cost and individual income deficiencies. Other costs associated with high school dropouts include incarceration, unemployment, reduction in wages, and engaging in high risk behavior (Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group, 2003).

Most middle schools are structured for students to remain in the same classroom for the day or at least remain with the same group of students. In high school, students must find their classrooms in a very small period of time, on a campus that may be spread

out through different buildings. Students are leaving middle schools for high schools that can be as large as colleges and may include students old enough to vote (Mehta, 2008).

Many students find the journey from middle grades to high school difficult. They lack the knowledge and skills necessary for doing high school-level work, and they do not have the study skills needed to meet higher standards in ninth grade and beyond (Bottoms, 2003). Students have been accustomed to seven or eight classes, which last no more than 50 minutes. Suddenly they are in a school day with only four classes, each lasting 90 minutes and divided by only a 5-minute class change or a short lunch period. In addition, several of these classes will be completed at the end of the semester with an end-of-course exam. Midyear a new semester begins with four new classes, four different teachers, and four new sets of teacher expectations. These challenges can cause students to perform poorly in high school or even drop out before graduation. Freshman year experiences may be crucial in the decision about whether or not to finish high school for those students already struggling academically before reaching the ninth grade. High schools are losing students each day. Is there anything that could be done to help a socially promoted student find academic success?

Table 1 demonstrates that until 2007-2008, the number of high school dropouts in North Carolina was on the increase. Over the 5-year period, the number of dropouts increased by over 2,000. This places an increased drain on the budget for North Carolina of over \$600,000 per year. Although there was a decrease in the number of dropouts for the focus Local Education Agency (LEA), there was an immediate increase for the 2007-2008 year. This total is approximately 1.5% of the number of dropouts in the state. However, with 100 counties and over 100 school districts, the focus LEA has lost students who may be able to become productive members of society if they can be

maintained in the high school. Although the system under study has a lower drop-out rate than the state, it is still losing too many students who could become productive members of society.

Table 1

Dropouts and Drop-out Rates 2003-2004 to 2007-2008

	<i>2003-2004</i>	<i>2004-2005</i>	<i>2005-2006</i>	<i>2006-2007</i>	<i>2007-2008</i>
NC Dropouts	20,035	20,175	22,180	23,550	22,434
NC Rates	4.86	4.74	5.04	5.24	4.97
LEA Dropouts	283	322	389	315	357
LEA Rates	3.53	3.68	4.09	3.15	3.40

Table 2 demonstrates that the number of students dropping out of school in the ninth grade is far greater than any other high school level. Researchers believe this is due to the large number of ninth-grade students who have been retained in at least one grade. The research on retention has shown that students who are retained are more likely to drop out than students who have not been retained (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

Table 2

Grade Distribution of North Carolina Dropouts for 2007-2008

2007-2008	9th or before	10th	11th	12th
Dropouts	8,233	5,653	5,227	3,320
Drop-out rates	36.7	25.2	23.3	14.8

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students. The average age for a ninth-grade student is 14. Table 3 demonstrates that 22 of the students in this study were 15 or older before entering the ninth grade.

Table 3

Ages of the Focus Students in the Transition Program

Ages	13.5	14	14.5	15	15.5	16	16.5
Male	1	5	2	6	2	3	2
Female	0	4	5	4	3	2	0

School records show that 17 of these students had been retained at least once, two were retained twice, and transcripts for 12 of these students show no history of elementary school which would neither prove nor disprove previous retentions. Retaining a student in early elementary school adds another year to the school career of that student. This means that the retained student's education will cost the state

approximately an additional \$7,500 (Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group, 2003). Social promotion does not carry this cost. Even though many socially promoted students have already been retained at least once, retention would only serve to add another year to the educational plan while giving the student even less hope of ever achieving a successful graduation before the age of 21. Social promotion extends the invitation for possible success and saves the state money.

Social promotion is the practice of sending a student to the next grade level despite his or her failing to achieve expectations (Frey, 2005). Advocates of social promotion believe that promotion occurs in order to protect the student's self-esteem and to keep students of the same age together in the same grade. When the social promotion occurs between eighth grade and ninth grade, it places the burden of educating the student to grade-level performance on the high school (Frey, 2005). The freshman year can bring anxiety. Teens are at a difficult age, between childhood and young adulthood, sometimes teetering between the two without adequate preparation. Relationships are changing, bodies are maturing, and hormones are in overdrive (Mehta, 2008). Add the pressure of readjustment to a new school environment and students can become overwhelmed.

The promotion standards for the eighth-grade students in North Carolina require a score of level III or IV on the reading end-of-grade test and on the mathematics end-of-grade test. The reading end-of-grade data were withheld until November 2008; therefore, students were promoted to the ninth grade based on mathematics end-of-grade test data, year-long report card data, and student attendance. The 39 student participants in this study received level I or II on the mathematics end-of-grade test, thereby failing to pass through the gateway. However, social promotion or placement into the next grade level

is at the discretion of the principal.

Most ninth-grade students on grade level will reach their fourteenth birthday during their ninth-grade year. As demonstrated in Table 3, one of the 39 students was less than 14 years of age. The remaining 38 students ranged in age from 14 to almost 17. In an attempt to remove older students from the middle school setting, the middle school principal determined that it would be in the best interest of all involved to socially promote all 39 students without regard to test scores.

Statement of the Problem

Underachieving middle school students have a difficult time adjusting to high school. They are typically unable to find academic success at the high school level. Unless appropriate levels of support and academic programs for struggling students are implemented and successful, these students will continue to drop out of school. This narrative case study evaluated the success of a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students in this study.

Both the middle school and the high school in this study were located in a small rural community in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. There were approximately three miles separating the two locations. The middle school served a student population of 793 that was 50% Caucasian, 35% African American, and 15% Hispanic. The middle school operated on a traditional schedule with class periods which were about 50 minutes each. The high school served a student population of 904 that was 55% Caucasian, 36% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 1% other. The high school operated on a schedule with the school year beginning near August 25 and ending near June 10. The school day consisted of four 90-minute academic blocks. Each semester included 90 school days.

During each semester, students had the opportunity to earn four academic credits with a total of eight courses accumulated during each school year.

Some rising ninth-grade students in this district opted to attend one of two magnet high schools; one was a comprehensive high school which served students interested in pursuing the arts, and one was an early college high school that served students interested in obtaining a technical associate's degree at the end of their 5-year high school career. Because of these two options for students, not all rising ninth-grade students from the feeder middle school attended the high school. The researcher for this study was the principal of the focus high school.

Social promotion at this site has become acceptable over a period of time. For the 2007-2008 year, there was a delay in the return of the reading end-of-grade test scores. North Carolina state promotion standards could only be met using the mathematics end-of-grade test data. At the end of the 2008-2009 year, 37 eighth-grade students from the feeder middle school and five eighth-grade students from the feeder alternative middle school performed at a level I or II on the eighth-grade end-of-grade mathematics test. Although they were expecting to be promoted to the ninth grade of the focus high school, they did not score sufficiently to pass through the North Carolina gateway from eighth to ninth grade. The lack of academic proficiency on the mathematics end-of-grade test afforded these 42 middle school students the opportunity to attend a summer school session, which would end with an opportunity to retake the mathematics end-of-grade test. Two of these students were served by the Exceptional Children's Department and special learning needs were being met as detailed in the Individualized Education Plan. It was determined that these two students would attend a summer school session with other middle school students in order that their academic needs could be better served. For this

reason, 40 students were served at the high school.

At the end of the summer session, all 40 students were retested on the mathematics end-of-grade test and regardless of score, were socially promoted into the ninth grade. Before the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, one student transferred out of the focus school district. This study placed its focus on the remaining 39 ninth-grade students in the rural North Carolina high school during the 2008-2009 school year. It was documented that 82 students were socially promoted at the same location during the 2007-2008 school year. A portion of this research focused on a comparison of the ninth-grade academic progress for these two groups of students—the 39 students in the 2008-2009 year with a transition program in place, and the 82 students in the 2007-2008 year without a transition program in place.

The transition program was implemented for 39 students during the summer of 2008. Its main goal was to provide academic activities and support for students as they earned one high school elective credit that could be used toward fulfilling graduation requirements. Administrators believed that some form of academic success in a small group setting could cause the students to transition more smoothly into the high school setting as ninth-grade students. With even more academic strategies and support methods during the regular school year, it was hoped that these students would earn enough credits to be promoted to the tenth grade as a result of their own efforts. This study was of interest to the focus school and to the focus district to aid in determining the effect the transition program had on ninth-grade retention for this group of students.

The transition program was divided into two parts: 3 weeks of continued eighth-grade studies, and 3 weeks of basic skills necessary for ninth-grade studies. It consisted of three different areas of study: math, English, and Character Education. From June 25

until July 16, the math and English curriculums were taught on an eighth-grade academic level. Busses transported students each day to and from the target school. The school day began at 8:30 a.m. Students were divided into three groups for the transition program, but these groups were rearranged when necessary. A short break was held at 9:50, with second period beginning at 10:00. Students were escorted to the cafeteria for lunch at 11:30. The last period of the day began at 12:15 and school was dismissed at 1:40. Each day one group had math class, the second group had English class, and the third group had Character Education. These classes were taught on a rotational basis so that all students received each subject every day. On July 16, 2008, the students retested the mathematics end-of-grade test.

At this point, the students were given an opportunity to continue the summer program in an effort to earn one high school course credit. Some students decided to opt out of the program due to summer plans, personal reasons, or family obligations. Twenty-one students elected to remain. From July 17 until August 6, the math and English curriculums were taught on a needs-based level for individual students. Throughout both sessions, the Character Education curriculum was based on a Character Education Kit titled *36 Weeks of Success*. This kit was developed and distributed by The MASTER Teacher located in Kansas. It provided weekly lesson plans and all supplementary materials necessary for daily instruction. Each day a vocabulary word from a reading selection was the main focus. In addition, students wrote answers to related questions and wrote a personal reflection in a journal as a response to a writing prompt.

During both the summer transition program and the regular school year, these students and their academic endeavors were supported in different ways by school

personnel. During the summer session, a ninth-grade administrator met daily with students to discuss behavioral issues, as well as student and teacher expectations. An English curriculum coordinator met with the teachers and the students to insure that all goals and objectives of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study were on target for grade-level expectations. During the regular school year, a drop-out prevention counselor met monthly with individual students to promote the idea of remaining in school, no matter what obstacles lay ahead.

Four part-time literacy teachers were employed at the high school site to tutor lower ability students each week. Students were selected based on prior test scores and current teacher recommendations. The teachers tutored students in English or math, either individually or in groups of two or three. Students were allowed to work with the tutors during nonacademic elective courses. The 39 students in this study worked with the literacy teachers weekly during each semester. Regular tutorial sessions with academic course teachers were held after school during the school year.

For 2 weeks prior to the end-of-course exams for first and second semester, extra tutorial sessions with free transportation were held. For 1 hour after school, 4 days of each week, students could attend tutorial sessions taught by the regular classroom teachers for each subject. Fourth period's tutorial was taught on Monday afternoon, third period's tutorial was taught on Tuesday afternoon, second period's tutorial was taught on Wednesday afternoon, and first period's tutorial was taught on Thursday afternoon. Sessions were held in reverse order so that the first period tutorial occurred on the afternoon before the first period end-of-course exam. The exam for first period was followed by a 2-hour review session for the second period exam. The second period exam was followed by a 2-hour review session for the third period exam, and so on.

As stated in a study by Picklo and Christenson (2005), various strategies have been tried with struggling students. Some of these same strategies are being implemented through various courses offered to students in the transition program. Students are experiencing smaller class sizes, flexible scheduling within class ability grouping, intensive remedial help, and the use of cooperative learning strategies. Although not all strategies are being implemented with every student in every course, strategies such as those identified by Picklo and Christenson are being used in areas where it is expected that they will be the most effective.

This study was also of interest because of the priority school label that was placed on this high school due to the No Child Left Behind standards. Priority schools have 50 to 60% of their students meeting grade-level expectations as measured by the state end-of-course tests, which are a part of the North Carolina School Based Management and Accountability Program (ABCs). The school has been in existence since 1960 and was a School of Progress with high growth in 2003-2004 and 2005-2006 according to the North Carolina's School Based Management and Accountability Program (ABCs). In 2004-2005, this high school earned School of Distinction with high growth honors. However, in 2007-2008 it became a school of No Recognition. Schools receiving no recognition are at an academic growth plateau. Between 60 and 100% of the student body are meeting grade-level expectations but they are exhibiting no academic growth. North Carolina uses an academic growth model which compares each student's standardized test scores with previous test scores to determine how much, if any, increase in academic achievement has occurred. Students progress from kindergarten to the twelfth grade with the expectation of learning all the skills necessary for promotion to the next grade level. The time frame for learning those skills is set in North Carolina at 10 months, from

August to June. Occasionally those skills are not adequately learned. In those cases, attending summer school or facing retention become options. However, the state of North Carolina's expectation is still 1 year of schooling should correlate to 1 year of academic growth for all students.

The district superintendent's first interest was in helping all students succeed academically and to be prepared for challenges of the 21st century. Both the superintendent and the assistant superintendents were very interested in finding strategies that would assist with this effort. The district supported 53 different schools, including 9 traditional high schools, 9 middle schools, 31 elementary schools, an Early College high school, an alternative school, an Exceptional Children's Developmental school, and a Central Academy of Technology and Arts. The schools were arranged throughout the district into nine cluster groups with two or three elementary schools feeding into one middle school which was followed by one traditional high school.

The district was very large and while thickly populated on the western end, the other side was a much more rural setting. The student participants in this study resided in very rural communities, known throughout the district as being low socioeconomic communities. The low socioeconomic status in this group of schools and one other cluster group in the district qualified these schools as high priority, with the related elementary schools being designated as Title I schools. In addition to the high priority status, the high schools in these two cluster groups shared the reputation of having the lowest composite score for student academic performance. District superintendents, school personnel and community members were in search of any strategies or programs which could have a lasting effect on the academic achievement in these low-performing schools.

Socially promoted students were not successful on the eighth-grade reading end-of-grade test in 2008. It was expected that many of these same students would not be successful on the English I end-of-course exam without the implementation of academic interventions. Table 4 and Table 5 show a decline in the academic achievement between eighth and ninth grade from eighth-grade reading to ninth-grade English I.

Table 4 demonstrates the percentage of eighth-grade students in the state of North Carolina, the focus district, and the focus middle school who were performing at the proficient level on the eighth-grade reading end-of-grade test (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2009).

Table 4

Eighth-Grade Student Performance (Percent Proficient) in Reading

Setting	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
School	87.2	87.3	82.1	88.8
District	90.3	90.7	89.6	92.3
State	87.8	87.9	86.9	87.9

Table 4 is a representation of eighth-grade students. Table 5 is a representation of those same students after they have completed the English I end-of-course exam. In 2003-2004 in the state of North Carolina, 87.8% of the eighth-grade students were proficient on the eighth-grade reading end-of-grade test. However, in 2004-2005, those same students as ninth graders were only 81.9% proficient on the English I end-of-course exam. These data demonstrate that around 6% of these students were not making academic progress as could be expected. When the English I end-of-course exam was

renormed in 2006-2007, the proficiency scores across the state of North Carolina were expected to decrease and they did as shown on Table 5. Table 5 demonstrates that this decrease for the state of North Carolina, as well as the focus district, was approximately 10 points. However, the decrease for the focus high school was 21 points (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2009).

Table 5

Ninth-Grade Student Performance (Percent Proficient) on English I End-of-Course Exam

Setting	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
School	82.5	82.5	61.0	63.4
District	87.3	89.1	79.0	81.5
State	81.9	82.8	72.0	73.1

In 2003-2004, 87.8% of the eighth-grade students in North Carolina achieved proficiency on the reading end-of-grade test. In 2004-2005, 81.9% of the ninth-grade students in North Carolina scored a proficient level on the English I end-of-course exam. These data present two different sets of information. In 2003-2004, 12.2% of the eighth-grade students in North Carolina did not earn a proficient score on the end-of-grade test, which in turn means that 12.2% of the eighth-grade students in North Carolina did not meet the gateway for promotion into the ninth grade.

Of all the students promoted or placed into the ninth grade for the 2004-2005 year, 18.1% scored less than proficient on the English I end-of-course exam. These data verify that not all students who were promoted into the ninth grade were able to reach grade-level achievement in English I by the end of the ninth-grade year. This trend

means that at the focus school site the number of students eligible for retention due to failure to meet local promotion standards rose from 52 students in 2004 to 80 students in 2007.

Background and Significance of the Problem

Retention and promotion carry significant implications for the development of lifetime opportunities for young people. As written in *95th Anniversary Edition Handbook of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association* (Strunk, 2008), athletic eligibility is based on successful completion of coursework, attendance, and promotion to the next grade level. Athletic eligibility begins on the first day a student enters the ninth grade and continues for 4 consecutive years. The time frame may not be interrupted for any reason. It also ends when the student has a nineteenth birthday before the end of October. A student with multiple retentions in elementary and middle school may have a shortened athletic eligibility before the high school years even begin (Strunk, 2008).

In North Carolina, everyone under the age of 18 must show adequate academic progress toward a high school diploma or its equivalent in order to obtain a driver's license (North Carolina G.S. 20-11). This general statute was adopted in an attempt to motivate students to remain in the secondary school setting while working diligently to obtain a diploma. Adequate academic progress is evaluated at the end of each semester. A student must remain in school and must pass five out of six courses each semester in a traditional schedule or pass three of the four courses in a block schedule. If adequate progress is not achieved, the Department of Motor Vehicles is notified. At that time, permits or licenses may be revoked. They can only be reinstated after the next semester has passed and the student has become more successful academically.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there were 1.6 million high school dropouts in North Carolina in 2007. Students who drop out are twice as likely to be unemployed, three times as likely to be arrested, and six times as likely to be unwed parents. According to Communities in Schools data, almost 82% of youth offenders in North Carolina are dropouts. Of the 39,746 inmates in NC prisons at the end of 2008, 27,688 or 70% were dropouts, and their incarceration costs alone were \$692 million (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

It is extremely important that students are academically successful in high school. The state of North Carolina mandates that students may remain in the public school setting until completing all graduation requirements or the age of 21, whichever comes first. When a student is not successful, academic credits do not accrue. The student does not inch closer to graduation in the normal range of 4 years. Instead, the student continues to age while becoming more frustrated. This frustration often leads to dropping out of school which in turn has an effect on the student's potential for becoming a contributing citizen.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students in this study. The *2005-2006 Student Accountability Standards for North Carolina for Grades Three, Five and Eight* stated that students shall demonstrate proficiency by having test scores at Level III or above on end-of-grade tests in both reading and mathematics, meet all local promotion requirements, and make adequate progress in writing, as determined by the seventh-grade

writing assessment with a score of 12 or above in order to be promoted to the ninth grade (Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

The transition program was implemented during the summer of 2008 and remained in session for 6 weeks. During this period of time, students received instruction in math, English, and Character Education. They also participated in group and individual counseling activities with a goal of easing their transition into the mainstream of ninth grade.

The ninth-grade academic year was designed to include most of the same courses for each of the 39 socially promoted students. Students were enrolled in Modular English, which was a preparatory course for English I but did not require an end-of-course test, Reading Competency (READ 180), Fundamentals of Math, and one elective for the first semester. The second semester included English I, Reading in the Curriculum (READ 180), a math course, and another elective. Students were allowed to select electives in special interest areas (i.e. band, chorus, or ROTC) in order to promote a freshman sense of belonging.

At the beginning of the school year, the ninth-grade administrator or the freshman coordinator met with students individually and with their parents to explain strategies for improving student success. In addition, the ninth-grade guidance counselor and the drop-out prevention counselor met monthly with each of the students in an effort to assist with academic or personal issues that may hinder academic success. These sessions were also intended to promote student involvement and belonging.

This study compared and analyzed the data from English I end-of-course exams and predicted scores from the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) in an attempt to determine the effect the transition program may have had on student

academic achievement on the English I end-of-course exam.

EVAAS provides diagnostic reports quickly to district leaders and school administration or teachers. Users can peruse reports that predict student success, show the effects of schooling at particular schools, or reveal patterns in subgroup performance. These reports contain easy-to-understand charts and graphs and can be accessed via the Web. EVAAS is a database filled with historical test data. The software program is designed to follow a student through all North Carolina schools and offer a precise measurement of student progress over time. A diagnosis of potential growth is based on up to 5 years of data for each individual student. Data from all subjects are used in predictions (Herschberg, Simon, & Krueger, 2004).

By following individual students over time, value-added predictions take into consideration the student background characteristics over which schools have no control and that tend to bias test results. Value-added predictions enable educators to identify not only the progress made by students but also the extent to which individual teachers, schools, and districts have contributed to it. This researcher compared the projected test score for each of the 39 students involved in the transition program to the score he or she actually achieved at the end of the school year.

Definition of Key Terms

Social promotion. The practice of promoting a student to the next grade despite their low achievement in order to keep them with grade-level peers. It may occur in an effort to keep students together by age, to facilitate student involvement in sports teams, to help with students' self-esteem, or to allow a student who is strong in one area, but weak in another, to advance further in the strong area.

End-of-grade testing. Refers to two tests, reading comprehension and

mathematics, which are administered annually in Grades 3 through 8. The testing component of the program measures students' annual academic progress on criterion-based tests. Each score is compared to the previous year's score with the expectation that students gain academic achievement as determined by preset criteria.

Achievement level. Refers to the student's ranking on end-of-grade or end-of-course testing. Achievement levels are divided into four categories: Level I indicates that the student has failed to achieve at a basic level and has no opportunity to be successful at the next grade level; Level II indicates that the student achieves at only a basic level and has minimal opportunity to be successful at the next grade level; Level III denotes achievement at a proficient level and mastery of grade-level subject material; and Level IV indicates achievement at an advanced level with student performance in a consistently superior manner.

Modular English. A course designed to better prepare ninth-grade students for English I. The focus of the course is grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. A standardized end-of-course exam is not required for Modular English. The course is offered first semester to be followed by English I second semester.

READ 180. A comprehensive reading intervention program distributed by The Scholastic Company. It is designed to meet the needs of students in elementary through high school whose reading achievement is below the proficient level. These struggling readers have deficits in their understanding of the reading process and gaps in their foundational skills. *READ 180* is designed to address these gaps by directly addressing individual needs through instructional software, high-interest literature, and direct instruction in reading skills.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Refers to a written statement for a

student with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with NC 1503-4.1 through NC 1503-5.1. As stated in *Policies Governing Services For Children with Disabilities*, an IEP must include (a) a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance; (b) a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals; (c) a description of the child's progress; (d) a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child; (e) an explanation of the extent to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class; and (f) a statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on state and district assessments (*Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities*, 2007).

Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS). An evaluation system, through which the methodology minimizes the influence of measurement error by using up to 5 years of data for an individual student. Analyzing all subjects simultaneously increases the precision of the estimates. Predictions for future scores on standardized tests are made from this analysis (*Schooling Effectiveness - SAS[®] EVAAS[®] for K-12*, 2009).

Local promotion standards for the focus district. Refers to a student's grade classification, which is determined by his or her English class as well as the number of units earned. These promotion standards apply to all students and are used in determining athletic eligibility. For example, any student who has completed the required number of units, including the required English unit for the previous grade level, may be classified as follows:

<u>Grade Level</u>	<u>4 x 4 Block</u>
Grade 9	Promoted from 8th Grade
Grade 10	6 units including English I
Grade 11	13 units including English II
Grade 12	20 units including English III

Research Questions

This narrative case study evaluated the success of a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students in this study. The information gleaned from this study was used to help district and school leaders determine the effectiveness of the current freshman transition program. The research questions underlying and providing a research framework for the study were as follows:

1. How did the target group's academic achievement compare to an earlier group that had been socially promoted but had not participated in the summer transition program?
2. How did the target group perform on the English I end-of-course exam as compared to the Education Value-Added Assessment System prediction?
3. What explanations were there for the performances described in Questions 1 and 2?
4. What attitude changes toward school had students undergone in the year since social promotion?
5. What supports were helpful in effecting academic and attitudinal improvement in the targeted ninth-grade group?

The researcher answered the first research question by collecting data from the reading end-of-grade tests from 2006-2007 and the English I end-of-course exams from

2007-2008 for the 82 students who were socially promoted to the ninth grade for the 2007-2008 year. Data was then collected from the reading end-of-grade tests from 2007-2008 and the English I end-of-course exams from 2008-2009 for the 39 students who were socially promoted into the ninth grade for the 2008-2009 school year. These sets of data were entered into the SPSS software for analysis in order to determine if outcomes demonstrated an increase in student achievement. A comparison of the means, medians, and modes between the two groups of students was made in order to compare the performance of the 39 participating students from 2008-2009 to the performance of the 82 nonparticipating students from 2007-2008.

English I end-of-course data were used in a comparison with predictions found in the Education Value-Added Assessment Systems for each of the 39 students enrolled in the transition program in order to determine the success of the target group in meeting their predicted scores on the English I end-of-course exam.

Questions 3 through 5 were addressed through a researcher-designed student survey and focus group interviews. A researcher-designed student questionnaire using the Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree was administered to each of the 39 students. Numerical values were assigned to each of the responses in order that the data could be entered into the SPSS software for analysis. Students and teachers were also included in focus group interviews conducted by a nonbiased moderator. Interview transcripts were divided into segments and the researcher coded responses in thematic categories. These segments and codes were entered into the SPSS software for examination and analysis. This analysis allowed the researcher to glean any information the students or teachers had about the success or failure of the summer portion of the transition program.

The ninth-grade year of high school is a crucial one. A student can become an active leader who is successful academically, athletically, and socially. A student can fail to succeed, become withdrawn, get frustrated, and find him/herself on the pathway to becoming a high school dropout. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders to prepare all students to succeed to the best of their abilities. This will take some support for many students, especially those who may be slow learners or socially promoted students. This study was conducted in an effort to determine if a transition program can provide the support these students need in order to become successful academically in the skills required for English I, a district requirement for promotion into the tenth grade.

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem of middle school to high school transition faced by today's rising ninth-grade students, the nature of the problem, the background and significance of the problem, research questions and definition of terms. Chapter 1 presented an explanation of the academic pressures facing low performing or socially promoted students in the focus high school following transition from the focus middle school. The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students in this study. Chapter 2 includes a literature review of research and theories relevant to already implemented transition programs and strategies for academic support.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This narrative case study evaluated the effectiveness of the freshman transition program at a high school by exploring the academic success and attitude changes of ninth-grade students who had completed a summer transition program and been socially promoted from eighth to ninth grade. Focusing on the transition from middle school to high school is critical to educators and policymakers because difficult transitions at this stage in a student's career often lead to lower levels of student academic achievement and student satisfaction. A difficult transition to high school is not only connected to academic underachievement, but also may signal the end of a student's high school career altogether and positive career opportunities for life (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001).

The data presented in the Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2001) study were collected from 150 participants and their families in the UCLA 2003 EASE Project Summer Bridge Program. The Summer Bridge Program was a summer residential program for ninth-grade students to encourage and foster career exploration and positive attitudes towards college attendance. Qualitative data were gathered through focus group interviews with eight to eleven students in each group. Additionally, focus group interviews were held with the families of these students in conjunction with the family day activities at the end of the program (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001).

Quantitative data were gathered through student surveys, using the Multi-dimensional Student Transitional Choice Scale. This survey consisted of 85 items assessing the influences and importance of the three spheres of influence on students' attitudes and experiences during their transitional year in high school. The scale tapped into a range of educational decisions that students must make while transitioning from

middle to high school: (1) the decision to continue their education at the next level (academic predisposition); (2) the decision to engage intellectually in the course work at the new school (academic transition); (3) the decision to pursue one's academic goals despite barriers (academic resiliency); (4) the decision to get involved in both the official and unofficial culture of the school (social transition); and (5) the decision to abide by the rules and policies of the new school (social adjustment). Responses on this instrument were on a 5-point Likert scale: extremely important, important, does not matter, not very important, and not important at all (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001).

Over 80% of the students in the Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2001) study were excited, hopeful, and sure of themselves with regard to entering high school. These students felt confident that they could do well in school (mean score of 4.06 on a scale of 5), get good grades (mean score of 4.19), and complete homework on time (mean score of 4.10). These are all positive academic attributes that lead to academic success. Yet, these students reported feelings of anxiety about transitioning to high school. Students reported that the large physical layout of the school and the increased number of students on the campus created feelings of fear. Students experienced feelings of being lost and disconnected. Exacerbated by the possibility that the class load may be more demanding in high school, many students expressed worry and fear about their successful transition to high school (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001).

The types of worries and fears reported by the students in this study differed by gender. For the girls, the concerns were focused on academic adjustments. For the boys, the concerns were more concentrated around the threat of being a victim of gang violence. Male students talked about the fear of unintentionally getting involved in gang activities. Also, boys reported perceptions of receiving disciplinary actions at a greater

rate than girls, and experiencing negative interactions with teachers and administrators (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001).

The process of transitioning from middle school to high school has been one of the many developmental challenges that students face. The transition to high school has been found to bring out increased stress levels, decreased self-esteem, and deteriorated academic performance. Beginning high school students may also become distracted by the increased complexity of social interactions within the high school environment. Peers emphasize fitting in and belonging, and this can be a great source of pressure for many students. The high school environment can become a more anonymous setting than the middle school environment. Students who were top scholars and athletes in middle school may experience role loss when they arrive in high school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

It is important that schools create environments that give students the best opportunities possible. There are many academic, personal, and social changes that adolescents undergo as they transition to high school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Research shows that transition to high school can be problematic for all adolescents. Although it could be an issue for all ninth-grade students, it would appear that there would be a correlation between one's academic and social skill levels and their ability to transition into high school. Therefore, transition strategies may be even more important when implemented with lower-ability or socially promoted students.

Social Promotion

Although the practice of social promotion has been the subject of debate in and out of educational circles, the research on low-achieving children who are socially promoted to the next grade level is sparse (Frey, 2005). Social promotion is commonly

viewed as one option when a student cannot meet promotion requirements, noting that the other option is retention. According to *Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion*, a report published by the United States Department of Education in 1999, neither promoting students without regard to their achievement nor simply retaining them in the same grade is the right response to low student achievement (Riley, Smith, & Peterson, 1999). Both approaches presume that high rates of initial failure are inevitable and acceptable. Ending social promotions by simply holding more students back is the wrong choice. Students who are required to repeat a year are more likely than other students to eventually drop out, and few catch up academically with their peers. The right approach is to ensure that more students are prepared to meet challenging academic standards in the first place (Riley et al., 1999). The intent of the transition program was to prepare students to meet these academic challenges.

Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, and Sroufe (1997) conducted a longitudinal study named the Minnesota Mother-Child Interaction Project. This project identified 190 children as at risk because of family poverty. Of these 190 participants, 104 were identified for retention studies and the results were published when the cohort was 10, 12, 14, 16, and 21. Each student in the cohort was placed into one of three groups—never retained, retained once during the elementary grades, or socially promoted. Jimerson et al. found no significant differences between retained children and their socially promoted peers on achievement and intelligence measures. However, the two groups differed on behavioral, peer relation, and emotional measures. Significantly, 52% of the socially promoted students graduated from high school, whereas only 24% of the retained students did so (Jimerson et al., 1997).

Of the Minnesota Mother-Child Project participants, 69% of the retained students

dropped out of school compared to 46% of the socially promoted students and 29% of the regularly promoted students. These researchers also found in 1999 that by the age of 20, students who had been retained averaged an hourly wage of \$6.59, compared to socially promoted students who averaged \$8.42 an hour, and regularly promoted students who averaged \$8.57 an hour (Jimerson et al., 1997).

Strategies for Effective Transition Programs

It has been necessary for researchers to attempt to find methodology that will improve the academic success for students and reduce the number of retained students. Transition programs are defined as ones that improve student attendance, achievement, and retention. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) wrote that the most effective transition programs were comprehensive and individualized activities to meet student needs. Identifying ninth grade as a critical transition period, several school districts have created ninth-grade academies or schools within schools. The academies provide support and academic attention at a critical time when many students fall between the cracks. Having a separate academy with separate teachers and schedules allows for closer relationships with teachers and more personalized attention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

At Worthington Kilbourne High School in Columbus, Ohio, freshmen had the school to themselves on the first day. They met in the auditorium for an assembly where they were introduced to the rules, rituals, and values of the school. After being escorted to their homerooms, they reviewed the handbook, followed their schedule, and met their teachers. Lunch was served as a cookout where students could socialize with each other and with their teachers. The Manchester High School Success Program, in Chesterfield County, Virginia, identified at-risk students and put them in a special sociology class that taught study skills, organizational methods, self-discipline, tolerance and diversity

awareness, anger management, and other relevant topics. These comprehensive transition programs that include numerous activities geared toward the needs and concerns of students, parents, and teachers can be effective in helping students transition to a new school with less anxiety and more academic success (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

In Georgia, Houston County High School created a special program for ninth graders to help them succeed in making the transition from middle school to high school. At that time, more than 60% of the discipline referrals at the 2,200 student school were for ninth-grade students. For the first 5 years of the program, the academy was housed in a separate wing of the high school. For the sixth year, the academy was placed in a separate building. The ninth-grade students involved with this program moved to a larger school where they were expected to adapt to a variety of instructional styles and conform to a different set of rules and expectations. The program included an elective class called High School 101, which covered time management, decision-making skills, study skills, test-taking strategies, learning styles, social tolerance, computer research skills, and career alignment. Teachers and other involved personnel credited a 55% decrease in the number of discipline referrals and a 46% decrease in grade retentions to the focus on meeting freshman needs (Chmelynski, 2003).

The Philadelphia school system began using freshmen academies in 2001 as part of the Talent Development initiative. These ninth-grade academies focused on the unique problems facing freshmen. These students received extra English and math instruction, as well as instruction for useful strategies on how to study at the high school level and how to learn new material. By 2004, the number of suspensions had decreased by 41%. Stakeholders credited the academies and their focus on meeting student needs

for the change in data (Chmelynski, 2003).

Chattanooga Central High School in Tennessee began an academy to create a program that would enable ninth graders to acclimate to high school with less pressure from older students. The program was also aimed at providing opportunities for teachers to interact more with students to identify their needs and help them learn. Suspensions dropped from 29.4% to 17.8% during the first year of the academy. The focus on reading had a significant effect on the number of students brought up to grade level in reading. An increase in academic achievement was credited for the decrease in suspensions (Chmelynski, 2003).

Dudley High School in Greensboro, North Carolina, implemented a ninth-grade academy in the 1999-2000 school year with 100 students. Retention and discipline problems decreased while academic achievement rose. Following that initial year, Dudley High increased the program's coverage to be for all ninth-grade students. Teachers collaborated with one another regularly, conferring on student problems and progress. Students received double classes of English and math and learned study skills and other tips for surviving ninth grade. Tutors were also available for math and reading. The Dudley ninth graders were physically separated from upperclassmen in their own building wing. These students had limited movement, less distractions, and appeared far more focused (Chmelynski, 2003).

Smith (2001) studied the effectiveness of middle school transition programs on high school retention and student performance. Approximately 30 eighth-grade students were selected at random from each of the 1,035 public, Catholic, and private schools chosen nationally for the sample (N=26,200). The National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) included data from eighth graders, their parents, teachers, and schools.

In addition, students completed a cognitive test battery developed by the Educational Testing Service. A follow-up survey identified which of these students were no longer in school 4 years later and again provided survey and test data on students, as well as information about the high school attended. From the larger sample, the researcher examined only data on public school students and limited the middle-grade span so that all students in the sample made a transition to a separate high school. These data restrictions reduced the original sample size to 7,924 students from 702 middle-grade schools (Smith, 2001).

The two outcome measures were generated from information collected 4 years after students were in the eighth grade. Drop-out status was derived from the supplemental drop-out file provided by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) combined with the regular second follow-up file. The grade point average measured was generated by the OERI based on grades through the last year that a student was enrolled in high school. Students who never made it to high school were missing on this measure and were left out of the analysis on this outcome. The independent measures considered in this analysis fell into three groups—background and home environment, eighth-grade behavior, and characteristics of the middle school attended. For home environment and demographic background, the student's gender, ethnic minority status, family socioeconomic status, and parental support for learning were considered. Student behavior in and through eighth grade included whether they were ever held back, their level of misbehavior in school, their interest in or engagement with school, and their academic background (a combination of grade and standardized test performance). Finally, the characteristics of the school included the average socioeconomic status of the students, whether the school enrolled a high percentage (over

40%) of minority students, whether the school was an elementary school or a stand-alone middle school, cohort size, and the level of positive learning environment as reported by the students and the teachers of the school (Smith, 2001).

Smith's (2001) study was structured as an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA); the effect of type of program was estimated on a set of outcome measures net of variables that might confound those findings. Although the data from NELS were structured hierarchically, with students nested in schools, the effects of concern were based in student experiences after the eighth grade. The research focused on students as the primary unit of analysis. The effects of the program may have been underestimated because no comparison was drawn between students who participated and students who were in the school but did not participate. This decision was based in large part on reports and experiences from principals and staff that transition programs were typically designed as an obligatory activity, reducing the variability in that part of the students' middle school experiences (Smith, 2001).

According to Smith (2001), programs specifically designed to aid in student transition to high school appeared effective. In the beginning, it was assumed that there were no differences between the sample schools. With that assumption, students who had access to a full and a partial transition program showed a reduced tendency to drop out when compared with students who did not have such a program in their middle-grade school. However, when the eighth graders' school behaviors and the characteristics of the school attended were taken into account, the effects of full transition programs became more pronounced. The most prevalent practice, for both full and partial transition programs, was to have high school counselors meet with the eighth grades; 83% of the full program schools and 74% of the partial program schools reported this

practice. The least prevalent practice was to have big brother/big sister programs matching up high school students with eighth graders to help them through the transition period. About 15% of the schools in each category reported doing this. The largest difference between the full and partial programs in use of different practices appeared in those targeting parents or staff. Seventy-eight percent of the schools with a full transition program in place permitted eighth-grade parents to visit the high school while only 35% of the schools with a partial set of programs did so. Similarly, 63% of the schools with full programs had middle and high school teachers meet with each other, but only 14% of those with partial programs did so. In general, the primary difference between these groups of schools appeared in the level of adult support for the transition process that occurred as students moved from middle schools into high schools (Smith, 2001).

Smith (2001) found transition programs effective in getting students to high school successfully. Students who had full transition programs available to them in their middle school were less likely to drop out of high school and performed better in high school (as measured by student grades) than did students who had either a partial program or none at all. These effects persisted after family, demographic, student, and other middle-school characteristics were taken into account. However, the positive effects of high school transition programs worked for students only when the school provided complete support. Programs that target only one population—student, parent, or staff—might be considered wasted because they showed no independent impact on improved student outcomes (Smith, 2001).

Smith, Akos, Lim, and Wiley (2008) conducted research as a pilot study designed to gain a better understanding of how students, parents, and school staff viewed the transition from middle school to high school. The purpose of the study was to collect and

analyze multiple perspectives of transition from all stakeholders prior to the transition and to assess a small group of students' perceptions before and after the transition to high school. A major transition issue emerged in the realm of ways in which students earn credits toward graduation. In middle school, students received academic feedback on report cards and were either passed or retained at the end of each year. In high school, students earned one graduation credit per course each academic semester. If they did not pass the course, they did not receive a credit toward graduation and could either retake the course if required for graduation or take a different course to earn credit in a future semester. According to school staff, students in the first semester simply do not appreciate this difference in academic policy. The idea of a transcript is very different from a report card. The cumulative effect of course completion and subject mastery does not set in until well into the freshman year (Smith et al., 2008).

Effective transition programs provide parents and students with information about the new school. Different strategies which can be implemented in order to meet this need are (1) high school tours; (2) small group sessions with high school counselors; (3) summer camp for rising ninth graders; (4) giving passes/invitations to supervised social/athletic events at the high school; (5) letters and websites dedicated to providing information to incoming students; (6) designating volunteer parents as ninth-grade ambassadors to formally and informally communicate with incoming parents; and (7) implementing a scheduling system that allows extensive collaboration with parents and middle school staff (Smith et al., 2008).

Effective transition programs provide academic support for incoming ninth graders. Some strategies which have been implemented in order to meet these needs are (1) create a support class that meets on a regular basis for all ninth graders and that

addresses transition issues, counseling, academic expectations, etc.; (2) assign each incoming ninth grader an adult advocate/advisor/mentor who assists the student with transition and attends to each student's academic progress and social adjustment; and (3) create tutorials and other academic support activities using teachers, adult volunteers, and older students to help struggling ninth graders (Smith et al., 2008).

Disadvantages to Some Transition Programs

One model of a transition program is the school-within-a-school, which may be called a learning community, a cluster, or an academy. This model can help downsize the number of students to a manageable student population for teachers and administrators. An example of this model is Findlay High School which was implemented during the 2000-2001 school year and studied by McIntosh and White (2006). Approximately 500 freshmen annually enter the Findlay High School population of approximately 2,100 students. They transition from three different middle schools with student populations of fewer than 500 and the local parochial school with an even smaller student body. In this model, the smaller learning community was named the Freshman Wing. Students had core classes and lockers in the Freshman Wing and a common freshman lunch period. Students and teachers were divided into teams for science, math, history, and English. Some disadvantages to this model were that it can create divisive rivalries or fracture existing relationships. A critical success factor is the commitment to implementation. Stakeholders must be involved throughout the transition process and collaborative action teams must be formed to implement goals. Researchers have found that schools with two or fewer transition practices had higher attrition and drop-out rates than those with three or more transition practices (McIntosh & White, 2006).

Zvock (2006) used data derived from student and school records of a large urban

school district in the southwestern United States to (a) examine the degree to which school drop-out rates and relations between student characteristics and student drop-out status varied across schools, and (b) assess whether select aspects of the schooling environment systematically related to school differences in mean drop-out rates and relations between student background and student drop-out outcomes. The school district consisted of more than 100 schools and served almost 90,000 students annually. In recent years, the student population had been approximately 46% Latino, 44% White, 4% American Indian, 3% African American, 2% Asian, and 1% other. The freshman cohort was characterized on the basis of risk factors that have been associated with dropping out of school in other reported research. Scholastic risk was measured by two student achievement indicators. A dummy code was used to identify students who were over-age for grade level by more than 1 year. The second achievement measure was derived from student scores on the TerraNova/CTBS5 Survey Plus, a standardized, norm-referenced achievement test. School organization was defined by the presence or absence of a smaller learning community style freshman academy. Results of this study indicated that the freshman academy schools tend to have lower drop-out odds for Latinos and an overall greater retention of ninth-grade students. Evidence from this study indicated that the nature of relations between student background and dropping out can vary across contexts. School districts may need to be sensitive to interactions between student and school characteristics when designing drop-out prevention strategies (Zvock, 2006).

Picklo and Christenson (2005) conducted a study to determine whether differences exist in the availability of instructional options for struggling students and students who did not pass state-required tests based on three school characteristics: retention practices, awards or sanctions, and school level. Participants were 242 teachers

and school psychologists (97 general education teachers, 89 special education teachers, and 56 school psychologists) representing 99 elementary and middle or junior high schools across 19 states. Participants were asked to rate on a 4-point scale the degree to which the 16 instructional options were routinely used at their school for students who were struggling academically and students who did not pass the required tests. The 16 instructional options include cooperative learning strategies, group work, one-to-one tutoring, smaller class size, multi-age grouping, flexible scheduling, use of curriculum-based management to make instructional changes, within-class ability grouping, small-group instruction, looping, intensive remedial help, before- or after-school homework programs, coordinated home-school interventions, instructional consultation, peer-assisted learning strategies, and instructional support from paraprofessionals or volunteers (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).

Analysis of variance was used to detect significant mean differences in the availability of instructional options between (a) schools that retained students and schools that socially promoted students; (b) schools that received awards or sanctions based on students' test performances and schools that did not receive awards or sanctions; and (c) elementary schools and middle or junior high schools (Picklo & Christenson, 2005, p. 264). The results indicated that there was limited variability in the instructional options that were being implemented. Many of the same instructional options were used regardless of school characteristics. This suggested that teachers and school psychologists may be using the same interventions to assist all students without considering the needs of individual students (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).

Summary

Research indicated that transition programs for students entering the ninth grade

had been successful in reducing the number of dropouts while improving the academic success of those students remaining in school. They were also effective in reducing the number of behavior issues or disciplinary infractions. Many different studies supplied a multitude of strategies to be used in transition programs to promote student success, especially with low-ability students. However, there was no conclusive research as to whether a transition program could be successful when only socially promoted students were the participants in the program.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The ninth-grade year in high school is a crucial one. Moving from an elementary or middle school atmosphere into a high school environment stressing precollege academics, athletics, and social interactions require different responses from the student. As students grow and become more acclimated to their surroundings, they are expected to become more successful. For many students who may not be academically prepared for high school, success does not occur in a timely fashion, if ever. These students face course failure, the possibility of grade retention, and eventually becoming a dropout (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001). The literature in Chapter 2 supported the use of strategies via different programs that assisted these students with their transition into high school. Many of these programs were found to be effective in raising student achievement, decreasing drop-out rates and lowering the number of behavioral issues.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 students. These students either did not achieve a level of proficiency on the eighth-grade end-of-grade mathematics test or did not meet local promotion standards for eighth-grade students. After attending a 3-week session of summer school following the eighth-grade year, each of the 39 students was promoted to the ninth grade at the discretion of the middle school principal.

Research Questions

The research questions underlying and providing a research framework for the study were as follows:

1. How did the target group's academic achievement compare to an earlier group

that had been socially promoted but had not participated in the summer transition program?

2. How did the target group perform on the English I end-of-course exam as compared to the Education Value-Added Assessment System prediction?

3. What explanations were there for the performances described in Questions 1 and 2?

4. What attitude changes toward school had students undergone in the year since social promotion?

5. What supports were helpful in effecting academic and attitudinal improvement in the targeted ninth-grade group?

Design of the Study

This researcher used a narrative case study design to explore the newly implemented transition program. A narrative case study is an in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in real-life settings from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon (in this case, a newly implemented transition program) (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). A narrative case study allows the use of multiple methods to collect data about a phenomenon. This approach can enhance the validity of case study findings through a process called triangulation. Triangulation uses multiple data-collection methods, data sources, analysts, or theories as corroborative evidence for the validity of qualitative research findings (Gall et al., 2003). Data reflecting end-of-course achievement, credits earned, EVASS predictions and actual achievement, focus group interviews with teachers and students, as well as responses from a student survey were analyzed to answer the research questions.

This study was a mixed methods research, using both quantitative and qualitative

approaches. Quantitative data was collected from English I end-of-course achievement, number of high school credits earned, and Education Value-Added Assessment System predictions. Qualitative data was collected from student surveys, as well as student and teacher focus groups.

Participants

The participants in this study were (1) 39 socially promoted students who were enrolled in a newly implemented transition program at this North Carolina high school during the 2008-2009 school year; (2) 82 socially promoted students who were enrolled in the focus high school as ninth graders during the 2007-2008 school year without the implementation of a transition program; and (3) four full-time certified classroom teachers who taught these students in the transition program.

Overview of Instruments

The data for this research study was both quantitative and qualitative; therefore, they were collected via several different instruments. The English I end-of-course exam was used as an instrument to collect quantitative data for each of the participants, the 82 students from the 2007-2008 school year without a transition program and the 39 students from the 2008-2009 school year with a transition program. The English I end-of-course data was used in a comparison between the group of 39 students and the group of 82 students. The English I end-of-course data was also used in a comparison with the EVAAS prediction for the English I end-of-course exam for each of the 39 participants, thereby making the EVAAS prediction another quantitative instrument used in the study. Another instrument used to collect quantitative data was the student questionnaire. Ordinal values were placed on Likert scale responses in order that the categorical data may be analyzed through the SPSS software. Qualitative data was collected via the

student focus group transcripts, the teacher focus group transcripts, and a free-response section included at the end of the student questionnaire. Themes emerging from the qualitative data collection were compared to the data obtained from the questionnaire in order to determine the outcome of the study.

Data Collection

At the end of the 2008-2009 school year, with the permission of the superintendent of the school district, each of the following steps occurred: (1) the researcher obtained the Education Value-Added Assessment System data including the prediction for student proficiency on the English I end-of-course exam for the 39 students enrolled in the transition program; (2) the researcher obtained the actual student proficiency scores from the English I end-of-course exam for the original 39 students enrolled in the transition program; and (3) the researcher obtained the actual student proficiency scores from the English I end-of-course exam for the 82 students who were socially promoted into the 2007-2008 school year but were not enrolled in any transition program. These data were entered into the SPSS system in order to compute central tendency statistics of mean, median, and mode.

This narrative case study design allowed the researcher to assess the effectiveness of the transition program using a student questionnaire and focus group interviews. The researcher created, tested, and administered a questionnaire to determine changes in students' attitudes toward school and their perceptions of the transition program. The questionnaire was tested on a trial group and revised. The revised questionnaire was administered near the end of the 2008-2009 school year (Appendix A). Students responded using a Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. This categorical data was entered into SPSS for frequency computation. The final response on the

questionnaire was open-ended in order to provide each student with an opportunity to offer additional information that was collected as qualitative data and presented as themes.

Focus group interviews were conducted by a nonbiased moderator with the student participants of the summer transition program. Students were randomly divided into groups of four or five students for each of the eight focus group interviews (Appendix B). One focus group interview was also conducted with the teachers who were involved in teaching the student participants during the summer transition program (Appendix C). Responses were recorded with a recording device (with the permission of the students and teachers), but were also recorded manually by the researcher. The recorded interviews were later transcribed by a separate party. At that time, the transcripts were verified by the participants.

Themes from the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interviews were elicited through a frequency and strength computation. Gall et al. (2003) defined themes as salient, characteristic features of a case. Responses to the five questions were triangulated to determine the overall effectiveness of the transition program.

Limitations of the Study

1. The questionnaires did not probe into students' beliefs, attitudes or inner experiences. Even if questions appeared unclear to the students, it was not possible to modify the items. The respondents' answers could only be as thorough as the questionnaire's items requested.

2. The groups of students being compared may have had inherent differences. They may also have been taught by teachers who were inherently different. Students naturally matured as they aged during the length of this study. That maturation could

have had an effect on the information the researcher collected.

3. The quality of the data collected through focus group interviews was influenced by the skill and motivation of the moderator.

Delimitations of the Study

1. This study focused on socially promoted to very low achieving students. More research may need to take place in order to determine if this type of transition program could have the same results with more academically successful students.

2. This study was conducted in only one location. While limited generalization could take place, the results from the study were individual to this school setting.

3. Time was also a delimitation. Collecting multiple years of data with the transition program in place could provide more meaningful data.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students in this study. This researcher compiled data on the academic achievement for these 39 students on the English I end-of-course exam compared to the score predicted for each student in the EVAAS system. The research examined the attitudes and beliefs of students and teachers through student surveys and focus group interviews. This Chapter described the procedures and instruments which were utilized to conduct the study and analyze the data.

Chapter 4: Results

Underachieving middle school students have a difficult time adjusting to high school. They are typically unable to find academic success at the high school level. Unless appropriate strategies for academic support and academic programs for struggling students are implemented and successful, these students will continue to drop out of school. Persons who drop out of school do not historically become contributing citizens to their environment. Often if they were able to find a job, it was one which only paid a minimum wage and required physical labor. Many educators believe that the drop-out rate could be reduced and students would stay in school through graduation if appropriate programs were implemented to motivate these students.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students. The research questions underlying and providing a research framework for the study were as follows:

1. How did the target group's academic achievement compare to an earlier group that had been socially promoted but had not had the summer transition program?
2. How did the target group perform on the English I end-of-course exam as compared to the Education Value-Added Assessment System prediction?
3. What explanations were there for the performances described in Questions 1 and 2?
4. What attitude changes toward school had students undergone in the year since social promotion?
5. What supports were helpful in effecting academic and attitudinal improvement in the targeted ninth-grade group?

Discussion

While collecting the data for this study, the researcher found that during the 2007-2008 school year, eight of the eighty-two socially promoted students moved from the target high school for different reasons. The data collected for the remaining 74 students for the 2007-2008 year were used to answer research questions in this study. During the 2008-2009 year, one of the 39 student participants from 2008-2009 returned to Mexico with his family, one student dropped out of school due to pregnancy, one student was placed through the court system into a group home located in the same LEA, and one transitioned with family to another school system in North Carolina. The data collected for the remaining 35 students for the 2008-2009 year were used to answer research questions in this study.

In order to answer the research questions for this study, data were obtained from school records. The researcher searched for and printed individual student transcripts from the NC Wise data system. This system contained all official data for students enrolled in all public schools for North Carolina. Data for the total number of credit units received and information containing the scale score and percentile of achievement for the English I end-of-course exam were collected from these transcripts. Official documentation for the retention in the ninth grade or promotion into the tenth grade for each of these students was also located on each individual student transcript.

In order to answer the first research question, a comparison of the academic achievement between the students from the 2007-2008 year and the students from the 2008-2009 year was completed. The researcher began to answer the question by collecting data pertaining to the promotion/retention rates for each group of students. The results of this data collection are displayed in Table 6. In order to be promoted from

the ninth grade into the tenth grade, a student must have successfully completed a minimum of six courses, one of which must have been English I. These data showed that from the 2007-2008 year, 42 students or 56.8% of the 74 students were promoted into the tenth grade. Thirty-one students or 41.9% of the 74 students were retained in the ninth grade. Table 6 displays a comparison of the number of students from each group who were promoted into the tenth grade or retained in the ninth grade, as well as a percentage of students from each group who were promoted in the tenth grade or retained in the ninth grade.

Table 6

Comparison of Retention and Promotion Percentages for Students of 2007-2008 Year and Students of 2008-2009 Year

	Retained	Promoted
2007-2008 year	32 (43.2%)	42 (56.8%)
2008-2009 year	13 (37.1%)	22 (62.9%)

Of the 35 students from the 2008-2009 year, 22 students or 62.8% were academically promoted to the tenth grade. Of these 22 students, 12 students successfully completed the summer transition program. One unit of elective high school credit was awarded to each student completing the summer program successfully. This credit would be used towards fulfilling high school graduation requirements. Thirteen of the thirty-five students, or 37.1%, did not meet promotion requirements and were retained in the ninth grade. Of these 13 students, only 6 successfully completed the summer transition program. The percentage of students promoted into the tenth grade, as well as the

percentage of students retained in the ninth grade infers that the students of 2008-2009 attained higher levels of academic achievement.

The students of the 2007-2008 year accumulated 387 credit units as an entirety, which was an average of 5.23 credit units per each of the 74 students. The students of the 2008-2009 year accumulated 188 credit units as an entirety, which was an average of 5.37 credit units per each of the 74 students. This comparison also indicated that the students in 2008-2009 were more academically successful than the students from the 2007-2008 year.

Next, a comparison of the English I end-of-course exam scale scores for each student group was completed. While collecting the data found in Table 7, the researcher found that not all of the students from the 2007-2008 year were tested on the English I curriculum. The administration during that school year predicted that 13 of the 82 socially promoted students would not be successful on the English I end-of-course exam and therefore, did not enroll those students in an English I course. However, the 13 students did attend the high school throughout the entire school year. Four of the students from the 2008-2009 year did not complete the English I end-of-course exam although they were enrolled in English I. For different reasons, each of the four students stopped attending school near the end of the second semester of their freshman year so they did not receive a test administration of the English I end-of-course exam. Each of the four returned to school as freshmen during the 2009-2010 year, so they were never designated as dropouts.

The data in Table 7 demonstrates a difference of only two points between the two groups of student scores when only those students completing the exam are used. However, the difference between the two groups increases to 10 points when all students

are involved in the comparison. In both instances, the students from the year 2008-2009 were responsible for the higher mean score. The median score was the same for the tested students and only a 1-point difference was experienced when all students were included.

Table 7

A Comparison of the English I End-of-Course Exam Scale Scores for Students in the 2007-2008 Year and the 2008-2009 Year

	Mean	Median	Mode
2007-2008 (61)	141.62	144	145
2008-2009 (31)	143.193	144	141, 144
2007-2008 (all)	116.74	141.5	no score
2008-2009 (all)	126.82	142.5	141, 144

In answering research questions pertaining to the academic achievement of the target group of students of 2008-2009 and the previous group of students of 2007-2008 without the transition program, different academic areas were researched. The promotion and retention rates for both groups of students were compared. The total number of academic credit units earned by each group of students was compared. Last, a comparison of the English I end-of-course scale scores for each group of students was completed.

In order to answer Research Question 2, a comparison of the English I end-of-course exam scores and the Education Value-Added Assessment System prediction for

each student participant in the target group from the 2008-2009 year had to be completed. The EVAAS system database houses at least 5 years of test data for each individual student when the data is available. However, when at least 3 years of data are not available for a particular student, the EVAAS prediction will not appear. The researcher found this to be true for nine students when collecting the EVAAS data.

Table 8 demonstrates a comparison of the EVAAS prediction and the English I end-of-course exam for each of the 30 participants with available data. The difference column shows a positive result to be one in which the English I end-of-course exam score was higher than the EVAAS prediction. A negative result shows that the English I end-of-course exam was less than the EVAAS predictions. A difference of zero shows that the English I end-of-course exam score was exactly as the EVAAS system had predicted. The end result of the difference column demonstrates that the positive totals were much more prevalent than negative or no differences by 266 points.

Table 8

A Comparison of the EVAAS Prediction and the English I End-of Course Exam for 30 Student Participants during the 2008-2009 Year

Student	EVAAS	EOC	Difference
01	20	20	NA
02	05	01	-
03	05	08	+
04	15	15	NA
05	23	49	+
06	09	15	+
07	05	07	+
08	23	20	-
09	33	24	-
10	04	24	+
11	04	15	+
12	09	34	+
13	20	54	+
14	26	24	-
15	23	30	+
16	17	15	-
17	03	02	-
18	15	06	-
19	20	62	+
20	15	49	+
21	20	34	+
22	12	17	+
23	23	24	+
24	09	27	+
25	12	15	+
26	23	34	+
27	21	42	+
28	29	24	-
29	17	36	+
30	03	02	-

The third research question was regarding the possible explanations there could have been for the findings regarding Questions 1 and 2. Students are often more successful in their academic performance when they believe in themselves. The questionnaire administered to the students asked specific questions about their beliefs

based on their experience in the program. Table 9 is an accumulation of the data regarding academic skills. These areas—reading skills, math skills, and organization skills—were reinforced in the transition program.

Table 9

Student Responses Regarding the Improvement of Academic Achievement

Areas of Improvement	SA	A	D	SD	NA	Percent Positive
Reading skills	12	10	1	2	0	88%
Math skills	3	14	7	1	0	68%
Organization skills	5	13	3	2	2	72%
If I try, I can do well	17	6	1	0	1	92%

Eighty-eight percent of the students in the target group from 2008-2009 who completed the survey believed their reading skills were improved. Sixty-eight percent of these students believed their math skills were improved. Seventy-two percent of these students believed their organizational skills were improved. Last, 92% of the students from the 2008-2009 year believed that if they tried to do well, they would do well.

The fourth research question asked about any attitude changes these students may have undergone since entering the high school program. These qualitative data were collected via student questionnaires and focus group interviews. A nonbiased interview agent divided the students into groups and led the focus groups by asking the interview questions. Responses were recorded by a recorder and an audio taping device. The recorder transcribed all responses into a notebook grouping specific question responses

together in order for the researcher to more easily locate the themes in student responses.

Table 10 is a visualization of the themes found through the student questionnaire and the focus group interview questions.

Table 10

Frequency of Themes Found in Student Surveys and Focus Group Interviews

Themes	SA	A	D	SD	NA	Percent Positive
Organization skills	5	13	3	2	2	72%
Reading skills	12	10	1	2	0	88%
Time-management skills	3	12	8	1	1	60%
Conflict-resolution skills	5	13	5	2	0	72%
Decision-making skills	9	11	3	1	1	80%

As demonstrated in the frequency table above, only 60% of the students responded that time-management skills had been affected by their involvement in the program. However, 72% believed that their organizational skills and conflict-resolution skills had been positively affected. Eighty percent of the students perceived improvement in their decision-making skills and 82% of the students responded that their reading skills had been improved.

Table 11 reports the responses from the student questionnaire related to the individual student participation in the transition program.

Table 11

Frequencies of Responses Related to Participation in the Transition Program Implemented in the 2008-2009 School Year

	SA	A	D	SD	NA	Percent Positive
Participating in the program was a positive experience.	16	8	0	0	1	96%
Participating helped improve math skills.	3	14	7	1	0	68%
Participating made transition go smoothly.	6	14	2	2	1	80%
Participating helped me understand teacher expectations.	10	13	1	1	0	92%
Participating helped me believe if I try hard, I can do well.	17	6	1	0	1	92%
Participating was a good experience overall.	16	8	0	1	0	96%
I would recommend the transition program.	17	6	0	1	1	92%

The qualitative data collected by the researcher for Table 11 demonstrate that only 68% of the students believed their math skills improved. Only 80% of the target students believed that participation in the transition program allowed their transition into the high school setting to go more smoothly. However, 92% of these students believed that participation in the program allowed them to better understand teacher expectations at the high school level, and helped them believe that if they tried hard, they would do well; they would recommend participation in the program to other students. Ninety-six percent

of these students responded that the transition program was a good experience overall and was a positive experience for them individually.

Five teachers and one administrator participated in the focus group interview sessions with a nonbiased interview agent. Their responses reflected their belief that the program was successful. However, a lingering theme throughout their responses was that students should not have the option of attending or not attending the program. In addition, they suggested that the program be held later in the summer. They believed that the program was implemented too early in the summer and the students still maintained the summer school attitude. They believed that the program should be attempted closer to the start of the next school year in order that students might continue that motivation in the regular school year.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Typically, students who have been underachievers in middle school have a difficult time adjusting to high school. Unless appropriate levels of support and academic programs for struggling students are implemented and successful, these students will continue to drop out of school. The purpose of this study was to evaluate a transition program which was implemented in the 2008-2009 school year at a traditional high school in an effort to increase the academic success for 39 socially promoted students. This study provided the opportunity to gain insight into the minds of a target group of socially promoted students who participated in the implementation of a transition program for at-risk students. In addition, quantitative data were collected to determine if a growth in individual student achievement did occur and if it could be contributed to the implementation of the transition program.

Research articles from the literature review showed that students are more academically successful when they are educated in smaller groups. Strategies should be implemented that teach students social skills as well as academic skills. Cauley and Javanovich (2006) studied different transition programs in various areas throughout the United States. Many of these transition programs extended the coursework for English I into a year-long course. Additional sessions for tutoring were held in an effort to make the students academically successful. The transition program in this study implemented a form of this strategy and began a summer session of reading and math which served to give these rising ninth graders a head start on the academic expectations for high school.

In order to determine if the transition program had been effective in raising academic achievement, the researcher made a comparison of English I end-of-course

exam scale scores for each group of students. Students from the 2007-2008 school year were socially promoted to the ninth grade with no offer of additional help during the summer months. The practice at the target high school was to enroll all rising ninth-grade students scoring less than a level four on the eighth-grade reading end-of-grade test in both Modular English and English I during the ninth-grade year. This afforded students a year-long opportunity to learn the skills necessary for scoring a proficient level on the English I end-of-course exam. The students from the 2008-2009 school year with the summer transition program in place were also enrolled in a combination of the Modular English and English I courses. Both groups of students were offered extra tutoring sessions before school or after school from the regular education teacher. The main difference in the instructional practices for these two groups of students was the extra tutoring in reading which occurred during the summer transition program.

Only 61 of the 82 students from 2007-2008 were in attendance and tested on the English I end-of-course exam during their first ninth-grade year. Thirty-one of the thirty-nine students from 2008-2009 were in attendance and tested on the English I end-of-course exam at the end of their first ninth-grade year. Regardless of the number of students included in the comparison, 82 students compared to 39 students or 61 students compared to 31 students, the results were the same. The student participants from the newly implemented transition program were more academically successful on the English I end-of-course exams.

Academic achievement, however, does not rest solely with the completion of the English I end-of-course exam. Another factor to be considered was the number of courses successfully completed and accumulated towards promotion to the tenth grade. While collecting data, the researcher found each group consisted of students with no

credits and students with all possible credits. Not all students participating in the transition program received the credit awarded for successful completion of the program. Support services during the 2007-2008 year and the 2008-2009 year were different for the two groups of students. For the students involved with the transition program, certain classes were assigned and special teachers were selected to instruct these classes. The drop-out prevention counselor was assigned to work with each of these students regularly. Follow-up sessions were scheduled from the transition program's character education teacher to discuss report card grades and other social issues. These extra supports were not provided for the students from 2007-2008 and the lack thereof may have made a difference in the accumulation of credits for the two groups of students. At any rate, the group of students from the 2008-2009 year with the transition program in place accumulated more credits than the other group of students from 2007-2008.

Total academic success was also affected by the retention or promotion of students from each group. A higher percentage of students from the 2007-2008 school year without the transition program were retained in the ninth grade than the students from the 2008-2009 year with the transition program. If the additional supports which were put in place had an effect on the number of credits accumulated, then the number of credits accumulated would have caused an increase in the promotion rate for a group of students. Therefore, it would seem that the group accumulating the largest number of high school credits would have the highest percentage of promotions for students and the lowest number of retentions for students. This was the end result and demonstrated that the students from 2008-2009 with the transition program in place were more academically successful than the group of students from 2007-2008 without the transition program.

The researcher used a comparison of the English I end-of-course data and the EVAAS prediction for each student as another strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of the newly implemented transition program. EVAAS predictions can be used to give administrators and teachers knowledge on the ability levels of their students in specific curriculum areas. Multiple years of test data are used to predict student outcomes on tests that are yet to be taken. Little research has been conducted to determine the accuracy of these predictions and some variance from the predicted outcomes would be expected for each student in the group. However, 63% of the students in the transition group experienced a higher score on the English I end-of-course exam than was predicted through the EVAAS database.

The positive growth demonstrated by the English I end-of-course exam scores above the predictions found in the EVAAS database could be explained by the emphasis placed on learning necessary skills during the year-long exposure to the English I skills in the regular classroom. However, additional emphasis was placed on improving social skills—organizational skills, time-management skills, belief in one’s own ability—and this may have had an effect on the students and their desire for academic focus. Students perform better when they believe in themselves (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2001). The questionnaire administered to the students asked specific questions regarding academic performance. Ninety-two percent of the students answered that they could do better if they tried. Students also responded in the focus group interviews with statements such as “my math skills have improved” and “my reading skills have improved.” As students began to experience success through participating in the transition program, they became more apt to attempt new things. One student wrote,

“For me, it was a big change. The program helped me get ready for high school, like moving from little things to big things.”

Students perform better when they relate to an adult and believe that someone cares about them. Many of the strategies that promote positive relationships between students and teachers, counselors, or administrators were implemented during this transition program. Students expressed through the focus group interviews that they learned to cope with social situations through the Character Education portion of the transition program. One student responded that the program helped a lot with tempers and anger problems. The program gave ways to solve a conflict instead of using violence. Less energy was expended in a negative manner and more energy was spent in a more positive focus.

The student questionnaire responses indicated that student attitudes had changed based on their own academic performance. Themes from data compilation proved that students believed they had better reading and writing skills. Beginning each day of the transition program by writing reflective thoughts in a journal enabled the students to focus on writing to grab the attention of others. Students also expressed improvement in organization skills and in developing the intrinsic motivation, “If I try, I can do well.” Attitude changes toward school appeared directly related to the improved skills and believing in one’s self.

Students responded during the focus group interviews regarding the support of two teachers who shared the role of teaching Character Education. One student stated, “I kind of liked the teacher in class. He pushed us to do better. We had open discussions, like he would ask questions and we would just have open words.” Another participant liked the fact that these teachers would not let students give up. Students were constantly

reminded that the program was beneficial and that they could succeed by following through with participation.

Smith (2001) stated that the positive effects of high school transition programs work for students only when the school provides complete support. The target high school teachers and administration in this study provided support during the 6-week duration of the transition program. However, in addition, supports were in place during the following school year—additional counseling sessions, regular tutoring sessions, enrollment in a year-long English I class, and modifications in the regular day schedule. Courses taken during the regular school year for the transition program group of students were manipulated in an attempt to meet student needs. A year-long course in reading with the use of READ 180 software was made available for students with low-level reading abilities. Many of the students were enrolled in classes taught by very nurturing teachers in an attempt to support student-teacher relationships and establish rapport with an adult.

A student responded, “The program was effective for me. It made me try harder to study and try not to get in trouble.” Ninety-two percent of the students completing the questionnaire responded that they would recommend the program to rising ninth-grade students in the future.

Conclusions

An increase in student achievement was documented through a comparison of English I end-of-course exam scores, promotion and retention rates for the two groups of students, and a comparison of the average number of high school credit units per each student in the two groups. An improvement in students’ attitudes toward school and school coursework was documented by the qualitative data gathered via the student

questionnaire and the interview questions asked in the student focus groups.

This newly implemented transition program was successful. Other strategies and factors had an effect on the results of this study. Those factors could not be ruled out as beneficial or harmful. However, the transition program did have an effect on the academic achievement of the involved students. When students were successful in transitioning to the ninth grade, other areas of their school life were affected. Positive changes in social roles and academic achievement levels were experienced for many of the students. Although more research will need to be conducted regarding transition programs and their effects on student achievement, this program did have a positive effect on the involved students.

Limitations

A limitation to the study was that the study took place in one location with only 39 students. Therefore, the ability to generalize with a larger population was limited. This study was of interest due to the high percentage of students who were socially promoted from the middle school to the high school yearly at the target school. It was a focus of the district administration to find ways to assist with lowering the drop-out rate, increasing the graduation rate, and closing the achievement gap for these students.

Lack of available data for some students was a limitation to the study. EVAAS predictions were not available for all students. Some students in the 2007-2008 group without the transition program were not tested on the English I end-of-course exam during their ninth-grade year. These missing data had an effect on the outcome of the quantitative portion of the research.

Responses given during the focus group interviews for the program's teachers indicated that a limitation involved the option students were given to attend or not attend

the second 3 weeks of the transition program. If student attendance had been mandatory and students had not been allowed to stop participating, the data may have been affected.

Another limitation to be considered was the honesty and openness of the student participants in their responses.

Recommendations for Future Study

1. Increase the number of participants to include a more diverse group of student learners. Participation should not be limited to those students who do not meet promotion standards between the eighth and ninth grade.

2. Study the implementation of a program which not only provides support for rising ninth-grade students but would follow those students throughout high school to document the positive or negative effects.

3. Consider the time constraints for the transition program. If it were held closer to the beginning of the new school year, students may enter the school year with more academic motivation. Putting more time between the middle school experience and the transition program may have an effect on student participation and performance.

4. Study the importance of the findings of this study and relate those findings to programs and their implementation at the middle school level.

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Appendix A
Student Survey for Transition Program

Student Survey for Transition Program

Please answer each question below by filling one circle.

SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree

NA = Not Applicable or Not Observed

Question	SA	A	DA	SD	NA
1. The transition program was a positive experience for me.					
2. Classes in the transition program helped improve my math skills.					
3. The transition program helped make my transition from middle school to high school go smoothly.					
4. Participating in the transition program helped me with my organizational skills.					
5. Participating in the transition program helped improve my reading skills.					
6. Participating in the transition program helped me with my time-management skills.					
7. Participating in the transition program helped me with my conflict-resolution skills.					
8. Participating in the transition program helped me with my decision-making skills.					
9. The transition program helped me understand the expectations of high school teachers.					
10. The transition program helped me realize that if I try, I can do well in school.					
11. The transition program helped me become more determined to graduate from high school on time.					
12. My grades have improved because I was part of the transition program.					
13. Overall, the transition program was a good experience.					

14. I would recommend the transition program to a student who needs help moving from eighth grade to ninth grade.					
15. Because of my hard work in this transition program, I will be a tenth-grade student next year.					
16. Other information I would like to share about the transition program is as follows:					

Appendix B
Student Focus Interview Questions

Student Focus Interview Questions

1. How effective was the summer school portion of the transition program?
2. How could the summer transitional program have been improved?
3. Tell me about your summer experience.
4. What was good about the program?
5. What was bad about the program?

Appendix C

Teacher Focus Interview Questions

Teacher Focus Interview Questions

1. How effective was the summer school portion of the transition program?
2. How could the summer transitional program have been improved?
3. Tell me about your summer experience.
4. What was good about the program?
5. What was bad about the program?