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Exploring Student Perspectives On Elementary To Middle School Transition Practices

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EXPLORING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ELEMENTARY TO
MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION PRACTICES

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Sioux Falls, 2005
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
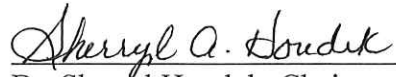
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Doctor of Philosophy

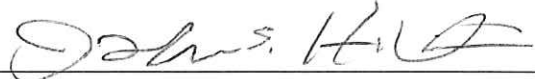Grand Forks, North Dakota
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This dissertation, submitted by Erin Marie Spies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been ready by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.
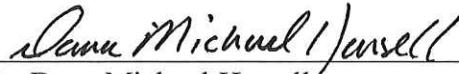
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Title	Exploring Student Perspectives on Elementary to Middle School Transition Practices
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Erin Marie Spies

November 20, 2018

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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of effective transition programs include (a) providing realistic experiences of middle school expectations for incoming students, (b) frequent communication with students, parents, and staff, and (c) extensive and ongoing planning, assessment, and redesign of the transition program. While these effective components of a transition program have been recommended based on research, student reflection on essential elements have not been included. The purpose of this study was to use phenomenology research methods to identify components of middle school transition programs from the perspective of middle school students. The study analyzed current transitional practices and their alignment with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981). Students participated in four 30-minute sessions in small focus groups. The students in this study believed through a process of strategic supports, the quality of their transition from elementary to middle school could have been improved. To effectively transition from elementary to middle school, students identified structural elements, which include understanding the academic and behavioral expectations of middle school and identifying necessary personal attributes and academic skills. Implications for practice include the implementation of in-school activities as part of a positive transition program. School staff can implement some of these expectations and experiences for students during their 5th grade year at the elementary school. In developing programs that assist students with the transition to middle school, educators

and researchers have failed to consider student perceptions of what constitutes an effective transition program. Understanding student perspectives allows educators and researchers to understand essential components of a successful transition program to effectively meet student needs.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the start of each academic school year, millions of students make the transition from elementary to middle school. Roughly 88% of public school students transition to middle school marking the second most dramatic shift in their lives (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002). According to Akos, Rose, and Orthner (2015) and Loke and Lowe (2013), the first dramatic shift is the transition into formal schooling. The transition to middle school signifies an increase in independence, social opportunities to make new friends, and for many, new and exciting academic programming experiences. According to Buehler, Fletcher, Johnston, and Weymouth (2015), "youths' positive perceptions of school experiences at this time point are associated with higher grades and place youth on a trajectory of greater engagement in school and fewer socioemotional difficulties during adolescence" (pp. 55-56). The transition from elementary school to middle school presents many opportunities but also vulnerabilities. Middle school structure, supports, and experiences are dependent on a student's experiences with school satisfaction, including behavioral engagement and/or success (Buehler, Fletcher, Johnston, & Weymouth, 2015; Holas & Huston, 2012; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010).

While the transition to middle school creates excitement for some, it also creates anxiety for other students, as school transitions are perceived as periods of threat (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010; Loke & Lowe, 2013). Many questions about

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middle school rise to the surface: how much homework will be expected, what the rules in middle school will be, how to make friends, getting to class on time, how to open a locker combination, and being around older students who might bully (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2008). Rice, Frederickson, and Seymour (2011) studied student concerns about the transition to secondary school in the United Kingdom. They administered a School Concerns Questionnaire to 147 year-six primary students and 263 year-seven secondary students. Results were consistent in that both groups of students endorsed highest concerns around being bullied and homework for both pre- and post-transition. Primary students also identified concerns relating to the secondary school environment, procedural factors such as changing classes and the size of the school (Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011).

Research points to declines in school engagement (Galván, Spatzier, & Juvonen, 2011), self-concept (Parker, 2009), increased aggression and peer victimization (Williford, Brisson, Bender, Jenson, & Forrest-Bank, 2011), and academic declines as students enter middle school (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). These declines can persist through the end of eighth grade. For some students, mental health concerns can increase during the transition to middle school (Goodwin, Mrug, Borch, & Cillessen, 2012).

In a study of Florida public schools, statewide data showed that "moving to middle school . . . causes a substantial drop in [students'] relative performance. Specifically, math achievement falls by 0.124 (0.221) standard deviations and reading achievement falls by 0.086 (0.148) standard deviations for transitions at grade 6"

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(Schwerdt & West, 2013, p. 309). Research indicates that transitioning to middle school results in a decrease in academic achievement among students, and achievement continues to decline throughout middle school with little evidence of recovering academic achievement in Grades 9 and 10 (Schwerdt & West, 2013). A similar study by Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) of New York City schools found that achievement "falls substantially (about 0.15 standard deviations in math and English) when students move to middle school," (p. 1052). Likewise, other studies have shown that middle school transitions are associated with an increase in behavioral issues and a decline in academic performance (Alspaugh, 1998; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008).

Research by Schwerdt and West, (2013) also indicated that negative effects of the transition to middle school impacts student attendance rates. Missed school days increase especially for students in sixth grade (Schwerdt & West, 2013). It is evident that a successful transition to middle school is essential in supporting students not only academically to ensure high school graduation but also with their social and emotional development.

Statement of the Problem

Students experience difficulties transitioning from elementary to middle school due to transitional interventions that fail to consider students' own perspectives of what factors might help them transition to middle school. Aspects of the transition from elementary to middle school pose risks to student functioning. Previous research has indicated that students experience difficulties in the areas of psychological and social functioning (Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015; Barber & Olsen, 2004). The degree of impact

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on a student is a culmination of various factors during the transition process. Identified factors include student race (Akos et al., 2015; Akos & Galassi, 2004a; Benner & Graham, 2009; Wampler, Munsch, & Adams, 2002), safety, socioeconomic status, communication, the relationship between home and school (Akos et al., 2015), academic environment, and teacher expectations (Rice, 2001). Most middle schools have larger class sizes and larger school sizes compared to the smaller, more personalized single-teacher environment of elementary schools (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Mac Iver, & Feldlaufer, 1993b). Larger class sizes and school systems are "seen to affect the psychological orientation and well-being of students by being less personal, including increased anonymity, less teacher support, greater teacher control, and less opportunity for decision making" (Barber & Olsen, 2004, p. 5).

Departmentalized instruction structures at the middle school level expose students to multiple teachers throughout the day. Therefore, students have to adapt to multiple teaching styles, multiple teacher expectations, different classroom management systems, as well as different grading standards and/or grading systems. As Barber and Olsen (2004) noted, "Teachers in the larger schools are less personal, more controlling, and require lower levels of cognitive skills than students were previously required to demonstrate" (p. 4).

Transitioning from the smaller, more personalized environment of elementary school to the larger, more anonymous feel of a middle school setting is contradictory to the psychological needs of students during times of adolescence. During this time, students have a need for greater psychological autonomy and positive relationships with adults and peers. The middle school setting of six to seven teachers per day with new

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groups of peers in each individual class is not structurally effective for easy development and navigation of meaningful, authentic adult and peer relationships (Juvonen, 2007). It is well documented that students feel less connected to school and their perception of caring adults drops at the middle school level (Baker & Narula, 2012). In contrast to elementary schools, the structure of middle school may appear to foster an environment exactly opposite of what students may need such as more frequent transitions and controlling, less personal educational environments.

The transition from elementary to middle school has had negative impacts on student outcomes. Such outcomes include measures of school academic performance, mental health, self-concept and identity, and a reduction in extra-curricular activity participation (Eccles et al., 1993a; Little & Garber, 2004; Parker, 2009; Seidman, Lawrence Aber, Allen, & French, 1996; Seidman, Allen, Lawrence Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). Furthermore, Eccles et al. (1993b) suggested that elements of middle school, such as higher levels of teacher control and lower levels of student autonomy, affect students' motivation and behavior by shaping their perception of the middle school learning environment, teachers' expectations in the classroom, and support or care from teachers. Creating transitional practices that help shape a supportive view of middle school is essential in creating an effective transition program for students.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to use phenomenology research methods to identify needed components of middle school transition programs from the perspective of middle school students. There is a lack of in-depth and intimate research on what students

identify as essential factors in making a successful transition into middle school. The study analyzed current transitional practices and their alignment with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981). Not only is there a lack of research on middle school students' perceptions of transitions to middle school, but there is also a lack of phenomenological studies meant to address students' perceptions of their experiences when transitioning to middle school. Results of this study allow educators to identify appropriate transitional interventions and practices based on student perspective, as well as current gaps, and to develop a transitional program that will effectively meet the needs of students transitioning from elementary to middle school.

Significance

Studying experiences of middle school students transitioning from elementary to middle school provides additional knowledge to school counselors and school personnel for developing and implementing effective components of a transition program to effectively meet the needs of students. Analyzing current transition programs and their relationship to Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981) provides additional insight into effective components of a transition program. Specifically, this research study provides data regarding how students are perceiving and assessing their transition from elementary to middle school and their level of control over the transition. It also provides specific insight into students' personal characteristics and how those characteristics influence the students' abilities to cope with their transitions.

Analyzing students' perspectives for managing the transition to middle school, through behavior or coping skills, provides insight for school counselors, teachers, and administrators on what essential skills are needed for students to experience a successful

transition. This may be impactful as it would allow for further teaching, instruction, and development of specific skills to promote student success. Finally, this study provides insight into current transitional practices of the school district in this study and the district's effectiveness in supporting students during their transition.

Theoretical Framework

Transition Defined

A transition is any event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Transitional events in the educational setting include (a) the transition from one grade to the next such as students moving from kindergarten to first grade, (b) school transitions such as the transition from elementary school to middle school, and (c) even daily class transitions such as transitioning from math class to language arts. Perception plays a key role as a transition is only defined as a transition if the person experiencing it believes it is a transitional event (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Additionally, according to Griffin and Gilbert (2015), "the nature of the transition process, and the context within which it takes place" (p. 72), as well as resources and personal assets can impact or influence transitions (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Multiple factors are at play in an individual's ability to effectively manage a transition (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995). To effectively assist someone with navigating a transition, Anderson et al. (2012) outlined three steps as the foundation of Schlossberg's Transition Theory: approaching transitions, taking stock, and taking charge.

Approaching transitions means identifying a transition and how much it will change individuals' lives as well as identifying where in a transition process an individual is. *Taking stock* refers to identification and development of coping strategies or what Schlossberg et al. (1995) established as the 4 S System. The 4 S System identifies four sets of factors that influence a person's ability to adapt to a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Finally, *taking charge* references the ability of an individual to utilize resources and strengthen the resources, which they have available.

Schlossberg's 4 S System

Situation. Situation refers to how individuals perceive and assess transition and the level of control over what is happening (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Within this factor, issues of concern include perceptions of the change to be temporary or permanent, perceptions of the transition to be either good or bad, and outside stressors present that may perpetuate transitional challenges (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Self. The focus of this category is how an individual's personal characteristics and internal resources influence his or her ability to cope with transition. Personal characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and culture can shape how individuals manage change and transition. Psychological resources such as personality characteristics also shape and influence how individuals manage change. Optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience are of importance, as higher perceptions of control and positive assessments of situations result in positive outcomes (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Within this research study students identified

resiliency, an open mindset and advocacy as personal skills and qualities necessary for making a positive transition to middle school.

Support. Support refers to the way in which affirmation and positive feedback can facilitate transitions (Anderson et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Support often manifests itself in a social nature. The need for various forms of support throughout the elementary to middle school transition process is continually highlighted in literature.

Strategies. The category strategies refers to an individual's ability to manage transition and/or change through his or her own behavior or coping skills (Evans et al., 2010). Coping responses include modifying a situation, controlling the meaning of a problem, and managing stress after a transition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). An individual's ability to implement various coping strategies and be flexible during a transition directly corresponds to his or her ability to successfully navigate the transition. One unique factor in the transition from elementary to middle school is each individual student's ability to identify, utilize, and implement various coping strategies based on his or her current level of psychological development and executive functioning skills.

The basis of this research study was founded in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981), because the transition to middle school is influenced by each individual's situation, self, support, and strategies.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the researcher for this study:

1. What are middle school students' perceptions of an effective transition to middle school?

2.   What personal skills and/or qualities do middle school students perceive as necessary for an effective transition to middle school?

3.   What are the experiences of middle school students in transitioning from elementary to middle school?

4.   What supports do middle school students perceive as essential in making an effective transition to middle school?

Definitions of Terms and Acronyms

The following terms and definitions are integral to this study and clarify meanings within the context of the study.

Administrator – certified licensed educator qualified to serve in the role as principal or assistant principal in a school setting.

Association for Middle Level Education – AMLE; formerly National Middle School Association.

AVID – Advancement Via Individual Determination; elective course offered at Cheney Middle School. School personnel recommend for qualifying students with parental approval. Course that promotes college and career readiness skills.

Cheney Middle School – CMS in West Fargo Public Schools.

Elementary Schools – schools that educate students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Middle Schools – schools that educate students in sixth through eighth grade.

Interdisciplinary Team – refers to the collaboration among math, science, language arts, and social studies teachers from each content area. These

four teachers, one math, one language arts, one science and one social studies teacher, share the same group of 80-100 students.

Packer Time – Twenty five minute study hall that all CMS students have in the middle of the school day.

Schlossberg 4 S System – refers to situation, self, support and strategies within a transitional experience.

School Counselor – certified licensed educators qualified to address students' academic, career, and social/emotional developmental needs.

Transition – any event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.

Transitional Practices – In the educational setting, it includes the transition from one grade to the next such as students moving from kindergarten to first grade, school transitions such as the transition from elementary school to middle school, and daily class transitions such as transitioning from math class to language arts.

West Fargo Public Schools – WFPS

Researcher's Background

The researcher has over 10 years of experience working in the field of education. Various roles within the field of education include high school speech and theatre teacher, high school theatre director and speech coach, high school counselor, middle school counselor, and middle school assistant principal. As a former school counselor, the researcher has background knowledge on elementary to middle school transitions as well as middle school to high school transitions. The researcher's personal commitment

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to supporting students in the transition from elementary to middle school is an inspiration to continue development of effective transition programs.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I provided the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, significance of the study, research questions, definitions of terms and acronyms, limitations for the study, and researcher's background. Chapter II consists of a discussion of literature related to the topic. Chapter III outlines the methodology and methods used in the study. Chapter IV presents findings of the study in tabular and narrative form. Chapter V includes discussion of conclusions of the findings, implications for practice and limitation of the study. Recommendations for future research, schools, educators and parents/guardians are included.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to use phenomenology research methods to identify components of middle school transition programs from the perspective of middle school students. There is a lack of in-depth and intimate research on what students identify as essential factors in making a successful transition into middle school. The study analyzed current transitional practices and their alignment with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981). Not only is there a lack of research on middle school students' perceptions of transitions to middle school, but there is also a lack of phenomenological studies meant to address students' perceptions of their experiences of the transition to middle school. Results of this study allow educators to identify appropriate transitional interventions practices, as well as current gaps, to develop a transitional program that will effectively meet the needs of students transitioning from elementary to middle school.

This chapter includes literature related to the study that is necessary to enhance the reader's understanding of the subject. The chapter includes literature on the purpose of transitional programming from elementary to middle school, including historical contexts, middle level philosophy, middle school students' developmental needs, student transition issues, and applicable related theories including Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981).

The Purpose of Transition Programming in Middle School

Historically, the educational system in the United States has been constructed to move students through a series of transitions. Year after year, students transition from one grade level to the next. These transitions are marked by individual, instructional, and institutional changes that have an impact on students' educational success (Lane, Oakes, Carter, & Messenger, 2015). According to Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, and Splittgerber (2000), students in the United States typically experience four major systematic transitions including home to school, elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and finally high school to college and/or work.

Middle Level Philosophy – A Historical Review

In the 1940s, educational reformers began advocating for creation of junior high schools. The argument was to provide an educational setting for students in Grades 7-9 that would prepare them for the environment of high school without placing them in the same academic environment as older students (Bedard & Do, 2005). Junior high and junior-senior high schools came to fruition in the early 1960s as a foundation for secondary education in the United States. They operated a factory-type model of education, which was a subject-driven curriculum with an emphasis on memorization and regurgitation. They taught students the same subject, the same way (Dintersmith, 2018). This type of education system gave little attention to the unique developmental needs of middle school students. The middle school model emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to replace a junior high model and became the predominant model by the 1990s (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007).

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Research by William Alexander and Donald Eichhorn paved the way for changes in middle level education. In his book, *The Middle School,* Eichhorn (1966) laid out several central concepts that contributed to the transition from junior high and junior-senior high schools to a middle school model. Eichhorn (1966) recommended constructing middle school programs to meet the unique social and academic needs of students, which prompted John Swain, president of the National Middle School Association in 1981, to form a commission to define characteristics of a middle school. These parameters set the organizational structure and curriculum of middle schools to properly meet the needs of a developing adolescent child. In 1982, the National Middle School Association took its initiative one step further by publishing *This We Believe*, a report in which they identified 10 essential elements of a middle school. Since then, three editions of *This We Believe* have been published. In the most recent edition (2010), the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly the National Middle School Association, identified sixteen characteristics of successful middle schools:

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.

Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.

Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.

Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.

Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Leadership and Organization

A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.

Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group,

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educational research, and best practices.

Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.

Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.

Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

Culture and Community

The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.

Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.

Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.

The school actively involves families in the education of their children.

The school includes community and business partners.

(Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 14)

Each revision of *This We Believe* expanded upon the core values of middle level education and the developmental needs of young adolescents, originally termed as transecents.

Student Developmental Needs in Middle School

Hill and Tyson (2009) note that "the middle school years coincide with key changes in adolescent development, including biological and cognitive growth, social development, and renegotiations of family relationships" (p. 740). During the transition to middle school, students are experiencing both a developmental and a systematic transition (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000). Developmental transitions

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take the shape of physical changes in an adolescent body, cognitive development, and social/emotional development of the brain. Because these unique changes occur at different rates of growth for each individual, they can heighten transitional difficulties (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Such changes can also make teaching middle level students extremely challenging for educators. At times, student needs may be overlooked or not addressed creating more disruption or inconsistency in an educational process. Structural changes of middle schools include more challenging curricular content, higher student expectations for learning and behavior, changes in grading practices, as well as changes in schedule like moving from class to class, and multiple teachers in a day (Lane et al., 2015). The main goal of middle level philosophy is to develop an educational setting aimed at meeting the unique needs of adolescent children. Developmental characteristics include a "need for autonomy, heightened self-consciousness, advancing cognitive abilities, and close relationships with peers" (Kingery et al., 2011, p. 216). Educators' understanding and acceptance of adolescent developmental characteristics are the foundations of middle level philosophy and engaged learning. A successful transition to middle school is partially dependent on middle level educators understanding best practices for meeting adolescent needs (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009). This indicates the importance of teacher education programs focusing on middle level grades to help middle school educators address transition issues (Andrews & Bishop, 2012).

Physical Development

As students begin making the transition from elementary to middle school, they experience hormonal and physical changes associated with puberty. A majority of the

students undergo changes at the same time (Anderson et al., 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). According to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, 2010), "Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives" (p. 5). Puberty can be difficult for a student to manage. It often affects schooling as a student's attention shifts from education and learning to an awareness of his or her body. Physical transformations occur as a result of hormonal shifts such as redistribution of body fat, significant increases in weight and height, sudden changes in the skeletal and muscular systems, and changes in voice, hair, and complexion (AMLE, 2010). These changes prompt both genders to have a heightened awareness of self-image causing them to focus more on their appearance and body image rather than academics.

According to Akos, Queen, and Lineberry (2005), "no two students will experience the same degree of growth and development – a fact that creates an interesting challenge for school personnel" (pp. 18-19). Specific to gender, Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) noted that "girls experience pubertal changes approximately eighteen months earlier than boys . . . complicating social interactions in the middle grades" (p. 16). Some research points to differences in gender pertaining to academic outcomes during the elementary to middle school transition, with females showing steady academic achievement and males exhibiting declines in academic achievement (Akos et al., 2015). Studies have been conducted to measure anxiety levels regarding transition to middle school and gender correlation. Results have shown higher levels of anxiety in females than males during the transition to middle school (Duchesne, Ratelle, Poitras, & Drouin,

2009; Duchesne, Ratelle, & Roy, 2012; Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010; Loke & Lowe, 2013; Rice et al., 2011).

During these physical changes, adolescents shift their focus from academics to self-image as they start to compare themselves to peers. Social acceptance from peers becomes heightened and can result in mood swings, bullying, peer conflict, and frequent changes in opinions (Akos, Queen, & Lineberry, 2005; Brighton, 2007). Because physical development of adolescents usually occurs during middle level years, it can positively or negatively impact the transition experience a student may have. Physical development is associated with the transition to middle school because it plays a critical role in how students are taught, how buildings are designed, and how students interact with each other.

Cognitive Development

Much like puberty, cognitive development happens at various rates for different adolescents. Cognitive development consists of executive functioning skills like time management, decision-making, impulsivity, intellectual development, memory capacity, and reasoning skills. Chung, Elias, and Schneider (1998) state that "middle school or junior high transitions are often associated with increased psychological distress, a decline in academic performance, decreased motivation, and lowered self-esteem" (p. 84). The shift from elementary school to middle school alters the ecology of adolescence through a change in perceived student roles of adolescents and through changes in the school setting (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998). Students transition from an elementary setting, which is much like a family dynamic with one teacher, the same classroom, and the same classmates throughout the day to a secondary setting where their teachers,

classmates, and classrooms are constantly changing. Gradual increases in executive functioning skills are essential developmental factors for middle level educators to understand in order to create developmentally appropriate learning experiences and opportunities within their classrooms.

An adolescent brain is developing in areas of reasoning and problem solving, decision making, information processing, efficiency, application of and use of experience, moral reasoning, and social cognition (Edwards, 2014). During this time period, the adolescent brain is also experiencing metacognition for the first time. This poses an interesting challenge for educators who are attempting to reach each learner since students are at different degrees of problem-solving ability. When teachers consider the diversity that exists in their classrooms, they present lessons using a wide variety of materials and approaches to address all students' cognitive abilities (Tomlinson, 2014). Some students may require a more structured setting while others seek more challenging activities. Hands-on experiences such as project-based learning opportunities, inquiry, creativity, choice, and peer interaction promote students to explore the world around them, make connections with a curriculum, and foster deeper intellectual development.

Middle school students learn best through social interaction and active learning, as these strategies allow the content to become more personally meaningful (Christensen & Knezek, 2018). Active learning refers to teaching strategies that are structured to promote curiosity, share thinking, evoke emotional connections to learning, and make real-life connections to foster metacognitive skills. In an educational setting, evoking emotion with content serves to help students connect with their curriculum at a higher level. Students may feel emotion such as frustration or curiosity by doing work, thinking

about content in relation to themselves such as how the content applies to their daily lives, and through relationships with classmates such as collaboration with others (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). These strategies require students to not only connect to what they are learning but also explain what they are thinking as they develop skills in deductive reasoning, problem solving, and generalizing (Edwards, 2014). When students explain their thinking, they articulate what they know and believe, expanding their knowledge and use of language. Student discussion also encourages students to listen to each other and reevaluate their position to refine their thinking. Student discussion incorporates communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity in student learning experiences.

Cognitive development is one of many developmental changes young adolescents experience that can create a variety of teaching implications. Lorain (2002-2017) suggested that educators:

Present limited amounts of new information, to accommodate the short-term memory. Provide opportunities for students to process and reinforce the new information and to connect the new information with previous learning. Provide lessons that are varied, with lots of involvement and hands-on activities. Provide lessons and activities that require problem solving and critical thinking . . . . The middle school classroom should be an active, stimulating place where people talk and share, movement is common and planned for, and the teacher uses a wide array of approaches to introduce, model, and reinforce learning. (para. 7)

Social/Emotional Development

Compared to awareness of cognitive or physical developmental changes, adolescents are most aware of their social/emotional development as social relationships with friends and peers begin to take priority over relationships with adults (Akos et al., 2015; Ryan & Shim, 2008). The shift to increased peer relationships is outlined in Sullivan's interpersonal theory of psychiatry. This theory "proposed that priorities for peer relations change and that youth are primarily concerned with peer acceptance during the time they are transitioning to middle school" (Dawes & Xie, 2017, p. 2).

Students at this age experience a variety of emotions, behaviors, and moods. Adolescents have a strong need for peer acceptance and a sense of belonging to a peer group in which they feel valued (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). The middle school environment is much larger than an elementary school environment. Additionally, the student population is more heterogeneous, which presents more social challenges for middle school students than younger students (Bellmore, 2011). Challenges include "maintaining friendships with peers from elementary school, forming new friendships with other students, and negotiating a new peer hierarchy" (Bellmore, 2011, p. 282). This peer shuffling results in the formation of new social systems.

Adolescents in middle school are also focused on increased opportunities for independence. This can lead to diminished communication and/or relationships with adults if these old relationships are not actively pursued. Research indicates a need for middle school students to have positive relationships with adults, both at home and school, during this time in an adolescent's life to promote student success (Akos et al., 2015; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). Middle level students learn best in

environments where school personnel can address their social and emotional needs (Brighton, 2007; Scales, 2003).

When students make a transition to a new school, a critical factor is their sense of belonging or connection to a school. Anderson et al. (2000) state:

> Unless students identify with the school to at least some extent, feel they belong as part of the school, and believe themselves to be welcomed, respected, and valued by others, they may begin the gradual disengagement process of which officially dropping out is the final step. (p. 329)

Students must see themselves as worthwhile members of their school community. The structure of the middle school concept supports adolescents' desire to belong (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Schumacher, 1998, Wormeli, 2011). Assigning students to an interdisciplinary team, as outlined in the definitions section, assists in establishing a sense of belonging, making the larger school environment feel smaller (Juvonen, 2007). Getting students involved in activities such as extra-curricular activities or clubs helps encourage involvement in school events either as participants or spectators. Participation in extracurricular activities provides opportunities for students to create a connection with school. This is especially important for students new to a school (Akos, 2006).

Students' social relationships, specifically peer relationships, are affected by school transitions (Chung et al., 1998). A major product of the transition to middle school, as compared to elementary school, is that adolescents interact with a large number of peers and spend more time with peers. Peers begin to hold a more prominent position in students' lives. Lippold, Powers, Syvertsen, Feinberg, & Greenberg (2012)

found that "youth are likely to be exposed to new peer groups during school transitions and peers become a central influence on development as adolescents select, imitate, and share information with them." According to Lane, Oakes, Carter, and Messenger (2015), "Although new relationship possibilities can emerge as peers converge from multiple feeder schools, challenges related to peer acceptance and rejection can also be heightened" (p. 39). With a variety of new students and a larger school setting, students are exposed to peer influence through either direct or indirect forms. Direct influence may include bullying, engaging in delinquent behavior with others, and so on. Indirect influence mostly occurs through modeling illicit behavior (Cook et al., 2008). How students respond to peer challenges can either be adaptive or maladaptive and "thereby contribute to positive or negative adjustment across a range of domains, including emotional, behavioral, and academic" (Erath, Bub, & Tu, 2016, p. 7). As Lippold et al. (2012) noted, "Associations with deviant peers is one of the strongest predictors of adolescent problem behavior" (p. 823). It has been suggested that how well students cope with transitional changes is linked to behavioral engagement in learning (Cadima, Doumen, Verschueren, & Buyse, 2015). "Students with behavioral problems in elementary schools tend to have more difficulty making the transition to middle or junior high school. These problems may be manifested in frequent class disruption or confrontation with other students and/or teachers" (Anderson et al., 2000, p. 328). If students are viewed by others in a negative way, it can directly affect their self-esteem, their ability to connect with peers, and their progress in finding a sense of belonging in their educational environment.

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Student Transition Issues

A critical experience in early adolescence is starting middle school (Holas & Huston, 2012). Transitions are on-going processes, not a singular event. This requires students to acquire and implement various coping skills and/or strategies, which causes many students to struggle with the transition to middle school. As students transition to a new school, specifically elementary to middle school, they face differences in grading practices, teacher expectations, and teacher-student relationships (Chung et al., 1998). The transition to middle school is often marked by a variety of negative outcomes for students including: lower self-esteem, self-concept, and/or self-perception (Alspaugh, 1998), lower academic achievement (Alspaugh, 1998; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995), and lower academic achievement motivation (Niehaus, Mortiz Rudasill, & Adelson, 2012). In a recent cohort study of 1,479 American children from 34 schools, Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, and Louis (2013) found that the transition to middle school had negative influences on students' connectedness to teachers, school engagement, and academic achievement.

Understanding students' perspectives of various dimensions of middle school transitions is essential in order to minimize students' difficulties during the transition. In their study of transition concerns, Akos and Galassi (2004b) established three major themes that concern middle school students. These can be categorized into social, academic, and procedural aspects of navigating middle school. Choosing good friends, fitting in and getting along with others, and coping with older students or bullies fell within the social category. Completing homework, taking more difficult courses, and practicing good study habits were included in the academic theme. Following teacher

expectations, navigating the school, showing respect to adults, and following rules fell under the organizational category.

According to Duchesne, Ratelle, and Roy (2012), previous research on student concerns about the transition to middle school fall into three different domains:

(a) *worries about academic demands*, bearing on the nature of tasks to be done in class and at home, classroom rules and routines, formal evaluation systems, and learning evaluation methods, (b) *worries about teachers*, involving exposure to excessively rigid teachers, unfair treatment by these teachers, and not getting enough attention, and (c) *worries about peers*, such as fear of losing touch with friends from elementary school, difficulty in making new friends, and fears of being bullied by older students. (p. 683-684)

Niehaus, Mortiz Rudasill, and Adelson (2012) noted that "evidence shows that the transition to middle school has important implications for students' academic, social, and psychological wellbeing" (p. 444). A student's ability to acquire and utilize coping strategies during the transition to middle school indicates their ability to successfully transition to middle school as well as their continued success throughout middle school. A number of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors may lead to negative perceptions of school transition. Factors may include the students' social functioning, school climate, mental health, students' academic attitudes, perceptions of academic control and importance, family characteristics, and puberty (Wang, Brittain, McDougall, & Vaillancourt, 2016).

Lane et al. (2015) noted the importance of establishing . . .

. . . a continuum of supports for students that extend over time . . .. Ensuring well-designed instruction and supports are provided to these students before the move to middle school and with consistency throughout their entire first year may be especially key to supporting the successful entry into and completion of sixth grade. (p. 48)

It is essential that schools develop transition programs that incorporate several types of support from various groups within an educational setting (Anderson et al., 2000).

Developmentally Appropriate Transition Practices

Student Practices

To make a successful transition from elementary to middle school, students must be prepared. Anderson et al. (2000) noted preparedness is a multidimensional concept that includes multiple factors. *Academic preparedness* is when students possess the knowledge and skills to succeed at a targeted level of education, as when a child is "ready" for first grade. *Independence* refers to students as self-starters or their ability to work by themselves and stay on task. *Conformity to adult standards* means students are able and willing to adapt their behavior and efforts to adult expectations. The final concept of preparedness, according to Anderson et al. (2000), involves *coping mechanisms* or a student's ability to deal with problems and difficulties by knowing where to get needed information, keeping track of multiple assignments, and resolving conflicts.

Student preparedness is a combination of academic skills and established executive functioning skills. Individual students progress in their level of development in

these areas at different times, hence the challenge of developing transitional practices that support students in their various levels of achievement.

Parent Practices

During the middle school years, while adolescents are looking for increased opportunities for independence, "if parental monitoring is reduced too early in middle school, youths may be placed at risk for deviant behavior" (Van Ryzin, Stormshak, & Dishion, 2012, p. 627). Furthermore, students from more supportive home environments tend to experience higher levels of academic achievement as they make the transition to middle school (Anderson et al., 2000) and tend to be less anxious about the transition to middle school (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010) than students with less supportive home environments.

Parental involvement is important for many reasons. Parents who are involved in their child's transition process tend to remain more involved in their child's educational experiences at the next level of education (Anderson et al., 2000; Andrews & Bishop, 2012). When parents are involved in their child's transition process, they role model communication between school and home, allowing them to be involved with addressing problems or taking actions when issues arise.

School Personnel Practices

For a transition program to be successful, it must be a comprehensive program that incorporates numerous strategies and supports. Barber and Olsen (2004) identified predictive factors of positive school-related and extracurricular forms of adolescent functioning, which include "connection with teachers or school administrators, perceived respect from them . . . and regulation imposed by the school environment" (p. 7). When

youth perceive a middle school environment to be safe, supportive, and positive, they are more likely to experience a positive first few months of school, perceive it to be enjoyable, and engage in the learning process resulting in academic success (Buehler et al., 2015). Wormeli (2011) suggested five mindsets for successful transition programs:

- Work to understand students' concerns to belong

- Empathize with students

- Be knowledgeable about adolescent needs

- Focus on positives

- Build hope and capacity within students

When a school creates an environment and transitional practices in which students feel supported and respected by school personnel, students are much more likely to function successfully. Additionally, when school personnel understand and build organizational structures to support unique adolescent needs, they facilitate a positive learning environment for the students.

When schools involve multiple stakeholders such as students, families, and teachers, transition programs are more likely to prepare students for change. Also, comprehensive programs created months before a new school year and executed throughout the year foster success (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). In their study of middle school transitions around the globe, Andrews and Bishop noted three specific practices evident in comprehensive transition programs to help ensure student success throughout a transition: "1) sharing academic data in a timely and efficient manner, 2) attending to

vulnerable populations, and 3) collaborating in shared study across schools" (2012, p. 11).

As students move from elementary to middle school, they report less availability of adults to provide support and guidance in meeting challenges (Niehaus et al., 2012). Such is the organizational nature of middle school; teachers have more students for shorter periods of time resulting in a different student-teacher relationship than elementary school (Alspaugh, 1998). It is essential for school personnel to create support systems and relationships with students as they make the transition to middle school, especially since "students who are disconnected in school report more incidents of maltreatment such as harassment form their peers" (Baker & Narula, 2012, p. 16). Utilizing a specific structure such as advisory time is one way to implement consistent time with an adult at school and can also provide time for teachers to implement programming aimed at developing relationships with students to meet their social/emotional development (Juvonen, 2007). "Adolescents who feel connected to school and perceive their teachers as fair and caring are less likely to participate in health-risk behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol or marijuana use, sexual activity, violence, or suicidal thoughts" (Baker & Narula, 2012, p. 16).

Similar to Andrews and Bishop (2012), Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger (2014) noted the importance of planning and collaboration between schools for effective student transitions. Though Roybal et al. studied transitions from middle school to high school (eighth grade to ninth grade), their ideas could be generalized to include transitions from elementary school to middle school. They noted the following interventions to be effective at reducing student anxiety and stress:

- Planning session between middle schools and high school teachers [elementary and middle school teachers]

- Involvement of parents in high school [middle school] activities

- Assistance for students with homework

- Incentive programs for attendance, grades, and citizenship

- System to earn credit each semester or each quarter [for high schools only]

- Block schedules for core classes

- Closed campus

- Small learning communities

- Celebrations of student successes. (Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger 2014, pp. 480-481)

Roybal et al. (2014) noted that teachers play a critical role in building a sense of connectedness between students and school. Teachers who show consideration and care towards students are more likely to ease a student's transition process while those who are inflexible and intimidating make it more challenging for students. Previous research indicates that teachers who provide constructive feedback, model a high level of concern for their work, acknowledge individual student differences, and allow "democratic interactions" are perceived by students as caring. This behavior leads students to higher levels of academic motivation (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2016). Teachers may be the central influence available and necessary to provide social and academic support that students need to make a successful transition to middle school (Hopwood, Hay, & Dyment, 2016).

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Communication with students and families about an upcoming transition should be accurate and clear (Anderson et al., 2000; Roybal et al., 2014). Educational programming that teaches coping skills and study skills is another strategy that school personnel could implement. Middle school students and teachers could visit with elementary students for information sessions or question and answer sessions. New school orientations for incoming middle school students and parents could be helpful, and finally, teachers and transitioning students could tour their future middle school (Bailey et al., 2015).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory "provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular time" (Evans et al., 2010, pp. 212-213). Schlossberg's Transition theory was initially aimed at aiding counseling professionals in their work with adults. In the infancy of her transition theory, Schlossberg (1981) described her model as a tool for "analyzing human adaptation to transition" (p. 2). Adaptation to transition is affected by the interaction of three different variables. The variables include perceptions, pre- and post-transition environments, and the individual experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 2).

Furthermore, Schlossberg noted that an individual's characteristics could be assets or liabilities in that individual's ability to cope with transition. Later in 1984, Schlossberg introduced her transition theory in her first book *Counseling Adults in Transition*. In this book, she re-conceptualized her model, noting that adaptation may not always be

achieved by every individual. She therefore referred to the process as response to transition.

Significant modifications of Schlossberg's Transition Theory were outlined in *Overwhelmed: Coping with Life's Ups and Downs* (Schlossberg, 1989). Here Schlossberg outlined the transition process as having three major components: approaching change, taking stock, and taking charge. The 4 S System: situation, self, support, and strategies were introduced within the taking stock section of Schlossberg's theory. The 4 S System reframed her prior work on coping resources. Another significant modification was the introduction of the terminology *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out* within the taking charge section. The second edition *Adults in Transition* (Schlossberg et al.) was released in 1995, the third (Goodman et al.) in 2006, and the fourth (Anderson et al.) in 2012.

Summary

Chapter II provided a review of literature related to middle school transitional practices. Specifically, Chapter II reviewed literature on middle school philosophy at a historical level, development of middle school education, middle level philosophy, middle school students' developmental needs, and student transition issues. Finally, Chapter II presented literature on Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Chapter III addresses the methodology and methods used in this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter III includes research methods for the proposed study including purpose of the study, research questions and design, theoretical framework, methodology and methods. The chapter also describes participants, site selection, confidentiality of participants, and interview questions. Finally, this chapter discusses data collection methods, data analysis, and validation techniques.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to use phenomenology research methods to identify components of middle school transition programs from the perspective of middle school students. There is a lack of in-depth and intimate research on what students identify as essential factors in making a successful transition into middle school. The study analyzed current transitional practices and their alignment with Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981). Not only is there a lack of research on middle school students' perceptions of transitions to middle school, but there is also a lack of phenomenological studies meant to address students' perceptions of their experiences of the transition to middle school. It was expected that the qualitative data would lead to greater understanding in allowing educators to identify appropriate transitional interventions and

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practices, as well as current gaps, to develop a transitional program that will effectively meet the needs of students transitioning from elementary to middle school.

Research Methods

The research design constitutes a phenomenological study orientated toward understanding middle school students' experiences of transitioning to middle school and their perceptions as to specific factors they feel are essential to making a successful transition. Phenomenological inquiry is the most appropriate approach for understanding phenomenon of meaning and incorporating students' lived experiences into the study.

Therefore, a phenomenological method was best suited to explore the perspectives of middle school students' experiences to develop a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of the transition from elementary to middle school. Through a phenomenological examination of the middle school transition experience of these students, the researcher identified the essence of what students perceived as helpful in their own transitions to middle school and what they viewed as essential factors for helping other students make a successful transition to middle school. The essence of the phenomenon was presented representing the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of middle school students experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school. Elements of the transition process that students deemed helpful aligned with Schlossberg's 4 S system.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study are a way of understanding student's experiences and their perceptions of how their experiences impacted their transition to middle school.

1. What are middle school students' perceptions of an effective transition to middle school?

2. What personal skills and/or qualities do middle school students perceive as necessary for an effective transition to middle school?

3. What are the experiences of middle school students in transitioning from elementary to middle school?

4. What supports do middle school students perceive as essential in making an effective transition to middle school?

Methodology

This chapter outlines a phenomenological approach to research, an approach informed by students' lived experiences. This approach is keenly suited for examining and identifying essential factors that could be implemented in middle school transition programs.

Maxwell (2013) noted five practical goals for conducting qualitative research in his book *Qualitative Research Design*. He mentioned a goal of qualitative research being "interested not only in the physical events and behavior that are taking place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understanding influences their behavior" (p. 30). One objective of this study was to determine what components helped students make a successful transition to middle school specifically from middle school students' perspectives. Another objective was to identify a connection of these participant-identified components with the Schlossberg's 4 S system.

Phenomenology

Theoretical reasoning for this research study followed the phenomenological critique of positivism and perceived inseparability of self and world. The researcher explored conceptualizations of perceptions and embodied experiences using French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's being-in-the-world and phenomenology of origins concept. In the book *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Moran (2000) noted:

> Merleau-Ponty's 'phenomenology of origins' aims to teach us to view our experience in a new light, not relying on the fully formed categories of our reflective experience but developing a method and a language adequate to articulate our pre-reflective experience, specifically the world of perception. (p. 402)

This is an important way to research students' perceptions. Exploring students' first perceptions of their transition to middle school, Merleau-Ponty's being-in-the-world concept brings to the forefront an opportunity for the researcher to evoke organic perspective (Moran, 2000).

Phenomenology can be described as putting aside our initial understandings or assumptions of an experience and being open to possibilities of new understanding and meaning of that experience (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, phenomenology is an attempt to rediscover fresh perspectives of past experiences. As Crotty (1998) noted, "It is in search of objects of experience rather than being content with a description of the experiencing subject . . . It calls into question what we take for granted" (p. 83).

Phenomenology seeks to understand the truth of experiences through the consciousness of an individual. It is deeply rooted in the works of philosophers Kant,

Hegel, and Mach but formally introduced by Edmund Husserl (Guignon, 2006; Moran, 2000). Husserl became known as the founding father of phenomenology (Moran, 2000) and believed the key to separating science from philosophy was to look for the meanings that connect our experience with objects (Guignon, 2006). Basic phenomenological principles assert that scientific investigation is valid when new information results from rich description from an understanding of a given experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological method comprises four intertwining steps: the epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). In the first step, the epoché, a Greek word that means to avoid, is about avoiding one's own biases. Husserl described this as setting aside predispositions and prejudices thereby allowing things, events, and people to be seen again as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). Thinking through this process, the researcher was intentional in specifically documenting researcher's bias, which is included in Appendix J. This step is reflective in nature, allowing for preconceptions to freely enter and exit a person's consciousness and be written down or documented.

The second step, phenomenological reduction, is aimed at bringing precision to research findings (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenological researchers want to systematically understand how things come to be or an experience as it is. "Through the medium of language, one is able to communicate to others the objects of consciousness to which one is present, precisely as they are presented" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 241). The description "leads to deeper layers of meaning" through an "interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96).

The steps of phenomenological reduction have been described by Moustakas (1994). First the researcher bracketed the focus of the research and set aside preconceived notions. Then, the researcher gave equal value to each statement to allow opportunity to wash the experience back and forth to determine the condition of the phenomenon. This led to deletion of repetitive and irrelevant statements. The researcher accomplished this by highlighting every expression and quote relevant to each participant's experience and assigning codes. Remaining statements were grouped into themes thus creating basis for textural description for the phenomenon. The researcher accomplished this by bringing together meaningful units to form invariant constituents. Finally, themes emerged that had not been evident previously.

Imaginative variation, the third step of the phenomenological method, is the process of finding meanings through different perspectives, roles, and functions (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed the researcher to construct structural themes and descriptions from textual meanings from the essence of an experience. To validate core themes, the researcher revisited recordings to compare to the transcripts for accuracy. Significant statements and themes were recorded as textural description of "what" the participants experienced in their transition from elementary to middle school.

The final step, synthesis of meanings and essences, brings the fundamental structural and textural descriptions into a combined statement from the experiences of an entire phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). The researcher put together a composite written description of the phenomenon, which incorporated the structural and textural descriptions. The essence of the phenomenon was presented representing the beliefs,

attitudes, and perspectives of middle school students experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

This study considered Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its application to middle school transition programs. How can schools create a successful transition program model that both implements research-based transition theories such as Schlossberg's theory while also incorporating essential elements that students find necessary? One of the core results of this qualitative study was to propose guidance for practicing administrators, educators, and school counselors to answer this question.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory describes a model for understanding transitions. This model has three parts to understanding a transition:

1. Approaching Transitions – identifying a transition and how much it will change a person's life as well as where the individual is in their transition process,

2. Taking Stock – examining resources for coping with a transition (the 4 S System), and

3. Taking Charge – taking an inventory of resources and strengthening those resources.

(Anderson et al., 2012)

The 4 S System identifies four sets of factors that influence a person's ability to adapt to a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. A phenomenological approach was used to understand students' experience making the transition into middle school. The application of this phenomenological study allowed the researcher to explore

students' perception of the situation. By examining students' lived experiences, the researcher was able to identify personal attributes that students identified within themselves that allowed them to make a positive transition to middle school. The phenomenological research approach allowed students to share supports they experienced when transitioning from elementary to middle school, and also identify areas where they perceived a lack of support. For this phenomenological study, focus groups were utilized to identify strategies students noted would have been helpful when making the transition from elementary to middle school. Schlossberg's 4 S System was utilized in the design of focus group questions for this study in order to analyze the relationship between situation, self, support, and strategies and students' lived experiences transitioning to middle school.

Participants

Participants for this research study included sixth grade students and one middle school counselor at Cheney Middle School (CMS). Within CMS, sixth grade students were organized into four interdisciplinary teams. Research for this study was conducted specifically with one sixth grade team, which consisted of 87 students.

Student-Written Reflections

The research consisted of two forms of data collection: written responses and audio-recorded focus group sessions. Prior to conducting the focus group sessions, the researcher provided students access to focus group questions so students could write out responses. The same questions were asked in each focus group session. Written responses were collected by the researcher at the completion of each focus group session and transcribed utilizing a hired transcriptionist.

Student Focus Groups

The research consisted of four sets of focus group sessions with five different focus groups. Focus groups were chosen by the researcher to engage students in more meaningful conversation and reflection about their transition to middle school. The focus group structure was designed specifically to promote high levels of student engagement, and to establish thick, rich description throughout the focus group sessions. Focus group sessions were structured so that 6th grade students were organized into small groups of four to five students at a table. At each table, a set of questions was provided for students to answer. During the first focus group session, the researcher reviewed with student participants the process for focus group participation. Students had a structured amount of time of five minutes to talk with the four or five other students at their table and respond to posted questions. In each group, one student was assigned to record the group's conversation. After five minutes, each group rotated clockwise to the next table to answer the next set of questions. This process continued until all groups answered the questions posted at each table. Focus group sessions were audio-recorded. Student participants were not asked to give or provide their name and are not identified in any manner in the written and/or audio recordings. A visual representation of the structure for focus group sessions is outlined in Figure 1.

Students randomly organized into 5 groups at the start of the Focus Group Session.
1. Group 1 started at Question 1
2. Group 2 started at Question 2
3. Group 3 started at Question 3
4. Group 4 started at Question 4
5. Group 5 started at Question 5
Each group had 5 minutes at their initial question to answer the question.
At completion of 5 minutes, entire group rotated to next question.
Process continued until all group members answered all 5 questions.

Figure 1. Study Design Graphic Representation.

School Counselor-Written Reflections

A CMS school counselor was invited to be present for each focus group session. During focus group sessions, the CMS school counselor was asked to reflect on questions that identify his or her understanding of student transitional experiences as well as his or her reactions to student responses. At the completion of each focus group session, the researcher collected the written reflections. The school counselor was not asked to identify his or her name on the reflection. Of the four focus group sessions, the school counselor was only in attendance for one session. Therefore, data from the school counselor was not analyzed by the researcher.

Participant Selection

Access to student participants was conducted through purposeful selection to achieve a balanced representation of gender among participants. To begin participant selection, the researcher met with the assistant secondary superintendent for West Fargo Public Schools to obtain permission for the study. After approval from the assistant secondary superintendent, administration at Cheney Middle School in West Fargo was contacted for building-level approval. A statement of purpose for the study, description of research and clarification of procedures, confidentiality, and risks and benefits of the study was provided to Cheney administration. CMS administration identified one of the four interdisciplinary teams for the research study. The researcher met with the interdisciplinary team and provided a statement of purpose for the study, description of research and clarification of procedures, confidentiality, and risks and benefits of the study. The meeting concluded with questions, answers, and an outline of the next steps. At the time of the research study, 87 students were on this interdisciplinary team. Of the 87 invited participants, 20 agreed to participate in the study. This included both parent/guardian consent and student consent to participate.

Selection of the CMS school counselor was dependent on the school building's portfolio assignments. Portfolio assignments included specific building-level initiatives, working with grade level teams and teachers, as well as student caseload assignments, which were assigned alphabetically by last name. There were four school counselors on staff at Cheney Middle School. One school counselor worked specifically with the transition from elementary to middle school as outlined in the portfolio assignment; therefore, that professional was invited to all four of the focus group sessions.

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Site Selection

Site selection for this study was West Fargo Public School District (WFPS). WFPS was the third largest school district in North Dakota in 2017, serving 10,573 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade (West Fargo Public Schools, 2017). WFPS had 13 elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, and one alternative high school. At the time of the study, enrollment in WFPS included 5,340 elementary students Grades K-5 and 5,115 secondary school students Grades 6-12 (West Fargo Public Schools, 2017).

Cheney Middle School and Liberty Middle School were the only two middle schools in the WFPS district. WFPS had been chosen for this research study due to its large size and diverse student population. Within WFPS, research for this study was conducted only at Cheney Middle School. Table 1 shows CMS's student demographics.

Table 1. Cheney Middle School Demographics. Adapted from "Enrollment Summary" (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

Grade Level	Total in Grade	Male	Female	Asian	African American	Caucasian	Hispanic	Native American	Pacific Islander
6	371	184	187	17	61	266	13	13	1
7	389	182	207	7	80	271	15	15	1
8	383	184	199	18	64	277	15	9	0
Total	1143	550	593	42	205	814	43	37	2

Research was only conducted at Cheney Middle School to ensure consistency in working with administration, school counselors, parents, teachers, and students. It

allowed for consistent focus group sessions scheduled during Packer Time, or advisory times that CMS had established. Each focus group session included roughly 20 students. It is important to note that the researcher spent time during the first focus group session conducting introductory activities. This included outlining the focus group process for ease of transition in order to maximize time during focus group sessions.

Data Collection

The research study utilized phenomenological inquiry through focus groups and open-ended questions to obtain experiences of middle school students from their frame of reference. According to Vawter (2009), the average middle school student sustains concentrated engagement for approximately 10 to 12 minutes. Therefore, focus group sessions were organized into five smaller groups where each group focused on answering one question at a time at a designated station in the classroom. Each small group had approximately five minutes to answer the question at its station before moving to the next station to answer the next question. The process continued until each small group had answered all five questions. While all focus group questions had been prepared in alignment with Schlossberg's 4 S System, student responses required adjustment of focus group questions for the second, third, and fourth sessions. Appendix A contains a categorized list of questions for all four focus group sessions in alignment with the study's overarching research questions and Schlossberg's 4 S System.

Methods used to collect data include collection of written responses by students to focus group questions, audio recording of focus group sessions, and utilizing open-ended questions. Focus group sessions were recorded in order to capture verbatim language and voice inflections. Transcription of focus group sessions took place to ensure quality

through a hired transcriptionist. Data was collected from the school counselor through

collection of written responses by the school counselor during observation of focus group

sessions. Guide questions were provided for school counselors to use during focus group

sessions (Appendix B). There was no identifiable information on written responses or

audio recordings. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher stored all collected data in a

locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. In addition, the researcher saved

audio recordings and transcripts on a secure password-protected computer and backed

them up on a secure external hard drive in the researcher's home office. Only the

dissertation advisor, qualitative committee advisor, and researcher had access to the data.

This method corresponds directly to phenomenological orientation and qualitative

research design and was used intending to understand students' personal experiences of

transitioning to middle school.

Introduction of Study to Participants and Confidentiality

To introduce the study to participants and maintain confidentiality of participants,

the researcher mailed out letters to parents and students (Appendix C). Letters were also

sent to teachers and school counselors (Appendix D) to introduce the study and present

participant rights. Also, informed consent forms (Appendix E) were sent to identified

students and their parents describing the study and asking for parents' signatures if they

agreed to allow their child(ren) to participate. The parent letter included an introduction

of the researcher, stated the purpose of the study, described the importance of the

research study, and drew the parent's attention to the consent form. The consent form

clarified procedures and explained confidentiality, risks, and benefits of participation in

the study. The consent form described any risk to participants and also informed parents

of their child(ren)'s option to withdraw from the study at any time. If a child would withdraw from the study in the middle of the study, the child's data would be destroyed. The letter also informed participants of the focus group session dates, times, and location.

To describe the research study and maintain confidentiality of the school counselor, the researcher sent out letters (see Appendix D) to potential school counselor participants. Letters included an introduction about the researcher, stated the purpose of the study, and described the importance of the research. An accompanying informed consent form (Appendix F) clarified procedures and also described confidentiality measures, risks, and benefits of participation. The informed consent form outlined any risk to participants. It also informed school counselors of their option to withdraw from the study at any time. If counselors would withdraw from the study, their data would be destroyed. The letter also informed participants of focus group session dates, times, and location.

For this study, parents, students, and school counselors had the opportunity to opt out of participation. Elements of the informed consent (see Appendix E and Appendix F) included who was conducting the study, why the participants were chosen, purpose of the study, time commitment, benefits to be expected, potential risks and how they would be managed, voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality measures, debriefing methods, contacts for questions, and a copy of the informed consent for the participants' records. Once the researcher received signed consent forms, follow up letters (Appendix G and Appendix H) were sent to participants confirming the dates of focus group sessions. Before starting focus groups, students were given assent forms (Appendix I) to sign showing that they agreed to participate.

Focus Group Questions

The focus group questions reflected Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the four sets of factors: situation, self, support, and strategies. These factors influence a person's ability to adapt to a transition. Each round of focus group sessions included five questions, one question from each of the four factors. As part of the focus group sessions, one CMS school counselor was present along with the researcher. The researcher provided the school counselor questions for reflection during focus group sessions and collected these reflections after each round of focus group sessions to provide additional research.

Data Analysis

Written reflections and focus group sessions were collected and transcribed. For the phenomenological study, the researcher utilized the Moustakas (1994) method of analysis, which consists of six steps: (a) begin with a full description of participant's personal experiences, (b) create a list of significant statements, (c) group the significant statements into "meaning units" or themes, (d) write textural description, (e) write structural description, and (f) write a composite description, which incorporates the textural and structural descriptions and represents the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher analyzed the data using Atlas.ti. This software is a method for organizing and coding qualitative data. Table 2 provides a diagram of how data was analyzed in each step.

Table 2. Data Analysis Procedure (Adapted from Moustakas, 1994).

Procedure	Product
Horizontalization – listing expression	Every expression and quote relevant to each participants experience were highlighted and assigned a code
Meaningful units	Horizons organized into meaningful units
Clustering and thematizing	Meaningful units brought together to form invariant constituents. The clustered and invariant constituents become core themes of the participants' experience
Textural description	Description of what the participants experienced – verbatim examples from focus group sessions
Structural description	Description of how the participants experience the phenomenon – built from textural descriptions
Composite textural and structural descriptions	Bring to light the essence of the phenomenon, which represents the study participants

To begin analysis, the researcher read the transcripts multiple times to capture

participants' meaning as comprehensively as possible. The researcher then began

highlighting significant statements, sentences, and quotes in each transcript and created

preliminary groups. Through this process, the researcher engaged in horizontalization of

which Moustakas (1994) notes, "we consider each of the horizons and the textural

qualities that enable us to understand an experience" (p. 95). Treating each expression

equally allows various themes to emerge and bring forth a fresh perspective (Creswell,

2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Meaningful units were then clustered into themes, forming invariant constituents.

These are the unique qualities of the experience that stand out (Moustakas, 1994), and

themes from the participants' experience emerge. To validate core themes, the researcher revisited recordings to compare to the transcripts for accuracy. Significant statements and themes were recorded as textural description of "what" the participants experienced in their transition from elementary to middle school. These included verbatim examples from the participants.

The next step in the data analysis process involved writing a description of "how" the participants experienced their transition from elementary to middle school. According to Moustakas (1994), this is "an extensive description of the textures of what appears and is given…to describe *how* the phenomenon is experienced" (p. 78). Finally, a composite description was written of the phenomenon, which incorporated the structural and textural descriptions. This step "provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). The essence of the phenomenon was presented representing the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of middle school students experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school.

All focus groups were recorded with permission and transcribed. The transcripts were read by the researcher, and meaningful units were coded and entered into Atlas.ti. During the process of horizontalization, a total of 134 meaningful units or codes were developed through analysis of the focus group transcripts. After rereading the transcripts and completing numerous queries to validate the data, 134 meaningful units were reduced to 95. Of those meaningful units, 21 invariant constituents were formed. From those 21 remaining invariant constituents, seven core themes or findings emerged capturing the students' experiences of their transition from elementary to middle school. Seventeen of

the 20 students expressed similar experiences, which constituted saturation. Following analysis of the data, it was determined that each of the seven core themes contained experiences from all 20 students.

Validation Techniques

Trustworthiness refers to the extent in which the phenomenon described accurately represents what the participants share in the study. Creswell (1998) recommends that researchers engage in at least two of the following techniques to ensure trustworthiness: (a) prolonged engagement, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarification of research bias, (f) member checking, (g) rich and thick description, and (h) external audits. For this study, the researcher utilized peer review, rich and thick description, and clarification of research bias. The researcher also validated how the focus group sessions were recorded, the amount of time in the field, and the focus group session schedule. Finally, the researcher utilized a reflective approach using methods of questioning or levels of inference (low inference vs. high inference questioning).

Peer Review

The researcher utilized a peer reviewer to examine transcripts and interpretations for potential researcher bias and assess interpretations for a level of confidence in interpretations. The peer reviewer was first provided copies of transcripts as well as a copy of the code list or meaningful units. Then the peer reviewer was provided a list of invariant constitutes for review of interpretations.

Rich and Thick Description

Thick description was utilized by the researcher to provide an understanding of the direct lived experience of the students. Thick description is referred to as describing and probing the "intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action" (Glesne, 1999, p. 22). Focus group questions were developed with the purpose of probing students' meanings and context of their transition from elementary to middle school in relation to Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the four sets of factors: situation, self, support, and strategies. Long term involvement and intensive focus group sessions enabled the researcher to collect rich data and data that was detailed enough to provide a full picture of what was happening (Maxwell, 2013). Focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, providing detailed personal accounts of students' lived experience of their transition from elementary to middle school. Thick and rich description and extensive use of quotes increased transferability or whether the results of this study can be generalized to others in a similar context or situation (Creswell, 2013).

Clarification of Research Bias

Focus groups were audiotaped using individual voice recorders. After each focus group, the recording was immediately uploaded to a password-protected Google Drive. The recorded focus group sessions were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. The transcripts were stored in the same password-protected Google Drive. The participants were not identifiable in the audio recordings or transcripts. The audio recordings were deleted from the individual recorders after being uploaded. Personal memos were stored in a password-protected Microsoft Word document on the researcher's personal

computer. Writing personal memos allowed the researcher to capture insights and concerns during the study (Fischer 2009; Kingdon, 2005) and provided a record of potential bias and predispositions. This allowed the researcher to identify if the researcher's bias affected the study.

Focus groups were scheduled consistently during Packer Time on each Thursday of the week for five weeks including the first introductory week session. Student participants engaged in low inference questioning, which led into high inference questioning during focus group sessions.

Summary

In summary, Chapter III provided a detailed description of this study's research methodology. A qualitative methodology was used to examine the experiences of middle school students' transitions from elementary to middle school. The participant sample comprised 20 students from one sixth grade team at Cheney Middle School. Data was collected through recording of five focus group sessions and analyzed using Atlas.ti. In Chapter IV, research results are presented.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the lived experiences of middle school students and their transition from elementary to middle school. The collective core, of the students' experiences moving from elementary to middle school, was examined to uncover what textural and structural elements are needed to strengthen, sustain, and enhance effective elementary to middle school transitional practices. The findings are reported out according to textural and structural themes, developed through meaningful units, and categorized by themes during the data analysis process.

Findings

Twenty sixth grade students participated in four focus group sessions to discover the essence of their lived experiences transitioning from elementary to middle school. The data presented in this chapter is verbatim from audio recordings. Findings that include more than six student quotations are presented in a list format for ease of reading. Other findings with less than six student quotations are formatted in paragraph form. The participants recently experienced the transition from elementary to middle school in the 2017-18 school year. Although students in this study transitioned from different elementary schools in the district to the same middle school, their perspectives were often similar.

The data and findings from this study are reported out in sections, which are organized into seven themes. Three themes are textural, and four are structural. Student quotes are included as evidence. Quotes included are representations of the students' perceptions of their lived transition experiences from elementary to middle school.

The three textural themes that emerged from the analysis of the data included: (a) school supports, (b) family supports, and (c) student concerns about the transition to middle school. The four structural themes that emerged from the data analysis included: (a) support, (b) personal skills, (c) academic skills, and (d) expectations. Figure 2 presents a data map illustrating the development of both textural and structural themes.
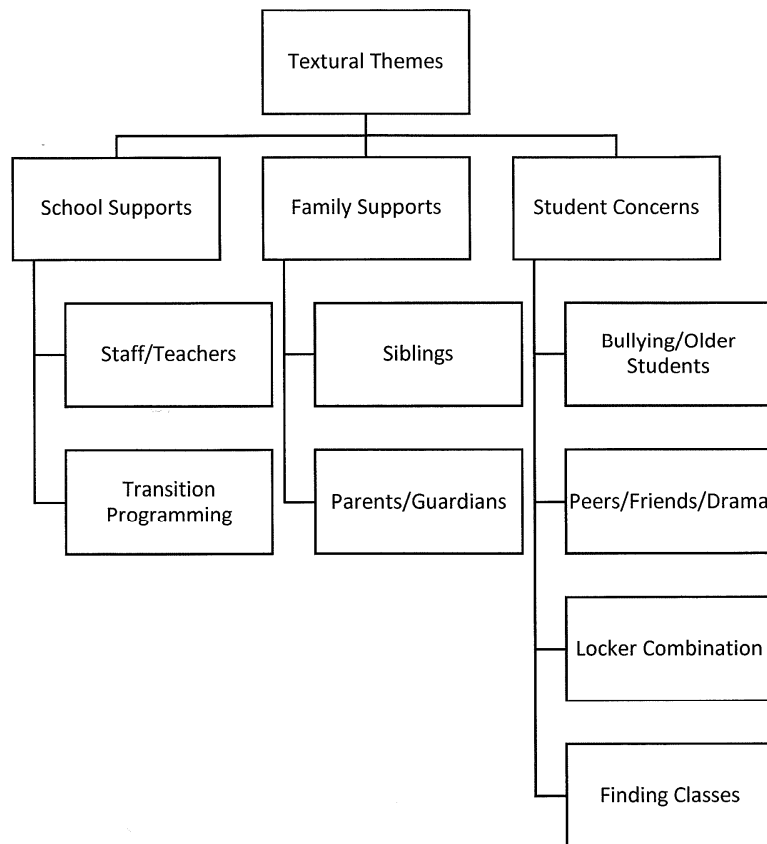
Figure 2. Textural Theme Data Map.
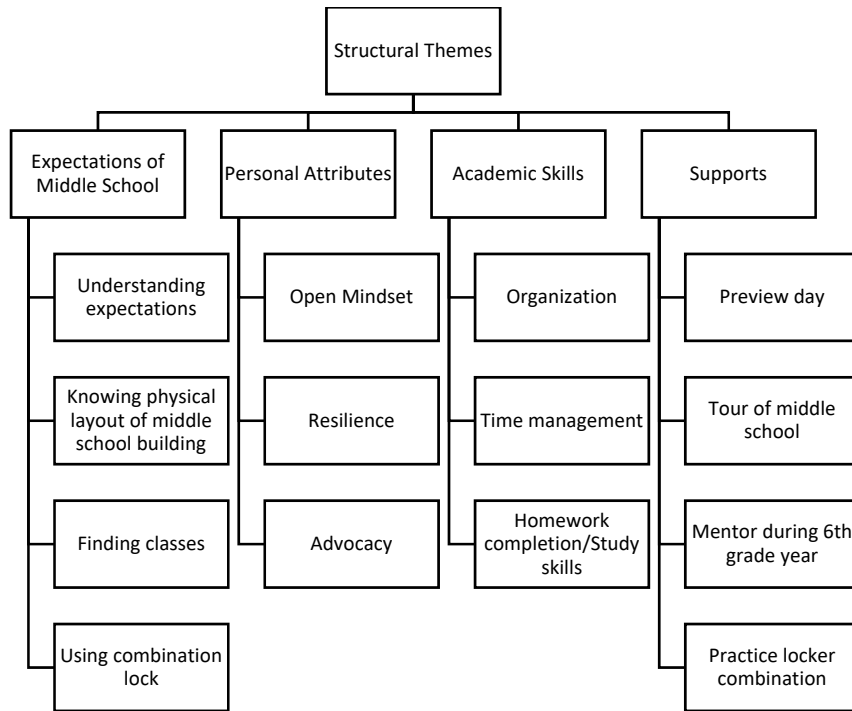
Figure 3. Structural Theme Data Map.

Composite Textural Descriptions

After meaningful units were clustered into themes, the meaningful units and themes were synthesized into description of the texture (*the what*) of the experience. The themes, invariant constituents, examples of meaningful units, and examples of sample quotes are identified in narrative form in Table 3. A discussion follows each textural theme.

Textural Theme One: School Supports

When students were asked to describe their experiences transitioning from elementary to middle school, the emphasis of school supports and current transition practices were two of the strongest themes that emerged. The students described methods

Table 3. Textural Themes, Invariant Constituents, Meaningful Units, and Sample Quotes.

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
School Supports	Staff/Teachers	School staff support, knowing school staff, meet 6th grade teachers ahead of time, asking for adult support, elementary counselor lessons	My teachers helped me because…when I asked them a question, where my class was they guided me to that specific area
	Transition Programming	5th classroom visits: CMS counselors, 5th classroom visits: CMS students, music preview, parent night, registration day	6th grade registration helped me know where my locker was, showed me around the school
Family Supports	Siblings	Exposure to middle school practices, finding classes, knowing the physical space, people as supports, receiving helpful advice	My sister helped me with the transition because she showed me my…where to find my classes and told me about what to do at the school
	Parents/Guardians	Parent night, exposure to middle school practices, finding classes, knowing the physical space, people as supports, receiving helpful advice	My mom and dad really helped me. They told me that it was going to be just fine and that I might not even know that I changed
Student Concerns	Bullying/Older Students	Be kind, concerned about bullies, good behavior, getting along with peers, worried about older students	The only thing I worried about was either bullies…and maybe getting laughed at once in a while

Table 3 cont.

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
	Peers/Friends/Drama	Concerns about friendships, concerns with making friends, drama with peers, friend support, people as supports	In middle school now, you have to find the right group and the right influences on you
	Locker/Combination	Concerns with locker, practice lock	The thing that I worried about when moving from 5th to 6th grade was that I was gonna forget my locker combination or become lost
	Finding Classes	Concerns about getting lost, concerns about knowing school, concerns with middle school schedule, finding classes, knowing the physical space, late to class, study class locations ahead of time	What I was worried about when moving from 5th grade to 6th grade was not knowing where my classes were

in which staff, teachers, and transition programming elements supported their transition. They provided examples of each during their transition from elementary to middle school.

Staff/teachers. The students noted that a variety of school staff supported their transition including 5th grade school counselors and middle school counselors. One student noted specifically that "the counselors in elementary school helped me because it kind of calmed me down about 6th grade. The middle school counselors kind of showed us what 6th grade was going to be like."

Most frequently noted by students was the level of support the 5th and 6th grade teachers provided during the transitional experience. Students stated that 5th grade teachers supported them in various ways. "My 5th grade teacher helped by like giving us more…[1]giving my class more of accustomed to middle school," and "my elementary teachers and my mom helped because they encouraged me to try new things." Providing 5th grade students opportunities to practice skills needed in 6th grade was a theme that emerged in the research to help students be better prepared for 6th grade.

Student participants believed their 6th grade teachers were an essential level of support for them at the beginning of 6th grade. "My teachers helped me because they helped me…when I asked them a question…where my class was. They guided me to that specific area." Students agreed that teachers supported them with advice and finding classes. "Because I didn't know where to go on the first day and I had to like keep asking a bunch of adults, a bunch of people…ummm…a lot of people where to go." Another student said, "I asked where to go from teachers and they helped me." Finally, students collectively agreed that teachers were a trustworthy source for assistance noting that "you just have to realize that teachers were kids too. So they've probably gone through the same problems as you have." These experiences exemplify that 6th grade staff play an important role in supporting students in their transition to middle school.

The role counselors and elementary teachers played in supporting students during their 5th grade year allowed students to begin to identify middle school expectations. Students noted that their level of understanding the middle school expectations was very

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[1] The ellipses (…) signify a pause in the conversation.

basic and could have been improved through more intentional transitional activities. They also noted that 6th grade staff and teachers were influential in supporting them with advice and physically navigating the school. Students shared that they received support from 6th grade staff and teachers by asking them questions.

Transition practices. Students believed that current transitional practices supported their elementary to middle school transition but indicated that more transition practices could be beneficial. Visiting the middle school during 5th grade for the music preview day was identified as a positive transition practice. "The 5th grade visit to Cheney Middle School presentation…helped me pick what instrument I wanted," and another student noted, "5th grade visits to Cheney Middle School really helped me because it helped me choose what music to do. Most of the time it was about music though, so, yeah." Students agreed that the music preview day focused solely on music class options. The music preview day was a transition activity provided to 5th grade students during the school day. Fifth graders were transported to CMS to listen to presentations about music class options and instruments. It provided students an opportunity to better understand expectations around middle school music.

Most students attended 6th grade registration, but it was not mandatory. Students who attended agreed this transition event was beneficial in helping them make a positive transition to middle school. They noted, "visiting the middle school helped me most when moving from elementary to middle school because I didn't know where my other classes were. And I found them when I came." Additional students explained, "what helped me with 6th grade registration was knowing where to go and what was where." Students shared that 6th grade registration not only helped them identify where their

classes were located, but registration also allowed the students to find their locker and practice their locker combination. "6th grade registration helped me know where my locker was," while another students noted, "6th grade registration helped me cause I played with my locker and I figured out my combination before school starts." Finally, one student shared that "6th grade registration was cool to see what team I was on. And where my locker was."

Providing time in the middle school building allowed the students to locate their lockers and practice their locker combination. Students identified both finding their lockers and practicing the combination as concerns when making the transition to middle school. This experience also provided them with a better understanding of where their classes were located in the building. Not only did their experience with 6th grade registration allow them to see the physical layout of the middle school, it also helped students understand what to expect when navigating their class schedules by allowing them to practice walking from class to class.

In 5th grade, students experienced counselor lessons specific to transitioning in which 5th grade counselors, middle school counselors, middle school principals, and middle school students visited 5th grade elementary classrooms. Students believed that the information shared by middle school staff and students was valuable in helping them define what middle school would be like. One student shared that the "presentation by CMS principals, counselors…um…it was good to know cause they were telling us what school was like and what it was going to be like when we came here." Other students echoed the same perspective. "The elementary school counseling lesson when I was in 5th grade. It was nice to actually hear what it was like for an adult at CMS and like their

duties that they have to do. And then with the students, when they came to 5th grade, I thought it was cool because I got to hear what middle school was like in a 6th grader's mind." Another student shared, "we had 8th graders from our school come over here and teach us some stuff about the school. And like tell us like what problems they had and how they fixed them and stuff like that." Supporting the same belief, a student stated, "I think the visits in 5th grade helped me the most because…aammm…it was kind of better to have it from a student perspective like at the moment. Because then they…it didn't make it as scared and they told us how fun it was. And they like told us…gave us some advice on what to do, like with some of the problems that you might have." These experiences show the importance of elementary students identifying middle school expectations through multiple voices. By providing elementary students an opportunity to hear from current middle school students, current middle school staff, as well as elementary staff, 5th graders are able to begin to develop ideas or concepts of what the middle school structure and setting will be like.

One student shared specifically the role that the elementary school counselor played in counselor lessons in 5th grade. "The elementary counselor lesson, I don't know…I could understand what they meant more." The student's relationship and familiarity with the elementary school counselor allowed a connection on a different level. Middle school counselor lessons incorporated a variety of topics including stations for transition topics. As one student noted, "the middle school counselor/student lessons I remember where they did different stations and the station that helped me the most was practicing a lock." These counselor lessons supported students in creating a basic understanding of what to expect in middle school. Students noted that many of them

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connected with the information and advice presented by current middle school students during the counselor lessons. Having information presented by a current middle school student enhanced their understanding of middle school in a different way.

Discussion for Textural Theme One: School Supports

Throughout all of the focus groups, students repeatedly shared common beliefs about effective school supports during their transition from elementary to middle school. The students agreed that school staff and teachers played a key role in supporting their transition from elementary to middle school by giving them advice about middle school, showing them what middle school would be like, and assisting them during their 6th grade year.

Students believed that transitional programming practices were essential to supporting their transition to middle school. The students believed that attending 6th grade registration allowed them to become more familiar with their schedules, navigating the physical structure of the school, finding their classes and lockers, and knowing their team of teachers. Students believed that the music preview day assisted them with understanding the 6th grade music programming, which included choosing a music class and instrument. Students indicated that they were placed in specific music classes depending on what instrument they decided to play. Students who did not choose to play an instrument could either decide to take choir or be placed in general music class. The students maintained that additional programming could help them become more comfortable and familiar with middle school expectations like finding classes and using locker combinations school.

Textural Theme Two: Family Supports

The students perceived family support specifically from siblings, parent(s), or guardian(s) as an influential encouragement in making the transition from elementary to middle school. They believed the quality of their transitional experience was improved by the advice and support of family members.

Siblings. Students who received advice and support from a sibling believed that support to be influential in their transition to middle school. One student shared, "my brother helped me the most when moving from elementary to middle school because…he brought me to all my classes and helped me with my locker." Another student shared, "my mom and sisters helped me the most when moving from elementary school to middle school because they calmed me down and talked about it." Yet again, a student noted, "my sister…helped me the most when moving from elementary to middle school because she helps me with friends, lockers, and more stuff." Another student echoed, "my older sister helped me the most with when moving from elementary to middle school. She was in, a 6th grader last year. So, she helped me the most because she told me the important things. What I should do and not to do. And how to control myself." The students with older siblings believed that receiving advice from their sibling or having their sibling help them with things like finding classes, locker, and making friends helped them feel more comfortable and confident in their transition to middle school. For example, a student shared, "my sister also helped me on tips, what to do and what to say in middle school. And how to act and react." Another noted, "I talked with my sister a lot to see what it was like being in middle school since she was older than me." These

examples demonstrate the influence and impact that advice from an older sibling has on elementary students embarking on the transition to middle school.

Parents/guardians. Students perceived support from their parent/guardian to be beneficial in their transition to middle school. They noted that support from their parent/guardian included advice, asking questions, assistance in finding classes, assistance in using a combination lock, navigating the physical space of the middle school, and social/emotional support. As one student shared, "I talked to my parents about it and they said I would be fine. And they really calmed me down," and another noted, "my mom and dad really helped me. They told me that it was going to be just fine." These examples of parents providing emotional support were noted as beneficial for the students.

Other students believed that the family support they received in finding classes and using their locker was beneficial. "My whole family I guess helped me the most from moving from elementary to middle school because…they like made me…or…showed me where all my classes were. And my sister told me what it was like." Another student shared, "my mom helped me a lot because she helped me with my locker combination. And like I couldn't really get it, but she helped me figure it out. And she had me practice. And it helped a lot." Parental support was found to be beneficial for students; students felt that parents or guardians were a trusted source that provided feedback and assistance even if the students experienced difficulty with the transition to middle school.

Discussion for Textural Theme Two: Family Supports

Students believed the quality of their transitional experience was improved through the support of family members. They credited both siblings and

parents/guardians as effective support personnel. Because of the support of siblings, parents, and guardians, participants were able to ask questions about the transition to middle school and receive trusted advice and support. Students noted that these family support personnel helped them to feel more comfortable and confident about the transition to middle school. Students also believed that the support their family members provided helped them find their classes, navigate the physical structure of the school, and become familiar with their combination lock.

Textural Theme Three: Student Concerns

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of data was student concerns about middle school. When students were asked what they worried about when moving to middle school, four major topics emerged in the data. The topics included bullying and older students, getting along with peers as well as friendships and drama, learning how to use a combination lock, and finally finding classes.

Bullying/older students. Students expressed concerns about being bullied in middle school. They also expressed concern about being around older students in the middle school setting. One student shared, "I worried about getting bullied," while others echoed similar concerns, "I worried about was either bullies…and maybe getting laughed at once in a while," and "you're with like…a bunch of kids and you don't want to make like the wrong friend. So…cause they could be really mean." Students expanded on this by specifically noting concerns about being around older students in the middle school. "Something I felt worried about before coming to Cheney was 8th graders because they're tall and scary." Specifically, students questioned how often they would be around older students in the middle school setting. For example, "if the older kids were in our

schedule a lot. Because that kind of scared me." These experiences indicated that students anticipated being around older students in the middle school setting and feeling uncomfortable or intimidated by their presence.

Friends. Friendships were regarded by students as a significant concern when transitioning to middle school. Several students shared concern about the ability to make friends in middle school. "Something I felt worried about or had questions about before coming to Cheney was how to meet friends because I didn't know if I had the confidence to go up and say, hey, be my friends," and another noted, "I worried about…not making friends." Students expressed concern about finding the right friendship groups in order to be successful in middle school. One student stated,

> Making friends in elementary school was really easy. Cause you could just go over to somebody and say, hey, we're friends now. But in middle school it's super hard cause there's like three grades. Some of them can be really rude, some of them can be super nice, and you've got to choose the right people.

Another student emphasized the importance of choosing friends that will have a positive influence. "In middle school now, you have to find the right group and the right influences on you." Another student shared, "and it's kind of hard to make friends here. Because you got to…first you got to choose the right ones, that are nice. They're not judgeful. They can't be rude or rough or mean in any way." Finally, students expressed concern about maintaining the friendships they had in elementary school and not being able to foster those friendships in middle school. "I worry about…not having the same classes with my friends. Not being in the same team with my friends." Another student echoed, "something I felt worried about or had questions about before coming to Cheney

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was if I…if my…if my friends were gonna be in the same team as me. Because I didn't think I'd make real good friends, other friends, if I wasn't in the same team as my friends." It was evident that students wanted to maintain friendships from elementary school and expressed worry about maintaining those friendships during the transition to middle school.

Students expressed concern about the ability to maintain elementary friendships in middle school if they were not placed on the same team as their elementary friends, since they would not have classes together if not assigned to the same team. Making friends in middle school as well as maintaining prior friendships from elementary school were both concerns identified by students. It was evident that the transition to middle school has a direct impact on students' friendships and peer relationships. The consolidation of multiple elementary schools into one larger middle school means students are surrounded with numerous unfamiliar same-age peers. At this stage in their adolescent development, peer relationships and interactions are emphasized. The students' concerns about maintaining former friendships and making new friends align with research in this area.

Locker combination. Being able to use a combination lock on a locker surfaced as a significant concern identified by students. Students shared that this was not a procedure they were accustomed to in elementary school. "The thing that I worried about when moving from 5th to 6th grade was that I was gonna forget my locker combination." Another student shared, "Something I felt worried about or had questions from before coming to Cheney was…um…how to work my lock because we didn't have locks in 5th grade. And it was my first year using them." This concern was echoed again when a student explained their concern:

Something I felt worried about or had questions about before coming to Cheney was my lock. Because I thought I would forget it. And I would never get into my locker. And I wouldn't get back all my value…valuable stuff.

Similarly, another student shared, "my combination on my lockers. Because I thought I would not get it open and would never get it open." And finally, "I wish I would have known that opening lockers was so hard." It was evident that students understood they would be required to utilize a combination lock in middle school. Consistently, students expressed concern about their ability to remember their combination and use the combination lock successfully to get their locker open.

Finding classes. The ability to navigate the middle school building, understand the physical layout, and find classes were the highest concerns expressed by students in their transition to middle school. "What I was worried about when moving from 5th grade to 6th grade was not knowing where my classes were." Several students noted the middle school building was larger than their previous elementary school. "Something I felt worried about or had questions about before coming to Cheney was how would I find my classes. Because Cheney is a lot bigger than my elementary school." Because of the struggle to find classes, students shared that they were concerned about being late to class and getting into trouble. "I worried about me losing class…or losing where my classes were and…ahhh…getting late to my class." Another student shared the concern that, "all my classes scattered around the whole school. And would I have time to get to them. And I felt worried about getting late to my classes and having a bunch of tardies. And then also finding out that we had detentions and lunch detentions that also worried me too." This common concern about getting in trouble for being late to class was echoed by

other students. "Something I felt worried about or had questions about before we come…before coming to Cheney was being late to classes because I thought I would get into trouble." It was evident that students were concerned about consequences teachers would assign if they were late to class. Prior to making the transition to middle school, and even shortly after making the transition to middle school, students could not identify consequences for tardiness. This directly supports another theme identified in this study; students did not adequately understand middle school expectations prior to making the transition or during the transitional experience. In this study, along with identifying a lack of understanding middle school expectations, students identified a lack of familiarity of the physical space and class locations as two main factors in being late to class.

Discussion for Textural Theme Three: Student Concerns

The third theme that emerged was student concerns about the transition to middle school. Students in this study were concerned about bullying and older students, friends, using a combination lock, and finding their classes in the school. Students shared that they worried about seeing and being around older students during the day in middle school and being bullied by their peers.

They also expressed concerns regarding friendships in middle school, noting that it is more difficult to make friends in a large middle school, specifically in the 6th grade. Students also recognized the importance of making friends with people who will have positive influences on them or finding friends in the right group of peers. Many students noted their concern about maintaining friendships from elementary school and wanting to be on the same team or have the same classes as those friends.

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Using a combination lock on the school locker was a concern identified by students. Students noted this was not a requirement in elementary school, so it was not a practice that they were familiar with. The ability to remember their combination was a concern, as well as how to successfully open the combination lock. Finally, students shared a big concern was finding classes in the middle school building because they did not want to get in trouble for being late to class.

Conclusion: Textural Theme

The essence of the textural themes related directly to the areas of support and situation within Schlossberg's 4 S System. Students described what they experienced during their transition from elementary to middle school. Students discussed the social nature in which they experienced various forms of support. The essence of support was established through school supports and family supports. Another textural theme that emerged was students' concerns about transitioning to middle school. Students' concerns related to the situation factor within Schlossberg's 4 S System, by connecting students' perceptions of the change to be bad or worrisome, and identifying stressors that perpetuate challenges during the transition.

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Composite Structural Descriptions

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The textural descriptions were examined from different perspectives from which the description of the structure (*the how*) was arrived. Four structural composite themes were derived from student participants describing the context or the setting that influenced their experiences transitioning from elementary to middle school, presenting a picture of what conditions affected their transition experience. Data analysis revealed four composite structural themes: (a) student expectations of middle school, (b) personal

attributes, (c) academic skills, and (d) supports. Structural themes, invariant constituents,

meaningful units, and sample quotes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Structural Themes, Invariant Constituents, Meaningful Units, and Sample Quotes.

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
Student expectations of middle school	Understanding middle school expectations	Concerns about knowing school, concerns with middle school schedule, exposure to middle school practices, worried about getting in trouble, concerns with lunch, good behavior	I wish I would have known my teachers. So that I know what they expect and everything like that
	Knowing the physical layout of the building and finding classes	Bigger school building, knowing the physical space, concerns about getting lost, finding classes; study class locations ahead of time	I wish I would have known that this school is too big. And I wish I would have known where everything was
	Using combination lock	Concerns with locker, elem: locker, practice lock	The thing that I worried about when moving from 5th to 6th grade was that I was gonna forget my locker combination
Personal Attributes	Open Mindset	Brave; feelings about transition; non-judgmental; positive self-talk – relax; responsible; be kind	Take things easily and not get stressed out so much
	Resilience	Being flexible; changes; have grit; have self-confidence; patience; ability to focus	Try your best because you need to have self-confidence
	Advocacy	Asking for help; receiving helpful advice; risk taking; self-advocacy; self-starter	I asked people questions if I got stuck on something or didn't know what to do

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Table 4 cont.

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
Academic Skills	Organization	Difficulty with organization; be organized	You need to be organized and the way you can do that is by keeping your stuff look neat
	Time Management	Concerns about getting lost; concerns about knowing the school; knowing the physical space; late to class; strategy: time management; time management	In order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to be able to know when their classes starts to they're not late
	Homework Completion/Study Skills	Ability to focus; get homework turned in; homework completed; lots of homework; strategy: studying	I do my homework in Packer Time or right away after school
Supports	Preview day	Registration day; practice day in 5th grade; music preview; meet 6th grade teachers ahead of time; knowing school staff; exposure to middle school practices	I would make a day for kids to spend there. So that they would get used to like kinda what it would be like in 6th grade
	Tour of CMS	Need: tour of middle school; knowing the physical space	Things that could have helped me transition from 5th to 6th grade is a tour so I could know my way better
	Mentor during 6th grade year	Middle school buddy/mentor	Meeting more older kids who had already been to Cheney before would probably be better. Cause I'd know my way around
	Practice locker combination	Concerns with locker; practice lock	I think they should have 6th graders come over and help them with their lockers. Cause they can get really frustrating sometimes

Structural Theme One: Student Expectations of Middle School

A clear understanding of middle school expectations, knowing the location of classes, and how to use a combination lock were perceived by students as precipitating factors for a positive transition. Additionally, understanding and envisioning what middle school would be like was perceived by students as essential to the transition. The students credited middle school counselor lessons in 5th grade and visits from middle school students as effective communication and strategies that helped to define these expectations.

Understanding middle school expectations. Students believed that providing them a clear description of middle school expectations improved their understanding of what the middle school day would be like. One student shared, "something I felt worried about or had questions about before coming to school was wondering…um…if you'd get in trouble for the little things." This supports the idea that elementary students need a clear understanding of what to expect in middle school to help alleviate worry and concern about the transition and middle school expectations. One student shared that the counselor lessons in 5th grade helped to support understanding of middle school expectations. The student shared:

> I think the visits in 5th grade helped me the most because…aammm…it was kind of better to have it from a student perspective like at the moment. Because then they…it didn't make it as scared and they told us how fun it was. And they like told us…gave us some advice on what to do, like with some of the problems that you might have. Other than like the counselor visits. Because the counselor visits

were more like how to deal with bullying and like all the basic stuff kind of. Which was still nice but 5th grade visits were better.

Another student shared, "the visits from the middle schoolers helped me because you get a better way of looking at the school and how it works." In addition, several students believed the middle school student lessons in their 5th grade class were helpful in understanding middle school expectations. "The elementary counselor visits helped because they taught us what middle school would be like and played games with us about middle school." Participating in activities such as games allowed students to become familiar with middle school expectations. "The elementary counselor lessons helped because…well, our counselor did like a jeopardy where we had to answer questions and stuff so it was really fun. And we got to learn more about 5th grade, 6th grade." Other students shared that hands-on activities such as stations during the counselor lessons supported their transition experience. "The middle school counselor/student visits…that helped me when all the students came and did a bunch of different stations with us…like telling us about middle school." These structured activities or stations allowed 5th grade students to gain additional understanding about important middle school concepts and expectations. A student shared, "the middle school counselor/student lessons helped me cause it taught us different things and like about locks and your classes."

Many students believed that their older siblings and/or family members were influential in helping them understand middle school expectations. "My brother helped me switching from 5th grade to 6th grade because he showed me some of…he told me some of the rules." Another student shared, "my mom helped me from moving to elementary school to middle school. Because she told me a lot about middle school and

what it…what to expect". Finally, students believed that any advice from someone older who had experienced middle school to be valuable in helping them understand what to expect. "My friend helped me the most when moving to elementary school because she told me what her sister told her about middle school." Whether the advice was from a middle school student, older sibling or parent, or received from an older sibling through a friend, students believed it was influential in helping them understand what to expect in transitioning to middle school. As one student noted, "knowing my environment, I was able to adapt to it. Kind of like how squid does. I was able to adopt to my environment and perform freely and do all my stuff correctly."

These findings exhibit the importance of the students' ability to identify and envision what middle school will be like. Providing elementary students time to encounter these processes and expectations is essential to making the best transition. For example, providing them time to practice their locker combination enhances their understanding and familiarity with the process. Additionally, walking the students through their class schedules in the middle school could assist them in finding their classrooms and being on time. In fact, students in this study identified wanting more exposure to these middle school expectations. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students gained an understanding of what middle school would be like, primarily through counselor visits in 5th grade and advice and feedback from family supports.

Physical layout of building and finding classes. Students believed an understanding of the physical layout of the middle school building and knowing class location ahead of time were important elements of a successful transition to middle

school. They believed knowing the class locations would help them be successful by ensuring punctuality. For some students, 6th grade registration supported their understanding of identifying where their classes were located. One student noted, "visiting the middle school helped me most when moving from elementary to middle school because I didn't know where my other classes were. And I found them when I came." Another student shared how registration supported them in locating their locker as well as understanding the physical layout of the building. "6th grade registration helped me know where my locker was showed me around the school." Finally, 6th grade registration supported students in understanding on which team they were placed. "The 6th grade registration was cool to see what team I was on." Other students noted that their siblings or parents supported their understanding of where their classes were located. These statements are representative of support provided by siblings and parents during students' middle school transition.

> "My sister in 10th grade helped show me around. And my mom helped show me around. And tell me where I should go. And my cousin helped me know where to go and how to memorize quick ways to get there."

> "My older brother and sister helped me because they've already been to this same middle school. And they helped me like, figure out where my classes were."

> "My brother helped me the most when moving from elementary to middle school because he brought out to meet……he brought me to all my classes and helped me with my locker."

"My brother helped me switching from 5th grade to 6th grade because he showed me some of….he told me some of the rules and he showed me where some of my classes were. Which really helped me find my classes."

"My sister helped me by showing me where the rooms were."

"My dad, my mom, and my older sister helped me by showing me all my classes and where to go."

The unifying theme within the series of quotes was how family members supported students by showing them around the school, and how they helped students find their classes.

Another student shared, "my teachers helped me because they helped me, um…when I asked them a question…where my class was. They guided me to that specific area." Some students shared that they were comfortable asking school staff for support in finding their classes, but not all students were comfortable with that strategy. For example, another student noted, "in middle school, you don't know your teachers yet when you first come here. So you're kind of afraid to ask." Because not all students are comfortable seeking assistance from new middle school staff, it is important for parents/guardians and siblings of students to be available to help. Parents/guardians and siblings are influential because they are already trusted and reliable personnel in the student's life.

Students believed taking extra time to analyze and become familiar with their schedules was another helpful strategy. Students noted that "memorizing my schedule,"

and "looking at my schedule so I knew all my classes," were strategies that supported them in feeling more confident in knowing their class locations. Another student shared, "something that I did to help myself to transition from elementary to middle school was looking at my schedule more closely." Taking extra time with their schedules allowed students to feel more confident. For example, a student noted, "I just memorized where my classes are and me walking with my friends every day to that class, really helped me." Memorizing the class schedule supported this student's confidence. Additionally, the support of friends and peers was identified as an effective strategy by students.

Students shared that studying their schedules, asking for help and/or receiving support from siblings and/or family members, and sixth grade registration were all levels of support. However, the participants also overwhelmingly felt a lack of support in knowing the physical layout of the middle school building and knowing where their classes were located. The following statements are representative of students' feeling a lack of support in knowing the location of classes and understanding the physical layout of the middle school building.

> "It would have been nice to know where all the quarter classes was because I was. On the 1st day I was trying to like look at all the numbers and trying…on the classrooms and trying to find where all the classrooms were."

> "Well there are two floors so it wasn't really that…it's not really easy. Especially during new quarters you have to go find your new quarter class."

"It's sometimes pretty hard. Especially as…when a new quarter is starting. Because you have to go and search and you switch every 55 minutes."

"Now, in middle school, there's a bunch of classes and they're not always next to each other so it's really harder to find your way around."

"It's harder cause there's two floors and they aren't…and your…there's no teacher that will show you where to go."

"It's harder cause there's two floors and they aren't just right there."

"If I could go back in time, I would…ummm…rather…in elementary school go to your different classes on your own. Because then it will teach you how to not get lost. And know how to transition from class to class in middle school."

"If I've already been into the school and I knew where everything was that would have helped me. Cause then I'd know where my classes were and everything."

"What additional things could have helped me transition from 5th to 6th grade? Ummm…someone would show you where to go to your classes and where they are. And how would that help you? Then you were never late for class."

The unifying theme within the series of quotes was how students overwhelmingly believed additional support with finding classes and knowing the physical layout of the

middle school building were necessary. In the statements above, students noted the difficulty in going to and from different levels of the middle school building to find their classes. Students identified the difficulty of switching from class to class each period and not having their classes located in close proximity to one another. They specifically noted that at quarter or semester time when class schedules changed, it was difficult to find their new classes around the building. Students shared that support strategies could include spending more time in the building before the start of school in order to locate classes, having someone show them around to find their classes, and locating new classes prior to schedule changes at quarter or semester time. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students gained an understanding of the physical layout of the middle school building and navigated finding their classes. Students' experienced these through support from family members and school staff and by studying their schedules.

Understanding combination lock. For students to make a successful transition to middle school, support in understanding and practicing how to use a combination lock is required. Students noted that locker use in elementary school was easy. In contrast, they felt it was more difficult in middle school because of the requirement to use a combination lock on lockers. One student shared, "in middle school, it's harder cause you have to remember your combination and open it," while others noted, "I wish I would have known that opening lockers was so hard," and "you have a combination lock and if you forget it, you have to go down to the office and get it. And sometimes it takes a long time to open it."

Students shared that finding opportunities to practice their locker combination supported their understanding of how to use the combination lock. One student noted, "6th grade registration helped me cause I played with my locker and I figured out my combination before school starts." Another student shared, "6th grade registration was like…well, it was really crowded and we got to take our picture. And I played with my lock. It was super, super, super hard to open." Another student noted the importance of school staff as a support with locker combinations: "we couldn't get our lock open so we had to get Mr. Lennon to do it." These examples show that students need multiple opportunities to practice their assigned combination lock prior to starting middle school.

Middle school counselor lessons supported students in their understanding of using a combination lock. "The middle school counselor/student lessons I remember where they did different stations and the station that helped me the most was practicing a lock." While students were not given their assigned combination lock, they practiced with an example lock during these lessons. Other students shared that practicing a combination lock was helpful for their transition to middle school. "Ummm…I practiced a lock at home cause I had one." Giving students additional practice with a combination lock, even if it was not their assigned combination at middle school, supported them in knowing how to utilize a combination lock and enter the combination code.

Another student shared, "my mom helped me a lot because she helped me with my locker combination. And like I couldn't really get it, but she helped me figure it out. And she had me practice. And it helped a lot." Yet another shared, "my two older sisters and my mom helped me with my switch…since we had a combination lock at home, they

helped me practice with that." These statements build on the strategy of giving students

opportunities to understand how to use a combination lock with repetitive practice.

Several students felt that their lack of experience using a combination lock made

the transition to middle school difficult. Unfortunately, not all students had a combination

lock at home to practice or support from parents and siblings. Students shared that using

combination locks in 5th grade would have better prepared them for this expectation in

middle school. One student shared that "having locks on our 5th grade lockers so we

know that it would be like to have locks" would be a support strategy, while another

student noted, "a lock on your locker would help me know what middle school was like

and everything that went for it." This was a common theme expressed by multiple

students in this study as the following statements indicate.

"S1: If you could design the transition from 5th grade to 6th grade, what would

you add to that experience or what would you change?

S2: Ah…we would have locks on our lockers.

S1: In 5th grade?

S2: In 5th grade."

Providing 5th grade students with combination lock practice would allow them to

be introduced to this middle school expectation in a smaller, more structured setting with

teacher support. Students would be allowed to learn the process of entering a combination

code and opening the lock. Students felt giving them this opportunity in 5th grade would

allow them to understand what it would be like in middle school, therefore providing

more realistic expectations. These findings structure the students' experience by

highlighting how students gained an understanding of using a combination lock,

primarily through counselor visits in 5th grade, practice using a combination lock, and advice and feedback from family supports.

Discussion for Structural Theme One: Student Expectations of Middle School

Understanding middle school expectations was perceived as essential in the transition from elementary to middle school. Some students felt they understood clear expectations through the 5th grade counselor lessons, and others understood expectations through advice from an older sibling and/or parent.

Understanding how to use a combination lock was perceived as essential in the transition from elementary to middle school. The students believed that finding opportunities to practice using a combination lock supported their understanding and development of this skill. Some students shared that their level of understanding improved by practicing during the middle school counselor lessons, sixth grade registration, and at home. They believed that another level of support could include utilizing combination locks in fifth grade.

Structural Theme Two: Personal Attributes

Factors that emerged from the data were the need for students to demonstrate and practice personal attributes of resiliency and an open mindset. Additionally, other factors that emerged include the need for communication skills and self-advocacy skills and how these impact transition.

Resilience. Students believed that in order to make a positive transition to middle school they need to have certain qualities. As the students explained these qualities in a variety of ways, the theme of resilience emerged. One student explained that in order for someone to do well in middle school, they have to have "the ability to work hard and

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focus but also like take things easily and not get stressed out so much." Another student

shared, "in order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to have these

qualities, patience and understanding." This theme of resilience was echoed again when a

student noted, "they need to be able to try their best because they need to have self-

confidence." Students described a variety of middle school experiences and expectations

that they needed to be able to work through in order to succeed in middle school. The

students' statements about taking things easily, not getting stressed out too much, and

having self-confidence point toward a necessary level of resiliency in difficult situations

such as conflict, failure, or a lack of understanding in a situation.

Others explained that students making the transition from elementary to middle

school "need to be hard working, kind. They need to be respectful, responsible, and they

need to have rigor, which is working your best, giving 100%," which corresponds with

the theme of resilience and hard work. Another student echoed these same ideas, saying,

"they need to be hard working. And a go getter because it takes a lot of hard work to get

good grades." Another student believed in the importance of resiliency, noting, "you're

always worrying about when something bad will happen. Don't worry though, it will but

just deal with it and you'll get through." These statements outline a common

characteristic that students feel is necessary for academic and social/emotional success in

middle school. They identified the ability to work hard and push through a situation as a

characteristic that will help students be successful in challenging situations. These

findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students utilized

resilience and also viewed it as an essential psychological factor or personal attribute for

success in middle school.

Open mindset. Students shared the importance of having an open mindset about the transition into middle school. Several students explained the importance of approaching the transition to middle school with an open, relaxed mindset. "I would tell them be relaxed and everything will be fine." Another student shared their own experience saying a relaxed mindset would have helped. "If I relax more, cause I got all worked up." As much as students expressed concern about the transition to middle school, they also noted that the ability to adapt with an open mindset was important when confronted with feelings of concern or worry.

Also, several students shared the importance of having a kind, caring mindset during the transition. "In order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to have these qualities. They need to have kindness, caring. They need to have open mind. They need to…they need to be open for others." Another student shared, "they need to be kind. They need to be caring. They need to be opened…or they need to have open arms. They need to have open mind. They cannot be mean, aggravated, insulting in any way. They cannot be judgeful and hurting and physical with anyone else." Finally, another student said, "they also need to be kind and caring." These statements supported the need for students to develop an open mind about the transition and show care and concern for others. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students utilized an open mindset and also viewed it as an essential psychological factor or personal attribute for success in middle school.

Communication skills and advocacy. The students believed communication skills such as effective listening skills and advocacy skills were necessary personal attributes for the transition into middle school. Students conceded that being a good

listener was an important communication skill in middle school. One student shared that students "need to be able to listen because you need to hear directions." Another noted, "well, you have to be able to listen when the teachers are talking and not screwing around." Finally, another student explained the importance of listening skills and how to apply this skill set in a different environment. "They have to be good listeners and quiet. They can practice these skills at the movie theater." These statements identified that students understood the importance of receiving directions and information from teachers, and that in order to understand expectations, students must be able to hear teachers effectively by listening and not being disruptive in class.

Other skills that emerged in the data were collaboration and advocacy. "You need to be able to collaborate with people very well." One student shared, "I asked people questions if I got stuck on something or didn't know what to do." Another student noted, "I asked where to go from teachers and they helped me," and another said, "if you still don't get it, ask your parents. Or ask your teacher before the class." Students believed that self-advocacy was necessary not just with teachers and parents but also with all school staff. "If it's like a problem with my family, then I'll just talk to like the counselor or something so yeah." The theme of self-advocacy and asking for help was evident in other areas of the data. For example, students referred to their struggle with finding classes during the middle school transition. One strategy that supported most of the students was the ability to seek help from school staff. It should be noted that not all students felt comfortable seeking help. However, basic advocacy skills are essential for students to experience a positive transition to middle school. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students utilized communication skills and

advocacy skills in order to be successful in middle school. Students viewed these as essential psychological factors or personal attributes for success in middle school.

Discussion for Structural Theme Two: Personal Attributes

Personal attributes emerged as a theme for all student participants. Students believed resilience was an essential personal attribute. The students also believed that an open mindset, as well as portraying a kind and caring mindset toward others, positively impacted the transition to middle school. These personal attributes impact the transition to middle school as they have a direct correlation to the self category of Schlossberg's 4 S System. These psychological resources positively shape and influence how students manage change throughout the transition from elementary to middle school. When students have a positive outlook or open mindset, they are more likely to experience positive outcomes during the transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Structural Theme Three: Academic Skills

A recurring factor that emerged from the data was the need for students to demonstrate academic skills. The students described three categories within the theme of academic skills: organization, time management, and homework completion and study skills.

Organization. Students believed organization was an essential skill in order to be successful in middle school. One student explained, "I was really good at organizing, I just had to be prepared for more…for being more organized. And my mom and dad helped me to do that because they always want my room to be nice and organized." Other students shared the importance of organization including organization of physical

materials or supplies for class, noting, "organize your binder," and "I guess just an organized locker." Another student noted, "they need to be able to be organized because you have a lot of paper and homework to do." Based on previous experiences in elementary school, students identified that organizational skills supported the transition. However, several students added that a higher level of these skills were needed in middle school given the increased demands of the middle school setting.

Students believed strategies for practicing organization were essential. One student noted, "every week…weekend I, my parents make me organize my binder out." This example of implementing organizational strategies is also consistent with the importance of parents as a support system for students making the transition to middle school. Other students indicated that practicing organizational skills in 5th grade would be helpful for the transition process. "I would be organized. To help you with that I would start organizing in 5th grade." Another student shared, "they have to be organized to make sure they don't have late work or missing schools…or missing work. And they can do this by practicing it in 5th grade." Finally, a student mentioned an in-school support strategy that promotes organization skills, "I go to AVID." AVID, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination, is an elective middle school course offered to assist students academically, socially, and emotionally in order to help them succeed in school. Additionally, AVID offers college and career readiness skills as students plan for the future (AVID, 2018). Students indicated that repetitive practice and sufficient time are required for maintaining physical organization of materials. These skills can be targeted through systematic routines provided by teachers, parents/guardians at home, or structured classes like AVID. These supports are important for developing

organizational skills for middle school students. These findings structure the students'

experience by highlighting how students learned and practiced organization skills,

primarily through practice in elementary school, and support in the school setting or from

family members.

      Time management. Students perceived that getting to class on time was

important and required time management skills. As one student noted, "the hardest part

about 6th grade is making it to class on time." Another student shared, "the hardest part

about class…6th grade is probably getting to class on time because you want to stay in

the hallway and talk with your friends." The social dynamics of the middle school setting,

desiring friendships and peer relationships as discussed earlier, can serve as a culprit for

tardiness. Several students expressed concerns about time management. One specifically

shared, "I worried about me losing class…or losing where my classes were

and…ahhh…getting late to my class," and another noted, "I got worked up about not

being on…in class on time." Another student shared, "I felt worried about getting late to

my classes and having a bunch of tardies." Students believed time management to be

important because "they have to…they need to be able to get on class on time because

then they won't have to go down to the office." Students expressed that they did not want

to get in trouble for being late for class, as another student said, "something I felt worried

about or had questions about before we come…before coming to Cheney was being late

to classes because I thought I would get into trouble. Which you will." Students believed

strategies for supporting time management included awareness of the time and class

schedule. Specifically, one student shared, "make sure I get there in two minutes. So I

have two minutes left." Another student shared that students "need to be able to know

when their classes starts so they're not late." These comments support awareness and implementation of time management strategies in order to get to class on time. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students learned and practiced time management skills, primarily through awareness of time and knowing class schedules and class locations.

Homework completion and study skills. Students overwhelmingly believed homework completion and study skills were essential academic skills for the middle school transition. One student expressed, "in order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to have these qualities. Turn in assignments at the…when they're due…have good grades and work hard." Several students noted a significant difference in the amount of homework they received in elementary school compared to middle school. The students' statements below are representative of the amount of homework students experience in middle school compared to elementary school.

"The hardest part about 6th grade is how much homework you have compared to 5th grade."

"In elementary school, homework, tests, and quizzes. Well, homework we never really had it. And tests were like really easy and on paper. And quizzes were just like something they brought up, just to make sure we know what we're doing. And it was super easy. In middle school, we have homework very often and it's a little hard sometimes. Tests are not really on paper. They're on computers now. And they can be pretty iffy sometimes. And then quizzes…umm…they give us

them sometimes. They're a little hard. No, we don't really like them that much but they're ok."

"Problems are harder and there's more work to do."

"We have more tests and homework."

"From not getting homework to getting homework in a span of a couple months, it was kind of hard. And, really changing."

"In middle school, it takes more like, focus and stuff. Because you have a lot of homework sometimes. And, um…you always seem to be studying for one quiz or another."

"In middle school, you have a lot of homework and you have to study a lot for tests or you could fail."

"Well, homework we have a lot of it. Mostly every day and then we have tests online more than tests on paper."

"But in middle school you have to study a lot and you have a lot of homework."

"Now we have harder problems and more questions, and you have to figure out more. You have to figure out which app or test to go on because you have…umm…because you have your device."

"The hardest part about 6th grade is trying to keep up with the work."

The unifying theme within the series of quotes was students' concern with the increase in homework. Students identified this as a factor as to why homework completion was an essential skill in order for students to successfully transition to middle school. One student shared, "they need to be able to pay attention in class because you have more homework and tests." Several students believed that the most important elements for successful homework completion were practicing, paying attention, and focusing in class. Another student stated, "be able to focus during class because otherwise you get off task." This comment reiterates the importance of focusing in class in order to successfully complete homework.

Students believed that studying and implementing specific strategies were also necessary elements for homework completion. One student shared, "I would say get your homework done and study because then you can get better grades and it's way easier. And you're not as much stress on…like if you don't get what you're doing in class. So then if you study, then you actually understand it more." Students believed using in-class time to complete homework was an effective strategy. One student noted, "I work on it at Packer Time or at home." These statements support the importance of time management skills, study skills, and homework completion. Other students believed providing 5th graders with more opportunities for homework and study skills in elementary school

would support students in developing these skills. "I think they should just practice studying in 5th grade. And…um…make sure they get their homework done. So then in 6th grade they'll be prepared for stuff." Another student said, "having more homework. Cause my 5th grade teachers didn't give us any homework. And then coming from a grade that didn't give you homework to a grade that gives you homework, it was kind of a fast past…pace, so." Finally, another student noted, "I think they need to be able to do homework. And the only they need to practice that, is they need more homework." These findings are consistent with previous student statements about understanding expectations of middle school. Presenting clear expectations about homework and studying could support students in the middle school setting. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students get homework completed on time and implement study skills. Students shared how they implement these, primarily through practice in elementary school, focusing in class, and utilizing time wisely to get homework completed.

Discussion for Structural Theme Three: Academic Skills

The third underlying theme among all students was the importance of understanding and implementing academic skills. Students believed that organization, time management, and homework completion and study skills are essential for a successful transition to middle school.

Time management was perceived by students as the physical ability to get to class on time. Students expressed worry and concern about the ability to navigate the physical layout of the school. Students believed getting to class on time is an important skill to avoid tardiness and consequences. Additionally, time management was perceived as a

skill needed to be successful in middle school. Finally, homework completion and study skills emerged as the final academic skills students identified as necessary for success in middle school.

Structural Theme Four: Supports

A recurring factor that emerged from the data was the need for supports. The students believed that additional transitional practices would improve their transition from elementary to middle school. It was evident that providing elementary students with more opportunities to be in the middle school would support their understanding of what to expect in middle school in a variety of ways. The students perceived supports as providing elementary students a preview day in the middle school, a tour of the middle school, and a middle school mentor during the 6th grade year.

Preview day. Students believed a preview day, or opportunity for them to experience a day in the life of a middle school student, would be essential during their 5th grade year. One student stated, "if I could design the transition from 5th grade to 6th grade, I would have it a day where the kids would just have like a pretend day at Cheney." The statements below represent the importance of students wanting an opportunity to experience a day in middle school, prior to starting 6th grade.

"I would have a day where the 5th grades…go to middle school for a day."

"I would make the 5th graders experience a day of middle school. So that they could know what it's like to be in middle school."

"um…I would make a day for kids to spend there. So that they would get used to like kinda what it would be like in 6th grade."

"having like a middle school day where you would change classes and have a lock on your locker would help me know what middle school was like and everything that went for it."

"I would pair…ah…5th grade up…5th grade up with 6th grade. And then one day we…the 5th graders come to our school. And then they just watch what we do. And then they could see."

"They can…they could have each had a partner who is a 6th grader. And be with them for a few days so they know what it's like to be one. Cause the 6th graders have the experience that 5th grader doesn't."

"I think…um…practicing a whole day at Cheney would be better. Cause then you would know the foundation and stuff."

The unifying theme within the series of quotes was how a preview day would allow 5th grade students to hear, see, and experience middle school expectations firsthand. Students in this study identified the importance of experiencing the middle school through their own eyes in order to understand and define middle school expectations. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how

students wanted more opportunities to experience the middle school setting, and they perceived a lack of support within the current transition program.

Tour of middle school. Understanding the physical space of the middle school and finding classes were two concerns that emerged throughout data. Students overwhelmingly believed that if they had received a tour of the middle school building, they would have been more supported in knowing the physical layout of the building and where their classes were located. The following statements given by students represent the need for a tour of the middle school building in order to navigate the school and gain a better understanding of class locations.

"I would like to have gone to the school more to see like all of my classes and where they were and stuff."

"Things that could have helped me transition from 5th to 6th grade is a tour so I could know my way better."

"If I got a tour, I think that would have helped. Because I didn't know where to go on the first day and I had to like keep asking a bunch of adults, a bunch of people…ummm…a lot of people where to go. And like I was confused."

"5th grade visit to Cheney Middle School. Well, we didn't have any but I wish we did."

"I didn't get a tour but that would have helped me."

"Well, um…if there was…if I've already been into the school and I knew where everything was that would have helped me. Cause then I'd know where my classes were and everything."

"Probably a tour so then I would know where like all of my classes would be and who would be in my class."

"I think they should have a tour with the 8th graders. So the 8th graders like take them around school. So then we…the 8th graders could show us everything and where everything is. But then we could also have like…ah…person who goes to the schools perspective of the school and what it's like."

The unifying theme within the series of quotes was how students emphasized the importance of receiving a tour in order to gain information and understanding of the middle school building. Specifically, some students commented on how older students could help with the tour, give advice, and share lived experiences with the 5th graders. Students reported that a tour of the middle school building would have helped them feel more comfortable independently navigating the physical space of the school at the start of 6th grade. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students wanted more opportunity to navigate and understand the physical layout of the middle school building. Students perceived this to be a lack of support within the current transition program.

Mentor during 6th grade year. Students believed utilizing a mentorship strategy during their 6th grade year could provide additional support in making a positive transition to middle school. One student shared how older students could serve as mentors, stating, "I think they should have 6th graders come over and help them with their lockers. Cause they can get really frustrating sometimes." This practice would directly support students with using a combination lock, which is one of the biggest concerns students had. Another student shared how having a mentor could support 6th grade students with navigating the physical layout of the building and finding classes. "Someone would show you where to go to your classes and where they are…then you were never late for class." Another student shared, "meeting more older kids who had already been to Cheney before would probably be better. Cause I'd know my way around." In this way, older student mentors could support 5th grade students with other major concerns they identified about middle school such as finding their classes and being late for class. A student shared, "I would have the 5th graders get a 6th grade student to help them, show them around the school," and another student explained, "I would have 5th graders get a 6th grade buddy. So that they can ask questions and show them around their schedule. And like stuff like that." Providing students an opportunity to ask older students questions about middle school supports students with practicing advocacy skills and developing positive peer relationships. These findings structure the students' experience by highlighting how students wanted more opportunities to understand the expectations of middle school while building positive relationships with older students who have experience in the middle school setting.

Discussion for Structural Theme Four: Supports

Students believed adding more transitional programming supports would improve the transition from elementary to middle school. Students described necessary supports that include a preview day where 5th grade students would shadow a 6th grade student for an entire day in middle school. They also indicated that a tour of the middle school during their 5th grade year was a needed support in order to better understand the physical layout of the middle school building. Finally, students believed that having an older middle school student as a mentor in 6th grade would support their transition school by having an experienced student answer questions and help them find their classes and get to class on time.

Conclusion: Structural Theme

The essence of the structural themes related directly to the areas of strategies, self, and support within Schlossberg's 4 S System. Students described how they experienced their transition from elementary to middle school. Students discussed the need to understand what middle school would be like, as well as a set of academic skills necessary for middle school. These two themes capture the essence of the students' ability to manage the transition through their own behaviors or coping skills, as students can implement coping skills and manage these when they clearly know what to expect in middle school. Their ability to implement these coping strategies aligns with Schlossberg's category of strategies, as an individual's ability to implement coping strategies directly corresponds to his or her ability to successfully navigate the transition. The essence of self was established through the theme of personal attributes. The students identified specific personal characteristics and psychological resources essential for

making a positive transition into middle school. A final structural theme that emerged was the students' need for more support. Students need more support related to the support factor within Schlossberg's 4 S System, by connecting students' desire for more positive experiences and affirmation within the middle school setting.

Counselor Engagement

The following section presents findings from the school counselor written reflections. The school counselor written reflections occurred during focus group sessions. They were collected by the researcher at the conclusion of each focus group session.

Counselor Attendance and Focus Group Sessions

Selection of the CMS school counselor was dependent on the school building's portfolio assignments. There were four school counselors on staff at Cheney Middle School. One school counselor worked specifically with the transition from elementary to middle school as part of their portfolio assignment; therefore, the CMS school counselors decided that that specific counselor should attend the focus group sessions. That professional was invited to all four of the focus group sessions.

Of the four focus group sessions, the school counselor only attended two sessions. The counselor was unable to attend the other two sessions due to unexpected scheduling conflicts. The conflicts consisted of students needing the counselor's support at the time of our scheduled focus groups. During focus group sessions, the school counselor was asked to reflect on what was heard from the student focus groups, specifically what was surprising about students' responses to the questions. The school counselor expressed surprise at the level of support the students' families provided them in their transition.

The school counselor made note of the important role older siblings played in helping the students with their transition.

The school counselor stated the concerns students shared about transitioning to middle school. Some of these concerns were regarding finding classes, mastering their locker combination, and locating encore classes, which were located away from their core classes. The counselor noted that these concerns were areas that the counseling staff was aware of and were attempting to address through current transitional programming. The counselor noted that the counseling staff is going to implement a 5th grade orientation in the following spring. The orientation will include inviting fifth grade students and parents to CMS for an informational session and student-led tour of the school. The counselor noted that the students' comments in the focus groups affirmed the importance of having 5th graders visit CMS to see what it will be like. The counselor also noted that the first few weeks of school, school staff should be present in the hallways specifically during transition times to support students with navigating their schedules.

Summary

In summary, Chapter IV provided a detailed description of this study's research findings. The data and findings from this study were organized into seven themes. Three themes were textural, and four were structural. The three textural themes that emerged from the analysis of the data included: (a) school supports, (b) family supports, and (c) student concerns about the transition to middle school. The four structural themes that emerged from the data analysis included: (a) support, (b) personal skills, (c) academic skills, and (d) expectations. In Chapter V, conclusions and implications are presented.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provided insight into the complexity of strengthening, sustaining, and expanding transitional practices for student participants transitioning from elementary to middle school. The overall essence of the study revealed that students viewed the significance of understanding the expectations of middle school and providing necessary time and opportunities to practice these expectations as essential elements in creating a positive transition from elementary to middle school. This chapter presents conclusions, addresses the research questions, and provides recommendations for school staff working to strengthen, sustain, and enhance the transitional programming established in their schools. The chapter concludes with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

The importance of developing effective transition programs for students transitioning from elementary to middle school cannot be understated. Effective transition programming originates from creating environments of support in which students are provided realistic expectations about what middle school will be like. Transition programming is about successfully providing students access to opportunities to understand middle school expectations. Consequently, these opportunities should lead the students through a positive transition into the middle school environment.

As schools continue to develop and implement transitional programming, it is essential that the programming includes multiple opportunities for students to experience middle school expectations prior to transitioning into the middle school setting. As a middle level educator, the researcher can verify the challenges of supporting sixth grade students in their transition to middle school. More importantly, the researcher has witnessed incredible opportunities provided to students to support their transition into middle school when school staff are willing to be open-minded toward new strategies and practices. Analyzing and developing effective transitional practices is a continuous process necessary for providing appropriate student support.

The purpose of this study was to collect the recent experiences of 6th grade students in the transition from elementary to middle school in order to identify the elements needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand effective middle school transition programming. Twenty 6th graders at Cheney Middle School participated in this study. The goal of focus group sessions was to hear from students' lived experiences of their transition from elementary to middle school with the hope of strengthening, sustaining, and improving current transitional practices from the perspective of students. Through focus group sessions, students shared experiences of how they transitioned from elementary to middle school.

Research Question One

The first research question asked how middle school students perceived and described a positive transition to middle school. Four structural themes were derived from the students' responses. These responses described the context or the setting that influenced their experiences transitioning from elementary to middle school, presenting a

picture of how they perceived and described their transition experience. Structural themes included: (a) student expectations of middle school, (b) personal attributes, (c) academic skills, and (d) supports.

Creating a clear picture of what middle school is like was regarded as crucial according to the participants' descriptions of making a positive transition to middle school. "During the transition students face new demands associated with differences in school structures, classroom organization, academic standards, teacher expectations, and peer relationships. These changes can lead students to experience a lack of predictability and increased ambiguity about the criteria for evaluation and success" (Rudolph et al., 2001, p. 930). The students agreed that clear expectations improved their understanding of what the middle school day would be like. Establishing clear expectations positively impacted the students' level of comfort with the transition into middle school. The students looked to parents/guardians and siblings to provide advice and feedback on what they could expect in middle school. Students also received information on middle school expectations through some structured transition programming such as counselor guidance lessons in fifth grade. Hopwood et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of the elementary staff's role in helping to establish expected routines and expectations.

> Primary school staff also have a role to play, as early preparation of students for the move to secondary school is essential. Transition does not start when students begin secondary school; it commences well before this when students are still in primary school and therefore teachers need a sound understanding of the routines, structure, and operations of secondary schools, and vice versa...primary school

teachers can address the needs of their students by beginning the preparation early

in the school year and by playing an active role in transition. (p. 303)

The students' responses clearly showed that they wanted more experiences in the

middle school setting to strengthen their understanding of what to expect in middle

school. It is important to note that "transition preparation should include orientation

programmes, visits to secondary school campuses, and talking to students about what to

expect at secondary school" (Hopwood et al., 2016, p. 303). Additionally, "being open

and positive about what secondary school will be like is also a key role for primary

schools, to ease students' apprehension and anxiety" (Hopwood et al., 2016, p. 304).

Students described specific personal and academic skills necessary for making a

positive transition to middle school. They identified advocacy, mindset, and resilience as

personal skills needed to be successful in the middle school setting. Students viewed

organization, time management, and homework completion and study skills as vital to

making a positive transition to middle school.

Finally, students described various support strategies as essential in making a

positive transition from elementary to middle school. Students shared that effective

support strategies included counselor guidance lessons in 5th grade as well as 6th grade

registration. They also noted that their parents/guardians and siblings were essential in

helping them make a positive transition to middle school. Wampler, Munsch, and Adams

(2002) note, "the family is an important source of support for adolescents during school

transitions. Responsive, developmentally sensitive parenting is a protective factor in the

transition" (p. 217). Students shared that family support personnel helped them by

providing feedback and advice before and during their transition to middle school. Akos

et al. (2015) notes that "positive relationships with adults at home and at school remain integral to student success" (p. 171). Students also identified a lack of support in areas of the transition programming. For example, students described a clear lack of support in their ability to locate their classes. They also identified a lack of understanding in how to use a combination lock. Finally, students shared that they did not know the physical layout of the middle school building. They expressed that having more experiences in the middle school building would have supported them in feeling more comfortable with navigating the physical structure of the middle school.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked what personal skills and/or qualities middle school students perceived as necessary for an effective transition to middle school. Students described personal skills and academic skills as necessary in order to make a positive transition to middle school. Specifically, they noted the importance of self-advocacy, a positive mindset, and resilience. Wampler et al. (2002) note the importance of personal and cognitive resources.

> When students who have greater personal and cognitive resources experience an initial drop in grades, a different trajectory can develop. The initial drop in grades may challenge the students' self-perceptions of academic competence in a way that motivates them to work harder. Students who have the necessary skills, knowledge, and work habits are able to draw upon those resources to successfully recover from dropping grades. (p. 215)

Students identified communication skills, specifically collaboration and effective listening skills, as essential in supporting a positive transition from elementary to middle

school. Students believed self-advocacy was an essential personal attribute for a successful transition from elementary to middle school. As Richardson (2002) notes, "Students with more emotional intelligence skills will be able to cope and adapt more easily, resulting in stronger abilities to succeed both academically and socially" (p. 2).

Studies show students who have completed the transition to middle school identified academic and organizational concerns as some of their top concerns (Akos, 2002; Koppang, 2004; Mitman & Packer, 1982). Students in this study described the importance of middle school students being able to apply the following academic skills: organize their materials, manage their time in order to get to class on time, complete homework, and practice study skills. The students believed organization of physical materials to be an important academic skill. This skill included organization of class materials through the use of strategies like binders and folders. Hopwood et al. (2016) note that "an important role of the primary school teacher in transition preparation is to support students to develop a level of independence they will need to manage the demands of the secondary school environment" (p. 303). Practicing these organizational skills in elementary school can support students in being more organized in middle school.

Time management was perceived by students as the physical ability to get to class on time. Students expressed worry and concern about the ability to navigate the physical layout of the school and know where classes were located. They believed getting to class on time was an important skill in order to be successful in middle school. Homework completion and studying emerged as the final academic skill students identified as

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necessary for success in middle school. Each of these academic skills were identified by students as necessary in order to make a positive transition into middle school.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked what the experiences of the middle school students were in their transition from elementary to middle school. Students described their transitional experience in three different themes: (a) school support, (b) family support, and (c) concerns about middle school. Students believed that school staff and teachers helped support their transition from elementary to middle school in a variety of ways. Several students noted that their 5th grade teacher provided support during their 5th grade year to prepare them for middle school expectations. Other students noted that middle school staff supported them the first few weeks of middle school by helping them locate classes, find their way around the building, and answer their questions. Hopwood et al. (2016) support these findings by noting, "teachers play a pivotal role in a students' education and in their transition experience, and they are in a central position for providing social and academic support students need in order to transition successfully" (p. 292).

Transition programming elements that students described in their transition from elementary to middle school included 5th grade counselor lessons, as well as a visit from middle school students who offered advice and answered questions. The students believed that hands-on experiences during these lessons supported their understanding of expectations in middle school such as using a combination lock. These practices are consistent with what the literature suggests in the development of transition

programming. Effective transition programs should begin transition activities before students enter middle school (Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2012).

Students also shared that the music preview day and 6th grade registration were experiences that supported them in making a positive transition to middle school. They shared that the music preview day was supportive in helping them to identify and decide what musical instrument to choose and what music class to take in sixth grade. Students noted that the 6th grade registration allowed them to look around the building, find classes, and practice opening their combination lock. It was identified by students that more elements could be added to the transition program to better support them in making a positive transition to middle school.

Family support from parents/guardians and siblings was identified by students as being an effective support strategy in their transitional experience. Students noted that parents/guardians and siblings supported their experience by offering helpful advice about middle school, listening to their concerns about middle school, and helping them practice strategies such as organization, finding classes, and opening their combination locks.

Finally, a significant element of the transitional experience expressed by students was their identified concerns about middle school. A recent study by Bailey et al. (2015) reports the concerns of 6th graders regarding their transition into middle school. Concerns reported by students in the study included getting lost, peer pressure, being bullied, academic performance, using a locker, making friends, and new school rules. Students in this study were concerned about bullying and older students, friends, peer relationships, and drama in middle school. Research points to the importance of peer

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relationships and friendships during the transition to middle school, as "friends offer social support to early adolescents and are an important part of the new school context, and the quality of these relationships can predict school adjustment" (Sebanc, Guimond, & Lutgen, 2016, p. 109). The research by Bailey et al. (2015) encourages developing intentional support within the transition program. "Sessions that focus on the students' psychosocial development, such as how to make and maintain friendships and how to work cooperatively with others, could help students more positively adjust to the transition process" (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 3).

Students also shared concerns about using a combination lock and finding their classes in middle school. They expressed concern about class locations and the size of the middle school building. The students shared that they were worried about not finding their classrooms resulting in tardiness and consequences. All of these concerns were consistent with current research on worries identified with the transition to middle school. Duchesne et al. (2012) categorizes these concerns into three domains:

> (a) Worries about academic demands, bearing on the nature of tasks to be done in class and at home, classroom rules and routines, formal evaluation systems, and learning evaluation methods (b) worries about teachers, involving exposure to excessively rigid teachers, unfair treatment by these teachers, and not getting enough attention and (c) worries about peers, such as fear of losing touch with friends from elementary school, difficulty in making new friends, and fears of being bullied by older students. (p .683)

Research Question Four

The final research question asked what supports the middle school students perceived and described as essential in making a positive transition to middle school. Students identified specific strategies that were missing from their transition from elementary to middle school. Strategies included allowing 5th grade students to take a tour of the middle school in order to get a better understanding of the physical layout of the middle school building. This would address the students' concern about class locations and navigating the physical layout of the building. "Other activities recommended in the literature include middle school teachers and selected students visiting elementary students, elementary students taking a tour of the middle school, and conducting parent orientations" (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 3).

Another strategy identified by students included the opportunity to visit the middle school for a preview day in 5th grade. Students noted that this strategy would allow them to shadow a 6th grade student for an entire day, which would help them better understand classroom expectations. It would also allow them to practice time management strategies for getting to class on time. Students shared that visiting the middle school would allow them to practice using a combination lock. They also noted it would help them become more familiar with class locations and finding classes. The students believed this strategy would allow them to witness and understand academic strategies like how to be organized in middle school. Finally, the visit would help them to better understand expectations regarding homework, tests, and quizzes in the middle school environment.

Students shared that having an older student in middle school serve as a mentor or buddy during their 6th grade year would support their transition from elementary to middle school in a variety of ways. They noted that this positive relationship with an older student would help alleviate concerns about being intimidated by older students in middle school. The students also shared that mentorship could support them the first few days of school by having someone help them find their classes, get to class on time, open their combination lock, and support them in implementing positive academic strategies like organization and time management.

These finding are heavily supported in the literature. Hopwood et al. (2016) note the effectiveness of specific transition activities that include orientation days at the secondary school where primary students visit the secondary school campus to participate in activities and meet secondary school staff and students. Hopwood et al. (2016) also highlighted the development of activity days where secondary school teachers or students engaged primary students in team-building activities to promote positive social interactions with older students and peers. Finally, Hopwood et al. (2016) shared the importance of transition programming to include parent information sessions to provide information about secondary school as well as a question and answer opportunity. They also stressed the importance of engaging primary students in discussions with secondary school staff about what to expect in middle school.

Moving Forward: Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Elementary to Middle School Transitions

Schlossberg's transition theory provided the theoretical framework to study the dynamic process of elementary to middle school transitions while focusing on the

interactions between the elements of the transition. Schlossberg's transition theory had important implications for understanding how the participants interacted and navigated through the transition from elementary to middle school. Assumptions set forth by Schlossberg's transition theory guided this study; the transition from elementary to middle school is impacted by each individual participant's perception of the situation, his or her own skills, levels of support the individual experienced through the transition, and strategies the individual utilized throughout the transition.

Schlossberg's Theory: Emergence of the 4 S System

The key principles of Schlossberg's transition theory provided the context to investigate the participants' experience transitioning from elementary to middle school. They key principles include (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. Examples and descriptions of new strategies may offer possibilities to school districts trying to implement, sustain, and expand effective elementary to middle school transition programs. In the following section, the key principles are described.

Situation. Situation refers to how individuals perceive and assess transition and the level of control over what is happening (Evans et al., 2010). This factor presents areas of concern such as perceptions of the change to be temporary or permanent, perceptions of the transition to be either good or bad, and outside stressors that may perpetuate transitional challenges (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Students perceived the transition from elementary to middle school as a necessary experience in their educational programming. Overall, they perceived the transition to be a process they had looked forward to. Students identified a variety of positive factors

about the transition including choosing a music class, meeting new people, and having lunch options. One student expressed excitement about the middle school structure, working with different peers, and having multiple teachers throughout the day. This student stated,

> Something I was excited about or looking forward to before coming to Cheney was having different classes and different teachers. Because I wasn't sitting in the same classroom all day long with the same teacher. I got to see different people's faces…umm…I was able to…I'm able to see different people's faces at a different point of time in the day. And they all have certain personalities that are really funny. And I think it's the best thing ever.

Students also described issues of concern they experienced during their transition. Concerns identified by students included bullying, being around older students, peer relationships, and middle school drama. Students also expressed concern about the ability to find their classes and effectively use a combination lock.

Self. Self refers to how an individual's personal characteristics and internal resources influence his or her ability to cope with transition. Personal characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and culture can shape how individuals manage change and transition. Psychological components such as personality characteristics also shape and influence how individuals manage change. Students identified personal attributes necessary for an effective transition from elementary to middle school. The personal attributes shared by students directly relate to psychological resources identified by Schlossberg in this category.

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Students perceived self-advocacy, a positive mindset, and resilience to be necessary for success in middle school. Regarding self-advocacy, students described the importance of seeking school staff to ask questions and getting help with solving a problem. One student noted the importance of self-advocacy, "if you don't talk to your teacher about a problem, especially in middle school, it can get bigger." Students also perceived resilience and a positive mindset as essential qualities in making a positive transition to middle school. One student noted, "in order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to have these qualities…the ability to work hard and focus but also like take things easily and not get stressed out so much." Students referenced the ability to work through a problem or new situation with resiliency. "You'll get the hang of it. As you like…in elementary school." Schlossberg et al. (2005) found that these personal attributes and resources support students in managing change. Optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience are of importance, as higher perceptions of control and positive assessments of situations result in positive outcomes (Anderson et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2006).

Support. Support refers to the way in which affirmation and positive feedback can facilitate transitions (Anderson et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Support often manifests in a social nature. The need for various forms of support throughout the elementary to middle school transition process is continually highlighted in literature. Through their experience, students identified support strategies, which included targeted events in the established transition programming and people who provided various levels of support through affirmation and positive feedback.

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Students identified counselor lessons in 5th grade, the music preview day, and 6th grade registration as transition program elements that provided affirmation and positive feedback in guiding their transition from elementary to middle school. While each of these elements supported students in their transition, it was evident that they wanted additional support in the transition program through more targeted events. Specifically, students identified additional supports that could have helped them better understand middle school expectations such as knowing the physical layout of the building, finding classes, and using a combination lock.

Students described effective support from people such as parents/guardians, siblings, and school staff. Through their experiences, students shared that advice and feedback from parents/guardians and siblings positively influenced them regarding middle school expectations.

Strategies. Strategies refer to an individual's ability to manage transition and/or change through his or her own behavior or coping skills (Evans et al., 2010). Coping responses included modifying a situation, controlling the meaning of a problem, and managing stress after a transition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). An individual's ability to implement coping strategies directly corresponds to his or her ability to successfully navigate the transition. Each student has the ability to identify, utilize, and implement coping strategies based on his or her unique level of psychological development and executive functioning skills.

Students described several strategies for managing the transition to middle school. Coping skills was one dominant strategy mentioned. The students expressed that making intentional changes in their behavior helped them adapt to middle school expectations.

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These coping skills included strategies such as organization, time management, finding classes, and homework completion.

The students described middle school concerns regarding peer relationships, making friends, bullying, and being around older students. They also described several coping skills to utilize in response to these concerns. Maintaining an open mindset and fostering a positive attitude were coping skills identified as necessary for a successful transition to middle school. Self-advocacy was another coping skill that students described as essential in navigating the transition from elementary to middle school for academic, personal, and social success.

Implications for Practice

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the experience from the students' perspective. The findings of the study provide insight into factors that may apply to schools, leaders, and staff who are trying to improve, sustain, and enhance elementary to middle school transition programming practices. Students made some generalizations about what they believe needs to be in place for an effective elementary to middle school transition. Students identified that lack of experiences in the middle school building as 5th graders had an impact on their understanding of middle school expectations.

According to student responses, it is important to emphasize the implementation of in-school activities as part of a positive transition program. For elementary students to develop a better understanding of what middle school will be like, they need time and experience practicing those expectations. It is imperative that 5th grade students have a clear awareness of class locations in 6th grade in order to successfully transition from

class to class. It is crucial that 5th grade students receive ongoing practice and support in understanding how to open a combination lock. Lastly, 5th grade students need time to see, feel, and explore the middle school building in order to better understand and navigate their new school. School staff can implement some of these expectations and experiences for 5th grade students during their 5th grade year at the elementary school. This would support practice and understanding of those expectations.

In order for schools to offer effective and sustainable elementary to middle school transition programming, leaders need to involve students, teachers, counselors, and parents in providing feedback on effective evaluation of transition programming. Giving students an active role in redesigning the transition programming will allow school personnel to better understand student concerns regarding the transition from elementary to middle school. In turn, this will allow school personnel to effectively implement strategies to support student concerns.

Limitations

The uniqueness of the middle school's transition program may limit the transferability of the findings to other schools. Only 6th graders participated in the focus group sessions; therefore, the participant makeup of the sample represented the perspectives of 6th graders. The time constraints of the school day posed an additional limitation. By being aware of the Packer Time class schedule, focus group sessions were limited to 25 minutes per session. At the end of the time limits, some student participants appeared to have more information to share in the focus group sessions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study was designed to contribute to the body of literature related to the development and sustainability of effective elementary to middle school transition programs. As the school district adapts the current transition programming to appropriately meet the needs of students, further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of transition programming.

Recommendations for Schools

Specific feedback from school counselors and educators regarding identification, alignment, and consistency of transitional programming is needed. It is recommended that this data be collected through structured conversations or focus group sessions with students. By conducting individual or focus group sessions with students, counselors are able to find out what went well or what areas of the transition program could be improved. It is also recommended that school counselors implement a format for collecting parent feedback on transition practices. This could be collected through the use of an electronic survey sent to parents via email or written feedback provided by parents at parent/teacher conferences in the fall of the year.

It is also recommended that school districts assess their transition programs through a program evaluation. The development and implementation of transitional practices should be modified to meet students' needs based on data collected from stakeholders, including students, parents/guardians, and school staff. Implementing a program evaluation model would provide schools with a comprehensive approach to collecting stakeholder feedback and identifying areas for improvement.

Academic preview day. Students expressed a basic understanding of middle school expectations through current transitional practices. Middle school counselor lessons, music preview day, and 6th grade registration were described as effective strategies for beginning to understand what to expect in middle school. The need for more opportunities for students to better understand expectations in middle school is evident; it is important to recognize that students need more opportunities in 5th grade to see and experience middle school expectations prior to making the transition into middle school.

The implementation of a preview day at the middle school is recommended. The preview day would include bussing 5th grade students to the middle school for the day. The 5th grade students would interact with a variety of people, which would help them develop clear expectations for middle school. Fifth grade students would be introduced to the 6th grade teaching staff. It is recommended that the preview day includes small group informational sessions with 6th grade teachers and middle school students. In these sessions, 5th grades students would take a tour of the middle school building to better understand the physical layout of the building. The music preview day would be incorporated into this experience.

By allowing 5th grade students to hear about academic expectations from 6th grade teachers, they would have a better understanding of expectations regarding school materials, organizational practices, homework completion details, classroom location, and consequences. Additionally, the 5th grade students would hear experiences from 6th grade students. They would question current middle school students to better understand

middle school expectations. This would allow the students to gather information from a variety of sources.

Finally, providing 5th grade students with a tour of the middle school building would allow them to understand the physical layout of the school. Providing them with multiple opportunities to be in the middle school building would help them be more comfortable with finding their classes and getting to class on time. This would be the first opportunity for students to navigate the building, identify class locations, and see other spaces such as the commons, library, office, lockers, gym, locker room, and so on.

6th grade parent night. Inviting parents and their 5th grade students into the middle school for an information session would allow parents to be introduced to the middle school building for the first time. This would allow 5th grade students to become familiar with the middle school building for a second time. It is recommended that school administration and school counselors present information to parents and students that will help support their understanding of what to expect in middle school. Specific information would include bussing information, explanation of the school schedule, introduction of 6th grade teaching staff, explanation of 6th grade elective or encore courses, and other school programming deemed necessary.

6th grade registration. Requiring students and their families to attend 6th grade registration would provide a third opportunity for students to be in the middle school building. This would allow students to receive their schedule for the first time, walk around to locate their classes, and practice their combination lock with a parent and/or sibling support. It is recommended that 6th grade staff are required to be present in their classrooms during registration. Additionally, a core teacher would be assigned as a

mentor for each student and family during registration. This would allow students and families to be introduced to their mentor teachers, which would establish positive student/teacher and parent/teacher relationships prior to the start of 6th grade. This meeting would allow 6th grade teachers to answer questions and provide specific academic expectations about middle school.

It is recommended that students would be required to attend 6th grade registration in order to address the student concerns presented in this study. For example, students receive their locker number and combination for the first time at registration. Allowing students to locate their locker and practice their combination at 6th grade registration would support them in knowing how to open their lock. Also, it is recommended that students would be allowed to take home their assigned locker combination after registration in order to practice the combination with parents and/or siblings.

Finally, required attendance at 6th grade registration would support students with their concern about finding their classes. Once they receive their schedule, the students would be allowed to walk around the school building and practice walking from class to class. This would support students in knowing their class locations before the first day of school.

6th grade mentor. It is recommended that 6th grade students have a 7th or 8th grade mentor during their 6th grade year in order to successfully support students in practicing middle school expectations. For example, a mentor would support students during their first week of school in opening their combination lock, finding their classes, and getting to class on time. Establishing a positive relationship with an older student

through a mentorship program would also support students with their concerns about bullying and being around older students.

5th grade common expectations. It is recommended that elementary students in 5th grade become familiar with combination lock expectations. Students should learn to use a combination lock in 5th grade through direct instruction or small group instruction. Another strategy is to provide students a combination lock for their 5th grade locker. This would allow students to practice using a combination lock prior to starting middle school.

6th grade common expectations. An additional recommendation for schools would be consistency in establishing common expectations for middle school students regarding organization, classroom routines, and consequences. By defining a common organizational strategy for all four core classes, students would be better equipped to succeed with organizing their materials. Establishing common routines within the classroom setting allows students to better identify what to expect within the classroom structure. Consistency of these practices among the four core teachers allows students to easily understand what is expected of them. Having consistent consequences among the four teachers also allows students to understand expectations.

Elementary guidance lessons. Incorporating intentional lessons and opportunities for students to build skills at the elementary level is important in order for students to develop personal skills and attributes necessary for middle school. It is recommended that elementary guidance lessons include a focus on teaching resiliency, self-advocacy, communication, and listening skills. Parker (2009) notes the importance of belief in academic skill sets:

Belief in one's academic self-concept becomes particularly vulnerable to outside influences and motivational shifts across the middle school transition, due to changes in peer groups, teachers, motivational constructs, and reevaluation of academic skills. This self-concept may influence academic achievement, which typically declines across the transition to middle school. (p. 328)

Students transitioning to middle school would be better equipped if elementary schools implemented targeted support in order to build students' academic self-concept. This strength would allow students to persevere in difficult situations.

Parent/student informational series. It is recommended that schools offer an informational series of parent and student sessions as part of the transition to middle school. It would be important to offer this strategy during 5th grade as well as the beginning of 6th grade. These informational sessions would be taught by school counselors in partnership with 6th grade teachers. It is recommended that sessions take place at the middle school building, which would provide another opportunity for students and parents to become familiar with the middle school setting. The sessions would be divided into two groups: parent sessions in one classroom and student sessions in another classroom. Informational session topics for parents would include (a) adolescent development including physical and social/emotional development, (b) middle school academic skills including organization strategies, time management strategies, and strategies for homework completion, (c) middle school expectations, (d) developing personal attributes including resiliency, self-advocacy, and communication strategies, and (e) support strategies for parents to implement during the transition to middle school.

Informational session topics for middle school students would include (a) introductory activities aimed at team-building or positive culture building within the group, (b) introduction of students to 6th grade teaching staff, (c) explanation of middle school academic expectations, (d) school rules and policies, and (e) explanation of personal skills and attributes needed in middle school.

Recommendations for Parents/Guardians and Siblings

It is recommended that parents/guardians foster positive school connections and relationships with school staff, especially counselors and 6th grade teachers, prior to, during, and after the transition to middle school. Parents/guardians can do so by actively participating in transition program activities such as parent informational sessions and 6th grade registration. By participating in any optional transition program activities, parents/guardians would establish and support continued communication with school staff. As trusted personnel in a student's life, parents/guardians and siblings need to recognize the important role they play in providing support for their student during the transition to middle school. It is recommended that parents/guardians and siblings listen to the students' concerns about middle school, allow them to ask questions, and offer advice. Finally, it is recommended that parents/guardians and siblings continue to provide support to students by encouraging opportunities to practice academic skills like organization, time management, and homework completion.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendations include a balance of strategies and supports that schools and families can implement to best support students in making a positive transition from elementary to middle school. Schools can provide additional supports to students by

incorporating an academic preview day, 6th grade parent night, parent and student professional development series, required attendance at 6th grade registration, and a 6th grade mentorship program into their transition programming. Schools can also enhance transition programming by developing elementary guidance lessons aimed at developing students personal skills and attributes in 5th grade. Finally, schools can support students in making a positive transition from elementary to middle school by creating consistency in common expectations in 5th and 6th grade. Parents/guardians and siblings can support students transitioning from elementary to middle school by fostering positive school connections, relationships and communication. This can be done by participating and attending transition programming events.

The Essence of the Phenomenon

The students in this study found the transition from elementary to middle school to be a challenging time during their educational experience. The students believed through a process of strategic supports, the quality of their transition from elementary to middle school could have been improved. For example, one student noted, "I didn't get a tour but that would have helped me." Another student shared an idea for improving transition programming stating, "I would make the 5th graders experience a day of middle school. So that they could know what it's like to be in middle school."

Students' identified various supports that assisted them in making a positive transition from elementary to middle school including (a) school staff, (b) current school transition programming practices, (c) family supports, (d) individual attributes, and (e) academic skills. Students identified strategies that schools could implement to create a more comprehensive transition program. To effectively transition from elementary to

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middle school, students identified structural elements, which include understanding the expectations of middle school and identifying necessary personal attributes and academic skills. Understanding expectations of middle school was provided for some students through family supports. For example, one student noted, "my mom helped me from moving to elementary school to middle school. Because she told me a lot about middle school and what it….what to expect."

Finally, students identified perceived areas of lack of support, specifically identifying additional transitional practices, which could provide students additional targeted support in their transition from elementary to middle school. Another idea included an older student mentor: "I would have 5th graders get a 6th grade buddy. So that they can ask questions and show them around their schedule." The overall essence of the study revealed that students viewed the significance of understanding the expectations of middle school and providing necessary time and opportunities to practice these expectations as essential elements in creating a positive transition from elementary to middle school. The results of this research study further solidify the clear need for the development of effective transition programming based on student needs.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Questions for Focus Groups

Session 1

Today's Date: 2/22/18

1. What was homework, tests, quizzes like in elementary school? What are they like now in middle school?

2. What was it like to find your classrooms in elementary school? What is that like now in middle school?

3. What was it like to find your way around to other rooms in elementary school? What is that like now in middle school?

4. What was lunch like in elementary school? What is lunch like now in middle school?

5. What was it like to use your locker in elementary school? What is it like now in middle school?

6. What was it like to make friends in elementary school? What is it like to make friends now in middle school?

7. What was it like to feel safe in elementary? What is it like to feel safe at school now in middle school?

8. In order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to have these characteristics/qualities . . .

9. Who helped you in your transition from elementary to middle school? In what ways did they help?

10. What did you worry about when moving from fifth grade to sixth grade?

11. Something I felt worried about, or had questions about before coming to

Cheney was _____, because _____.

Session 2

Today's Date: 3/1/18

1. What did you wish you would have known about middle school before you came here? Why?

2. In order for someone to do well in middle school, they need to be able to _____, because _____. (Fill in the blanks and explain)

3. Which of these people helped you during your switch from 5th grade to 6th grade? Explain how each one helped you.

   a. Parents

   b. Middle school teachers

   c. Friends

   d. Principal

   e. Elementary teachers

   f. Family members other than parents

   g. Middle school counselor

   h. Other adults in the middle school

   i. Elementary counselor

   j. Older students in middle school

4. If you had to give a 5th grader advice about starting middle school, what would you tell them?

5. Have you learned any ways to talk to a teacher about a problem? Explain what you are doing or what you did to be better at it. Who helped you and how did they help you with that?

6. Have you learned any ways to get homework completed on time? Explain what you are doing or what you did to be better at it. Who helped you and how did they help you with that?

7. Have you learned any ways to make friends in middle school? Explain what you are doing or what you did to be better at it. Who helped you and how did they help you with that?

8. Have you learned any ways to be organized in middle school? Explain what you are doing or what you did to be better at it. Who helped you and how did they help you with that?

9. Have you learned any ways to get to your classes on time? Explain what you are doing or what you did to be better at it. Who helped you and how did they help you with that?

Session 3

Today's Date: 3/8/18

1. Which of these transition activities was most helpful for you? What do you remember about each activity? How did they help you make a good transition to middle school?

   a. Elementary counselor lessons/visits in 5th grade

   b. Middle school counselor lessons/visits in 5th grade

   c. 5th grade visits to Cheney Middle School – presentation by principal

   d. 5th grade parent/student night at CMS

   e. 5th grade tour of the middle school

   f. 6th grade registration

2. What additional things could have helped you transition from 5th grade to 6th grade? How would that have helped you?

3. Looking back, what did you do (yourself or on your own) that helped you transition from 5th grade to 6th grade?

4. Something I was excited about, or looking forward to before coming to Cheney was _____, because _____.

5. Something I felt worried about, or had questions about before coming to Cheney was _____, because _____.

Session 4

Today's Date: 3/15/18

1. _____ helped me the most when moving from elementary to middle school, because _____.

2. If you could go back in time, what would make the transition from elementary to middle school better? Why?

3. What skills do you think 5th graders need to have to be successful in 6th grade? How do they learn those skills?

4. What do you wish you would have known about 6th grade before starting at Cheney Middle School?

5. If you could design the transition from 5th grade to 6th grade, what would you add to that experience or change?

6. If you had to give a fifth grader advice about starting middle school, what would you tell them?

Optional Questions

Situation

    1.   Coming to Cheney Middle School made me feel _____, because

          _____.

    2.   Before coming to middle school, I felt _____, now that I'm here

          I feel _____.

    3.   Something I felt worried about, or had questions about before coming to

          Cheney was _____, because _____.

    4.   Something I was excited about, or looking forward to before coming to

          Cheney was _____, because _____.

Self

    1.   Looking back, what did you do that helped your transition into middle

          school?

Support

    1.   When I have a question or concern about school, I talk with

          _____ because _____.

Appendix B
Questions for Middle School Counselors

Today's Date:

1. Please reflect on the student reflections you heard today. What reflections

    surprised you regarding their feedback or experiences on the transition from

    elementary to middle school?

2. Do you feel the feedback you heard from students today validates your

    current transitional practices, how so?

3. Do you feel the feedback you heard from students today raises awareness

    for a need to change transitional practices? Why or why not?

Appendix C
Letter to Parents/Students

Date

Dear Parent/Student,

I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, North Dakota. I am writing my dissertation to examine the experiences of middle school students regarding their transitions from elementary to middle school. I believe it is crucial for administrators, school counselors, teachers, parents and researchers to understand the experiences of middle school students, and to be aware of what transitional activities have been successful in helping students make a successful transition from elementary to middle school.

I will be working with teachers on Team _____ to conduct focus group sessions in each of their Packer Time classes. The focus group sessions will be focused on prepared research questions relating to the transition of students from elementary to middle school, and specific activities your son/daughter experienced that helped them make the transition to middle school. The process will include four 30-minute focus group sessions with your child's Packer Time class during Packer Time.

Included in this correspondence is a Parent/Guardian Consent form. By allowing your child to be part of this study, educators, researchers, and parents will gain a better understanding of what students experience when making the transition from elementary to middle school. This research has the potential to impact and improve middle school transition programs. Please complete your Parent/Guardian Consent form and have your child return it to their Packer Time teacher by (date).

Individual students will not be identified by name in the focus group process to help ensure confidentiality of information shared for this study. Once the project is complete, you will receive a copy of my research conclusions in an effort to make a contribution to your school district.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to contribute to the extension of the knowledge base related to middle school transition programs.

Sincerely,

Erin Spies
Assistant Principal, Liberty Middle School
West Fargo Public Schools, ND
espies@west-fargo.k12.nd.us

Letter to Teachers and School Counselors

Date
Teacher/School Counselor
Cheney Middle School
West Fargo Public Schools

Dear Teacher/School Counselor,

I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, North Dakota. I am writing my dissertation to examine the experiences of middle school students and their transitions from elementary to middle school. I believe it is crucial for administrators, school counselors, teachers, parents and researchers to understand the experiences of middle school students, and to be aware of what transitional activities have been successful in helping students make successful transitions from elementary to middle school.

I will be working with your sixth grade team of teachers, counselors, and students to conduct four different focus group sessions during your Packer Time on the dates listed below. During the first session, I will introduce myself to the students, explain the purpose of the study, and model the focus group discussion process. During the next three sessions, I will focus on asking questions relating to the students' middle school transition experiences. A CMS school counselor will be present for each focus group session. During focus group sessions, the CMS school counselor will be asked to reflect on questions that identify their understanding of student transitional experiences, as well as their reactions to student responses. Teachers, your role would be to support student participation in the focus group sessions. I will mail to the home of each student: (a) a letter to the student's parents detailing my study, (b) a consent form for parents to sign allowing for participation of their student in this study. Teachers, I would ask for your assistance in collecting Parent/Guardian Consent forms returned by students for their parent/guardian.

Session 1:   Session 3:
Session 2:   Session 4:

This research study has been approved through Dr. Burgad and WFPS. Thank you in advance for your willingness to contribute to the extension of the knowledge base related to middle school transition programs.

Sincerely,
Erin Spies
Assistant Principal, Liberty Middle School
West Fargo Public Schools, ND
espies@west-fargo.k12.nd.us

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE:	*Elementary to Middle School Transitions*
PROJECT DIRECTOR:	*Erin Spies*
PHONE #	*701-499-9003*
DEPARTMENT:	*Educational Leadership*

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

Your child is invited to participate in a research study conducted by Erin Spies, from the University of North Dakota Educational Leadership program. The researcher hopes to learn about the experiences of students as they make their transition from elementary to middle school, and to identify essential transitional practices that help students make a successful transition. Your child was selected as a participant in this study because they have recently made the transition from elementary to middle school.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately *100* students from Team _____ will take part in this study at Cheney Middle School, and approximately four counselors from Cheney Middle School will take part in this study.

HOW LONG WILL MY CHILD BE IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to allow your child to participate, they will be engaged in discussion with peers regarding their transitional experiences from elementary to middle school through a focus group format. Focus groups will last approximately 30 minutes, and will take place during the school day during Packer Time, at their designated school. A total of four focus group sessions will be conducted during your child's Packer Time to gain an understanding about their experiences transitioning to middle school. Each focus group

session will be audio-recorded for accuracy. Students will also engage in anonymous written reflection of focus group questions, and their reflections will be collected by the researcher.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

During focus group sessions, students will be organized into small groups of four or five students each. Each small group will answer a specific set of questions at their table, before rotating to the next table to answer another set of questions. All questions will be based on their experiences regarding their transition from elementary to middle school.

Students will be provided with their focus group questions ahead of time, to engage in written reflections. Students may refer to their written reflections during the focus group process. Students will have their answers audio-recorded during focus group discussions. Students are free to skip any question they would prefer not to answer. Upon completion of each focus group session, students will turn in their written reflections. They will not be required to write their name on their written reflections, to ensure confidentiality.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. If, however, students become upset by questions, they may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question. If they would like to talk to someone about their feelings about this study, they are encouraged to contact a school counselor at Cheney Middle School.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

Students may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because learning what transitional practices students view as beneficial will help us develop a more comprehensive transitional program to best meet student needs in helping them make a successful transition from elementary to middle school.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

If you choose not to have your child participate in this study, your child will be provided Packer Time with another one of their core teachers during scheduled focus group dates. Your decision on whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will not affect you or your child's relationship with Cheney Middle School.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You and/or your child will not be paid for being in this research study.

WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you and/or your child will not be identified. The results may be reviewed by government agencies and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you or your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe a child has been abused, or he/she poses a danger to themselves or someone else. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of anonymous recordings and written reflections. Students will not provide their name on their written reflections or say their name during audio recordings. Coding of the transcripts will not include any identifiers, and storage of the data will be kept on a password protected computer. The only people who will have access to the data includes the researcher, the doctoral committee advisor, and university IRB.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that no one can be identified.

Students' and or parents/guardians have the right to review audio recordings. No individual student will be identified in audio records. Intent of audio recordings are to document student's answers during focus groups regarding their perspectives of their transitions from elementary to middle school. After transcribing is complete, audio recordings will be erased and destroyed. Transcriptions will be available for parents to review upon request. In the transcriptions no individual student will be identified.

IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

You and your child's participation is voluntary. You or your child may choose not to participate or may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you and your child are otherwise entitled. The decision whether or not to participate will not affect you or your child's current or future relations with the

University of North Dakota, with Cheney Middle School, or with any of the schools present in the West Fargo Public Schools District.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?

The researcher conducting this study is Erin Spies. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please contact *Erin Spies* at *701-499-9003.* You may also contact her UND advisor, Dr. Houdek at 701-777-4255.

If you have questions regarding your child's rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at **(701) 777-4279** or **UND.irb@research.UND.edu.**

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "Information for Research Participants" on the web site: http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm

I give consent for my child to be audio recorded during this study.

Please initial: _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

I give consent for my child's quotes to be used in the research; however he/she will not be identified.

Please initial: _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to allow your child to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's (Student's) Name:

_____

_____   _____
Signature of Parent of Student   Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent   Date

Consent to Participate in Research – School Counselors

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE:	*Elementary to Middle School Transitions*
PROJECT DIRECTOR:	*Erin Spies*
PHONE #	*701-499-9003*
DEPARTMENT:	*Educational Leadership*

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Erin Spies, from the University of North Dakota, Educational Leadership program. The researcher hopes to learn about the experience of students as they make the transition from elementary to middle school, to identify essential transitional practices that help students make a successful transition. You were selected as a participant in this study because you currently work as a middle school counselor, and play an essential role in developing the elementary to middle school transitional practices.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately *100* students from Team _____ will take part in this study at Cheney Middle School, and approximately four counselors from Cheney Middle School will take part in this study.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to participate, you will be engaged in reflection based on your observations of student's transitional experiences from elementary to middle school through their participation in focus groups. Focus groups will last approximately 30 minutes, and will take place during the school day during Packer Time, at their designated school. A total of four focus group sessions will be conducted during Packer Time to gain an

understanding about students' experience transitioning to middle school. Each focus group session will be audio-recorded for accuracy. As a school counselor, you will be asked to answer reflective questions after the completion of each focus group session. Written reflections will be collected by the researcher.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

During focus group sessions, students will be organized into small groups of 4 or 5. Each small group will answer a specific set of questions at their table, before rotating to the next table to answer another set of questions. All questions are based on their experiences with the transition from elementary to middle school.

Students will be provided questions ahead of time, to engage in written reflections. Students may refer to their written reflections during the focus group process. Students will audio record their answers during the focus group discussions. Students are free to skip any questions that he/she would prefer not to answer. Upon completion of each focus group session, students will turn in their written reflections. They will not be required to write their name on the written reflections, to ensure confidentiality.

As an observer of the focus group sessions, you will be asked to answer some questions based on your observations of students answers and feedback. You will not be required to write your name on the written reflection to ensure confidentiality.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. If, however, you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

School counselors may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because learning what transitional practices students view as beneficial will help us develop a more comprehensive transitional program to best meet student needs in helping them make a successful transition from elementary to middle school.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

If you choose not to participate in this study, the researcher will recruit another school counselor in the building to participate. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your relationship with Cheney Middle School.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show information to other people. For example the law may require us to show information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe a child has been abused, or he/she poses a danger to themselves or someone else. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of anonymous written reflections. School counselors will not provide their name on their written reflections. Coding of the transcripts will not include any identifiers and storage of the data will be kept on a password protected computer. The only people who will have access to the data include the researcher, their doctoral committee advisor and university committee members.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?

The researcher conducting this study is Erin Spies. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact *Erin Spies* at *701-499-9003.* You may also contact her UND advisor, Dr. Houdek at 701-777-4255.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at **(701) 777-4279** or **UND.irb@research.UND.edu**.

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "Information for Research Participants" on the web site: http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm

I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however I <u>will not</u> be identified.

Please initial: **____ Yes** **____ No**

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: _____

_____   _____
Signature of Subject   Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent   Date

Appendix G
Follow up Letter to Parents/Students

Date
Parent/Student
Address
Town, State

Dear Parent/Student,

Thank you for agreeing to allow your child to participate in my study to examine the experience of middle school students' transitions from elementary to middle school. I am confirming the following dates/times for the focus group sessions.

Packer Time Teacher:

Session 1:
Session 2:
Session 3:
Session 4:

At the first focus group session on (date), I will explain the consent form to your child, respond to any questions your child may have, and ask your child and his/her peers to consent to participate in the study. Should they consent, I will ask them to sign a consent form before we proceed with the focus group. You and your child will be provided a copy of your child's informed consent for your records.

Thank you for your willingness to contribute to the extension of the knowledge base related to middle school transition programs.

Sincerely,

Erin Spies
Assistant Principal, Liberty Middle School
West Fargo, ND
espies@west-fargo.k12.nd.us

Date
School Counselor
Address
Town, State

Dear School Counselor,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study to examine the experience of middle school students' transitions from elementary to middle school. I am confirming the following dates/times for the focus group sessions.

Packer Time Teacher:

Session 1:
Session 2:
Session 3:
Session 4:

Thank you for your willingness to contribute to the extension of the knowledge base related to middle school transition programs.

Sincerely,

Erin Spies
Assistant Principal, Liberty Middle School
West Fargo, ND
espies@west-fargo.k12.nd.us

Appendix I
Student Assent Form

Project Title: Middle School Transition Practices: Exploring Student's Perspectives on Elementary to Middle School Transition Programs

Investigator(s): Erin Spies

We are doing a research study, which is a special way finding out about something. We want to find out what your transition from elementary to middle school was like. What activities you participated in at school to get ready for middle school, and what you liked or didn't like about those activities.

If you want to be in this study, we will ask you to do several things.
- You and your Packer Time class will meet with Mrs. Spies four times during Packer Time to answer some questions about what it was like to move from elementary to middle school.
- Each meeting will be about 30 minutes long, and will always take place during Packer Time with your entire class at school.

We want to tell you about some things that may happen if you participate in this study. Some of the things you remember about moving from elementary to middle school may make you feel sad or frustrated.

Not everyone who is in this study will benefit. A benefit means that something good happens to you. We don't know if you will benefit. But we hope to learn something that will help other students someday.

Sometimes we need to show your information to other people. If you tell us that you have been abused, or if we think that you might be a danger to yourself or other people, we will tell someone who can help, like the school counselor or principal.

When we are done with the study, we will write a report about what we find. We will not use your name in the report.

You do not have to be in this study. It is up to you. If you want to be in the study, but change your mind later, you can stop being in the study at any time.

If you do not want to be in this study, you will have the option to attend a different Packer Time class with one of your other core teachers on the days the focus group sessions are scheduled.

If you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

_____   _____
Your name (printing is OK)   **Date**

I certify that this study and the procedures involved have been explained in terms the child can understand and that he/she has freely assented to participate in this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent   *Date*

Appendix J
Researcher's Bias

Researcher's Assumptions/Bias/Experiences
- All students worry about the transition to middle school on some level.
- All students experience some level of nervousness or anxiety about the transition from elementary to middle school.
- Current transitional practices are not sufficient in supporting all students in an effective transition from elementary to middle school.
- School counselors at the middle level are responsible for transitional activities, including planning and implementation.
- Very little work is done to evaluate the effectiveness of transitional programming activities.
- Students are not provided the opportunity to voice the effectiveness of transitional programming activities; therefore, there is a lack of understanding of student perspectives on what elements of current transitional programming activities are beneficial to them.
- Parents sometimes project feelings of anxiousness or worry on their incoming 6th grade student.
- There may be economic or other factors that impact parents'/students' ability to participate in current transitional programming activities, so not all students have access to the same information or experiences.

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