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# How Do Ninth-Grade Students Make Meaning of Their Transition Experienced During Their Freshman Year? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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How Do Ninth-Grade Students Make Meaning of Their Transition Experienced During  
Their Freshman Year? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

By  
Tashna C. Morris

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  
2015

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Tashna C. Morris under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Abstract**

How Do Ninth-Grade Students Make Meaning of Their Transition Experienced During Their Freshman Year? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Morris, Tashna C., 2015: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Ninth-Grade Transition/Freshman Experience/Freshman Transition/Making Meaning

The purpose of this study was to better understand how students make meaning of their freshman transition year and to assist school personnel in the school to develop effective strategies to help students transition more successfully into the ninth grade. This study explored the self-efficacy theory as it relates to ninth-grade students' transition experiences in their freshman year of high school and adapted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis stance as the theoretical framework from which the issue of the ninth-grade transition was explored. Few studies have used a phenomenological approach to examine the freshman transition experience and even fewer studies have used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach to study this topic. This study attempted to address this gap in the literature.

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, 13 ninth-grade students were asked in the second semester of their ninth-grade year to journal and participate in a 30- to 40-minute interview session about their high school transition experience. To further ascertain how students experienced their ninth-grade transitional year, they also submitted symbolic representations. The study data were analyzed using the steps outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) which included reading and rereading the data several times, initial note taking, identifying emergent themes from the transcript and early notes, searching for connections across themes by organizing identified themes into those that cluster together and those at a higher level, moving to the next case, and then looking for patterns across cases.

Six themes emerged from the data that helped to explain how students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year of high school: facilitators of successful transition, indicators of successful transition, transitional adjustments, barriers to successful transition, looking to the future, and high school readiness. Each student experienced his or her freshman transitional year in a personalized way, yet commonalities were found in these unique experiences.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

The way schools create an event to welcome new arrivals is a clear indication of the importance of school transitions. Elementary schools have Beginners Day for kindergarteners. Middle schools have day visits or a full week of camp for rising sixth graders. High schools have orientation sessions and registration nights for rising ninth graders as well as their parents. Colleges and universities have some form of special orientation session or seminar for their incoming freshman class. Needless to say, all educational institutions mark the transition of their students with some kind of special or set-apart event, clearly indicating the significance of this major event in a student's life. Despite, however, the very best of intentions on the part of the school community as well as parents, some students never make a successful transition into high school (Queen & Algozzine, 2005).

A plethora of interpretations exists in the educational setting as to the meaning of transition. On one hand, transitions are viewed as a one-time set of activities that programs, families, and children undertake at the end of the outgoing school year or at the beginning of the new school year. On the other hand, transitions reflect an ongoing effort to link children's natural environments to school environments (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). Transition has also been defined as the process that all partners or major stakeholders experience as students move from one level to the next, rather than a single event that happens to a child (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). Also, Kimmel and Weiner (1995) defined transition as "a period of change, growth and disequilibrium that serves as a kind of bridge between one relatively stable point in life and another relatively stable, but different point" (p. 10). They further defined transition as being both external and

internal where the transition of adolescence can be viewed as activated by internal biological changes: those present in growth, puberty, cognitive development, and psychological maturation. External transition is understood as those events involving individuals and society, social regulations, and expectations in life such as graduating from high school, attending college, or getting married (Kimmel & Weiner, 1995).

While the transition from middle school to high school is an external transition, it should be noted that adolescents are also experiencing an internal biological transition as well.

These two types of transitions, occurring simultaneously, further compound the physical and psychological issues of middle school students who transition into high school.

Regardless of the various interpretations of what the transition process means, it cannot be denied that transitions increasingly are being recognized as critical periods in public education in the United States (Queen & Algozzine, 2005).

According to Akos, Queen, and Lineberry (2005), various research on transition has postulated the following:

- a child's transition to school creates a foundation for future academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development;
- ninth graders entering high school experience academic achievement losses regardless of whether they attend a middle or K-8 school; those who attend middle school experience two transitions within a 3-year span and experience even more severe losses;
- students who experience a higher number of transitions are more likely to drop out of high school;
- successful students have at least one adult who cares about their personal

success; and

- children who do not make effective transitions will be less successful in school, have difficulties making friends, and may be vulnerable to mental health problems.

Therefore, helping students make a smooth move from middle to high school is essential for their future successes.

A positive school environment is characterized by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships; opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making; and shared positive norms, goals, and values (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). While students making a school transition at any level face important changes in school environment, young adolescents are particularly vulnerable to difficulties during a transition. The transition into high school presents several challenges; namely, students face a change in their environment where there is an increased number of peers and a decreased sense of connectedness with teachers which could cause students to develop a decreased sense of belonging (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Roderick, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Students who feel connected to school are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically. Research also has demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes including school attendance, staying in school longer, and higher grades and classroom test scores. Connectedness is also enhanced by a healthy and safe school environment and a supportive psychosocial climate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). The more connected students are to their new school, the better they will do in all the measures important in tracking success such as grades, test scores, attendance, and discipline (The Boomerang Project, 2004-2015).

Another challenge that students encounter is a new social structure and a dramatic change in their social status where eighth graders go from being the oldest, most experienced students in the middle level school to the youngest, newest members of the high school population. This phenomenon known as the “top dog to “bottom dog” status may cause greater feelings of anonymity and isolation and inevitably hinder students’ abilities to become integrated into their new school community (Blyth et al., 1983; Roderick, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Also, low achievement, low on-time graduation rates, and increased high school drop-out rates are the end results of failing to make an effective transition into high school (Herlihy, 2007). Research shows that making a successful transition to high school can help students form lasting attachments to school and increase their likelihood of graduating from high school (Kerr, 2002).

Based on the abundance of literature surrounding this issue dating back almost 3 decades, there is indeed a crucial need to find ways of increasing the successful transition of students from middle to high school. It is also evident that, based on the continued study of this issue, no single solution exists to this problem. However, studies indicate that the highest number of dropouts occurs between the ninth- and tenth-grade school years (Wheelock & Miao, 2005) and that the ninth-grade year may determine whether or not students go on to graduate from high school (Legters, 2005). This is a problem that cannot be ignored.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Adolescence is one of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the life span: a time of accelerated growth and change second only to infancy; a time of expanding horizons, self-discovery, and emerging independence; a time of metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood. Its beginning is associated with

profound biological, physical, behavioral, and social transformations that roughly correspond with the move to middle school or junior high. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995, p. 3)

Coupled with these changes, adolescents experience cognitive transitions as they make the shift from concrete forms of thinking to more formal operational thinking. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) described this formal operational thinking as one that emerges during the early adolescent period (ages 11-12 years) and remains as characteristic of one's reasoning process during maturity into adulthood. During this process, the adolescent begins to see objects as free from their concrete ties, and he or she is able to reason in more abstract and flexible ways (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). However, the ability to describe one's self less concretely works as a double-edged sword for the adolescent, in that the adolescent's self-concept becomes more susceptible to distortions. The adolescent then is at risk for developing an inaccurate self-concept that may lead to maladaptive forms of behavior. While some may overestimate their abilities, dooming themselves to failure, others might devalue their abilities and avoid challenges. This perspective may be one to help explain the academic and social challenges students encounter as they transition into high school (Harter, 1990). The literature indicates that there is no shortage of explanations as to why the transition year from middle school to high school is so tumultuous.

In helping young adolescents make a successful transition into high school, one of the fundamental functions of the initial middle-level education movement was to articulate young adolescent transitions into high school. However, today, young adolescents frequently have a difficult time making the transition into high school; and as a result, many drop out often shortly after they enter high school or fall behind and fail to

graduate on time (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). The issue of falling behind and failing to graduate on time is illustrated by Wheelock and Miao (2005). They posited that if students were progressing on time through their academic grades, the numbers for eighth- and ninth-grade students enrolled should be very similar in size across the country from 1 year to the next. According to their research, however, 13% more students were enrolled in ninth grade in 2001 than in eighth grade the previous year. The number of students enrolled in the tenth grade compared to the number of previous year ninth-grade students was far less, thereby creating what is known as the ninth-grade bulge and the tenth-grade dip (Haney et al., 2004; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). As a result, students in ninth grade comprise the highest percentage of the overall high school population as students in disproportionate numbers are failing to be promoted out of ninth grade. Promotion rates between ninth and tenth grade are much lower than rates between other grades (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

One study of 450 high schools and their feeder middle schools showed that ninth grade spells doom for about 25% of ninth graders nationwide and becomes the holding tank for high schools (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). Furthermore, over the past 30 years, the number of students in the ninth grade has more than tripled, with recent reports indicating that over 4.2 million students were enrolled in the ninth grade, or about 23% of all students in the United States (Williams & Richman, 2007).

One factor that contributes to this transitional challenge is that by the time students get to high school, as many as 40-60% of all students (urban, suburban, and rural) are chronically disengaged from school; and this disturbing number does not include the young people who have already dropped out (Blum, 2005). Substantial research has emerged documenting the fact that the transition into high school is also

marked by increased disengagement and declining motivation, particularly for low-performing youths (National Research Council, 2004). Increased disengagement and declining motivation, in turn, predict subsequent school dropout. The national graduation rate is estimated by some to be 68%, with nearly one third of all public high school students failing to graduate (Swanson, 2004). In the 35 largest central cities in the United States, between 40-50% of high schools graduate less than half of their ninth-grade class in 4 years (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

Academic failure during the transition to high school is directly linked to the probability of dropping out. Statistics indicate that as many as 5% of all high school students leave school each year; unfortunately, among certain groups, for example, low-income students, that number rises to 10% (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). Despite the increasing importance of holding a high school diploma, the high school completion rate has not increased significantly since 1985; and should current rates continue, one in seven children born in the United States today will not graduate from high school (Children's Defense Fund, 2004; Kaufman et al., 2001). Furthermore, students failing courses during the first semester of high school were more likely to experience further deterioration in their school performance and not likely to experience a recovery (Roderick & Camburn, 1999).

While most students during the transition will rise to the new challenges they face, the reality is that some will stumble toward academic failure especially if they have received inadequate preparation in middle school and insufficient support to ease the transition (Mizelle, 2005). Alspaugh (1998) pointed out that achievement loss in students transitioning from middle school was greater when moving to high school than those who transitioned from a K-8 school. Clearly, preparation is critical since academic demands

increase at the high school level and students encounter new rules and expectations, an increase in departmentalization and differentiation by academic ability, and different instructional techniques that require new, more advanced skills (Roderick, 1993).

A study of all 50 states shows North Carolina as having one of the nation's worst attrition rates between ninth and tenth grades. The state's sophomore class in 2000-2001 shrank 18% from the freshman class the year before, the result of students held back and others who just quit (Silberman, 2004). The drop-out rates for the 2010-2011 school year, however, saw drastic improvements where North Carolina recorded 15,342 dropouts in Grades 9-12. This was an 8.7% decrease from the count reported in 2009-2010, the fewest number of high school dropouts ever reported. Though there was a marked improvement in drop-out rates in North Carolina for the 2010-2011 school year, as in past years, students dropped out most frequently at Grade 9 (30.1%), followed by Grade 10 (27.6%), Grade 11 (25.2%), and Grade 12 (17.0%) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], n.d.b).

Jonsson (2004) wrote that according to a new study by Boston College, ninth-grade students' rates of retention have tripled in the past 30 years nationwide. The article also noted that in North Carolina about 15% of ninth graders are retained. According to Schargel and Smink (2013), "poor academic performance linked to retention in one grade is the single strongest school-related predictor of dropping out" (p. 33); the authors further noted that "one report indicated that out of every ten dropouts, nine had been retained at least one year" (p. 33). The relationship here among academic performance, retention rates, and drop-out rates cannot be overemphasized.

Schargel and Smink's (2013) statement about drop-out rates gets right to the heart of the matter. They stated,



Every September, approximately 3.5 million young people in America enter the eighth grade. Over the succeeding 4 years, more than 505,000 of them drop out—an average of nearly more than 2805 per day of the school year. Picture it: Every single school day, more than 70 school buses drive out of America's school yard, filled with students who will not return. (p. 9)

This is such a profound statement by the writers and a vivid illustration of the epidemic that we still face, that of students dropping out of school. However, according to Reents (2002), researchers found a significant impact on the number of student dropouts—a drop-out rate of 8% in schools with fully operating transition programs compared to 24% in schools without transition programs.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Issues surrounding school transitions have been widely documented in the literature (Alspaugh, 1998; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Mac Iver, 1990; Monahan, 1992; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006), and the perceptions of students regarding the transition to high school is no exception (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Case, 2006; Cushman, 2006; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Moore, 2009). Other studies document the comparison between student perceptions and parent perceptions regarding the transition process (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Smith et al., 2006; Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008; Zeedyk et al., 2003). However, very few studies have explored this topic from a phenomenological standpoint.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year of high school using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Selected students were asked to journal in the second semester of their ninth-grade year and were also asked to

participate in a 30- to 40-minute interview session about their high school transition experience. While previous studies examined how students experienced the transition in the initial weeks of the ninth-grade year, this study was retrospective. The researcher believed this reflective approach gave a more comprehensive view of how students make meaning of the transition experienced during their freshman year of high school.

This research was conducted in the largest and most diverse high school in the school district. This high school has also experienced a steady increase in graduation rates over the past 3 years. Many transitional studies examining the move from middle school to high school have highlighted the link between a successful transition into the ninth grade and continued success throughout a student's high school career to graduation. According to Legters (2005), students' probabilities of graduating from high school have been directly linked to the amount of success they encounter in their first year of high school. Therefore, an additional purpose of this study was to ascertain direct student input about factors that impacted their success or lack thereof as they experienced their first year of high school. Findings will provide valuable data for the school as they plan and implement their Freshman Academy and as they plan their Freshman Orientation session for the upcoming 2016-2017 school year. This research could also provide schools with valuable information that may contribute to improved 4-year cohort graduation rates while expanding the literature in this field.

### **Research Question**

The central research question was, "How do first-time ninth-grade students make meaning of their freshman experience?"

## Demographics

The target population for this study included ninth-grade students in a suburban high school located in southwestern North Carolina. The high school is one of 10 high schools in the district including the early college high school. The school's total population is approximately 1,435 and is considered the most diverse in comparison to all the other high schools in the district (Table 1). The high school also boasts increased graduation rates surpassing those of the district and the state for the past 3 years (Table 2).

Table 1

### *Student Demographics*

Race/Ethnicity	Ninth n(%)	Tenth n(%)	Eleventh n(%)	Twelfth n(%)	Whole School n(%)
Asian	8(33.3)	5(20.8)	6(25)	5(20.8)	24(1.5)
Black	157(27.5)	151(26.5)	133(23.3)	129(22.6)	570(39.7)
White	155(25.7)	174(28.9)	142(23.5)	131(21.7)	602(42)
Hispanic	46(25.7)	39(21.8)	49(27.3)	45(25)	179(12.5)
Multi	22(39)	13(23)	7(12.3)	15(26.3)	57(4)
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	2(100)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	2(0.14)
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0(0)	1(100)	0(0)	0(0)	1(0.07)

Table 2

*Cohort Graduation Rates (2009-2012) North Carolina Report Card (NCDPI, n.d.a)*

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Target High School	76.8%	80.7%	87.4%
District	72.0%	75.4%	77.8%
State	74.2%	77.9%	80.4%

The participants for this study were purposefully selected from the ninth-grade class of the 2013-2014 school year based on having experienced the ninth-grade transition for the first time. Participants were also selected from one regular and one honors English 1 class.

The IPA approach challenges the traditional linear relationship between “number of participants and value of research” with a sample size of 10 participants at the higher end of most recommendations (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 32). A sample size of 13 first-time ninth-grade students was used for this study.

### **Overview of the Study Design and Procedures**

This study employed a type of qualitative approach known as the IPA approach. This recently developed and rapidly growing approach to qualitative research seeks to examine how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Journal writing, symbolic representations, and interviews were used as the instruments for data collection, and the IPA’s three-tiered component—the lived experience, hermeneutic inquiry, and an idiographic focus—was addressed in the data analysis.

### **Researcher’s Organizational Ties**

The researcher is not a staff member of the school being studied. However, the

researcher is currently employed within this school district and has worked in previous years in this particular school district in the capacity of a middle school sixth- and eighth-grade teacher, also two very important transitional points for students.

The researcher became interested in the issue of transition when the ninth-grade teachers from the feeder high school of the researcher's middle school contended that the incoming freshmen were not adequately prepared for the academic, social, and emotional rigors of high school. They began to question if the eighth-grade teachers were doing an effective job of preparing students for high school. On the other hand, the eighth-grade teachers were questioning whether the high school teachers and administration were doing an effective job of ensuring that students have a successful transition into high school, each passing the blame onto the other. The researcher felt that this "passing of the buck" was futile and decided to conduct a student and teacher survey of the entire eighth-grade class to get a clearer picture of student and teacher perceptions of the preparation students received for high school and what could be done to help students transition more successfully to ninth grade. Needless to say, the survey findings were quite enlightening and useful in helping eighth-grade teachers and administrators envision what steps needed to be taken in helping students make a successful transition into high school.

The researcher took further interest in this issue and wanted to know how high school students viewed the transition process. The researcher selected the high school in question because this school is the largest and most diverse high school in the district. The school has also seen a significant increase in its graduation rates over the last 3 years, which, according to research, is tied closely to the success students experience in their transitional year of high school.

Since the researcher has no organizational ties to the school in question and was serving as an independent investigator, she was able to remain unbiased to a large extent in this study. The researcher hopes to use the data from this research to bring to the forefront what this school may be doing during the ninth-grade transition year to impact its graduation rates which, in turn, would prove beneficial to other high schools in the district, especially those that need to increase their graduation rates and lower their drop-out rates. Also, the researcher hopes that as school personnel hear directly from students how they make meaning of the ninth-grade transition year, school personnel will utilize this information to build on or improve their transition activities so as to increase the likelihood that all ninth-grade students will experience a successful ninth-grade transition year.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Transition.** The way people respond to change over time. It is the period of time during which something changes from one state or stage to another.

**IPA.** A qualitative research approach that examines how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

**First-time ninth-grader.** A student who has successfully completed the eighth grade and has entered the ninth grade for the very first time.

**Graduation rates.** The percentage obtained when the number of students beginning the ninth-grade year is divided by the number of students that graduate 4 academic years later.

**Drop-out rates.** The percentage of students who drop out of school each academic year.

**Self-efficacy.** Having a sense of competence to perform adequately in a given

situation or regarding specific tasks (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003).

### **Summary**

Transitioning from middle to high school has been identified in the research as one of the most treacherous experiences students encounter as they make the move from one academic setting to the next. The difficulties that plague this transitional point are numerous, and the data show that the number of students who do not make a successful transition has continued to grow. The alarming drop-out rates and the number of students who fail to graduate after 4 years of high school are also causes for concern, since these two phenomena have been tied to students' successful transitions to high school. This topic becomes even more pertinent and has regained momentum in education with the increase in accountability standards such as the No Child Left Behind legislation, which demands accountability for all teachers and students and the North Carolina 21st Century Ready Initiative, which embodies the idea that all students graduate high school ready to be successful in the next phase of their lives. Both initiatives have at the forefront the idea that all students need to be able to compete in the global market and should be able to find their place in our changing economy.

This study took an IPA approach to the examination of how students make meaning of the transition from middle school to high school. Chapter 1 is an overview of why it is crucial for students to make a successful transition to high school and the problems associated with the transition process. This chapter also outlines the background and significance of the problem, the research question, definition of terms, and a summary of the chapter. Chapter 2 offers a literature review of various topics associated with the transition from middle school to high school and identifies a theoretical framework through which the transition process can be viewed. Chapter 3

describes the methodology used to obtain data for this study and gives detailed information on the instruments utilized for data collection. Chapter 4 of the study provides a data analysis as well as findings related to the research question. Finally, Chapter 5 relays recommendations for practice as well as for further research that may be beneficial in helping to further expand the scope of research in this area, answers new questions that emerged from this study, and also presents limitations of the study.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter provides a review of the research literature related to the transition to high school. The following subtopics are addressed: examining the paradigm shift to ninth-grade, the ninth-grade year and why it is considered a critical year, key challenges of the transition to high school, adjusting to the high school transition, examining student perceived self-efficacy on the transition to high school, a synthesis of lived experience research on the transition to high school, and a summary statement.

The purpose of this study was to explore how ninth-grade students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year of high school and utilized an IPA approach. The study sought to give “voice” to and explore this topic from the perspective of those who actually experience it, the students.

### **Ninth Grade: A Paradigm Shift**

In order to determine the current organizational structure of schools and understand school transitions, it is important to examine the history of school configuration. Among the many questions facing education policymakers, how best to group students in different grades across schools is of critical importance. At a minimum, the choice of grade configuration determines the number of structural school transitions, the age at which students make these transitions, and the relative age of the peers with whom they interact (Schwerdt & West, 2011). It is therefore understandable that school systems around the world have answered this question in very different ways. In Germany, for example, students typically attend one school through Grade 4 before moving to the school in which they will complete their secondary education (Schwerdt & West, 2011). Also, in Finland, where students are known for their strong performance on international assessments of student achievement, students attend a single school from

Grades 2-10.

Currently, the majority of the students in the United States switch from elementary school to middle school in Grade 6 or 7 before entering high school in Grade 9 (Schwerdt & West, 2011). Historically, however, alternative paths through primary and secondary schooling were more common; for example, the one-room ungraded schoolhouse was popular for many years (Franklin & Glascock, 1998). These one-room ungraded schools merged into larger schools, thereby introducing the graded school system in the mid-1800s, and as student population increased, Grades 1-8 became the norm (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). According to Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, and Constant (2004), the vast majority of public school districts in the United States had this single elementary school configuration, serving Grades K-8, which dominated throughout most of the early 1900s.

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education recommended a 6-year elementary and 6-year high school configuration, where the upper six grades were typically designated as junior and senior high schools (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008). The goal of this reconfiguration was to reduce high drop-out rates, prepare students for the job market, and offer a more rigorous curriculum to seventh and eighth graders (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008). This 6-year elementary and 6-year high school model lasted for most of the 20th century and was especially designed for students to spend less time in elementary school and to create a transitional period between the sheltered elementary school and the more demanding high school environment (Juvonen et al., 2004; Styron & Nyman, 2008).

Despite this change in grade configuration, most of the same problems with

student performance persisted (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008). Many eighth graders were still experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors; were not adequately prepared for high school and college; and were performing poorly on national and state assessments as evidenced in only the slight increase since the 1990s on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math scores and no significant increase in reading scores (Dove et al., 2010).

As a result of concerns such as these, groups such as the National Middle School Association encouraged the creation of middle schools to serve Grades 6-8 and to help ease the transition of one level of schooling to another. The expectations of middle schools were for them to create small learning communities; introduce advisory, teaming, and flexible scheduling; give each child the opportunity to build a meaningful relationship with at least one adult in the building; help teachers make connections across content areas; and allow students to work together on long-term meaningful projects (National Forum To Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008).

Though the number of Grades 6-8 schools increased, many failed to implement the recommended middle-level practices. As a result, the focus shifted in the 1980s from simply creating more middle schools to helping these schools become more effective (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) published a seminal report called *Turning Points: Preparing American Youths for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. This report, as cited in Jackson and Davis (2000), outlined the essential ingredients of effective middle schools. These essential ingredients focused on the developmental needs of young adolescents and the organizational structures and supports needed to create a nurturing learning environment (Leonard, 2008).

The decline in student achievement in the middle grades on international assessments of student achievement and the continued concerns about middle school students' low academic performance on state and national assessments have led several urban school districts to experiment with a return to the K-8 model (Hough 2005; Juvonen et al., 2004; National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2008). This recent return to the K-8 model by many school districts is in an effort to improve academic achievement as well as reduce the number of campus transitions (Dove et al., 2010).

Virtually every school district in America has invested time, money, and energy into changing school grade levels, taking one or more grades from the elementary school and moving the ninth grade to the high school all in an effort to bring a rich and rigorous curriculum to help alleviate some of the problems that have plagued the high school since the disappearance of the junior high school and to help schools develop a sense of community where students and faculty feel connected to each other in appropriately personal ways (George & McEwin, 1999).

### **Why Focus on Ninth Grade?**

There are several reasons cited in the literature as to why the ninth-grade year is an important transitional point for many students, and the increase in the demand for accountability at the high school level has added to an already difficult transitional year. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) noted that there has been a magnitude of research done to pinpoint exactly why students have so much difficulty during the ninth-grade year. They stated that most of the research conducted points to one overarching problem, the transition from eighth to ninth grade. According to Akos and Galassi (2004), 40% of students generally suffer serious problems after the transition to high school.

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) stated that while the ninth-grade year is the first point in time that students begin earning credits toward their high school graduation, many fail to realize the importance of gaining those credits while in their ninth-grade year. When students who failed one or more classes during ninth grade were asked about their ninth-grade experience, they stated that they wished they better understood the importance of the freshman year and its impact on graduating from high school. Students claimed that had they been aware of this impact sooner, they would have worked harder to achieve higher grades (Zsiray, 1996). Legters (2005) stated that student probability of graduating from high school has been directly linked to the amount of success they encounter in their first year of high school. Allensworth and Easton (2005) also stated that the first year of high school is a critical transition period for students, and those who succeed in their first year are more likely to continue to do well in the following years and eventually graduate. According to Chmelynski (2004), the data show that once students make it to the tenth grade, they will probably graduate from high school.

A successful transition into high school is of paramount importance; as such, the Consortium on Chicago School Research in the late 1990s developed an indicator to gauge whether students make sufficient progress in their first year of high school to be on-track to graduate within 4 years. These four indicators included attendance rates, grade point averages (GPAs), total number of credits earned, and the number of F's received in core courses. Of these four indicators, two were selected in creating the on-track indicator that the Consortium developed and included credits earned and the number of F's received in core courses (Allensworth and Easton, 2005). Based on these indicators, Allensworth and Easton (2005) defined on-track students as those who have completed enough credits by the end of the school year to be promoted to tenth grade and

have failed no more than one semester of a core subject area. These two indicators were selected because students need to accumulate enough course credits and they need to pass specific courses in core subjects in order to meet academic requirements for graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Both indicators, are crucial for success in that if a student does not earn sufficient credits in the first year, he or she will need to earn extra credits in subsequent years in order to graduate in 4 years; or if a student fails a core course, he or she will need to make up this credit and would not have taken the expected sequence of courses in that subject (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

The on-track indicator provides information about performance within a students' first year of school, thereby making it a timely indicator of student progress and highly predictive of whether students eventually graduate. The data gathered from the study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research on "on track" indicator as a predictor of high school graduation, revealed that students are unlikely to graduate if they do not make a successful transition into high school. Helping students make a successful transition into high school is essential, as an unsuccessful transition could result in low achievement, low on-time graduation rates, and increased high school drop-out rates (Herlihy, 2007).

Additionally, Hertzog and Morgan (1998) and Roderick and Camburn (1999) stated that course failures, suspension and expulsion rates, and high school drop-out rates are higher in the ninth grade than in any other high school grade levels. Ninth-grade students who are off-track as identified by lack of credits, attendance, or failing grades or who lack the needed skills to succeed at the next grade but are still promoted to the tenth grade are less likely to reach graduation on time or at all (Williams & Richman, 2007); while students who are on-track are more than 3.5 times more likely to graduate from

high school in 4 years than those who fall off-track in their ninth-grade year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). The ability of students to stay on-track in their ninth-grade year is a far more accurate predictor of whether or not they will graduate than their middle school achievement test scores or background characteristics (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

Since the world has become a global village, students have to be prepared to compete in a global market. The critical issue of ensuring that students graduate from high school becomes even more pronounced as we are well on our way into the 21st century. According to Wise (2008), 90% of well-paying jobs require post-secondary education training. Consequently, students who drop out of high school are clearly at a distinct disadvantage, as a high school dropout in the United States on average earned approximately \$10,000 less annually than a high school graduate (Wise, 2008). Also, on average, those with no high school diploma earn \$260,000 less over the course of a lifetime than those who graduate from high school (Wise, 2008). According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989, p. 29), students who do not complete high school cost taxpayers billions of dollars in lost revenues, welfare, unemployment, crime prevention, and prosecution. Further, the nation pays the price not only in welfare payments but in an estimated \$260 billion in lost earnings and tax payments. Helping students make a smooth transition into ninth grade and continue through to twelfth grade and to graduation becomes an important issue to educators all around America.

### **Key Ninth-Grade Transition Challenges**

According to McCallumore and Sparapani (2010), part of what makes the transition to high school so difficult is the fact that there are paramount differences both academically and socially between middle school and high school. Smith et al. (2008)

also stated that ninth-grade students are introduced to new stresses and different expectations for which they are often not prepared. It is with these points in mind that the writer has identified four key challenges that the transition to ninth grade brings which will be discussed in further detail in this section. These include academic challenges, increased graduation requirements, the issue of dropping out of high school, and a sense of school belonging or connectedness.

### **Academic Challenges**

As students transition into a new school, not only do they encounter a new building, new teachers and administrators, new rules for conduct, and new sets of classmates, but research states that there is some loss of achievement that occurs during this transition (Brown, 2004).

According to Stevenson, Schiller, and Schneider (1994), academic performance is one of the most important elements of a successful school transition and academic performance in the first year of high school impacts the rest of a student's high school career. Student GPAs in their first year of high school are predictors of both more rigorous course taking as well as cumulative GPA (Stevenson et al., 1994). Gillock and Reyes (1996) and Weiss and Bearman (2007) stated that it is common for GPAs to decline as students transition to high school, although according to Roderick (1993) and Catterall (1998), evidence suggests that this decline in achievement is temporary for most students who are not considered at risk. Kerr (2002) identified three areas of concern for students transitioning to a new school setting. These included academic expectations, decreased sense of belonging, and social support.

Roderick (1993) investigated the educational career pathways of a cohort of beginning fourth-grade students in Fall River, a small urban school district in



southeastern Massachusetts. The study examined academic performance, school engagement, and social background factors both for students who eventually dropped out and for students who eventually graduated. Findings demonstrate that on average, grades declined following a school transition, elementary to middle and middle to high. This was particularly true following the transition to high school. For example, the average grades of students in the Fall River study declined by 8% following the transition to middle school in the sixth grade and by 18% following the transition to high school. According to Roderick (1993), grade changes and academic difficulties associated with school transitions raise the chances that a youth will drop out. This is primarily because the more poorly students do in school, the more likely they are to drop out. Also, student academic and adjustment difficulties during the first year of middle and high school may result in significant barriers to their ability to form positive attachments and become integrated into these larger and more complex environments (Roderick, 1993).

Roderick's (1993) findings are supported by the results of the study by Alspaugh (1998). Alspaugh examined the nature of achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary to middle and to high school as well as school-to-school transition and the percentage of students who dropped out of high school. The study which consisted of three groups of 16 school districts for a total sample of 48 districts found a more significant achievement loss in the group where two or three elementary schools were merged into one middle school than for the linear group where the elementary school students moved as a single cohort to the middle school. Study conclusions show that all three school groups experienced "a mean achievement loss in the transition to high school at ninth grade" (Alspaugh, 1998, p. 22), and students attending middle school had a greater achievement loss when moving to high school than students transitioning from a

K-8 school environment. This study showed that in general, the fewer educational transitions, the better students perform.

As students progress from one level of education to the next, they can experience major changes in school climate, educational practices, and social structures. Rice (2001) pointed out that these transitional discontinuities or changes, namely school climate, educational practices, and social structures, can have a negative impact on student achievement. In previous work by Rice (1997), the transition from middle to high school was found to have a negative impact on student performance regardless of when the transition occurs or if it is associated with a change in schools. Schumacher (1998) also reported that as students transition to higher levels of education, there is greater emphasis on student ability and higher levels of competition. For some students, this increase in competition can serve as motivation for them to perform at optimal levels; for others, it could prove perilous and cause them to lose confidence and motivation resulting in decrease in effort and lower academic performance.

Rice (2001) explored how the institutional discontinuities between middle school and high school affect the mathematics and science progress of students from different types of families and backgrounds. This study draws on 5 years of data from a nationally representative sample of students from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY). Two school climate variables, concerns about school safety and academic achievement, were used in Rice's study. Findings demonstrated that an increase in the concerns about school safety across the transition and academic performance magnified the negative impact on student performance across the transition in math and science. Also, analysis showed a significant positive effect on student achievement across the transition when there was a decrease in teacher academic push (Rice, 2001). The study

further revealed that an increase in autonomy granted to students and their parents to select courses was a significant predictor of student achievement across the transition (Rice, 2001). Rice's study also explored the importance of parental support to academic performance and found that the only significant parent support variable was the degree to which parents and students participated in non-school activities (e.g., cultural or sporting events, projects around the house) together. The effect was a positive one but was limited to mathematics progress.

Although study findings are still wanting in prescribing specific policy interventions, they are consistent with efforts being made in the area of school transition. The attention paid to high-quality counseling to correctly place students in courses, new student orientation programs, and the attention to the learning environment that is focused on academic excellence and safety are evidence of the consistent efforts being made in the area of school transition. Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, and Splittgerber (2000) also suggested three areas for facilitating a successful systemic transition: (a) more comprehensive efforts to help students adjust to and thrive in the new school environment, (b) greater parent involvement to help students cope with the changes, and (c) creating a sense of community and belonging within the new school setting.

### **Increased Graduation Requirements**

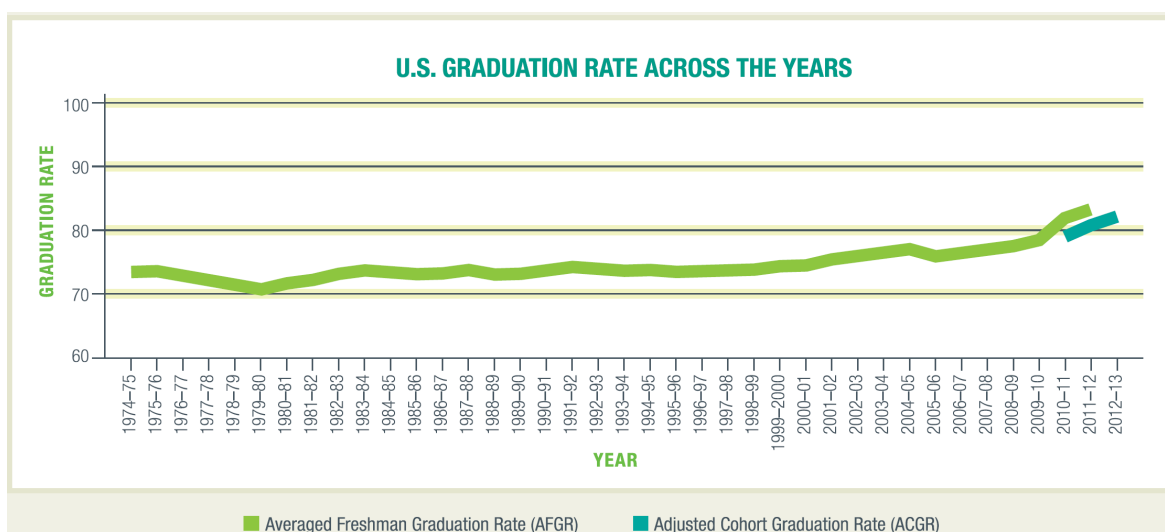
As states have felt the pressure to compete globally, they have raised their graduation requirements. Ninth graders unfortunately are the first ones to experience the impact of state-mandated graduation requirements. According to Fulk (2003), these rigorous requirements are noticeable changes for students from middle school expectations.

According to the Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina State

Board approved a Future Ready Core course of study to prepare students for careers and college learning in the 21st century and for success in the global economy. This future ready core course of study came in effect with the ninth-grade class of the 2009-2010 school year and was adopted as the major diploma option for virtually all students, except those who qualify for the occupational course of study. According to the future ready new graduation requirements, students will need to earn four mathematics credits, four English credits, three social studies credits, three science credits, one health and physical education credit, six elective credits, and four credit concentrations. Students are required to earn a minimum of 21 credits in total. The new requirements see an increase in the level of mathematics proficiency for many students and a one credit increase in the total number of credits required under state standards. In addition, students will be expected to continue to successfully complete a graduation project and to score proficient on the end-of-course assessments in Algebra 1, biology, English 1, civics and economics, and U.S. History or AP U.S. History. Also, local school districts have the option of adding other requirements for graduation as well. The new requirements do not impact the Occupational Course of Study as it will continue to be available to students with disabilities who are specifically identified for this program.

The Future Ready Core course of study is a change from North Carolina's three-track system where high school students, based on what they decided early in their freshman year, were either in line to get a job, the career preparatory option, go to community college, the technical preparatory option, or go to a four-year university, the college or university preparatory option, with each track having different course requirements. Also, a fourth option for the severely leaning disabled students, the occupational course of study, was in place.

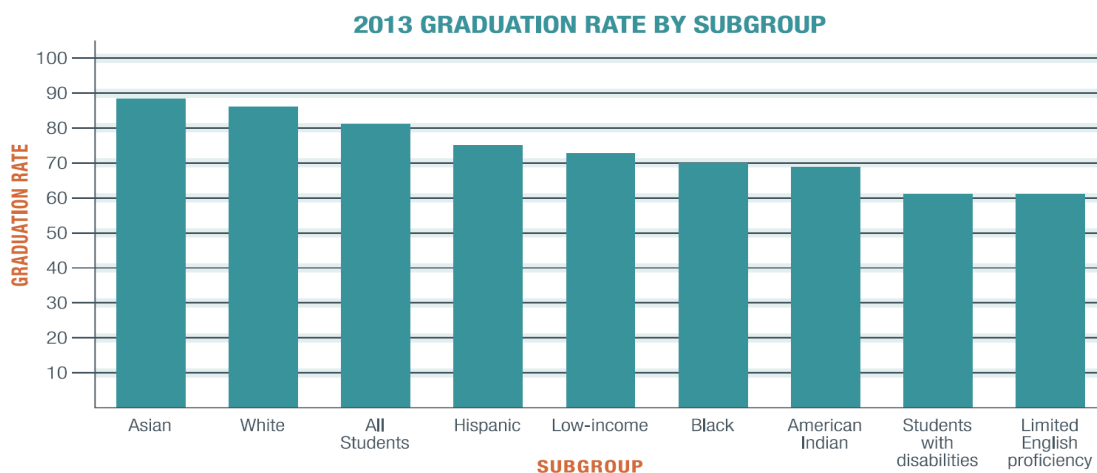
Beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, the U.S. Department of Education stipulated that the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) be used to measure and report graduation rates. The ACGR is the number of students who graduate in 4 years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. Students who drop out of high school remain in the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. Students who drop out of high school remain in the adjusted cohort (ASCD, 2015). North Carolina is one of the majority of states nationally to recently implement more rigorous academic standards to help more students graduate and be better prepared for life after high school (ASCD, 2015). The ACGR data demonstrate change in the positive direction as graduation rates in several states have increased, North Carolina being no exception, with rates topping 83%. The chart below shows trends in graduation rates from 1974-2013.



*Figure 1.* U.S. Graduation Rates 1974-2013 (ASCD, 2015).

Despite, however, this upward trajectory in graduation rates across all subgroups, disparities in the graduation rates still remain. As noted in Figure 2, significant graduation gaps can be seen when the data are examined by race/ethnicity and

socioeconomic status among other determinants (ASCD, 2015).



*Figure 2.* 2013 Graduation Rate by Subgroup (ACDC, 2015).

Wheelock and Miao (2005) stated that statistically, and regardless of new requirements, such as the Future Ready Core course in North Carolina schools, not all incoming freshmen will graduate in 4 or even 5 years of high school and still, even more troubling, may not even graduate at all. Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) further noted that this statistic is even more daunting as it is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to find employment that pays more than minimum wage. Certainly, interest in graduation rates is hardly likely to subside and factors such as high school transition that continue to impact graduation rates will continue to garner increased research interests.

### **Dropping Out of High School**

One of the main challenges students face as they transition into a new high school environment is the issue of staying in school. McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane (2008) stated that this concern is well-founded as dropping out of school puts students further at risk for poor adult outcomes. In the United States, 10.3% of 16 to 24-

year-olds were dropouts in 2004 with 32.4% of these individuals being between the ages of 16 and 19 years (Bowlby, 2005; National Center on Educational Statistics, 2006).

Haney et al. (2004) stated that the rate at which students disappear between Grades 9 and 10 has tripled over the last 30 years. Data show that during the first half of the 1970s, less than 4% fewer students were enrolled in Grade 10 than in Grade 9 the previous year. The writers further added that attrition between Grades 9 and 10 began to increase in the late 1970s and accelerated from the mid-1980s onward. By the turn of the century, there were nearly 12% fewer students enrolled in Grade 10 than in Grade 9 of the previous year. In other words, in 1998-1999 there were 3.86 million students enrolled in Grade 9, but in 1999-2000, there were 3.42 million enrolled in Grade 10. The difference, 440,000 students, means that 11.4% of ninth graders in 1998-1999 did not show up as enrolled in Grade 10 in 1999-2000. By the end of the century, the Grade 9 to 10 transition was clearly the largest leak in the education pipeline (Haney et al., 2004). This, however, was not the case 30 years ago as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

*U.S. Public School Enrollment, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 1968-1969 to 1972-1973 (in 1000s)*

Grade/Year	68-69	69-70	70-71	71-72	72-73
K	2526	2601	2559	2483	2487
1	3923	3858	3814	3570	3352
2	3765	3714	3654	3587	3383
3	3694	3721	3662	3612	3533
4	3629	3660	3676	3623	3554
5	3570	3619	3634	3662	3597
6	3556	3565	3599	3622	3639
7	3552	3665	3662	3710	3713
8	3420	3515	3601	3635	3649
9	3508	3567	3652	3781	3779
10	3310	3408	3457	3571	3648
11	2987	3051	3127	3200	3247
12	2655	2733	2774	2862	2871

Based on the data in Table 3, Haney et al. (2004) pointed out that 3 decades ago, far more students were lost between Grades 11 and 12 than between Grades 9 and 10. They propose that the increasing rate of attrition between Grades 9 and 10 may be explained in part by the fact that there has been a sharp increase in the “bulge” of students enrolled in Grade 9 during the last 30 years; the data show how enrollments have been “bulging up” in Grade 9. Haney et al. (2004) explained that during the 1970s, there were only 4-6% more students enrolled in Grade 9 than in Grade 8 the previous year. However, beginning in the mid-1980s, this percentage began to climb sharply, so by the end of the century, there were about 13% more students enrolled in public schools nationally in Grade 9 than in Grade 8 the previous year.

According to the writers, these data reveal that in the last 30 years, the “bulge” of students in Grade 9 has more than tripled from around 4% to 13%. This combination of increasing attrition of students between Grades 9 and 10 and the increase in student enrollments in Grade 9 relative to Grade 8 is an indication that nationally more students were being held back to repeat Grade 9 (Haney et al., 2004). This pattern is somewhat disturbing, as research suggests that retaining students to repeat a grade is not a sound educational strategy and contributes to the likelihood that these students will drop out of high school (Shepard & Smith, 1989, as cited in Haney et al., 2004).

Researchers have identified two important categories of educational risk categories that play a role in fueling drop-out rates: academic performance and educational engagement (Jerald, 2006). Low grades, low test scores, Fs in English and math, falling behind in course credits, and being held back one or more times have all been linked to lower chances for graduation. Also, students who become disengaged from school and develop disciplinary problems are more likely to drop out; high rates of



absenteeism or truancy, poor classroom behavior, less participation in extracurricular activities, and bad relationships with teachers and peers all have been linked to lower chances for graduation (Jerald, 2006). These educational risk factors are both practical and predictive and are helpful in determining the types of intervention that may be appropriate for students who are at risk of dropping out (Jerald, 2006).

### **School Connectedness and Belonging**

Though the need to connect and belong is somewhat pervasive throughout a person's life, research has suggested that during the period of adolescence, the need to connect with others through a mutually supportive relationship is at its peak (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). Within the context of the transition to high school, according to Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, and Smith (2000), adolescents lose familiar teachers, coaches, advisors, and routines. Additionally, high schools are typically larger buildings with more students in larger classes. Consequently, high school students receive less individualized attention from teachers.

Kerr (2002) and Bottoms (2008) stated that in the new high school environment where there is an increased number of peers and a decreased sense of connectedness with teachers and where students come to school and have no solid connection to an adult advisor or mentor, students could develop a decreased sense of belonging and even students who enter high school on grade level can become disengaged. This problem of disengagement is particularly acute during the middle and high school years (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

According to Finn and Rock (1997) and the National Research Council (2004), substantial research literature has shown that the transition to high school is marked by an increase in disengagement and declining motivation, particularly for low-performing

students. Disengaged students are more likely to perform poorly and engage in problem behaviors such as dropping out of school. In contrast, engaged students are more successful in school, generally avoid disruptive behaviors, get better grades, and perform better on standardized tests (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Caraway et al., 2003; Jablon & Wilkinson, 2006). Goodenow (1993) also found that an adolescent's sense of school belonging was positively associated with motivation for school, effort, level of participation, and eventual achievement in school.

A sense of connectedness to teachers and peers in school is associated with multiple indicators of academic motivation and engagement, in particular emotional engagement (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Furrer & Skinner, 2003, cited in Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Furthermore, in a socially supportive and caring school environment, students have a more positive attitude toward academics, and they identify themselves as feeling that they belong in school because they can freely express themselves and count on teachers for support with a range of problems (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000, cited in Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Wang and Holcombe (2010), in an ongoing longitudinal study of more than 1,000 adolescents, their families, and teachers, investigated which features of school environment from a student's perspective best support or undermine school engagement and academic achievement during the middle school years. The researchers focused on five aspects of school characteristics, namely promotion of performance goals, promotion of mastery goals, support of autonomy, promotion of discussion, and teacher social support. Results demonstrated that students' school experiences are significantly associated with their school engagement. They noted that, among other variables, greater

school participation and school identification were positively associated with GPA. Additionally, support of autonomy was effective in increasing student sense of school identification.

Overall, Wang and Holcombe's (2010) study revealed that there is a connection between school environments that emphasize individual mastery and self-improvement and students' enhanced interest in school participation and identification. According to the study, teacher awareness that heavy emphasis on competition, comparison, and pursuit of high grades or test scores may diminish student participation and sense of emotional connection with their schools can be both equally beneficial to both teachers and students.

Researchers use the term "school connectedness" to refer to the study of a student's relationship to school. A sense of school connectedness is associated with opportunities for students to have meaningful interactions with adults both inside and outside the building (Klem & Connell, 2004; Newman et al., 2000; Whitlock, 2006). Students who feel connected to school and who feel that they belong and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly do better with regards to both academic performance and behavior. These factors increase the likelihood of students completing school (Hallinan, 2008; Libbey, 2004; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001). Although some researchers contend that the business of school is teaching for knowledge acquisition and that attention to the nonacademic aspects of school is a low priority, nonacademic factors clearly do contribute significantly to students' school success (Libbey, 2004).

Hallinan (2008), using data from a large sample of public and Catholic school students in Chicago, examined the extent to which teachers provide social and emotional support for students, the nature of teacher expectations for student academic

performance, and the impact of these on students liking school. The study found an important dimension that undergirds the role that teachers play in the daily lives of students. Since most students spend 40 or more hours a week in school, engaged in verbal and nonverbal interactions with teachers, students' reaction to meeting or not meeting teachers' expectations are likely to have a significant impact on their attitudes toward learning and their feelings about school. Teachers who support their students by caring about them and by respecting and praising them satisfy student needs, which contribute to an increase in student attachment to school; and although the effect of teacher expectations on whether students like school is less clear, the study shows that even when other factors are taken into account, the extent to which teachers support students has a strong influence on their attachment to school.

Also, the way teachers interact with students is of crucial importance in shaping how they feel about themselves and their surroundings and can impact their feelings about school. Students want to know that their teachers care about them and know them in more than just a peripheral way. Through relationships with teachers and other adults in the school, adolescents establish a sense of school belonging and internalize the norms and values of the school as a social institution (Klem & Connell, 2004; Newman et al., 2000; Whitlock, 2006).

Students benefit from a sense of connection or attachment to school. To further examine this phenomenon as it relates to the transition process to high school Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) looked at whether a sense of school connectedness during the transition to high school is protective against a decrease in academic motivation and involvement in violent behavior. Results demonstrated that students who have low levels of attachment to school are more likely to be in poorer

physical health, to smoke and drink, and to participate in fewer extracurricular activities than their peers who are connected.

Frey et al. (2009) used data from two waves of the Social and Health Assessment (SAHA), a large-scale longitudinal study of risk and protective factors for problem behaviors in inner city youth. The survey was administered in a public school system in the Northeastern United States. The results from this study indicated that students who had low attachment to school experienced higher levels of violent behavior, had aggressive beliefs, perceived school climate more negatively, and had lower academic motivation. The converse was also found to be true: Students with consistently high attachment to school had lower levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs, perceived school climate more positively, and had higher academic motivation. Frey et al. (2009) also pointed out that teacher support, parental control, witnessing violence, and male gender were other factors associated with levels of violence, aggressive beliefs, perception of school climate, and academic motivation. Hence, the researchers suggest that prevention of violence will require not only increasing adolescent attachment to school in the middle school years and over the transition into high school but also addressing those factors such as community environment, parental supervision, and teacher support.

Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, and Spas (2007) also examined student connectedness to family, peers, and school and how these factors helped to buffer the challenges of the high school transition and reduce the likelihood of depression and negative or risky health behaviors. The study used a sample of students who represented middle to high income predominantly White students from a community in southern Rhode Island. Results demonstrated that school belonging was greater in the two middle

schools than in the high school, indicating a difference in perceived school belonging between students in eighth and ninth grades. In fact, the researchers found perceived school belonging declined between eighth and ninth grade and was lower in ninth than eighth grade. The results confirmed that the transition to high school is accompanied by a decline in a sense of school belonging and an increase in depressive symptom. This, they say, is one reason there should be concern about the decrease in school belonging, its link to depression. As a result, given the important role school connection appears to play in ninth graders' emotional well-being, prevention and intervention efforts need to incorporate targeted efforts to enhance experiences of school belonging (Newman et al., 2007).

There is also a clear indication that parent and peer supports are essential in helping students feel connected in their new school environment. The study conducted by Isakson and Jarvis (1999) was designed to assess the adjustment of adolescents transitioning from the eighth- to ninth-grade year in high school. Adjustments were measured three times, once at the end of the eighth grade and twice during ninth grade. The writers hypothesized, based on previous transition studies, that compared to eighth grade, social and academic adjustment, measured by sense of school membership, GPA, and attendance, would decrease during the transition to high school and that stressors and sense of autonomy would increase. Study participants were adolescents attending eighth grade at a public, university-affiliated, K-8 Laboratory School in the Midwest along with their parents. The predominant socioeconomic class of the sample was upper-middle.

Findings demonstrated that lower autonomy at the beginning and the end of ninth grade predicted a greater sense of school membership at the end of the ninth-grade year. The less autonomous adolescents are, the more they feel a belonging to their school. The

researchers also found that support from parents measured at the beginning of ninth grade was important in influencing a sense of school membership at that time and predicted a greater sense of school membership at the end of ninth grade, indicating the importance of the role that parents play in ensuring a successful transition experience. The same was true at the end of eighth and ninth grade, where increased peer support at each time predicted a greater sense of school membership. This reflects the importance of friendships in the context of school belonging.

### **Adjusting to the High School Transition**

Though the problems of transition are varied and complex, there have been several documented solutions that schools have utilized to assist students adjusting to the transition from middle to high school. Solutions ranged from simple and affordable to complex and costly. Some solutions have been as simple as providing each ninth-grade student with a bell schedule and a map to help them better understand where they need to go and when or handing out sample packets of ninth-grade tests and homework assignments to help answer questions that students or parents may have about the level of difficulty of the classes in high school (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). Other solutions have included a meet the teacher night for incoming freshmen, a ninth-grade orientation for both parents and students before school begins, and the use of student mentors (Cushman, 2006; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

It is recommended that transition adjustment strategies mentioned earlier, along with several others not included here, not end when the ninth-grade students arrive but should continue throughout most of the ninth-grade year. As research by Kennelly and Monrad (2007) shows, schools with fully operational transition programs have an average drop-out rate of only 8%, while schools without these programs have a drop-out rate of

24% (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

The main variables to predict the adjustment of students in the transition to high school are parent, peer, and teacher support as well as helping students develop effective coping strategies (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). In 1994, Phelps and Jarvis examined the reported stressors and patterns of coping strategies used by adolescents. The study sample consisted of 484 ninth through twelfth graders (ages 14-18) attending a Laboratory High School. The study found that female students tended to use emotion-focused coping such as seeking social support, while overall, all students identified humor and religion as possible coping strategies but did not indicate using such strategies when faced with stressors (Phelps & Jarvis, 1994).

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) and Felner, Primavera, and Cauce (1981) agreed that generally peers provide support for adolescents as they face new challenges. Felner et al.'s Transition Project study, which consisted of 59 intervention and 113 control students, sought to increase the levels of peer and teacher support during the transition to high school and reduce the challenges associated with mastering the transitional tasks they encountered. The Transition Project study demonstrated that the level of social support from peers and teachers was positively related to school adjustment after the transition to high school for students involved in a support project. Compared to students who were not involved in the project, the students in the project had higher GPAs, better attendance, more positive self-concepts, and viewed school more favorably (Felner et al., 1981).

Other studies, such as Fuligni and Eccles (1993) and Steinberg and Steinberg (1994) found that parents who treat their adolescents in a more adult-like fashion and allow them more autonomy ease the transition to high school more than parents who



restrict opportunities for growth and development in this transitional stage. Indeed, some parents may restrict adolescent life choices causing them to actually experience greater dependency rather than the more healthy process of becoming autonomous adults.

The research mentioned above indicates that not only do peers and parents help students feel connected to their school, but they also play an important role in helping students make the adjustment to their school.

### **Freshman Academy**

There are many other ideas and programs that schools have implemented to decrease the number of ninth graders who easily get lost in a large high school setting. Since the structure of freshman academies gives students more individual attention (Reents, 2002), some schools have taken easing the transition from middle to high school to a whole new level by providing separate wings or buildings for ninth-grade students. Here, these students are served solely by teachers who teach only ninth grade and a principal who is only responsible for the freshmen. This model has been termed “The Freshman Academy.” The main goals of this model stemmed from research that says separating ninth graders will help them become better acquainted with the rigors of the high school curriculum and become more mature and ready for high school (Reents, 2002).

The freshman academy model allows students to experience an entire year of transition before being incorporated into the bigger setting with other students from upper grades (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The freshman academy can take many forms, but the central goals of this model is to separate freshmen, help ease the transition, and to help as many ninth graders as possible experience success their freshman year (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Finally, the freshman academy can make the student

population easier to manage for both teachers and administrators in a large school setting (McIntosh & White, 2006).

The model, however, has experienced degrees of successes as well as disappointments. According to McIntosh and White (2006), some advantages of freshman academies include improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parental contact. Students also have demonstrated an increase in academic success as is evidenced from the reduction of freshman class failures and an increase in standardized test scores (White, 2008). Noted disadvantages of the model include mostly negative concerns associated with social issues such as being a part of sports activities and school dances (Scott, 2006). Students complain that the freshman academy still feels like middle school, and the model has been claimed to create rivalries between teachers who start to become committed only to the ninth-grade academy and not the entire school as a whole (McIntosh & White, 2006).

The overall impression of the freshman academy model is that the successes outweigh the negatives. However, while many programs have been implemented to assist ninth graders with the hurdles of the initial transition, McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) stated that it is important to consider what can be done to better prepare students for the new challenges they will face and provide support for students after the ninth-grade transition period into their remaining 3 years of high school.

### **Efficacy Theory and School Transition**

Initial success fosters further success, and helping students transition successfully at the beginning of the high school ninth-grade year will more likely help to ensure a successful academic finish. Reevy and Frydenberg (2011) stated that numerous studies across different academic domains have shown that self-efficacy judgments are positively

correlated with academic performance. This is the case for a number of reasons, namely students who have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to set higher goals (Zimmerman, 1995), to persist when confronted with challenges (Schunk, 1982), and to use more effective tactics (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Also, researchers have found that students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are motivated to engage in challenging academic tasks, set higher academic goals for achievement, invest more effort and persist longer in accomplishing those goals, and feel positive and less anxious in academic contexts (Miller, 2002). Since efficacious beliefs are profoundly impacted by failure, these beliefs are correlated with academic choices, changes, and achievement (Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch, & Murphy, 2007). Consequently, according to Pajares (1996), efficacy beliefs can determine and predict to a great degree the level of success individuals will attain and may hinder a student's academic career in high school.

Bandura (1986), a leading proponent of the self-efficacy theory since the late 1970s, stated that self-efficacy refers to "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391). According to Miller (2002), the courses of action may involve behavior (academic, social, or recreational), thoughts, and emotions. Students may have the skills necessary to complete certain tasks, but if they do not perceive themselves as able to complete them successfully, they may fail or fail to attempt to complete the task (Bandura, 1986; Miller, 2002). According to this theory, as students make the transition to high school, how students perceive themselves plays a major role in how well they apply themselves academically in their new setting and how successful they are in their freshman year. Furthermore, self-efficacy most directly impacts a student's level of engagement as well as his/her goal orientation (Caraway et al., 2003).

Social-cognitive learning theory demonstrates that goal orientation works in conjunction with self-efficacy to increase motivation. In their study of the psychological variables of self-efficacy, goal orientation, and fear of failure as factors of school engagement in adolescents, Caraway et al. (2003) found that the more confident adolescents are about their general level of competence, the more likely they are to get better grades and be more engaged in various aspects of school. The results of their study also suggested that goal orientation influences student levels of engagement in school.

People's belief about their efficacy continue to develop as they move through different life stages, thereby making self-efficacy a dynamic force in a person's life. This is evidenced in Wigfield, Eccles, and Pintrich's (1996) research where during the elementary school years, girls and boys exhibited no differences in mathematics self-efficacy, but by middle school, boys began to show higher efficacy than girls.

Throughout their lives as students experience changes in their self-efficacy, various entities influence or contribute to the development of their efficacy. Miller (2002) noted that the main contributor to the development of young children's efficacy is the family; however, as children move into the middle childhood years, the peer group becomes increasingly influential. Miller (2002) further stated that peer groups can have a substantial impact on a student's social and emotional efficacy. Children with low social self-efficacy show signs of social withdrawal, have a very low perception of acceptance by their peers, and have a low sense of self-worth (Bandura, 1997). As students make the transition into high school, this may be a point at which their self-efficacy beliefs about themselves are changing. As student self-efficacy is tested during the transitional years, how he or she responds can have implications far beyond the ninth-grade year.

Reevy and Frydenberg (2011) noted that during adolescence, several research

studies show that when teenagers have to make decisions about their future, low efficacy beliefs in their academic and social abilities contribute to avoidance behaviors, depression, anxiety, poor school achievement, and other behavioral problems. Low self-efficacy has a negative influence on the teen's school experience and may lead to dropping out of school. Conversely, high self-efficacy and the ability to manage different school tasks provide the resources to deal with the challenges involved in school-to-school and school-to-work transition and help students persist in the face of challenges and rejection (Miller, 2002; Pinquart, Juang, and Silbereisen, 2003).

As students face the many challenges associated with the transition to high school, they may need to assess their capabilities and adjust their behavior in order to experience success in making a smooth transition into the ninth grade and making academic progress towards tenth grade and eventually graduation.

### **Key Experiential and Phenomenological Research**

An overwhelming number of studies relating to the ninth-grade transition have consistently utilized a quantitative approach focusing on school data and surveys to study this essential topic. However, having a qualitative aspect where students involved in the ninth-grade transition discuss their experiences is crucial in understanding and addressing the problem of how students make meaning of the transition experienced during their freshman year of high school.

According to Lincoln (1995), listening to student voices can help us find our own voices. The author stated that we need to allow children who have learned to be silent to find their voice by listening to what they have to say. This is important, as children are, in a very real sense, the primary stakeholders in their learning. Giving students a voice can be empowering for them as they feel that what they have to say is worthwhile.

Lincoln noted that student views and perspectives do not always reflect the views and perspectives of the dominant majority or the adults who have power over them; hence, their voices can criticize the dominant power structure, question the way things are, and even provide new theories of how things should be.

Typically, adults tend to underestimate the ability of children to be keen observers, to possess profound insight and wisdom into what they see and hear, and to possess internal resources (Lincoln, 1995). However, examining directly what students have to say and giving them an opportunity to fully articulate their experiences as they see them during the transition from middle to high school could add valuable insight into the study of this topic.

A plethora of research studies has examined and demonstrated insight into how students feel about their ninth grade transitional year, (Table 4). However, of these studies, only three—Dudley (2012), Ganeson (2006), and Ganeson and Ehrich (2009)—have used a phenomenological approach, which gives a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 4

*Experiential/Perception Research Literature Summary (1990-2012)*

Author	Year	Study Population	Research Methods	Results Description
Akos & Galassi	2004	Ninth graders and parents	Surveyed one middle and one high school in the fall	Negative & Positive aspects of the school transition (academic and procedural concerns)
Case	2006	Ninth graders with the largest increase and decrease in performance as measured by GPA, discipline referrals, and absences	Interviewed after transition year	Overall perception of success. No significant difference between the least and more successful students in their recollection of & participation in transition activities
Cushman	2006	Ninth-graders	Interviewed a few weeks after school started. Used two large high schools	Initial worry and later worry but later in the year described their transition experience in more realistic terms
Dudley	2012	Ninth-graders from medium sized all-girls school	Interviewed 4 students three times each over the course of the ninth-grade year	High school not as difficult as initial beliefs and made meaning of the transition in a fluid way
Ganeson	2006	Ninth-graders from one high	18 students journaled their experiences over the first ten weeks of school	Problematic and also positive aspects of the transition
Newman et al.	2000	Ninth-graders in Young Scholars Program (YSP)-from low socio economic backgrounds, but all academically promising	Interviewed students to find out what factors may affect academic motivation and performance	Ninth grade more academically challenging than expected, adjusting to social life of a new school and the importance of forging new relationships especially with teachers
Letrello & Miles	2003	Ninth-graders with and without Disabilities	Interviewed during the transition year from one high school	Difficulties and easiest aspects of the transition. Two major themes: social interaction and activity involvement
Sansone & Baker	1990	Ninth-graders and school level personnel ( school data also collected)	14 at-risk and not at-risk students were interviewed	Ninth grade is a confusing experience. Getting lost, different classes and not knowing many people were transition concerns

### **Experiential/Perception Research Study Highlights**

Findings from the experiential studies of students transitioning from middle to high school suggest that students, parents, and teachers all agreed that the amount of homework (academic) and getting lost (procedural) were top concerns (Akos & Gallassi, 2004). At the high school level, top concerns of students focused on academic performance (homework, hard classes, and pressure to do well) and making new friends (Akos & Gallassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003). Study reports show that the most difficult aspects of moving to high school included getting accustomed to the block schedule, high expectations of the teachers, managing time, and lack of time for social activities because of the demands of homework. On the other hand, students rated the easiest aspects of moving to high school as making friends, getting involved in extracurricular activities, and having more fun and freedom (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Overall, students rated the difficulty of the transition to high school as “somewhat easy,” and this could be as a result of being able to readily identify an adult in the school to whom they could turn for help or to answer questions. Furthermore, students were more likely to think that everything was going okay if they were passing courses and had good school conduct and attendance (Akos & Gallassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Sansone & Baker, 1990).

Letrello and Miles (2003) demonstrated that social interaction and activity involvement were important for both students with and without learning disabilities during the transition to high school. Students specifically with learning disabilities indicated that they relied more heavily upon help from peers and teachers to be successful in the ninth-grade year than did students without learning disabilities. Again, having someone to turn to, even simply talking to older friends and siblings, helped students



understand life in high school. Study reports also show that students learn about the high school by visiting the school on their own and attending athletic events, making it clear that internal and external traits do impact student moves from middle school to high school. Most importantly, however, when students earn enough credits to move on to their sophomore year, is a clear indication that the freshman year was academically successful for them (Dudley, 2012; Ganeson, 2006).

The experiential studies that examined student performance and academic motivation in transitioning from middle school to high school (Case, 2006; Newman et al., 2000) found that freshmen who experienced the greatest increases in the change of performance were well aware of their level of success. Conversely, some of the students who had the greatest decreases in change of performance rated themselves relatively high for success (Case, 2006). This phenomenon may be attributed to these students seeing grades as less important than other things such as building friendships or simply being able to find their class the first day of school. Also, Case (2006) stated that this may speak to a child's motivation towards school and the importance of grades, resulting in resiliency among those who had the greatest increases in performance, while the student who is not motivated by grades would look for successes or positive reinforcement in other areas.

Newman et al. (2000) utilized participants' own language to describe change during the transition. Study participants identified as academically promising and selected to participate in the Young Scholars Program (YSP), a program designed to encourage minorities to attend college, had concerns about academics. Students found ninth grade to be more academically challenging than they had anticipated. They realized that they had more assigned homework, more studying was required, and more

responsibility was needed in order to do well in high school. Students also mentioned needing to adjust to the social life of a new school; the importance of forging new relationships, especially with teachers; learning new subjects which made learning more interesting; and appreciating being taught by many teachers who supported them if they needed it and who engaged them in the learning process (Ganeson, 2006; Newman et al., 2007).

These experiential studies also demonstrate that student initial impressions about the transition to high school shift after a few weeks into the transition. Initially, it is shown that students worry about the fact that high school will be huge and confusing, the work will be harder and there will be more of it, and older students will bully and haze the new ones (Cushman, 2006; Ganeson, 2006; Sansone & Baker, 1990). Then, after a few weeks from the start of high school, students worried about being able to gain a fresh start, classes building on work done in middle school, high school teachers having less time for individual students, teachers cutting them less slack when they mess up, their decisions having a longer lasting effect, and developing identities that continue through high school and beyond (Cushman, 2006).

### **Summary**

The literature review in this chapter focused on several key elements involved in the transition to high school. The paradigm shift to ninth-grade section of the literature review examined the history of school configuration and the implications of this as it relates to the transition to high school. Also, the researcher decided to review the literature to identify why the ninth-grade transition for students has been bombarded with so many challenges and devoted some discussion to some of these key challenges associated with the middle to high school transition including academic challenges,

increased graduation requirements, dropping out of school, and students feeling a sense of belonging or connectedness to their school.

Though there have been many solutions offered as to how to better help students make a smooth transition into high school, there continues to be many challenges that surround this issue. The writer felt, however, it would be noteworthy to mention some of the solutions that have been tried and tested and have proven to be successful, to some degree, in helping ninth graders make a smooth transition into high school. It was also the researcher's desire to examine the significance of student self-efficacy to ascertain if this may be a factor in helping students successfully maneuver the turbulent waters of the transition from middle school to high school. Hence, the literature was examined to decipher what it had to say about self-efficacy and its applicability to the transition process.

For this study, the researcher decided to utilize the IPA approach, which has not been commonly used to investigate this particular topic, but the researcher believed would be beneficial in adding valuable insight into the study of this topic. The researcher also highlighted several key studies that have contributed to the lived experience of students as they experience the ninth grade transition, with only three of these studies approaching the topic from a purely phenomenological standpoint.

The next chapter considers the research methodology the researcher utilized in attempting to answer the research question designed for this study, "how do first-time ninth-grade students make meaning of their freshman experience?" The chapter presents the research design, procedures, instruments, and participants involved in the study.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Helping middle school students make a smooth, successful transition into high school is not a new concern for educators. In fact, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education recommended the 6-year elementary and 6-year high school model to help with this transitional issue. Despite this effort, however, many young adolescents still experience difficulty making the transition from middle school to high school. Consequently, many drop out, often soon after they enter high school, or fail to graduate on time (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

This study was designed to investigate how students experience the ninth-grade transition during their freshman year and gain insight into how students themselves perceive the transition process. Very few studies have focused solely on student perspectives and on examining what students themselves have to say about their transition experience. The literature, however, was inundated with research that examined the issue of middle school to high school transition from student and stakeholder perspectives (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Moore, 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006; Zeedyk et al., 2003). The researcher felt that asking students to speak reflectively about how they experienced the initial transition from middle school to high school and how those experiences may have changed over the course of their ninth-grade year, would add further depth of insight into understanding and addressing the issue of students' transitioning from middle school to high school and would help to fill a gap that exists in the literature.

A qualitative approach, phenomenology, was selected to explore the phenomenon of students transitioning from middle school to high school. This method of inquiry

places the research participants at the focus of the study and uses their words to shape a general understanding of the lived experience. Phenomenology not only serves as a philosophy but also a method (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenology brings to the forefront the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives and challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions and the comfortable status quo (Lester, 1999). It is this intense focus on the participants, their experiences, their perceptions, and their words that drew the researcher to this type of methodology.

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and psychology and originated in Germany during the 20th century (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). German philosophers such as Heidegger (1889-1976), Gadamer (1960-1998), Satre (1905-1980), Husserl (1859-1938) and Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) have all been associated with this methodology. Though this methodology originated in Germany, there has been a rapid growth over the last 10 years in its use across the world, which has led to the development of The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations (Goulding, 2005; Petty et al., 2012).

Coupled with this growth in popularity, this method has also been used in collecting data across a number of fields including nursing, psychology, and education. Osborn and Smith (1998), cited in Petty et al. (2012), for example, used phenomenology to explore the personal experience of women with chronic low back pain underpinning patient-centered care by health professionals. Also, Manen and Adams, cited in Dall'Alba (2010), explored the phenomenology of writing with rich use of metaphors while aiding the understanding of learning and teaching in online environments. Dall'Alba explored learning during professional education programs where she argued for the reconfiguration of these programs as a process of becoming that is always open and incomplete. Angus

Brooks, cited in Dall'Alba, described his own experience of using Heidegger's phenomenology in coming to terms with becoming a teacher. He explored what authenticity means in teaching and learning while investigating how phenomenology can inform the practice of teaching. Ganeson (2006) used the phenomenological psychological approach developed by Amedeo Giorgi to explore student experiences of the transition to high school. She identified important aspects of school transition and discussed implications for facilitating the transition to high school. These authors, in their different ways, explored the contributions of phenomenology and demonstrated that it is a contemporary movement that is both dynamic and varied (Dall'Alba, 2010).

A researcher brings to this exploration of the phenomenon frames of meaning and an understanding that cannot be bracketed (Koch, 1996). Therefore, understanding the phenomenon is based on interpretation rather than description (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009). Heidegger, who reinterpreted phenomenology as hermeneutic or interpretative, claimed that to be human is to interpret, and interpretation is critical to the process of understanding (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009; Lavery, 2003).

This interpretative variant of phenomenology postulates that an investigator's findings are not purely descriptive but rather interpretative as well. For example, Cashin (2003) studied the lived experience of parenting a child with autism using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. He surmised that the lived experience of parenting a child with autism is not about a series of activities but profound changes to the self of the parent. Also, Sharkey (2001) utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach in a case study of educational change. He investigated a program of change in a particular school, with the school's mission and professional outlook of teachers being at the forefront of his investigation. Sharkey found there were many differences among

teachers and administrators as the change process unfolded. Both studies, interpretative in nature, provided a greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The second main variant of phenomenology is transcendental phenomenology. This type of phenomenology requires researchers to “bracket” out their own views in order to arrive at a description of what and how they experienced the phenomenon that is free of interpretation (Bradbury-Jones, 2009; Petty et al., 2012). Guided by the thoughts of Husserl (1859-1938), acknowledged as the founder of the phenomenological movement, the aim of transcendental or descriptive phenomenology is to describe the essential structures of a phenomenon in a way that is free from interpretation—the goal of this type of inquiry being to investigate the phenomenon without making assumptions or judgments about the world (Koch, 1999). Ganeson (2006), who utilized a descriptive phenomenological approach in studying how students experience the transition to high school, was interested in student descriptions of their transition experience. Also, Zeeck (2012) examined through descriptive phenomenology the lived experiences of elementary school principals who were involved in dual-career marriages with children. Zeeck was interested in attempting to describe these principals’ experiences and uncover what would help them cope with the stressors they encounter in work and nonwork environments. Of these two main variants of phenomenology, the former variant has been developed as IPA, the phenomenological research approach used in this study.

## **IPA**

IPA is a qualitative experiential research method that examines how people make meaning of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of a person’s lived experience takes on some significance as a result of something important happening in

that individual's life (Smith et al., 2009). Students who are transitioning into ninth grade are experiencing this transition phenomenon. Their everyday flow of life is interrupted by this important event, and therefore this event takes on significance for the student experiencing the transition.

According to Smith et al. (2009), individuals are constantly caught up, in a sort of unconscious way, with the flow of their everyday experiences; however, as soon as they become aware of what is happening, they encounter the beginnings of what can be described as “an experience” as opposed to just “experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 10). The writers further added that when people are engaged in an experience of something major in their lives, they begin reflecting on and thinking about the significance of this experience and attempt to work their way through what it means. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that this type of thought process is central to the theory of IPA, as the main aim of this type of research is to engage with these reflections.

IPA wants to know in detail what the experiences are of a few participants within a specific context and what sense they are making of what is happening to them (Smith et al., 2009). This describes the idiographic focus of the IPA methodology. Furthermore, the researcher needs to interpret the participant's account of their experience in order to understand the experience. This, according to Smith and Osborn (2007), is referred to as a two-stage interpretation process or a double hermeneutic where the participant is trying to make sense of their world while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. This component of the IPA methodology is known as hermeneutic inquiry or the theory of interpretation.

The reflective and interpretative components of the IPA research methodology were two of the main reasons the researcher was drawn to this approach. Also, the



researcher chose this research methodology because of the focus on a person's lived experience. The researcher was drawn to this approach because she wanted to hear what students themselves had to say about their transition within the context of their freshman year of high school.

### **Research Question**

This study was designed to examine how students make meaning of their ninth-grade transitional year, and this question was investigated:

How do first-time ninth-grade students make meaning of their freshman experience?

The researcher's goal in answering this question was to provide suggestions that will possibly enable the school in question to help its ninth-grade students make a successful transition into the ninth grade and enable school personnel to develop more effective transition activities and programs for incoming freshmen. It was also the researcher's intent to possibly ascertain, from the students' perspectives, factors that may have contributed to the increased graduation rate of the school in this research study.

### **Study Design**

This study used a qualitative IPA approach design to investigate how students make meaning of the transition during their freshman year in high school. Students were asked to journal their ninth-grade transition experiences in the second half of their ninth-grade year. Additionally, participants were invited to participate in a 30- to 40-minute interview to gain further clarification of emergent themes derived from the individual journals and better understand how students experience the transition from middle to high school.

### **Site and Participants**

One of the largest high schools located in southwestern North Carolina was selected for this study. The school, one of 10 high schools in the school district, has a total population of approximately 1,435 students and includes Grades 9 through 12. Student demographics include 1.5% Asian, 39.7% Black or African American, 42% White, 12.5% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial, 0.14% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 0.07% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. This high school enrolled students from three feeder middle schools. The primary feeder school provided 258 students for the 2013-2014 school year, and the secondary feeder schools provided 113 and 19, respectively.

The student participants who were involved in the study transitioned into the ninth grade during the 2013-2014 school year. The freshman student body comprised 390 students, 209 males and 181 females. Of the 390 students who made up the ninth grade, eight were Asian, 157 were Black or African American, 46 were Hispanic, two were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 22 were Multi-Racial, and 155 were White.

Participants were selected purposively rather than through probability methods because it gave the researcher better insight into the particular phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2009). A purposive sampling, according to Welman and Kruger (2001), is considered the most important nonprobability sampling to identify primary participants. Also, in a phenomenological study, the aim is to examine the specific experiences of individuals or groups involved in actual situations and places (Kruger, 1988; Seamon, 2000). Thus, the sample must comprise individuals who are experiencing or have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, this type of inquiry could not be carried out on a random sample of individuals. Smith et al. (2009) and

Polkinghorne (1989) also noted that a phenomenological study deals with understanding the particular phenomenon in a particular context, so the sample represents a perspective on the particular phenomenon rather than a group as a whole.

The sample of study participants does not reflect the whole population but represents a perspective on a particular experience (Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith et al., 2009). As a result, finding a fairly homogeneous sample for whom the research question would be significant and which would allow a clearer picture to be developed of the phenomenon being experienced is recommended (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Also, according to Smith et al. (2009), employing a fairly homogeneous sample enables the researcher to form a more reliable picture of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The following criterion was used to acquire a purposive homogeneous sample and ensure one common factor among the participants: first-time ninth graders experiencing the phenomenon of the ninth-grade transition thus eliminating students who were repeating the ninth grade.

Gatekeepers, “someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site,” were used to guide the selection of participants (Neuman, 2000, p. 352; Smith et al., 2009). The ninth-grade administrator and the English 1 teachers for both the honors and regular English classes recommended two English 1 classes, one honors and one regular, to participate in the study. Smith et al. (2009) called this process “referral,” where the researcher, with the help of various gatekeepers, selects participants for the study and initiates contact. English teachers were solicited as they would have better insight into which group of students would be willing to articulate their experiences about transitioning from middle to high school while the ninth-grade administrator ensured the homogeneity of the student participants. The researcher also wanted to create a study

participant pool that had different perspectives to offer on the transition experience. Therefore, the researcher decided to include gender and ethnicity in study criteria. Hence, the sample for this study included 13 students with different characteristics: eight boys and five girls; seven Caucasian students, five African American students and a Hispanic student. Though this was not the researcher's intent, the students who returned their Informed Consent form to participate in the study were all from the honors English 1 class. Despite this limitation, this sample gave the researcher multiple perspectives that Creswell (2007) recommended while still maintaining a thread of homogeneity as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). Also, to protect their anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to the students to reflect their gender.

The number of participants for a phenomenological study varies considerably and is dependent on the phenomenon under investigation. However, according to Smith et al. (2009), for an IPA study, a small sample size of three to six is recommended with 10 being at the higher end of most recommendations. Small sample sizes allow the researcher the opportunity for a deeper more interpretative analysis that goes beyond just the apparent content (Smith et al., 2009). As the IPA research is concerned with the detailed account of the individual's experience, quality is preferred over quantity. Though the researcher's intention was to have a small sample size of students who met study criteria, a larger pool of candidates was solicited so as to adjust to occurrences such as if some students decided to attend another high school or if participants decided to opt out or withdraw from the study altogether. Therefore, for this study, a sample size of 13 participants was utilized to achieve the rich depth of analysis that Smith et al. (2009) said an IPA research should produce.

## **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

Phenomenology is a research method in which data are collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Often, data collection in phenomenological studies consists of in-depth interviews, observations, journals, poetry, music, and other forms of art (Creswell, 2007). Other forms of data that may be collected in this type of study, according to Van Manen (1997), may also include taped conversations, protocol writing, experiential descriptions from others, formally written responses, diaries, and logs. The IPA approach aims at collecting data that elicit detailed stories, thoughts, and feelings from participants. Therefore, the usual approaches adopted by the IPA researcher in collecting this rich, detailed, first-person account of an individual's experiences are detailed interviews and diaries (Smith et al., 2009). However, data collection does not necessarily need to be confined to these approaches. Smith et al. (2009) noted that beyond these approaches, there is great room for imaginative work in collecting data that emphasize detailed engagement with a small sample, accessing the phenomenon from more than one perspective or at more than one time point and from the creative and reflective efforts of participants.

In order to gather the data to answer the research question posed in this study, the researcher needed to hear directly from ninth-grade students experiencing the freshman transition. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher utilized three data collection tools: (a) reflective journal writing, (b) 30-40 minute interview sessions, and (c) symbolic representations of the transition experience. Below, each data collection tool is described along with the participant response rate.

### **Journaling**

First-time ninth-grade students, while in their second semester of high school,

were invited to write about their experiences of being in ninth grade for the first time. They were asked to write about their initial and current impressions of being in high school for the first time, what some of the highlights were of being in high school for the first time, and what some of the most worrisome things were about being in high school for the first time. Students were asked to record these journal entries at least once each day for a period of 1 week toward the end of their second semester. Students were told they could record their entries between or during class break, after school when they had a few minutes, or at home. They were asked to write for at least 5 to 10 minutes each day. Also, the English 1 teachers for both the honors and regular classes agreed to give student participants 5 to 10 minutes each day in class to write in their journals over the 5-day period.

Participants were also given the options of a spiral hand-bound journal titled “Ninth Grade School Transition,” a username and password protected online journal, or an online blog to use as their outlet for the reflective journaling component of the study. In addition, participants were encouraged to voluntarily indicate on the final page of their journal what symbolic representations (Edward & Welch, 2011) best reflected their transition experience into the ninth grade. These symbolic representations could have included a poem, quote, picture, song or lyrics of a song, metaphor, self-made video, and so on. Students who chose to use a self-made video as their symbolic representation were asked to share this information with the researcher as a video attachment via e-mail. Students who submitted a symbolic representation were asked to further elaborate on these during their one-to-one interviews.

To help further structure the journal, detailed instructions were provided of how to journal and each page was divided into three main sections: first to document what

went well (that specific day or reflectively throughout the year), second to document what did not go well (that specific day or reflectively throughout the year), and third what was learned from the experience (that specific day or reflectively throughout the year) (Appendix A). In addition to the outlined template and questions above, student participants were also given suggested journal prompts to use as they wrote about their transition experience. They were instructed to use all or some of the following prompts to guide their writing each time they recorded a journal entry:

- High school is like .....
- What is discovered during high school is .....
- High school feels like .....
- I recognize high school as being .....
- What comes to light when I focus on high school is .....
- High school seems to be .....
- What is uncovered when I focus on high school is .....
- The metaphor/s that best convey/s high school is/are .....
- What I see in high school is ..... (Crotty, 1996, pp. 279-280)

Boyd and Fales (1983), cited in Lamb (2013), described reflection as “the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of an experience (present or past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world)” (p. 101). The act of writing helps to facilitate the process of reflection in expanding thoughts on paper (Lamb, 2013). Also, according to Jasper (2005), reflective writing is written in the first person and is essentially subjective to the experiences and perceptions of the author. It helps to bring into focus the individual and his or her experiences. The researcher identified the use of

reflective journal writing as an appropriate methodology for this study for several reasons, namely the reflective component of this type of writing, the focus on the individual's experiences expressed in his or her own words, the ability for students to express themselves without any inhibition, and the fact that this method of data collection is less intimidating for students. Furthermore, with student full class loads as well as their afterschool extracurricular activities, they are typically pressed for time. Therefore, this method of data collection allowed students the choice to write down their experiences throughout the day or after school without feeling the pressure that comes with time constraints. These reasons reinforce why the researcher felt that journal writing for the initial collection of data was appropriate.

The researcher is aware of Ganeson's (2006) phenomenological study that also utilized journal writing as the means of data collection. However, unlike this study, Ganeson collected data for the first 10 weeks of school to ascertain students' initial impressions of the transition from middle school to high school, and journal writing was the only means of data collection. Also, Ganeson was employed at the school where the study took place and would have been better able to oversee the process of journal writing over the span of 10 weeks.

This study used journal writing to collect data towards the end of the second semester in conjunction with a 30- to 40-minute one-to-one student interview. The researcher decided to collect data at this set point because she wanted to get a reflective and comprehensive view of how students experience the freshman transition during their ninth-grade year, not just their initial impressions, and to also ascertain how student transition experiences may have changed over time. Also, research has shown that students begin to get a more realistic picture of what high school is really like after their



initial impressions begin to dissipate. The researcher wanted to capture this “realness.”

## **Interview**

The second data collection tool used by the researcher was semi-structured individual student interviews. Smith et al. (2009) called this type of data collection method “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57) with the aim being to facilitate an interaction that allows participants to express their stories in their own words. Smith et al. (2009) and Creswell (2007) also noted that though the interview should be flexible for novice researchers, both encouraged the use of some structure in the interview as the process can be more frustrating and harder than expected. With this in mind, the researcher developed a modified semi-structured interview schedule adapted from Dudley’s (2012) IPA study (Appendix B). The researcher received permission via email correspondence from Dr. Dudley (Appendix C) to use samples of her semi-structured interview questions for this research.

According to Smith et al. (2009), semi-structured interviews can facilitate empathy and rapport and permit great flexibility of coverage; hence they tend to be a good source of rich and interesting data production. An interview schedule is recommended by Smith et al. (2009) as a way to decide on the logical order of the interview before it begins and a tool to help organize questions that the researcher would like to ask during the interview process. They say the schedule is not a rigid structure and should be used as a guide as the researcher may deviate from the schedule to find out more about the interesting or important things a participant may say (Smith et al., 2009).

For adult articulate interview participants, Smith et al. (2009) suggested a schedule between 6 to 10 open-ended questions with possible prompts for 45 to 90 minutes of conversation. For this study, the researcher decided to use 10 open-ended

questions with prompts adapted from Dudley's (2012) modified semi-structured interview schedule, for 30-40 minutes of conversation. Study participants were ninth-grade students who may not have the articulate ability of adult study participants. Hence, the researcher developed the interview questions and selected the timeframe with this mind.

All 13 study participants were invited to participate in one individual 30- to 40-minute interview toward the end of the second semester. Interviews were conducted over a 3-day period during the school day in one of the school's mid-size conference rooms. This was a quiet space that provided enough privacy where faculty members or other students would not overhear interviewees and where interviews could be video recorded easily with little or no disruptions. The space was also considered a public area with glass doors toward the back so the interviewer and the interviewee could be seen easily from that vantage point. This location was recommended and arranged by the ninth-grade school administrator. The ninth-grade administrator also assisted the researcher in deciding the most appropriate times during the day to pull students for their interview. It was decided that students would be pulled from their elective classes, and an interview schedule was arranged giving each student a specific interview date and time. The ninth-grade administrator shared this schedule with the elective teachers to ensure students would not be counted absent or tardy for that class period. Each study participant was given his or her interview schedule in advance of the interview date to help ensure that he or she would be at school the day of his or her scheduled interview. Also, students were given their interview date and time in advance to aid with rescheduling interviews if students knew of a prior engagement on their interview day or if they knew that they would be absent from school that day.

Each research participant interview lasted between 30-40 minutes. The researcher started the interview process by reiterating to each student the purpose of the interview; how important it was for their voices to be heard about their own transition experience; and how their input on this topic may help benefit their school, the incoming freshman class for the upcoming school year, and possibly their school district. Students were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and they could opt out of the study at any time.

The researcher initiated the interview sessions by asking participants to comment on some of the things they reflected on in their journals over the past week. The researcher then followed up this question by asking participants to tell more about their symbolic representations. Appendix B further details the remainder of the interview questions and prompts. The interviews were video recorded so the researcher could capture not only what students said but also their use of body language in conveying their experience of the transition process.

### **Symbolic Representation**

The researcher also decided that it would be beneficial to include in her study the extra step that Edward and Welch (2011) used in their study of the phenomenon of resilience in the lives of adult patients between the ages of 18 and 57 who had experienced mental disorders. Due to the nature of the phenomenon being studied and the inability of participants to clearly articulate their experiences through language alone, Edward and Welch (2011), while utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological approach to inquiry and data analysis methodology, invited participants to use symbolic representations in therapy and otherwise to enhance personal expressions and articulation of their experiences.

Similarly in this study, the researcher felt that giving students the opportunity to articulate their experiences about the ninth-grade freshman transition through the use of symbolic representation would be significant. The researcher used this extra step in helping to collect data from the journal-writing phase of the study as well as the interview sessions. Students were asked to comment or illustrate on the final page of their journal their symbolic representations (Appendix D) that would help them better articulate their experience of the phenomenon, while further elaborating on these symbolic representations during their interviews. Students were told that these symbolic representations could include expressions of life such as poetry, music, art, nature, objects, and metaphors as a symbolic representation. Students were informed that this is not a requirement but purely a personal choice. The researcher used these symbolic representations as a way to help initiate each interview session, giving each student participant a chance to describe how his or her symbolic representation reflects his or her experience of the phenomenon. A comparative analysis was done of the student participants' original descriptions of their transition experience through the use of journal writing and interviews and descriptions of their experiences through the use of symbolic representations to further expand on their intended meaning.

### **Student and Parental Consent**

To initiate the data collection process, the researcher sought the permission of the ninth-grade administrator and the school's principal to meet with the selected participants for a brief informational session. During this session, the researcher briefly clarified the purpose and design of the study, explained to student participants the study procedures and what would be required of them, and reinforced that their participation was completely voluntary but that their input could provide significant information that would

possibly benefit their school, the incoming freshman class for the upcoming school year, and possibly the district as a whole.

Two copies of the Informed Consent document (Appendix E) were given to each potential participant in a brown envelope during the information session. Students were told that the document they received was seeking participant and parental consent to participate in a 30-40 minute interview session, the journal writing and symbolic representation aspects of the research study. The researcher included two copies of each document so the potential participants could keep a copy for their family records and return the second copy. To make the process flow smoothly, the researcher informed students that she would be at their school in the next 2 weeks to collect their Informed Consent document. They were asked to seal their brown envelopes and leave these with their ninth-grade school administrator. The researcher also informed the potential participants that they could return their Informed Consent document to their ninth-grade administrator prior to the 2-week deadline if they made an early decision to participate in the study. Recruited participants were told they had 2 weeks to return the materials in order to participate and that participation was completely voluntary.

Prior to the researcher meeting with the potential participants, the ninth-grade administrator made a Connect-Ed phone call to all the potential participants' parents explaining briefly what materials to expect home that afternoon, the 2-week deadline, and that participation in the study was completely voluntary (Appendix F). The researcher and ninth-grade administrator decided that if after the 2-week deadline the researcher did not receive the Informed Consent documents, a second Connect-Ed phone call would be made to the potential participants and their parents. This served as a reminder and also informed parents or guardians to contact the researcher if they had additional questions.

## **Data Analysis**

The data for this study were analyzed using the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for an IPA study. Also, interview data transcripts were reviewed in their entirety on a videorecorder and then uploaded to the researcher's laptop for further analysis. Smith et al. (2009) stated that analysis is an iterative process of fluid descriptions and engagement with the transcript and is multidirectional. They recommended that the novice IPA researcher work closely with their suggested set of steps and then adapt them when and where they feel comfortable and as the data required to help make the process more manageable. As the researcher is new to research using the IPA format, she decided to closely follow the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for the data analysis. These steps included reading and rereading the data several times, initial note taking, identifying emergent themes from the transcript and early notes, searching for connections across themes by organizing identified themes into those that cluster together and those at a higher level, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases.

The first step outlined by Smith et al. (2009) is to read and reread the data. This stage helps to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of the analysis and also helps the researcher enter the participant's world. It is during this phase that the researcher actively engaged with the data. At this stage of the analysis, the researcher began to record some of her initial and most striking observations about the transcript to bracket them off for a later time. This helped the researcher to remain focused on the data while still feeling confident that she captured the initial impressions (Smith et al., 2009). It is at this step that the researcher conducted a first reading and a verbatim transcription of the data. The researcher then conducted another reading to ensure that the transcription was done faithfully, not leaving anything out. The next stage that the researcher undertook in

the reading and rereading phase was to read through the data once again; this time the goal was, as Smith et al. (2009) stated, to record any initial thoughts and striking observations about the transcript. Maxwell (2005) referred to this type of reflective writing as “memos.” Maxwell defined memos as “any writing that a researcher does in relationship to the research, other than actual field notes, transcription and coding” (p. 12). This type of writing by the researcher is a means of getting ideas down on paper and is used as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight, as those important insights may evade the researcher when he or she needs them the most (Maxwell, 2005).

In step two of the analysis process, Smith et al. (2009) suggested a merger between steps 1 and 2 where the researcher adds further exploratory notes or comments on the transcript with subsequent readings. Smith et al. (2009) identified three ways of exploratory commenting: (a) a descriptive core of comments focused on describing what is being said, (b) linguistics comments focused on how language is used by the participants, and (c) conceptual comments focused on the participants’ understanding of the experience rather than the explicit claims of the participant. As the researcher continued to engage with the data from the transcript, she began the initial note taking stage of the exploratory process by using the headings suggested above by Smith et al. (2009).

The third step in data analysis that Smith et al. (2009) recommended is developing emergent themes. Here, the researcher is attempting to capture what is crucial in the text. It is at this stage, according to Smith et al. (2009), that

the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of the detail (the transcript and the initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationship, connections

and patterns between exploratory notes. (p. 91).

The emergent themes not only represent the participant's original words and thoughts but also the researcher's interpretation. It is at this stage that the researcher not only worked with the original data from the transcript but also the exploratory notes from the second step of the analysis. At this point, the data were divided into three columns: original transcript, exploratory notes (under the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments heading), and emergent themes. This process was applied to each journal transcript and each interview transcript.

Searching for connections across emergent themes is the fourth step in the IPA data analysis process. According to Smith et al. (2009), this step involves developing a charting or mapping of how the researcher thinks the themes fit together. They outlined some specific ways of looking for patterns and connections between emergent themes. These are (a) abstraction, which is a basic way of grouping themes; (b) subsumption, where an emergent theme acquires a superordinate status; (c) polarization, which focuses on the oppositional relationship between emergent themes; (d) contextualization, where groups of themes are gathered based on a temporal or narrative thread; (e) numeration, which is the frequency with which emergent themes appear throughout the transcript and may indicate the relative importance of some themes; and (f) function, where emergent themes are examined within the transcript based on their specific function. It was at this stage that the researcher produced a list of themes for each case and then drew those themes together in a consolidated list while testing new themes against earlier data. The guidelines suggested above by Smith et al. (2009) were applied to the thematic analysis of each case.

The fifth stage in the IPA data analysis is moving to the next case. This step



involves moving to the next participant's transcript and starting the process all over again. Smith et al. (2009) noted that it is important to be able to bracket off the ideas emerging from the previous case and treat each new one on its own terms, thus allowing new themes to emerge with each new case. Also, as Smith et al. (2009) noted, while IPA is idiographic in focus, there needs to be balance in the account of what is shared. It is with this in mind that the researcher examined each case on its own merit but also examined cases comparatively to ascertain what study participants share in terms of their transition experience.

The final step of the data analysis for IPA is looking for patterns across cases. The idea here was to find connections across cases while still remaining true to the individuality of each case (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher's focus in the analysis phase of this study was to move from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative.

### **Summary**

This study investigated how first-time ninth-grade students make meaning of their transition experience during their freshman year of high school. The researcher sought to obtain students' own accounts of the transition process through the use of journal writing, interview sessions, and symbolic representations. This chapter described the procedures and methods the researcher used to conduct this study and analyze the data. The study aimed at capturing the authentic experience of ninth-grade students experiencing the transition from middle school to high school for the first time.

Chapter 4 focuses on the description of the sample population, analysis and synthesis of the research data, and the results expressed in the common themes that are discussed in light of the study's research question.

## **Chapter 4: Findings of the Study**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-time ninth-grade students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year utilizing an IPA approach. This methodology utilized six key steps in the analysis of the data within the context of this investigation. An additional step, symbolic representations, utilized by Edward and Welch (2011) in their study was also used in this investigation to better understand students' experiences of the phenomenon.

By analyzing how students make meaning of their transition from middle school to high school through journal writing, interviews, and symbolic representations, several overarching themes connecting student experiences emerged, highlighting some very important aspects of the ninth-grade transition year. Though they experienced these overarching themes in unique ways, all students mentioned these aspects of the transition either during their journal writing, symbolic representations, or interviews.

The population for this study consisted of first-time ninth-grade students who were enrolled at a high school in southwestern North Carolina. Student consent forms were sent home with all students to their parent/guardian in one regular and one honors English 1 ninth-grade class. Initially, 15 students volunteered to join the study, all from the honors English 1 class. During the data collection process, one student did not attend his scheduled interview time nor did he return his hand-bound journal, and one student simply opted out of the study. This provided a total of 13 students who participated in the study. The researcher decided to include all 13 students in the study although the original intention was to enlist between eight to 10 students. The reason to enlist more students was in the event that some students decided to attend a different high school or

in the event of withdrawal during the study, which coincidentally, did occur. Another reason the researcher accepted a larger pool of candidates was that she did not want to select some students and exclude others.

Table 5

*Participant Demographics and Journal Entries*

Participant #	Pseudonym	Class Regular or Honors 1 or more	Race	Gender	# of Journal Entries
1	John	Honors	White	Male	3
2	Gabe	Honors	White	Male	8
3	Aiden	Honors then switched to regular	White	Male	10
4	Ashley	Honors	White	Female	7
5	Fred	Honors	White	Male	14
6	Ronnie	Honors	Black	Male	13
7	Mike	Honors	Black	Male	5
8	Donna	Honors	White	Female	7
9	Mary	Regular then switched to Honors	White	Female	7
10	Pete	Honors	Hispanic	Male	10
11	Stacy	Honors	Black	Female	0
12	Tony	Honors	Black	Male	0
13	Tiffany	Honors	Black	Female	0

There were five female participants and eight male participants who volunteered for this study. Table 5 represents the participant demographics including how many journal entries were submitted to the researcher. As shown in the table, some participants recorded more experiences in their journals than others. This was not surprising given that students had different interests, abilities, and personalities and some were more apt to write about their experiences than others, as illustrated by Aiden who made 10 entries and noted that he actually enjoyed journaling about his experiences. He wrote, “I have enjoyed this experience, I may start keeping a journal of my own. I have learned about myself during this week, and I had fun.” Other participants, namely John, Mike, and Tiffany, seemed to have made the bare minimum of required entries or may have just forgotten altogether to write. This was the case for John as he noted in his interview: “I did get your card and when I got it I said oh . . . had projects due and totally forgot about it.” All students were reminded midweek via postcards during the week of journal writing to make entries in their journals and return journals to the researcher the following week.

All 13 students participated in the 30- to 40-minute interview session of the study and seven students accepted the opportunity to share their experience of the phenomenon under study through the use of symbolic representations. For participants, symbolic representations included metaphors, quotes, song lyrics, pictures, and drawings. Table 6 provides participant descriptions of their experience of the transition from middle school to high school through the use of symbolic representations

Table 6

*Explanations of Symbolic Representation of Middle to High School Transition*

Participant #	Pseudonym	Symbolic Representation	Symbolic Meaning
1	John	None	
2	Gabe	A Quote “Nothing Lasts Forever”	“which means like time goes by so fast and stuff like that cause it has. I remember when I was in 6 <sup>th</sup> grade now I’m pass that now I’m in high school and I know its gonna go by in this school... we’re almost already done and freshman year is almost already over and nothing lasts forever and like remember what you can and have fun when you have it in freshman year”
3	Aiden	None	
4	Ashley	Drawing of a giraffe	“Well a giraffe, its neck gets longer and I thought...that meant like growing up and maturing cause a lot of people grow up and they understand that these 4 years of high school are they’re getting ready for the real world and there’s no more playing like this is you know, make it or break it. And then, they [giraffes] also grow spots on them and I thought that was like the characteristics and traits you gain from high school like extra credit, understanding, knowledge, life lessons and scholarships.”
5	Fred	Picture of the American Flag	“I chose [American Flag] because you get a lot more freedom when you come to high school than you do in middle school. Like they trust you...they don’t watch you like stay right beside you at lunch, like they don’t watch you in the hallway and that sort a thing. Like they let you do what you do and they do what they do.”
6	Ronnie	Drawing of high school (labeled “Jail”) to college	“I drew this picture because I’m ready to move out to college but I still have to get through high school first, but I’m just ready to move on, so that’s what this means...it feels like I’m stuck in here but I’m ready to go.”
7	Mike	None	

(continued)

Participant #	Pseudonym	Symbolic Representation	Symbolic Meaning
8	Donna	Metaphor "Guilty By Association" and Song 'Man In The Mirror'	<p>"In high school you have to really be careful about what you do because like no matter what you do you're still going to get blamed for it. Like one of my teachers he always says that, "You can be at home, under the covers and don't move all day and still get blamed for something." Which is really true because if you hang out with the wrong people or the wrong group of friends and everything you're going to get like a bad – I hate to say a bad image because you shouldn't really care about what people think.</p> <p>"Because ['Man In The Mirror'] talks about like how if there's something in the world where you don't like what's going on that you need to start with yourself and you need to change what you're doing because you can't go and tell somebody like, "Oh, you don't need to leave trash on the ground." When you walk out of the classroom and you left all your papers on the floor. Like you need to start with yourself and be like, "okay, this is what I need to do and I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna take charge and do what I need to do."</p>
9	Mary	Song "Be Alright and Believe"	<p>"Well, Be Alright and Believe is a song by Justin Bieber. And I like look up to him. Be Alright – like I said, I was scared [coming into high school]. And when I would have, bad days where, like, somebody would say something, like, mean or something, I would go home and listen to that song and it would, like, cheer me up a little. And then the Believe part it, like, helped me, like, to believe in myself. Because, like I said, I was nervous and I was scared. And so I didn't really have, like, confidence and I wasn't really, like, believing in myself that I could do this. And – yeah so that's what it means to me."</p>
10	Pete	None	
11	Stacy	None	
12	Tony	None	
13	Tiffany	Metaphor - High school is like a "stage" before college	<p>"High school is like a stage before college. You are kind of on your own, you have some guidance, But as far as turning in assignments that's all on you.</p>

### **Emergent Themes: Interviews, Reflective Journals, and Symbolic Representations**

The researcher interviewed all 13 participants. The data collected during the 30- to 40-minute interview sessions were analyzed using the six steps outlined by Smith et al.

(2009) for an IPA study. First, the researcher read and reread the data, then added further exploratory notes and comments to the transcript. From here, the researcher began to develop emergent themes while searching for connections across these emergent themes. The next phase of the analysis was to examine the next case while searching for connections across cases.

Journal entries submitted by 11 participants were also analyzed using the six steps outlined for an IPA study by Smith et al. (2009). Participant symbolic representations of the phenomenon were analyzed in the light of students' further elaboration about these symbolic representations during interview sessions, thus adding more depth as students spoke about their transition experience. As depicted by Table 7, six main themes emerged from thirteen 30- to 40-minute interviews and 89 reflective journal entries.

One way students made meaning of their ninth-grade transitional year was elucidated in the theme facilitators of success. This theme emerged through participant descriptions of several experiences in their transition during their freshman year. Students spoke about transitional supports defined by the availability of older siblings, peers, parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors to help bridge the transition from middle to high school. They spoke about connectedness defined by the importance of the teacher-student relationship, school community involvement, and friendships. Finally, students spoke about time management and having a positive attitude or outlook, which helped to facilitate a successful transitional year.

Indicators of success also emerged as another theme when looking at how students experienced their ninth-grade transition year. As participants spoke and wrote about their experiences, it became evident that students had experienced, to some degree, an increase in their self-efficacy. The researcher defined this as academic success and

development where students take ownership of their own learning. Personal development also emerged as a subdimension of this superordinate theme where students make good social choices, experience a level of growth and maturity, choose friends wisely, and become more self-aware. Students associated a successful transition with success in these areas.

The experience of transitional adjustments emerged as the third theme as students tried to make meaning of their transition during their freshman year of high school. Students spoke of transitional adjustments in terms of perceptions of freedom, adjusting to new academic performance expectations, adjusting perceptions versus the reality of high school, and adjusting to the new structural environment of the high school. Students had to come to terms with adjusting their perceptions and expectations during their ninth grade transitional year.

As students entered high school, they encountered barriers to a successful transition. This fourth theme emerged as students reflected on the obstacles they encountered during their freshman transitional year. This theme encompassed parental pressure, pressure to fit in, fears of being bullied, and peer pressure.

The next theme that emerged was looking to the future. Students looked at this theme in terms of the perceptions that high school is a rite of passage for college and life in general. It became clear that though students were in their initial year of high school, a part of making meaning of their freshman transition seemed to be thinking about the bigger picture of their lives after high school.

The experience of high school readiness emerged as the sixth and final theme. Students perceived this theme in terms of successful strategies that helped in their preparedness for the transition from middle school to high school and recommendations



to improve readiness for incoming freshmen.

Table 7 depicts these emerging themes, their subdimensions and corresponding symbolic representations.

Table 7

*Themes, Subdimensions, and Corresponding Symbolic Representations*

Themes	Subdimensions	Symbolic Representation
Facilitators of Successful Transition	<b>Transitional Supports</b> <i>Social Support</i> - peer support, older sibling support, parental support, teacher, counselor and administrative support  <b>Connectedness</b> <i>School Community Involvement &amp; Friendships</i> <i>Teacher-Student Relationship</i>  <b>Time Management</b>  <b>Positive Attitude/Outlook</b>	Quote - "Nothing Lasts Forever"
Indicators of Successful Transition	<b>Increased Self-Efficacy</b> <i>Academic Success &amp; Development</i> -taking ownership of own learning  <i>Personal Development</i> -choosing friends wisely, maturity and growth, and self-awareness	Drawing - A Giraffe Metaphor – "Guilty By Association" Song - 'Man In The Mirror" Song – "Be Alright and Believe"
Transitional Adjustment	<b>Physical &amp; Structural Environment</b> <b>Perceptions vs. Reality of High School</b> <b>Academic Performance Expectations</b> <b>Perceptions of Freedom</b>	Picture – The American Flag
Barriers To Successful Transition	<b>Parental Pressure</b> <b>Pressure To Fit In</b> <b>Fears of Being Bullied</b> <b>Peer Pressure</b>	
Looking to the Future	<b>Preparation For College and Life</b>	Drawing - High School (labeled "Jail") To College Metaphor - High school is like a "stage" before college
High School Readiness	<b>Perceptions of Readiness</b> <b>Suggestions to Improve Readiness</b>	

## Facilitators of Success

### Transitional Supports

**Social supports.** Felner et al.'s (1981) Transition Project study demonstrated that the level of social support from peers, teachers, and parents was positively related to how well students made the adjustment to their school after the transition to high school. The current study revealed that peers (same aged and older), siblings, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators all provide a kind of social support for students.

When asked what they thought contributed to their success in high school, Mary and Stacy both attributed their success to support from parents, teachers, and friends. Stacy responded, “Um—having people support me, like my parents and some of my teachers and my friends.” While Mary remarked,

What helped me feel like that is like my teachers that, like, gave me confidence on my grades and things. Or, like, my mom. She is really proud of me. So that really boosts me up, cause I don't want to disappoint her or anything. And then my friends. They're all like, you're doing so well. Because they know how I am about my grades and stuff like that. So if I make a bad grade on something, they're like, it's okay, it's okay. And so it boosts my confidence and it boosts my success.

Gabe mentioned an older peer who helped to provide information about the school as well as showed him where his classes were located before the school year started. He stated,

Yeah, I was kind a scared cause I remember in middle school I had to learn where everything was . . . I knew that if I came here I'd have to do it again. Ahhhhh one

of my brother's friends took me here before the school year started and showed me around and showed me where all my classes were so I wasn't that scared when I got inside and I had to have the map and everything but I already knew where I was going so it was good.

When asked what he thought helped him the most transitioning into the ninth grade, Gabe reflected on this particular experience and said, "Probably when my brother's friend took me here and showed me where my classes were cause that's probably what I was most scared of not knowing where my classes are . . . So, yeah that probably helped me the most." This support helped to reduce the student's fears and anxieties regarding transitioning into his new school environment.

As he reflected on his first week of high school during his interview and journal writing, Aiden mentioned his friend "K" whose advice helped him through the first week of high school. He noted,

It was a really long week, really stressful and I thought all of high school, my entire year, my entire 4 years was going to be just like that week. I just wanted to stay home (laughs). But my friend K who's in 10<sup>th</sup> grade now, she said that this is the longest week of the entire school year and after this it'll just go by in the blink of an eye and she was 100% right.

When talking about peer support, Donna stated,

Yeah and I have like people that I go to church with who – like the ROTC leader – so he let me come in over the summer and he let me help him set up his room and he showed me, he was like, "This is your first period, here is your advisory." And that really helped because I had no clue where my classes were. And he was like, "Okay, I got you, I'll show you where you're rooms are and stuff." And that

was really helpful.

In addition to peer support, study participants spoke about sibling support in helping them during the transition into high school. Though not all study participants had siblings who attended the high school, those who did spoke about the support they received from their older siblings. Pete noted in his interview and journal,

I thought it was going to be, full of bullies and stuff, and nobody was going to try to be your friend. But it's really not like that. My sister told me it really wasn't like that. She said it was actually – people were actually friendlier than you would think. My older sister she, uh, took me to my first class and from then on I was on my own.

Stacy also noted that her older sibling helped to ease her anxieties about transitioning into high school: “Um, well, I wasn't as scared because I have an older brother, and he goes here. And he kind of like told me not to worry about it.”

In addition to peer and sibling support, several students also spoke about counselor and administrative support. Mike stated,

the counselors help you a lot, cause I was lost pretty much to every single class and they helped me. Like questions, any questions like anything, that's what they're here for. They helped me a lot, like in the first two weeks of school until I got like I think more use to it.

Stacy spoke about the fact that her counselor helped her by looking out for what was in her best interest. This not only helped her in transitioning into high school but also it was a help for her future. She remarked,

Like if there is something that she thinks I should do or like sign up for, then she'll tell me. Or if there's something like going on in the community, like, that

could help me or look good on my college applications and stuff, she'll tell me about it or she'll tell me to, like, apply for, like, different things that could help me.

Tony noted that after he had been suspended several times in his ninth-grade year, the ninth-grade administrator switched his classes around. He admitted that this switch helped a lot. Clearly Tony needed the additional support of switching his classes, which could have only been authorized by an administrator, to help him make that turnaround in his ninth-grade year.

Isakson and Jarvis's (1999) study indicated the importance of the role that parental support plays in ensuring a successful transition experience. Several participants in this study spoke about this type of transitional support helping them during their freshman transitional year. Mike, in both in his interview and journal, talked about the support his mom gave him, which came in the form of advice:

My mom she always talked to me a lot about how she wanted me to graduate with like a full ride scholarship to a school and that I can do it. And that she went to college. First she started at \_\_\_ and then she went online, went from \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ and through all that she had me, my sister, my two sisters and my brother and it was just a handful for her. And she told me that if she could get her degree and make her career with all the distractions she had, I can do the same without any distractions.

Tony mentioned that after getting into trouble several times at school and seeing a decline in his grades, his mom was the real catalyst that caused him to change his behavior. He remarked,

My main motivator I'd say is my mom. So she'd be like, "If you don't make

good grades I'm not going to buy you nothing." So I was seeing that she wasn't buying me nothing so I had to make the change. Me personally I like to dress every day up. I won't just wear anything to school. Like when she had stopped buying me stuff I just had to do a turn around so I had to. When I did that, she realized that I was doing good and she started buying me stuff.

John noted that his parent helped him maneuver the structural challenges of high school:

I remember, the first day of school for high school me and my mom spent like 45 minutes mapping, the map that they give us- and she would put like little X's where I'd start, "here's your staircase you get to first period, then to second" and stuff like that. After that first day it was real easy.

Clearly, the significant role that the above transitional support systems play cannot be over emphasized.

### **Connectedness**

Though the need to connect and belong is somewhat pervasive throughout a person's life, research has suggested that during the period of adolescence, the need to connect with others through mutually supportive relationships is at its peak (Midgley et al., 1989). Several study participants spoke about the fact that developing friendships, school community involvement, and the student-teacher relationship helped them feel more connected to their school and helped facilitate a more successful high school transition year.

**School community involvement and friendships.** For study participants part of making meaning of the transition experienced during the freshman year of high school seemed to be getting involved in activities beyond the regular school day as well as forging new and losing old friendships. Though their actual participation in school

community activities varied, several of the students spoke and wrote about the importance of getting involved. Some students revealed that they understood that getting involved was not just for fun or to fill a void in their freshman year but also a means of building their resume for college and for attaining college scholarships. Students who were involved in activities also spoke about how their involvement made their transitional year more enjoyable. Similarly, getting involved in the school community played a dual role for several students; it was also a means for students to build friendships. These two subdimensions were closely related, so they were discussed together.

Aiden stated,

I would say ahmmm, (pause) extracurricular activities like ahhh tech crew and cross country, stuff like that and chess club. Getting involved in other things, other than, than just, where you don't have to worry about your class work or your homework, or that project that's due tomorrow you don't have to worry about that. You can just worry about that later and you're just hanging out with your friends so I would say that's been my favorite part here.

Aiden spoke about being involved in activities outside of the classroom as the highlight and most rewarding part of his freshman year. He also wrote in his journal about how being involved in activities outside of the classroom helped him to make new friends and gave him an opportunity to "start fresh":

At the beginning of the year, I was unsure about most things, like classes, people, and work. It was very stressful, but when I joined cross-country, I made many new friends who helped me obtain a sort of "social foothold" in high school.

Since I'm a transfer student, I did not have many friends, so I had an opportunity

to “start fresh.”

Similarly, Tiffany talked about how her involvement in chorus and the ROTC drill team helped her to meet new friends:

Oh yeah, because you get to know more people. You can't be on a team and not know who is on your team because that's just not – so if you get involved you're definitely going to meet some great people and sometimes not so great. So yeah, getting involved is going to help you be socially active.

Also it seemed that sports was one area where freshmen students got the opportunity to interact with sophomores, juniors, and seniors more regularly. When asked what was most rewarding about being in high school, Donna mentioned being a freshman on a sports team and interacting with the older kids. She stated,

Because, I don't know, a lot of freshmen don't make it. I think that goes for a lot of my friends too because like I have friends that are like freshmen on varsity . . . I just think it's really rewarding because they're like, “You're just a baby. I didn't know you were good at this.” And I'm just like oh, okay. And they're just like, “Oh, you go.” . . . it's just really fun and rewarding because you get to be friends with the older kids and you get to like do stuff with them instead of just doing stuff like a little freshman, I guess. I mean not that it's bad being a freshman.

Mike also mentioned that the best experience for him in high school has been playing football and getting to know the players:

It was fun, I got to play ball together with the other guys and stuff. We always had fun and we been through a lot like we lost some games and we saw like the bad side of some of our players and the good side, you could get to know people



better and come together as a team like brothers. Football season, that's probably been the most fun I've had this year, yeah football season.

Mary thought it was exciting to be on a sports team for the first time in her school experience: "Well, I'm on the cheerleading team. And I've never made the ahm – I never made a sports team before for my school. So coming into high school being on the cheerleading team, it was definitely exciting." This was a new experience for her but nonetheless an exciting one.

Though he was not directly involved in any activities within his school, Pete wrote in his journal about playing for a soccer team outside of his school: "One of the highlights during high school was when I did well in soccer. My actions inside and outside school affected my everyday life." He further added,

High school feels great when you are exceling in your extra- curricular activities outside of school. I think that was a real boost of my morale when I was in school. My actions in school could sometimes depend on whether or not I did well in my soccer match.

According to these initial findings, involvement in extracurricular activities, whether within the school community or outside the school community, is key. It would also appear that being involved in sports is beneficial in ways other than simply making friends or having fun. It can be a self-esteem or morale booster, enhance popularity, and be a means of helping stay focused on work. This was the case for John. It was clear from his interview and journal entries that sports played a crucial role in his transition experience. He said that being involved in soccer over the summer before school actually started allowed him the opportunity to form friendships that helped in his transition into high school. Having these familiar faces among so many unfamiliar faces helped the

student feel more confident about being able to cope with the new environment. He noted,

The first thing that started the school year off right was making the soccer team . . . I had already developed a group of friends so like when I came here I didn't have to completely re-start. I already had a group of guys that I'd been seeing for about maybe about two months, so we got to build a relationship up, so I wasn't completely like this—just thrown out there.

He further added,

Yes it . . . helps me to stay focused more cause I'm a student athlete, so student comes before the athlete so it helps me stay focused in school. Yes, you get popular. People start knowing your name and shoutin out your name in the hallway (smiles) makes you feel good.

Though this was not the sole motivator for several of the students who were involved in the school community, it did seem that getting involved in extracurricular activities was also a means of attaining college scholarships and building up your resume. Donna, for instance, recounted her experience with a friend who plays varsity football:

Sports are a lot more like hard core in high school than they are in middle school I guess. Cause like especially like foot – like guy sports because they're trying to get scholarships and everything and they are so like Ahhh– they're like into it. It's crazy. They're just like Friday night football – like dog gone, they're so like focused.

She said she cheers and she does take that seriously, but for her it's just fun: "It's high school. It's not a big deal. Honestly, if I do get a scholarship I don't think it's gonna be through school. It'll probably be through like my work cause like I don't do that much."

For several students, actually attending the games with friends and showing school spirit, not just being involved in extracurricular activities, was a means of relieving stress and one way that several students made meaning of the high school transition. Donna stated,

Friday night football is probably my favorite thing about high school. Being at a game showing school spirit is so much fun. Yeah. I really like the school spirit here. That aspect of it was really good because we all care about each other.

Pete expressed how rewarding it was for him to attend Friday night football games with his friends:

The experience of going to games with your friends, I think that's pretty cool. In middle school not too many people went to the games. But when it's like a football game, the stadium is full and everybody is yelling, and you kind of get into that. It relieves your stress, like you have from school.

Tony mentioned that he was not involved in any sports during his ninth-grade year. He also did not mention any involvement in any other extracurricular activities. It is interesting to note that of all 13 participants, Tony was the only student who had been suspended for behavioral issues during his freshman year.

Students also found that there were more opportunities to get involved in high school compared to the middle school. Students also mentioned academic and social benefits of being involved. Most of the students noted that activities were fun, especially when experienced with friends.

One aspect of making meaning of the high school transition is the opportunity to make new friends, but for some it is also about losing old friends. Fred, in one of his journal entries, wrote, "Some things that didn't go well throughout the school year was

losing friends.” This was also the case for Ashley as she expressed in her interview. She pointed out that though you lose friendships you also gain some too, so she did not view this experience of loss in a completely negative light. She said,

cause I mean you lose a lot of friendships when you go from middle school to high school cause they all leave and go different ways and also when they go to the same high school they go different pathways . . . but you also gain a lot of friendships.

Donna spoke about when she came to the realization that she was actually going to lose the friendships she had formed over her middle school years:

It was just a wakeup call really . . . Like my best friend that I went to school with for like middle school and elementary school and she goes to a different high school now and I mean like I don’t see her as much as I’d like to. But it’s just really sad. And they’re like – they forewarn you. They’re like, “You ain’t gonna see these people at all anymore.” It’s really sad.

Study participants highlighted through their interviews and journal entries the important role friendships played during the freshman transition year. The transition was a period for bringing some existing friendships to an end, but it was also the beginning of new friendships for many of these students.

**Teacher-student relationship.** The way teachers interact with students is of crucial importance in shaping how they feel about themselves and their surroundings and can impact their feelings about school. Students want to know that their teachers care about them and know them in more than just a peripheral way (Klem & Connell, 2004; Newman et al., 2000; Whitlock, 2006). When asked if anything surprised him about high school, Aiden remarked, “Definitely the teachers they ahhh I’ve really gotten a

connection with most of my teachers and ahhh they're really ahhh, I really like most of my teachers they're really good at what they do." He further noted,

Like ahhh, the teachers are very nice. They, they most of them make ahhh, try to make a one on one connection with me so that helps me a lot with my grades and stuff like that and ahhh some of them I know from sports. Like ahh my English teacher and my math teacher they're both a part of my cross country team so ahh that's really helpful cause they already know me and my work ethic and stuff like that.

Ashley stated, "the teachers really do care about you and that like I'm really upset that I'm going to 10th grade . . . I'll miss the teachers cause you don't get them every year." Gabe also mentioned that losing teachers was a pretty big deal for him. When asked to further elaborate on what he meant by this statement, he stated,

Well ahhmm, I had Ms. \_\_\_ at \_\_\_ middle and she was really nice and stuff all the way to seventh grade and then we changed – she retired and what not and then we had someone new, and then we had to change again so I was like – But hopefully I'll have \_\_\_ all the way through all 4 years.

For Gabe having the consistency of the same teacher or teachers is important in the transition.

Also, students stated that high school teachers cared more about their students' education, and they pushed you more in terms of your work ethic. Fred commented,

Like they actually make you do your stuff and like they like make you go to your classes. Like in middle school if you didn't do it they just didn't care and they just really didn't care. But they care here, they want you to get your education and they want you to go do something with your life. When I figured out that like the

teachers actually care what you do, that made me wanna try harder.

Ronnie remarked in both his interview and journal that teachers made learning more engaging and were relatable and approachable. He noted,

You feel like you can talk to them about stuff you couldn't normally talk about, and they can like take it better than teachers in middle school. They're kind of like friends more than teachers but they're not at the same time. I like my teachers now because they are a lot more engaging than in middle school.

When asked about the changes she experienced moving from middle school to high school, Mary mentioned her teachers:

I actually think they are more strict here. I don't know. Because when I was in middle school, my teachers would, like, give me a week to make up something. But, you know, these teachers here might give you, like, two days. And it's like if it's not in there it's a zero for the entire semester, or something like that. But other than that, they just expect more out of you. And I guess that's a good thing, because you don't have the teachers that don't really care about you.

She said her teachers in high school expect more from her, so they are harder on her. She seemed to be okay with this difference in her teachers as this is an indication that they care. She also remarked, "my teachers, they all get me and they're all, like, helpful. So that helps a lot."

### **Time Management**

Another facilitator of success as students made meaning of the transition during their freshman year was how students managed their time. John expressed how problematic it was for him to fit everything he had to do in his day. He said this was the most difficult thing about being in high school. He stated,

Ahhhh I mean since I'm a student athlete ahhhh every day I usually have practice . . . some days I'll have homework like four classes and I'll have practice from 3:30 to 6:00. I have to come home my mom still wants me to get in bed before 10:30 and I have to eat take a shower and get all my work done still, puts a little bit of stress on me. I mean some days you get that break when you don't have no homework, no practice and you just get to go home and take a nap.

Mary also discussed her issues with managing her time during her interview and in her journal:

I've never been one to like manage my time. But now I have to. So with me not ever doing that and having to start now, it was definitely hard because I had to get used to – you know, I can't go home and sit on my bed and watch TV; I have to do my homework and then I have to start on my project for that week or – it was like at one point in time it did all pile up on me and I got so stressed out, I just sat on my bed and cried. But that's when I realized that I have to do something about it. So that was definitely hard.

When asked how she was able to handle or cope with these new demands of high school, she responded,

I, like I have sticky notes. If you look in my room you'll see sticky notes everywhere. So like I write all my dates down that everything is due, and I post it. And then I make – when I'm doing a project, I'll be like, okay, I'm going to do this on this day, and then I'm going to start on this next section, I'm going to finish the next session the next day. So, like, I schedule when I'm going to do everything. And so far it's been pretty okay. I don't know. I actually have a science project due this week, or today, and I had an English project due last

week. So – and they don't pile up this time, so it's working.

Donna also talked about the difficulty in managing her time at the beginning of her freshman year:

I mean at the beginning of the year I was really stressed out because I cheer for like here and somewhere else and then I had school work and I was like, “Oh my gosh, I'm never going to get any of this done and I'm going to be up to 2:00 in the morning doing all of this work.”

Pete also commented that one of the things that got harder in high school was keeping up with his time better than he did in middle school:

Homework got harder, and I had to, like, keep up with my time better than I used to in middle school. Like, I didn't play around as much when I was at home. I had to get my homework done and stuff, and projects. I would, like, even it out. I'd work on it an hour in one day, then the next day an hour. And, like, by the sixth day it would be done.

Mary and Pete were able to find a successful system that worked for them in helping them manage their time well, while Donna simply mentioned that she was able to overcome this issue but did not really share specific details about how. This, however, may not be the case for all freshmen.

### **Positive Attitude**

Another subdimension of the overarching theme of facilitators of success is simply having a positive attitude about the freshman transition experience. When Mary was asked what advice she would give to incoming freshmen for the next school year, she responded,

Don't be so scared. I don't know. Because like I said, I was really scared. So it's



not something to be scared about. You should be happy about it because, you know, I guess it's a sense of, like, victory that you went to high school. You know obviously you don't have a right to make it here. So, don't be scared about it.

Mary encouraged students to change the way they view coming to high school. See it as an accomplishment that you made it to high school. In other words, have a positive outlook so you will not be as scared and intimidated as she was when she came to high school.

Tiffany, in her final comments in her interview, said, "I've had some downfalls but I picked myself back up. That's what you gotta do. You gotta pick yourself back up. And dust yourself off and keep going. Because if you don't you can fall way behind." The student said though she's had some ups and downs in the ninth grade, she's learned to pick herself up from the downfalls and persisted on. She said that is what it is all about in high school. Gabe, in reflecting and elaborating more on his symbolic representation which took the form of a quote, remarked that "nothing last forever." This was an indication that things do change. No matter how bad or how good things are, it does not last forever. This quote described his ninth-grade experience. He elaborated that no matter how bad it was, it would pass, so just hang in there, learn all you can while you are able, and enjoy your freshman year because it will all go by before you know it. Having a positive outlook about the transition experience seemed to be another way these students make meaning of their transition during their ninth-grade year.

### **Indicators of Successful Transition**

**Increased self-efficacy.** Students associated their transitional success with success in two key areas, both grouped under the subdimension of increased self-efficacy.

These were academic success and development and personal development specifically in the areas of making good social choices, maturity and growth, carefully choosing friends, and self-awareness.

**Academic success and development.** Feeling academic success was a key indicator for overall success in the students' ninth-grade year. Also, student academic development, that is their ability to stretch themselves, cultivate new academic strategies, and gain more self-confidence in their new environment were also viewed as indicators of success in the ninth grade.

Mary remarked in her interview and also noted in her journal the pride she felt in her academic accomplishments:

I feel prideful of myself because walking in I didn't know if I could do it. I didn't know if I could – you know, because at the beginning of this semester, I was actually in all basic classes and then switched to all honors classes. So when I got my last report card and realized that I was making an A in English and a B in science, I was really happy with myself. And I just did a little victory dance. I don't know it's a sense of pride that I feel.

Mary felt her transition was great because she did well academically. Her academic success helped to boost her self-confidence. Donna also remarked that she felt good about her freshman year so far because she was doing well academically. She noted,

I feel like – honestly I'm really proud of myself because I always keep like decent grades but like sometimes I'll slip just because I'm stressed out and like “oh crap I forgot to do that.” But I've kept really good grades this year. All A's right now. So I'm feeling good because I don't think I'm gonna fail anything.

Mary, Donna, and Tony all directly addressed the issue of self-efficacy and expressed

their sense of pride and accomplishment in doing well academically.

Tony said he felt accomplished in the ninth-grade because he did what he told his mother he would do, he pulled his grade up. He admits that he was not making A's or B's, but the fact that he was not making D's or F's was an achievement for him. He remarked,

I feel, I accomplished what I told my mama that I would accomplish. Cause last year my grades wasn't good. But I told her that I'd pull up my grades and stuff and she's seen me pull up my grades or whatever. That's accomplish – I wasn't making like A's and B's but I didn't have no D's or F's. I was doing okay.

Academic success varied for different students and is not always defined by making A's or B's, as is evident in Tony's case.

John wrote in his journal that making A's and B's on his report card gave him a “right” start to the school year. Pete also wrote, “High school is a place where you should have good grades to enjoy your experience.” He further elaborated in his interview about the most rewarding thing about being in high school: “When you get your report card and you see straight A's. That's what I think is the most rewarding.” In contrast, making a bad grade in one of his core classes was a negative point in his freshman year. He wrote about this in his journal:

What did not go very well at times during the school year was, my grade in Math II honors. It was by far my worst grade in any of the classes I took this whole ninth-grade year. My grade in that class made high school feel like it was really complicated. High school had seemed to be a place where you could just have fun and enjoy yourself. My grade in that class made me want to work harder to achieve a higher grade. Overall, that was a very negative point during my

freshman school year at \_\_\_\_ high school.

He then further added, “What comes to light when I focus on high school is hard work and perseverance. Without those two traits, it would be hard to become a great student and have great grades.” The implication here is that Pete’s negative academic experience made him realize what it took to be successful in high school, “hard work and perseverance.” This idea of working hard, making an effort, and persevering also came to the forefront during other participant interviews.

Ashley wrote,

What I have learned from the transition from middle school to high school is that you have to really grow up fast and not slack off on work and studying . . . you can’t depend on anyone to do your work for you . . . you only get half a year in your classes so you have to really buckle down and do your work.

In her journal, Tiffany also wrote about what she learned in high school: “You can’t play around, you have to be on top of your game. Or it will catch up with you. Stay focused, I have definitely learned that.” Ronnie noted in his interview that he started to take his academics more seriously once he got to high school:

Academically, I took it more serious than I did last year and I was trying to get straight A’s all the time, like last year I didn’t care. When I got to high school I started caring more about that.

Tony simply said,

In the beginning I really wasn’t thinking about work and stuff I was just thinking about you know girls and stuff about coming to high school, try to get me a upper classman but now, you really can’t be thinking about stuff like that just think about your books that all you really need to be focused on, and your work.

Keeping up with your work. You gotta keep up with your stuff. You got to. No slacking. No slacking.

Overall, several students spoke and wrote a great deal about the importance of academics in high school. Most seemed to realize that academic requirements are changing and they have to adjust the way they approach studying as well as their overall approach to their work in high school. Most also talked about the fact that it takes making more of an effort, not “slacking” off on your work, and perseverance to make good grades in high school.

**Personal development.** Several study participants wrote in their journals and also mentioned in their interviews about how choosing their friends wisely was another indicator of a successful transitional year. They also talked about how becoming more mature as well as becoming more self-aware was important in having a successful year.

Donna wrote in her journal,

I think high school is a time for you to find your place in the world. Now you have all the freedom to do what you want. All the choices your mom use to make for you, you can do now. You get to make new friends and try new things. Now is when our lives really change for better or worse depending on the choices you make.

She mentioned in her journal that throughout her ninth-grade year, she “finally came out of her shell.” Mary wrote about what she learned in high school:

What I learned is to not care what others think. Just be yourself and have fun. I also learned to speak out. That you need to be heard. And also don’t be scared because once I stepped out of my comfort zone the people that I thought where “scary” later became my best friends.

She further noted,

My transfer to high school was hard but yet exciting it was a “new chapter” for me. What I see in high school is a new opportunity waiting to be open.

Something new is always in store. It also gives you challenges that you have to be able to overcome. It gives you a new lesson each day not only what your teachers teach. High school also gives you the opportunity to find a new you and to express yourself. I know the person I am today is not the person I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I’m still loud but I’ve also found “me” I believe going into high school.

Mary’s description above points to what the literature says about this transitional point in life where students are finding out or discovering who they are. It is also a chance for some students to reinvent themselves or become a “new” person. She wrote that she had learned to just be herself in high school; she discovered her “true self” in high school. Similarly, Aiden mentioned in his journal that high school has shown him who he really is. He further developed this thought in his interview when he mentioned again that high school has taught him about himself and who he is as a person. He felt that he had developed a lot socially. He remarked,

Umm socially I think I’ve, I think I’ve (pause) discovered as a little bit about myself you know who I am as a person. High school has really shown that to me by the people I hang around with and ahhh so I think it’s kinda shown me, who I am.

Ashley also spoke about the fact that people change through high school. She mentioned that the troublemakers in middle school are now the model students: “like a lot of people change, like a lot of people that started trouble are like the most hardworking now so they really were smart they just didn’t show it.” Several other participants also

noted that there was a major change with friends. Mike stated, “Like a lot of people who I knew last year, a lot of my friends, we don’t really talk that much and they’re different now. They don’t act the same; they do bad things too and stuff like that.” Similarly, Stacy remarked,

Because some of your friends, they like find a different group of people, or they change and you’ve just got to, like, cut some people off so you can focus on.

They get in the whole aspect of high school and they just start changing, and they just start getting into the wrong stuff. And then you don’t want to get, like, you don’t want to get in trouble or get in the wrong crowd. So you’ve just gotta, you know, just tell them you don’t wanna hang out with them anymore.

Stacy further noted that the thing that contributed to her success in high school was choosing the right friends. She stated, “Choosing the right friends is another thing that helps. Because if you choose a better crowd to be around, and you’re all going to be successful, and it helps a lot.” Donna also talked about the fact that choosing the right friends in high school is one of the most important things you could do. She said,

Oh, definitely who I hang out with because there’s a lot of people . . . that do stuff that . . . most ways are not legal . . . I didn’t know they were like that. Like I mean I’m not gonna judge them for it. Like they can do whatever they want to do and that’s fine but I’m not going to go do that with them. Like . . . you have to be really careful about who you hang out with I guess would be the most important thing. Because like – I don’t know. I’m just really scared like you could be in the car going to get food or something, like out with your friends and something and you show up at a party and you’re like, “What is this? I thought we were going to a cookout.” Like it’s crazy...there’s some crazy people. Super sketchy.

Tony very openly talked about his suspensions from school during his first semester. When I prompted him further about how that impacted his transitional year, he responded,

I had to change. I had to change. I had to get in a new group of friends, I couldn't be getting into trouble unless I wanted to fail my grade and I didn't want to fail my grade. So I had to change. I had to get a new act for myself. So like you know, I guess choose wisely with your friends. Don't just pick anybody.

Tony said he had to change in order to pass his grade and he did make the change.

Kimmel and Weiner (1995 p.10) defined transition as “a period of change, growth and disequilibrium that serves as a kind of bridge between one relatively stable point in life and another relatively stable, but different point.” For several students in this study, it became clear from their comments that they had experienced some level of maturity and growth during the freshman transition year. Ronnie spoke about the fact that in high school they talk about important stuff and the teachers treat students more like adults:

Like in middle school a lot of people laughed about stuff that wasn't really funny I guess, but here we don't really do that as much as we use to, we talk about important stuff like gettin jobs and college and stuff (pause). The teachers (pause) well here they don't treat you like kids they treat you more like adults. That's mostly one thing that surprised me I guess.

Donna referred to her symbolic representation during her interview which took the form of a song, “Man in the Mirror.” She spoke about the fact that students need to start with themselves if there is something in the world they want to change. In other words, taking responsibility for what you do or for what you need to do. She said,

Because it talks about like how if there's something in the world where you don't



like what's going on that you need to start with yourself and you need to change what you're doing because you can't go and tell somebody like, "Oh, you don't need to leave trash on the ground." When you walk out of the classroom and you left all your papers on the floor. Like you need to start with yourself and be like, "okay, this is what I need to do and I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna take charge and do what I need to do, because like coming into high school there's a lot of stuff you have to do on your own. Like signing up for classes is probably the biggest thing to me, just because I'm really careful about what courses I take and stuff.

Her comment reveals a certain level of maturity in taking ownership of her learning and life in general. Aiden demonstrated his level of growth and maturity when he spoke about his decision to transfer out of Math II honors after his emotional breakdown in middle school taking Math I. It was his way of taking some level of control over his academics and over his own emotional well-being. He said he now feels less pressure and his grades are much better.

I'd say stuff like math has got a lot easier because I transferred out of math honors because ahh last year I think it was, I was in Math I . . . so my mom said that I had like emotional breakdowns and stuff like that. I don't remember any of that, it must be liked repressed in the back of my mind. In middle school I had these, I was a nervous wreck because that was the first time I got an F on a report card and that was when I was taking Algebra 1 last year. So I decided to go to the guidance counselor get myself switched out of Math 2 honors and just get switched into a normal class and it's gotten a lot easier. My grades are doing a lot better, I'm under a lot less pressure so that's helped a lot.

Ashley, in talking more about her symbolic representation during her interview, had this to say:

Well a giraffe, its neck gets longer and I thought that, that meant like growing up and maturing cause a lot of people grow up and they understand that these 4 years of high school are they're getting ready for the real world and there's no more playing like this is you know, make it or break it. Like I've grown up a lot . . . like in middle school they would just sit there and talk about how they hate their teachers and how they hate school and that it's not important. But now they're like (pause) the only thing the teacher is doing is helping me succeed and helping me grow. So they're maturing in that way . . . they mature in the way of their work because they don't like wait till the last minute and put somethin together for a project or they get to school and they say can I copy off of your homework . . . But now they are actually taking time out of their day, even if they do have a busy schedule and doing their homework and really focused on it and their projects.

Ashley suggested here that students are maturing and growing up in various ways during the ninth grade transition year; she admitted that she grew a lot in the sense that she now cares more about her work. Based on the information the study participants shared with the researcher, it would seem that they developed personally during the transition. Also, for students, this was indicative of a successful transitional year.

### **Transitional Adjustment**

As students make the transition from middle school to high school and during their freshman year, there are several adjustments they have to make. One such adjustment is to the physical and structural environment of the school itself. Having to

navigate through a massive school building with several wings and an immense hallway can be a tremendous feat for students. In addition, adjusting to the new high school routine which includes rotations and schedule of classes and adjusting their perceptions of high school to the reality of high school were important factors in how students make meaning of their freshman transition year. Another significant adjustment that students had to make during their ninth grade transition year was in their academic performance expectations. Students seemed to become more concerned about their grades as grades now count toward accumulating credits toward graduation. The final adjustment that students had to make as they experienced their ninth grade transition year was their perceptions of freedom. For many students, high school gave them an opportunity to experience freedoms they had never had before. Several students talked about these transitional adjustments during their interviews and in their journal entries and further developed these in their symbolic representations. It became clear that students made meaning of their transitional year by being able to make the necessary adjustments in these areas.

### **Physical and Structural**

Several students mentioned how surprising it was for them to discover how big their new school was and the difficulty they experienced in finding their way around to their classes. Aiden commented,

\_\_\_ Middle is the smallest in the county, so we didn't have that big of a building. It's not that hard to get lost in 3 hallways, so it was a change coming into high school cause they have just 8 hallways on just that side of the building (indicating with hands). That's just on that side and two gyms so a lot of stuff. Ahhh I remember in 1<sup>st</sup> semester, I had to go from World History which is over that way

(indicating with hands) all the way to gym in 5 minutes. And then from gym to upstairs to science and then back downstairs back down that hall to chorus (indicating with hands). It was a lot of stuff. I had to rush through the halls and it was really crowded, so that was a challenge.

Gabe described his experience of walking through the crowded hallway as a “train wreck.” This analogy showed the confusion and the chaos he experienced attempting to get to his classes:

I don’t know, I just thought that there wasn’t gonna be that many people and then when we switched classes it just like a big train wreck right at the corner right there (pointing). Yeah, like people having to go this way and turn and running into each other.

Ashley, in her description of the size of the school, compared it to a “shopping center.” For her having to navigate through this shopping center, finding the right stores or classes, and finding the right facilities like the lunchroom and library, was a major change:

I think of \_\_\_ high as a shopping center really I don’t know like I know where Mr. \_\_\_’s classroom is but I went up a different stairwell and I didn’t know where his classroom was then, but I was upstairs (shaking head). It’s like bigger (smiles) cause you don’t know what store to go in like there’s all different kinds (indicating with hands and smiles) of classrooms and different facilities.

Tony expressed his experience this way:

I was kind of scared though coming into ninth grade, trying to hustle with big kids, the upper classmen, you know. Walking in the hallways sometimes you get bumped, people touching, step on your shoes and stuff, it’s a lot. I would say the

first day is really the worst day, cause there's just a whole bunch – when class change you just see everybody be in the hallway. You might get run over and stuff, people be walking slow, people be bumping into people, don't say excuse me and stuff but that's how it is in high school.

Not only were crowded hallways a common occurrence in this massive high school, but students also talked about getting lost in the building. Mary said,

walking through the halls with everybody, it definitely was a change for me.

Because your teachers in middle school are like, stay in line. You know, you didn't get out of line. And now there's not really a line . . . I didn't know where my classes were. I still got lost every day. I walked in circles a couple of times. But I was scared and nervous. That was hard being a freshman and all, you get lost. Even til' this day I still get lost.

Tony also remarked,

I got lost a couple of times in the first week. I had to ask a couple of people where the classes were and stuff. When I went upstairs I was like, "Oh my gosh, all these upperclassmen." I was so scared like once you get here and you see how big the people is you be like, "Oh my gosh, Oh my gosh."

In addition to the size of the building, students also spoke and wrote about having to adjust to the complicated nature of the class schedules, switching classes, and the semester courses of high school versus year-long courses of middle school. For Ashley, making the adjustment in terms of semester and yearlong courses was difficult. She fears this will be a great challenge for her as she moves up to the next grade:

What I think did not go well throughout the school year is that I took math 1, first semester and did really well . . . a couple of weeks ago my friend asked me to

help her with her math 1 homework and I didn't understand ANYTHING!!! I think I'm not going to remember anything next year in math 2. I like taking classes a whole year instead of one semester. Next year I'm scared I'm not going to remember a lot of stuff that I learned this semester because I only took it half a year instead of a whole year. I guess that is a huge thing you have to get use to when transitioning from middle to high school.

In one journal entry, Mary wrote about what did not go well for her in high school, and she mentioned changing classes. She also mentioned that having different teachers each semester was a major adjustment for her. She emphasized in her interview that it was not really her schedule that was the issue but the changing of classes with different people:

You know like in middle school your mostly, you're like, sittin in class with like the same people all day long, yeah you change classes but they're always with you. And then going into this, I have classes with everybody. Like, I may have one class with one of my friends, but then the other one I don't get to see her. So that was definitely a pretty big change for me.

In contrast however, there were some study participants who looked forward to the variety of classes, the changing of classes, and the longer class times. Aiden stated,

I think I looked forward most to ahhh the variety of classes because in middle school we mostly just stayed with the same group of people all throughout the day (indicating movement of classes with hands) and in high school every class is different so (pause) also taking a bunch of classes. I was looking forward to that.

It would appear that this experience made the transition more meaningful for him.

Ronnie said,

Well I have more time to understand what the teachers are saying because we

have a longer class time (rubbing beard under chin). Cause in middle school the core classes were longer than encore classes, but here they are all like pretty much the same.

Ronnie emphasized that he preferred the fact that his classes were longer and that all classes lasted for an equal amount of time. This was an important aspect in the transition for him.

Unlike other students, Stacy's challenge was her schedule and not necessarily changing classes. She commented,

When they put my schedule together last semester, I only had one core class. And now this semester I have three core classes. And so I think the work is much harder. That was hurtful because now I have to, like – like the first semester it was easier because I only had one core class and then I only had the one big exam. But now I have all this. I'm not used to all the homework and stuff because they gave me that one semester where it was just easy. And now I have all this homework, and then I have these big exams coming up. And you can't really – I mean, I guess you could go to the guidance office and tell them about it, but there's really not much – I mean, they might change it, it just depends on how bad it is.

### **Academic Performance Expectations**

Several students spoke about their challenge in adjusting to the academic expectations of high school. When asked what was the most difficult thing about being in high school, Aiden pondered for a few minutes and then responded,

Hmmm, most difficult thing, I would say maintaining your grades. Because the ahhh, I can tell the grades are calculated slightly differently so if you don't do

your homework but you make really high grades they will still keep you at about maybe an 80 or 85. And ahhh if you have really high grades and you make a bad test grade or project grade then your grade just plummets really fast. So maintaining grades is really difficult.

Several other study participants also agreed that keeping up with grades in high school was a major adjustment. Fred stated,

I use to make like straight A's but when I came here I started making B's and stuff cause it's a lot faster than I thought. Cause the work pace I thought it was gonna be the same but it got faster.

Tony commented,

The work is harder . . . you gotta put effort you gotta pay attention and you can't just be doing anything in class. You might miss something and boom you got a test tomorrow and you don't remember any of the stuff, none of it and you going to be looking lost on the test and failing it and start bringing your grade down a lot. So work, that's a major change.

Students agreed that the work was harder and highlighted homework as one particular area of work that was most challenging. Pete stated,

Like, in middle school we didn't get homework all the time. Like, we had time to do our homework. It was like – I forgot what the class was called. But it was, like the last 15 minutes of the day you got to finish your homework. It's different because high school doesn't even have time – they make homework so you can do it at home and not give you time here.

He went on to say,

You have to try to maintain a good grade in each – in every class. And it's pretty



hard to keep up with that and do every homework and every assignment as good as – each class. Because sometimes you don't have as much time as you think you have.

Student responses are echoed in Akos and Gallassi's (2004) and Letrello and Miles's (2003) studies that found that at the high school level, one of the top concerns of students focused on academic performance (homework, hard classes, and pressure to do well). Clearly, adjusting to the academic demands and expectations of high school was a major way the students made meaning of their freshman transition experience.

### **Perceptions of Freedom**

At various points in the interview and journal writing, several students made mention of how much more freedom they experienced in high school compared to middle school. Though most welcomed this new freedom, some still experienced difficulty adjusting to it. Gabe stated,

I knew there was a lot more freedom and stuff and that's kind a what I like more than middle school, because there's a lot more freedom. Like (pause) you don't have to stand in lines or whatever, you just go to lunch and there's no teachers that come, they just sit in their classes and you just go.

Gabe also mentioned that he now has his driver's permit and soon he will have his license. This seemed to be a common theme among participants as they equated getting their permit and eventually their license to having more freedom as well as more responsibility. This was certainly something that several of the students looked forward to in high school. Fred represented his view of high school through the symbolic representation of the American flag. In relation to the other study participants, he spoke and wrote the most about the freedoms experienced in high school. It would seem that

this was an important aspect of his freshman transition experience. This was how he elaborated on his symbolic representation during his interview:

Like I chose that because you get a lot more freedom when you come to high school than you do in middle school. Like they trust you. Freedoms like, they don't watch you like stay right beside you at lunch, like they don't watch you in the hallway and that sort a thing (pause). Like they let you do what you do and they do what they do. Cause like in middle school they was always with you and you never got to do anything.

As students discovered this newly found freedom, they also came to realize that with this freedom came greater responsibility. Donna noted in her journal,

In high school you have a lot of freedom, this can be good or bad. It's good because you can make choices for yourself, but at the same time you can easily fall short and your grades/attendance will slip. High school is just very independent. Your teachers don't baby you and hold your hand the whole time now like they use to.

In Donna's opinion, you can be disciplined and do what you need to do in high school to succeed or you may not be able to handle this new freedom and your grades and attendance can plummet. Fred also mentioned in his journal about having to become more responsible in the face of more freedom:

I learned from this experience that your whole demeanor will change with the responsibility you have . . . high school is like an introduction to real life . . . you have more responsibility and freedom . . . more responsibility to do your work because most of the teachers trust you.

Ashley described freedom in high school this way:

They let you be more independent. They didn't give you an agenda, they didn't write on the board they told you one time and you're gonna have to remember it and if you come in tomorrow and you don't remember there's a test then (pause) then you just better hope that you have good memory. Like everything is independent because you don't see lines in halls anymore, in the cafeterias you don't see like people sitting with their classes you see everyone sitting different.

For her, students are given more independence, more autonomy, and what they do with that new independence, that new freedom, will help to determine how well they do in high school. For Ashley this was one of the most challenging things about high school.

### **Perceptions of High School vs. Reality**

Another important aspect of the transition for students was their perceptions of high school versus the reality of their experience of high school. Based on what middle school teachers, family, and friends told them as well as what they saw and heard on the media, study participants admitted that they had preconceived ideas about what high school would be like. These perceptions ranged from academics to social to perceptions about high school in general.

Several study participants stated that they felt that the work was not going to be as challenging but found their perceptions to be wrong. Fred stated,

Like they told me the work is gonna be exactly the same. Like these formulas we learn in math we're gonna use those as we did the same, like it wasn't the same (shaking head indicating that it really wasn't the same). When we got here it was like three letters for exponents and stuff and in middle school it was just like  $y=mx+b$ , that's easy (pause). Like they told me the work was gonna be the same, like it turned out to be way different.

Mike also expressed that the work was much harder in high school than he thought:

There was a lot of work, a lot of homework and stuff (pause) . . . I expected it to be like real, real fun than stuff in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and I was like I can't wait to get to high school, but now that I'm here I wish I was back in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (smiles).

Mike seemed to be overwhelmed with the many changes he encountered in high school.

When pressed as to why he felt this way, he simply said, "It's just a lot going on more sports and stuff like that; it's just a lot. Eighth grade was more funner."

Other study participants mentioned that their perception of high school as it relates to bullying and what they had heard about the reputation of the school were not accurate. Mary asserted,

Well, at \_\_\_ middle school– that's where I went to middle school – actually, \_\_\_ high school definitely had a reputation there. And when I was like, hey, I'm going to \_\_\_, people were like, oh, it's a bad school. There's gangs, there's um bad kids, there's bullies. And so when they told me that, like, I said, I didn't have an older sibling or someone to tell me that's not what it was like. So going into high school I was, like, scared. Like I don't know. That was, like, my opinion on high school. I was expecting like mean people, bullies. And you know like I said, all that. But, um, I got here and, like, everybody was just super-nice. I felt really welcomed. I was like, oh, I love it here. And I just had fun. And it was great.

Pete wrote in one journal entry about his perception of bullying in high school,

One of my initial impressions of high school was that everyone was going to be a bully. I recognize high school as a place where not too many people are mean . . . My overall outlook on my whole freshman year at \_\_\_ high school is really

positive. High school feels like it's better than I expected and what people had told me . . . My whole year was pretty well, even though it had many ups and downs.

Pete said that his initial impressions of high school turned out to be inaccurate. He discovered that there are more opportunities to meet great friends than there are for you to be bullied by mean people. Mary mentioned that she was surprised at how nice the seniors were. She said

Ummm- something that surprised me was that the seniors were really nice. Some of them – some of them looked really scary, and I'm just like, umm. But I think that's one thing that surprised me, because I was expecting them to be like the big "dawgs" and be mean to everybody.

Several students spoke about their perception of the school's reputation. Ashley said,

I didn't know that like everybody told me that \_\_\_\_ High was ghetto and that there's a lot of fights and like I've only heard of two fights in the whole year that's gone by and it's like it's not even ghetto. Like it's like everybody's like such a family and that helped because the seniors are friends with the freshmen and don't feel little. Like the first day of school I felt little. Like when you're in sixth grade you feel so nervous and the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders are not as welcoming as seniors and juniors and sophomores I mean they play around with you and they're like we're older than you and all that but they're still welcoming and they'll help you.

Ashley's perception of her high school was not the reality. She described the school environment as everybody being a "family" at this school in contrast to what she had heard about the school being "ghetto."

Donna also said that she expected that there would be a lot of “drama” and fighting in high school but this was not the case. She even went on to say that she thought the principal was doing a good job and gave him her stamp of approval. Tony, who was the only participant in the study who had been suspended from school a few times during the school year, spoke about his perceptions of high school:

Trouble thing, trouble. Like in middle school you could get away with stuff like that, like me I’ve been suspended a good four or five times this year. So like last year – I mean I didn’t really get suspended like that last year. I mean I did but like they let you get away with more stuff. But like high school, they don’t, like they gonna suspend you on the dot for anything. Like tardies you get suspended – all types of stuff. I got suspended a good four or five times. But I went to like \_\_\_\_, so I had to make up the days so it didn’t mess up my attendance or anything like that.

Tiffany spoke about the fact that high school was more explicit than she had expected:

I went from preschool – well, not preschool but it was like a day care – until seventh grade I went to private school. And eighth grade I went to \_\_\_\_, which is kind of sheltered a little bit. It’s not really as explicit as like \_\_\_\_ and other schools like that. So when I came here you know, it was like, wow. I aint expect high school to be like that. It’s rough. Like all the cussing I guess and all the like how people treat each other and this other stuff that couples just making out in the hallways and all that stuff, touching and stuff. It’s real, yeah.

For several participants, their negative perceptions were shattered and replaced with more positive ones as they experienced high school throughout the school year. For others, they wished their perceptions were closer to the reality before they entered high school

especially as it related to academics. Still for others, they felt that their negative expectations of high school were exceeded as they encountered things they had not anticipated. Though study participants all had varied perceptions of high school before they entered the building, it was clear that as the school year progressed they all tempered these perceptions to the actual reality of their high school experience.

### **Looking to the Future**

Another superordinate theme that emerged from the data was looking to the future. Students discussed this theme as preparation for college and life. Several study participants alluded to this theme in their journals as well as in their interviews. Though students were only in their freshman year, it was evident that they were already looking to life after high school and thinking about their future. Students were anticipating attending college and graduating high school. One participant's symbolic representation was a reflection of this particular theme and seemed to be the way he most made meaning of his freshman transition experience.

Ronnie's symbolic representation was a drawing of high school labeled jail and an arrow pointing to another building labeled college. When asked how his symbolic representation depicted his high school experience, he responded,

I drew this picture because I'm ready to move out to college but I still have to get through high school first, but I'm just ready to move on, so that's what this means . . . it feels like I'm stuck in here but I'm ready to go.

For Ronnie, high school represents a transition into college. He said that in a way you are trapped as you have to get through this stage of life first. You have to get through high school in order to move on to college. He said you are stuck in high school; it seems to be an unpleasant chore, a daunting task you must complete before you can move on.

He said he is getting tired of school and he's ready to move on. Though just in the ninth grade, it is evident that he is already anticipating college. Mary and Tiffany similarly viewed high school as a bridge to cross, a stage before college. Both, however, had a more positive outlook on this stage of life. Mary stated,

My chorus teacher at \_\_\_\_ Middle was always like, when you get to high school you're almost crossing the bridge – she would, like, refer to it- the bridge – and I saw, like, I was, like, stepping from the middle to almost the end on the bridge. And I was really excited to experience new things. You know, it's definitely exciting.

Tiffany said, “I recognize high school as being a tool for life and definitely college. But you have to take advantage of it. It's kind of rewarding in a way to know that you getting closer to your finish line.” For her, high school is preparation for college and for life; but in order to reap the benefits, you have to use this tool to its fullest capacity.

Donna was most concerned about ensuring that she did not do anything “stupid” in high school that would derail her future. She was concerned about some of her friends who seemed to be doing just that. She remarked,

Probably just making sure you don't do anything stupid. Like honestly – I've said that like twenty million times but that's just so important because I know a lot of people that they're really good kids, they're really smart, they have like a really good future ahead of them but they're screwing it up now . . . And when I tell them that, and they're like, “I'm going to a party this weekend.” You shouldn't do that. You should like go see a movie or something like that. And they're like, “But that's not fun.” I'm like, “Okay, you can go ahead.” But I try to tell them like you're messing yourself up and for your future . . . If you go to a party you're



going to be tired the next day. That's going to mess you up now but like 4 years from now when you're applying for colleges and stuff and everybody is like, "Oh, I see that you got charged for underage drinking when you were 15 or something like that." That's gonna mess you up getting into college when you want to get into a good school.

Clearly, in Donna's eyes, the future is tied to the decisions and choices made right now while in high school. Tony mentioned that he was okay with being recommended for honors math as it gave him the opportunity to gain extra credits which would put him on the path to an early or on-time graduation. During his interview, he seemed very preoccupied with graduating high school and graduating either early or on time. When asked what he most looked forward to in coming into high school, he said graduating on time and going to college. He commented,

Yeah cause you know there's a lot of drop outs and stuff. But I'm not going to drop out, really. My mamma wouldn't even approve of that. I don't even know why I said that. I'm going to finish high school and then I'm going to go to college. I want to go to college though. Either \_\_\_\_\_ – 'cause that's a good school – or \_\_\_\_\_ in Atlanta – somewhere. I just want to go out of state a little bit unless it's \_\_\_\_\_ . . . Just somewhere where you know I can be away.

Tony said that he is looking forward to graduating because there are a lot of "dropouts and stuff." He distinguishes himself however from those dropouts by saying that he is not going to drop out. It is clear that his mom has some influence on his having the desire to stay in school and persist through to graduation and eventually to college. He has even started to think about exactly where he would like to attend college, which shows some level of awareness about his future ambitions.

Though only in the ninth grade, several of the study participants spoke about their expectations for the future. For them, their ninth-grade year was more than just the first year of high school; it meant preparation for college and for their future. Most of the participants made the connection between doing well academically, getting involved in extracurricular activities, and how these could impact their long-term goals of graduating high school and eventually going to college. Evidently, looking to the future was an essential ingredient in how these students made meaning of their transition during their freshman year.

### **Barriers to Successful Transition**

As discussed in the literature on school transition, once students enter high school, they are faced with numerous challenges. Some of these hindrances are internal struggles, while others are external. For many students, these barriers can be the tipping point to a successful or unsuccessful transition year. Several study participants mentioned some of these barriers in their journals and interviews and one student mentioned them in her symbolic representation.

### **Parental Pressure**

Aiden spoke and wrote extensively about how much pressure his mother puts on him academically. He also mentioned his mother's influence over his academics, including the courses he signed up for in high school. He hinted that she has too much control over his academics and he has very little. He wrote, "my parents have put a lot of pressure on me to make good grades . . . Ma says that if I don't make good grades, I'll never get anywhere in life, so I guess I'm going nowhere fast." He further elaborated in his interview,

Ahhmm most of my classes were chosen for me cause my mom chose them. She

has a lot of control in my academics. I think she takes things ahhh just a little bit too seriously because I had about ahhh eight missing homework assignments in English which didn't really bring my grade down that much because it only accounts for about 15 to 20 percent of my grade but ahhh I had to make up all of them and turn them in for my grade to be brought up to an 89. So (pause). And ahhh she says that she knows I can get into college, but paying for it, is gonna be difficult. So she's all about me getting a scholarship like full ride and ahhh a mean I'd like that too but I don't think it's, I don't think it would be that hard cause I do a lot of volunteer work which takes up a lot of my free time and my grades are mostly pretty good, and ahhh I play some sports so ahhh I hear that helps.

Though the literature speaks about the positive impact of parental involvement in the transition to high school, for Aiden it would seem that his parents' perceived over-involvement might have negatively impacted how he experienced his transitional year in the ninth grade.

### **Pressure to Fit In**

Another barrier that study participants spoke about was the pressure to fit in. Ashley mentioned in her interview that some of her friends from middle school had completely changed, and not in a positive way, once they entered high school. When prompted as to why this change may have occurred, she responded, "because they got around the wrong crowds and they wanted to try and fit in . . . I think kind of just to fit in is why they changed." Mary spoke about her own personal struggles of fitting in and being very self-conscious. This fear became crippling for her to the point where it even impacted her learning. She stated,

when I started high school I wondered what everybody thought of me, was I pretty enough? Did my clothes look ok? Was something on my face? These were the questions I would ask myself every day and because of this I became really self-conscious which effected my learning ability.

Donna wrote in one journal entry,

In high school I have seen a lot of segregation. If you don't fit in it would probably be really hard. I honestly don't care what you look like or what you do in your free time-if you're nice to me I'll be nice to you. There is a lot of people who do bad things that I would never imagine they do. Honestly you just have to stay firm in your integrity and hold on to what you know is right.

Clearly, the pressure to fit in to can cause students to act "out of character."

Aiden similarly commented on the fact that the social groups in high school are much more distinct than in middle school:

Ahmm in middle school the ahh sort of groups of friends like the clicks and stuff, the lines between them were blurred mostly . . . But in high school they are very very separated. Like, Ahhmm I became part, my main group of friends is in tech and theatre so ahmm, the social groups are you can tell them apart very easily as compared to middle school where they were kinda blended.

According to Aiden, social groups in high school are very distinct and students try to fit in with the group they want to most identify with.

### **Fears of Being Bullied**

Bullying, picking on others, or kids just being mean was another barrier that several study participants alluded to. In Ashley's observation, students had not matured as much as she thought they had in the transition to high school. She said there is still

“drama” in high school and there are still bullies:

Like, I thought, like they had matured a lot but . . . they still wanna start drama with you over nothing and that really gets on my nerves when they try to start drama with you. And there’s also people that are like, there’s also still bullies and I thought that everybody would overcome that but they are also still bullying and it’s like they don’t care about ahmm other people’s feelings.

Mike talked about the fact that his expectations turned to reality upon entering high school when he realized that there were indeed bullies. He seemed to overemphasize the point in his interview that he was not bullied but knew of people who it happened to. He stated,

There is crazy people, a lot. A lot of things about the bullying part in high school, like freshman, newly coming in and picking on them and stuff, that didn’t really happen for me, like I know it happened to some people, but that didn’t really happen to me, so.

The researcher prompted a bit more to see if the student would divulge further information about any incidences of bullying as she suspected that he himself may have experienced being bullied. He commented,

Like the seniors and stuff, some of them, some of them are cool, but like other people are like playing around, picking on and messing with the freshmen sometimes. That was a part of my problem, but I got over it now. Cause it’s like they would be like playing around and beatin up on them and stuff. Now it’s like okay, it’s not really a big problem.

Tony mentioned that some students get picked on because of what they wear which is why he is so concerned about his appearance. He remarked,

People nowadays they like judge how you dress or how and what not– ‘cause I know if I do it other people do it too I’m not even gonna lie. Cause I’ll look at him and be like whoa what he got on. You gotta dress... and me personally I like to dress every day up. I won’t just wear anything to school . . . cause people they will try to crash on you, they try to play your face in high school. And then coming in as a freshman, you’re going to get picked on . . . They just do that to freshmen for some reason . . . But if you can’t they’re gonna try to flame you like, “Oh, look what he got on.” You know, somebody else come over there and boom everybody laughing, everybody laughing at you. You’re feeling some type of way like, like “Dang. I’m being picked on.” And some people they kill themselves over stuff like that. People just don’t know how other people are they just don’t think through when they say stuff to people that can really hurt a person. Like . . . I don’t pick on nobody. Like if you can’t dress, that ain’t my problem. Like I just know that I’m blessed or whatnot. Some people they just got it hard and some people they don’t.

In addition to all the challenges incoming freshmen have to deal with, being judged or picked on because of appearance is another difficulty students face.

Mary, for her symbolic representation, wrote and talked about the song “Believe and Be Alright” by Justin Bieber. She mentioned that when she felt down because kids were mean to her and she needed a boost in her self-confidence, this song got her through those times. This was a sort of coping mechanism for her:

Well, Be Alright and Believe is a song by Justin Bieber. And I like look up to him. Be Alright . . . when I would have, bad days where, like, somebody would say something, like, mean or something, I would go home and listen to that song

and it would, like, cheer me up a little. And then the Believe part it, like, helped me, like, to believe in myself. Because, like I said, I was nervous and I was scared. And so I didn't really have, like, confidence and I wasn't really like believing in myself that I could do this. And – yeah so that's what it means to me.

Bullying was evidently an issue in the transition to high school for several study participants, though most spoke and wrote about it from the perspective of an observer, never stating that any bullying actually happened to them. There is the possibility, however, that some of these students did experience bullying but may not have been comfortable enough to directly share this information, though some hinted at it.

### **Peer Pressure**

The final barrier that study participants mentioned was peer pressure. While peers can be a positive influence in the transition to high school they can also hinder this process. Stacy spoke about the fact that people get pressured into doing the wrong thing or hanging out with the wrong group which can be detrimental to their future. “Like, people get pressured into doing things and hanging with certain groups. And it's just not good if you want a good future.” Likewise, Donna wrote in one journal entry that her transition experience has taught her to stay firm in her beliefs even through peer pressure:

What I've learned my freshman year is to stay firm in what you believe. There are a lot of people who will try to get you to do bad things that you don't approve of. Sometimes peer pressure will lead you to do stuff you shouldn't or wouldn't normally do.

### **High School Readiness**

Once students enter high school, they begin to question their readiness, or lack thereof, for high school. Study participants were very conscious of and elaborated on

their perceptions of readiness for high school. They also gave suggestions and recommendations as to what the middle and high schools could do to help students feel a greater sense of readiness for high school. This reflective component of the study seems to be another way in which these students made meaning of their ninth-grade transition year.

### **Perceptions of Readiness**

Several study participants spoke about high school orientation, efforts by the middle school, and visits of the various entities such as, ROTC and counselors to their middle school, as instrumental in helping them feel a sense of readiness for high school. Aiden mentioned that the high school orientation and freshman camp were two different activities. He pointed out that the latter was more helpful than the former as this involved having high school ambassadors or mentors interacting with the students. He said,

They did ahhh freshman camp and ahhh orientation which were both really fun, I liked it. And ahhh I think they really helped. They helped me ahhh, feel a little bit more comfortable in the school . . . Freshman camp was a little more helpful . . . Ahhh, Ambassadors, like ahhh, I got accepted into ambassadors, ambassadors were helping us, they were showing us around the school, ahhh (pause). It was a lot more inclusive. We were able to ask a lot more questions and ahhh a lot of stuff like that.

Fred also spoke about the high school orientation and that it helped prepare him for high school because he was able to learn about the credits he needed in order to move on to the tenth grade and to graduate. He stated that learning these things at orientation helped him choose his classes well. Ronnie mentioned that his middle school Algebra 1 teacher spoke to the students about the credits they would need in high school. He felt that



helped to prepare him for the transition into high school:

Like they told you the credits you would have to have to be able to graduate. Like how many you would have to have to go to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, how you gotta pass the finals so you don't have to retake a class and all a that stuff. Yeah, that helped me choose my classes, so I could go ahead and get a lot of em done, so I could do other stuff, so I could get more credits to go to college.

Both Gabe and Donna spoke and wrote about the fact that their middle school English and Algebra 1 teachers helped prepare them for the academic rigor of high school. Gabe said,

Well I got one of the best English teachers in middle school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade-cause we do a lot of essays and read books and stuff and that got me a lot prepared for the essays here cause we do a lot in English and stuff like that.

Donna stated,

Eighth grade I took Algebra 1 like as an eighth grader so I don't have to do it here. And um we like – she was a high school teacher. Like that was her first year in a middle school and so she was like really strict on like taking notes and the way she did our tests and like none of our other teachers really let us do test corrections and if you failed you failed. And she was like, “Well, when you get to high school they're going to let you like retest for an 85 – or like a 70 on the test for an 85.” Just to make my grade come up. And um we did that a lot here too. And she was like, “Well, this is how it's going to be in high school so I'm not going to sugarcoat anything for you.” So she helped us out a lot.

Both students felt a greater sense of readiness for the academic rigor of high school because of the efforts of their middle school teachers.

Though only minimally, Tony did mention that changing classes from core to encore in middle school, to some extent, helped prepared him for that aspect of the high school transition, while Tiffany spoke about the fact that the high school counselors coming to her middle school and mapping out with students their schedule for high school, based on the eighth-grade teachers' recommendations, was really helpful. While this was the case for Tiffany, Tony had a different experience; he came into high school not knowing what courses he was going to take. This inconsistency can certainly impact student readiness for high school as well as how they make meaning of the transition.

### **Suggestions to Improve Readiness**

Aiden commented on the fact that the middle school did not do much to prepare the students for the transition into high school. In fact, his suggestion was for the middle school to get more involved in the process:

I would say that the ahhh the middle school should bring students to ahhh to the high school and have ambassadors or faculty take them on a tour, walk around, sit in on some classrooms and ahhh stuff like that and I think that would help a lot, certainly would have helped me.

This is in line with what the literature states about transition activities being a collaborative effort between the middle and high schools. Transition activities need to also happen in middle schools in order to help students grasp a sense of readiness for high school. Stacy suggested having a mentor in high school would have been beneficial regarding her readiness for high school but also would have been helpful as a support throughout the school year. She said,

Throughout the year have people that can, like, help with your work and stuff if you're struggling or something. Because if I had a mentor, like, it would – like, I

could go to my mentor and, like, ask them, like, if I needed, like, help on something, like with my homework or something, or if I was struggling in a subject or something, I could have went to my mentor. Because they were upperclassmen and they would probably have already took that, hopefully. They could have helped me like – they could have, like tutored me kind of I guess . . . I wouldn't be so, like, stressed out around the work, and I would have another friend . . . So then if you have that one friend, it's just like okay, I have a friend right now so I don't have to worry about all the other people.

As it relates to readiness, Fred suggested that the high school pay more attention to helping students navigate through the lunch schedule:

I guess they could tell you like when the lunches are. Cause I did not know what lunch to go to at first . . . I guess they could teach us that. Tell you which like the numbers, like which lunch they got, the number of the room, cause they all got certain lunches. So I guess they could have taught us that.

He also added that it would be helpful in middle school to start giving students more freedom in preparation for the freedoms they will encounter in high school. Ashley also suggested in her interview that in middle school, students should be given more independence to build their level of maturity for high school. Additionally, she commented on the fact that teachers in middle schools are too lenient. She suggested that they stop giving out second and third chances as this is not helping to prepare students for high school:

Like I think in 7<sup>th</sup> grade that should be the last agenda they give. Because in 8<sup>th</sup> grade you need to know that you don't need an agenda because in 9<sup>th</sup> grade you're not gonna get one and they need to stop writing stuff on the board because I mean

they write on the board but then they're like they tell you then they erase it and write whatever you need next. Like they need to stop giving 2<sup>nd</sup> chances in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They just need to tell em once and then if they do it again send them to redirect or something or discipline them (pause) because that's why kids think they can get away with stuff in high school but then they get here and they're like shocked cause they can't get away with that stuff anymore.

Mike related his suggestion about having a sense of readiness to students being more informed about bullying and about the difficult things they will have to face in high school:

Have some people who have like been through a lot here, like bullying and stuff go down to the 8<sup>th</sup> graders and talk about them. Talk about how high school was for them for the first couple of weeks or the year.

Mike spoke to the idea of having a reflective piece or component to the transition experience. Through this process, students can evaluate what helped or hindered them most in their transition experience and can share these experiences with incoming freshmen either orally or in writing which could be included in the high school transition packets. Mary also suggested having former freshmen share their experiences with incoming freshmen to help prepare them for what is ahead:

Um I think that they should take advice from people who are in the ninth grade already, and take that and give it to the other kids to . . . Like my time management. To go ahead and start, like, timing yourself and like lay everything out . . . Because even though, like, my teacher did give me advice, I don't think it was enough to, like, say that I was fully prepared. I mean, it prepared me but it didn't fully prepare me, if that makes sense. So just advice. You know, take what

you learned from your past students and give it to them.

For several participants having peers share their experiences of high school seems to be more helpful than other transition activities in preparing students for high school.

Both Donna and Stacy suggested that middle school teachers give more projects and increase the difficulty and amount of work so students become familiar with the research process and as well as the academic rigor of high school. Donna also suggested that teachers allow students to take more responsibility for their own learning:

Um oh gosh, I guess like honestly this is going to sound crazy because you're never going to hear a kid say this. But they should give more projects. I'm not even going to lie because like I've had a couple of research papers that I've had to do in this semester alone for my English class and I was like, "What is this? Like I've never seen this before." Because we never had to write research papers or any of that and I'm just like, I hope he's gonna help us out cause I have no clue what this is. And then just more projects and I think they should make the point to you that like teachers aren't going to baby you in high school. If you miss a class or if you miss a day or whatever then you need to get with that teacher and get your work. Because in middle school they're like, "Oh, \_\_\_\_ you missed yesterday. You need this and you need this from your math class." But they don't do that here. Like you have to get your own work and if you don't that's a zero. You have to get your own stuff and take responsibility for your own work.

Tony suggested that middle school students be made more aware of the requirements for graduation and what subjects they will need to take once they get to high school. Again, the student talked about wishing he knew just how important it was to take Math 1 class seriously in middle school. He said if he had, he would not have to

retake it in high school. He said he did not realize the importance until he got to high school:

Like I knew that I was taking Math 1 but I didn't think it was nothing and when I got to high school I was like, "Oh." I realized that I took it, that I failed it. So I gotta take it again.

It could be that in Tony's estimation, the importance of this class toward high school credit was not stressed in his middle school or that he did not understand the concepts of high school credits, graduation requirements, and so on. Whatever the case, the student felt he was not adequately prepared in middle school to understand the implications of his choices and the impact on his high school years.

Several study participants were eager to give suggestions on how to improve readiness for high school. They saw this as an opportunity to help the new group of incoming freshmen in the next school year. Describing their perceptions of readiness for high school and offering suggestions to improve high school readiness were other important ways students made meaning of their freshman transition experience during their ninth-grade year.

## **Summary**

For several of the study participants, their high school transition year presented many challenges. However, though they had several negative experiences, most of the study participants reflected on their high school transition experience in a positive way. When asked how successful they felt in the ninth grade, most of the study participants responded that they felt very successful while indicating reasons for their feelings of success, namely doing well academically, forming friendships, involvement in sports and extracurricular activities, support from parents, friends and the wider community, and

others. Overall, most study participants characterized their ninth-grade year as a successful one.

In conducting the data analysis, the researcher arrived at six superordinate themes with subdimensions linked to some themes. Through study participant journal entries, interview sessions, and symbolic representations, the researcher was able to glean important insight about how students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year. As students enter high school and throughout the transitional year, several factors were identified that helped to facilitate a successful year, namely transitional supports, time management, connectedness, and a positive outlook or attitude about high school. As students considered their success or lack thereof in the ninth grade, the focus shifted to some indicators of their success. These included an increased sense of self-efficacy which encompassed academic success and personal development. Students also found they had to make several adjustments during their transitional year. These adjustments included adjusting to the physical and structural environment, academic performance, perceptions of freedom, and perceptions versus the reality of high school. While making these adjustments, students also encountered several barriers that can derail a successful transitional year. During the transitional year, students also seemed to start looking ahead to college and life after high school while sharing their thoughts about how to improve high school readiness.

The data collected and the themes derived helped the researcher to better understand how students made meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year of high school and highlighted some key issues in the area of freshman transition.

Chapter 5 provides an overall summary of the study data, offers recommendations

and conclusions based on the data collected, and identifies limitations of the study.



## **Chapter 5: Discussions and Recommendations**

High school transition is a significant period in the lives of adolescents (Blythe et al., 1983; Roderick, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Students who succeed in the first year are more likely to continue to do well in subsequent years and eventually graduate high school (Akos et al., 2005; Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Adolescents frequently have a difficult time making the transition into high school; and as a result, many often drop out shortly after they enter high school or fall behind and fail to graduate on time (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). The purpose of this study was to garner from first-time ninth-grade students transitioning from middle school to high school how they make meaning of their freshman year. Given the magnitude of quantitative studies in transitional research, a qualitative phenomenological study that explored student ninth-grade transition experiences was deemed an appropriate approach to increase understanding of the issues associated with school transitions (Alspaugh, 1998; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Mac Iver, 1990; Neild et al., 2007). Of particular importance in this phenomenological study was allowing student voices to be heard in the conversation about freshman transition. Being able to use students' own words added a key component that was lacking to the body of literature on the transition experienced during the freshman year of high school.

There were three types of data collection tools used in this study: journaling, student interviews, and student symbolic representations. Student symbolic representations and interviews provided further insight into how students made meaning of their ninth-grade year.

A total of 11 students participated in the journaling portion of the study, while all 13 study participants participated in the interview section of the study. Seven students

submitted symbolic representations about their ninth-grade transition experience.

The data collected were analyzed to emphasize the significant findings of the study. Common themes from the study revealed the various ways students made meaning of their ninth-grade year. Students felt there were certain facilitators that helped to make their transition into ninth grade a smooth one, namely transitional supports, time management, connectedness, and having a positive attitude or outlook on the transition process.

Study participants also felt there were various indicators to consider when ascertaining if a student's ninth-grade transitional year was successful; these were grouped under the heading of an increased sense of self-efficacy. In addition, transitional adjustment, barriers to successful transition, looking to the future, and high school readiness were all essential themes that emerged through careful analysis of the study data. Below are discussions of findings from the study, limitations of the study, recommendations for improvements, and recommendations for future research on the transition into high school.

### **Summary of Study**

This study demonstrated key factors that facilitated how students made sense of the transition experienced during their freshman year of high school. Study findings showed peers; older siblings; parents; teachers; counselors; and, to a lesser extent, administrators help make the high school transition year a smooth one. Most of these factors are similar to what has been found in various research which show that this type of support network is critical in helping students become more familiar with and connected to their new school environment, thus reducing nervousness and fear about entering high school (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Furrer & Skinner, 2003, cited in

Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Hallinan, 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Libbey, 2004; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Newman et al., 2000, 2007; Whitlock, 2006). Students spoke about friends and older siblings helping them acclimate to their new school by showing them where classes were, giving them great advice about what to expect coming into high school, and in general friends who were very supportive towards them.

Students also articulated that teachers made the transition easier. They mentioned that teachers helped to boost their level of self-confidence and provided the encouragement and support they needed. Counselors and administrators were helpful to them as well. Counselors were not only helpful in directing students who were lost to their correct location or helping students map out their course of study for the year but also aided in helping students plan for their future by seeking out opportunities for them to get involved in various activities that would help in future plans for college. The finding of administrative support as a key factor in helping students make a smooth transition into high school has not been demonstrated in published research studies. This finding warrants examination in future research. The reason this factor may have been so new is that administrators typically are not as directly involved with students as are teachers and counselors. They also are mainly seen as the disciplinarians, and students shy away from getting to know their ninth-grade administrators. This phenomenon may have emerged in this study, however, as the ninth-grade administrator at this high school was very involved with the students. She knew the students personally and seemed to have a very good relationship with them. The implication is that ninth-grade administrators need to engage more with their freshman student population and make a concerted effort to build and maintain positive relationships with these students.

The important role parents play in the transition into high school was also evident

in this study. Parental support came in the form of advice and encouragement, actual visits to the school with their children, and consequences for inappropriate behavior. This study found that all of these supports seem to have made the transition easier for study participants. This is in line with findings from the study conducted by Isakson and Jarvis (1999) who found that peer and parental supports were essential in helping students feel connected in their new school environment. Felner et al. (1981) also found that the level of social support from peers and teachers was positively related to school adjustment after the transition to high school. Similarly, according to Jarvis (2009), the main variables to predict the adjustment of students in the transition to high school are parent, peer, and teacher support as well as helping students develop effective coping strategies.

Though several studies emphasize the importance of parental support in the transition to high school, few address how problematic parent over-involvement in the transition can be. Fuligni and Eccles (1993) and Steinberg and Steinberg (1994) pointed out that parents who treat their adolescents in a more adult-like fashion and allow them more autonomy eased the transition to high school more than parents who restrict opportunities for growth and development in this transitional stage. This study clearly helps to reinforce the point that too much parental involvement during the transition, where parents give their students few opportunities to be autonomous, can be harmful rather than helpful to students.

Connectedness was another facilitator of success as students moved through their freshman year; this was yet another way students made meaning of their ninth-grade transitional year. Several students spoke and wrote about the connection they felt with their teachers and how this helped them during their transitional year. Study participants

who found the transition easier were assisted by teachers who were caring, relatable, approachable, more engaging, and understanding. Cushman (2006) found that after a few weeks from the start of high school, students worried about several components of the transition from middle school to high school including high school teachers having less time for individual students and teachers cutting them less slack when they mess up. Though Cushman found these were areas of concern for students, this study found that several students actually viewed teachers “being strict” on them or “cutting them less slack” as an indication that they actually cared about them and had high expectations of them. Also, though in Cushman’s study students worried about high school teachers having less time for individual students, this study found most students felt that their high school teachers were more pleasant, approachable, and understanding of their needs than their middle school teachers.

Evidently, the way teachers interact with students is of crucial importance in shaping how they feel about themselves and their surroundings and can impact their feelings about school. Also, students want to know that their teachers care about them and know them in more than just a peripheral way; and through their relationships with their teachers as well as other adults in the school, adolescents can establish a sense of school belonging and internalize the norms and values of the school as a social institution (Klem & Connell, 2004; Newman et al., 2000; Whitlock, 2006).

This study helped to reinforce the important role teachers play in helping to ease the transition to ninth grade and also showed that though students may encounter more teachers at the high school level than at the middle school level, there is greater opportunity to actually meet teachers who they can connect with.

For study participants, another part of making meaning of the freshman year was

making connections with friends and connecting to the school community through involvement in activities outside of the regular classroom. The study conducted by Isakson and Jarvis (1999) reflected the importance of friendships in the context of school belonging. Similarly, Newman et al.'s (2007) study revealed that in addition to other supports, peers play a significant role in helping students feel connected to their new school environment. Furthermore, a sense of connectedness to teachers and peers in school is associated with multiple indicators of academic motivation and engagement, in particular emotional engagement (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Furrer & Skinner, 2003, cited in Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Students acknowledged that friendships played an important role in the transition to high school. However, while friendship groups changed during the freshman year and though students lost old and sometimes trusted friends, this study found that some students did not view the loss of friendships in an entirely negative light; for though old friendships were lost, new and great friendships emerged.

The study also found that getting involved in the school community was an important way for students to build new and lasting friendships, functioned as a way for students to relieve academic stress, served as a way for students to gain a social foothold within their new school environment, brought about a sense of accomplishment and achievement and a boost to their morale and self-esteem, served as a resume builder, and functioned as a stimulant for students to stay focused and engaged in their work. Letrello and Miles (2003) demonstrated that both students with and without learning disabilities found that social interaction and activity involvement were important during the transition to high school. This study found that a lack of involvement in school community activities could result in feeling less connected to school and may be a factor

in some students' aberrant behaviors. Students who feel connected to school are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

Student responses from their interviews and journal writing indicated that being able to manage their time well was another facilitator of success during their ninth-grade transition year. Students pointed out that time management was an extremely problematic area for them in their transition. Letrello and Miles (2003) also pointed out that among other variables, time management was rated as one of the most difficult aspects of moving to high school. Students, however, spoke and wrote about being able to devise various time management coping strategies to help them manage their time well, which aided in a smoother freshman year.

Anderman et al. (2009) spoke about developing effective coping strategies as one of the main variables in adjusting to the transition to high school. In this case, students developed time management coping strategies which clearly assisted them in adjusting to high school. Several students pointed out that they figured out a personal system to manage projects and homework against the backdrop of the other activities in which they were involved outside of the classroom. Some students utilized sticky notes while others mentioned using scaffolding to help manage projects and homework. This type of thinking and strategizing reveals an increase in the level of student self-efficacy as students who have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to use more effective tactics (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990) and to persist when confronted with challenges (Schunk, 1982). Managing time well clearly helped students experience a smoother transitional year. The challenge remains, however, for those students who are not as efficacious and who are not able to personally develop a system to help them manage

their time well. It would be worthwhile to incorporate within this school's high school transitional program a system in which students are explicitly taught time management coping strategies and how to effectively use these strategies throughout their high school years. Though this was a major area of concern for several students in the study, students came to realize that developing effective time management coping strategies, though these were unique to each participant, helped them combat this problem.

The final facilitator of success students mentioned was simply having a positive attitude about the transition process. Students felt that looking at things through a positive lens made the transition somewhat easier, such as viewing the transition to high school as an accomplishment and persisting even in the face of many downfalls and challenges.

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) found in their study that students seemed to experience fewer stressors as their ninth-grade year progressed; however, they faced significant stressors in the early months of the school year. It would seem that if students enter the ninth-grade transition year with a positive attitude about the transition process, even if difficulties arise later and if they experience significant stressors at the beginning of the year, they are able to have a less stressful start to their year and can successfully persist through to the end of their ninth-grade year.

The next category in this research study was identified as indicators of success. In this study, there were various outcomes students experienced which indicated they had experienced a successful transitional year. Increases in self-efficacy with regard to academic success and academic development as well as personal development were such indicators.

According to Stevenson et al. (1994), academic performance is one of the most



important elements of a successful school transition, and academic performance in the first year of high school impacts the rest of a student's high school career. Similar to study findings, students felt that they had experienced a successful transition into high school because they experienced academic success in their freshman year. Students equated one with the other. Students mentioned that they felt a sense of pride and accomplishment because they kept good grades in their freshman year. Of course, academic success varied for study participants. Self-efficacy for some expanded to include being able to handle the rigors of honors classes their freshman year; while for others, success meant pulling failing grades to average.

Students who experienced a drop in grades quickly realized the implications of this and made the effort to get back on track. Gillock and Reyes (1996) and Weiss and Bearman (2007) stated that it is common for GPAs to decline as students transition to high school; although according to Roderick (1993) and Catterall (1998), evidence suggests that this decline in achievement is temporary for most students who are not considered at risk. Interestingly, all study participants were enrolled in one or more honors classes, and although student academic data were not examined as part of this study, based on student interview responses and journal writing data, it can be concluded that this finding may be similar to those documented in the body of literature regarding a decline in student GPAs (Alspaugh, 1998; Brown, 2004; Herlihy, 2007; Mizelle, 2005; Roderick, 1993). There were some areas, however, where the researcher felt her study may have expanded on the information from other studies.

For some students, once they transitioned into high school, they started to take their academics more seriously and made more of an effort than when they were in middle school. It is also interesting to note that a study participant, an African-American

male who, based on research, would be considered more at risk for dropping out of high school and would have the most difficulty transitioning into high school, demonstrated that he entered the freshman year with a more positive attitude toward academics. It could be that several other factors played a role in how this student experienced the transition rather than simply gender and race. This student was actively involved in sports during his freshman year, and it was also evident from his journal entries and interview that he had a strong parental support system. Tony, however, another African-American male study participant, did have the most difficulty in the area of academics and had more issues than his counterparts in this study with unacceptable behaviors. Again, factors other than race or gender may have impacted this student's transition into the ninth grade. Tony was not involved in any school activities outside of the classroom. He did not attend his freshman orientation or freshman camp and transitioned into the high school from outside of the district. Interestingly, however, both students seemed to have a strong parental support system, which could be one reason why Tony did not completely fail the ninth grade. Rice's (2001) study also explored the importance of parental support to academic performance and found it was a positive one, though in her study it was limited to mathematics progress. It would be interesting and probably beneficial to consider studying how students who transition from outside of the district experience the transition differently from students who transition from a primary feeder school within the school district and also identifying specific strategies to help students who may have transitioned from outside of the district make a smoother transition into high school.

Study participants mentioned that they had developed personally during their transitional year, and this was an indication of their success in the ninth grade. Students

mentioned that being able to make wise choices, especially with regard to friends, was an indication of a successful transitional year. Several students noted that people changed during their freshman year, some for the better and some for the worse. Students stated that they had to decide to keep or leave behind certain friendships based on the changes that occurred in their friends. This study found that students did not just lose friends involuntarily because of the transition, but students voluntarily made the decision to leave certain friendships behind based on whether or not they thought these friends would hurt or help them in their high school years. Bandura (1986) stated that self-efficacy refers to “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). Miller (2002) stated that the courses of action mentioned by Bandura may involve behavior (academic, social, or recreational), thoughts, and emotions. Clearly, student courses of action, in terms of the level of decision making they showed with regards to voluntarily leaving behind disadvantageous friendships, revealed an increased level of self-efficacy.

Students also spoke about becoming more aware of who they really are in their freshman year. Students stated that high school teaches you who you really are as a person. Being able to discover this “true self,” according to students, is an indication of a successful transition. Students also spoke about how growing up and maturing in different ways during the freshman year, and this is also an indication of a successful transition.

Signs of maturity can also be seen in the increase in a student’s level of personal and academic responsibility. The symbolic representation of a giraffe reflected this idea of growth and maturity, such as discussing more important “stuff” in high school like getting jobs and going to college. Students also stated that even the teachers treat them

more like adults. Taking ownership over their own learning also showed an increase in students' levels of maturity and ultimately their levels of self-efficacy. This aspect of the transition, increased self-efficacy and also personal development, is particularly important as, according to Pajares (1996), efficacy beliefs can determine and predict to a great degree the level of success that individuals will attain and may hinder a student's academic career in high school. Part of making sense of the ninth-grade transitional year involved successfully experiencing certain indicators of success as depicted in this study.

Students also made sense of the freshman transition by making transitional adjustments in various areas. These included adjusting to the physical and structural environment, adjusting perceptions to the reality of high school, adjusting academic performance expectations, and adjusting perceptions of freedom. The Freshman Academy model's main goals stemmed from research that says separating ninth graders will help them become better acquainted with the rigors of the high school curriculum and become more mature and ready for high school (Reents, 2002). It is this model that was put into place to help students with these adjustments that need to be made during their freshman year. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that in order to facilitate a successful systemic transition into high school, there need to be more comprehensive efforts to help students adjust to and thrive in the new school environment.

Students had difficulty finding their way around their new school since the school was so enormous in size and their classes were spread out throughout the building. Students also found it challenging adjusting to the new class schedules, switching classes, and year-long versus semester-long courses. Course schedules were an issue as students found that core courses were not evenly distributed over the year. For example, first semester course load was quite manageable with one or two core courses, while second

semester course load was overwhelming with three to four core courses and thus three to four major exams. Though guidance counselors, in putting student schedules together, may want to give students a lighter load at the very beginning of their freshman year and then progressively increase the work load so as to help students with the adjustment, it may prove counterproductive. The implication here is that students would make a better adjustment to high school if more attention was paid to high-quality counseling to correctly pace student core classes over the course of the year. Changing of classes and longer class times were also problematic areas for some students; however, there were those who actually looked forward to this change. Some students appreciated the longer class periods; they stated that it gave them more time to understand what the teachers are saying, thus helping students make the adjustment to the increasing academic demands of high school.

Kerr (2002) identified three areas of concern for students transitioning to a new school setting. Academic expectations was one of these areas of concern. According to Roderick (1993), student academic and adjustment difficulties during the first year of middle and high school may result in significant barriers to their ability to form positive attachments and become integrated into these larger and more complex environments.

Students found they needed to adjust to the increasing academic demands of their new school. They had to adjust to the increase in pace; the increase in the rigor of the work; the amount of classwork, projects, and homework; and being able to maintain their grades. Change in work habits was one solution to meet the new academic demands of high school. Though students were not very specific about what these changes in work habits entailed, putting more effort into their work, paying more attention in class, persevering, and generally working harder were all suggested ways to meet the new

academic challenges of high school.

The study found that with regard to academics, students' "built up" expectations fell far below the actuality of high school. Smith et al. (2008) pointed out that ninth-grade students are introduced to new stresses and different expectations for which they often are not prepared. For example, study participants found that high school academic work was much harder and the workload was much more than they thought it would be. These findings are similar to Newman et al. (2000) and Ganeson (2006) who found that students found ninth grade to be more academically challenging than they anticipated. They realized that they had more assigned homework, more studying was required, and more responsibility was needed in order to do well in high school. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) pointed out that while the ninth-grade year is the first point in time where students begin earning credits towards their high school graduation, many fail to realize the importance of gaining these credits while in their ninth-grade year. This study found that students indeed wished they had realized the implications of earning credits towards graduation but not just early in their ninth-grade year; indeed, they wished they realized these implications as early as their eighth-grade year.

Students clearly enjoyed the added freedom that high school brought. Being able to sit wherever they want at lunch, being monitored less by teachers, taking Driver's Ed, not having to walk in lines in the hallway, and making choices on their own were mentioned as part of this newfound freedom. However, students agreed that while this new freedom was a welcomed change from middle school, it presented its own set of challenges. With this new freedom, students have to become more disciplined and responsible; otherwise this could result in failing the ninth grade and ultimately high school.

With regard to bullying in high school, the study found that students did not experience bullying to the extent that they had expected. The upperclassmen did not stuff freshmen in the lockers, and there was actually no freshman Friday which the students all dreaded. In reality, the upperclassmen were actually nice and welcoming to freshmen. This is not to say that there were no bullying incidents. Students spoke about witnessing kids being mean to other kids, but it was not to the extent they thought it would have been.

Students also heard that their high school was really “ghetto.” However, they found that there were not many fights in their school and there was little to no “drama.” Students stated that they expected they could get away with things in high school that they had gotten away with in middle school. However, this expectation was shattered as students realized that they could actually get suspended for “any little thing.” Students mentioned that high school was more explicit than they thought. The explicit language, the cursing, and couples just “making out” in the hallway were all unexpected occurrences for students. A part of making meaning of the transition was clearly adjusting expectations to meet the reality of the high school experience.

Students also spoke about the barriers they encountered during their ninth-grade year. Pressure to fit in was one such barrier. Students felt it would be really hard if you did not fit in in high school. Fitting in meant fitting into a particular social group. Study participants all seemed to have a certain group that they identified with more than others. Those who were cheerleaders identified with this group; those involved in ROTC identified with this group; those who played soccer and football identified with this group; those in chorus identified with that group. One study participant did not identify with any particular group; in fact, he said he did not have friends because “you can’t

really trust people.” Interestingly, this student was the only one in the study who experienced behavioral problems that warranted suspensions. It could be that his noninvolvement and his inability to form any true friendships may be factors in his problematic transition into high school. Students also felt that the pressure to fit in made some students do things and engage in certain activities in which they typically would not be involved.

Another barrier that students experienced was peer pressure. Students mentioned that peers can hinder or help their transition. They realized through this experience that in order to rise above the pressure of peers, they have to stay firm in their beliefs. Bullying and parental pressure were also identified as transitional barriers. Though students stated that bullying was not as prevalent as they had expected, there were instances of bullying nonetheless. As Cushman (2006), Ganeson (2006), and Sansone and Baker (1990) stated, being bullied or hazed by older students was one of the initial concerns students had about the transition. Parental pressure was the final barrier listed. Studies have shown that parental involvement and support are essential to a successful transition, but this study found that too much parental involvement and pressure could also be a hindrance to student transition experiences during the freshman year of high school. Anderson et al. (2000) suggested greater parental involvement as one of three areas for facilitating a successful systemic transition. Though Anderson et al. suggested greater parental involvement, the extent of this involvement needs to be tethered so as to prevent too much involvement. Another part of making meaning of the transition was that students were able to identify barriers they encountered during the transition, and some were even able to offer suggestions as to how they handled some of these issues.

Another area of the freshman experience was looking to the future. As students



progressed through their freshman year, it was clear that they were already thinking about life after high school. Students viewed high school as preparation for college and life. Kimmel and Weiner (1995) mentioned that the external transition, which is one type of transition incoming freshmen are experiencing, can be understood as those events that involve individuals and society involving social regulations and expectations in life. These include graduating from high school, attending college, or getting married. While students did not speak about getting married, they certainly spoke of graduating high school and attending college as part of their expectations in high school. It was also important to students that they not make mistakes during their high school years that could jeopardize their college prospects; there was also concern about not dropping out of school but persisting to graduation and eventually college. These issues may have surfaced during student interviews in their symbolic representation and as they wrote in their journals as data indicate that the highest number of dropouts occurs between the ninth- and tenth-grade school years (Wheelock & Miao, 2005), and the ninth-grade year may determine whether or not students go on to graduate from high school (Legters, 2005).

Low grades, low test scores, Fs in English and math, falling behind in course credits, and being held back one or more times have all been linked to lower chances for graduation. Also, students who become disengaged from school and develop disciplinary problems are more likely to drop out; high rates of absenteeism or truancy, poor classroom behavior, less participation in extracurricular activities, and bad relationships with teachers and peers all have been linked to lower chances for graduation (Jerald, 2006). For one study participant, several of these educational risk factors as outlined by Jerald (2006) became evident through his interview. Hence, he may be a student who

teachers, counselors, and administrators need to monitor even more closely as he progresses to tenth grade and beyond. Making sense of the freshman experience then seems to be having a keen outlook on the future which involves graduating high school and going on to college.

The final phase was students reflecting on their own readiness for high school and what helped best prepare them for this transition while at the same time offering suggestions as to what could be improved upon and implemented to help incoming freshmen feel a sense of readiness as they prepare to make the transition into high school.

Students mentioned efforts such as the high school orientation and freshman camp, ROTC, counselor visits to the middle school, academic preparation by middle school teachers, lockers, and changing classes from core to encore in middle school as means of preparation for the transition. Suggestions that students offered ranged from simply not giving them an agenda in eighth grade and helping them become more responsible in terms of their work to having a mentor assigned to students throughout their entire ninth-grade year. Students also felt that their middle schools did not do much to help prepare them for the transition. They mentioned that their middle schools should get more involved in the process of helping students get ready for the transition into high school. One area where middle schools should become more involved includes preparing students for the freedoms they will encounter in high school. Students did not list specifically how the middle schools should do this but simply said they should. Students also suggested that the middle school not allow students to get away with “every little thing.” They felt that the middle school teachers and administrators should be stricter in terms of discipline and ought not to give students multiple chances. Also, students mentioned that the rigor of the work and the workload should increase in middle school

to match that of the high school. As academic demands increase at the high school level, students encounter new rules and expectations; an increase in departmentalization and differentiation by academic ability; and different instructional techniques that require new, more advanced skills, so preparation to meet these new challenges is critical (Roderick, 1993).

Another suggestion was for the high school to be more efficient at helping students navigate the lunch schedule. Though this may seem like a trivial suggestion, to students this was equally as important as being able to find their way to class. Students also felt that transition activities provided by the middle and high schools while they were still in middle school needed to be somewhat consistent across those feeder middle schools. This is to ensure that as students enter high school, they all enter on somewhat of the same footing, even if that is in terms of the types of transition activities to which they were exposed. Additionally, students felt that they needed to be made more aware of graduation requirements, bullying, and in general the difficult things they would encounter in high school. The final suggestion that students gave was for the high school to include a reflective component in their freshman camp or the have the middle schools include this in their transitional activities. This could be in the form of students sharing orally about their transition experience or it could be a series of letters included in the orientation packet to freshmen from former freshmen about their transition experiences.

Regardless of the transition activities, what is essential is that these activities are offered to students both in the middle and high schools and continue throughout most of the ninth-grade year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). For students, the final piece of making meaning of the ninth-grade year was reflecting on their readiness for high school and offering suggestions about how to improve readiness for incoming freshmen.

Overall, these students seem to make meaning of the transition in a linear, positive, and reflective way. Though there were some challenges during the transition, students were able to pinpoint these problematic areas but still felt that there were many aspects of the transition that were positive. Students felt that high school was much better than middle school and overall expressed positive feelings about their year. The researcher was able to capture unique student experiences using their own words while at the same time fitting those unique experiences into common categories. The researcher will be sharing this data with school personnel with the hope that the findings identified here can be used to help both the feeder middle schools and the high school in this study develop and improve transition activities that will be beneficial and helpful to students.

### **Limitations**

Though a more-than-adequate sample size for a phenomenological study, which according to Smith et al. (2009), allows the researcher the opportunity for a deeper, more interpretative analysis that goes beyond just the apparent content, some researchers may consider this sample size of 13 not large enough and generalizability may not be applicable. With this sample size, it is recommended that the analysis of data be evaluated for transferability as shown through a well-constructed narrative that allows other researchers to decide whether they can apply these findings to other research contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Hence, though the data may be transferable, this type of study prevents generalizability.

The students who chose to participate in this study also added another limitation as well. Information packets were given to all students in one regular English 1 class and one honors English 1 class. The students who indicated an interest in participating in the study were the ones who chose to return their informed consent paperwork. These 15

students were all from the English 1 honors class, which is an indication that these students already have moderately good grades and possibly already possess a certain level of responsibility and maturity and may be more apt to experience the transition in a more positive way. Certainly, these students may have experienced the transitional year quite differently from other students in a regular English 1 class.

This study was also limited to a specific high school located in southwestern North Carolina. Students who transition from urban, suburban, and rural districts face different challenges during their ninth-grade transitional year. Hence, the whole range of experiences that students face during the transition in one of the districts mentioned above would not be represented in this study.

Though this study had several limitations, the IPA approach was deemed an appropriate methodology for studying the phenomenon of high school transition. A major contribution of this study was that it utilized an approach to the study of freshman transition that is not commonly used in educational settings. In addition, being able to add student voices to the study of this phenomenon proved significant to the study of the high school transition.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

In the context of this study, the data collected and subsequently the emerging themes may not be generalizable but may be transferable to individuals based on similar context. Therefore, the following recommendations for improvement are presented.

1. High school ninth-grade administrators and teachers should collaborate with their feeder schools to organize eighth-grade transitional activities that are consistent across the board and are ongoing throughout the eighth-grade school year. This will enable incoming freshmen to enter their high school on

a level playing field with regard to the transition activities they were exposed to in eighth grade and to have a greater sense of readiness for high school.

2. Incoming freshmen should be assigned a mentor for the entire first year of high school. This would mean not just someone to show them to their classes on the first day of school but a support through the year and the peace of mind that they at least have one friend in the building.
3. Counselors should help students plan a balanced schedule for the year so student workload can be evenly spread out per semester so students do not feel overwhelmed with most of their core classes in the second semester while having a light first semester.
4. Middle school teachers should increase the academic rigor of middle school work so that it more closely aligns with that of the high school. This would involve possible collaborative efforts between eighth-grade and ninth-grade teachers which would need to be spearheaded by administrators.
5. Administrators and teachers should include in the freshman orientation or freshman camp a reflective component to the program. This could be in the form of several reflective letters from past freshmen about their ninth-grade experience included in student orientation packets or having past freshmen themselves sharing orally about their ninth-grade experience.
6. Teachers, middle or high school, or both, should explicitly teach students various time management strategies to help them with the new academic and social demands they will encounter in their freshman year.
7. Counselors and teachers should educate students more thoroughly about high school credits and the requirements for high school graduation.

8. Middle school teachers and administrators should allow students more independence and opportunities for more responsibilities in preparation for high school.
9. High school teachers and administrators should pay special attention to students who may be entering high school from outside the school district or from a middle school that is not a primary feeder school to help ensure successful student transition into high school.
10. High school administrators, teachers, and key stakeholders should revisit the idea of the block schedule to see if this is truly best practice for students.

See Table 8 below for a crosswalk of these recommendations aligned with student representative quotes and findings in the research literature.

Though some subtleties of the IPA approach, which is still not widely used in educational arenas, may not have been captured in this study, it is the researcher's hope that use of this approach will spark other researcher interest in utilizing this approach to study various educational issues and that the researcher's work with this approach will be of some worth to other researchers.

Table 8

*Recommendations Aligned to Representative Student Quotes and Research Literature*

Recommendations	Quotes	Literature
1. High school ninth-grade administrators and teachers collaborate with their feeder schools, to organize 8 <sup>th</sup> grade transitional activities that are consistent across the board and are ongoing throughout the 8 <sup>th</sup> grade school year. This will enable incoming freshmen to enter their high school on a level playing field with regards to the transition activities they were exposed to in eighth grade and to have a greater sense of readiness for high school	“I’m here on a transfer I haven’t seen most of the people since elementary school so . . . like I said I’m a transfer student so there were some major changes in my social life because ahmmm, I know about a total of like 4 people that were from my middle school so ahhh I’ve had to ah make some new friends which is a little bit difficult because they didn’t know me prior to this year and those who did the last time I saw them was in 4 <sup>th</sup> or 5 <sup>th</sup> grade” - Aiden	Feeder middle schools and receiving high schools should communicate to identify distinctive components of academic, social, and procedural concerns in the middle school to high school transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Gibson, 1969, cited in Gear Up Educator Development Initiative, 2012).
2. Incoming freshmen be assigned a mentor for the entire first year of high school. This would mean not just someone to show them to their classes on the first day of school but a support through the year and the peace of mind that they at least have one friend in the building	“throughout the year have people that can, like, help with your work and stuff if you’re struggling or something. Because if I had a mentor, like, it would – like, I could go to my mentor and, like, ask them, like, if I needed, like, help on something, like with my homework or something, or if I was struggling in a subject or something, I could have went to my mentor. Because they were upperclassmen and they would probably have already took that, hopefully. They could have helped me like – they could have, like tutored me kind of I guess . . . I wouldn’t be so, like, stressed out around the work, and I would have another friend . . . So then if you have that one friend, it’s just like okay, I have a friend right now so I don’t have to worry about all the other people” - Donna	Other solutions that schools have utilized to assist students adjusting to the transition from middle to high school have included a meet the teacher night for incoming freshmen, a ninth-grade orientation for both parents and students before school begins, and the use of student mentors (Cushman, 2006; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

(continued)



Recommendations	Quotes	Literature
3. Counselors help students plan a balanced schedule for the year so students' work load can be evenly spread out per semester so students do not feel overwhelmed with most of their core classes in second semester while having a light first semester	<p>"When they put my schedule together last semester, I only had one core class. And now this semester I have three core classes. And so I think the work is much harder. That was hurtful because now I have to, like – like the first semester it was easier because I only had one core class and then I only had the one big exam. But now I have all this. I'm not used to all the homework and stuff because they gave me that one semester where it was just easy. And now I have all this homework, and then I have these big exams coming up. And you can't really – I mean, I guess you could go to the guidance office and tell them about it, but there's really not much – I mean, they might change it, it just depends on how bad it is" - Stacy</p>	<p>According to Roderick (1993), grade changes and academic difficulties associated with school transitions raise the chances that a youth would drop out.</p> <p>Also, students' probability of graduating high school has been directly linked to the amount of success they encounter in their first year of high school" (Legters, 2005).</p>
4. Middle school teachers increase the academic rigor of middle school work so that it more closely aligns with that of the high school. This would involve possibly collaborative efforts between eighth-grade and ninth-grade teachers which would need to be spearheaded by administrators	<p>"students to take more responsibility or their own learning. She stated: Um oh gosh, I guess like honestly this is going to sound crazy because you're never going to hear a kid say this. But they should give more projects. I'm not even going to lie because like I've had a couple of research papers that I've had to do in this semester alone for my English class and I was like, "What is this? Like I've never seen this before." Because we never had to write research papers or any of that and I'm just like, I hope he's gonna help us out cause I have no clue what this is" – Donna</p>	<p>As academic demands increase at the high school level, students encounter new rules and expectations, an increase in departmentalization and differentiation by academic ability, and different instructional techniques that require new, more advanced skills, preparation to meet these new challenges is critical (Roderick, 1993).</p> <p>Transition to high school is a comprehensive process that involves a collaborative effort with middle and high school administrators, teachers, parents, and students (Mizelle, 2005).</p>

(continued)

Recommendations	Quotes	Literature
<p>5. Administrators and teachers include in the freshman orientation or freshman camp, a reflective component to the program. This could be in the form of several reflective letters from past freshmen about their ninth-grade experience, included in students' orientation packet; or having past freshmen themselves sharing orally about their ninth-grade experience</p>	<p>"I don't know if it's new but you could have like . . . have some people who have like been through a lot here, like bullying and stuff go down to the 8<sup>th</sup> graders and talk about them. Talk about how high school was for them for the first couple of weeks or the year." – Mike</p>	<p>Kennelly and Monrad (2007) show, schools with fully operational transition programs have an average drop-out rate of only 8%, while schools without these programs have a drop-out rate of 24% (McCallumore &amp; Sparapani, 2010; Morgan &amp; Hertzog, 2001).</p> <p>Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that in order to facilitate a successful systemic transition into high school there needs to be more comprehensive efforts to help students adjust to and thrive in the new school environment.</p>
<p>6. Teachers, middle or high school teachers or both, explicitly teach students various time management strategies to help them with the new academic and social demands and that they will encounter in their freshman year</p>	<p>"I've never been one to like manage my time. But now I have to. So with me not ever doing that and having to start now, it was definitely hard because I had to get used to – you know, I can't go home and sit on my bed and watch TV; I have to do my homework and then I have to start on my project for that week or – it was like at one point in time it did all pile up on me and I got so stressed out, I just sat on my bed and cried. But that's when I realized that I have to do something about it. So that was definitely hard"- Mary</p>	<p>Letrello and Miles's (2003) study showed that, among others, time management was one of the most difficult aspects of moving to high school.</p>

(continued)

Recommendations	Quotes	Literature
7. Counselors and teachers educate students more thoroughly about high school credits and the requirements for high school graduation.	“like with the math 1 thing . . . you need math 1 to graduate. Math 2 and then geometry and all that. So they put me in Math 1 like last year but I failed it and whatever so I had to retake it this year. I knew that was taking Math 1 but I really didn’t pay it no mine because I didn’t know all that I needed to do to graduate high school. I didn’t know none of that. So last year I was just all out there. I didn’t know. Like I didn’t really know like what classes you needed to like, like the middle of this year I knew the classes you need to graduate, so” - Tony	Low grades, low test scores, Fs in English and math, falling behind in course credits, and being held back one or more times have all been linked to lower chances for graduation (Jerald, 2006).
8. Middle school teachers and administrators allow students more independence and opportunities for more responsibilities in preparation for high school	“In high school you have a lot of freedom, this can be good or bad. It’s good because you can make choices for yourself, but at the same time you can easily fall short and your grades/attendance will slip. High school is just very independent. Your teachers don’t baby you and hold your hand the whole time now like they use to” - Donna	The Freshman Academy model’s main goals stemmed from research that says separating ninth graders will help them become better acquainted with the rigors of the high school curriculum and become more mature and ready for high school (Reents, 2002).
9. High school teachers and administrators pay special attention to students who may be entering high school from outside the school district or from a middle school that is not a primary feeder school, to help ensure those students’ successful transition into high school	“I didn’t go. I mean I knew that I was coming to the school. I think my mom came but I didn’t come. I didn’t come this year to orientation” - Tony	Feeder middle schools and receiving high schools should communicate to identify distinctive components of academic, social, and procedural concerns in the middle school to high school transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Gibson, 1969, cited in Gear Up Educator Development Initiative, 2012).

(continued)

Recommendations	Quotes	Literature
10. High school administrators, teachers and key stakeholders revisit the idea of the block schedule to see if this is truly best practice for students.	“What I think did not go well throughout the school year is that I took math 1, first semester and did really well . . . a couple of weeks ago my friend asked me to help her with her math 1 homework and I didn’t understand ANYTHING!!! I think I’m not going to remember anything next year in math 2. I like taking classes a whole year instead of one semester. Next year I’m scared I’m not going to remember a lot of stuff that I learned this semester because I only took it half a year instead of a whole year”- Ashley	Among other factors study reports show that the most difficult aspects of moving to high school included getting accustomed to the block schedule (Letrello & Miles, 2003).

### Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future studies are as follows.

1. This study could be expanded by considering participants from a range of schools and seeking the experiences of students enrolled in regular classes.
2. A study from student perspectives that looks more closely at the parent involvement variable in student high school transition experiences.
3. A study on the impact of year-long upperclassmen mentors on the freshman transition experience.
4. A study on the collaborative efforts of the middle school and high school and how these impact a student’s transition experience into high school.
5. A study examining how a student’s outlook to the future, college, and life after high school impacts their motivation in the ninth grade.
6. A study to examine the transitional experiences of honors-level students in comparison to students in regular classes.
7. The expansive use of the IPA approach in the study of the human experiences,

particularly with regard to the transition from middle school to high school, as this type of approach to this phenomenon is lacking.

These are just a few of the many possibilities that exist for future research.

### **Summary**

The ninth-grade transition experience can be an experience that is met with much anxiety and apprehension. This study, however, showed that though the ninth-grade transition can be scary, it can also be positive and even less traumatic for the most apprehensive student. When the researcher began this research several years ago, she started out with the thought that she wanted to study student transition. This thought later evolved into wanting to look at student transition from middle school to high school. Later, this research evolved even further until it became about looking at the transition through the eyes of students themselves and examining how they experience the transition during their freshman year. Using phenomenology as the methodology of choice, there were six essential themes that emerged with several subdimensions that depicted how students made meaning of their transition as experienced during their freshman year of high school.

- **Facilitators of Success**

- Transitional supports (social support, peer support, older sibling support, parental support, and teacher, counselor, and administrative support)
- Connectedness (teacher-student relationship, school community involvement and friendships)
- Time Management
- Positive Attitude

- **Indicators of Success**
  - Increased Self-Efficacy
  - Academic success and academic development—taking ownership of own learning)
  - Personal Development—choosing friends wisely, maturity and growth, and self-awareness
- **Transitional Adjustments**
  - Physical and Structural Environment
  - Perceptions vs. Reality of High School
  - Academic Performance Expectations
  - Perceptions of Freedom
- **Barriers To Successful Transition**
  - Parental Pressure
  - Pressure to Fit In
  - Fears of Being Bullied
  - Peer Pressure
- **Looking to the Future**
  - Preparation for College and Life
- **High School Readiness**
  - Perceptions of Readiness
  - Suggestions to Improve Readiness

While each student uniquely experienced the transition, the researcher was able to find similarities among those personalized experiences and was able to fit those into one

of the categories above. Looking at the ninth-grade transition through student eyes, it is the researcher's hope that this may be a small step in better understanding how students feel and the challenges they go through during their ninth-grade year. It is also the researcher's hope that this study has provided some insight into how to improve on transition activities both at the middle and high school levels and provide the necessary resources and strategies needed to help students make a smooth transition at this very important juncture in their high school lives.

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## Appendix A

### Journal Writing Instructions with Structured Journal Page

## **Journal Writing Instructions**

**Circle the method you would like to use to journal for the week:**

- A Bound Journal (hand-written journal).
- An Online Journal (Penzu). You will need access to an electronic device, the Internet and email.
- An Online Blog (kidblog.org). You will need access to an electronic device and the Internet.

**1. Use the following to write about your experiences of being in ninth-grade:**

- Your initial and current impressions
- Some of the highlights of being in high school
- Some of the most worrisome things about being in high school

**2. Also, use TWO of the following prompts each day to guide your writing:**

- High school is like .....
- What is discovered during high school is .....
- High school feels like .....
- I recognize high school as being .....
- What comes to light when I focus on high school is .....
- High school seems to be .....
- What is uncovered when I focus on high school is .....
- The metaphor/s that best convey/s high school is/are .....
- What I see in high school is .....

**3. Use these prompts to reflect on your transition experience into high school:**

- Reflect on what went well throughout the school year
- Reflect on what did not go well throughout the school year

- Reflect on what was learned from the experience
4. **You may choose (optional) to indicate on the final page of your bound journal, your online journal or your blog, what symbolic representation best reflects your transition experience into the ninth grade.**
- Your symbolic representation may include a poem, quote, picture, song, metaphor, self-made video and so on.
  - If you choose to use a self-made video as your symbolic representation, you will need to share this information with me as a video attachment via e-mail (tmorris1@gardner-webb.edu).
  - If you submit a symbolic representation you will be asked to further elaborate on this during your one-to-one interview.

**Happy Writing!**

**~ Thank you~**

## **Step-by-Step Instructions For Online Journal & Online Blog**

### **1. Online Journal (Penzu)**

- You will need to give me your name, month and year of birth. I will use this information to create a username and password for you.
- You will go to the URL <https://penzu.com/account/login>
- You will be directed to the Penzu log in screen.
- You will type your username in the box that asks for your email and then type in your password.
- Your screen will then go to your journal page

### **2. Online Blog (kidblog.org)**

- You will type in the class' URL (type it **EXACTLY** as it is written) <http://kidblog.org/NinthGradeSchoolTransitionStudy/>
- Click on "Log In" at the upper-right corner of your screen
- You will be directed to a new screen
- Select your name from the username drop down menu and put in your password
- Click "Log In"
- You will be directed to the Class Blog Page
- Read the Posted Message
- Click on "New Post" in the top left corner of the screen to begin blogging
- After each post click "Publish" located to the right of your screen.
- Remember to log out after you have posted to your blog. "Log Out" icon is located in the top right-hand corner of the page.
- To "Log In" again, follow the above steps

**Your posts will remain private and other than you, I will be the only one who can see them.**

## Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions  
Samples taken from Dr. Rachel Dudley's (2012) Study



### Interview Questions

1. As you reflected in your journal over the week what were some of the things you talked about?
2. How does your symbolic representation reflect your transition experience into high school?
3. (a.) When you were in middle school what did you think high school would be like? Prompts: What things did you worry about or looked forward to, what did parents or friends tell you about high school.  
(b.) Describe how high school did or did not meet your expectations? Prompts:  
What are some things that you did expect that did occur and what are something's that surprised you about the high school.
4. Tell me about the major changes you have experienced so far moving from middle school to high school? Prompts: academics, social life, organization, structure etc.
5. What do you remember about efforts to help you transition from middle school to high school? How effective do you think those efforts were?
6. Talk about your impressions of your first week in high school to your impressions now? Prompts: Did your initial impressions remain? Why or why not?
7. What has been the most difficult about being in high school?
8. What has been the most rewarding about being in high school?
9. (a.) What can be done in middle school next year to help 8<sup>th</sup> graders with their move to high school  
(b.) What things can be done here at the high school next year to help 9<sup>th</sup> graders with their move from middle school to high school?

10. At this point, how successful do you feel in the ninth grade? Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics etc.

## Appendix C

### Email Communication with Dr. Rachel Dudley

[Print](#)[Close](#)**FW: Requesting Permission**

From: **Ms Tashna Comica Morris** (tmorris1@gardner-webb.edu)  
 Sent: **Thu 4/24/14 8:17 PM**  
 To: **tashnaservis@hotmail.com** (tashnaservis@hotmail.com)

From: Rachel Dudley ; rdudley@needham.k12.ma.us  
 Sent: Wednesday, March 12, 2014 7:17 PM  
 To: Ms Tashna Comica Morris  
 Subject: Re: Requesting Permission

Hi Ms. Morris,  
 I would be pleased if my work can help you with yours. You have my permission to use samples of my questions for your research. Good luck and have fun--I found the research phase to be a good reward for the hard work already completed.  
 Enjoy.

On Tue, Mar 11, 2014 at 11:01 AM, Ms Tashna Comica Morris <tmorris1@gardner-webb.edu>mailto:tmorris1@gardner-webb.edu> wrote:  
 Dear Dr. Dudley

My name is Tashna Morris and I am currently a doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University located in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. My research topic is focused around the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade and I am taking an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach to my research.

My methodology includes using 'journal' writing and a focus group. With this in mind, I am seeking written permission to use samples of your interview questions that were used in your study as prompts for my focus group session.

My goal going forward is to collect data towards the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my request. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Tashna Morris  
 Ed.D Candidate  
 704 674 4746 (mobile)

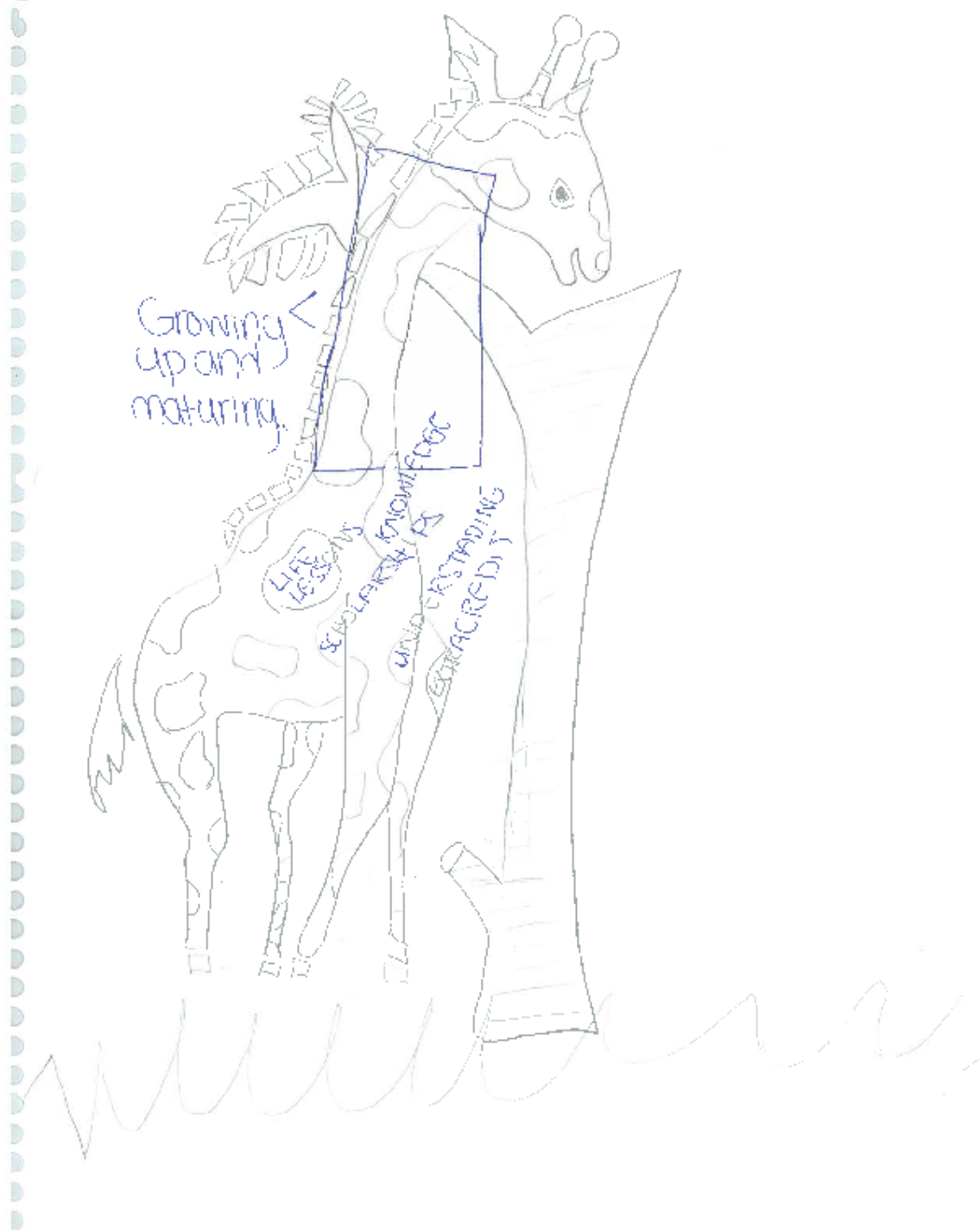
--  
 Rachel Dudley, Ed.D  
 Social Studies Department  
 Needham High School

## Appendix D

### Participants' Symbolic Representations

Be Afraid to Believe  
By. Justin Bieber







↳ metaphor: describing its is:

## "Guilty by association"

- this is probably the most true statement EVER. You will get called out for the most bull crap things ever in HS. like my chorus teacher McGill says "You could go home and lay in bed all day and not leave your house and still get accused of spilling the trashcan" - which is a really good point. You just have to ignore it + move on

Highschool is like a stage before college. You  
are kind of on your own, you have some guidance.  
But as far as turning in assignments that's  
all you.



Appendix E  
Informed Consent Document

## **Informed Consent to Participate In a Research Study**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Tashna Morris and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Gardner- Webb University. I am also employed by \_\_\_\_\_ schools in the capacity as a Curriculum Resource Coordinator. Your child has been invited to take part in a research study at \_\_\_\_\_ High School. This letter is to explain the research study and process. If you do not wish for your child to participate, you and your child will sign the Opt Out section of the form and mail it to me in the envelope provided. If you give your child permission to participate, you may sign the form and have your child return it to Ms. Pam Huffstetler at the high school. Your child must also sign to indicate his or her willingness to participate.

### **Purpose of study and why your child is eligible**

The purpose of the study is to examine how students make meaning of their freshman transition experience during their ninth grade transitional year. The eighth grade to ninth grade transition can be a very difficult time for students, and I am studying this phenomenon in order to better help students at this school and throughout the district transition successfully into the ninth grade. Your child has been recruited for this study as a current ninth grade student experiencing the transition.

### **What your child will be asked to do and time commitment**

If you agree to let your child participate, I will be asking your child to record their thoughts about their ninth grade transitional year in a bound journal, an online journal or journal through a blog. Your child will be asked to write about their transition experiences at least once per day, over a one-week period. I will collect your child's journal at the end of the one-week period.

Your child will also be asked to participate in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be conducted at a convenient time, as decided by the assistant principal, during the school day. All interviews will take place over a three-day period. Students in their individual interviews will be asked to share their thoughts about how they experience the transition from middle school to high school. With your permission, your child will be video recorded during the interview session so that the transcript of the session can be completed. Your child's name will not be listed on the transcript and the tape will only be accessible to the researcher.

Also, your child will be encouraged to voluntarily submit a symbolic representation (a poem, quote, picture, song, metaphor, self-made video and so on) that represents for them their transition experience into the ninth grade. If your child chooses to use a self-made video as his/her symbolic representation, he/she will be asked to share this information as a video attachment via e-mail. If your child submits a symbolic representation he/she will be asked to further elaborate on this in his/her one-to-one interview. I am going to use

the information from the journal writing prompts, the interview sessions and from your child's symbolic representation to write my dissertation.

### **Potential risk and confidentiality**

As your child reflects on his/her ninth grade transition experience, he/she may experience stress or psychological distress or may share expressions through his/her journal writing, one-to-one interview, and symbolic representation that may be inappropriate or that may cause me to be concerned for the safety of the child or others. In this event, your child will be referred to the ninth grade school counselor Jean Peach or the high school mental health clinician Demetrius Cofield, for further resources for counseling. Also, the researcher will report to the appropriate school personnel, namely the ninth grade administrator, Pam Huffstetler, any information causing concern for safety or any inappropriate content that may be received throughout the data collection process.

Your child will have complete confidentiality and his/her identity will be entirely masked in the written product. All research materials will be securely kept in a locked drawer and on a username and password protected computer during the research process and all raw data related to this research study will be completely destroyed after a 3year period.

### **Voluntary participation and withdrawal**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You and your child have the right to withdraw consent for your child's participation at any time between now and the final acceptance of my written dissertation. There will be no negative consequences for your child in his or her standing in the school if the decision is made to withdraw him or her from the study.

### **Questions and concerns**

If you have questions or concerns about your child's participation, you can contact me at:

XXXXXXXXXX. You may also contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Karen Sumner at XXXXXXXX.

If you have any questions about your and your child's rights in this research, you may contact Dr. Jeff Rogers, IRB Institutional Administrator, Gardner-Webb University at XXXXXXXX.

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Tashna Morris

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent for Tashna Morris to use my child's \_\_\_\_\_ confidential Journal responses in her research and for my child

\_\_\_\_\_ to participate in a video recorded one-to-one interview for Tashna Morris' research study on how students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year of high school.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of parent/guardian  
parent/guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of child

**You and your child have the right to withdraw consent at any point during this research study or not participate in this research study**

**OPT OUT: I do not agree to have my child take part in this research**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of parent/guardian  
parent/guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of child

## Appendix F

### Connect Ed Phone Transcript



**Connect Ed Phone Transcript**

"Your child has been selected to participate in a study examining how students make meaning of their transition experienced during their freshman year of high school. The information that will be gained from this research study will be beneficial to our school and possibly the school district on a whole. Participation is entirely voluntary, but we hope you will consider allowing your child to participate. Please read the letter your child brought home today, which gives more specific details about the study. Please read carefully, complete and return to the school by Friday May 9th. Thank you."