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School Connectedness: Teachers' Perspectives on the Effects of a Small Learning Community on Ninth-Grade Student Transition And Dropout

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SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS:
TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE EFFECTS OF A SMALL LEARNING
COMMUNITY ON NINTH-GRADE STUDENT TRANSITION AND DROPOUT

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Brittany Richey

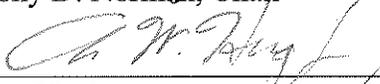
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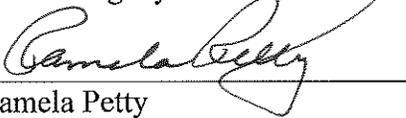
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The purpose of this study was to explore ninth grade teachers' perspectives' of a small learning community and its impact on student connectivity, transition and dropout.

The following overarching research question framed this study: (Given the 15-year history of this freshman academy, what are the teachers' perspectives on the impact of a small learning community on ninth grade transition? (a) What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' sense of interpersonal connectedness? (b) What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' sense of physical and emotional safety? (c) What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' academic commitment? (d) What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects student dropout?

Findings revealed the teachers' perspectives included that the ninth-grade academy provided a catalyst for community, eased transition, and allowed for academic flexibility, commitment, and common collaboration by proximity. Additionally, the vision of rigor, relevance, and relationships was fostered inside of the small learning community. Finally, findings revealed that teachers were supportive of the interventions to give students a sense of belonging and safety by encouraging ninth-grade students to persist to graduation. Overall findings suggested a consistent, caring, and committed perspective from teachers throughout the small learning community.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Humans have a driving need to develop relationships and feel a sense of belonging with others. Voelkl (1995) noted that understanding the importance of school belonging or connectivity is vital because of the concerning problem facing American adolescent students as they continue to emotionally, socially, and physically withdraw from school. Students are more likely to succeed academically when they feel connected to school (Blum, 2005). Regardless of how it is labeled (school bonding, school climate, teacher support, or student engagement), the concept of students' feelings of support and sense of connectedness can impact the academic environment.

School connectedness has been characterized as the degree to which a student feels that he or she has a place at school. Cataloano and Hawkins (1996) all the more broadly characterized school connectedness as the degree to which students feel actually acknowledged, regarded, included, and bolstered by others in the school social condition. Students with high sentiments of connectedness likewise are bound to go to class frequently and accomplish higher scholastically. It is clear young people's hazardous conduct and academics are impacted by their feelings of association with school (Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013). Be that as it may, there has been an ongoing accentuation on regardless of whether school connectedness is a hazard factor for emotional wellness issues in students. McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) noted students who feel associated with school report more elevated amounts of enthusiastic prosperity. Likewise, in 2003, Anderman presumed higher individual dimensions of connectedness are identified with expanded positive thinking and lower dimensions of grief. Analysts have

found a positive relationship between school connectedness and prosperity/emotional wellbeing (Anderman, 2003). Of course, this also prompted the finding of negative connections too: as psychological instability expands, school connectedness diminishes. Melancholy and nervousness have been found to be connected with adolescents who are disassociated with school (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

Even though school connectedness is important in all grades, connectedness is especially crucial during the adolescent years (Blum, 2005). Adolescents who do not have a sense of connection to a larger group or community likely will experience increased stress and emotional distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Better perceived school relationships with teachers and peers are likely to lead to a stronger sense of belonging in school which, in turn, is likely to lead to more positive beliefs and emotions about one's learning, which then relates to higher academic grades and lower levels of behavioral problems (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996).

In the PBS documentary, "Making Schools Work," aired in October 2005, Joyce Phillips stated, "Twenty percent of students will learn no matter what. Eighty percent of students need a hook, something that makes them want to come to school and want to learn" (as cited in Gibbs, 2006). The problem begins before students disconnect and drop out. Schools are constantly evaluating and modifying to meet the ever-changing needs of the students.

A growing body of research has clearly identified and demonstrated the change from middle school to high school is especially difficult for students and has become the pivotal year of need (Black, 2004; Gary, 2004; McIntosh & White, 2006). According to Lipsitz (1980), early adolescents are at a critical time of growth and change, "second only

to infancy in velocity" (p. 18). Aside from the obvious physiological changes of puberty, research has identified significant cognitive, social, emotional, conceptual, and moral developments that accompany this time (Johnson & Gerstein, 1998). It is a milestone year that often gets overlooked in the educational system and a year that can equal a diploma or a dropout. The slippery slope of ninth grade becomes more profound as students begin to experience ramifications of becoming lost, defiant, or discouraged as they transition from the cloistered world of middle school to the autonomous world of high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999).

The Problem Defined

Relatively little attention has been given to school belonging in high school compared to middle school, even though it may be more important to students' academic and psychological adjustment during these adolescent years (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000; Walker & Greene, 2009). A potential barrier to building connections and sustaining school belonging is the transition from middle school to high school (Davis, 2003). Some consider the ninth-grade transition critical to the remainder of students' high school academic careers (Fulk, 2003; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). During this transitional year, all students are more vulnerable because of increased social and academic demands. Incoming ninth-grade students often have limited understanding of the concept of earning credits toward graduation; they must navigate multiple teachers and schedules usually in the context of a larger student body, and they may lack basic academic skills that teachers may be unable to remediate (Fulk, 2003; Neild et.al, 2008.). The obstacles students encounter during transitions could possibly undermine their connections with school. The transition to high school often is

accompanied by disruptions in teacher, parent, and peer support, yet students continue to be in need of strong relationships with others at school (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007). As a result of the changes students encounter during the transition, many experience declines in motivation, grades, and school belonging (Eccles, 2004; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Researchers have contended these declines contribute substantially toward dropout (Baker, Derrer, Davis, Dinklage-Travis, Linder, & Nicholson, 2001, Heck & Mahoe. 2006; Zvoch, 2009). Therefore, supporting students through this transition when the impact of school belonging may be the strongest is a potentially important means for preventing alienation and anxiety (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Murdock et al., 2000).

Regan, Burkeley, Hughes, and Brady (2015) discovered marginal research regarding the voice or perceptions of classroom teachers on the transition process of students from middle school to high school. The little data that exists consist of statistical data sources such as standardized test scores, demographics, dropout rates, and school populations. Teachers can generate statistical data, but statistical information is not enough to see the entire picture clearly. To understand the transition between middle school and high school, it is necessary to hear the actual voices of teachers (Elderbrock, Denmon, Owens, & Lindstrom, 2015). This concept has been alluded to as school commitment across the country, especially for high schools.

Purpose and Research Questions

The main purpose of this study is to understand the teachers' perception of the effectiveness of a ninth-grade academy, used as a transition program, to help students connect to school. It also addresses the specific problem, which is the 19% dropout rate

of ninth-grade high school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). High school dropout rates are nationally higher in the ninth grade than in any other high school grade level and, according to Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, and Pointer (2014), ninth grade teachers have a unique perspective that may help explain the academic and social challenges students encounter as they transition into high school.

This study analyzes teacher perceptions to explore the motivation behind the effectiveness or lack thereof inside small learning communities. This study evaluates the perceived level of connectivity in SLCs, more specifically a ninth-grade academy, at one high school, in order to make program improvements to increase the positive influences on students' transitions.

Thus, the overarching guiding question for this study is: Given the 15-year history of this freshman academy, what are the teachers' perspectives on the impact of a SLC on ninth-grade transition? Specifically,

1. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' sense of interpersonal connectedness?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' sense of physical and emotional safety?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' academic commitment?
4. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects student dropout?

As the literature review (Chapter II) further delineates, the first three research questions are derived from the Eccles and Roeser (2009) Triad of Engagement. The fourth research

question speaks directly to the original stated purpose for developing the freshman academy; increasing high school graduation rates.

Rationale for Methodology

Qualitative research is the process of inquiry that explores a social or human problem (Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative researcher builds a picture for the reader through studying participants in their natural setting and reporting their views (Moustakas, 1994). Teacher perceptions of school connectedness in SLCs were assessed qualitatively. Data collection and analysis occurred in the traditional qualitative manner of interviews; selecting themes; and identifying categories, patterns, and relationships in the responses (Berg, 2008). The interviews provided the participants a voice in presenting their respective roles and responsibilities as they relate to the organization and operation of the freshman academy. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions, and the sessions were audio recorded for accuracy. The recorded sessions were transcribed and coded for emerging themes.

This study is based on a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists say people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When one encounters something new, they must reconcile it with previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what is believed, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, individuals are active creators of their own knowledge. To do this, one must ask questions, explore, and assess what is known.

The theory is based on the perspective that truth is relative and dependent upon one's perspective. Piaget (1956) proposed that learners gain knowledge through engaging

in personally meaningful experiences. As Piaget stated, knowledge “is actively constructed and reconstructed through direct interaction with the environment” (Kafai & Resnick, 2001, p. 26).

Constructivism is based upon the premise of the social construction of reality; and one of the advantages of this approach is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participant while enabling participants to tell their stories (Merriam, 1988). Through these stories, the participants are able to describe their views of reality, and this allows the researcher to better understand the participants’ actions (Creswell, 2003).

Significance of the Study

This study examines teachers’ perspectives on obstacles and challenges of ninth-grade student school belonging in a SLC. The research may give educators valuable information that may contribute to SLCs and their effect on improved student-to-school belonging. Specifically, it provides feedback on how transition programs, such as the ninth-grade academy, impact student dropout and connectivity. This study seeks to describe the environment of a SLC to better understand how the setting affects connectivity between school and student, and teacher and student. Academic failure and engagement in risky behavior can be attributed to the failure to meet developmental needs during an important time of transition (Cotton, 1996).

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

It is an assumption of this study that it is in the best interest of the teachers, students, schools, and society that academic achievement and high school graduation give students the best chance of being successful. This study also has several limitations. First, there is a limitation related to the selected participants attending the school in

southcentral Kentucky. While generalizations to all high schools nationwide would be unlikely, the results of this study can be used by individuals seeking ways to improve SLCs and student connectivity. Second, not all SLCs have the same structure, characteristics, or implementation.

Definition of Terms

Community: sense of “community” experienced by those working, teaching, and learning in a school—i.e., the administrators, faculty, staff, and students. In this case, educators may also be actively working to improve the culture of the school, strengthen relationships between teachers and students, and foster feelings of inclusion, caring, shared purpose, and collective investment (Ishimaru, 2014).

Dropout: The National Center for Education Statistics (U.S Department of Education, 2014) defines a high school dropout as one who was enrolled in high school the previous year and is not enrolled the following year who has not graduated from high school and does not meet any of the exclusionary conditions: transfer to another school, temporary absence due to suspension, or school-approved illness or death.

Middle School: Middle schools in the United States usually cover grades 5–8, 6–8, or 7–8 (Benner & Wang, 2014).

Ninth Grade Only: A concept in which students are housed at a separate high school campus for ninth graders only (Cook, Fowler, & Harris, 2008).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The 2002 update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which increased the level of involvement of the federal government in accountability for education of students. NCLB mandated the narrowing of the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their peers, put more focus on

educating special education students, and contained provisions to cut Title 1 funding for noncompliant states (Klein, 2015).

School-within-schools: Another name for a SLC.

Small Learning Community (SLC): A separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Students and teachers are scheduled together throughout the school day. The teachers frequently have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes.

Transition: The process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another, or students in transition from one program to another (Adelman & Taylor, 2015).

Summary

Adolescence has been characterized as a “high-risk” developmental period in which many students feel isolated and estranged within the educational environment (Calabrese, 1987; Goodenow, 1993). Although many adolescents pass through this developmental stage without experiencing any lasting repercussions, a significant number of adolescents experience negative psychological changes that result from the incompatibility between their developmental needs and the opportunities provided from the social environment within the school setting (Eccles, Flanagan, Lord, Midgley, Roeser, & Yee, 1996).

In summary, one of the most significant and stressful years in a student’s education is the ninth grade. Most students transition from a more structured middle school environment to a more independent high school setting. Too often students fail to meet the demands because they are ill-equipped and never graduate. With the development of smaller learning communities, schools are reforming the approach to the

“new kids on the block.” Utilizing semi-structured interviews of ninth-grade teachers, this study addresses the central research question: Given the 15-year history of this freshman academy, what are the teachers’ perspectives on the impact of a SLC on ninth grade transition? What are the challenges and obstacles faced by students as perceived by teachers in a SLC? By analyzing teachers’ perspectives, this study can help gain insight into dealing with the demands of the ninth-grade year. It can effectively improve other SLCs and possibly engage school belonging. According to Alfaro, Kupczynski, & Mundy (2015), the evidence clearly shows that school administration and classroom teachers need the assistance of applied research to identify the most effective strategies for addressing the disturbing trend of high school dropouts. This study contributes to the literature in the field of education due to a deficit of research existing in the area of teachers’ perception of ninth-grade academies.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

A growing body of literature has examined the impact and importance of student-school connectedness in relation to positive student outcomes and adolescent norms during pivotal grades such as ninth grade (Black, 2004). Evidence exists that the transition to ninth grade is a challenge for students, and it can determine the likelihood for success for the remainder of high school and beyond (Black, 2004; Cohen, McCabe, Mitchelli, Pickeral & McCloskey, 2009; Pharris-Ciurej Hirschuman, & Whilhoft, 2012; Walker & Greene, 2009). Gewertz (2014) noted a national awareness of the ninth grade as a “make-or-break year” (p. 14); educators are becoming increasingly aware of its importance. To address the transition to high school from middle school, which can present students with numerous challenges, some schools offer programs and increased support to incoming freshman. Allensworth and Easton (2005) asserted students who remain “on track” after their freshmen year are significantly more likely than their peers to graduate from high school in four years. Pharris-Ciurej et al., (2012) pointed out the significance of “the 9th grade shock” - (p. 2) a sharp decline in academic performance as students enter high school sometimes leading to retention or dropout. Little attention has been given to school belonging in high school compared to middle school age, even though school belonging may be more important to students’ academic and psychological adjustment during the high school years (Walker & Greene, 2009). Research has found an adolescent’s sense of school connectivity can lower dropout, decrease the incidents of risk-taking behaviors, raise levels of academic motivation, improve student outcomes, and develop positive school and social relationships (Anderman, 2003). Strengthening

student-school connectedness can be achieved through a positive school climate, which will assist in promoting academic motivation and healthy adolescent student norms (Cohen, et al., 2009).

The following sections encompasses five interrelated components: (1) school reform history (2) the dropout crisis (3) school size (4) student belonging, and (5) SLCs.

School Reform

School reform continues to be at the heart of debate and educational policy in the U.S. The quest to improve and reinvent schools has been in the forefront of policymakers for decades; yet, they disagree on why the majority of the nation's high schools are still underperforming. Reformers continue to say the educational system is failing to prepare students for the future. Some reformers believe administration, staff, or central office decisions are to blame for underperforming schools (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, de la Torre, 2014). Other reformers assert to the schools that lack proper lines of communication and support between school staff and community have a difficult time implementing effective action plans for school reform (Borba, 2003).

School reform is not a new concept. Previous movements started at the turn of the century soon after the end of World War II. Policymakers believed the nation's educational system was failing to produce scientists and engineers able to create systems to defend the country during the Cold War. This perceived political threat was the catalyst that led reformers to seek solutions to the challenges of equity, desegregation, and poverty in the U.S. educational system (Cuban & Usban, 2003). The lack of equity and the high levels of poverty created significant problems for the country's economy and affected its standing as a world economic leader. As such, it became necessary to

provide opportunities for the poor to become participatory and gain power in community programs (Stuckler, Basu, & McKee, 2010).

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty in his address to Congress in 1964 (Halsall, 1998). Defined as a new era of American liberalism, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was composed of 11 major initiatives designed to deal with the root problems of poverty. The federal government allocated monies to create programs designed to lift those citizens who were historically in the lower class into the middle. In 1965, President Johnson enacted the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) to allocate federal funding for elementary and secondary schools in an effort to provide equal access to education with multiple levels of accountability. The ESEA also was aimed at providing extra funds to support minority students with the goal of closing the achievement gap. The ESEA has been reenacted every five years since its inception.

Reform once again was rekindled in 1983 when President Ronald Reagan unveiled a landmark document entitled “A Nation at Risk” (Halsall, 1998). The report consisted of failing schools resulting in students being left behind internationally and overall declining educational standards. According to Guthrie and Springer (2004), the initiative propelled a move from measuring school quality by resources received and to a plane where performance is judged on outcomes achieved by students.

A crucial element in this shift was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed in 2002 by the George W. Bush Administration with both Republican and Democratic support; it subsequently became “the standard unifying framework for American K-12 education” (Jaiani & Whitford, 2011, p. 9). Consistent with its title, NCLB was an act to “close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and

choice, so that no child is left behind” (Department of Education, 2002). It called for an extension of statewide testing to be mandatory and stipulated that every state introduce standards plus comprehensive systems of testing and accountability. Its four guiding principles were “accountability, flexibility and local control, parental choice, and what works” (Department of Education, 2002). The introduction of NCLB was part of a larger move towards accountability in the public sector, instigated by President Bush (Jaiani & Whitford, 2011).

In 2009, the Obama Administration came to office and the adoption of the state incentive grants program, later known as Race to the Top (RTT), was developed in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). In their article on Obama’s stimulus and education reform, Weatherford and McDonnell (2011) argued by using ARRA to promote its education reform agenda, the Obama Administration was able to accomplish federal education reforms that had eluded other administrations.

Bennett (2012) cited Daggett and Meeder’s (2011) 10 components of successful school reform from their research on small learning communities:

1. A culture that embraces a rigorous and relevant curriculum must be created;
2. Data should be used to provide clear unwavering focus;
3. High expectations should be set and monitored for continued student improvement.
4. A framework that organizes curriculum that drives instruction should be created;
5. Students should be provided real-world applications;
6. Multiple pathways to rigor and relevance should be created;

7. Sustained professional development that is focused should be provided;
8. Parent and community involvement should be obtained and leveraged;
9. A safe and orderly school should be maintained.
10. Effective leadership development should be offered. (p. 23)

Student Dropout

Smink and Schargel (2004) make a poignant statement:

Every September, approximately 3.5 million young people in America enter the eighth grade. Over the succeeding four 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).

In one of the country's oldest institutions - the school - students are failing.

Certainly, the dropout problem is a complex issue influenced by many individual, familial, social, economic, and school policy variables that are already evident during middle school (Rumberger, 2006).

As the world landscape changes from physical to virtual one, the ability to compete on a global playing field is tentative at best; and for those without the benefit of a high school diploma, the game may well be over. Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver (2007) stated,

This is a high school epidemic, one that threatens our ability to keep pace with an increasingly demanding and globally competitive economy, It is costing our nation billions of dollars each year, and is diminishing the productivity and happiness of millions of our young people. We can and we must do better (p. 5)

Decades ago, students could drop out of high school and still fulfill their potential in the workforce. However, in today's grueling and competitive society, there is little room for jobs without a high school diploma. Such students are more likely to be unemployed and to earn less over their working life (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Benner and Wang (2014) determined the significant social costs of dropping out of high school include reduced social participation such as voting, increased demand for social services such as public assistance, increased crime rates leading to incarceration, and reduced levels of health. Identifying key factors before dropout occurs inside schools is the starting point to catapulting change.

A large volume of research has been dedicated toward identifying factors that might explain why students drop out of school before high school graduation. It has shown that students bear greater risk of leaving school if they perform poorly academically, demonstrate more misbehaviors, become less engaged in school activities, come from low-income families or single-parent families, have a less supportive relationship with parents, join schools with poor academic quality, obtain less support from teachers, or get negative influence from peer friends (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Kaplan, Peck & Kaplan, 1997; Rumberger, 1987). Students, parents, the school system and the local and regional community all benefit from a strong, well designed program that improves student achievement, enriches the social expectations of young learners, and lowers the rate of dropout.

While a common perception is that the dropout problem appears to be a "boy's crisis," in truth, one in four female students eventually becomes a dropout statistic, with the eventual outcome typically more bleak for them than for their male counterparts

(Balfanz et al., 2009). Female dropouts are more likely to be teen and young adult parents. The American Community Surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007 estimated that 13.5% of young women (ages 16-24) were mothers at the time of the survey. In comparison to their age-level peers, female dropouts were six times more likely to have given birth than their peers who were college students or were four year college graduates; and of those young women who had given birth, 60% were not married at the time the survey was conducted. Female high school dropouts were nearly nine times as likely to have become single mothers as compared to their counterparts with a bachelor's degree (Sum, Ishwar, & McLaughlin, 2009).

Over the years the government has attempted to create programs and passed legislative actions to level the educational opportunities to decrease dropout all in frustration. According to Swanson (2005), "Federal programs are aimed at either gifted and talented students or special-needs and at-risk kids" (p 1), and "most of the forgotten-middle students are really above average [and] we simply have defined our expectations and requirements too low" (p. 3). It appears schools are comfortable in assuming those average students, who do not fall into the gifted or at-risk categories, are doing well and do not need special attention.

In nearly 2000 high schools scattered across the American landscape, 40% of the incoming freshman class will have dropped out of school by their senior year (Balfanz et al., 2007). When comparing the US with other industrial and developed countries around the globe, America rates 18th in high school graduation rates and 15th in college graduation rates (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). According to Lee and Burkam (2003), large comprehensive high schools have a higher dropout rate than smaller

schools. Approximately 70 % of American high school students attend schools enrolling 1,000 or more students, nearly 50 % of high school students attend schools enrolling more than 1,500 students, and the average school enrollment is five times what it was 50 years ago (Cotton, 1996).

Certainly, the dropout problem is a complex issue influenced by many individual, familial, social, economic, and school policy variables that are already evident during middle school (Rumberger, 2006). Research has shown that, among high school students, ninth graders have the lowest grade point average and the most discipline referrals (Reents, 2002). Neild (2013) found approximately one-third of the nation's recent high school dropouts were never promoted beyond ninth grade. It is during the transition into the ninth-grade year that the majority of students for the first time must earn passing grades in core courses required for graduation (Stetser & Stilwell, 2014). The purpose of this study is to research this unique ninth-grade population and, most important, address the specific problem of the 19% dropout rate of ninth-grade high school students (NCES, 2014). High school dropout rates are nationally higher in the ninth grade than in any other high school grade level and, according to Davis et al. (2014), ninth-grade teachers have a unique perspective in which they may help explain the academic and social challenges students encounter as they transition into high school.

An analysis of research data provides evidence of serious academic problems for ninth graders immediately upon entering high school, resulting in declining grades, widespread course failures, and low promotion rates (DeJong & Locker, 2006). Further research has suggested that freshmen experiencing academic difficulty during the first year of high school are more likely to drop out of school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson,

2007). In *Adolescence, School Transitions, and Prevention: A Research-Based Primer*, Berliner (1993) discussed the Timing and Discontinuity Theory that suggests two hypotheses associated with adolescents coping with transition. She believed the reason for adolescents having such difficulty with change is because of other life events are taking place at the same time. Berliner also hypothesized that an “abrupt change from the child-focused elementary school to the performance-focus secondary school is a powerful stressor during early adolescence” (p. 6). During this time, adolescents are dealing with self-esteem issues where they feel inadequate socially, which directly correlates to the classroom. Gary (2004) recognized Elias (2001) as stating, “The change brought by puberty combined with cognitive and social development changes make the middle school transition a complex situation” (p. 11). During this first step into high school, it is important students have a nurturing and inviting environment that specializes in their life stage.

Mizelle and Irvin (2000) suggested that programs should provide information, social support for students, bring teachers from both the sending and receiving schools together, and involve parents. Programs also should help build a sense of community among students and provide a faceted approach to meeting their needs. Final analysis of research identified effective strategies aimed at creating a plan of success for ninth graders, including SLCs and restructuring of traditional high schools (Cole, 2013).

School Belonging

Importance of Ninth Grade and School Connectedness

A developing assortment of research literature has analyzed the effect and significance of school connectedness with positive student results and juvenile standards

amid essential evaluations (Black, 2004). Proof exists that the change to ninth grade is a test for students and can decide the probability for progress for the rest of secondary school and beyond (Walker & Greene, 2009). Gewertz (2014) noticed a national consciousness of the ninth grade as a “represent the moment of truth year,” and instructors are becoming mindful of its significance. A potential barrier to building connections and sustaining school belonging is the transition from middle school to high school (Jackson & Davis, 2000). For freshman students entering a new school, the stakes are even higher.

“Rough transitions can make ninth grade little more than a holding tank for high school” (Black, 2004, p. 42). Some consider the ninth-grade transition critical to the remainder of students’ high school academic careers (Neild Stoner-Eby, et al., 2008). The transition from middle to high school can be a period of great anxiety for many students (Barren County School District, n.d, SREB, n.d.). Since transition from middle school to high school symbolizes the coming of age, it is a time in a young person’s life that can create feelings of isolation, disconnect, and an immeasurable sense of loneliness (DeJong & Locker, 2006). To help with the change to high school from middle school, which can cause adolescents to experience various difficulties, a few schools offer projects and expanded help to freshmen. Allensworth and Easton (2005) affirmed students who stay “on track” after their first year are essentially more likely than their friends to move on from secondary school in four years. Pharris-Ciurej, et al. (2012) pointed out the importance of “the ninth grade stun”—a sharp decrease in scholarly execution as understudies enter secondary school, occasionally prompting maintenance or dropout. Research has discovered an adolescents feeling of school availability can lower dropout

and the episodes of hazard-taking practices, raise dimensions of scholarly inspiration, enhance student results, and create positive school and social connections (Anderman, 2003). Reinforcing student and school connectedness can be accomplished through a positive school atmosphere, which will help with advancing scholastic achievement (Cohen et al., 2009).

During this transitional year, all students are more vulnerable because of increased social and academic demands. Incoming ninth-grade students often have limited understanding of the concept of earning credits toward graduation, they must navigate multiple teachers and schedules usually in the context of a larger student body, and they may lack basic academic skills that teachers may be unable to remediate (Fulk, 2003). The obstacles students encounter during transitions could potentially undermine their connections with school. The transition to high school often is accompanied by disruptions in teacher, parent, and peer support, yet students continue to be in need of strong relationships with others at school (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). It is a milestone that often gets overlooked in the educational system. Schiller (1999) defined academic transition as “a process which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (pp. 216-217). Therefore, the importance of transitioning into a nurturing and supportive environment is crucial, especially at a time of growth and change during an adolescent’s life.

As students struggle to fit in socially, insufficient academic preparation in core subjects increases the anxiety associated with transitioning into high school (DeJong & Locker, 2006). DeJong and Locker (2006) asserted ninth-grade students have a very

difficult time adjusting to the academic and social demands of a large high school and, therefore, experience higher rates of academic failure, disciplinary problems, and feelings of not belonging. Students who remain in school after unsuccessful or difficult transitions are more likely to pursue less rigorous degree programs (Chmelynski, 2004). Academic failure and engagement in risky behavior can be attributed to the failure to meet developmental needs during an important time of transition (Cotton, 1996).

Research by Fang, Sun & Yuen (2016) observed the school connectedness and the segments that may impact its improvement with a case of Chinese children. Six focus gatherings including 52 secondary school students were co-coordinated by use of the specific interview topics. Results revealed the students desired school connectedness and could perceive key effects impacting their direction. These segments could be assembled under specified zones, including teacher care, peer relationship, progressively broad school associations, and school practices inside the school. The students also were prepared to describe methods may familiarize schools with re-design and anchoring of connectedness to the classroom.

In research by Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton (2006), school atmosphere (attachment, disconnection, rivalry among students, and fulfillment with classes and studies) was indirectly connected to resulting early adolescent issues and burdensome manifestations like depressive symptoms. Members included 489 10- to 14-year old center school students. The outcomes demonstrated that school connectedness intervened in the relations between considered attachments, considered contact, fulfillment with classes and consequent student related issues one year later. In this cases, school

connectedness did not decrease negative behavior and in this way did not change the school atmosphere enough to have impacts on early juvenile behavior issues.

Theories of School Connectedness

According to the belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), two criteria must be met. First, humans have a need to develop frequent, pleasant interactions with a few people. Second, those interactions need to take place within a stable environment of affective concern for each other. In agreement with the belongingness theory, Hoyle and Crawford (1994) found daily interactions and involvement in activities are a vital component of belongingness. Humans who do not develop social belonging will suffer ill effects such as maladjustment, stress, and behavioral problems.

Another theory pertaining to human connectivity is Maslow's motivational theory. It proposes a hierarchy of human needs and human motivation based on deficiency needs and growth needs (Maslow, 1954). Within the deficiency needs, which are the first four levels of the hierarchy, each need must be satisfied before progressing to a higher-level need. The most basic needs in the hierarchy are the physiological needs of a person, such as food and water. Once the physiological needs are met, a new need emerges, the need for safety. Safety needs are at the foundation of human desire to seek familiar things as opposed to the unfamiliar. Similarly, the need for safety is at the origin of children's predisposition to require a predictable, orderly world in which routines are not disrupted. Physiological and safety needs must be gratified before ascending to the next level in the hierarchy, which addresses the need for love. Love is associated with the human need for love, affection, and belongingness. In order to satisfy the love needs, affectionate relations must be developed and a place within the peer group secured.

Hindering a person's gratification of the need for love, affection, and belongingness may lead to maladjustment (Maslow, 1943). Esteem needs are related to the desire for self-respect and self-esteem and are based on actual achievement and the respect of others. Within this level of the hierarchy, emphasis is placed on gaining the approval and recognition of others. Fulfillment of the esteem needs leads to self-confidence, while an unfulfilled need for esteem may lead to feelings of inferiority and helplessness (Maslow, 1943). Once all deficiency needs are satisfied, the growth needs emerge. Maslow (1954) initially conceptualized one growth need, self-actualization, or the realization of one's own potential and the quest for self-fulfillment. Maslow (1943) simplified the concept of self-actualization with the statement, "What a man can be, he must be" (Maslow, 1943).

The issue of the retention of high school ninth-grade students can be examined within the framework of stage-environment fit theory (Eccles, et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). This theory provides a lens with which to understand and examine this phenomenon, evaluate its components, and structure interventions to improve student outcomes. Drawing upon person-environment fit theory, Eccles and Midgley (1989) extended that theory with a developmental perspective and established stage-environment fit theory, proposing that declines in motivation and behavior in secondary school could result from the fact that the schools are not providing the transitions and organizational and educational environments that are appropriate for the student's developmental stage. The declines occur, they argued, as students experience a change in their educational environment from the more developmentally appropriate elementary school to the junior high school, and from junior to senior high school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989).

Table 1 displays adolescent developmental needs contrasted with characteristics of post-transfer secondary school environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The column on the left lists the developmental characteristics of the typical adolescent.

Table 1

Adolescent Development Needs

Early Adolescent Development	Post-Transfer School Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased desire for autonomy • Increased salience of identity issues • Increased self-focus and self-consciousness • Increased need for safe environment in which to explore autonomy and identity • Increased cognitive capacity with movement toward formal operational thought • Physical and hormonal changes associated with puberty • Increased need for close ties to non-familial adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in student autonomy • Decrease in opportunity for student participation in classroom decision making • Increase in practices likely to incur comparison: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increased peer orientation – Ability grouping – Whole class instruction – Normative performance grading – Competitive motivational strategies • Initial decrease in the cognitive level of tasks • More rigorous grading practices resulting in lower average grades • Increase in teacher concern with control • Increase in extrinsic motivational strategies • Decrease in opportunity for close student-teacher relationships to form • Decrease in teachers' trust of students • Decrease in teachers' sense of efficacy

Note. Adapted from “Adolescent Developmental Characteristics and Environmental Changes Associated with School Transition” by Eccles et al., 1989, *Stage-environment fit: Developmentally appropriate classrooms for young adolescents*, 3, p. 16-19.

At this stage, the young person has increasing needs for independence; however, he is very self-conscious and needs a safe place to explore this developing sense of identity.

The adolescent experiences physical and hormonal changes, and increased cognitive capacity. As peers become more important, the student begins to separate from the family and as a result, there is an increased need for support from non-familial adults to help with transition to full independence (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1989). In stark contrast to these adolescent psychological needs, the column on the right in Table 1 describes the typical secondary school environment. Eccles, et al. (1989) noted at the post-transfer secondary school, teachers exercise a great deal of control, coupled with discipline, and students are given less independence and opportunity to provide input to classroom decisions. Students have less opportunity to assimilate with their peers as teachers practice ability grouping, competitive grading practices, and whole-class instruction. According to Eccles, et al. (1989), opportunities for students to enhance identity and self-concept are diminished as teachers use rigorous grading practices and extrinsic motivational strategies. The student need for nurturing adult relationships is met with teacher distance, mistrust of students, and a decrease in teacher sense of self-efficacy, resulting in decreased student motivation (Eccles, 2004; Eccles et al., 1996).

Research has discovered an adolescent's feelings of school network can bring down the episodes of hazard-taking practices, raise dimensions of scholastic inspiration, enhance understudy results, and create positive school and social connections (Anderman, 2003). Revitalizing student-to-school connectedness can be accomplished through a positive school atmosphere, which will help with advancing scholastic inspiration (Cohen et al., 2009). The sharp increase in school viciousness performed the need to build up a feeling of having a place and with meet the social and enthusiastic

needs of the understudies in secondary schools. "In the ten years after Columbine, in excess of eighty acts of mass violence occurred in the United States" (Calabrese, 1987).

The Triad of Engagement

Procedures for creating successful schools are not so complicated. There are many strategies which directly influence the development of the school effectiveness and its impact on the connectivity with students. The Triad of Engagement (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) is a way of finding the theory, which developed in its essence to find out the maximum developments in the school connectedness. The Triad of Engagement has three main components. Students feel associated with school when they encounter:

- Interpersonal connectedness: A positive interaction with school staff and companions,
- Physical/Emotional Safety: A connecting with condition that is physically, sincerely protected, and
- Academic commitment: The bolster to achieve their own best with adaptable, applicable guidance. (Eccles & Roeser, 2009)

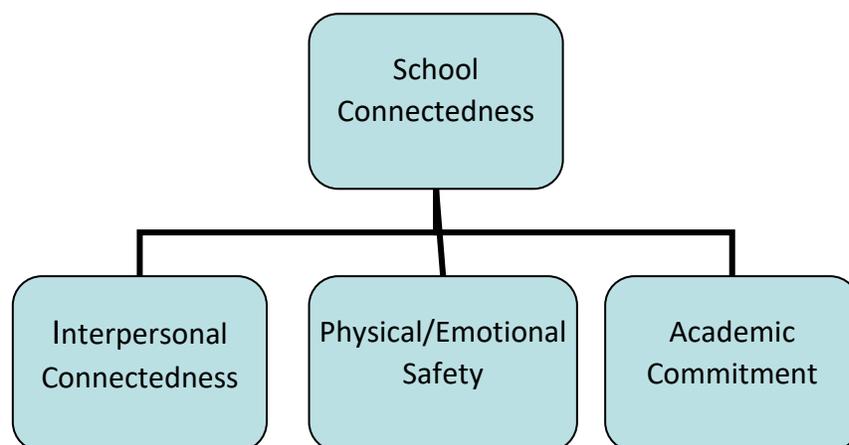


Figure 1. The triad of engagement. Adapted from Hagerty, B., Williams, R., Coyne, J., & Early, M. (1996). Sense of belonging and indicators of social and psychological functioning. *Arch Psychiatr Nurs.*10(4), p. 235-244.

Each element promotes the characteristics that make a student more resilient. When schools excel in the Triad of Engagement, students feel supported, safe, and capable of solving academic and personal challenges. At the point when schools exceed expectations in the set of factors, teachers can create an environment of respect. Studies have noted when adolescents feel connected to one noteworthy adult in their school; they encounter more prominent commitment and fulfillment. Students report they take in more, visit school all the more frequently, and perform better scholastically. On the basis of a national longitudinal study, Blum (2005) concluded "connected" teachers listen, compliment, are not guided by prejudice, do not assume, and treat students fairly. They also create a caring and structured environment, with high and clear expectations. With these strategies in place, educators can begin to invest in sincere school relationships with their students.

Educators alone cannot make an atmosphere of connectedness. The school's atmosphere is unequivocally affected by the reasoning and arrangements of the school initiative. At the point when school administration is committed to students and teachers make endeavors to connect, students have an increased sense of belonging. The fundamental messages that school staff, especially teachers, should provide for all students is: "I know you can achieve this objective; I consider you responsible for progressing in the direction of this objective; and I'll bolster you in achieving this objective" (Arthur et al., 2002).

Some best practice programs to build interpersonal connectedness include First Things First (FTF), which is a proof-based school-wide program that concentrates on enhanced scholastic execution through minimal learning networks. Created by the

Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), the essential objective of FTF is to manufacture close, conscious, and gainful connections between understudies going to schools in financially burdened networks and adults working in those schools. The program includes low student-to-teacher ratios in classes; while every student is combined with a staff advocate who fills in as advisor and who meets intermittently with the student. Results in a pilot school demonstrated a 25% expansion in students fitting the bill for graduation, a 57% decline in the quantity of suspensions, and enhanced day-by-day participation and parent inclusion (Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe, & Taylor, 2006). For environmental connectedness and physical and emotional safety, advancing a positive school-wide condition implies making a zone of physical, enthusiastic, and scholarly security. Making this security zone includes executing systems that urge students to feel esteemed, act with satisfaction, have regard for school strategies and property. In such situations, students have less conduct issues and think it is simpler to make relational associations with their educators and peers. Overall, students must feel safe inside and outside the classroom (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

School Size

The literature on small schools began with large-scale quantitative studies in the 1980s and 1990s, which found that students in small schools generally learn more (Lee & Smith, 1995), graduate at higher rates (McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994); and behave better than students in larger schools (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). The evidence on the inverse relationship between school size and student outcomes is based largely on correlational studies in which researchers have compared schools of varying sizes and have frequently found students attending small schools have better outcomes. The U.S.

Department of Education reported that current research has indicated large high schools have lower achievement, higher incidences of misconduct, higher dropout rates, and a tendency to be less safe when compared to smaller schools serving similar student populations (*AUTHOR*, para. 4). Without being able to redistrict every school in America, schools must be innovative about creating a smaller learning community within the larger school setting. Lee and Burkam (2003) also found school settings had an effect on the dropout rate, including “(1) structure and school size, (2) academic organization (curriculum offered) and (3) social organization (focusing on the relationships between teachers and students” (p. 3).

According to Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008), with the number of non-promotions and dropouts on the rise, educators desperately seek alternative strategies to ease transition challenges that leave too many students behind. The most obvious of these challenges is the physical environment. During the past 40 years, the average size of high schools has increased drastically, creating more support for smaller school settings.

School size also has been shown to have a negative relationship with engagement; however, these findings are nuanced. In their examination of the U.S. High School and Beyond database, Lee and Smith (1995) found engagement was higher and more evenly distributed among student ethnic groups in the small schools. In a study by Silins and Mulford (2004), they examined the impact of school context variables, including school size, on participation in school activities, including academic activities. They found school size has a direct and negative relationship with participation and engagement with school. Klonsky and Klonsky (1999) concluded small schools are “out-performing the big schools in many important areas including measurable student achievement,

improved attendance and course-passing rates, and most importantly, in creating safe environments” (p. 31).

Research by the U.S. Department of Education has consistently shown that, when a school is too big, serious problems arise. Typical secondary schools are bigger, more impersonal, and more formal than most elementary schools (Eccles, et al., 1996). High schools are even more formal, bureaucratic, and impersonal than junior high schools (Roeser, Eccles, & Freedman-Doan, 1999). An organizational change to a SLC, like a ninth-grade academy, would provide a more appropriate fit to the adolescent developmental stage (Eccles et al., 1996; Eccles, et al., 1993). Smaller schools are more beneficial for high school students, since they contribute to a greater ability for teachers to monitor student progress and to have closer, caring teacher-student relationships (Eccles et al., 1996). These secondary school teacher relationships have been shown to have an even greater degree of impact on student emotional and cognitive engagement with school than do peer relationships (Wang, 2012). There also is a connection between smaller school size and student-school attachment (Eccles et al., 1996). Further, “in a small school, every student has the opportunity to develop personal relationships with small groups of peers and teachers” (p. 5) through the creation, by teachers and administration, of appropriate structures and strategies.

The advantages of smaller schools were first settled in Barker and Gump's (1964) original investigation inspecting the relationship of emotional outcomes with schools in Kansas. They reasoned that smaller secondary schools encourage a feeling of network among students that gives more prominent chances to take an interest in extracurricular

activities and to practice positions of authority. These researchers began the expression “campus model” which

provides for repeated contacts between the same teachers and students; this continuity of associates probably leads to closer social bonds. A common sense theory is that the campus school welds together the facility advantages of the large school and the social values of the small school (Lee, Ready, & Welner, 2002, p. 29).

SLCs

With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the development of the 1990s, Goals 2000 of 1994, and The National 3 Education Summits of 1996 and 1999, Congress was able to pass enactment for subsidizing the Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) program activity in 2000. The SLC program activity was intended to grant awards to class areas for the making of smaller schools. Following the SLC program, NCLB, which reauthorized and further upgraded the SLC program, was authorized. McIntosh and White (2006) considered it a “school-inside-a-school” (p. 41), also called a small learning network, a bunch, or an institute. Small learning networks are being examined decide to what degree the most up-to-date changes like group educating and joint effort are impacting understudy accomplishment at the secondary school level. Despite that it might be difficult to diminish the size of the number of inhabitants in an expansive secondary school, teachers today are discovering approaches to make smaller learning networks inside school boundaries. Schools are providing an increasing closeness to home and strong progress with age-suitable expectations. Bernstein et al. (2008) stated despite tthat SLC schools may execute an assortment of structures and systems, they all offer the

shared objective of improving personalization of the secondary school understanding for all understudies. The SLC movement has led to the development of different models to meet the needs of various students. Research overwhelmingly has supported the notion that students from kindergarten through high school are more successful when they attend small schools. In fact, smaller learning environments positively affect grades, test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, drug and alcohol use, and school safety. Moreover, smaller, more personalized learning structures seem to provide the setting for other high school reforms, perhaps because change is easier to implement in a smaller setting. (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2002, para. 1).

Cotton (2001) identified 11 areas where significant improvements are caused by SLCs.: achievement, equity, affiliation/belonging, safety and order, truancy and dropouts, preparation for higher education, extracurricular participation, parent involvement and satisfaction, teacher attitudes and satisfaction, curriculum quality, and cost. Cotton said:

When we compare findings from the research on the new generation of small schools with findings from the older small schools research, we find that the effects produced by the new schools are the same—only more so. . . . Those who work in newer schools that are well conceived and well run find ways—some conventional and some radical—to use smallness to produce an array of highly desirable outcomes. (p. 13)

Research has documented that well-run smaller learning communities are strongly focused on personalization. In fact,

"good schools intentionally layer multiple personalization strategies in unique ways to ensure powerful relationships. They take steps to ensure that every adult

knows every student, at least by sight, and every student has an advocate and the opportunity to pursue his or her passion and gifts" (Vander Ark, 2002, p. 5)

Personalization in effective smaller learning communities is evident through a variety of attributes, such as knowing students well, heterogeneity, looping, and parent and community involvement. Parents and community members are viewed as critical allies who participate by providing instructional support and governance (Cotton, 2001). These personalization strategies are essential to learning because the nature of learning is about constructing relationships in which students connect with teachers or subjects. Maslow (1935) stated the need of belonging must be satisfied before other needs can be fulfilled. Fuchs (2010) identification--participation model indicates that, unless students identify well with their schools (i.e., feel welcomed, respected, and valued), their education participation always will be limited. Small schools are better able to foster the personalization strategies to support those relationships (Vander Ark, 2002).

There are numerous expected outcomes of smaller learning communities that successfully implement the five key elements of self-determination, identity, personalization, support for teaching, and instructional accountability. According to Cotton (2001), SLCs produce higher student achievement levels and reduce the negative effects of poverty on achievement. Supovitz and Christman (2005) examined the effectiveness of small learning communities in improving teaching and learning. The research also emphasized that sustainable reform requires change that supports and provides training for all stakeholders, while directing their focus toward effective learning principles and practices that are unique to small environments (Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Small environments make it possible for teachers to become familiar

with students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses (Steinberg & Allen, 2002). Small environments also allow teachers to focus on student work over time and collaborate to develop instructional strategies to help students engage with rigorous work (Steinberg & Allen, 2002).

Wise and Leibbrand (1996) stated (as cited in Zadra, 1998): “teaching is undergoing a renaissance. It is evolving into a shared, collegial experience rather than the traditional solitary one” (p. 206). As this renaissance is being introduced, today’s high schools are lagging behind the learning curve. Academic departments are still isolated by subject matter, teachers are separated in individual classrooms, and students are unable to adequately connect the pieces together. Zadra (1998) stated that “the structure of the schools and classrooms perpetuate a lonely, individualistic educational journey” (p. 19) which disconnects students from connecting with the teachers, subjects and the school. Glasser (1986) believed individualism is the reason so many students are apathetic and unwilling to work hard. Schools today are not satisfying basic human needs, the need to feel a sense of belonging. A possible remedy is Glasser’s Control Theory, which encourages and embraces learning with collaboration, encourages teachers to work together to learn together, and the need for teaming among schools to achieve excellence. According to Bronson (2013), just reducing the size of a high school is not enough. There also must be structural support from teachers for the students to succeed.

Freshman Academies

“None of us is as smart as all of us” (Bennis & Biederman, 1997, p. 1). Throughout history, humans have been innately social gravitating toward each other to achieve mutual goals. In today’s society, as sophisticated as it is, most tasks require the

coordinated contributions of many talented people. The idea is that working together allows individuals to accomplish more; therefore, two heads are better than one. Yet, we have become a society of “self” and cling to the myth of that we can accomplish our goals and be the lone hero standing on the podium with the gold medal. Achievement is thought of in terms of the “Great Man or Great Woman, instead of the Great Group” (Bennis & Biederman, 1997, p. 2). The same is true in the country’s oldest institution, the schools; educators have resisted the idea of collective creativity. Until recently, many teachers taught their entire career alone, isolated by their classroom walls with a locked door. Yet, the reforms in the schools today are revolutionary and are making an impact in the educational field and opening that closed door. One proposed solution involves “a school-within-a-school called a small learning community, a cluster, or an academy” (McIntosh & White, 2006, p. 41). Acting as a small learning community, the freshman academy is a model to help ease the transition from eighth to ninth grade.

The ninth-grade academy is one of the many high school reform initiatives that came to fruition in the latter half of the 20th century. In recognition of these trends in Kentucky, SLC grants were given statewide to high schools to transform the traditional high school to a more flexible model to assist in a more seamless and supportive transition into high school. In order for this reform initiative to be successful, there were some specific controls that had to be in place. Instructional leaders had to possess a sound foundation regarding the understanding of the SLC concept and the way ninth-grade academies evolved from that ideology. These instructional leaders also must be aware of the negative potential of student disengagement on freshmen and its high propensity for supporting dropping out of school at this grade level (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Researchers have shown that improving student performance in the ninth-grade can lead to significant improvements in graduation rates (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum, 2014). The importance of developing an intervention program to address the problem of ninth-grade dropout was discussed by Reents (2002) when she stated that if students are to graduate, their freshman year is the most critical during their academic careers.

Gary (2004) stated the academy has the “heart of an elementary school, the teaming of a middle school and the curriculum of a high school” (p. 56). Students are housed in a separate hallway with each academic subject represented by caring teachers, which gives the academy its unique blend of middle and high school. The schedule allows teachers an increase in the time spent with the freshman population, and teaming of freshman teachers helps them to monitor student success (McIntosh & White, 2006). In Gary’s study (see Figure 2), he compared school data before and after the implementation of the academy. His data showed mixed results; however, there were significant improvements within the first year. The number of discipline referrals decreased from 471 to 53, and academic credits earned by students in all eight classes increased from only 64 % to 82 %. Students were improving academically and staying out of principals’ offices more frequently. Unfortunately, one factor that did not change was the attendance rate. There was little or no impact in attendance; ninth graders were still the worst attendees of the entire school.

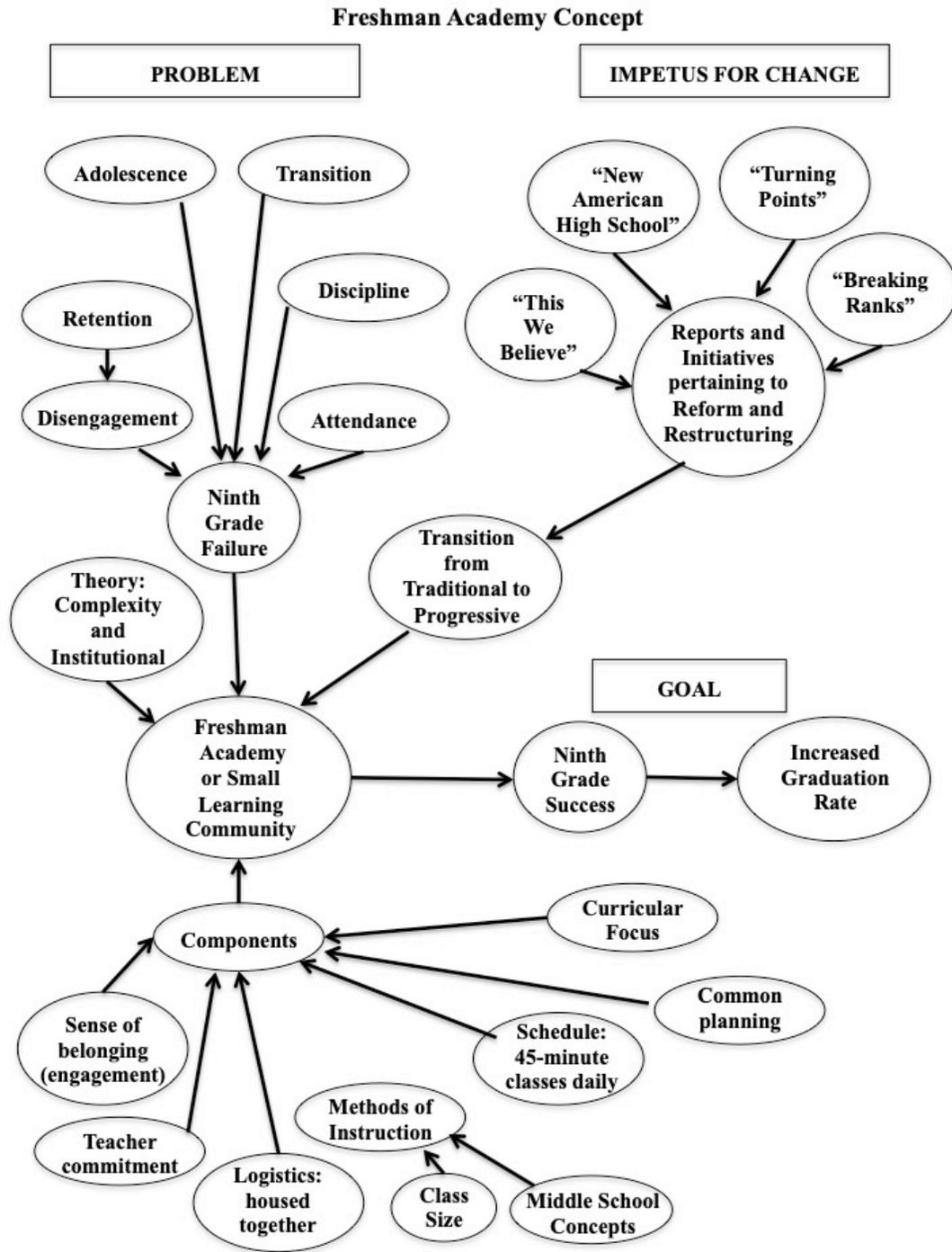


Figure 2. The freshman academy concept. Adapted from Gary, C. (2004). *Small learning communities: The impact of a FA approach on student achievement and transitions of ninth graders* (Doctoral Dissertation). Available Dissertations and Theses Database from ProQuest. (UMI 3142982)

Equally important are Habeeb's (2013) key components for maximizing the impact of a freshman transition program:

- Make it difficult for students to “slip through the cracks” by making the high school environment more nurturing.
- Help students and teachers understand what their position is in the transition program by standardizing expectations.
- Equip students with belief systems they need to learn and succeed.
- Create classroom cultures that foster excellence.
- Students should be taught organizational and time-management skills.
- Foster effective parent-teacher contact.
- Ensure that freshman teachers use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology and that they grow professionally.
- Make freshmen feel at home in their school and recognize them for their accomplishments.
- Provide support services to students who fall behind, proactively. (p 18)

Because of common planning time, the teachers indicated that they could “learn from each other” and “pass on information” to each other. When teachers circulate knowledge and ideas, as well as assistance and support, they increase their confidence to improve and change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). When teachers collaborate and have avenues for continuous learning, schools are successful (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

When teachers are learning, students are learning (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005).

Career Academies

High schools include students with a high degree of variance in learning style and ability. While some students survive and even thrive in independent classes that focus on a particular academic or career-oriented curriculum, many struggle to show adequate progress in academic achievement despite their academic ability. In light of the push by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legislation to close “the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children - especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, Sec. 101. Statement of Purpose # 3), it has become apparent that the continuing gap is a problem in need of a solution. Therefore, it is important to find key elements to school reform that show promise in closing the achievement gap while improving individual student academic achievement. With constant change in demands for America’s workforce, it is important to focus more attention on preparing young people for that workforce (Gordon et al., 2002).

Jane Addams, who educated immigrants and urban children at the turn of the 20th century during America’s Industrialization period... “like Dewey, believed that children, as part of their education, should be introduced to a range of vocations” (Guttek, 2011, p. 336). Although in the 21st century, many school districts offer some career-based programs, the need to incorporate more programs was noted in President Barack Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address, when he stated high schools need to “better equip graduates for the demands of a high-tech economy” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 1). Additionally, “the Obama administration has laid out plans to redesign high schools and Career and Technical Education (CTE), to ensure that young

people graduate with the skills and abilities that are aligned with the needs of a global economy” (p. 1).

A Career Academy is a high school model that integrates school-to-work elements in a personalized learning environment. Academies have three essential features: school-within-a-school, partnerships with employees, and integrated academic and occupational curriculum centered on a career theme (Kerka & National Dissemination Center for Career and Technical Education, 2000, p. 3).

Career Academies are schools within the larger school that focus on the training needs of a particular career-oriented program. Unlike the traditional structure of high school classes that work independently of each other, the Career Academy’s CTE and core subject teachers work together to offer career training in conjunction with academic classes to demonstrate the relevance of academic courses to the career goals of their students. Additionally, Career Academies draw students of all academic abilities from average to gifted to at risk, unlike the tracking structures of the mid-20th century vocational classes.

The Quaglia Institute’s survey results indicated that only when students “have a sense of belonging . . . are actively engaged . . . [and] are deeply connected to their learning will the larger goal of narrowing the achievement gap be met” (McNulty & Quaglia, 2006). When teachers encourage students and develop positive relationships, students will rise to the higher expectations. One aspect of Career Academies is that “students stay with a group of teachers over three or four years in high school” (Kemple, Snipes & Manpower, 2000, para. 10), which naturally develops positive relationships. These relationships help students develop a sense of belonging that encourages better

attendance and greater participation. With better attendance and greater participation, it is believed greater student achievement will result.

The voice of the teachers' perspectives is missing in research and is needed to find the needs of adolescents' firsthand. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 1985) has maintained most American high schools are not structured to meet the developmental needs of these students. This organization published the highly acclaimed *Breaking Ranks*, and *Breaking Ranks II*, which recommend a wide range of stage-appropriate high school reforms, including smaller schools, personalization of instruction, and caring teachers (NASSP, 1985, 2004). Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger (2014), best summarized the ongoing problem by stating that the middle school concept has, too often, not been able to fulfill its announced intention to make the transition to high school a smooth and successful experience.

Summary

The transition to high school has never been more treacherous nor the consequences more personally disastrous for so many young adolescents. Habeeb (2013) identified ninth grade as the most critical point to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation, failing, and dropping out of school. According to Dedmond (2008), "Whether or not students leave high school with a diploma and plans for postsecondary education or training often hinges on the attitudes they develop in the eighth and ninth grade about themselves and their educations" (p. 16). Although there have been many reform attempts, researchers have concluded solving the problems is a complex task. The goal is "that all students will attend, stay and succeed in, and then graduate from high school well prepared for further learning, successful careers, and engaged citizenship"

(Fleischman & Heppen, 2009, p. 107). This current study shows the variables of school connectedness and the importance of dimensions of school belonging, resilience factors, learning factors, and relevant variables for better understanding the impacts and dimensions of small learning communities.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Purpose

Students' sense of school belonging has been defined as "a sense of psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 60). A sense of belonging is associated with students' subjective perception of being valued in their surroundings (Goodenow 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). It includes a student's feelings that he/she is an important and respected member of his/her school (Booker, 2004) and is specifically based on feelings of being welcomed in the school environment (Osterman, 2000). Relatively little attention has been given to school belonging in high school compared to research conducted on middle school students, even though school belonging may be more important to students' academic and psychological adjustment during the high school years (LaRusso et al., 2008).

According to Wang and Degol (2015), small learning communities at the ninth-grade level may increase a student's connection to high school. Roybal et al., (2014) confirmed the need for effective programs that are designed and led by teachers of this specific grade level who will assist students and improve graduation rates. Ninth-grade students have struggled to navigate through large, impersonal, and competitive environments, which have altered the comfort level formulated in the middle school setting (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Most students make the transition smoothly, but others get lost in a maze of corridors, fast-paced schedules, and rigorous course requirements. Research conducted by Strogilos, Nikolarazi, and Tragoulia (2012) determined students'

feelings of belongingness in their school positively affect their motivation for school, effort, level of participation, and eventual achievement in school. Yet, little attention has been given to school belonging in high school compared to research conducted on middle school even though school, belonging may be more important to students' academic and psychological adjustment during the high school years (LaRusso et al., 2008; Murdock et al., 2000; Walker & Greene, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implications for transition, connectivity, and dropout in a small learning community at one high school based on teacher perceptions of ninth-grade academies. Although success in the ninth grade is a critical component of a student's progress toward high school graduation, a large percentage of ninth-grade students in this country are retained each year and not promoted to the next grade, due to academic failure (Neild, 2013; Neild et al., 2008).

Research Questions

The overarching guiding question for this study was: Given the 15-year history of this freshman academy, what are the teachers' perspectives on the impact of a small learning community on ninth-grade transition? Specifically:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' sense of interpersonal connectedness?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' sense of physical and emotional safety?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students' academic commitment?

4. What are teachers' perceptions of how the freshman academy affects student dropout?

The first three research questions were derived from Eccles and Roeser's (2011) Triad of Engagement. The fourth question speaks directly to the original stated purpose for developing the freshman academy - increasing high school graduation rates.

These questions guided the data gathering process; additional questions and themes emerged during data gathering.

Research Design

The significance of this study was to analyze the impact of school connectivity has on student belonging during the ninth- and tenth-grade years relative to teacher perceptions. Both observation and interview data were used to establish context as participants responded to their perceptions of school belonging and connectivity. Data collection and analysis occurred in the traditional qualitative manner of coding; selecting themes; and identifying categories, patterns, and relationships in the responses (Berg, 2008).

Method of Collection and Analysis

The process of interviewing is necessary to observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews are important to gather data about past events that cannot be replicated. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posited that qualitative research is characterized as an activity that locates the observer in the world. An effective interview requires the interviewer to ask relative questions and record responses accurately. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested the

common way of recording interviews is with the use of an audio recorder, thereby freeing the interviewer to concentrate on the topic and the dynamics of the interview.

Data analysis was the process of making meaning of the data as related to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analysis began with the transcription of the interview sessions into legible text. Codes were labels that were attached to segments of data related to the research questions or specific themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Coding, also understood as analysis, included the process through which data chunks were split into common groups or reoccurring patterns until they developed into analytic meanings to answer the research questions and hypotheses and/or to develop theory (Miles et al., 2014).

Population and Sample

This study involved the population of ninth-grade teachers in a freshman academy located in a southcentral Kentucky high school during the 2018-2019 academic year. Educators encompassed male and female, and both veteran and apprentice teachers. This arrangement allowed for various viewpoints of each school system's SLC programs. It was assumed there would be different opinions during the interview process and gathering of data. Participants' perceptions may have been influenced by their years of teaching experience, subject area taught, and even the participants' own experiences as students in public school. All participants were state-certified in middle grades or secondary education. Due to their varying experiences during their pre-service college of education requirements and various teaching assignments, it was assumed they would have prior knowledge of other middle school or secondary campuses to compare to their current ninth grade only campus assignment.

Instrumentation

To explore perceptions and experiences of teacher participants, data were drawn from observations, individual interviews, and notes from the researcher. Through a series of one-on-one interviews with ninth-grade teachers, the researcher identified the roles, importance, buy in, challenges and successes of a SLC. A researcher-developed demographic questionnaire was utilized to collect personal and professional characteristics of subjects. In this study, the demographic characteristics included age, gender, employment status, educational preparation, years of experience in education, years of experience in teaching, years of experience in the ninth-grade academy, and understanding of the SLC goals and concept. With the collection of data of teachers' perceptions, an exploration of factors influencing student connectivity and belonging inside a ninth-grade academy was conducted.

Person as Instrument

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) referred to the phrase *researcher-as-instrument* when the researcher is an active respondent in the research process. They “use their sensory organs to grasp the study objects, mirroring them in their consciousness, where they then are converted into phenomenological representations to be interpreted” (p. 510). It is through the researcher's interaction that a conversational space is created and respondents feel safe to share stories on their experiences.

I, as the researcher in this study, had to be very aware of previous knowledge and possible personal bias resulting from my teaching career as a freshman teacher in a SLC. During the process of gathering data, I acknowledged my own thoughts, feelings, convictions and expectations. I also thought through the strengths and limitations, given

the target population and research objective. In the end, as the researcher I was prepared to revise my understanding of a SLC, to identify contradictions, and to avoid inconsistencies based on the data and conclusions of this study.

Procedures

Data collection occurred during the spring semester of 2019. The researcher contacted the superintendent of the school district chosen for this study to obtain permission to interview teachers in the ninth-grade academy. After obtaining letters of approval from the superintendent, the researcher contacted the principal and obtained permission to communicate with the teachers. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at Western Kentucky University, the researcher met with the school counselor to explain the purpose and procedures for the study. The school counselor then relayed the information to the individual classroom teachers who volunteered to be interviewed and observed. Participants also were provided with informed consent forms that explained their right to participate voluntarily and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants were encouraged to ask questions if something was unclear, and the researcher explained their rights to obtain a copy of the results of the research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect personal and professional opinions, ideas, and views of the ninth-grade academy teachers about SLCs. By examining each teacher's perceptions of belonging and strategies to encourage connectivity among the students, the researcher identified the roles, challenges, and successes of a SLC. Focusing on the phenomenological aspect of qualitative research allowed the researcher to incorporate educators' perceptions, both emotionally and

intellectually, about SLCs. The method was selected to reveal educators' stated perceptions of SLCs developed from observations and conclusions in the teaching field.

The interview questions were void of personal feelings and experiences from the researcher to better understand the participants' point of view. The researcher sought neutrality in data collection and analysis during phenomenological inquiry, drawing closer to subjects to understand their experiences (Gergen, 2014, p. 51). Interviews continued until no new information transpired and response duplication occurred. Before, during, and after data analysis, the researcher maintained a clear mindset and put aside all known prejudice and biases. At the conclusion of each interview, the major focus that points were covered and were summarized, the respondents were allowed ample time to clarify their answers and provide additional information as needed. Despite having prior knowledge of the study, the researcher was cautious not to reveal any preconceived ideas or bias on the topic. Participants were allowed to discontinue participation at any point in the study without penalty or prejudice.

Data Analysis

Teacher interviews were transcribed and reread to ensure accurate interpretations. The experiences of participants were "bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 106). Using these methods of data collection, the researcher increased understanding regarding any influences that participants teaching in the ninth-grade academy may have had on adolescents' school belonging. Using the qualitative process gave the study the method by which thick, rich descriptive interviews could occur. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated thick, rich description occurs when the reader knows everything in order to understand the findings. This

technique allowed the researcher to conceptualize the data from both an emotional and an intellectual level.

Framework Analysis

“Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 23) Qualitative research, as defined by Creswell (2005) is a type of in-depth examination in which the researcher concentrates on a program, event, or individuals engaged in a particular activity. Robert Stake, an expert on case study in the social sciences, affirmed a case study is both a methodology and a research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Through the use of qualitative research in this study, the purpose was to uncover and seek a greater understanding of teacher perceptions and their experiences with ninth-grade students at a separate ninth-grade only campus. When doing research, the researcher’s key function is to extend knowledge, question practices, and start to shape a new reality (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Overall, the literature lacks qualitative data where teachers are interviewed as an important stakeholder in a SLC. This study utilized teacher voices and perceptions to gain a better insight and knowledge about the effects of a ninth-grade academy on student belonging.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Stake (2015) stressed the importance of qualitative researchers recognizing that they are guests in the private spaces of the world. Respecting the school, teacher, classroom, and students was essential, as the study is conducted in the SLC. Participants were informed before and during the study verbally and in writing of their rights to

anonymity and confidentiality. The confidentiality of the interviews and observations will continue to be protected after the conclusion of the study.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher provided an overview of the research methodology, introduced the study and rationale for the research, and discussed the purposeful sampling used for the study. Research design and participants were described and variables of interest were identified. The researcher provided a detailed description of the instrumentation that was used in the study and described the data collection procedures. In Chapter IV, the results of the study are presented. In Chapter V, the researcher presents a summary of the study, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

In gathering data, it is imperative for the researcher to remain focused on the research questions guiding the study. Interviews provided a large portion of the data collected during this study. The voices of the teachers were the primary source guiding the researcher to frame an image of daily life at the freshman academy. These interviews were instrumental in serving as the foundation from which themes emerged.

Specifically, the researcher aimed to discover teachers' thoughts on the impact of a freshman academy on student academic performance and social development. This study tells a story of teachers' perceptions of a freshman academy at their school, as well as their perceptions concerning the impact of student connectivity, transition, and success.

Program Description

Secondary school educators recognize there is a critical transition period for ninth-grade students. The transition from middle to high school can be a period of great anxiety for many students. Educators across the state of Kentucky have reported poor grades, dropout casualties, and increased disciplinary referrals from this cohort as a result of the transitional stress to the new environment. Students who remain in school after unsuccessful or difficult transitions are more likely to pursue less rigorous degree programs students.

In recognition of these trends, the high school in this study initiated a freshman academy in 1999 with \$45 million in grant monies that were appropriated to school districts to implement SLCs. Initially, the freshman academy was integrated into the main

campus building, but in 2007 a dedicated building was introduced to offer incoming freshmen a true identity and space in which to operate. In the 2018-2019 school year, 354 freshmen are being housed in this facility daily and are comprised a student population that consists of 175 males and 174 females who are 2% African American, 1% Asian, 92% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% two or more races. The Free or Reduced Lunch percentage for this high school is 52.9% for the entire population of ninth through twelfth-grade students.

The goal of the freshman academy is to provide incoming freshmen with a strong academic foundation and assist them in a successful transition into high school. The freshman academy faculty team is comprised of a core group of teachers who serve the students much like the middle school team approach. Students follow a middle school schedule as opposed to the high school block schedule. However, the freshman academy students mix with the regular high school population for one elective class each day.

All team members recognize the SLC can impact grades, dropout rates, disciplinary issues, and social expectations for ninth-grade students. The focus of the freshman academy is to prepare ninth graders to integrate into the mainstream high school curriculum and the social environment. Freshmen students are placed on one of four teams and have all of their classes with other freshman, except for one block in which they are mixed with the upperclassmen. Placing students in one building wing allows teachers to get to know them better and gain a better understanding of their academic ability. By creating a culture of success and self-confidence, students are more prepared to recognize the challenges of high school. Improved academic achievement and creation of strong affinity groups through social engagement are key variables in student

transitional success. Students, parents, the school system, and the local and regional community benefit from a strong, well-designed program that improves student achievement and enriches the social expectations of young learners.

The freshman academy is a program designed to promote an effective and positive transition for students going from Grade 8 into their first year at the high school participating in this study. Through the offered academic and social supports, the visions to ensure all students who enter as freshmen leave with the skills and knowledge necessary to be more productive and successful students. The freshman academy is constructed under a series of assumptions—a common mission and vision. Assuming these are all in place, the program can be implemented with full fidelity and buy in from teachers and staff. Additionally, external factors such as student home life and socio-economic conditions can be anticipated, but not avoided. Somers and Garcia (2016) suggested that more research is needed to understand the implementation and effects of ninth-grade academies on student success. It is, however, suggested that the smaller the environment for the transitioning student, the easier the transition into the environment.

The core teachers utilize a common planning time. During this time they were able to address student needs as well as create thematic units. The teachers were able to discuss students who were not achieving academically, having behavior or attendance problems, or having social/emotional issues. Teachers also used this time to collaborate on interdisciplinary lessons related to a theme. The teachers used a constructivist approach to teaching. Periodically, they met as a team with the assistant principal and counselor to discuss the “big picture” for students and the program. As a school-within-a-school the core teachers’ rooms were located in close proximity utilizing a wing of the

school. It provided consistency, convenience to the students and teachers of the program, and the most time on task as possible for students during the school day. This allowed the teachers to communicate easily throughout the day. Also, the students did not interrupt the rest of the school, and vice versa, since they operated on different schedules.

In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with the teachers in the freshman academy building, isolated from the main high school building, which houses 10th through 12th graders. The open-ended approach allowed the subjects ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Study Participants

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix A) to conduct the study, the researcher gained access through the “gatekeeper” (Creswell, 1998); in this case the superintendent, and information was shared with the school administrator and freshman academy counselor prior to the start of the study. With permission from the superintendent and the freshman academy principal, the researcher was allowed to contact the teachers via email. All participants were asked to volunteer and agreed to participate by written consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect each participant’s identity (see Table 2). Participants were informed that individual interviews would be recorded on a digital recording application called Voice Recorder on an iPad. As teachers responded to open-ended questions, the researcher remained neutral in both verbal cues and body language. Patton (2015) stated, “I cannot be shocked; I cannot be angered; I cannot be embarrassed; I cannot be saddened. Nothing the person tells me will make me think more or less of her or him” (p. 457). Remaining neutral was vital to keeping the study true and valid with no bias.

Table 2

Interview Coding System

Role	Years	TA Mission/Vision	Interview Code
English Teacher 1	22	Very Familiar	ET1
English Teacher 2	18	Very Familiar	ET2
English Teacher 3	8	Familiar	ET3
Math Teacher 1	15	Very Familiar	MT1
Math Teacher 2	12	Very Familiar	MT2
Math Teacher 3	11	Very Familiar	MT3
Science Teacher 1	26	Very Familiar	ST1
Science Teacher 2	2	Familiar	ST2
Science Teacher 3	8	Very Familiar	ST3
Social Studies Teacher 1	21	Very Familiar	SST1
Social Studies Teacher 2	11	Very Familiar	SST2
Social Studies Teacher 3	4	Very Familiar	SST3
Exceptional Education Teacher	26	Very Familiar	EET
Health Teacher	9	Very Familiar	HT
Physical Education Teacher	8	Familiar	PET
Literacy Teacher	17	Very Familiar	LT

For their convenience, fourteen teachers were interviewed individually, all from this freshman academy, during their common planning time at the end of the teaching window. The freshman academy staff included three male and 11 female teachers, all with different areas of core content expertise including three English, three math, three

science, one health, one physical education, one literacy, and two Exceptional Child Education. All interviews were conducted voluntarily, as outlined in the IRB human subjects protocol. Participants also were informed they could ask that the recording be stopped at any time during the interviews, if needed. The central research question was used as a guide when conducting participant interviews (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Data Gathering Process

Interviews of the ninth-grade teachers were conducted and questions were developed specifically focused on the participants' experiences and perceptions of the freshman academy, aligned with the research questions in this study (see Appendix B for the interview protocol). These interviews provided a baseline for collecting rich, qualitative data regarding the program's impact on ninth graders, program vision, continued development, successes, and failures. During the process of gathering data, the researcher had to also acknowledge her possible personal bias due to her teaching experience in a ninth-grade academy. Her thoughts, feelings and expectations were pushed aside with the focus on only the participants' experiences and perceptions.

The researcher recorded and took written notes during the interviews. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim. All notes and transcripts were shared with participants after individual interviews, and the researcher asked for permission to return for any clarification of ideas at a later date, if necessary. However, a follow-up interview was not conducted.

During the interviews, the researcher attempted to gain an understanding of the vision and mission of the freshman academy being studied, and how they guided practices and daily implementation. The interviews explored the teachers' experiences

with the planning and procedures of the freshman academy, as well as their overall experiences in a SLC. Predictions were explored concerning the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of ninth-grade students and additional questions addressed the teachers' perceptions of SLCs.

The data collection circle suggested by Creswell (1998) was utilized as the procedural process to collect data: "Locating site/individual, gaining access and making rapport, purposefully sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and storing data" (p. 110). Careful attention was given to the overarching and specific research questions. The methods utilized to collect data for this study included (a) structured interviews with the freshman academy teachers; (b) a demographic survey of teachers' experiences and visions and (b) relevant document reviews, including analysis of the district's implementation and mission of a SLC.

Description of Responses to Interview Protocol Questions

By decoding the responses of the 14 teacher participants, the researcher was able to decipher how each answered the interview questions and categorize them as positive, negative, or neutral. Table 3 allows for a visual overview of how the teachers responded and in what manner. Overall, findings revealed that the majority of teachers' were supportive of the interventions applied by the SLC that aid ninth-grade students to persist to graduation.

Table 3

Percentages of Teacher Responses Coded as Positive, Neutral, or Negative Toward the Freshman Academy

Question	Positive	Neutral	Negative
1	13 (92%)	0 (0%)	1 (.07%)
2	14 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3	12 (85%)	1 (.07%)	1 (.07%)
4	11 (78%)	2 (14%)	1 (.07%)
5	9 (64%)	1 (.07%)	3 (21%)
6	12 (85%)	1 (.07%)	1 (.07%)
7	14 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8	10 (71%)	1 (.07%)	3 (21%)
9	12 (85%)	0 (0%)	2 (14%)
10	9 (64%)	1 (.07%)	4 (28%)
11	10 (71.5%)	0 (0%)	4 (28%)

Emerging Themes

From the analysis of the various interview responses, four common themes emerged that were apparent throughout the study: community, adolescent transition, academic expectations, and collaboration by proximity. Emergent themes based on analysis of open-ended responses are the basic building blocks of qualitative research and are derived from the life worlds of research participants (Given, 2008).

Teachers acknowledged the mission statement for the freshman academy and all were very familiar with its vision. At some point throughout the interview, each interviewee found a way to speak about the same topics related to the vision of the academy and the mission of a SLC.

Theme 1: Community (RQ1)

Community is the description of the relationships built throughout the personal connection between students, students and teachers, teachers and their colleagues, and teachers and administrators. Membership within a community creates a sense of belonging. As members begin to sense their identification within the community, they begin to develop relationships. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), membership consists of boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging, identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system.

Community building in schools has as a premise that teachers and their peers, along with their students, work together to create connections. Members of the SLC expect and rely on the relationships within a community and can, thereby, commit to that community (Cross, 1998). Wallace (2009) argued teachers couldn't effectively teach students they do not know well. By investigating schools that had programs instilling the sense of community and belonging between teachers and students, Wallace discovered the better relationships between students and teachers improved attendance, decreased behavioral incidents, and increased parental involvement. By improving school attendance, students are in school and not dropping out (Wallace, 2009). Teachers who are able to develop these relationships with their students and their peers show improvement in teacher performance (Supovitz & Christman, 2005).

SST1 shared with the researcher about her understanding of community in the freshman academy:

Many times I hear upperclassmen, who were former students, say "The [freshman academy] teachers cared for us, the main campus teachers don't!" I

remind them that it's not true...it's not that they don't care about you, it's just a different way of caring. We are coming alongside you more and they are pushing you along more.

Another teacher (ST2) stated, "I know these kids—I'm like their second mother at school."

The student-to-teacher connectivity was very evident during the first interview and continued until the last. "Anecdotal evidence suggests that students in the Ninth Grade Academies feel close to their teachers and to one another" (Quint, 2008, p. 65).

MT3 explained, "Everyday a student will find a teacher in the hallway and talk with them for the entire class break."

Not only did the freshman academy teachers feel that they have an influence on the community, but the community influences them. "We" was a dominant word in the transcripts of the focus group and interviews. The word "I" was rarely used. According to ET3:

Colleague to colleague, we are family, we have friendships that cross subject lines because we are here together in the same hallway. We eat together and we celebrate birthdays together; just like with our students, we know what's going on in each other's lives because we are so close knit."

Another teacher (EET1) described her community experience as "heavenly":

"...if you don't feel like you have died and gone to heaven, then something is wrong with you! It's not only good for students, it's good for teachers too!"

The overall feeling was they were like "one big family," and during interviews it was obvious that there was a sense of connection in the academy. It seemed that the

vision of the freshman academy for relationships was not only seen at the student level but the teacher level, as well. “We are kind of like a little family down here, not to sound corny or clique, but it’s true!” said ET. While LT1 said, at my last school, I was at the end of the hall, I never even saw another teacher, I ate lunch by myself, and I was very isolated in my classroom. I had never felt a part of a teaching community until I began here at the freshman academy.

Along with their sense of belongingness within the SLC, the participants indicated members recognized the influence each had on the community. Responses from the teacher interviews illustrated the freshman academy created and enhanced a sense of community for both students and staff. A true sense of caring and nurturing was observed in the academy, and students were given many opportunities to build strong relationships with teachers and peers.

Theme 2: Adolescent Needs during Transition (RQ2)

During the transition to high school, the academic, social, and emotional demands of students increase as they begin transition from children to practicing adults. A solid awareness for teachers is essential for them to understand students’ developmental progress in order to strategically plan specific procedures to move them forward. MT3 responded by saying, “It’s a learning and growth curve for them, in middle school they can’t fail and they come to high school where their grades count for the first time and it’s a wakeup call for many of them.” PET1 even stated, “Students are very prepared to transition from 6th grade to the middle school but there was a missing link in prepping for high school.” HT1 commented that the freshman academy represents a “bridge” between being as “motherly as middle school” but not as “instructor focused” as high school. It

feels like a “happy medium.” The middle school is connected to the high school, with the freshman academy building in between. It serves as a bridge between the two schools visually and physically. EET1 stated, “This time in the kids’ life is so hard anyway, so this place is where they can slowly and safely make their transition to the high school. Freshmen are more needy and overall freshman are completely different than upperclassmen.” ST2 recalled:

In this transition stage, there is lots of emotional insecurity and insecurity, in general, so I think that this setting is a support system for them. The students are all together, they are all the same age, in similar places in their lives, so they have this academy and they all know they are in the same boat.

Freshman students are adolescents who are bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood. It was evident the freshman academy teachers had a strong and deep understanding of the developmental stage of the students they teach during the ninth-grade year. Educators who have a high level of knowledge and comprehension of developmental theory are better equipped to meet the needs of adolescents cognitively, socially, emotionally, and morally. Larson (2005) stated, “A central question of youth development is how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170).

Theme 3: Common Collaboration by Proximity (RQs 3 & 4)

School-within-a-school utilizes rooms in close proximity and common teachers. The structural organization of the freshman academy reduces the amount of change students encounter, establishes teacher and peer support, and creates a space where they

are less likely to be harassed by upperclassmen. Also, it enhances students' sense of belonging and reduces the complexity of the school environment (Reyes & Jason, 1991).

Themes of collaboration emerged as teachers discussed the boundaries of the freshman academy versus the main campus school. The teachers remarked that the ninth-grade hallway was isolated and almost felt "protected." They also stated that, because the freshman academy had a designated area on campus, the teachers felt the community "had an identity," a separateness that distinguished the freshmen from the main campus. ET3 commented, "The location matters to us and to the students." The close proximity allows the SLC to build strong, positive relationships.

The freshman academy program utilizes an interdisciplinary team approach that provides students with a support group in which teachers can connect with them on a regular basis to identify their needs and help them learn. Interdisciplinary teams, also known as teacher teaming, organize teachers from different subject areas into groups of varying numbers with an assigned common area of the school, a common schedule, and responsibility for a common group of students (Hecht, 1995). Teaming is one step toward decreasing the failure rate, increasing standardized test scores, and thus increasing the graduation rate.

ST1 stated,

Like, if a student is having trouble in math, I can just walk down the hall and ask the English teacher if they are having trouble too. We know what's going on, good or back or otherwise. Location is key when designing an academy, it makes all the difference.

Another teacher ET1 explained: “Location is essential... the isolated building helps so much. Middle school kind of treats them like ‘babies’, and then high school expects them to be ‘grownups’. This is a bridge year to help them understand those upcoming expectations.” MT3 stated and concluded with a voice that confirmed the ninth-grade academy as “not really high school, this is like a grown up middle school. We are the bridge between the two.”

Planning lessons and working collaboratively also is an advantage of a SLC. Listening to the teachers respond to the ease of “buildable lessons” and “units across subject” lines brought awareness that all content blends can be learned together easily. This is very different from a traditional high school where core subjects are usually located next to one another in the building. To coordinate a core content lesson across subject lines would be almost impossible, yet beneficial for learners to see the value in how science intertwines with math, literature, and even history.

Theme 4: Academic Accountability and Expectations (RQ3)

The nation’s goal is to improve student learning, and in many ways that goal can be reached by improving teacher practice. When educational leaders allow teachers “to become an active, integral part of the school environment in ways that support healthy, positive relationships among their co-workers and students, student achievement will improve” (Craig & Pepler, 2003). Knowing students well and using strategies that aid in student learning add to student success (Darling-Hammond, 2008). Statements and comments from the interviews indicated the freshman academy is the “vehicle” or “bridge” for promotion of student learning. SLC models have been adopted mainly for

two reasons: to bridge the transition and to prevent dropout (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

A key component to the freshman academy is an intervention period called “What I Need,” or WIN. This intervention time is built in to include learning styles, study skills, test-taking strategies, organizational skills, time management, as well as addressing social and emotional issues. PET1 said:

...the timeframe for WIN is ideal in transitioning from the middle school to the high school. Students have no idea how to organize, study or anything. So this serves as another bridge as a life skills class before tackling the high school curriculum as 10th graders.

Freshman also can use this period to ask for further instruction or extra help. Teachers encourage students to be proactive about taking advantage of making up missing work. ET3 stated, “We continually push procedures and expectations, but ninth graders need constant reminders. A typical high school freshman in a traditional high school classroom would not be getting that extra push.”

An overwhelming consensus was seen as every teacher interviewed mentioned the importance of this hour each day for student success. LT1 noted, “The kids who are struggling will say, ‘I’ll just take this class again next year. . . .’” SST2 added, “But we remind them the [freshman academy] is only for true, first time freshman. We do not allow retainees to come back in the hallway.” MT1 stated, “We use our WIN time or our planning periods to send parent emails so we can touch base with when a student begins to fall behind.”

The freshman academy has created an environment where everyone is known and no student is able to disappear or go unnoticed. SLCs allow for teachers to hold each other and students accountable for teaching and learning. Failing and having students drop out is rare due to the community, close proximity, and academic standards and interventions.

Summary

Themes and theories are fundamental in research for schools to be successful. Yet, educators serving in the trenches with these students helping them engage and spark excitement is a huge piece of the puzzle that cannot be ignored or dismissed. After interviewing the freshman academy teachers, the complex balance between connecting, transitioning, and motivating while pushing young adolescent students to their potential was admirable and encouraging. Larson (2005) stated, “A central question of youth development is how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170). The freshman academy teachers are armed with the knowledge of how to approach transitioning adolescents, they are executing the program’s tools to give them every chance to succeed, and they are using the tools to build bonds for real relationships. Overall, the concepts of teaching provide guidance, academic accountability, and acceptance to adolescents while promoting strong relationships. Curriculum design and classroom proximity are more integrated and collaborative for both students and teachers. These teachers believe that the SLC is encouraging an environment of belongingness that is positively affecting their motivation, effort, and achievement in school.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine whether a SLC would affect student connectivity, dropout, and transition as determined by teacher perspectives. Ninth graders typically have the highest percentage of low grades, low attendance, and the highest rate of suspensions and discipline problems (Kerr, 2002). Dillon (2008) stated, “Studies have shown that 9th grade is a pivotal point in a student’s academic career with data from the U.S. Department of Education revealing that little more than 60% of freshmen from 1,700 schools nationwide make it to graduation” (pp. 29-30). Many believe high school reform begins with the transformation of the ninth-grade experience because this sets the tone for the high school years.

An overarching goal was to analyze through research and teacher interviews whether a SLC implemented at their school would have an impact on ninth-grade students. This chapter responds to the four research questions that formed the foundation for this study:

1. What are teachers’ perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students’ sense of interpersonal connectedness?
2. What are teachers’ perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students’ sense of physical and emotional safety?
3. What are teachers’ perceptions of how the freshman academy affects students’ academic commitment?
4. What are teachers’ perceptions of how the freshman academy affects student dropout?

This chapter is a discussion of the findings from research and ninth-grade teacher interviews. The research questions were explored and addressed through reviews of multiple sources of data in an effort to depict a total picture of why the academy was created, what it looks like, and what teachers perceive to be the reality of the work they do each day. It is the researcher's hope that high school leaders will learn from this research, provoking change in the way teaching and learning occurs in a manner that will foster growth for adolescent students. This study tells the story of one high school to add to the research of SLCs. It focused on applying concepts to help ninth-grade students' transition from middle school for a successful high school experience.

This chapter includes three major sections: (a) a summary of findings related to the body of research in SLC implementation (b) linkages from this case study's findings to literature and previous studies and (c) suggestions and implications for future research concerning the freshman academy concept and education stakeholders.

Summary of Findings

This case study investigated the role of SLCs, specifically a freshman academy, to examine teachers' perspectives of student connectedness, dropout, and transition. The researcher used a qualitative design approach to investigate and identify roles of ninth-grade teachers to reveal challenges, successes, and strategies developed from their classroom experiences. The case study offers an in-depth understanding of this freshman academy's vision of rigor, relevance, and relationships in specific application situations teachers encounter in the classroom with students. The researcher also identified through interviews how implementing a freshman academy shapes the adolescent experience in a significant transitional time period.

This study was conducted at a district of 4,879 students in 11 schools in southcentral Kentucky and captured the experiences and perceptions of high school freshman academy teachers. The researcher developed conclusions based on research and individual ninth-grade teacher interviews.

The case study produced evidence supporting the conclusion that ninth grade teachers' perspectives are vital in recognizing and sustaining school connectedness for transitioning adolescent students, both typical and at risk for dropping out. Several themes emerged from the data analysis in describing their role as ninth-grade teachers in the freshman academy.

Theme 1: Community (RQ1)

Theme 2: Adolescent Needs at Transition (RQ2)

Theme 3: Common Collaboration by Proximity (RQ3)

Theme 4: Academic Accountability (RQs3 & 4)

While many researchers have studied the freshman academy concept in the past, lack of data from the teachers' perspectives was a noted void. This study explored the missing voices of the educator working inside a SLC to discover how school size, school connectivity, and transitional approaches establish change in students.

Connections to Literature

This research explored facets of student connectivity as it relates to SLCs in a ninth grade transition program. As the freshman academy creates and implements the vision of rigor, relevance, and relationships, teachers' perspectives were recognized in connection with the data and research on ninth grade, as well as the turmoil with young adolescent school years. By analyzing the themes from the teacher interviews, the

connection with accompanied research was found to be parallel. The need is necessary and the results could offer support to improve the quality of SLCs.

Ninth Grade (RQ1)

Rice (2016) stated, “In fact, a ninth grader’s school attendance is a better predictor of whether that student will drop out of high school than his/her eighth grade test scores” (p. 28). Daily attendance at school is critical in improving student academic success, for without consistent exposure to peers, teachers, and the curriculum, a student loses opportunities for socializing, bonding, and assimilation into the new school environment. Students struggle to find their fit as ninth graders during this pivotal time of adolescence. The sudden rigor of the high school building and curriculum leaves many students feeling anxious and stressed. Kaufeldt (2015) further reported: “Stress, excessive pressure, and perceived threat can temporarily shut down enthusiastic motivation as our brains go into a default reflect response” (p. 27). Creating a more nurturing and encouraging environment is crucial during this time of growth during a student’s life. This was evident with the freshman academy teachers as they expressed concerns and understood the unique “beast,” as SST1 called it, that is ninth grade.

Freshman Academy (RQ1)

Educators have begun to implement a variety of reforms aimed at improving the ninth-grade transition to bridge the gap between middle and high school. These transition programs have included strategies to provide a more personal learning environment to address student needs through interdisciplinary teams, and to track and evaluate student progress. SLCs allow a large school to feel smaller and be more intimate. Teachers can be responsible for a smaller number of students and truly get to know the students, their

strengths, and their needs. The freshman academy creates this learning environment, sustaining the middle school feel with a high school approach. Wasley (2002) stated, “Students do best in places where they can’t slip through the cracks, where they are known by their teachers, and where their improved learning becomes the collective mission of a number of trusted adults” (p. 10).

Transition (RQ2)

The research in this study shows ninth-grade transition programs can be a best practice in meeting the needs of this vulnerable adolescent age group. Freshmen are arguably the most vulnerable age group, experiencing significant changes and challenges in their lives. Clearly, programs are needed based on the difficulties associated with the transition to high school. In fact, studies have demonstrated the difficulties associated with the transition to high school are responsible for achievement loss in students (Smith, 2006). Smith (2006) examined the impact of achievement loss between the middle and high school on a student’s first year in college. He found high-achieving middle school students who experienced significant achievement loss were more likely to leave their first college, as opposed to high-achieving students who did not experience achievement loss. Thus, potential transition challenges at any level in the educational system must be observed and investigated as students move through school.

Student Dropout (RQ4)

The solution for eliminating retention for students has not been found; however, educational leaders continue to strive to find ways to reduce this rate so that students come out of high school ready for either postsecondary education or the career force (Camara, 2013). This study focused on addressing one element of the issue that impacts

student success in the critical ninth-grade year, which has been identified as the most profound educational adjustment time in early adolescence. The difficulties associated with transitioning to high school are clearly outlined in student outcomes through poor attendance, grades, and behavior. This combination of poor outcomes typically results in high levels of dropouts, in that when students are not successful in the ninth grade, they are much more likely to drop out of school. The WIN class period at this high school reflects that teachers and administrators are conscious of this data and are very aware of the at-risk students who need extra instructional time. It provides teachers with a one-on-one student-teacher ratio to engage and encourage those who may be falling behind and at risk of failing.

Implications

Educators

A shared sense of the vision and goals of a learning community is constructed through continuous conversations by its members. This vision is embedded in daily practice, and it is visible to all stakeholders. Such a vision exists and is practiced at the high school in this study, more specifically in its freshman academy. The focus and goals of the school's staff are woven into the fabric of school and community life and are centered on the improvement of student achievement, learning, and growth. Barth (2006) stressed: "The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else" (p. 8). Inside the SLC, the close bonds are evident with students and teachers. The teachers are very cooperative, willing to plan and help one another. Fullan (2000) wrote:

“Collaborative schools do not take on the greatest number of innovations; they do not engage in the greatest number of staff development days. Rather, they are selective: they select and integrate innovation; they constantly work on connectedness; they carefully choose staff development, usually in groups of two or more; and they work on applying what they learn.” (p. 581)

While interviewing the freshman academy teachers, the researcher noted how comfortable the teachers were in their interactions, much like family. They were very complimentary of one another and not threatened by the strengths or weaknesses of individual teachers. Elmore (2002) stressed the importance of collaborative environments and believed those who share the same concerns and challenges will learn more effectively if they work together in a professional atmosphere and teacher quality can be positively affected.

Connections in the research point to the necessity of effective leadership for school belonging, the establishment of student-teacher connections inside SLCs, and the development of academic expectations for young adolescents. The participants in this study commented that vision is shared and valued throughout the school. It is apparent teachers consider the freshman academy vital to the young transitioning adolescent. Research also congruently has symbolized the importance of relationships and rigor while setting the standard for the remaining school years at the high school in this study.

Educational Leaders

Graduation rates are one of the most troubling concerns in today’s schools (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). In addition, rocky transitions from middle school to high school seem to comprise a majority of the reasons for students struggling and

failing. Solutions to help ease the transition to high school, including the development of freshman or career academies, are possibilities that in the long run may reduce high school dropout rates. As educators, we must not simply ignore the concern facing our young adolescents in today's schools. Reducing the ninth-grade bulge and improving graduation rates requires educational leaders to first make problems visible, and then take steps to support progress of the most vulnerable students through the education pipeline. We as leaders among our schools must invest time and resources to seeing the need in students. Teachers need learning materials and special training to aid adolescent students with study and social skills. Whatever the setting, more educators must make graduation central to what they do in their individual classrooms. Teachers must be advocates for the most vulnerable students. School leaders also need to also encourage counselors to offer more personalized support to students who fall behind in earning credits necessary to graduate in four years. Additionally, we as educators must keep asking the main question: "What do potential dropouts in the ninth grade need to be successful as they make this big transition to high school?"

High Schools (and Middle Schools)

Ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). Part of what makes the transition so difficult is not merely the adolescent age of the students, but the substantial differences both academically and socially, between middle school and high school. Teachers linking arms with one another more frequently after eighth grade and before ninth grade is a suggestion for more schools. Instead of looking at these two grades separately with

different needs, eighth- and ninth-grade teachers may need to meet in the summer between the transition year to discuss students, strategies, and scenarios. Eighth grade teachers need to prepare students for the more rigorous classes and frequent homework assignments, and possibly provide a preview day to help them understand. This also would allow students to obtain information and hands on experience to debunk high school myths. Another intervention would be to pair each freshman student with an upperclassman to mentor and give advice as a wiser student. Blankenstein (2004) recommended the following guidelines to practitioners developing a system of prevention and intervention, such as a pyramid of interventions.

- Get verbal commitment from the faculty members and define success,
- Provide examples of exemplary programs,
- Jointly develop a plan of action to be used when students don't learn,
- Agree on criteria for identifying students in need of assistance and ensuring they enter the appropriate programs,
- Surface objections and address resistance,
- Pilot aspects of the new program,
- Build a culture of success,
- Refine and add interventions. (pp. 123-125)

School leaders, in both middle and high schools must begin to take steps for a long-term plan to make school completion central to the mission and reform conditions that contribute to student attrition before graduation.

Researchers

Patton (2015) described the process of program evaluation as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgments about the program, improve or further program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding” (p. 178). In discussing the applicability of the results of this study for educators, it is important to note the limitations of the findings. The variables chosen for study were limited, in particular, to perceptions of freshman academy ninth-grade teachers in only one district in southcentral Kentucky and for only the 2018-2019 school year. Generalization of the results may not be appropriate. This study also was conducted in a rural high school with very little diversity. Serious consideration should be given to the possibility of further research being conducted in urban and suburban high schools with high percentages of ethnicities to determine whether conclusions are congruent. Additionally, this study has the potential to lead to programs that will ease the transition to high school and decrease the dropout rate. The study also would benefit school boards, superintendents, and administrators by detailing the reasons why a ninth-grade academy as a small learning community is a viable alternative to traditional high school models. Most important, the study offered the opportunity for teachers to provide a real-life perspective of only the ninth grade and to express their firsthand experiences with this unique population.

Further research should be conducted regarding whether student changes remain after the year in a freshman academy. Due to the possibility that implementation of a freshman academy has a positive effect that is not sustained in the following year,

additional research is needed on whether there are instructional strategies that tenth-through twelfth-grade teachers can learn from ninth-grade teachers.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it concentrated on one county in southcentral Kentucky. While generalization to all high schools nationwide would be unlikely, educational leaders seeking ways to improve high school transitions and student outcomes can use the results of this study.

Research quality is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases. The researcher's presence during data gathering, which often is unavoidable in qualitative research, may have affected the teachers' responses. Finally, a greater number of teacher interviews may have enhanced the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

SLCs, often found in the form of freshman academies, are considered to be the 21st century answer to addressing the needs of a vulnerable population of students. In the past decade, ninth-grade transition programs have begun to emerge around the country, and a great deal of literature has focused on this phenomenon. According to Huffman and Jacobson (2003), "Past decades have seen many educational reforms, all of which have been supportive of advancing student interests and providing the best possible educational experiences for these students" (p. 239). The researcher's hope is that educational leaders will begin to explore the idea of schools as SLCs with a focus on rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Although many factors play a role in the implementation of a successful ninth-grade transition program, student connectivity, dropout, and transition appear to be the most important in influencing a student's trajectory in high school and beyond. Perhaps most important is the manner in which relationships are developed, instruction is supported, adolescent self-esteem is promoted, and safety nets are in place for students at risk for dropping out. Thus, while this study provides teachers' voices and perspectives of ninth-grade transition programs, the area of SLCs is still an area of study that is in need of a great deal of research.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

DATE: March 1, 2019
TO: Brittany Richey
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [1400605-1] SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT DROP OUT, TRANSITION AND THE EFFECTS OF A SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITY
REFERENCE #: IRB 19-285
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 1, 2019
EXPIRATION DATE: May 5, 2019
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a *signed* consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 5, 2019.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Robin Pyles at (270) 745-3360 or irb@wku.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

Interview Guide

1. Describe yourself as an educator and the work you do in & outside the classroom.
2. The Trojan Academy is a program based on rigor, relevance, and relationship that will hopefully serve as the catalyst for a strong foundation in high school; therefore, increasing the likelihood that students will graduate. How do you see these three factors influencing student success?
3. Based on the Triad of Engagement, consider this definition of interpersonal connectedness: a positive interaction with school staff and companions. How does the ninth grade academy foster student belonging?
4. Based on the Triad of Engagement, consider this definition of physical and emotional safety: connecting in a condition that is physically protected and emotionally. How do you as a teacher in the freshman academy help students feel secure and safe?
5. Based on the Triad of Engagement, consider this definition for Academic commitment: The bolster to achieve their own best with adaptable, applicable guidance. How does the small learning community foster academic commitment in the Trojan Academy?
6. The school's atmosphere is unequivocally affected by the reasoning and arrangements of the school initiative. At the point when school administration is committed to students, and teachers make endeavors to connect, students have an

increased sense of belonging. What are ways that the Trojan Academy creates this atmosphere for ninth grade students?

7. Does your school have a formal structured plan detailing the activities, events, and interventions of Trojan Academy? Describe how your small learning community been successful in providing interventions to ninth grade students?
8. What resources or strategies are in place at your school for students at risk of dropping out? Are these measures effective?
9. What recommendations would you offer to new teacher about working with ninth students in a small learning community?
10. Everyone faces challenges. Describe a challenge have you recently encountered as you worked with ninth grade students. How did you overcome the obstacles while identifying and working with adolescent students transitioning into the ninth grade?
11. In what ways did your administration /school prepare you to design and implement interventions ninth grade students? Tell me some areas you would like further training. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Demographic Background Questionnaire

Name: _____

Gender: _____ Age: _____ Ethnicity: _____

Employee: _____

Position: _____

Colleges Attended, Major/Minor, Degrees Awarded:

Work Experience:

Number of years as a teacher: _____ Grade level(s) of assigned students: _____

Familiarity with Barren County Trojan Academy Goals:

_Unfamiliar _Somewhat familiar _Familiar _Very Familiar