Don't Count Them Out: Transitioning Adolescents' Perceptions of Issues Impacting Learning in Middle School

Concetta Lucchese
St. John Fisher College

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First Supervisor
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Second Supervisor
Chinwe Ikpeze

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By

Concetta Lucchese

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed. D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Jeannine Dingus-Eason

Committee Member
Dr. Chinwe Ikpeze

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

December 2009
We recommend that the dissertation by

Concetta Lucchese

Entitled Don’t Count Them Out: Transitioning Adolescents’ Perceptions of Issues Impacting Student Learning in Middle School

Be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Education Doctorate degree.

Jeannine Dingus-Eason, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

Chinwe Ikpeze, Ph.D., Committee Member

Date

November 2, 2009
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family who support me in all that I do, no matter how it impacts their lives. To my father, my greatest advocate, who instilled in me a great love and respect for education and who has been a great inspirational force in my professional life. To my mother, my very heart, whose love, encouragement, and patience made my dreams possible to achieve. She taught me the value of hard work and commitment to excellence. To my brother, my best friend, who continually reminds me of my many blessings and of the importance of walking each step of this life’s journey with the Lord, our God, at the center. To my sister, who knows the value of never giving up. Know that each day is a promise for new possibilities and that we all have the power to do it! To my son, my life, who is always patient with me as I attend to professional and academic goals. You bless me by being a young man whom I can trust and I know you will do great things in your life. My dear family, you need to know that all I have accomplished is because of what you have done for me and I love you so very much. This one’s for you.
Biographical Sketch

Concetta Lucchese is currently Executive Director of Integrated Literacy in an urban school district. Ms. Lucchese attended Monroe Community College from 1973 to 1975, transferring to the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1975 to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Teacher Certification in English Education (7-12) in 1978. She continued studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo and graduated with a Masters of Science in Secondary Education. She attended St. John Fisher College from 1999-2001 and graduated with a Master of Arts in Educational Administration. She returned to St. John Fisher College in May of 2007 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Lucchese pursued her research on the urban middle school transition experience and its influence on student learning under the direction of Dr. Jeannine Dingus-Eason and received her Ed.D. degree in 2010.
Acknowledgements

Completing a doctoral program is an intense and complex process that necessitates the support of many important others. Without these special individuals, the completion of this dissertation would have never been possible. It is with undying appreciation that the following advisors, friends and colleagues are acknowledged for their contributions.

First, much appreciation goes out to each of the Ed.D. instructors of Cohort 2 at St. John Fisher College. In particular, my utmost thanks and respect to Dr. Jeannine Dingus-Eason, my doctoral chair, for the incredible wisdom, guidance, and support. You have transformed your student into a researcher and scholar. Thanks to Dr. Chinwe Ikpeze for being a great listener and advisor and for making contributions that moved the writer forward. Many thanks also to Betsy Christiansen for all of the assistance and encouragement provided as program objectives were met.

I am fortunate to have been surrounded by very special educators, colleagues and friends who served as models and mentors. Thanks to Dr. Tyra Webb-Lewis, who convinced me to take the first step in the dissertation journey. Much appreciation and love to Marilynn Patterson-Grant, who was my strength and comfort as we shared the journey. I am indebted to Dr. Michele Hancock, who gave so much of herself as a teacher, mentor, and friend. I appreciate the time she gave to discuss my work and to provide exemplary models. Thanks to Dr. Cheryl McGruder-Holloway for checking in on me and for sharing words of wisdom. I am tremendously grateful to Tina DiNicol
assistant, who responded daily to all of the extra requests for support and who was an exceptional transcriptionist.

My sincere gratitude also goes out to several district administrators who supported my research needs and provided approvals and information during the data collection process: Mary Andrecolich-Diaz, Dr. Deasure Matthews, Dr. Sam Rodriguez, Adam Rogers, Andrew MacGowan, and Joanne Bakeman. I am also thankful to have had Jerome Watts as a professional colleague and cohort classmate. Our conversations had such a positive impact on me. Love and heartfelt thanks go to my long time friend and colleague, Dr. Jeanette Silvers. She was as outstanding as my program mentor and she has been in all aspects of my life and I will spend a very long time attempting to repay her for her friendship and support.

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Finally, a special thanks to the students who participated in this study. This research project was about them and for them; and I was honored to have been in their company. They were wonderfully sincere participants and it is my dream that they will continue to be included and valued for what they can bring to their own education.
Abstract

The transition from elementary to middle school presents adolescents with challenges that deter them from becoming learning-focused students. In urban settings, transitioning students are often confronted with issues as they enter middle school and attempt to acclimatize to the new environment. This study explored first-hand experiences of transitioning urban middle school seventh graders at the completion of their first year in a middle school setting. The purpose of the study was to describe students' perceptions of the issues negatively impacting their ability to focus on learning.

This phenomenological research study was conducted primarily using pre-existing data from seventh grade test responses; a card pile sort task activity; focus group interviews; and field notes to gain insights into the issues that urban adolescents confront as learners in middle school settings. Purposeful sampling was used to identify three groups of participants from three middle school sites across a large urban district. Findings from the interviews suggest that there are common issues negatively impacting urban students’ ability to focus on learning. Participants characterized the early transition period into middle school as a time in which specific issues create discomforts distracting them from their primary responsibilities as learners. Students also identified elements of classroom dynamics and teacher pedagogical practice that disenfranchise them from learning as experienced during an adjustment phase. Findings further indicated that students’ middle school counselors are not reaching out to them to address issues, to counsel them through difficulties, or to circumvent the impact of negative learning
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Middle school students have historically presented unique challenges for educators. As adolescents in the ten to fourteen year-old age group, they enter middle school with a decreased interest in academics and increased incidences of school misconduct (Eccles, et al., 1984; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Research related to adolescents and their transition to middle school indicates that the early adolescent years trigger the beginning of a downward spiral that may lead adolescents into failure and increase the risk for dropout (Eccles, et al., 1993; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995). At this age, students are developmentally stressed as they adjust to puberty, while forced to make adjustments to changes in social relationships with peers, family, and authority figures (NMSA, 1995; Eccles, et al., 1993; Rudolph, et al., 2001; Cook, et al., 2007).

Additionally, as they transition into middle level education, adolescents are exposed to the social and academic challenges of the middle school environment. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to negative peer group influences as effects of delinquent peers tend to increase from early to middle adolescence, peaking at the age of thirteen (Jang, 1999). Several studies have concluded that the educational environment of middle schools is a major contributing factor to declines in achievement, attitudes, values, and behaviors for many adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley & Adler, 1984; Feldlaufer, Midgley & Eccles, 1988).
Historical Perspective

The division of primary and secondary education into an eight-year elementary school and a four-year high school system was the primary model for American public schools throughout the nineteenth century (Manning, 2000). By the first decade of the twentieth century, however, primary schools were unable to flexibly meet the needs of adolescents in overcrowded schools, resulting in large numbers of out of school eleven and twelve year-olds (Cuban, 1992). The junior high school framework emerged to replace the predominant school structure, focusing on the unique needs of the adolescent learner in grades seven through nine (Thompson, 1976; Cuban, 1992). As a result, junior high schools were introduced as a means of addressing challenges pertinent to educating adolescents at the primary school level (Cuban, 1992; Thompson, 1976). The move of adolescents to what became known as junior high schools responded to the need for educating adolescents in a unique setting (Clark & Clark, 1993). However, the creation of a separate institution for adolescents unfortunately resulted in a reform effort that was more structural than responsive, receiving criticism for its departmentalized structure, and for remaining ill-prepared to address the needs and interests of its adolescent students (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; Cuban, 1992).

With the inadequacies of the junior high school model in mind, the middle school concept was formed by advocates such as Alexander and Williams (1965) who recognized the need to provide adolescents with more than just an appropriate grade-level setting. It was argued that an educational environment serving ten to fourteen year-olds needed to be more conducive to meeting their academic, social, and emotional needs (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Hence, the large scale reconfiguration of American educational
settings in the 1960s to include middle schools responded to the inability of the junior high school to address the sensitive needs of adolescents (NMSA, 2003). These new school models focused on addressing the challenges of educating adolescents with the inclusion of flexible scheduling, ungraded programs, and team teaching models (Alexander & George, 1981). Unfortunately, even in the earliest stages of middle school education reform, experts such as Alexander (1968) noted that:

> the data do not show that the program and instructional organization of the reorganized schools differ, for the most part, from what they were in the predecessor schools, and an improved school for learners between childhood and adolescence is yet to be realized (p. 114).

Furthermore, more recent claims that students attending middle schools experience a greater achievement loss in the transition to high school than do students making the transition from a K-8 elementary school (Seidman, et al., 1994), suggest that current educational efforts to meet the needs of adolescent learners continue to fare poorly in the twenty-first century.

In 1965, only five percent of middle-grade schools in the United States were grade six through eight or grade five through eight middle school structures. Sixty-seven percent were considered junior high schools composed of grades seven through nine. By the year 2000, only five percent of middle grades schools were seventh through ninth grade junior high schools and sixty-nine percent were sixth through eighth or fifth through eighth grade middle schools. The reversal in the trend occurred incrementally from 1971 through 2000, resulting in sixty-nine percent of the nation's schools specifically configured for middle grades (Valentine, 2000). The shift was based on
compatible research findings supporting the need to better attend to the developmental and academic needs of adolescents (Trauschke, 1970). Researchers such as Tegarden (1976) contended that the learning environment prevalent in the elementary and high school did not lend itself to the peculiar needs and interests of early adolescents. It was argued that middle level programs would need to be designed to provide specifically for the adolescent learner and to be staffed with sensitive, specially prepared personnel.

In contemporary society, adolescents continue to experience middle level education in varying school configurations with middle-grade schools comprised of grades six through eight as the predominant grade-span configuration for adolescents between elementary and high school. However, secondary schools serving the nation's seventh and eighth graders in a seven through twelfth grade secondary setting, although relatively few, continue to exist. As of 2008, there were 3268 out of 23,4436 school districts configured to accommodate middle level students in a seven through twelfth grade setting (Digest of Educational Statistics. 2009). Surprisingly, however, regardless of past trends or prevailing models, achievement data consistently support the need to identify more effective ways of educating the ten through fourteen year-old adolescent learner. This remains the case in 2009.

Over the past four decades, the National Middle School Association has focused on middle-grades schools to determine which elements might create the most effective learning experience for young adolescents. Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000) addressed the need for middle grade schools to investigate and identify successful strategies for schools to organize, create, and implement effective programs that will engage students at this age in positive learning experiences. The authors contend that the
main purpose of middle grades education is to promote young adolescents' intellectual development: to facilitate creative thinking and problem-solving skills; to provide students with opportunities to communicate and work well with others; and to develop a strong set of base skills and knowledge. The middle school is also given the charge of helping students develop the physical and mental capacities to lead healthy lives and to become caring, compassionate, and tolerant citizens. Primarily, middle schools must meet these goals by helping all students develop their minds to fullest potential through effective learning opportunities.

Demands for more effective means of educating adolescent students have continued through the latter decades of the twentieth century and have necessitated new perspectives in the throes of a twenty-first century global society. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) estimated that nearly twenty-five percent of the adolescent population is at risk of academic failure and behavior problems leading to school disengagement, with another twenty-five percent identified as "moderately" or in danger of being at-risk.

On October 24, 2007, then Senator Barack Obama was joined by other senators in introducing the Senate version of "Success in the Middle" H.R. 3406, a bill that would authorize grants to states and school districts to help improve middle-grades education and turn around low-performing middle schools. The act responded to the current research associating the middle years with declines in motivation, self-perception, and academic achievement. The research revealed that young adolescent students who do not engage in learning attend school regularly, exhibit poor behavior, or fail math or English are very likely to drop out before graduation from high school (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006;
Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Lee & Burkam (2003) support the contention that students become disengaged in schooling well before they make the decision to drop out. In fact, it has been shown that if poor performing middle grade students who have already shown disinterest in learning are not provided appropriate supports and interventions, they will become discouraged and begin to think of themselves as dropouts long before they actually leave school in later years (Lee & Burkam, 2003). The H. R. 3406 "Success in the Middle" Act acknowledged the precarious nature of middle level education and the need to upgrade and modernize our nation's twenty-first century middle schools before dropping out of high school becomes a consideration.

Today, over 15 million adolescents enter middle school uncertain about the next phase of their education as they are caught in this critical juncture point. By eighth grade, many students have decided whether they will drop out or graduate from high school, whether they will take algebra and other "gatekeeper" courses that predict success in college, and whether they will engage in risky behaviors such as drug use and unprotected sex (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Therefore, school characteristics that may influence a student's decision to stay in school are important variables that must be sought and identified (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007).

Students struggling at the middle school level are more likely to struggle at the high school level where performance losses have been shown to continue (Alspaugh, 1998). This poses serious implications with decreasing odds for such students as they prepare to enter ninth grade. According to the Massachusetts Advocacy Center (1988), a student's decision to drop out of high school is often the end result of a long series of
negative school experiences—academic failure, grade retention, or frequent suspensions—that begin before the ninth grade.

Consequently, the pattern of regression associated with the middle grades merits serious attention since declining academic performance at the middle level may result in irreparable learning gaps, deteriorating students’ best chances for success at ninth grade when a second transition is made (Seidman, et al., 1994). This is relevant in light of recent research that has identified specific performance indicators that students must meet as ninth graders to ensure continued high school achievement and secure graduation within four years (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). According to Allensworth and Easton (2007), a number of freshman indicators can be used to predict high school graduation. These predictive measures include freshman year grade point average, the number of semester courses failed, and freshman year absences. The academic indices for success may be weakened by the nature of the academic foundation established for students in the years most immediately preceding the ninth grade cohort year. Research has supported the notion that academic risk factors may be cumulative and that these declines lead to high dropout rates (McMillan, Kaufman, Hausken, & Bradby, 1993; Smith, 1997). Studies have concluded that even young children may be at academic risk of eventually dropping out if early in their school lives they manifest such school behaviors as low grades, low educational expectations and discipline problems (Roderick, 1993; Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Therefore, the declining academic and behavioral performance of students, as they move from elementary, through middle and into high school, signals a pattern that merits further investigation.

*Academic Achievement Losses of New York State Middle Schools*
Academic achievement data and attendance rates of students in the seventh grade consistently reveal a drop in academic performance from the previous school years (Mizelle, 1999). New York State and district level student performance data for English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments, for example, present a case for the need to better meet the distinctive learning needs of adolescent students in ways that will result in increased rather than declining academic performance. Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 shows test results of three cohorts of students, each over three years of state testing in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Each cohort represents the same population of students taking the same test during the same years. The percentages represent the passing rates for those groups of students taking the appropriate grade-level test as sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. As shown in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2, English Language Arts and Mathematics scores indicate that there is a major decline in passing rates when the same students move from sixth to seventh grade with eighth grade scores leveling off or declining further. It might be argued that increased expectations, higher performance standards, and increased difficulty of academic material at grade seven are at least partially responsible for the performance gap. However, incremental increases in academic expectations and course work are ordinary and to be expected from one grade to the next as students progress and build on prior knowledge. How is it, then, that the greatest achievement decline occurs at this particular grade level? What educators might best consider is how students respond to new learning settings, unfamiliar performance expectations and more advanced academic material at this point in their education so that educators can respond appropriately.
Table 1.1

*New York State English Language Arts Assessments Results*

*Student Cohort Data for Same Student Populations over a Three Year Period*

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<th>Cohort 1 Passing Rates</th>
<th>Cohort 2 Passing Rates</th>
<th>Cohort 3 Passing Rates</th>
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*Note:* New York State data reflects total aggregate passing rates for the "Big 5" Urban School Districts (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, New York City, Yonkers).

Table 1.2

*New York State Mathematics Assessments Results*

*Student Cohort Data for Same Student Populations over a Three Year Period*

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*Note:* New York State data reflects total aggregate passing rates for the "Big 5" Urban School Districts (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, New York City, Yonkers).

Three years of student trend data for English Language Arts and Mathematics (Tables 1.1 and 1.2) for cohorts of students in the five largest urban school districts in New York State (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, New York City, and Yonkers) present an alarming reality. As students transition into the seventh grade, regardless of the school...
configuration in which they learn, they are at a higher risk of experiencing declining performance scores. Additionally, scores continue to decline in the subsequent school year, increasing the risk of students for being able to meet the rigor of the high school curricula and graduation requirements (Alspaugh, 1998).

The alarm sounds loudly for middle school students and educators, especially since such high numbers of students exit our schools prematurely and unprepared each year. Considering the dismal results that schools continue to yield, there is an urgent reality that calls educators to reach deeper and in new directions for possible solutions. It is time to better understand middle school learners in the twenty-first century; the impact of the transition from elementary to middle school on these learners; and how the middle school setting contributes to or hinders their ability to learn.

Statement of the Problem

School transitions have a negative effect on students' functioning at any grade level, but the most pronounced changes in student academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning are evident at the transition from sixth to seventh grade (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Gronna, 1998; Diemert, 1992; Peterson & Crockett, 1985; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983). Studies over several decades have determined this age group to be especially vulnerable and in need of early and ongoing transition planning to reduce student alienation, improve attendance, and prevent dropout (Finger & Silverman, 1966; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Peterson & Crockett, 1985; Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007).

Adolescents are especially prone to the negative consequences associated with the middle school transition at this stage in their development. The point at which the
transition to middle school occurs coincides with a time of rapid biological and interpersonal change (Brooks-Gunn & Petersen, 1993). The transition to a new school environment is a challenging and disruptive event, particularly in terms of adolescent self-image and social relationships, increasing students’ risk for long-term negative outcomes (Seidman, et al., 1994). Precisely when adolescents are most in need of opportunities to develop their intellectual abilities, feel a sense of belonging, and interact with supportive adults, they are thrust into a new school environment that often fails them (Roeser, Midgley & Urden, 1996). Middle school age students are also in need of supportive relationships with adults outside the home, yet it is at this point that they leave the more nurturing elementary environment for less personal experiences with their teachers (Feldlaufer, Midgley & Eccles, 1988). Combined, these factors present overwhelming challenges for adolescent learners.

Elementary to Middle School Transition

The middle school concept is built on the assertion that adolescents are unique and have different developmental, social-environmental, and academic needs from elementary students (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991). Developmentally, as children move into this age group, they become more curious and explorative, reaching out of their families for social interaction and approval (Thornberg, 1983). Research shows that as adolescents seek new social relationships, peers become exceptionally important in influencing their behavior (Nichols & White, 2001). On many occasions, the new socialization patterns characteristic of this period are in conflict with those of earlier socialization, stirring adolescents to question authority, and exhibit atypical behaviors from the past (Thornberg, 1973).
Adolescents, at this transitional stage, experience more psychological stressors than ever before (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Stresses increase at home, at school, with peers and as a by-product of puberty; and students often enter middle school on overload (Butte, 1993; Elkind, 1990; Hilliard, 2003). It has been found that as a result of the stresses experienced among this age group there is a diminished interest in learning and a heightened sense of alienation (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Each of these complicating factors transfer with the student as he or she moves into the larger middle school setting where it is hypothesized that larger school size further contributes to declining performance as measured by test scores (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lee & Smith, 1993).

The research on middle school transitions unequivocally indicates that there are multiple contextual factors exclusively affecting the transitioning adolescent. The period is characterized as one that continues to coincide with a host of negative consequences for students (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991; Seidman, et al., 1994; Mizelle, 1995; Barber & Olsen, 2004), as they experience many changes in the school environment when moving from the elementary to the secondary level (Alspaugh, 1998). Students struggle with the much less personalized school structures and unfamiliar middle school instruction models (Feldlauffer, Midgley & Eccles, 1988) and are often incompatible and uncomfortable with the systems, practices, and structures that replace those known in elementary school.

Larger schools are blamed for having the inability to provide adolescent students personal attention, a caring academic environment, and more opportunities for the types of involvement that lead to positive behavioral and academic outcomes (Johnson.
Crosnoe & Elder, 2001; McMillen, 2004; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Larger school organizations have also been documented as experiencing higher incidents of dropout, suspensions, and truancy (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; McMillen, 2004). The larger middle school environments have also been identified as more unsafe, disorderly, and where high rates of student disruption have been reported to influence higher incidents of low performance (Lee & Bryk, 1989; Rumberger and Palardy, 2005).

A disparity between elementary and middle school education is also evident in the goal orientation favored by each of these educational settings. Elementary schools are primarily task-oriented while the middle school places emphasis on performance (Midgley, Anderman & Hicks, 1995). As outlined by Ames (1992), the task-oriented elementary school environment places importance on effort, mastery and growth. Such classrooms include students of mixed-abilities where time is used flexibly to meet the needs of individuals or groups of children and where mistakes are regarded as necessary for learning. Cross-age and peer tutoring are often integrated into the learning structure. Conversely, the performance-oriented middle school environment places emphasis on grades and test scores, and learning occurs largely in classrooms where students are grouped homogeneously by ability. Articulation of the right answer is encouraged above demonstration of understanding. Performance-oriented middle school classrooms do not foster motivation as do task-oriented learning environments that teach students that building new knowledge requires effort (Ames, 1992).

According to Steward (2007), increasing student engagement in ways that improve academic achievement must consider the impact of school structural and environmental factors on students. Several organizational and environmental factors have
been shown to predict motivation and achievement of adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Schools and school related activities serve key roles for students, particularly since they are the primary social setting (Brown & Evans, 2002). Schools influence the academic achievement of students through the manner in which they organize and structure the school and its classrooms (Steward, 2007). The organization of middle and secondary schools, as measured by class and school size, has been shown to have specific negative outcomes on students. Several researchers have conjectured that smaller school and class size allow for more personalized interactions, greater student autonomy, and more opportunities for student involvement which, in turn, lead to more positive behaviors and improved academic outcomes for students (Johnson, et al., 2001; McMillen, 2004; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Positive student-teacher relationships have been associated with higher rates of student success at the middle school level (Midgley, et al., 1989; Wentzel, 1997). It is critical that teachers see each student as an individual, not as a group of adolescents (Alexander, 1995). Motivation of middle school students increases when they are supported by teachers who know them, challenge them, and encourage their independence (Midgley, et al., 1989; Wentzel, 1997).

Supportive peer relationships also matter to adolescents (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Their relationships with peers affect their perceptions of school and their own sense of confidence in their abilities (Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000). Since peer influence appears to be greatest at the adolescent stage (Erikson, 1968), the transition from elementary to middle school is exceptionally distressful as students' friendships are disrupted in the transfer. It is believed that this shift causes students to be particularly
vulnerable to negative peer influences when entering middle school (Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000). Overall, as students transition from the elementary setting and immerse themselves into the middle school culture, their growth is influenced positively or negatively by the social, emotional, and academic factors of the environment to which they are exposed (Freiberg, 1999).

*Transition programs.* Regardless of the complexity of the transition event, research has shown that stresses created in the lives of adolescents when transitioning into middle and high school can be less traumatizing and detrimental to future success when the new environment is designed to be responsive to the needs of this age group (Schumacher, 1998). Based on the premise that declines in motivation and productivity are linked to characteristics of the educational environments to which early adolescents are exposed (Eccles & Midgley, 1988), middle school educators have been compelled to respond. The result has been the development of middle school transition programs designed to better prepare students for the next phase of their education.

Successful transition programs for students moving from the elementary to middle level are characterized by specific components. According to Mac Iver (1990), a transition program preparing students for success in the new setting includes (1) communication with students and parents regarding the new school, its programs and procedures; (2) social support with opportunities for students to meet peers and older students before and during the transition; and, (3) teacher involvement in interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum and course requirements. Transition programs must also incorporate collaboration between teachers of sending and receiving schools and opportunities for students to meet their new teachers, counselors, and other students prior
to the new school year (Weldy, 1991). These recommendations highlight the need to establish a sense of belonging among constituents and to proactively and appropriately respond to the needs of incoming students. Other recommended strategies for transition programs include providing students with mentors or advisors to work with students to provide academic and social support; maximum flexibility in grouping of students for instruction; and an environment where it is acceptable for students to act their age and have fun (Jett, Pulling & Ross, 1995).

Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) identified specific practices that principals of schools containing seventh graders found to be most responsive to this age group. The administrators in the study believed that advisory periods, interdisciplinary teaching, and transition activities yielded the best results for their incoming seventh graders. Advisory time affords adolescents time to address personal issues that impede learning and set goals for success. Through more personalized approaches, students are offered mentoring opportunities better aligned to their personal and academic needs (National Education Association, 2002). The NEA (2002) also noted that interdisciplinary teaching models create opportunities for teachers to share education outcome goals and work together to set high standards for all students.

Middle school success has been predicated on an academically challenging and supportive environment that engages young adolescent learners. This includes attention to student motivation, a meaningful and relevant curriculum, and opportunities for students to make choices in their educational settings (Anfara, 2007; Phelps, 2005). Such instructional variables converge with school environment, structure, and relationship variables to create multiple contextual factors uniquely affecting the transitioning
adolescent. With this in mind, transition programs have admirably sought to reduce the negative impact associated with the transition to middle school through the interweaving of these factors. Yet, in spite of efforts to better meet the needs of transitioning adolescent students, deteriorating academic performance is notable, particularly for those who continue to feel overwhelmed by school-related stresses (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark & Kurlakowsky, 2001). The inconsistent results that transition programs yield suggest that in order to benefit from their responsive practices they must be implemented properly and fully inclusive of all desirable components (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

The main function of elementary to middle school transition programs has been to respond to students' needs in order to increase student potential at the next level of education. In light of declining performance rates of students at this academic juncture, it is concerning that transition programs have not proven to meet their primary objective, thus far. As Curtis (2006) noted, transition activities may be meaningful, but they appear to be temporal. Overall, little remains known about the impact of transition programs and how they influence and shape later student performance (Murdock, Anderman & Hodge, 2000). Interestingly, research does maintain that if students participate in transition programs and activities prior to and at the onset of the middle school experience, they will perceive the middle school experience in more positive terms which may translate to improved chances for academic success (Schumaker, 1998).

The most desirable characteristics of well-designed middle school transition programs and successful middle schools are well documented (NMSA, 2003; Schumaker, 1998). The primary objectives have been to familiarize students with and ease their adaptation to existing school structures and practices. Typically developed from the
experiences and assumptions of adults who believe they understand what is best for students, transition programs and middle school reform efforts seek to increase student capacity for focused learning and engagement, abiding by the principles of research that contend that adolescents’ needs are best met when provided academic challenges, meaningful curricula, and student choice in a supportive environment (Anfara, 2007; Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1995; Phelps, 2005). Yet, relatively little remains known about the individual differences in adolescents’ reaction to the transition and related stressors (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Moreover, the voices of young adolescents, the major stakeholders in schooling, are missing from all school improvement discussions (Baldwin, 2004; Lamm, 1993; Soo Hoo, 1993). Perhaps, stronger relationships, a better curriculum, more relevant choices, and improved support systems can be built from what is yet to be learned from those who remain unheard.

Student voice. While transition programs have been viewed as a proactive response to middle school failure (NMSA, 2003), transition programs do not consistently yield the desired academic outcomes when considering student performance data, graduation rates, and dropout statistics. In fact, contrary to the intended personalization of program and heightened attention to students’ needs, they tend to silence or marginalize the voices of students themselves (Noguera, 2007). Specifically, most transition program designs do not and therefore cannot take into account what practices middle school students, themselves, might identify as key to their learning (Vaughn, et al., 1995). Actually, schools are the only service organizations that do not routinely include their consumers’ (i.e., students) opinions about their educational experiences in planning for successful end-products (Foster, 1997; Gentilucci, 2004).
More recently, research has attested to the value of student feedback, affirming that it certainly could not hurt to solicit student perspectives on what they believe might be done to make their schools better from a variety of perspectives (Noguera, 2007; Mitra, 2004). Interestingly, for example, students' perceptions of the quality of school life decline as they progress from elementary to high school with the largest decline occurring during the transition to a middle level school (Diemert, 1992). How students perceive these school life factors is significant in that such perceptions have been shown to correlate with school satisfaction and performance. Research has shown that before youth can feel accepted in their schools and extend themselves fully as learners, they must be seen as important players in the school community (Mitra, 2006).

When the voices of students are routinely unsolicited or ignored, the actions assumed by teachers and administrators can be misguided, particularly when their efforts directly clash with students' own concerns (Lee, 1999). Determining students' interests, encouraging participation in school, and creating greater support services to meet social, cultural and academic needs are all important elements toward fostering a school culture that empowers students (Louis & Miles, 1990; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Moll, 1986; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). These elements hold promise for repairing misaligned structures and misguided practices.

Ascertaining how students feel about their school experiences and the quality of the learning environment is of great value to educators. First, it is impossible to design improved school systems and learning environments without comprehending how students view and internalize their learning experiences and why they relate to them as they do (Gentilucci, 2004). Secondly, failure to consider students' thoughts and feelings
devalues student perspective as a valid source of information and alienates them from the learning experience. The danger in relying exclusively on adult viewpoints is that adult perceptions are often drastically different from those of students (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). Hence, efforts to better engage students in education fail as a result of what Denzin (1978) referred to as the "fallacy of objectivism," (i.e., the substitution of one's own perspective for that of the participants under study). Adults must be wary of attributing inaccurate meaning and motive to students' actions (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007), particularly if they expect to create effective school programs and more successful institutions of learning.

Student voice ought to be heard and considered as school redesign efforts unfold. This position was taken by Hammersley and Woods (1984) who stated:

Unless we understand how pupils respond to different forms of pedagogy and school organization and why they respond in the ways that they do, our efforts to increase the effectiveness, or to change the impact of schooling, will stand little chance of success (p.3).

More recently, researchers have investigated the validity and value of students' perceptions of middle and high school instruction and have shown the merit of student insight for improving teaching and learning (Babad, 1990; Babad, Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991). These studies conclude that student input may have value in determining positive change for school reform efforts. It is argued that until adolescent students are participants in making decisions about transition programs and middle school designs, it is unlikely that students will find a meaningful fit in a school setting that is able to meet their developmental and academic needs.
To date, few studies have examined the retrospective perspectives of the just-lived experiences of urban seventh graders who have transitioned into and presently completed their first year of middle school. This study explores how students encounter the difficult transition into middle school and describes the issues that they perceive to distract them and interfere with their ability to focus on learning. As adolescents leap forward from the familiar elementary school setting and face the uncertainties ahead in middle school, issues arise for which students require appropriate supports and interventions (NMSA, 2003). While transition programs attempt to fully serve the needs of incoming adolescents (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991), student performance declines during the first year of middle school suggest that transition programs may be either unavailable to students or ineffective in supporting the short and long-term needs of the adolescent learner. In the latter case, a mismatch between program design and the needs of the transitioning adolescent may exist. This study, which seeks to inform educational practices and programs geared toward increasing the learning potential of middle school students, examines middle school issues that impact learning as perceived by seventh graders at the completion of the first year of middle school.

Theoretical Rationale

Within the American school system, there exists a mismatch between the more controlling atmosphere of middle and high schools and the optimal level of autonomy and support needed for adolescents to thrive (Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Barber & Olsen, 2004). Developmentally appropriate practices are needed to provide interactive opportunities and approaches to learning which reflect both the age and individual needs of the adolescent learner (Bredekamp & Roesgrant, 1992). Attention must be given to the
use of educational practices that will allow children to construct their own knowledge through interactions with their social and physical environment (Novick, 1996).

According to Hunt's (1975) developmental framework, individuals undergo a detrimental decrease in motivation when their environments do not correspond to their needs. Hunt (1975) contended that learning is enhanced when there is a match between the skills of the learner and the challenges of the subject matter. Dubbing the phrase, "optimal match," Hunt argued that learning depends on creating an environment with just the right amount and nature of information that will naturally stimulate an individual to exercise inherent skills and hence, benefit fully in the learning experience. Hunt, however, also articulated the challenges presented in achieving this perfect fit. First, there is no guarantee that learners and settings will cooperate in providing the "just right" elements. Secondly, Hunt warned that since each child is different, "teaching for match" would require intensive attention and skill on the part of educators and that the attempts to do so could be quite exhaustive. Yet, Hunt emphasized the importance of matching the environment to the child and claimed that this could be done in cases where students' responses, feelings, and behaviors provided the information and guidance to teachers concerned with matching.

Person-environment fit theory (Hunt, 1975; Mitchell, 1969) asserts that motivational and behavioral declines could be the result of the failure of schools to provide appropriate educational environments for adolescents. The developmental perspective of the person-environment fit theory maintains that certain types of school environments are more appropriate than others at different stages of development and that
appropriate amounts of structure are more likely to support eventual independence with
the need for less structure.

Eccles, et al., (1993) agree that an educational environment created to fit the
developmental needs of the adolescent will yield positive motivational consequences.
Eccles, et al. (1993), however, expand on Hunt’s theory by introducing the concept of
mismatch in terms of the impact of changes in structures during the adolescent stage. In
their adaptation of the person-environment fit theory, Eccles, et al., (1993) contend that
the negative psychological changes associated with adolescent development result from a
mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded
them by their social environments particularly when in transition from one educational
setting to another. This mismatch between school and learner is regarded as a contributor
to the negative age-related changes that are often observed in early adolescents’
motivation and self-perceptions as a time when the transition is being made to a new
educational setting. Focused more exclusively on the characteristics of the developmental
stage of the adolescent learner during a transition period, Eccles, et al. (1993) identified
their framework as the stage-environment fit theory.

Through the stage-environment fit theoretical framework, Eccles, et al. (1993)
maintain that as a result of the middle school transition, students undergo a
“developmentally regressive” experience caused by unfamiliar structural conditions that
are in direct opposition to the psychological needs of adolescent students. Hence, lived
social experiences in institutional environments, such as schools, must be aligned in ways
that can be positively internalized by the individual in relation to his or her current
developmental stage. Eccles, et al. (1993) stated that:
Stage-environment fit theory suggests behavior, motivation, and mental health are influenced by the fit between the developmental stage of the adolescent and the characteristics of the social environment. Adolescents are not likely to feel connected to school if they are in a school that does not meet their developmental needs. Conversely, school connectedness is maximized when the social environment meets their core developmental needs (p. 91).

Stage-environment fit theory illuminates the importance of considering both the individual's developmental needs and the impact of school environment as a requisite for improving behavioral outcomes such as increased school engagement and academic success. Moreover, it gives critical attention to the need to accurately determine the most essential elements for developing middle school environments that will cultivate the potential of each developing individual. The concept that there must be a fit between the adolescent and the environment for positive outcomes to occur provides a case for increasing educators' awareness of how today's adolescents experience the transition and react to their middle school setting.

Statement of Purpose

Unsuccessful school transitions contribute to declining grades and attendance (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis & Trickett, 1991), achievement loss (Alspaugh, 1998), and lead to high dropout rates (Owings & Peng, 1992; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988). Therefore, it is vital to identify what measures must be taken to ensure that all students make it through this important educational gateway.

The purpose of this study was to explore the notion that students may have much to offer educators regarding their social and academic needs as they enter and attempt to
learn and be successful in the middle school environment. While extensive research has been conducted on effective schools environments for adolescent learners (Learning Associates, 2008; NMSA, 2003), and in spite of the attempt to respond to students’ needs through transition programs for adolescent students entering middle school, there remains a considerable gap between intended program objectives and actual student outcomes. Given that student performance data of transitioning seventh graders has consistently pointed to failed attempts to address the needs of middle level learners, and acknowledging the wide gap between elementary and middle school performance, inclusion of students’ perspectives as they transition into middle school is critical. Thus, this study explored the perceptions of students based on their recent experiences entering and engaging in the middle school environment.

Research Questions

The following primary research question guided this study:

1. How do urban adolescent students characterize their transition and first year in middle school as seventh graders?

As the study explored the characteristics of the elementary to middle school transition event and first year middle school experiences of urban seventh graders, the interview protocol was designed to further reveal which of those characteristics seventh graders determine to be positive influences and which negatively influenced their learning. Ascertaining from the perspectives of transitioning adolescents those issues impacting their own learning supports the development of educational practices and environments more aligned to the developmental needs of middle school learners. Therefore, the following sub-question guided the research:
2. Specifically, what do urban adolescent seventh graders perceive as critical issues impacting their ability to learn as they transition into and experience the first year of middle school?

Summary

Dropping out of high school is a long-term process of disengagement from school and has profound social and economic consequences for students, their families, and their communities. Students who drop out of high school are more likely to be unemployed, earn less than those who graduate, are more likely to be on public assistance, and have higher odds of spending time in prison. Dropping out of high school is a serious problem for the individual, the school system, and society. There is a 40% difference in the range of unemployment between high school graduates and dropouts, as reported by national reports in 2000 (Stanard, 2003).

The consequences of an educational system's inability to perform its first and foremost function of preparing students for successful futures are devastating to all members of society. This is a horrific reality when considering current national graduation and dropout rates. Research warns that the road to high school dropout is paved several years prior for students who eventually make that decision (Belcher & Hartley, 1994; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988). In fact, it is evident that the greatest declines occur as seventh graders transition to the middle school setting (Mizelle, 1999) signaling the need for earlier drop-out prevention strategies, and school organization and curriculum redesign that target the middle grades (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988; Bry & George, 1980). As the search continues, there may be new insights gained from an exploration of how school is experienced by students from
their own point of view (MacIver & Epstein, 1991). This is particularly relevant when considering that research has shown a relationship between school performance and how students respond to school life factors (Mitra, 2006).

The following provides a brief description of the contents of each of the remaining chapters of the dissertation. Chapter 2 reviews existing knowledge and current research related to critical factors for middle school success. An historical overview of middle level education and its efforts to meet the unique needs of the ten-to-fourteen year-old adolescent is included, along with a discussion of transition programs and the value of student feedback as a means of informing middle school designs. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the study as it relates to the research questions, context, participants, data collection, analysis procedures, and a summary of the methodology used in this study. In Chapter 4, results are presented. The chapter delineates study findings into three major themes related to issues negatively impacting the learning of students as they transition into and experience the first year in an urban middle school setting, using participants’ responses to the card pile sort task and respondents’ quotes from the focus group interviews as primary data sources. The chapter closes with a summary of the findings. Chapter 5 discusses and interprets the results, and includes implications of findings, study limitations, recommendations for future research or actions, and concludes with a summary of the entire dissertation.

**Definition of Terms**

- **Adolescent** - for this study, adolescent will refer to a student in the ten to fourteen year-old age group (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000).
• *Middle School* - middle schools have typically been distinguished as intermediate educational settings comprised of either grades 5 through 8, grades 6 through 8, or grades 7 through 9 (Anderman, 2002). For the purposes of this study and in terms of study participants, middle school students will refer to seventh graders in the 10 to 14 year-old age group in a school setting that comprises seventh through ninth graders in either a seventh through ninth grade or seventh through twelfth grade school.

• *Secondary School* - secondary schools are typically configured for grades 9 through 12 with some inclusive of grades 7-12 (Howley, 2002). The participants in this study are in the middle level grades in a secondary school setting configured to accommodate grades 7 through 12 or grades 7 through 9, although they may be housed in a separate "academy" or section of the school.

• *Student Voice* - student feedback and input. Student voice is giving students a role in the decision making and change efforts of schools (Mitra, 2004).

• *Transition* - a period in which an individual terminates a stable life structure in order to work toward a new structure (Levinson, 1977). The transition period applicable to this study is that which takes place when students move from sixth grade in an elementary school setting to seventh grade in a middle school setting.

• *Transition program* - a pre- or early entry experience provided students as they move from the elementary to middle school setting. Such programs relieve the stresses of the transition, and engage students in activities and experiences that minimize social, organizational, and motivational barriers to student success (Schumacher, 1998).
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter will examine extant literature pertinent to critical factors associated with adolescents' and their transition into and early experiences in middle school. The review begins with an historical overview of the educational efforts that have been made to meet the unique needs of the ten-to-fourteen year old adolescent. Secondly, characteristics of this age group will be investigated to examine possible relationships between age-level developmental traits and learning needs and preferences. A discussion of factors unique to urban adolescents is included. Literature on the transition experience from elementary to middle school follows to bring clarity to the specific challenges adolescents experience when making this educational shift. Consideration is also given to recent efforts to address the challenges of the transition experience through the development of transition programs. Finally, a brief literature review on student voice is included for current research perspectives on the value of student perception data regarding their challenges during the transition and first year of middle school.

Historical Framework and Philosophies for Educating Adolescents

The junior high school and middle school structures in the United States were designed, implemented, discounted, and then reestablished as preferred redesigns at different points in time (NMSA, 2003; Cuban, 1992). Each of these periodic change efforts has been driven by the urgency to better meet the unique developmental, intellectual, physical, social, and emotional needs of adolescents. The reform of middle
level education has been characterized by John Lounsbury (1991) as the “longest-running, and most extensive educational reform movement in the United States” (p. 68).

Initially, reform focused on educating adolescents originated when the elementary school structure of grades one through eight was seen as a failure in meeting the budding and diversified interests of early adolescents in an early 1900s society (National Education Association, 1982). As noted by the National Educational Association (1982), the discipline model, methods of instruction, and class administration approaches did not meet the mental, emotional, and vocational demands of adolescents. Educators working with eleven and twelve year olds in overcrowded elementary classrooms became increasingly concerned as the inflexible practices of the age-graded elementary schools could no longer meet the needs of adolescents, and was resulting in large numbers of out-of-school youth (Cuban, 1992).

Compounding the social and academic challenges of this period in American education was the great wave of immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the highest peak of immigration experienced at one time in American history to date (Capps, et al., 2005). Large numbers of children of immigrants, as part of a 14% peak in immigration, primarily from European countries to the U. S., filled urban schools with non-native speakers of English (Fix & Passel, 2003). In the early 1900s, the in-flow of more than 9 million immigrants entering the United States rapidly altered the demographics of large cities and complicated the work of urban schools.

According to educational historians (Brough, 1995; Cuban, 1992; Van Til, Vars & Lounsbury, 1961; Spring, 2003), there were certain social conditions contributing to the public’s outcry for school reorganization at the beginning of the twentieth century
Firstly, the great influx of immigrants had burdened primary school enrollment in cities. Secondly, the rapid rate of industrialization had necessitated the need to better prepare its students for work in factories. Thirdly, colleges were pressuring schools to offer college preparatory classes to students prior to the ninth grade. The American public school system at the turn of the twentieth century was faced with an overwhelming responsibility for accommodating large numbers of immigrant youth in urban schools, keeping students from dropping out, and preparing youth for the academic challenges of the high school and college curriculum. In addition to the challenges of these charges, the overcrowded schools containing these youth would also need to find educational approaches to address the needs of large numbers of children of immigrants who were at risk for slower cognitive and language development, and who were poorer academic performers in school due to many factors which included poverty, lower parental education, and limited English proficiency (Capps & Fortuny, 2006).

The academic and social inadequacies of the grade school system of the 1900s gave cause for concern and an attempt was made to better meet the specific needs of this population of students and to fill the performance gap that had emerged between elementary school and high school. As a result, the junior high school framework was established as the predominant school structure, moving adolescents out of the K-8 school structures in order to focus on the unique needs of learners in grades seven through nine in changing societal times (Thompson, 1976).

In the 1920s, the junior high school concept gained acceptance and became the target of educators who were compelled to identify its distinguishing characteristics. The first definition of the junior high school was formulated by Briggs (1920), one of the
founders of the design, who wrote, "In its essence, the junior high school is a device of
democracy whereby nurture may cooperate with nature to secure the best results possible
for each individual adolescent as well as for society at large" (p.327). In this context, the
junior high school could better serve both student and society.

The original formation and philosophy of the junior high school remained intact
from 1910 until the 1930s, at which point there emerged an interest in the revitalization
of the junior high school experience. The renewed interest in the junior high school
focused on determining what these schools ought to be. Searching for clarity around the
junior high school structure, Gruhn and Douglass (1947) proposed six functions of the
junior high. These included integration of learning in ways that would translate to more
wholesome behaviors; exploration opportunities based on students' interests, abilities and
talents; provision of guidance to assist students in making wiser personal and educational
decisions; differentiation of opportunities to better accommodate the backgrounds and
needs of students; establishment of socialization experiences that would more fully allow
students to engage socially in the present structure and be able to contribute more
productively in the future; and articulation through provision of programs suited for
smoother transitional experiences from preadolescent to adolescent educational
programs. Attributing such specific functions to the junior high school was intended to
strengthen the model with specific purposes and outcomes. Gruhn and Douglass' structural propositions, however, did not take hold and the junior high school design
became the scrutiny of the 1930s.

Criticism of the junior high school focused on its continued departmentalization
and subject-centered curriculum, poorly trained teachers unprepared for the needs of the
age group, and for limited opportunities it provided students to explore interests (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947). What was originally proposed for the junior high school was actually found in only a few schools by the 1930s. While some of these schools had become exemplars, they were but few offering eighth graders electives, club and extracurricular activities, college preparatory options, integrated subjects, extended class periods, and guidance classes.

While incremental changes were noted in the junior high school curriculum between the 1930s and 1950s, the other components of the design remained virtually the same, and structures to support this age group were noted as being less appropriate and effective than intended. The junior high school had become accepted as the most appropriate setting for educating early adolescents on the premise that they would offer special guidance programs, homeroom periods, and the expansion of secondary education practices moving downward to students in grades seven and eight (Hansen & Hearn, 1971). However, junior high schools evolved into miniature high schools which led scholars and practitioners to once again question whether such schools were being responsive to the needs of its younger students (Hansen & Hearn, 1971; Lounsbury, 1954).

As a result of the concern that junior high schools might not be accomplishing that for which they had been designed, a new mission to reform junior high schools led to the introduction of the middle school in the 1960s. It was proposed that middle schools would be the kind of educational sites where ten to fourteen year olds could learn in ways tailored to their growth spurts and the notable diversity of their age group (McEwin, 1983). As McEwin (1983) noted, the middle school experience was intended as a second
chance to develop an educational model based on the characteristics of ten to fourteen year-olds. Although intent upon the reformation of structures and practices to improve the educational experience for students in grades six through eight, Gruhn and Douglass' (1947) functions continued to lay the foundation for how effective middle schools should be defined, despite the intent of reformers to transform the model from one dominated by senior high school mentalities to one better focused on adolescent needs (Lounshury, 1996).

As a leader in the reform movement, in 1963, William Alexander, Chairman of the Department of Education at George Peabody College, publicly criticized the junior high school format in an address made at Cornell University. He criticized the junior high school format as being merely a junior version of the high school. Remaining consistent with this stance, Alexander (1995) later wrote,

A clearly defined middle school unit should more easily have the other characteristics already described as desirable than the typical junior high school: (a) a well-articulated system of education; (b) preparation for, even transition to, adolescence; (c) continued general education; and (d) abundant opportunities for exploration of interests, individualization of instruction, a flexible curriculum, and emphasis on values” (p. 24).

The reform movement of the 1980s followed and resulted in further redefining middle school in terms of ten “essential elements of a true middle school” (NMSA, 1982). The ten essential elements of effective middle schools were identified as: (1) educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents; (2) a balanced curriculum based on student needs; (3) a range of organizational arrangements meeting
the varying interests and needs of students; (4) varied instructional strategies to accommodate different learning styles; (5) a full exploratory program of elective course offerings; (6) comprehensive advising and counseling for each student; (7) continuous progress monitoring for improved intervention and support; (8) evaluation procedures with alternative modes of assessment compatible with the nature of young adolescents; (9) cooperative planning of teachers sharing students; and (10) establishment of positive school climate and learning environment (p. 10-15).

Lounsbury (1980) questioned if educational experiences offered adolescents during that time were more aligned to the needs of adolescents than they were in the past. In a shadow study of seventh graders, results of adolescent students in 1980 were compared with those in 1964, noting that while educational experiences were overall more attuned to the needs of early adolescents, they were still not adequate. Furthermore, they concluded that the most significant differences that contributed to any improvement were more related to school climate factors than to curriculum adaptations.

The debate over the most effective structure and design for educating adolescents continues into the twenty-first century. The junior high school model presently receives the greatest criticism for its impersonal, departmentalized approaches, and inability to meet the specific developmental and academic needs of adolescent learners (Clark & Clark, 1993).

The middle school model, however, has held firm as the predominant school organization for ten to fourteen year old since the 1960s when middle school proponents, Alexander and Williams (1965) claimed that middle school programs were more inclined to be developmentally appropriate. While conceptualized nearly 50 years ago, and
endorsed since the 1980s, the case for developmentally appropriate middle level education continues to hold firm as an essential for twenty-first century adolescent learners. However, it also continues to give cause to continue to improve early adolescent education (Lounsbury, 1991).

The Emerging Middle School

In 1995, the National Middle School Association Board of Trustees released a paper entitled, This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level School. Representing the cumulative experiences of the thousands of committed educators who re-conceptualized middle level education over the previous decade, the position paper established a rationale built around the nature of young adolescents. In the paper they wrote, "Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes during the years between 10 and 15 than at any other period of their lives" (p. 5). The writers point out that developmentally-responsive middle schools must take into account all that is known about young adolescents and the cultural context in which they live.

The middle school has been adopted as a promising approach to meeting the needs of adolescents because its practices are more conducive to meeting the need of adolescents. Unlike the junior high school model, the environment of the middle school is more keenly attuned to meeting the developmental needs characterizing adolescence and fostering continued growth (Ryan, 2002). This includes a tendency to adopt practices that promote academic excellence in developmentally responsive ways (NMSA, 2003). Middle level school research over the past three decades has minimized its focus on school organization and reentered effective middle school design discussions with a
renewed interest in adolescent development as it relates to middle school purposes and practices (Clark & Clark, 1993).

The work of Lipsitz (1984) resulted in the identification of general characteristics of successful middle schools and has remained a frontrunner in middle level school design. In her study of four successful middle level schools, Lipsitz (1984) found that successful middle level schools are responsive to early adolescent development by 1) reducing the size of academic, supportive, and social networks within the school; 2) personalizing the quality of adult-student relationships; 3) giving ample room for peers to flourish; 4) acknowledging diverse areas of competence; 5) engaging students in participatory activities; 6) emphasizing self-exploration and physical activity; and 6) encompassing the previous characteristics within an orderly and clearly defined school environment (p. 199).

It is suggested that the organizational structure may have less of an influence than a program design that is age-specific and developmentally appropriate for adolescent students. Since numerous studies have shown that considerable declines in motivation and performance are evident as students move from elementary school to middle school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, et al., 1984; Simmons & Blyth, 1987) climate factors that influence this age group may be a more appropriate focus.

As mentioned earlier, responsive middle schools take into account all that is known about young adolescents (NMSA, 1995). Whether designing the ideal organizational structure or focused on climate factors, the most appropriate and effective middle school design is grounded upon the nature and needs of the adolescents it intends to impact.
When addressing ten to fourteen year old adolescents, there is extensive literature indicating specific areas of consideration for meeting the emotional, physical, social, and developmental needs of the middle school student (Coalition for Justice, 2007; NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, 2007; NMSA, 2003; NMSA, 1995; Roeser, Eccles & Strobel, 1998). Academic excellence, social equity, and developmental responsiveness are consistently cited as paramount to giving adolescents what they require to function and progress. The Coalition for Justice (2007) called for comprehensive reform to ensure that all middle-grades students had access to a well-rounded and rigorous curriculum that puts them on the road to college: strong academic, social, and emotional supports for all students; highly qualified teachers and principals who understand early adolescent development; and smaller class size. The National Middle School Association (2003) also advocated for middle schools to provide young adolescents with an inviting, supportive, and safe place to learn and a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students’ physical and emotional well-being in a healthy school environment where human relationships are paramount.

While the goal of middle school education is to make junior high schools more developmentally responsive, the vision of the middle school has not been fully implemented as conceived and has been less than adequate in serving the developmental needs of those in their early teens (Juvonen, et al., 2004). In fact, an analysis of international data conducted by Juvonen, et al. (2004) showed that U. S. middle school age students report the highest levels of physical and emotional problems and view the climate and peer cultures in their schools more negatively. With this in mind, it seems
that we may need to gain deeper insights about the nature of adolescents if we are to respond to their needs in appropriate ways.

**Characteristics of Adolescents**

The characteristics of adolescents within the ten to fourteen year-old age range are worth investigating to examine possible relationships between age-level developmental traits and the learning needs and preferences of adolescents entering the middle school experience. Extensive research supports the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of adolescents in relationship to academic outcomes (Cuban 1992; Van Hoose, Strahan & L’Esperence, 2001).

The literature on the developmental nature of adolescence (Thornburg, 1983; Eccles, et al., 1993; NMSA, 2003) has identified this period as a time characterized by great physical, cognitive, and social change. In addition to these intense changes and heightened sensitivities, adolescents also face uncertainties that are associated with transitioning into a new social and academic environment, somewhere between elementary school and high school. Eccles, et al. (1993) noted that if the social environments in junior high school do not fit the psychological needs of adolescents, a decline in motivation is imminent (p. 91). Eccles et al. also pointed out that the early adolescent has very unique developmental needs. Lack of attention to these needs may contribute to the academic achievement drops experienced in this age group.

Another distinguishing feature of adolescence is puberty, a physical experience that educators commonly understand as a disruptive factor that teens bring with them to the school experience (Armstrong, 2006). Understanding the potential of this developmental period on the adolescent learner’s intellectual, social, and emotional lives.
Armstrong (2006) maintains that educators have been cognizant of the need to bring these insights into the development of effective instructional, curricular, and administrative practices. Ironically, in terms of the junior high and middle school movements, "research suggests that the onset of puberty is an especially poor reason for beginning a new phase of schooling" (Jovonen, Lé, Kaganoff, Augustine & Constant, 2004, p.18-19). Armstrong (2006) also suggests that since middle school education exists, it must provide students with structures and supports to navigate through difficulties imposed on them as a result of puberty.

With respect to the impact of physical/biological change, researchers have suggested that the difficulties and declines are the result of the simultaneous occurrence of the middle school transition and puberty (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983). These researchers contend that the cumulative stress theory diminishes motivation due to the fact that adolescents are faced with two concurrent events at this point in their lives: puberty and school change. Furthermore, it is asserted that as adolescents cope with multiple transition-related challenges, the risk of negative outcomes increases.

Simmons and Blyth (1987) compared the patterns of multiple changes on school-related outcomes that students experience. In a four-year longitudinal design, Simmons and Blyth compared children moving from the sixth grade to junior high school with those remaining in a K-8 elementary school. Data was collected through students' self-reports related to several concepts including self-esteem and stability of self-concept (Rosenberg's scales); perceived self-competence; gender-role attitudes; relations with parents and peers; participation in activities; and stage of physical development. Causal
modeling was used to identify factors that mitigate or aggravate the early adolescent transition, including the occurrence of many life changes simultaneously. The study revealed that students making the transition from an elementary school into junior high in grade seven are at a disadvantage compared to students who remain in an elementary school setting until grade nine. Adolescent students moving to seventh grade in a new setting were shown to have greater difficulties with decreased motivation, diminished self-esteem, lessened interest in participating in learning, and declining academic performance. Based on the evidence, the authors argue that it is due to the timing of a transition and the existence of several simultaneous life-changing factors during this adolescent phase that negative outcomes result.

Adolescents who are faced with multiple life stressors, particularly those related to environmental and relationship conditions, experience serious problems in adaptation which may translate to psychological distress and negative school performance outcomes (Johnson, 1986). Dubois, et al. (1992), for example, in a 2-year longitudinal study examined the relationship between stressful life events and social supports to psychological distress and school performance among 166 adolescents of an average age of 13 years-old. Using a prospective approach, self-report questionnaires administered to the same individuals twice at a 2-year interval provided data for determining later adaptive impact on adolescents' school functioning. Using the questionnaire data and student grade reports, DuBois, et al. (1992) found that life stresses significantly contributed to the prediction of subsequent school performance. This study contributes to the body of literature asserting the importance of understanding and responding appropriately to adolescents, particularly if there are to be positive adaptation outcomes.
in later years (Carnegie Report, 1989). DuBois, et al. (1992) also contend that it is critical that greater attention be especially given to the nature of the contextual conditions that youth experience at this age.

Research indicating that several interfering factors are at play at this time in an adolescent’s life suggest that middle schools should be better prepared to invite these students into the type of environment in which they might be more apt to prosper (Simmons & Blyth, 1989). This would suggest that schools enrolling adolescents might pay closer attention to the multiple transition-related challenges to which these students are subjected socially, emotionally, and physically. Schools committed to building strong foundations for these students through effective practices would do well to “honor the developmental uniqueness of young adolescents, including the provision of a safe school environment, student-initiated learning, student roles in decision-making, and strong adult role models” (Juvonen, L. Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004, p. 113).

The turmoil that adolescents face during a school transition is clearly not based solely on internal struggles. Socially, adolescents are most concerned with friendships, social interaction, and belonging. Young adolescents do not define themselves in a vacuum. Rather, they define their identity, based to a large extent on how “significant” others convey their perceptions of them. As a result, not only friends, but parents and teachers are important as adolescents develop socially and personally (Van Hoose, Strahan & L’Esperence, 2001).

The research of Van Hoose, Strahan and L’Esperence (2001), on the importance of adults in the lives of adolescents, is joined by a limited number of other studies which have shown that relationships with adults matter to adolescent students. These studies
contend that adults set the stage for student learning and serve an important role as mentors along the way. For example, in a longitudinal study of almost 1,500 young adolescents and their families as part of the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study, Roeser, Eccles and Sameroff (1998) studied the influences of home, school, neighborhood, and peer group on adolescent academic, emotional and social development. Data were collected from interviews and questionnaires administered to 1,041 African American and white students from 23 middle schools across a large county in Maryland, at the starting point of their seventh grade year and again at the completion of their eighth grade year. Of relevance to the present discussion were findings associated with students' reports of relationships with teachers and school counselors. Perceptions of supportive teachers were related to an increase in academic values over time, while negative interactions with teachers and counselors resulted in a debilitating effect on adolescents in terms of their motivation for school. The researchers claim that the impact of unsupportive relationships with adults in the middle school setting may be especially detrimental to adolescents when feelings and self-worth are so important. Roeser, Eccles and Sameroff (1998) also noted that while more research is warranted to better understand the developmental significance of adolescents' school experiences as they relate to academic and emotional functioning during middle school years, there is substantial evidence that unsupportive relationships and negative treatment by teachers and counselors negatively impact adolescents' academic values and performance.

Playing such a critical role for the adolescent, the effective educator must be equipped to design a relevant educational program using approaches that will allow for academic focus and growth based on accurate understandings of the adolescent learner.
Van Hoose, et al. (2001) noted that a “developmental override” constantly occurs in classrooms where teachers fail to prepare for classes with the developmental concerns and needs of their students in mind. Developmental override occurs when students, distracted by personal concerns, direct their attention inward and withdraw from the learning environment. Van Hoose, et al. (2001) maintain that teachers who are responsive to their adolescent students need to know where their students are focused and why they are focused there so that modifications and allowances can be made in instruction.

Middle school educators have the especially complex task of knowing the unique nature and characteristics of their students as well as the content of their curriculum. Young adolescents are developmentally different from elementary school children and from older high school students, demanding teacher attention to the physical, intellectual, emotional/psychological, moral/ethical, and social domains of their students (NMSA, 2003). Educators expecting success in the middle grades must consider their adolescent students’ needs for approval and success; fairness; belonging; autonomy; and opportunities for experimentation, socialization, relevance, and expression/voice (NMSA, 2003; Turning Points 2000, 2000).

With such a daunting task facing current and prospective middle school educators, there will need to be more training provided if teachers are be able to identify the strengths and challenges of their adolescent students and integrate those understandings as a fundamental component of educational planning and pedagogical delivery. Furthermore, since adolescents are also responsive to their environments, teachers will need to become cognizant of the environmental contexts within which students operate and how those settings impact learning. Given that schools are one of the important
contextual settings where youth are expected to master learning as they progress to adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), consideration of adolescents in urban settings introduces yet another factor in a teaching-learning formula geared toward ensuring positive academic outcomes for urban adolescent students.

_Urban adolescents._ As adolescents, urban students face many of the same developmental challenges as their suburban counterparts when making the transition to middle school. However, as learners in urban settings, there may be additional demands placed upon them. Studies have pointed to the negative impact of violence in schools and neighborhoods on adolescents’ school performance, documenting that there may be a link between such environmental characteristics and student achievement and behavior at school (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Haller, 1992; Lee & Bryk, 1989; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987).

Studies have suggested that crime and violence in settings in which youth live and attend school create a poor context for academic involvement and performance (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). It is believed that violence and aggression among students in urban schools interfere with teaching and learning processes in classrooms where teachers’ and students’ attention is diverted; and time on learning is diminished (Lochman, Lampron & Harris, 1987). Likewise, perceptions of danger at school negatively influence student learning as a result of the loss of confidence they experience in their ability to meet school demands while dealing with perceptions of danger (Bowen, Richman, Brewster & Bowen, 1998).

In a study of the effects of crime and violence in neighborhoods and schools, Bowen and Bowen (1999) examined students’ exposure to neighborhood and school
danger, and the effects of this exposure on their attendance, school behavior, and grades. The study involved a national probability sample of 2,099 middle and high school students representing 93 public middle and high schools. Data were collected using a two-stage stratified sampling designed to ensure representation of students by gender, ethnicity, urbanicity of location, and region. The School Success Profile (SSP) self-administered survey instrument (Richman and Bowen, 1997) was used to assess students' perceptions of their family, school, peer, and neighborhood environments. Data findings indicated that African-Americans had the highest ratings on school crime and violence as one of the four measures of danger. Urban middle school students had a significantly higher mean on school personal threats and higher mean results than suburban and/or rural students for negative neighborhood peer behavior, neighborhood personal threats, and school crime and violence. The findings showed that the high incidents of violence in urban middle schools and neighborhoods negatively influence school performance. Interestingly, in the second stage of the study, regression statistics for the prediction of attendance and grades based on measures of neighborhood and school danger showed, as hypothesized, that attendance increased when levels of neighborhood and school danger decreased; and grades decreased when danger in those environments increased. Bowen and Bowen (1999) conclude that.

It is intuitively obvious and consistent with an ecological perspective that crime and violence in settings in which youth live and attend school pose a poor context for academic involvement and performance (p. 322).

In a similar study of social contexts and urban adolescent outcomes, Rankin and Quane (2002), used multilevel data to assess how family, peer group, and neighborhood
influence positive and negative outcomes for urban African-American adolescents. Their study was guided by several previous research findings. Such studies noted that educational outcomes are influenced by neighborhood socioeconomic status (Jencks & Meyer, 1990). Adolescents residing in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods achieve lower grades (Dornbusch, Ritter & Steinberg, 1991), and are more likely to drop out of school (Brooks-Gunn, Guo & Furstenberg, 1993). Adolescents who reside in poor neighborhoods are more likely to have friends who devalue education and undermine their own commitment to education and academic achievement (Rankin and Quane, 1998). Children that grow up in poor neighborhoods have been shown to do worse than those from affluent families on social, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes due to a variety of factors including single parenthood, low parental educational attainment, and welfare dependence (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; McLanahan, Astone & Mark, 1991; Zill, et al., 1995).

In Rankin and Quane’s (2002) investigation of family, peer group and neighborhood influences, face-to-face interviews were conducted using a structured questionnaire, with a sample of African-American mothers and one or two of their adolescent children. A final sample of 636 adolescents in 59 Chicago mixed income, predominately African-American urban neighborhoods yielded results which include “both ‘successful’ asset-based outcomes and a ‘problematic’ deficit-based outcome (p. 85). The researchers focused on two different youth outcomes, prosocial competence and problem behavior, based on the premise that successful transitions from adolescence to adulthood are highly dependent on the acquisition of certain social and educational competencies, and avoidance of problem behaviors. Findings revealed that although only
at moderate levels, neighborhoods do affect urban African-American adolescents because of how certain neighborhood characteristics influence the manner in which parents deal with their children and the peers with whom they associate. The most significant parenting factor noted in the study was the effect of neighborhoods on parental monitoring, which was noted to be a predictor of both prosocial competency and problem behavior. Neighborhoods became significant where there was the presence or absence of a collective efficacy within neighborhoods to monitor children more closely, which supports previous research concluding that better youth outcomes are evident with higher levels of parental monitoring (Furstenberg, et al., 1999). Study findings, however, concluded that residing in a disadvantaged neighborhood does have negative consequences for African-American youth resulting in less successful youth outcomes due to the lack of normative collective socialization provided by neighborhood adults who allow unconventional peer groups to thrive and influence the behaviors of neighborhood adolescents.

Researchers have also hypothesized that urban African-American adolescents might experience the challenges of transitioning from elementary schools to middle schools differently. In a study by Simmons, Black, and Zhou (1991), an investigation was conducted to determine differences between African-American and white children as they made the transition from elementary school to a junior high school setting. This study followed 512 children as they transitioned from grade 6, in twelve randomly selected K-6 schools in a midsize city, to grade 7 in junior high schools in an urban setting. Of the twelve randomly selected K-6 schools, eight of the schools were predominantly white and four predominantly African-American. The mean age of study participants was 12.8
years. Students proportionately represented social class, with 34 percent at higher, 33 percent at middle, and 33 percent at the lower socioeconomic level. Students were administered a survey interview in grade 6 and then again after the transition to grade 7.

The survey instrument measured students' need 1) to make choices between conforming or deviant behavior; 2) to intensify peer relations as part of the emotional preparation for leaving one setting for another; 3) to establish a revised self-image as physical changes occurred; 4) to establish more physical independence from parents; and 5) to start to plan for the future. The survey also included questions to measure students' attitudes toward school.

Findings related to whether African-American and white children change differently upon the transition and entry into middle level education showed no difference for 44 of the 71 variables. However, there were significant differences in change in 27 of the variables, of which most pertained to African-American males. In terms of school problem behavior, scores of African-American males indicated that they experienced the highest degree of problem behavior. With respect to grade point average, both male and female African-Americans scored significantly lower than whites at the junior high level. African-American males had greater incidents of parent-child conflict as measured by parents' approval of child's friends. African-American males, however, outscored all groups as having the highest levels of self-esteem. African-American females, although not as high scoring as African-American males, outscored their white counterparts in changes in self-esteem. Both African-American males and females were less likely to establish independence by taking on a part-time job, and both scored higher than whites in terms of expressing their desire to go to college. The authors' note on this latter finding
that the discrepancy between behavior and aspiration has been shown in the literature (Ogbu, 1989; Carter, 1990; Mickelson, 1990) and may be a reflection of a lack of realism about the connection between behavior and future outcomes. On the measure of liking school, findings showed that both African-American males and females are more likely to decrease their liking of school as they enter junior high. In summary, Simmons, Black and Zhou (1991) highlight that African-American adolescent males were noticeably more likely to change and take on the stereotypical characteristics of the transitioning adolescent with a greater disliking for school, lower GPAs, higher incidents of suspension from school, and increased incidents of parent-child conflict.

In a study of 62 African-American families living in poverty in an urban environment, Gutman and Midgley (2000) investigated the effects of psychological, family, and school factors on student grade point average as they made the transition into middle school. The study tested several hypotheses: a) Students, on average, will experience a significant decline in grade point average across the transition from elementary to middle school (fifth to sixth grade); b) Controlling for prior grade point average, students who feel more academically efficacious, whose parents report more involvement, who perceive more support from teachers, and who have a greater sense of school belonging in middle school will have higher grade point averages across the transition than their classmates; c) Controlling for prior grade point average, students with high levels of both academic self-efficacy and parental involvement, perceived teacher support, or school belonging will have higher grade point averages across the transition than their classmates with high levels of one or none of these factors; and d) Controlling for prior grade point average, students with high levels of both parental
involvement and perceived teacher support or school belonging will have higher grade point averages across the transition than their classmates with high levels of one or none of these factors (p. 231). Students participating in the study attended one of seven elementary schools in pre-K through grade six and one of four middle schools containing grades six through eight.

The data collection process included surveys administered to participating school principals to obtain information regarding the nature of the school environments, and interviews with parents to gain information about parent involvement. Information about psychological and school factors was obtained from students who participated in the data collection process by responding to survey questions which were read aloud to students in classrooms. Students were assured of confidentiality.

Using Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PAIS; Midgley, et al., 1997) students' academic self-efficacy was measured based on work related items on a 5-point scale to investigate students' perception of their ability to master work in their current 6th grade classes. The student survey also assessed student perception of teacher support using items from the Classroom Environment Scale (Moos & Trickett, 1987) to assess whether students felt supported and respected by their middle school teachers. Feelings of school belonging were assessed using adaptations from a scale designed by Goodenow and Grady (1993).

Parental involvement was measured using the Family School Survey Study (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000). This scale, which included open-ended questions, also contained ten items measuring the degree to which parents and other family members are involved in their children's education both within the home and at school.
during the school year. Responses on these items were required on a 6-point scale indicating frequency of participation on various school involvement indicators. The study also tested for the interactive effects of the protective factors.

Several findings were reported. First, based on grades collected from records at the end of the fifth and sixth grade school years, it was noted that, there was a significant decline in student grade point average across the transition to middle school. While these results were expected, the study investigated certain factors to determine if African-American students might be protected from experiencing a decline in achievement associated with the middle school transition. The study’s investigation of protective factors supporting the academic achievement of poor African-American students during the transition from elementary to middle school yielded key findings. Students who were more academically efficacious had higher grade point averages across the middle school transition than did their peers. Parental involvement, perceived teacher support, and feelings of school belonging, as single factors, did not significantly predict grade point average across the transition. Students with high levels of both parental involvement and perceived teacher support had higher grade point averages across the middle school transition than did their peers with high levels of one or none of these factors. Students with high levels of both parental involvement and school belonging also had higher grade point averages across the middle school transition than did their peers who had high levels of either one or none of these factors (pp. 240-241).

Gutman and Midgley (2000) indicate that certain findings from this study may have important implications for middle school reform, particularly when considering that poor African American students who feel more academically efficacious may earn higher
grade point averages than peers; and that students with a combination of high levels of both parental involvement, along with perceived teacher support or feelings of school belonging earn higher grade point averages across the transition than did peers who had high levels of just one or none of these factors. The authors suggest that efforts to support the academic achievement of poor African American students during the transition to middle schools must be focused on a combination of student efficacy, parental involvement and school environment factors and that this combination of factors may be more effective when addressed simultaneously.

With multiple risks facing them, early adolescence can be a very difficult phase for poor minority youth. During this time period, they are forced to contend not only with environmental and social pressures, but also have to negotiate the biological, physical, and social transformations that accompany early adolescence. The transition to middle school, in particular, can be difficult for poor minority students as the stresses in the surrounding environment interact with the changes in the new school structure (Seidman, et al., 1994). As a result, it has been observed that many poor and minority youth begin to engage in behaviors that are harmful to themselves or others (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1989).

In addition, the middle school structure may threaten students' identification with their teachers and connection to their school environment, changes that may challenge the academic success of poor and minority students who are more likely to feel unconnected to an environment whose culture seems irreconcilable to their own (Ford, 1993; Steele, 1992). The need for enduring, stable, and supportive bonds with caring adults may also be especially important for poor minority youth who often have less access to adult role

Considering these factors, it is not surprising that academic problems either begin or accelerate in middle school for many poor and minority students. As the research has indicated, although African American students begin school with test scores that are similar to their European American peers, by middle school many African-American students fall two grade levels behind (Steele, 1992). Studies revealed that while the grades of all students on average declined after the middle school transition, the grades of African-American students "plummeted" (Simmons, Black & Zhou, 1991). Seidman and his colleagues (1994) also found that the grade point averages of urban minority students declined significantly after the middle school transition.

These studies give attention to the environmental, relationship, circumstantial, and change issues that African-American adolescents face during the middle school transition in urban settings. As well as adolescent developmental issues, urban youth enter urban schools experiencing exigent circumstances related to neighborhood, family, peer groups, and school environment factors in urban setting. Violence and the pervasiveness of danger in their communities and schools further serve to influence negative educational outcomes. In fact, studies have shown that students themselves believe crime and violence constrain their school performance, attributing school-related problems to crime or the threat of crime in their lives (Harris & Associates, 1996).

Of particular interest are the findings of the Simmons, Black and Zhou (1991) study which situate African-American males at the apex of the middle school transition phenomenon. While Simmons, Black and Zhou (1991) identify the need for further research to investigate reasons why African-Americans, and in particular African-
American males show significant differences in change from elementary to middle level education, the study sheds light on a population of adolescents whose academic performance and behaviors have alarmed devoted middle school educators.

School Transition and Transition Programs

For adolescent students, the transition from elementary to middle/junior high school poses especially difficult circumstances found to be associated with a variety of negative effects on adolescents, regardless of school setting. These include declines in achievement (Alspaugh, 1998), decreased motivation (Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999), lowered self-esteem (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991), and increased psychological distress. These difficulties are found to lead to achievement loss, failure to graduate on time, or drop-out (Mizelle & Irwin, 2000).

The effect of school transitions on academic performance and self-esteem was the focus of a study conducted by Crockett, et al. (1989) who investigated the impact of the timing of multiple transitions on adolescent adjustment in a suburban middle school setting. Using a cohort-sequential longitudinal design, three groups of adolescents (n = 253) were interviewed and compared. One group had made one school transition prior to sixth grade; a second group of adolescents had made one later transition prior to seventh grade; and a third group had experienced two transitions prior to the sixth and seventh grades. Adjustment was determined based on course grades and self-image. Course grades were measured by assigning grade point values on a 0-12 point scale on students’ final report cards (i.e. F=0, A=11). Self-image was assessed using the 98-item Self-Image Questionnaire for Young Adolescents (SIQYA) measuring impulse control; emotional tone; body image; mastery and coping; psychopathology and superior
adjustment; and social functioning. Comparative analysis of the findings of the three groups revealed that transitions had a negative effect for adolescents experiencing both early and repeated school transitions for both course grades and self-esteem, with an especially debilitating impact for those experiencing two transitions.

Achievement loss associated with the elementary to middle school transition was studied by Alspaugh (1998). Three groups of 16 rural or small town school districts were included in the study. Each district varied in the number of schools at each level and had different grade span configurations for elementary, middle and high school. School size in terms of student enrollment also varied and each group of school districts was in a different socioeconomic setting. Student achievement was measured using the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests (MMAT) for reading, math, science and social studies, which is given to students yearly. Pre-transition test scores were taken from the May 1994 MMAT and post-transition scores were taken from the May 1995 MMAT administration. Upon data analysis of the scores for the same set of students taking the exam as fifth and then as sixth graders, it was found that students making a school transition between fifth and sixth grades experienced achievement loss, whereas sixth graders in K-8 schools who were not in a transition year, showed performance gains. Also noteworthy were the data that showed the greatest achievement loss for the groups of students coming together from 2 or 3 elementary schools into one middle school as opposed to fifth graders who had moved as a cohort from one elementary school and into one middle school together.

The findings of the Alspaugh study (1998) are consistent with earlier findings (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995) that showed an achievement loss for students having
transitioned into middle school as sixth graders. The more recent study also concluded that districts with grades 6-8 middle schools experience higher high school dropout rates than districts housing early adolescents in a K-8 school.

Research has also been conducted to explore the perceptions of adolescent students on the issues of the transition experience. Akos and Galassi (2004) examined student perceptions during the transition from elementary to middle school. As part of the larger study on middle and high school perceptions as viewed by student, parents, and teachers, 173 middle school sixth grade students in a high performing university community were interviewed. Items for the student questionnaire were based on previous transition research (Akos, 2002) and were formatted in a checklist including 15 middle school transition concerns and 18 positive middle school aspects. Results identified challenges and opportunities for the middle school students interviewed. The predominant transition concerns were the amount of homework, getting lost and getting to class on time. The most difficult aspects of actually being in middle school were reported in descending order as classes, good grades/homework, and teachers. Students also shared strategies for adjusting to middle school which included hanging out with friends as the most often used method of acclimatizing, followed by trying to fit in, and ignoring people who picked on them.

From study results, Akos and Galassi (2004) suggest transition programming as a positive response for facilitating student adjustment to the academic, procedural and social aspects of the middle school transition. Based on the recommendation of students completing the study questionnaire, it was suggested that transition support include more discussions about middle school which should occur in elementary school. Students want
these discussions to highlight the positive aspects of the middle school experience and inform them about middle school homework and organizational skills needed. Students also stated that a tour of their new school would be very helpful. In contrast, parents and teachers focused only on the need for the tours and school orientation as pre-transition supports. In response to students’ concerns, Akos and Galassi (2004) suggest several steps to better support students upon entering middle school. These include middle school educators who are welcoming and encouraging to incoming students; opportunities for new students to talk about the transition as they become acclimated to their new surroundings; and middle school counselors prepared to implement preventive or proactive programming to assist students with the issues related to the elementary to middle school transition.

As adolescents transition, they are experiencing both school and personal changes. Personal changes include those that accompany puberty, including heightened emotionality, conflict, and defiance of adults (Berk, 1993). Primary concerns for students should include both those in the academic and social realms since students worry about a myriad of issues including older students; getting lost; bullies; too much homework; school rules; making friends; lockers; unfamiliar staff; and multiple sets of new expectations (Akos, 2002; Mitman & Packer, 1982).

Eccles, et al. (1993) noted strategies that align to the developmental levels of adolescents. These would include building smaller communities; teaming and cooperative learning approaches; elimination of tracking, empowerment of teachers; and building strong student-teacher relationships. In line with this, Felner, et al. (1997) attribute a smoother transition for students to teaching teams and advisory programs. Shumaker
noted that when making the transition into middle/junior high school, students needs would be best addressed prior to, during, and after the move increasing the likelihood of social, psychological, and academic well-being. As part of the educational experience for these students, attention must be placed on those barriers that influence academic progress on a continual basis. Schumacher (1998) noted:

The transition into middle level school is accompanied by intellectual, moral, social, emotional, and physical changes taking place in at least part of the transition group at any given time. Students making the transition into middle level schools need to receive assistance prior to, during, and after the move so that their social, psychological, and academic well-being is not compromised (p. 1).

Surprisingly, in the twenty-first century, in spite of efforts to support adolescent students through transition programs and middle school redesigns, challenges remain for middle school educators to support adolescents in making a smooth and successful transition to middle school; to knowledgeably and steadfastly consider the transition needs of students; to respond appropriately to those needs at all costs, and to have all involved in this process (Mizelle & Irwin, 2000).

Student Voice

Disclosure of the unique characteristics of adolescents may contribute to the development of more effective strategies for educating students of the 10 to 14 year-old age group. For example, educators working with this age group should understand that adolescents begin to develop a growing capacity for thinking about how they learn and that they have an interest in planning their own learning activities (National Middle
School Association, 2003). This understanding allows the educator to be more mindful of giving credence to students' voices and choices in the learning process. As human beings, adolescents also bring a set of cultural perspectives which need to be validated and incorporated into the classroom if learning is to be maximized (Gay, 2000).

With that said, it would seem relevant to consider what young urban adolescents, particularly those just entering high school, think and feel about their own educational experience. Students may be able to bring educators nearer to an understanding of the most desirable components of schools that invite them to engage in learning and to be successful. Smith, Petralia & Hewitt (2005) contend that researchers are long overdue in considering students' ideas for improving schools. It is suggested that students can make valuable contributions for how to improve instruction and restructure schools to increase the level of student interest and participation. The authors describe how administrators can gradually move forward to take teachers and students to a more productive level of interaction and understanding. The plea is for building the trust of students so that they will believe there is a sincere intent to listen to what they think should change. Students must be called on to become part of the change process. In an article on student voice in school leadership, Fiscus (2005) observed that student leaders had become increasingly interested in participating in decisions about school programming, finances, activities, and even hiring. It was noted that if given the chance to contribute, middle level students can be key resources in identifying positive solutions and in creating stronger schools.

More recently, researchers have investigated the perceptions of adolescents to better understand the transition experience and how to build an educational model that will increase each student's chances of success (Akos, 2002). In a four-phase study, Akos
interviewed four different samples of demographically diverse students with a mean age of 11.8 years. The purpose of the study was to gain insights regarding concerns and questions students have about middle school; to examine perspectives on the anticipated experience; and to explore whom students believed they would be able to count on in difficult situations. Phase I and II of the study included 331 fifth graders from three different elementary schools in a large southeastern rural public high school. Phase III involved 103 randomly selected students from the original Phase I sample at the start of their sixth grade year. These students demographically mirrored the demographics of the original population. Phase IV included a purposeful sample of students from the original 331, however these students were selected because they had experienced success at the middle school level.

Data was collected through an initial process by which students submitted questions they had about middle school. In Phase II, students completed a five-item questionnaire of checklists and open-ended questions developed from the Phase I questions focusing on students' concerns, feelings about the transition to middle school, and regarding persons they felt they would be able to trust. In Phase III, the participants completed a second questionnaire of seven items asking about academic strategies and goals for the sixth grade. In this phase, students were also provided the opportunity to ask questions about the anticipated middle school experience. In Phase IV, a final questionnaire was given, replicating the questions in the previous questionnaires.

From an analysis of content and qualitative themes in the open-ended responses and from the coding of individual question responses, larger themes were identified. Findings revealed that students were inquisitive about rules and procedures, whether
questioned in the fifth or sixth grade year. Students revealed an assortment of anxieties about transitioning to middle school, the repetitive and wide-ranging nature of these worries indicating that students in transition share many of the same fears. As students moved closer to the transition experience they worried more about being the victim of bullying or of other safety infractions against them, getting lost, and not being prepared for the level of academics or volume of homework.

The Akos (2002) study revealed common themes among transitioning students and may suggest that the preoccupation with negative aspects of the experience could become barriers to student success early on in the middle school experience. The study also suggests that the awareness of the challenges facing students in transition can translate into opportunities for educators to meet these students where they are, developing school transition experiences that can diminish the distractions to academics and success.

Akos and Galassi (2004) point out that it is startling to think that in most of the transition research, the voices of students, those who are most directly involved, are rarely heard. In their study of 173 sixth grade students, 83 parents, 12 teachers; and 320 ninth grade students, 61 parents and 17 teachers, participants responded to a questionnaire about the elementary-middle and middle-high school transition experience. From the responses it was found that school transitions posed both challenges and opportunities for students. While parents and teachers appeared to have a reasonably good appreciation of how these developmental experiences were perceived by students, results suggest that schools respond to challenges and provide opportunities by
establishing distinct types of transition programs to better facilitate successful adjustment to the academic, procedural, and social aspects of the new experience.

Findings from a *Pathways to Student Success* study of 150 tenth graders attending ten Boston Public Schools are presented by Noguera (2007). Surveys and interviews with students were used to obtain student perception data to highlight how students can inform school reform efforts. Emergent themes revealed consistency over previous studies of this kind. Students articulated the impact of relationships between students and teachers; high stakes testing; discipline and order; and student motivation and goals for the future. Noguera’s analysis of these themes provided information on lessons learned to school reformers and practitioners. Of relevance are the recommendations students offered to educators for guiding interactions with students and for making schools more conducive for learning. Noguera emphasizes the importance of listening to students:

> Given how poorly so many past reforms in our nation’s high schools have fared with respect to delivering lasting improvements in student achievement and overall quality, it certainly could not hurt to solicit student perspectives on what they believe might be done to make their schools better from a variety of perspectives (p. 209).

In an ethnographic study investigating the causes of school failure from a student perspective, Lee (1999) interviewed 40 students experiencing academic difficulties in an urban high school undergoing reform. Using low-achieving students as collaborative researchers to conduct and analyze interviews with their peers, it was found that interviewees focused primarily on the impact of school structures. Interviewed students were most likely to note the impact that peers and home had on their academic success
and stressed the influence that teachers had when they were provided with a challenging curriculum, high expectations, interactive learning, and when those teachers established closer relationships with students. “These findings magnify issues of power, resistance, and diversity intricately linked to patterns of student achievement that many urban schools must address before advancing specific restructuring efforts” (p. 242).

Engaging students in ongoing reform efforts has been the focus of recent studies that suggest specific designs for student inclusion in school reform. In a study of high school students as co-researchers, Yonezawa and Jones (2007) describe how student input is used in school reform. Student co-researchers design and conduct their own study and present the research findings to stakeholders. Considering that students frame issues quite differently from school administrators (Fine, 1986), evaluating school effectiveness from this vantage point holds promise for school reform efforts. “School leaders increasingly recognize the value of including students’ perspectives in arenas that previously were ‘adults only,’ in many schools” (Fiscus, 2005, p. 22). The challenge for educational leaders and teachers, however, will be in how open and willing they will be to accept what students will offer.

As Cook-Sather (2002) has stated:

We as educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate hotb in the critique and reform of education (p. 3).
Researchers have argued convincingly that school-age children, particularly as they get older, are often the best informants about their own situations, behavior, and feelings (Paulson, 1996; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998).

Summary

This selective review presents some of the scholarship and research on the history of middle level education. The chapter examines the developmental characteristics of adolescents, the issues challenging transitioning middle school adolescents, the unique challenges of urban adolescents in urban settings, the efforts of middle schools to address student needs through transition programs, and the potential of student feedback to contribute to middle school improvement efforts.

The literature reveals consistent themes related to student transition experiences as adolescents move from elementary school to middle school. Empirical studies have shown that adolescents experience fears and anxieties about transitioning to middle school. These feelings, related to unfamiliar school structures, peer relations, and student-teacher relationships, influence adolescents' ability to focus solely on academics. In addition, adolescents experience developmental changes that interfere with how schooling is experienced. Studies have also revealed how urban adolescent outcomes are further influenced by social contexts and environmental factors in their families, neighborhoods, and schools. As the literature on middle school transition and transition programs asserts, much is yet to be accomplished in the provision of effective middle level education for ten to fourteen year-olds. Transition programs that address the multiplicity of adolescent needs and concerns are offered as one solution; however, the elements of these program designs must be appropriate and ongoing for students.
throughout the middle school experience. As current research proposes, an accurate understanding of the complicated nature of adolescent, of factors prevalent in their environment, and of the appropriate nature of the responsiveness and interaction of adults provided is essential. Researchers also contend that the level with which these propositions are accomplished may be dependent on the input of those immersed in the phenomenon.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of urban adolescent students as they transitioned from the elementary to middle school setting and experienced the first year of middle school to determine what students perceive to be the negative influences on their learning in middle school. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of this qualitative phenomenological study which focused on urban adolescent students at the completion of their first year of middle school.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain insights regarding the transition into and first year experiences in middle school from the perceptions of urban adolescent students. The study contributes to the current knowledge base associated with adolescent school transitions and early middle level education and may be relevant to educational practices and transition programming that serve this population of learners. The study specifically examines what transitioning middle school urban adolescents perceive to be negative influences on their learning. This study is a qualitative phenomenological study using a descriptive research design based on data collected during focus group interviews with seventh grade students (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). The researcher sought deeper understandings of the experiences of the study participants, withholding personal perspectives and experiences in order to determine new patterns and relationships pertinent to the study focus (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the methodology used in this qualitative study and includes a description of the research context, study participants, data collection instruments and procedures, and process for data analysis.

Study Context

This study took place in three urban schools which serve seventh graders within a large urban district. In total, the City Center School District (CCSD) houses 19 secondary schools, 15 of which include a seventh grade population. In order to preserve
confidentiality, the district under study was referred to using the fictitious name, City Center School District (CCSD). The CCSD total student enrollment for 2008-09 for pre-kindergarten through grade twelve was 33,264 students. The total number of seventh grade students in the district for that year was 2,344. District seventh grade students attend school at one of two middle schools configured with grades 7-9 or one of twelve middle/high schools comprised of grades 7-12. The remaining schools within this district do not serve seventh graders and are configured with grades 9-12 only. The district supports middle and high schools of varying grade-span configurations for a variety of reasons. Schools housing grades 7-12 were formed as part of district restructuring of schools from a model which held middle level students in 6-8 only middle schools and high schools students in 9-12 buildings. These populations of students were relocated by placing 6th graders back into elementary setting and seventh and eighth graders into 7-12 secondary schools. Schools housing grades 7-9 only were formed as foundation academies to support and that feed into 9-12 buildings with the same school name.

According to the 2007 Basic Education Data System (BEDS) report for CCSD, approximately 66% of students are African American, 20% Hispanic, 12% Caucasian, less than 1% Native American and 2% classified as “Other”, which includes students of Asian decent. The population classified as Students with Disabilities (SWD) is approximately 18%. English Language Learners (ELL), which includes Spanish speaking bilingual students and students from foreign countries, fluctuates at around 8%. Students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch is at 88% and 29% percent of the district’s schools are at or above 90% poverty. CCSD has the highest poverty rate of the state’s five largest urban school districts.
The schools selected for this study each represent one of the three regional zones (Northeast, Northwest, and South) within the large urban district. The three schools selected for this study, Northeast City School (NECS), Northwest City School (NWCS), and South City School (SCS), represent differing structural configurations in which seventh graders experience middle school education as the entry point into the middle/secondary level in CCSD. Demographic information regarding the schools at each of the sites participating in this study can be found in Table 3.1.

As shown in Table 3.1, students in the Northeast Zone experience middle school as seventh graders at the Northeast City School (NECS) which is designed as a "small school," configured to serve no more than 500 students in grades seven through twelve. NECS is housed on a campus that is shared with three other "small school" models, each serving an additional five hundred students. NECS is in its seventh year of operation and continues to struggle to meet state assessment benchmarks with passing rates for seventh grade reported in 2008 for English Language Arts at 46% and for Math at 24%. As a result of the school's failure to meet Average Yearly Progress (AYP), for more than three consecutive years, NECS has been designated by the state as a School Under Registration Review (SURR).
Table 3.1

School Demographics for Northeast City School, Northwest City School, and South City School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Grade Span</th>
<th>Student Enrollment</th>
<th>Student Demographics/Grade 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NECS</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>Total Students = 471</td>
<td>58.1% African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7th Grades = 62</td>
<td>35.5% Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.8% Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88.7% Reduced/free lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.7% ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19.4% SWD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>Total Students = 1053</td>
<td>47.2% African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7th graders = 163</td>
<td>23.9% Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.2% Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19.6% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>96.3% Reduced/free lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>44.8% ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22.7% SWD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCS</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>Total Students = 942</td>
<td>72% African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7th graders = 289</td>
<td>15.2% Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.7% Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.4% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88.6% Reduced/free lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.1% ELL and 22.8% SWD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Northwest Zone, seventh graders are situated in a large comprehensive high school, also comprised of seventh through twelfth graders. The total population of Northwest City School (NWCS) is approximately 1,100 students. NWCS has failed to
meet state assessment benchmarks since the inception of the state mandated exams in English Language Arts and Mathematics in 1998. The most recent assessment scores for the 2008 testing cycle for NWCS revealed seventh grade passing rates of 26% for English Language Arts and 41% for Math. In addition, this school had previously been designated in 2007-08 as a “persistently dangerous” school based on reported incidents of violence, but had been removed from that state ranking at the start of the current school year. The school continues to remain on the state’s SIRR list for low performance in English Language Arts and Mathematics for three years consecutively and is currently under redesign due to its failure to increase student performance significantly enough to meet state benchmarks.

In the South Zone, South City School (SCS) exclusively serves students in grades seven through nine. This school is in its second year of redesign, after being cited by New York State as a low performing school for its Mathematics scores. The school was removed from the state’s list of Schools Under Registration Review (SIRR) in March 2009 as a result of its recent performance in Mathematics, when scores of seventh graders more than doubled to over 52% passing in just one year. SCS is credited with improved school climate; organization of 7th and 8th grade students and teachers into academic teams to provide smaller, more personalized learning communities; altering the school’s schedule to increase the amount of instructional time by incorporating an 85-minute block schedule for core subjects; and working collaboratively with parents, students, and community partners to develop a plan for school improvement.
Study Participants

Participants for the study were selected using purposeful sampling to create homogeneous sub-groups (Patton, 1990) of seventh graders who had recently transitioned into middle school and who had just completed year one in a middle school setting. The objective was to collect data in order to describe the perceptions of seventh grade urban adolescents between the ages of ten and fourteen regarding their transition and first year experiences in the middle school setting. Data collection, therefore, occurred between June 2009 through July 2009, the point at which participants completed their first year in seventh grade in the middle school setting. The participants were selected from three schools, each of the schools in one of the regional zones within the district. The researcher contacted the principal of each school directly to request permission to form a sub-group of students to participate in the data collection process, to provide all relevant details pertinent to participation, and to be granted permission to pursue the data collection process of the proposed study in its entirety.

Criteria for Selection

Each of the three sub-groups formed a focus group of 8 students (n=24). Each focus group was comprised of male and female students of African American, Hispanic and Caucasian descent. Student performance data (i.e., grade point average and state assessment scores) for seventh grade students at each study site were reviewed through the district’s Department of Accountability. The purposeful sample of 24 students was created from lists of students who had not met the benchmark for the English Language Arts and/or Mathematics State Assessment for the current school year. Student
performance is relevant in that the study was interested in students whose academic needs were not being met.

Since the proposed study was interested in student perception data of school experiences, each student participant had to have maintained an attendance rate of at least 75% for the seventh grade school year. The researcher was interested in students who spent enough time in school to be able to make appropriate judgments and express meaningful perspectives about the school environment.

Using these selection criteria, a list of seventh grade students at each of the three schools was compiled. From the list of students meeting the selection criterion, three subgroups of eight students were selected to form three focus groups. Focus groups typically consist of six to twelve participants who are selected by the researcher and who consent to share their views on the research study topic (Glanz, 2003). While engaged in the interview with the researcher/facilitator, participants were able to reveal their perceptions within a social context rather than on a more limiting individual basis (Patten, 2007).

Students agreeing to participate in the proposed study were given a parental consent form (Appendix A) which included the details of the study. Letter content details were provided through the district’s Department of Accountability and approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. The form was made available to students at the time in which they first met with the researcher. Forms detailed the nature of the student’s participation and included a request to return the form with student and parent signatures upon agreement of terms. All but one original party agreed. The student who did not accept the invitation to participate in the study was released and another student who met the criteria was selected from the purposeful sample, was contacted, and agreed
to participate. The process concluded when eight students at each site had agreed to voluntarily participate and submitted the consent forms to the researcher.

Tables 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 provide demographic information on each of the students that participated in a focus group for each of the selected sites.

Table 3.2

\textit{Northeast City School Participant Demographics}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECS Student 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.3

**Northwest City School Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*SWD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWCS Student 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Student with Disabilities  *English Language Learner
Table 3.4

South City School Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
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Prior to the start of the sample selection process approval was secured from the Internal Review Board (IRB). Permission from CCSD was requested for conducting the student focus group interviews, and the approval of the district’s Chief of Accountability was obtained. Once the sample of twenty-four students was confirmed, the researcher assigned each participant a numerical designation (Creswell, 2007) in order to protect each student’s anonymity.

The time frame for completion of the participant selection process and forming three subgroups for the focus group interviews was four weeks. The focus group
interviews were held sometime between the end of June of 2009 and the end of July 2009, an ideal point in time, as these students had just completed their first year experience as seventh graders and were aware of their academic performance level as recorded on their final report cards.

Data Collection

The study employed several tools for data gathering: 1) pre-existing data as a source for identification of relevant topics; 2) a pre-focus group pile sort activity requiring participants to categorize and prioritize themes identified from the pre-existing data; 3) focus group interviews; 4) transcription of focus group recordings; and 5) field notes.

Pre-Existing Data

In preparation for the introductory focus group activity, the pile sort task, the researcher reviewed and recorded prevalent topics from pre-existing responses written by seventh graders on a district-wide midterm examination in English Language Arts administered in January of 2007. The extended response exam question required students to respond to a prompt directly related to their transitional experiences into seventh grade. The exam question asked students to reflect on their experiences in the first six months of their seventh grade year and write an essay in which they were to provide suggestions about what they believed would have helped them be more prepared and more likely to do their best in their first year in a middle school setting (Appendix B). The researcher reviewed a random sample of fully completed test responses from a different cohort of students who were seventh graders in January 2007 in each of the three schools which participated in the study. The students completing the essay question that was used as
pre-existing data would have been in the first year of middle school prior to the year that study participants entered middle school. The random sample set of pre-existing data was comprised of 100 student exam question responses. The researcher read each exam response and recorded the topics related to middle school issues in the sample sets. The topics were then cross-referenced to identify fifteen topics that emerged as common amongst students in each of the three school sites represented in the sample sets (Appendix C). The fifteen topics were written on sets of index cards for use by each study participant at the start of each of the three focus group interview sessions.

**Pile Sort Task**

The method of data collection that was possible using the pre-existing test responses is referred to as a pile sort task (Weller & Romney, 1988). In a pile sort task, participants are instructed to sort cards which have been pre-labeled with names or topics into piles that are similar. In the constrained version of this data collection method, which was used in this study, participants placed cards into two piles based upon their experiences with each topic as either having had a positive or negative influence on their learning progress and academic achievement. Used extensively in field research, the pile sort task is simple for researchers and participants and can facilitate conversation. Studies have used this data collection method to identify relations (Miller & Johnson, 1983) and to compare concepts of success and failure (Freeman, et al., 1981). The pile sort is easy to administer and is found to be enjoyable by participants (Weller & Romney, 1988).

The researcher prepared for the pile sort task, to be conducted at the beginning of the focus group session, by labeling index cards with topics that had been identified in the pre-existing data. Sets of cards were color-coded to identify the school represented by
each study participant. Students in the focus group from Northeast City School worked with green index cards; students from Northwest City School worked with yellow index cards, and South City School students worked with white cards. Each set of cards was numbered from 1 to 8 to indicate which student had handled each set of cards within each focus group.

At the start of each focus group session, participants were instructed to review their set of cards and to then place each card in an appropriate stack. Students were instructed to complete the activity independently. Cards with topics associated with positive experiences related to learning were placed in a pile on the right side of the students' desks. Cards revealing topics that were associated with negative aspects of their school experiences were placed on the left side of the desk. When this activity was completed, students placed a plus sign on the cards in the right side pile and a minus sign on the cards in the pile on the left. This activity was completed in each focus group within ten minutes.

Students were then allowed to place the cards back into one pile. They were given an additional five to ten minutes to review the same set of cards and to prioritize the fifteen topics from highest to lowest importance in terms of supporting student learning. Upon completion of the prioritization task, participants numbered each card from highest to lowest personal importance and placed the cards back into one pile. Each set of labeled cards was given to the researcher who placed each set in plastic bags labeled with the number and school of each participating student for later analysis.
Focus Groups

Focus groups are typically used in qualitative research to obtain a broad range of information about events (Sandelowski, 2000). They have been defined in the literature as organized discussion (Kitsinger, 1994), collective activity (Powell, et al., 1996), and social events (Goss & Leinbach, 1996). For this study, focus groups refer to a group of individuals who are selected by the researcher to discuss and comment on the research topic based on personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs (Powell, et al., 1996). In the case of this study, eight 7th graders in each of three focus groups represented their peers who transitioned into and experienced the initial year of middle school. Their personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs were solicited through discussion on the research topic and noted for their potential to reflect the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of their peers. The researcher also made note of the interactions within the group of seventh grade study participants and non-verbal cues and gestures during the discussions (Morgan, 1997).

Focus group interviews were the primary data collection source for capturing students' perceptions of their middle school experiences in their own voices. Focus group interviews were selected because they are appropriately aligned to the purpose of this qualitative study. The researcher served as the moderator of the discussion guided by a set of open-ended interview questions (Appendix D) which were designed based on the topics identified from the pre-existing exam data (Appendix A). The researcher was cognizant of the need to play a subjective role in the group, and observe of the quality of the information that was derived from the discussion. Research supports the use of focus group interviews as an effective way of gathering information about a topic of interest that can generate hypotheses, stimulate new ideas, and diagnose problems (Stewart &
Focus group interviews are regarded as a highly effective qualitative data technique (Patton, 1990). Focus groups provided several advantages for the current study. Focus groups 1) provided more information from a group of people in a time and cost effective manner; 2) allowed the researcher to interact directly with participants, allowing for clarification of points and probing for further information; 3) allowed respondents to interact with one another involving a synergistic approach for soliciting greater response than might have been possible through individual interviews; 4) allowed respondents to provide information through discussion, an advantage for adolescents who may not be particularly proficient in articulating ideas in writing; and 5) allowed the researcher to collect data from the observable behaviors (reactions, gestures, posture, and eye movements) of the participants.

The researcher served as focus group facilitator. The focus group interviews began with introductions and the researcher set a tone of trust and openness to ease the participants. The purpose and focus of the discussion was again articulated. Reassurances of the respect for anonymity and for the opinions provided were made.

The focus group sessions each lasted for a period of sixty to ninety minutes. The first ten to fifteen minutes of that time was reserved for the pile sort task. The remaining time was used to engage study participants in an open conversation, which was tape-recorded. The recordings were transcribed by a transcriptionist and the transcripts of the recordings were presented to the researcher for analysis. Students were treated to a pizza lunch at the conclusion of each focus session and were given two movie tickets each as incentive and in appreciation for their participation.
Field Notes

Data was collected through the researcher's observations of students' actions, reactions and gestures during the focus group discussions. Field notes of these observations were taken during the interview. A research notebook was kept as a recording and organizational system throughout the data collection process. The content of the notebook included the researcher's notes taken during the data collection process and field notes taken during the focus group interviews based on participant observations. Observation during the focus group sessions increased the researcher's ability to identify and address potential deception or lack of credibility of the participants in the interview setting (Creswell, 2007).

Data Management

The approach to data management and storage should reflect the type of information collected (Creswell, 2007). Since qualitative research can result in large amounts of data, the researcher will need to give importance to how data is organized and stored. In the process of data collection, it is wise to back up information collected, while noting any changes made to the database along the way (Davidson, 1996). For this study, the researcher adhered to Creswell’s (2007) recommendations for storing data. Backup copies of computer files containing data were developed; high quality tapes that captured more than 120 minutes were used in taping focus group discussions; two taping sources were used at each focus group session; an organizational file of the types of information that had been collected was developed in order to provide easy access for locating and identifying information for the study; and the names of all participants were protected through a color-coded and numeric labeling matrix.
Data Analysis

When information is collected, particularly that which is derived from open-ended questions, the researcher will be confronted with the organization of a multiplicity of data and data formats. According to Creswell (2007), data analysis in qualitative research involves three analysis strategies. First, the researcher will prepare and organize the data for analysis. Next, the data must be condensed into themes using a coding process. Thirdly, the data must be presented in an appropriate form, be it tables, figures, or narrative description.

The data analysis process began by creating a table disclosing the categorization and prioritization of topics identified by the study participants when completing the card pile sort task activity at the start of the focus group interview sessions. The table provided data that was analyzed for emergent patterns and trends and evident similarities and differences among participants, noting such as they related to representative genders and ethnicities within each sub-group. The researcher used these findings as one of the data sources employed to triangulate data findings (Madison, 2005).

The next phase of data analysis involved the review of the transcripts word processed from the audio tapings of the three focus group interviews. Since a thorough, well prepared, and well documented analysis is what distinguishes scientific approach from superficial conjecture, the researcher carefully reviewed, synthesized and interpreted the data to describe and make sense of the study phenomenon (Fossey, et al., 2002). In making sense of information, the researcher determined what matters most from the data by using coding, a process identified by Huberman and Miles (1994) for effectively reviewing and dissecting a set of data meaningfully. Coding the data provided
the researcher with the ability to reduce the data into meaningful segments that could be assigned labels or names (Creswell, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, the initial coding process was conducted using the topics identified from the pre-existing assessment data to be used in the pile sort activity and to develop the focus group question protocol. These initial fifteen topics were listed on a template created on a Word document. Transcript segments from each of the focus groups were cut and pasted onto the template matching participants comments with topics. Each segment of text added to the template was color-coded to allow the researcher to identify the school that each segment represented. The number assigned to each student was also entered at the beginning of each quote for analysis purposes. When all topics were addressed, remaining transcript text that did not fit into original topics was viewed and new topics emerged. Those topics were added to the template which was used in its entirety to identify frequency of responses across schools within any particular coded theme. Upon completion of the input of data, the multiple codes were organized into supercodes which captured the larger themes represented.

The researcher also reviewed and analyzed the observations recorded in the field notes, paying particular attention to the researcher’s notations which were made as participants responded and interacted with each other during the focus group interviews. According to Kvale (1996), identifying the themes that emerge from the experiences of the study participants as they respond and interact fulfills the ultimate goal of phenomenological research. Analysis of the pile sort analysis table, of the focus group interview transcripts, and field notes allowed for the triangulation of three distinct data sources. The researcher was able to examine these multiple data sources to determine
similarities as well as contrasting concepts and themes that emerged across data sources.
As a result of triangulation of more than one data source, the researcher was able to build a more coherent justification for themes (Creswell, 2003). Triangulation provided a process corroborating evidence from different sources.

The analysis of each of the data sources resulted in a descriptive narrative utilizing a phenomenological analysis presentation method. In accordance with Moustakas (1994) a “textual description” of the experience was included with word-for-word examples from study participants. A “structural description” provided an explanation of how the experience happened for the study participants. Finally, a more detailed “summative description” of the phenomenon was provided to highlight text meaning.

The timeline for conducting the data collection and analysis is outlined in four phases as presented in Table 3.5.
Table 3.5

*Research Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase I</th>
<th>Phase II</th>
<th>Phase III</th>
<th>Phase IV</th>
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<td>May-June 2009</td>
<td>June-July 2009</td>
<td>August 2009</td>
<td>September- November 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings with principals to disclose study details and roles</td>
<td>Contacted students and parents and collected consent forms</td>
<td>Analyzed and coded card pile sort card data</td>
<td>Prepared results and discussion of findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlined tasks, dates, times to collect information, create study participants' lists</td>
<td>Scheduled and conducted focus groups with pile sort activity and interview sessions at three school sites</td>
<td>Transcribed focus group tapes</td>
<td>Completed dissertation revisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewed pre-existing data to identify topics and prepare pile sort task cards</td>
<td>Collected and organized pile sort cards</td>
<td>Analyzed focus group interview transcriptions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop focus group questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reviewed field notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consult with district Office of Accountability</td>
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<td>Triangulated data</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conducted coding process</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Identified themes</td>
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*Summary of the Methodology*

The researcher has completed a data collection process for this qualitative phenomenological study that is appropriate for an investigation of urban student perceptions of factors that impact learning during their transition to middle school. The proposed research was initiated in May 2009. The data collection process included pre-existing written responses provided by seventh grade students in 2007; a focus group card pile sort task activity; three focus group interviews; field notes; and memos. The selected
methodology yielded volumes of rich perception data that informed the study in ways that might contribute to more effective transition programs and educational practices for urban adolescents entering the first year of the middle school experience. Chapter 4 reports on the data results from the described data collection process.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter examines three major themes from the results related to students’ transition and first year experiences in a middle school setting. Themes were derived across various forms of data including pre-existing data of middle school student responses to an exam essay question asking for students’ perceptions of their early middle school experiences; card pile sort task data indicating students’ perceptions of and experiences with fifteen middle school topics identified from the pre-existing data source; focus group interview data; research field notes; and memos. Data was analyzed to reveal those commonalities in the experiences of first year middle school students across sites that might be attributed to students’ ability or inability to focus on learning regardless of their school size or grade configuration. In addition to identification of themes consistent amongst middle school settings, themes also were found to intersect across gender and ethnicities of the participants in the study.

Findings

This chapter is divided into three sections based on study findings. In the first section, the theme Discomforts as Distractions to Learning is presented. This section highlights the discomforts that students experience during the transition and entry into middle school and reveals what students perceive to detour them from a learning-focused beginning to middle level education. The second theme, Classroom Dynamics and Pedagogical Practices that Disenfranchise Students, highlights classroom environmental
factors related to teachers and classmates and the pedagogical practices that participants identified as impediments to their ability to learn. A third theme, *Failure of Counselors as Advocates of Learners*, highlights participants' perceptions of the critical roles of counselors in supporting students as they seek to resolve issues obstructing academic progress.

*Discomforts as Distractions to Learning*

Participants revealed that they come to middle school with every intention of being successful. For example, in the Northeast City School interview, students shared their aspirations for careers in forensic science, law, movie production, and business. However, for students to be able to attend to the academic aspects of school that will promote the acquisition of skills needed to pursue career goals, the discomforts that divert their attention away from learning must be identified and addressed. These discomforts become the pre-entry factors that students worry about as they experience a new set of routines and practices. Sometimes, the discomforts are anticipated based on hearsay or expectations, but most times they are not. Student 4 from South City School summed it up:

> It was my first experience with stuff like that. You know, it's hard. You go into middle school and there are like all these different people and new stuff. Sometimes you have to be independent and care for yourself and not just care for everyone else and so that was some of the problem I had. That took me off track. Of course, you know middle school has trauma. Those are the things that took me off track and put me somewhere else. These were roadblocks that I needed to get over so I can learn more.
Middle schools roadblocks foretell learning for many adolescents. As adolescent students, they are naturally confronted with personal and social challenges which are further exacerbated by the fears and frustrations of the middle school experience. Participants revealed that they are excited about some aspects of transitioning to middle school and that they are eager but often derailed before experiencing success. Participants talked about their early positive expectations and how the derailment occurred. Student 3 from NWCS stated, “I thought that I could act the same way as I did in 6th grade and so I did. Things were O.K. for me in 6th grade but it did not work in my new school, though. I got lots of calls at home from school.” NWCS Student 5 added, “In elementary school, the teacher made it fun, instead of talking all the time. Last year, our teacher was joking around and stuff, going outside, then coming back in and doing math. They don’t do anything like that in high school.” In the same conversation, NWCS Student 7 remarked, “Yeah, I was excited about meeting new people in my new school. And I got to choose where I was going to school. But it’s awful now.”

The twenty-four students participating in this study were unanimously uncomfortable with specific elements of the transition and first year experiences in their middle school settings, including: a) course scheduling; b) transportation issues; c) school safety concerns; and d) separation from elementary school friends. Students described how these issues presented challenges and served as the first distractions from academics. Students believe that these distractions deprive them of opportunities for connecting with their new schools in positive ways, minimizing their ability to focus more fully on learning.
Course Scheduling Problems

Participants across school settings introduced schedules as a transition issue in each of the focus group discussions. Middle school course schedules pose concern for students transitioning from elementary schools where they previously spent the majority of the school day in one classroom with one teacher. Contrary to their earlier experiences, middle school life requires a great deal of movement during the school day, sometimes independently, in larger buildings with hundreds of other students. Further, having heard of scheduling mix-ups from friends or siblings who have gone before, participants enter middle school with a lack of faith in the system and with anticipation for the worst possible scenarios. One student from Northwest City School, Student 2, for example, had heard from other students that it was not uncommon to find out you have an incorrect schedule or that you may be sitting in the wrong school. She stated, “She (her friend) was in the wrong school for a whole day. She was in the office crying. The next day they put her back in elementary school.” This was a frightening prospect for this Northwest City School student as she prepared to enter middle school. The thought of experiencing such an uncomfortable situation in an unfamiliar setting preempted any consideration she might have otherwise given to academic matters. Middle school entrants do not cross the threshold into the new setting with a mindset focused solely on academics.

Participants across sites noted that course scheduling presents them with challenges. Course scheduling anxieties include difficulties with reading and following a course schedule, getting lost while navigating the way from one class to another, and being in the wrong class. Others study participants shared their observations of peers who had experienced difficulties with course scheduling at the start of the middle school. A
student from South City School shared an example of what she observed. South City School Student 4 remarked:

There were lots of kids when I got to middle school but everyone has to be independent and care for yourself and not just care for everyone else. That was some of the problem I saw other kids get into when they were given the wrong schedule. Sometimes the teacher would figure it out and make the student go to another class and then they got in trouble because they were not in the right class or got to class late.

Student 6 from Northeast City School shared the following observation as an example of the distress created for students when course schedules are incorrect. “Some kids in my school found out in the middle of the year they were in the wrong classes. They messed up the schedules. It was awful.”

Being subject to course schedule errors after the first day of school is not only uncomfortable for students who have to change into classes that are already in session, but present circumstances likely to decrease students’ chances for academic success. In the rescheduled classes, for example, students have previously been provided several weeks of instruction that the new entrant has not experienced. Students have already begun to form relationships within the classroom with the teacher and classmates. The late entrant has lost the opportunity to be included in the early stages of the classroom dynamics in progress and faces increased challenges as a learner.

Course scheduling also poses concern for middle school students due to an inability to read and follow the unfamiliar middle school schedule. This is a new experience for students who come from the elementary school setting where there usually
are no printed copies of student schedules for students to follow. As students enter the unfamiliar setting of a new middle school, they are often handed a difficult-to-read schedule in a school that is usually much larger than the school from which they have experienced education up until now. Students are then left to navigate their own way from class to class within a short time frame, typically three to five minutes. This is a tremendously stressful situation for the already anxiety-ridden adolescent in transition. Several examples of personal experiences were offered by students in each of the three focus group settings.

Students from Northwest City School, a building of approximately 1,100 seventh through twelfth grade students, found their first experiences with a middle school schedule unnerving. NWCS Student 3 stated, “I couldn’t find my class at first. I passed it 3 times. I was so uncomfortable.”

Students from South City School, a middle school setting of approximately 1000 students in grades seven through nine, expressed similar experiences with not being able to follow their course schedules.

SCS Student 4: I got lost like 4 periods which was most nerve wracking.

SCS Student 5: My first day of school, it was complicated for me to learn the schedule and know where to go. It was so complicated then.

SCS Student 7: For a couple days of school it was hard. It was really hard for me. I was lost. Like actually for 2 weeks I went to the wrong classes.

At Northeast City School, a small school model of 500 seventh through twelfth grade students, participants had also experienced challenges with course scheduling. For example, NECS Student 2 detailed the discomfort that scheduling created for her as a
new middle school entrant, when she emphatically stated, "Yeah! They put me in a seventh grade honors class!" This student was amazed that the school could have made such an error on her schedule, placing her in an uncomfortable situation when she was forced to be rescheduled to a new setting with a new teacher, unknown classmates and unfamiliar course material. In this case, the student faced additional discomfort due to the type of scheduling error, from an honors class to a non-honors class. For this student, the discomfort was heightened with the possibility that students in her honors class may have realized that her academic abilities were in question and that they might say derogatory things to her should she encounter them in the hallway or at lunch.

Study participants' identification of topics interfering with learning as recorded from the card pile sort task were consistent with several topics identified from the pre-existing test data. Likewise, findings from the focus group interviews concurred that students have negative experiences with school organizational issues. One such experience was with the impact of errors in course scheduling and students were eager to offer remedies. Student 2 from South City School suggested that "middle schools should have things on the walls like directions to classrooms, or a place to go if you don't understand the schedule or they should provide like guidance for people." Another South City School student, Student 6 stated, "I think they should have the ninth graders help the seventh graders so they get used to the school. Or they should have older age groups teach the first year kids that are coming into the school about the school, to help them learn about the school."

Participants are aware of the heightened anxiety level they feel as a result of the changes that are about to take place as they enter middle school. They are frustrated by
their school's failure to provide them with a proper orientation to school facilities. They find their schools unprepared to address their needs in terms of being able to assist them in navigating the school on the first days so that they could get to classes without fear or worry.

*Transportation Issues*

Transportation issues are another source of discomfort for participants. Students in each of the focus group interviews described their apprehensions as they prepared to travel to new schools. South City School Student 4 recalled the uneasiness felt when traveling to middle school on the first morning and shared, “On the first day of school my mom took me to the bus stop and she stood near me and put me on bus. It was like going into school and you don’t know where to go. I was afraid.” This student remembered the support his mother provided, but was also aware that the security felt prior to boarding the bus was temporary.

Several students from Northwest City School concurred about the anxiety that transportation during the first days of middle school caused them. These students revealed that as they remembered their angst about transitioning to middle school, taking a public city bus with other middle school students on that first day was tremendously unnerving. Study participants had come from elementary settings where all students are transported on yellow school busses with bus monitors as safety guides. Middle school students were now transitioning into a transportation system that was less personalized, that required a city bus pass, and that transported students ages 12-20 from several city neighborhoods to each school site. These students have nothing more than a bus pass with a pick-up location before the first day of school. By the time each of these students
arrive at their middle schools on the first day, or possibly on any day thereafter, they already expend a great deal of energy worrying about the ride to school rather than preparing mentally for the learning ahead.

The following statements were made during the discussion on transition issues. Two students from Northwest City School, a large comprehensive 7-12 grade school of approximately 1,100 students commented on their discomfort with city bus transportation as was experienced by participants from each of the focus groups.

NWCS Student 3: I was more nervous about the transportation than anything. The thing I was most interested in was the busses. I was never on a city bus before so I was more nervous about that.

NWCS Student 7: I was afraid to get on the bus the first day. I was scared that I was going to get beat up on my first day of school, like my sister.

Safety Concerns

Participants discussed anxieties related to safety concerns, primarily concerning student fights in their school settings. Card pile sort task data supported safety as a concern for students as a distraction to learning and impediment to academic achievement. Students described frequent incidents of being ridiculed or mistreated, even to the point of violence. Northwest City School Student 7 stated, "I was afraid I was going to get beat up on my first day of school, like my sister. She got jumped by a lot of girls for no reason on her first day. They didn’t even know her."

For the urban middle school students in this study, it was not unusual for them to experience or witness fights in school. However, participants were still surprised when
fighting was observed on the first day of school. One Northeast City School student stated, “There was fighting on the first day of school. suspensions even on day one!”

Some students reported that when entering their new school settings, they presented a tough exterior, representing themselves as someone less friendly and tougher than they might be. One young woman, Student 2 from Northwest City School explained her situation and how she was able to “save face” without having to actually fight:

Some girls tried to jump me. They tried to mess with me. They must have thought something about me that wasn’t true. They kept arguing with me.  
But then my friend pushed me into a classroom so I wouldn’t get in a fight.  
She got bruised, but she didn’t want me to get suspended because she says I am too smart for that. I think like—kids harass other kids for no reason.  
Not every friend is going to pull them in a room. Some are like—“go fight,”  
and some are going to encourage them to fight.

The fight scene described by this student depicts a willing fighter/caring friend scenario. The student being attacked will be expected to defend herself by peer observers. As the student verbalized the event, she was certain to intone that she had every intention of going through with the fight. However, her friend then intervenes to remove her from the situation. The girl being confronted is then saved from being considered weak or afraid and the friend becomes the excuse and somewhat of a hero after the fact.

Incidents shared by participants revealed the emotional and physical discomfort that students experienced when they were involved in potential or actual acts of violence against one another. It also became evident that learning becomes seriously disrupted during and after these incidents occur. Student 7 from Northwest City School, a school
just cleared from the State’s “Persistently Dangerous” list, shared the following details from her own first year experience in middle school:

I was sent to the hospital. A boy kept putting stuff in my ear in class. He was rolling it up and putting in there. He was close to me and I told him to stop. He punched me and I punched him back and then he slammed me on the floor, and he slammed me again. My friend tried to help me up but my back was out of whack. I have scoliosis and I have a rod in my back. They had to move everyone out of the class because my back was out of whack. They sent me to the hospital and I was there for eight and a half hours. I had to have five X-rays and three CAT scans. He got a long-term suspension and was sent home. I had to stay home for a week and stay in bed.

A study participant from the same school provided another example of the problematic nature of student interactions in the middle school. Northwest City School Student 4 explained the following incident with respect to a need to defend herself. “This girl messed with me and I knocked her down and then I swung at her. She hit me and I hit her back and then we started fighting.”

Respondents agreed that fights are often senseless because students get the wrong idea about someone else, about what they think they heard someone say, or as a result of rumors spread by others who want to see a fight. When learning is not the focus for all students, some students’ efforts may be sabotaged. One student in the Northwest City School interview explained when he said that “sometimes fights start just because students are bored.” Even if participants had not been involved in fighting, all had witnessed student-to-student interactions of a violent nature. Such incidents took time and
attention away from learning and made school safety a concern for students as they attempted to make academic progress.

*Separation from Elementary School Friends*

Participants' revealed that their angst is heightened when there is no one with whom to share difficulties or with whom they can seek companionship and solace while in the midst of uncomfortable or unsafe situations. When students perceive they are alone, they feel vulnerable and exposed, particularly to unfair and demeaning treatment by other students. *Northeast City School Student 3* affirmed, “I was scared of everything because I didn’t know anyone.”

Especially difficult were the experiences of one of the participants who had come to the middle school experience from another country. *Student 8 from Northwest City School* had a particularly challenging beginning because she was perceived by other students as different. This student had no one to connect with and found herself dealing with peer conflict while trying to acclimate to the new school setting in a new country. She stated, “I had a very bad start. I am from a different country. They didn’t want to talk to me and they were being mean and it made it uncomfortable for me.”

As these students willingly shared their inner fears about entering a new school in the absence of peer relationships, it became evident that when adolescent students experience social isolation there is a detrimental impact on academic progress. Across participants, knowing other students upon entry into the middle school environment helped ease anxieties. *South City School Student 1* entered middle school with other students who were her friends in elementary school. She was able to share the importance of peer affiliation.
I did have friends that was there for me and that helped me. You know, they listened to me, gave me advice. Things like that were helpful. One of my friends said, like, you don’t have to worry, you can talk to me. That was very helpful to improve my grades. That was like so helpful.”

For participants who had friends with whom they could connect immediately, anxieties were less overwhelming. These students were less troubled by their first year experiences as they reported about them. On the other hand, those participants who did not know others students upon entry experienced an amplified sense of defeat as emotions and thought processes were taken over with distress. Student 7 from South City School stated,

The first couple days of school were really hard because I didn’t know anyone there from elementary school. It was terrible. I had no one to help me figure things out.

The first days of school pose serious concerns for adolescents entering the middle school setting. Participants who were confused and frightened of the unknowns had negative perceptions about school. These perceptions further alienate students from one another and from the objectives of learning. One student from Northeast City School explained:

I was scared to meet people, and afraid of what was going to happen.

When I first came to NECS, I was kind of scared. Everyone looked at me.

I didn’t know anyone there and everyone looked mean. I did not want to be there.
Since middle school students are characteristically concerned about peer relationships, new friends and the nature of social experiences, (Berndt & Keefe, 1995) absence of positive experiences in this realm leads to a sense of social isolation and an overwhelming concern for self-survival. Consequently, while in survival mode, academics become meaningless. On the other end of the spectrum, the few students interviewed who were able to make friends early on during the first year of middle school appeared to be less troubled by their first year experiences as they reported about them. South City School Student 1 was comforted when recalling that, “I did have a friend who was there for me and that helped me. You know, to listen to me and give me advice. Things like that were helpful.”

Students’ responses on the card pile sort task were consistent with findings related to the importance of friends during the transition into middle school. More than two-thirds of the participants identified friends as having been a positive force in relation to their ability to make academic progress. Participants also acknowledged friends as a priority area for academic success, listing friends as a top five most important factor for academic success for fifty-five percent of the participants. While pile sort data reflected students’ perception that friends are critical in their ability to make progress, the value of friends to adolescents became critically apparent through interview discussions and interactions between students who knew each other in the focus groups and who appeared to be more at ease participating in the interviews from the beginning of the experience. Positive social interactions with peers contributed greatly to increased comfort levels of students while in school settings. On the other hand, discomfort associated with feeling
isolated from peers created a major distraction from learning for students who became emotionally consumed by the absence of friends.

Adolescents in this large urban district are preoccupied with specific transition and middle school factors that present themselves to students as part of district systems and as elements of the middle school environment. These factors act as stressors that create emotional discomforts overriding middle school students' concerns for learning. Across the three middle school settings in this study, students struggled with 1) course scheduling problems; 2) transportation issues; 3) school safety concerns; and 4) separation from elementary school friends. These factors presented the earliest of challenges for seventh graders transitioning into middle school.

Classroom Dynamics and Pedagogical Practices that Disenfranchise Students

Student participants referenced classroom environment factors and the teaching practices of their teachers as critical elements in determining their ability to learn as seventh graders. Students' responses during the focus group interviews and the card pile sort task indicated that middle school students are not finding the classroom environment and instructional practices to serve their academic interests and needs. Classroom dynamics involved students' perceptions of interactions experienced and observed within classrooms and the degree to which interactions obstructed learning opportunities. Perceptions of classroom dynamics were reflected in students' experiences with student-student and student-teacher relationships which included teacher reactions to disruptive behaviors of classmates during instruction. Classroom dynamics were also determined to be positive or negative based on the teacher's ability to reach out to students in
encouraging and respectful ways and to work with them comfortably, patiently, yet firmly on a consistent basis.

Additionally, students shared perceptions of teacher competencies for creating an interesting, interactive and effective learning environment. Students' focus on pedagogical practices was not based on curriculum content. Rather, teacher mode of instruction and effectiveness of lesson delivery were highlighted.

Classroom Dynamics

Across the interview sessions held at the three middle school sites, students described the environment in most classrooms as chaotic at times, filled with distractions much of the time, and often led by teachers with limited control of the students in the classrooms. Students depicted many of their classrooms as inadequate for supporting academic progress in the card pile sort task, as well. The card pile sort task data revealed that most students perceived the classroom environment to fall short of their expectations for positive learning experiences. For example, only one student of the seven respondents from Northwest City School, two of the eight respondents from Northeast City School, and one of the eight respondents from South City School labeled "classroom environment" as having been positively experienced in their first year of middle school. Based on the same data, 82% of the students interviewed had negative experiences with classroom environment issues. Yet, based on student prioritization of the fifteen given school-related topics, fifteen (65%) of the twenty-three students completing the prioritization task placed classroom environment as one of the top ten most critical elements for their academic success.
Students described the negative nature of the middle school classroom environment across focus group interviews. Student 5 from Northwest City School asserted that, “There is no order or control in lots of classes. Kids just get up if they get aggravated and walk out! Teachers call security or just let them walk.” Additionally, another respondent from Northwest City School, Student 7, eagerly added that, “There was a whole bunch of kids that got in trouble. There were people (seventh grade students) chasing kids around the room with lighters. They were fighting during class.”

In the South City School focus group, Student 8 stated regarding classes she had experienced during her first year in middle school:

Oh kids! Like they just talk or just start to be bad. Or they monkey around.

Kids that don’t want to participate and they make it bad for other kids that want to learn. Then the teacher stops everything for like one student.

These descriptions of the difficulties confronting students as learners in their urban classrooms reveal how the dynamics within the classroom present learners with frustration, distraction, and time off task. By the nature and content of the remarks students made, it became apparent that students are aware of the relationship between the environment created through the interactions of individuals within the class and academic success. Students were conscious of the impact of disruptive classroom dynamics on their concentration and learning potential, to the extent of being able to predict success or failure in a course based on the nature of classroom dynamics. Classrooms that consumed a great deal of instructional time attending to unruly students, that lacked teacher guidance for dealing with such students, or that frustrated the teacher into engaging in
inappropriate and condescending interactions with students were perceived as classes in which students would struggle and be at risk of failing.

Participants across focus groups shared similar concerns regarding such classroom environments. Several students unanimously and emphatically agreed that in many cases classroom setting in their middle schools had not provided an ideal environment for learning. The following statements provided examples of frustrating situations witnessed while in classrooms where they were attempting to learn. Student 6 from Northwest City School who had been frustrated by his classroom experiences stated, “We need more quiet, more order, and more focus on learning.” Northwest City School Student 8, a student in the English Language Learners Newcomer program was very perturbed by what she found in her classes. She stated:

Some students mess with other students because they do better in school. They think smart kids act like they know everything but they are not bragging, just good. They are like, oh, I know what you did wrong. Like you are trying to solve a problem and they know when did it wrong. They just mess with you cause you do better in school. They are just mad because I know the answers and they don’t. I have a higher GPA, so they call me a nerd and treat me bad.

This student expressed her frustration with her peers and the difficulties she faced as she tried to apply herself in the classroom. She was not only upset by the other students, but also concerned that these types of behaviors were allowed to continue. Having a language barrier was more than enough for her to overcome. From her tone, it was clear that she
could not comprehend how her fellow students could treat someone this way for simply trying to be a good student.

Participants shared experiences across schools regarding difficult situations with peers in their classes. Sometimes students found no other recourse than to become participants in the disruptive behaviors of the rest of the class. One discontented student from South City School explained a chain of events that resulted from participating in unacceptable classroom behaviors. South City School Student 2 explained:

Because of all of the fooling around in my class, I got in trouble and they put me in the in-school suspension room for the whole marking period. We had no work to do while we were there. I asked for work, whatever, and they would tell me I had to wait. It was like they did not want to bring me work or anything like that. I got all Fs on my report card. Yeah, like the last marking period I had failed. It was bad. That’s why I have to go to summer school.

Participants viewed student behavior as a reflection of the teachers in those classrooms. Students reported teachers as having the greatest impact on classroom environment. While they reported behaving and performing better for well-liked teachers, they faulted teachers in disruptive classrooms for having a lack of control and for the inappropriate way in which they spoke to and treated students. The feeling among students interviewed is that teachers contribute greatly to the lack of focus on learning as a result of their reactions and responses to students.

Negatively perceived teacher behaviors offer students no option but to shut down from the learning experience or to engage in the undesirable behaviors of the rest of the
class. Students invariably agreed that they failed to engage in classrooms where there was
an absence of “good” interaction with their teachers.

Conversely, students described favorite classes as those in which they were most
likely to learn from a teacher who was a “real person.”

NWCS Student 4: I’m comfortable in her class. I can talk to her and she jokes
around with us. It’s fun. The classroom is safe. She is in control.

NWCS Student 2: My Social Studies teacher is cool. We just have fun in that
class. He cracks jokes.

Several comments were also freely offered to reveal the behavioral characteristics
of ineffective teachers. During the Northeast City School focus group interview, students
shared several details. Student 7 stated, “They yell and get mad and kick you out.”
Another Northeast City School student, Student 8 added, “Yeah, they bring their personal
problems to school. They take it out on you.” Student 4 commented, “Some teachers have
favorites. Not like black or white. Like they treat kids that are bad special and they don’t
say or do anything about it.”

Students want and need to know that their teachers want a positive relationship
with them, are willing to create pleasant learning conditions for them, and are committed
to their academic progress. This is more in line with what students become accustomed to
in the elementary setting. Student 4 from Northwest City School said, “In elementary
school, the teacher made it fun. Instead of teacher talking, he was joking around with us
and stuff. We were going outside, coming back and then doing math. They had fun with
us and we had more fun learning. They don’t do that in middle school.”
Unfortunately, participants experienced several teachers in the middle school setting who were short-tempered and lacked patience with students. In these instances, teachers are perceived as unwilling to help students and more likely to remove students from the learning environment than engage them in it. In such instances, students characterized teachers as a major contributing factor for the academic failures they experienced. South City School Student 6 remarked:

They need to give you more help. They just say, “Try it on your own.”

They don’t like to help. If a student does not know something, they like say “just try it.” Some kids need more help, like in math, it was hard but she (teacher) won’t help anyone. They like ignore people.

In the South City School focus group interview, Student 7 offered an alternative to what he usually experiences with his teachers. He stated, “Teachers need to be more patient. Like when someone in class talks so much, it happens all the time. The teacher should ask what the problem is. Just have some more patience, ask what the problem is.”

Students are frustrated by the conflicts that result when teachers mishandle student disruptions. They believe that if teachers were more patient and kind to students, there would be fewer student distractions to learning because students would feel more respected and more highly regarded. A major contributing factor to a desirable classroom environment was knowing that they could count on the teacher to help them learn as called upon. Students’ anxiety level increased when a teacher was reluctant to re-teach previously taught material, unwilling to provide extra help to individual students when asked, or did not care enough to make the effort to keep them on task.
Northwest City School Student 6 was eager to make this point, "Some teachers just come out and say they don't care because they get paid anyway." Participants viewed such negative teacher-student interactions as powerful barriers to their ability to engage in learning and excel in that subject with that teacher. Two students from Northeast City School provided additional examples of teachers' comments they had heard and found disturbing.

NECS Student 2: They put you down a lot. They say, "We already got our education. You aren't getting an education." And they say it like they're glad.

NECS Student 7: One teacher said to me, "I don't know why you show up for school. You aren't going to do anything anyway."

These situations are quite disheartening for the students experiencing them. They feel defeated and believe that attempting to learn from such teachers is futile. Northwest City School Student 4 expressed frustration regarding the impact of teacher "coldness" by interjecting during this heated conversation, "Wonder why we get attitudes? Because the teacher gets mad. We get frustrated. Then we can't learn." All students in the focus group agreed. They can't learn from teachers who display these feelings for them. The classroom environment becomes a dreadful place, a place from which students may prefer to escape rather than learn.

During interview discussions, students depicted some of their classroom experiences as demeaning or annoying, and others as destructive as war zones. Fortunately, however, each student could identify at least one classroom in their first year of middle school that met their standards. In these classrooms, teachers were kind and patient, had a good sense of humor, but were in control of the classroom the entire time.
They were able to gain students’ respect by virtue of their personality, demeanor, or as a result of the favorable interactions they had with their students. For these students, teacher interactions serve to create a productive classroom environment. Positive teacher behaviors formed their perception of the classroom environment as one in which students wanted to learn and behave.

For the students participating in the focus groups, perceptions of classroom environment quality are formed as students experience the individuals in the classroom. Where the teacher is encouraging, nurturing, kind, and responsive to students, there is increased capacity for students to learn. When this occurs, students become contributors to the creation of a desirable classroom environment. Middle school students, as developmentally social beings, judge “right and wrong,” and “good and bad” classes based on how they feel when interacting with others in those classrooms. Their descriptions of the types of classroom environments in which they learn best focused greatly on the behaviors and interplay of teachers and students. However, the classroom environment, as created by the dynamics between individuals, was not the only factor that contributed to their ability to learn and make progress in a given class. Students also identified the quality of teacher pedagogical skill and competence as essential to creating a classroom environment that fostered or hindered students’ learning potential.

**Pedagogical Practices**

Teacher pedagogical practice was a key factor based on students’ descriptions of positive and negative classroom experiences influencing their ability to succeed academically. Students participating in this study perceived “the way” many teachers teach to be misaligned with their interest levels and learning styles. Students expressed
pedagogical practices in terms of the ability of teachers to engage students in effective teaching and learning practices and to create a physical environment that is learning-focused and student centered.

As one of the fifteen topics that participants prioritized from most to least important in the pile sort task, "teachers" ranked high in each of the focus group settings. Eighty percent of all student respondents placed teachers as an important factor for student success with sixty-six percent of the respondents placing teachers as one of the top three most important factors. While all students had negative experiences during the first year of middle school with teachers, fourteen of the twenty-four participants also reported having had positive learning experiences with at least one teacher in their middle school year.

During the focus group interviews, students indicated that they learned more and performed better in classes in which the teacher provided interesting learning opportunities. Interesting classes were not only described as fun and interactive, but as challenging. Students discussed their desire to be more challenged as learners and felt that where they were being challenged with more rigorous learning materials and activities, they were less likely to experience boredom and the subsequent off-task behavior that is too common in their classrooms. Students reported that they did not find urban middle school classrooms to provide them with academic challenges that require their full attention and commitment to learning. As a result, they lose interest and disengage from what is being taught.

Several students addressed the lack of challenge in their coursework. Student 3 from South City School student stated indignantly, "School is easy!" Interestingly, this
student’s grade point average did not justify her view that school is, in fact, easy. Instead of being a top performer as it might be expected, this student, who proclaimed school to be easy, had attended school for ninety-nine percent of all school days through the first year of middle school, yet completed the school year with a cumulative Grade Point Average of 0.63. What might be happening in this case was somewhat illuminated upon through other interview discussions regarding experiences with the rigor in urban education. One of the focus group participants from Northeast City School, Student 6, a suburban elementary transfer student, was adamant about the diminished quality of education in his new school and offered insight on its impact on students. He said, “I went to (a suburban school) for 6th grade. It was more fun, the classes were calmer and more focused on learning. It was different. The work was way harder and if you didn’t pay attention, you were going to fail.” This student brought to light the impact of a challenging instructional program on student interest and engagement. It seems that challenging students with rigorous course material and interesting higher level work increases students’ value for the class and for applying oneself more fully in the classroom.

As participants expressed a preference for more strenuous learning activities that would require them to do more than listen to teacher lectures, students shared that they wanted their classes to engage them more actively. Two students from Northwest City described classrooms where they became disengaged.

NWCS Student 5: We get bored in that class. They should let us do interesting stuff instead of just doing notes all the time.
NWCS Student 4: They need to give us breaks from listening to them, something more, so we don’t fall asleep.

Students want classes to be stimulating, interactive and fun. Preferred modes of learning, as expressed by participants across schools, involved a wider variety of activities: small groups working collaboratively; projects and activities like debates and making posters; games for engaging learning; more equipment and technology for students to use as learning tools; and hands-on learning opportunities as experienced in some science classes.

Students provided feedback in the interviews regarding perceptions of effective practices and stressed that they were best equipped to focus on learning when the teacher made the learning both interesting and accessible. Students in the focus groups reported their frustration with ineffective teachers from whom they could not learn and described instances of teacher pedagogical practice that disenfranchised them from learning. Students eagerly reported the tremendous time wasted on worksheets, note taking, and listening to non-stop teacher talk. Participants in each of the focus groups also noted that they are tired of the boring and sometimes pointless things they are asked to do and the occurrences of ineffective teaching that lead them to failure. Student 2 from Northwest City School noted, “The teacher just gives a worksheet and when it gets to the test we don’t do well.” Northwest City School Student 1 also reported her frustration with meaningless tasks given in class. She complained, “The music teacher will start us watching movies and then go to another and then another, and never finish any. Then she gives us a worksheet but we only saw half of the movie. Teachers set us up for failure.”

This last comment reflects students’ capacity for understanding that systemic obstacles to
their success are being imposed on them. The level of frustration with which this student spoke indicated that the student had felt powerless over her ability to learn.

As students attempted to negotiate their powerlessness over some of their educational circumstances, focus group interviews eventually turned to a discussion of possible solutions. Students from Northeast High School were excited about the concept of having courses be more career-focused. These students revealed that they came to the middle school experience with career interests and a plan to succeed. Several knew what they wanted to be after high school and they were aiming high. As the students took turns sharing their career goals, the following fields of interest were shared: law, forensic anthropology, film director or screen writer, and business owner. So, how do we keep students’ dreams alive, rather than squelch the enthusiasm and ambitious vision for their futures? As this was noted in the researcher’s notes, students went on to make suggestions.

NECS Student 4: Teachers need to ask more questions to help you figure out what you want to do when you grow up and teach you about that subject.

NECS Student 1: Schools need to have to have programs to help you decide on your career. Like if you want to go to law school, you should go to a school where they have a law and government magnet. Every school should have these programs built in.

Conversation in the NECS focus group turned to career-focused education as a more successful approach to creating interesting classes. Students cited programs that help them be more academically successful in school by providing interesting options, academic support, and career possibilities. Northeast City School Student 4 explained.

In (the program), they help you find jobs and stuff. They support you, like
with a tutor. My sister started in tenth grade. She got paid when she was going through that program. She loved the program. She goes to college to be a lawyer now. That program helped her a lot.

There was no dispute from students that they do better at that which they are most interested. Students strongly feel this way about their classes. Students in the interview focus groups felt that they did their best in classes where teachers engaged them in relevant learning activities.

Prior to the conclusion of the Northwest City School focus group interview, students began discussing how they wished they could contribute to making their classrooms more interesting. Students’ comments on this topic were fascinating as they broached the importance of student voice in education. Northwest City School Student 7 suggested:

They should let us plan and let us help the school get better and make it more interesting. We would be able to get it in our heads. It will help us learn.

I think it’s important to have a say in what the teacher is teaching. Think of it.

Plan with our teachers? I wish.

Others in this focus group agreed that having a voice would be awesome. They thought that they should be able to plan with teachers, go to school meetings, and be provided with school venues to express themselves as partners. Students in the Northwest City School focus group were especially excited about the thought of having input. They expressed their belief that “it is important to have a say in our education,” and that if they were engaged as participants they would find school and classes more interesting to the point that “I might even help other kids learn because I liked it!” At the conclusion of this
discussion, students took a vote. Seven of the eight students indicated by a show of hands that they would definitely like to be asked how they learn best and be given more choices regarding their middle school education.

According to students in the Northwest focus group, teachers would be better able to address their learning needs if they could enter into such discussions with them. As part of that discussion, students would be interested in advising their teachers as to what might better engage them as learners. In addition, students also want input on the physical environment that is created for them. If given the opportunity, students would tell their teachers that they want classrooms that provide a comfortable, quiet, and inviting learning environment where they are more likely to attend to the teacher and learning tasks. Students from the Northeast City School were specific about the physical elements of a classroom environment that promotes learning. Those classrooms have, “colorful surroundings and posters,” “more comfortable seating with tables rather than desks,” “more space in which to move and work,” and “a more home-like atmosphere with student pictures on the walls.” Students were in agreement that the nature of the surroundings created by their teachers determine whether they find the classroom environment to be student-centered and learner-focused and thus able to promote their interest in learning.

As students reported what they wanted from their classroom experiences, the simplicity of their requests was noted. Students want the best of the basics in their educational environment and they need teachers to be able and willing to create an environment that is physically and intellectually pleasing and stimulating.
Study participants reported that they required the assistance of supportive adults as they transitioned into middle school to help them make sense of their new surroundings and overcome learning obstacles. Middle school counselors were found to be best situated to fulfill this role. However, study findings revealed that counselors in the middle school settings studied failed to a great extent to support participants in meaningful ways. As noted in the card pile sort task data, only nine of the twenty-four study participants indicated having ever received support from their counselor. Of the thirty-seven percent of students who reported interacting with their counselor on any level, none believed that the support received was adequate for meeting their personal or academic needs. These respondents sought a more proactive and preventative approach to addressing their needs.

South City School 7 explained, “Counselors should check up on you once in while, like once a month and not wait until the end of the year when it’s too late. I don’t even know my counselor.” After expressing this sentiment, other students in the South City School interview indicated that their counselors did not reach out to them either. South City School Student 6 indicated that he did not know his counselor, as did Northwest City School Student 4. The finding that middle school students are not given opportunities to build relationships with their counselors was also revealed by sixty-three percent of the respondents on the card pile sort task who reported having had no interaction with their school counselors. It appears that counselors are failing to serve as advocates of learners as they encounter problems or require academic assistance. When asked, students confirmed that if their counselors would make an attempt to support
them, it would make a difference and be appreciated. However, since many did not have counselors reach out to them, they felt they had been abandoned and in some cases, unable to get on back on track with their academics. Desperate for advice, encouragement, or consolation, students reported looking elsewhere for support. In some cases, it worked out. South City School Student 1 explained,

I did have a friend that was there for me, that helped me, you know listen to me and give me advice. Things like that were helpful. He (my friend) said, like “you don’t have to worry, you can talk to me.” That was very helpful. And my mom, of course, was there for me to improve my grades, so like that was helpful, too.

This student expressed her gratitude for having individuals in her life who could play a support role for her personally and academically when there was no other adult in her school who she felt she could approach. South City School Student 3 added, “My sister, who is in college now, helped me out a lot.” Fortunately, for some of these students, there were family members and friends who were available and willing to support them personally and academically. However, most of the study participants were not afforded the needed support from a school counselor or any other adult. South City Student 5 shared the lack of support she found when she needed it most.

That’s how it was for me when I was pregnant – like I went to the nurse and she wasn’t that nice. Some teachers said you are too young to be pregnant. They were saying stuff like that, smart comments. So it was hard for me. One girl threatened me one time when I was pregnant. It was very hard and I stayed by myself.
Dealing with this issue presented numerous challenges for this student who had to experience the emotional strain of a teen pregnancy without support from others. Yet, instead of getting support from the adults whom she sought out, this student underwent further stress created by the unsympathetic adults she found in her school community. Not surprisingly, this student, while present for more than eighty percent of the total school days for the school year, ended the school year with a final average of “F.” A trained and compassionate counselor may have provided the needed emotional and academic support this student sought, particularly when support was so important for this adolescent who was facing a life-altering situation such as pregnancy while in an academic transition period.

Sometimes students require support from adults at school when dealing with an overwhelming problem at home. Students shared situations that made it difficult to get support at home. One student’s story defined the need for counselors as support agents. South City School Student 7 explained:

Like part of the worse time for me was the beginning of my seventh grade year. My sister started doing drugs and got into it real bad. During my seventh grade year, my mother and her kept fighting and just wanted my sister out of the house, to go to detox or jail. It was so bad for me.

Students were sincere in expressing their need for counselors who are available when they do not know what to do. Participants wished they had a counselor who could be compassionate, supportive, and encouraging. Students indicated that for them it’s about “adults who listen and who are patient with them.”
One of the participants who indicated that she had been fortunate enough to have a supportive counselor shed light on the desired role of a middle school counselor. Student 8 from South City School found that her counselor was helpful when having issues within the classroom. She stated, “She (counselor) helped me. I got to go see her when I was having trouble during class and she helped me out.” For this student, there was a safety net, or an “out” when needed. She was able to seek a positive course of action rather than get in trouble in the classroom. The same student also recalled how her counselor supported her academically. She added, “My counselor helped me catch up on my work. She showed me how I could do better. She gave me encouragement and good ideas on how I could do better.” This student was appreciative of the efforts made by her counselor. It relieved stress and provided her with alternatives to shutting down from learning or shunning her academic responsibilities in those cases when her counselor reached out to her. This student’s experiences, however, were not the norm for students interviewed.

Common themes based on information derived from pre-existing test essay responses, card pile sort task data, focus groups, field notes, and memos characterize the experiences of adolescents transitioning into and experiencing the first year of middle school in an urban setting. The emergent themes are depicted in a conceptual model representing the findings of this study, as shown in Figure 4.1. The model illustrates the relationship of the three major themes that participants identified as challenges to academic progress as they transitioned into and experienced the first year of middle school.
Figure 4.1 illustrates common themes that emerged in this study. Themes, located in the three rings around the center, represent the thematic issues that study participants identified as negatively influencing their learning during the transition into middle school. The themes are placed sequentially from the outer to inner layer of the model in relation to the occurrence of issues that impact student learning. The time periods in which the themes occur correspond to phases experienced during the transition and first year experience.

1. Phase I: The Transition Phase - The outer ring of the model corresponds to the earliest phase of the transition experience when students prepare to enter the unfamiliar middle school setting from elementary schools. As students anticipate new routines and systems they begin to experience emotional discomforts that distract them from academic preparations on which they
might be otherwise focused. According to study participants, initial
discomforts around transportation and course scheduling materialize since
these are the first two major modifications they are required to make after at
least six previous years of schooling in a setting with which they have become
comfortable. Immediately upon entering middle school, students experience
additional discomfort as course scheduling problems arise, school safety
issues are experienced, and the absence of friends prevent them from finding a
comfort zone. Students describe the emotional discomfort as resulting in
barriers to learning.

2. Phase 2: The Adjustment Phase – Moving inward, the adjustment phase
begins. During this period, students are situated in their classes and begin to
make an effort to adjust to the new setting by connecting with classmates and
teachers. However, as findings revealed, participants found that the learning
environment created conditions that negatively impacted their ability to focus
on or engage in learning. Undesirable learning conditions were found to be the
result of teacher-student and student-student interactions and ineffective
teaching practices. Classrooms were too chaotic and teachers failed to bring
order to the disruptive nature of the environment created by unruly students;
learning environments were uncomfortable and not stimulating; and teacher
practice was not engaging or aligned to support student success on learning
outcomes. Studies of classroom environment issues as they impact student
learning are consistent with findings in this study. Researchers such as Falls
(2005) have found that these classroom environment factors have a profound affect on students’ academic achievement.

3. Phase 3: The Crisis Phase – Closest to the center is the crisis phase, when students, who have been dealing with discomfort and disenfranchisement realize that they may be at risk of failing. During this phase, students seek adult support, which is not always available to them. Participants viewed school counselors as the most appropriately trained and objective individuals for supporting their needs but disclosed that they did not find their counselors to be proactive in preventing academic risk or available to assist them in recovering from the earlier experiences.

When transitioning students intersect with the negative characteristics of each of these phases without intervention or support, learning is obstructed and declining academic achievement levels are imminent.

Summary of Findings

In conclusion, this chapter presented findings related to how urban middle school students characterize their transition into middle school and what they specifically view as issues of the transition and middle school experience that impact their learning. Three themes were identified from the collective responses of study participants in the three research settings: 1) Discomforts as Distractions to Learning; 2) Classroom Dynamics and Pedagogical Practices that Disenfranchise Students; and 3) Failure of Counselors as Advocates of Learners. The next chapter will discuss results in terms of implications of findings, limitations of study, recommendations, and summary of the study.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of urban middle school students as they characterize the transition and first year experience in middle school to determine what they specifically view as factors influencing learning. Chapter 5 presents implications of the findings and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and a summary of the dissertation.

Implications of Findings

Findings from this study contribute to scholarly understandings and have implications related to middle school transition programming; professional practices of educators of middle school age students; and teacher education and counselor training programs, particularly those associated with urban middle school settings.

Theoretical Implications. The findings of this study contribute to research that asserts that there are several negative influences that adolescents encounter as a result of the transition from sixth to seventh grade (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Gronna, 1998; Diemer, 1992; Peterson & Crockett, 1985; Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983). This age group is especially at risk and in need of early and ongoing transition planning as they enter middle school (Finger & Silverman, 1966; Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007). Research related to adolescents and their transition to middle school shows that the early adolescent years trigger the beginning of declining academic performance leading adolescents into failure (Eccles, et al., 1993;
Alspaugh & Harting, 1995). In this context, factors that influence students' learning during the middle school transition period were worth further investigation. Students in this study identified specific factors that divert their attention from academics; that disenfranchise them from learning; and that fail to serve as support as they set forth into the middle level gateway to their futures.

The findings of this study contribute to previous studies that maintain that school factors which may be to blame for declining student performance must be sought and identified (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007). This study also responds to research asserting there is an absence of student voice in studies related to school transition and school improvement (Noguera, 2004; Mitra, 2004). Findings of this study reveal specific factors negatively influencing urban middle school student learning.

This study filled the void in existing research. There are a limited number of studies that investigate the transition experience of adolescents and the impact of the transition on learning through the perspectives of students in urban settings (Seidman, et al., 1994). This study investigates urban students' perspectives of their recent transition experiences within an urban setting at a pivotal point in time; when they have just completed the first year of middle school as seventh graders. The study contributes to the work of researchers who assert that further exploration of student perspectives on school organizational systems are needed as a means of determining what is not working for them and what interferes with their learning (Noguera, 2007; Cook-Sather & Schultz, 2001a).

Through an investigation of issues that negatively impact the learning of adolescents, this study further contributes to the work of Hunt (1975) and Eccles, et al.
(1993) who maintain that there is a mismatch between middle schools and adolescent learners that negatively effect the learning potential of students. Through the stage-environment fit theoretical framework, Eccles, et al. (1993) explain that as a result of the middle school transition, students undergo a “developmentally regressive” experience caused by unfamiliar structural conditions that are in direct opposition to the psychological needs of adolescent students. Middle school adolescents participating in this study identified several structural conditions that were not aligned to their needs as they transitioned into, adjusted to, and faced crises in middle school. These conditions created discomforts, disenfranchised students as learners, and failed to provide needed support.

There are three major findings from this study. First, urban students experience emotional discomfort resulting from common challenges presented during their transition from elementary to middle school in urban settings. Emotional discomforts create a distraction from academic matters early in the transition period. Second, urban students struggle to adjust to middle school as they experience academic classes that are not meeting their learning needs. Students struggle with classroom dynamics and pedagogical practices that disenfranchise them from engaging fully in learning. Third, prior to and during personal and academic crisis, students do not find the support to work through issues that impede their learning progress so that they can get back on track before they are at risk of failing. Students perceive middle school counselors as the most appropriate adult to fill this role but find that this support is not consistently provided.
Discomforts as Distractions to Learning

As noted in Figure 4.1, during the transition phase from the elementary to middle school setting, urban adolescents encounter uncertainties that superseded their earliest ability to focus on academics. Students become preoccupied with certain fears and anxieties related to the transition phase. If left unaddressed, the resulting emotional discomforts become the focus for concern and serve as distractions from learning. These influences appeared to form a barrier to the cognitive aspects of the new educational experience as students fixate on these issues rather than on academic matters.

Subsequently, the first layer of negative influences which includes course scheduling problems; transportation issues; safety concerns; and the absence of friends prevented some students from developing a success-oriented trajectory at the start of middle school. These findings contribute to research studies on factors that serve to distract transitioning adolescent students from focusing on learning objectives (Falls; 2005; Newman, et al., 2000; Isakson & Jarvis 1999; Haberman, 1991).

Findings from this study are consistent with research asserting that, as a result of the lack of information provided to students on navigating new systems, the transitioning student experiences increased anxiety (Falls, 2005). Study findings imply that school districts may not be sufficiently considering the effects of system changes that exist between the elementary and middle levels of education.

A number of district systems change for students when they move from elementary to middle school within any school district. District offices with responsibilities for district and school operations must consider what operational changes will be experienced by middle school students when they leave one setting for another.
New routines imposed on students during the middle school transition need to be scrutinized for how they might impact students. As participants in this study noted, for example, making the change from yellow school buses to public city busses presented several challenges. Minimizing these types of discomforts for transitioning adolescents can improve their transition experience and increase the ability to focus on learning rather than change. This will require identification of district operation changes between one level of schooling and another; determination of the possible issues that the changes create for students; and a commitment to respond to the questions and concerns that students may regarding changes.

Study findings also have implications for middle schools. First, attention must be given to how schools design course schedules for incoming adolescents. To insure that middle school students are scheduled into classes appropriately, additional steps may be required regarding the review of student academic proficiency levels and academic needs. School leaders and registrars may benefit from additional training focused on the construction of student schedules with students, not space and time, as the most important factor. In addition to these actions, middle school educators will benefit by reflecting on how they are orienting students to their new schedules and providing them support as they learn how to navigate their way into the school and from class to class.

Study participants identified safety as an issue creating distractions for them in their new middle school settings. In accordance with research that shows high incidents of violence in urban middle schools to be associated with declining school performance (Bowen & Bowen, 1999), middle schools may need to reassess school safety procedures and the role of school safety officers. Furthermore, middle school administrators and
teachers might consider educating incoming adolescents differently around the school’s code of conduct in ways that will increase students’ responsibility for their behavior and improve school climate.

Study findings support research on the importance of friends to students transitioning into new school settings. Participants in this study reported transition issues to be exacerbated as a result of the absence of friends. Friends assist in minimizing the impact of the unfamiliar setting, to protect and encourage, and to help with class work and personal problems. Previous research findings are consistent with conclusions drawn in the current study that suggest that friends provide support when students are faced with challenges during the transition phase, and act as buffers to the stresses that interfere with academic achievement (Newman, et al, 2000). This reaffirms the need for providing students with opportunities to meet new students and participate in team-building exercises prior to and upon entering middle school. Serious consideration must be given to addressing non-academic factors that impose on student learning as a prerequisite to core class integration and academics.

Findings related to discomforts that distract transitioning middle schoolers from focusing on learning provide numerous possibilities for improving outcomes for students. Alleviating initial transition concerns and improving the nature of students’ earliest experiences in the middle school setting will increase students’ capacity to focus on academic efforts. One of the essential components of such efforts will be to learn specifically what concerns a given population of middle school students. The other will be to keep students informed during the change process and to include them in decisions about their transition and middle school education.
Classroom Dynamics and Pedagogical Practices that Disenfranchise Students

Studies of the impact of teacher practice on student achievement are consistent with the findings in this study which show that instructional practices are a significant factor influencing student engagement and learning (Falls, 2005). Relevance of learning activities, interactive and collaborative learning tasks, and intellectually stimulating and engaging classrooms have been identified by participants to greatly impact their engagement in learning and academic achievement. Research has also supported the claim that there is a need to pay attention to what students say about their own learning. Haberman (1991), for example, contended that good teaching involves students in the issues they believe to be important as related to their own learning. When students have a decision-making role in their education, there is increased motivation for learning and higher levels of academic achievement (Noguera, 2007; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

Findings reveal that students are aware of the impact of their learning environments on their learning ability; are able to articulate the components of the environment that are most influential; and are capable of providing suggestions for improvement.

Study findings maintain that student-teacher interactions can promote or inhibit student engagement in learning (Falls, 2005). As noted in previous studies, participants view teachers as effective in creating a positive learning environment when they are caring and respectful of students; when they make learning fun; when they support students in need of extra academic support; and when they respond to students in kind and patient ways (Wilson & Corbett, 2001; Arroyo, Rhoad & Drew, 1999; Haberman, 1991). Consistent with these studies, findings indicate that positive classroom
environments involve group work, hands-on projects, and interactive learning activities that engage adolescent learners.

Findings were in agreement with studies concerning the connection between instructional practices that engage students in challenging learning activities and increased student engagement in learning (Arroyo, Rhoad & Drew, 1999). Students shared a tendency to want to perform at high levels when they view the instructional activities to be challenging and in need of their full attention. Findings also support previous research that argues that urban teachers are more likely to create a learning environment that is teacher-driven and authoritative rather than collaborative and less encouraging of student ownership of learning (Haberman, 1991). Participants noted specific difficulties they had in classrooms that were teacher-centered and that promoted student passivity or resistance to learning. Findings based on participants' descriptions of their classroom environments in urban settings support the research findings of Waxman, Huang and Padron (1995) which, like the “Pedagogy of Poverty” study of Haberman (1958), indicate that there is a low intellectual demand with a focus on task completion rather than authentic learning experiences in many urban settings. As was found in this study, pedagogical practices rooted in low intellectual endeavors do not engage students in the appropriate level of challenge; are void of learning activities that students would consider fun; and contribute to the boredom middle school students associate with learning. As participants revealed, middle school students spend too much class time completing worksheets, watching segments of movies without purpose, and completing tasks that are not revisited or tested. This is a type of “work vs. learning” approach that is disenfranchising urban middle school students (Falls, 2005).
With regards to student-student interactions within learning environments, studies have shown that while peer relationships are important and can play a positive role in academic achievement, peer interactions can also distract students from academic pursuits (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). As study findings support, academic goals can be seriously impacted by negative peer influences in classrooms where students are disruptive or unsupportive of their peers. Findings contribute to the importance of classroom dynamics as observed through positive student and teacher interactions; with the physical and emotional environment that is created for learners; and with teacher practices that appropriately engage students in interesting and challenging learning opportunities with respect for learning and the learner.

Findings related to classroom dynamics and teacher pedagogy have implications for school districts and middle schools. School districts must be sure to provide training for district Human Resource personnel responsible for recruiting and hiring middle school level teachers. Recruiters must seek candidates that exemplify the characteristics of effective educators of middle school adolescents. Human Resource personnel should provide training and support to administrative supervisors on how to use the teacher evaluation process to better support teachers or to counsel out those who are not effective at the middle school level. Administrators must make a commitment to the improvement of classroom environment and teacher practice. Middle school leadership must make this priority transparent for teachers by embedding it into school improvement documents, as part of the classroom observation process, and as a topic for school-based professional development.
Teaching and learning are the goals of all levels of education. Findings suggest that at the middle school level, learning depends on responsive and developmentally appropriate teaching in a positive and challenging learning environment where adolescent learning is not compromised.

*Failure of Counselors to Advocate for Learners*

The present study reinforces the imperative for school counselors to actively partner with educators to advance the academic growth and learning for all students (Sink, 2005). As students encounter personal and academic roadblocks to success, they are in need of guidance and support. In agreement with current research that contends that counselors have a professional and ethical responsibility to assist in the academic development and learning of students (Ripley, Erford, Dahir & Eschbach, 2003), findings in this study support the critical need for counselors to be present and active as supportive adults for middle school students. As noted in the American School Counselor Association National model (2003), study findings support the need for counselors to participate more fully in the education of middle school students by calling attention to situations within the schools that hinder students' academic success, and by being catalysts for change. Present study findings show that when faced with the possibility of academic decline or failure, brought on by middle school systems, academics, or personal issues, students perceive counselors to be capable of saving them. However, study participants noted that they need counselors to be readily available to them; to build and sustain relationships with them; and to serve as advisors, prevention and intervention specialists, and confidantes.
Participants in this study want counselors who 1) reach out to students early and on a regular basis; 2) help students catch up when they fall behind in their class work; 3) provide them with strategies for improving their academic performance; 4) provide encouragement; and 5) are available as needed to give advice on personal and academic issues.

These findings imply that urban middle school counselors are not providing the level and quality of support that students desire and require. Study participants reported struggling with a diverse set of personal and academic issues throughout the first year of middle school. As a result, participants faced, and in most cases, experienced, declining academic progress and failure. Students believe that if their counselors proactively set a better course of action for them and are available as needed, failure could be prevented.

Further, findings call for school districts to reevaluate the current roles and responsibilities of middle school counselors. Inquiry should be made into the amount of time that counselors spend on duties that do not directly impact student academic outcomes. This may mean the support of directors of counseling services to survey middle school counselors and students within their districts for data that may be applicable for systemic change.

Students seeking proactive support as prevention to failure would benefit from the availability of built-in school procedures for students to access if, when, and as often as needed. Counselors would improve the learning potential of students if they were to partner with teachers, supporting the learning process in classrooms, and providing special classes and workshops for students on pertinent issues challenging adolescent learners in the middle school environment.
Transition Programs

Adolescents need support as they make a successful transition to middle school (Mitzelle & Irwin, 2000). Although this is not a new concern for middle level educators, adolescents continue to struggle with the difficulties of making the transition (Mizelle & Irwin, 2000; Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond & Walker, 1996). There is abundant research on the need for transition programs that better introduce and prepare students for the transition from elementary to middle school (NMSA, 2003). Research suggests that effective transition programs include five or more diversified activities (Mac Iver, 1990). These include school tours; student and parent meetings that address questions and concerns about the academic environment and social community (Smith, 1997; Rice, 2001); and attention to the diverse needs of the incoming population, especially those who may have the greatest issues, such as students with behavioral problems, low achievers, and minority or low socioeconomic status students (Anderman, et al., 2000).

Study findings support the need for multiple transition activities for all learners. Additionally, however, findings also reveal that transition programs must be extended for longer periods of time. While traditional models of transition programs engage students in activities that anticipate the support middle school students will need prior to and sometimes upon early entry into middle school, new program models for transitioning middle school adolescents must be designed to support students as they adjust to the new environment and face diverse issues throughout the first year of middle school.

In spite of efforts to better meet the needs of transitioning adolescent students, deteriorating academic performance remains notable, particularly for those who continue to feel overwhelmed by school-related stresses (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark &
Kurlakowsky, 2001). The inconsistent results that transition programs yield suggest that in order for students to benefit from the responsive practices offered, transition programs must be implemented properly and inclusive of the appropriate components (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Since the main function of elementary to middle school transition programs has been to respond to students' needs in order to increase student potential at the next level of education, it is imperative that those needs be identified and appropriately addressed. Studies on identifying the most desirable practices of transition programs have been concerned that such programs predominantly depend on the perceptions of school principals and teachers. Students may be able to contribute to the development of more meaningful and lasting activities in the redesign of middle school transition programs, especially since it has been noted that transition programs cannot continue to have but a temporal effect (Curtis, 2006).

These findings have implications for middle school educators preparing for and expecting to educate young people. If transition programs are to minimize the anxiety and difficulties of the transition experience, transition program developers must be certain to address the issues that students find troubling. Based on the findings of this study, a transition program for students in CCSD would include specific elements. For example, course scheduling issues would need to be addressed. Students might be able to receive their course schedules in advance to review with an older student, teacher or adult. The transition program would include an opportunity for students to participate in a "dry-run" experience by following their new course schedule with a peer or adult partner at their new school site prior to the first day of school. Ideally, teachers would be available in classrooms to greet students and to answer questions as part of the orientation experience.
Students would be able to meet classmates and develop relationships with them prior to the opening of school. Opportunities for clarification or addressing concerns would be available during and after the run-through experience to ensure that students would enter school on the first day ready to move from one class to the next without anxiety or mishap. Students would meet their counselors and set up appointments to meet with them soon after school opens as a proactive measure for addressing students' needs and concerns as they occur.

As is documented in the study findings, transportation generates a great deal of stress for students transitioning to middle school within an urban setting. CCSD would better support its transitioning adolescents by reviewing current transportation systems used by middle school students, and by identifying the concerns of students before the first day of school. As was evident for students in this study, apprehension regarding the challenges of an unfamiliar and more threatening system of transportation took priority over academics. Ideally, as part of the transition program experience, students would be able to experience the transportation system with a parent or guardian prior to the first day of school. After the trial run, students would then be able to voice concerns and district and school leaders might consider partnering with individuals from the Department of Transportation to resolve transportation issues identified by students and parents.

Study findings revealed that safety issues affect adolescent learners. Participants described occurrences of demeaning or violent acts in terms of students' treatment of one another on the bus, in the school hallways, or in classrooms. Each of the instances shared by participants revealed the disrespect with which adolescents treat one another. Friends
become critically important in minimizing the fears students experience around safety concerns since students feel more protected from others when they are not alone. District and school-based transition programs might capitalize on the power of friendships by providing community and team-building activities within the transition program design. District and school leaders should also consider including respect and character building workshops, and establish friendship development networks during the transition program to ease students' anxieties as they transition into middle school. Occurrences of disrespectful behavior and violence toward one another may be reduced as students support their peers as friends, and attend more productively to academic endeavors without negative interference.

Findings reveal that transition programs must include components identified as relevant to the current group of transitioning students. This will necessitate the involvement of students in the planning process. Student input can be incorporated by asking incoming students about what concerns them. In addition, more student-centered transition programs might be possible by involving students who would be transitioning out of seventh grade and into the second year of middle school. Input provided by students who have already experienced the first year of middle school in the same setting will bring insights to transition program planning that adults may not have considered.

In summary, study findings have resulted in parallel understandings, and have contributed to and extended the knowledge base related to research on the middle school transition and its impact on students. Themes identified in this study corroborate with the findings of previous research studies which contend that there are numerous challenges for transitioning middle school adolescent learners (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991;
This study contributes to understandings of the impact of the middle school transition through the identification of specific challenges that are unique to urban adolescents transitioning to middle schools in urban settings. Participants' retrospective feedback offers pertinent insights which support the critical relationship between transition factors and learning outcomes. Participants' suggestions are based on the actual learning struggles and suggestions that were offered with an "if I had to do it over again" mentality. As a result of lessons learned, study participants offer valuable insights as to specific issues that impede learning. These lessons, if heeded, are likely to have a more positive impact on the learning of the next cohort of transitioning middle school students.

The present study also extends the base knowledge of current research on the nature of middle school transitions. Findings revealed that the challenges of the middle school transition do not occur simultaneously. The transitioning adolescent is influenced by transition issues in phases that begin prior to the entry into middle school (transition phase); occur as students attempt to acclimate to the middle school environment (adjustment phase); and continue throughout the first year experience until students realize they may need additional support (crisis phase). If the issues are not addressed as they are encountered, the impact is compounded and student learning is further impacted. These findings have implications for professional practice and teacher and counselor education programs.

*Implications for Professional Practice*

Review of the literature and findings of this study related to young adolescents' and the transition into middle school confirm the importance of preparing adolescents for
the middle school experience socially, emotionally, and academically. Urban educators must rethink current practices to include student opinion and participation. Educational practices based on professional elitism, where the adult is the sole keeper of knowledge, minimizes student interest and engagement in the learning process. Findings based on students' perceptions of the middle school transition and first year experience challenge educators to embrace students as thinking, feeling, and problem solving partners in the quest for learning in the middle years.

Study findings also have implications for the professional practices of teachers and counselors as educational partners. Middle school educators and counselors need to work together to better understand and address the developmental and learning needs of students. A new commitment must be made to joint professional development based on current research on adolescent issues in urban education and focused on the student population they both serve. Teachers' and counselors' collaborative efforts will increase the frequency and improve the quality of supports provided for addressing the diverse issues and needs of the middle school adolescent.

As middle schools work toward meeting the personal, social, and academic needs of students, the role of the school counselor becomes increasingly critical. Research suggests that to increase the capacity of middle school counselors to support students in ways that contribute to higher academic achievement, specific practices must be introduced (Sink. 2005). According to Lapan, Kardash, and Turner (2002), NMSA (2003), and Paisley and Hayes (2003), counselors must be trained to deliver school guidance curricula to target classrooms and provide responsive services through small group counseling. Counselors focused on students' academic skills can contribute to the
establishment of improved learning structures through participation in advisory programs, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and by supporting safe and caring classrooms and schools. As study participants noted, counselors are most effective when they are available to students early in the transition experience. Students need counselors who are prepared to work with them, collectively and individually, to prevent academic risk, and to intervene as needed along the learning continuum.

Findings suggest that professional practices of middle school educators build upon those of their elementary school colleagues. Since features of the elementary school are discarded for systems, practices, and structures that are unfamiliar to or incompatible with what the emerging adolescent is most comfortable, middle school practitioners must become more familiar with the nature of the educational experiences that worked for their students in the elementary setting. This would necessitate a purposeful dialogue between teachers from both educational settings. Teachers across school settings may be able to work together to build upon effective elementary school practices while preparing middle school students for the responsibilities that come with greater autonomy in the middle school setting.

Implications of the study for professional practices are worth consideration for educators in urban settings where it has been shown that urban students might experience the challenges of the transition from elementary to middle school differently (Simmons, Black & Zhou, 1991). As findings revealed, urban middle school adolescents transition into the new setting with the challenges of adolescence compounded by specific issues related to their urban neighborhood and school settings. Pedagogical practice must include an awareness of the additional stresses that students experience in low-income
urban environments so that the negative impact of stressors on student learning can be minimized. As identified by study participants, classroom dynamics and pedagogical practices are two critical areas that educators can address immediately as one piece of the solution.

Implications for Teacher Education

Study findings revealed that teachers are highly influential in students' ability to engage in learning. This has several implications for teacher education programs. Findings imply that teachers will be much more likely to bring learning to students if they are able to surround students with a positive learning environment. In addition to curriculum and content area expertise, teacher education programs must provide instruction on the affective aspects of the learning experience. If students' preferences and interests are ignored; and if teachers are ineffective in building meaningful relationships with their students, student reactions, interactions, and responses will be less likely to contribute to a positive learning environment.

Based on research and study findings, there is a need for teacher education programs to focus on the affective domain as intently as they emphasize the cognitive aspects of teaching and learning. For learning to occur, teachers of middle school students need to understand the developmental stage and learning needs of the urban middle school adolescent. Such understandings applied to instructional planning can improve classroom dynamics and increase the effectiveness of teacher pedagogical practice. Teacher education programs for prospective urban educators need to include strategies for effective student-teacher and student-student relationship building; classroom management techniques that understand the nature of the adolescent and
respect the diversity of all learners; tools for increasing student adolescent engagement in learning; models for instructional lesson planning that incorporate student engagement exercises as well as content knowledge; and principles of safe, positive learning environments for adolescent learners.

Counselor education programs must prepare prospective counselors to understand the needs of middle school students in order to be able to anticipate and address students' issues in a timely fashion and prevent negative consequences associated with the transition experience. Counselor education programs might also consider immersing its counseling candidates in research literature related to the middle school transition so that counselors may become more focused on interventions for supporting student academic achievement needs prior to and during student crises. Counselor training is needed in the development of school guidance curricula designed to support adolescent learners' needs. Prospective middle school counselors' can also benefit from training on the establishment of support systems to enhance student learning potential. These might include advisories, safe and caring classroom workshops, and prevention/intervention strategies for struggling learners.

According to research, urban students come to the transition experience with multiple risks factors and the transition to middle school can be especially difficult for poor minority students. Stresses in the school environment can interact with the changes in the new school structure (Seidman, et al., 1994) and result in more challenges for urban adolescents than for their suburban counterparts. As participants' responses indicate, these factors can surface as safety concerns, low teacher expectations, and poorly prepared classrooms in an environment that lacks adult support. Additional
implications become apparent for urban middle school educators and counselors. Teachers and counselors in urban settings must be well-informed of the circumstances that prevail for their students in order to address them appropriately. Teacher and counselor education programs could include on-site training with students in urban middle school settings as a component of the certification requirements and work placement criteria. More intensive hands-on training can better prepare urban educators for the nature of the work ahead, and may indicate to some that the middle school setting is not a good fit.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select urban seventh grade participants. A study of suburban, rural, special education, or non-native speakers of English, for example, may have yielded different results reflective of those environments or personal challenges. This study, however, was mainly interested in the specific learning challenges of urban adolescent students during the transition to and first year in middle school.

Participants had completed their first year of middle school and were aware of their low academic standing at the completion of the first year of middle school. Findings from this study may not be generalizable to populations of transitioning adolescents who are average or high performing students. Such a study might yield findings less related to pedagogy, less concerned about safety, and more concerned about a different set of issues prevalent in that school environment. This study, however, sought to identify specific characteristics of urban middle schools that influence student learning.
Findings from this study will not be relevant where systems and structures identified as issues for the urban participants in this study context are not existent in another study context. This could be remedied through an investigation of systems and structures that change for middle school students as they leave elementary school in the given school district with that population of adolescents.

Finally, findings from this study were primarily derived from data collected in three focus group settings. A study based on a larger population of students from each school setting, or inclusive of additional school sites within the same district, may have yielded different or additional findings.

**Recommendations**

Study participants perceive the transition into middle school to be especially difficult as they encounter new systems; navigate unfamiliar settings; attempt to learn in frustrating learning environments; and seek support for a variety of personal and academic issues. These findings confirm previous studies which have attested to the difficult nature of the transition experience on middle school learners (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, et al., 1993; Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Christie, Jolivette and Nelson, 2007).

Given the insight gained from participants in this study, practitioners in individual school districts are encouraged to replicate the study within their individual school districts. Specific findings can be used to inform middle school transition programs and classroom teaching practices, to identify areas of challenge associated with changes between elementary and middle school, and to develop improved systems of guidance and support for middle school learners. It is recommended that further studies focus on
urban populations that struggle with declining student achievement at the middle grades. Such studies are recommended for the contributions they can make for improving education for children whose development has been neglected in the past (Simmons, Black & Zhou, 1991) and where there is little research pertinent to transition experiences from elementary to middle school in urban settings (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Findings related to the unique challenges of urban adolescents suggest that there needs to be further research that contributes to understanding how individual and collective factors in urban environments impact student learning. Since research has shown that the same students perform better academically at the elementary level before they transition into middle school, studies are needed to determine how students manage the same environmental and personal issues in the elementary school setting where academics achievement outcomes have been shown to be less concerning.

As a result of study findings related to the importance of teachers and counselors, further research is recommended to investigate various models of teacher and counselor education/training programs to test and compare program elements for effectiveness on student outcomes in the middle grades. Research of this kind would have additional implications for teacher and counselor preparation.

Research has shown that middle school transition programs are a positive response to the academic, procedural, and social aspects of the middle school transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004). In recent years, more and more middle schools are developing transition programs to address the particular needs of their students (Cognato, 1999; Thompson & Prisbell, 1999). Further studies are needed to examine these programs and evaluate their effectiveness in relation to the quality of the transition experience and
subsequent academic achievement. In light of the number of challenges urban adolescents face, as revealed through this study and indicated in the literature, further research on transition programs is critical. Research is needed to investigate the types of transition programs that exist for urban adolescents to identify elements and results of effective transition programs for urban middle school students. Longitudinal studies are also needed to determine if transition programs have a long-term impact on academic achievement.

Additionally, further research is recommended to compare the academic achievement outcomes or grade point averages of first year middle school students who attended, as opposed to those who did not attend, a middle school transition program. This type of study could be further expanded to include a comparison of transition program results on the academic achievement of students differentiated by gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

Amid the stresses of early adolescence, entry into middle school can be especially troubling (Turning Points 2000, 2000). In fact, the middle school transition has been shown to have a negative effect on students’ academic functioning, particularly when the transition occurs between sixth and seventh grades (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Gronna, 1998; Diemert, 1992; Peterson & Crockett, 1985; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983). Moreover, research has contended that urban youth enter middle school with multiple risks facing them, making this early adolescent transition especially difficult for poor minority youth (Seidman, et al., 1994).
The purpose of this study was to examine how urban adolescent students characterize the transition experience and first year in middle school. The study investigated what students specifically perceive to be the negative influences impacting learning as they transitioned into and engaged in the first year of middle school.

This study was conducted in three middle school settings within a large urban district. Using purposeful sampling, eight participants (n = 24), having just completed the first year of middle school as seventh graders, were selected from each of three urban research sites to form three focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of male and female students of African American, Hispanic and Caucasian descent. Participants’ final grade point averages for their first year of middle school ranged from 0.00 to 3.83, of which seventeen students had a failing final grade point average for the school year. None of the students had met the benchmark for the English Language Arts and/or Mathematics Assessment for New York State for the current school year. Student performance on the state assessment was relevant in that the study was interested in students whose academic needs were not being met in the first year of middle school. Since the proposed study was interested in student perception data of school experiences, each student participant was required to have maintained an attendance rate of at least 75% for the seventh grade school year. The researcher was interested in students who spent enough time in school to be able to make appropriate judgments and express meaningful perspectives about the school environment.

The primary method of data collection for this study was through three focus group interview sessions. In order to find common themes related to the influences of the transition and first year of middle school on urban students’ learning across the school
sites, several data sources were used. These included pre-existing data from the three sites; a card pile sort task activity; focus group interviews; field notes; and memos.

Triangulation of the data revealed three themes. Themes identified were reflective of the common negative influences on learning found by students across study sites. The themes that emerged as barriers to learning are: 1) Discomforts as Distractions to Learning; 2) Classroom Dynamics and Pedagogical Practices that Disenfranchise Students; and 3) Failure of Counselors as Advocates of Learners.

Results from the research suggest that learning challenges for urban adolescent middle school students occur during three phases of the transition experience. The phases correspond sequentially to the themes identified. The issues revealed through the first theme, Discomforts as Distractions to Learning, occur in the early transition period, or transition phase as students prepare to transition or as they engage in the first experiences in the new setting. Phase II, the adjustment phase, is characterized as a period in which students begin to engage more fully in the middle school setting. At this point during the transition into middle school, participants experience learning issues related to the second theme, associating urban middle school classroom dynamics and pedagogical practices as causes of disenfranchisement from learning. The adjustment phase, which participants characterize as a time in which they expect to gain a sense of belonging, presents challenges in the learning environment that frustrate learners and deter them from academic interests. As students move further away from learning, they may enter the third phase of the transition experience, the crisis phases. This is a time when students find themselves at a point in which support is critical. However, as was identified through the third theme, participants report that they are not provided support, particularly from
school counselors, who they expect to save them, but who often fail them as advocates of learners.

This study offers insights specific to middle school issues impacting the learning of transitioning urban adolescents. Results are presented in a conceptual model outlining the learning challenges urban middle school students experience episodically throughout the transition experience, suggesting that issues impacting learning begin early and continue through the first year of middle school. Failure to identify and address issues as they occur weaken students' chances of making adequate academic progress at the middle school level of their education.

Based on the findings of this study, the following can be learned from urban students regarding their transition into and first year of middle school. Learning is negatively impacted when circumstances of the transition create stress. Early stressors create discomforts as a result of changes relevant to the middle school experience. Middle school adolescents are concerned about their unfamiliarity with new systems; are anxious about dealing with situations that may be unsafe; and become fearfully conscious of the implications of making the transition in the absence of friends. Additional stressors complicate learning possibilities as urban students attempt to learn in classrooms that are unsupportive, chaotic, disrespectful, and unfavorable to their learning styles, and misaligned with their developmental nature. Furthermore, middle school students are not afforded opportunities to work through issues with the support of a trusted adult that might provide counseling support as prevention to subsequent failure.

Study findings reveal that systemic issues impacting students' learning prevail and require the attention of urban school district leaders, middle school administrators,
teachers, and counselors. Implications contribute to the professional practice of school district administrators, middle school leaders, teachers, and counselors. School district administrators leading departments associated with systems that change for students between the elementary and middle school settings need to be aware of changes imposed on students and the impact of those changes on students’ ability to enter the middle school setting as eager learners, not uncomfortable and distracted by the changes. This will require new perspectives for those working in departments of transportation, safety and security, and student placement and scheduling.

Implications for the professional practices of middle school leadership include review of the current school scheduling process and the expertise of the school registrar. Improvements should be made where applicable to place students appropriately into classes prior to arrival to middle school and to allow new entrants to comprehend scheduling documents and navigate the way from class to class. Middle school administrators’ work in relation to school safety and security needs to include the building of peer relationships, modeling of appropriate behavior, and the creation of school supports that provide safe havens and alternatives to violence. This might include a revision of the role of school security officers to include responsibilities as prevention agents. Middle school administrators will also benefit students by increasing the attention that the school places on teacher-student, counselor-student, and teacher-counselor relations as part of building a more respectful, learning-centered environment.

The study has several implications for the professional practices of teachers and counselors. Middle school educators must place as high a priority on the needs and interests of the adolescent learner as they place on course content objectives and learning
standards. This will require a shift from subject focus to learner focus. Classrooms that inspire adolescent learners through student-centered physical environments will welcome students as respected and capable learners. Interactions within the classroom that encourage learners to participate in challenging and interesting ways establish settings that excite rather than bore adolescent learners. Teacher professional development offerings focused on increasing capacity in these areas is essential.

Teachers and counselors can better serve the learning needs of students if they collaborate to educate and support middle school students. Close monitoring of student progress, personalized learning approaches, and counseling services should be the work of teachers and counselors throughout all of the phases of the transition experience. This will necessitate taking extra steps to stay abreast of students’ academic standings and to confer with students on a regular basis to identify and address issues that may prevent student acquisition of the highest academic outcomes. The role of middle school counselors must include one of educators, serving students’ needs and interests through educational forums within classrooms and after school. The urban middle school teacher’s role will need to coincide with the counselor’s role as both collaborate to provide a safe, emotionally stable, supportive, student-centered, and responsive learning environment.

These implications expand to teacher and counselor education programs which must prepare middle school professionals in ways that will yield positive results for students. University, college, and training programs will need to include components specific to educating urban adolescents and inclusive of course topics specific to the needs of urban adolescents. Additional coursework must be required to insure that as
prospective teachers and counselors, they are prepared for the field with a research-based awareness of urban education, urban environments, and the nature of the urban adolescent. Practical applications of these understandings will be critical. Therefore, course requirements for individuals interested in working in urban settings must include field practice that is more than observation-based or short-term student teaching at the end of coursework. The current state of affairs in American urban middle schools is much too serious to neglect the extra steps that may be required to increase the likelihood that potential educators and counselors will be able to achieve high results with urban adolescent students.

Implications of the findings fill a void in existing knowledge on the impact of the middle school transition on adolescent learners. Findings suggest that there are specific issues impacting transitioning students in urban settings that may inform the actions of middle school educators interested in designing effective transition programs for urban middle school entrants. Additionally, findings provide new insights as to the nature of the middle school transition phenomenon, indicating that the transition period presents challenges incrementally during three phases of experience from entry to completion of the first year of middle school. These findings offer insights related to the nature and duration of the transition experience that may have implications for supporting student learning in more appropriately focused and time-sensitive ways.

The research study also contributed to professional practices of middle school educators to suggest the value of student feedback and participation in the development and implementation of middle school transition programs and middle school practices. The perceptions of learners hold wisdom for those who seek to improve the outcomes of
students at the middle school level. Furthermore, these observations yield powerful insights for practitioners and college preparation programs for teachers and counselors.

Recommendations for future research on urban adolescents’ transition to middle school include studies that: a) replicate the present study in other urban settings; b) investigate the impact of individual and collective factors existing in urban environments as they influence student learning; c) examine the practices implemented in existing urban middle school transition programs for their immediate and long-term effects on student learning; and d) investigate teacher and counselor education programs to identify elements pertinent to achieving high academic outcomes with urban middle school adolescent learners.

In conclusion, investigations to improve the experiences of transitioning adolescents, particularly those in urban middle school settings continue to be relevant and necessary. To date, middle level education has not been successful in reversing the declining academic performance gap that has been historically evident with ten to fourteen year old students. School district leaders, middle school administrators, and developers of teacher and counselor education programs must come together to improve systems, educational environments, teaching practices, and supports that impact the learning potential of transitioning middle school students. Based on the findings of this study, however, students must also be an esteemed partner in this quest for excellence in middle level education.
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Appendix A

Parent/Participant Consent Form

St. John Fisher College

PARENT PERMISSION FORM (For use with minors)

Title of study: Adolescents’ Perceptions of the Transition into Middle School

Name of researcher: Concetta L. Lucchese 585-797-8293

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jeannine Dingus-Eason Phone for further information: 585-385-8002

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study is to examine adolescent seventh grade students’ perceptions of their transition and first year experiences in an urban middle school setting. The research aims to contribute to a growing body of research promoting the inclusion of student voice in education reform in order to provide a basis for the development of more effective educational practices and programming for adolescent students making the transition from elementary to middle school.

Approval of study: This study has not been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Place of study: Rochester City School District

Length of participation: June 2009

Potential Risks: There are no expected risks to participating in this study. Participant confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained at all times. All information provided by participants will be maintained in a secure location.

Potential Benefits: The results of this study may provide scholars and educators with better understandings for educating adolescent learners. The study findings may contribute to existing knowledge on factors contributing to the development of effective transition and middle school programs for students transitioning from the elementary to middle level education.
Method of protecting confidentiality/privacy: Participants’ given names will be concealed and replaced with numbers to protect privacy and confidentiality. Cards used by participants in the pile sort task will be color-coded and matched to participants’ numbers for analysis. All raw data will be stored and locked in the researcher’s office. No personal identifying information will be used in the dissertation, transcript, field notes, or in any subsequent publication.

Your rights: As a parent/guardian of a research participant, you have a right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw your child’s participation at any time without penalty.
3. Allow your child to refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of this study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print Name (Participant) ____________________ Signature __________ Date __________

Consent for a minor child:

I, the parent or guardian of ____________________________________________, a minor, ________ years of age, consent to his/her participation in the above named study. I have received a copy of this form.

Print name (Parent) ____________________ Signature __________ Date __________

Print name (Investigator) ____________________ Signature __________ Date __________

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate approvals.
Appendix B

Pre-existing Data Source

English Language Arts Midterm Exam
Grade 7
January, 2008
PART TWO:
THINKING THROUGH WRITING

SECTION TWO: ESSAY WRITING

DIRECTIONS: Across the country, there is serious concern about current graduation rates. Educational leaders, business leaders, politicians, principals, teachers, parents and the American public are trying to come up with solutions to keep young people in school. Adults have tried to solve the problem, but you are closest to this situation. As a seventh grader, at the beginning of your journey to becoming a high school graduate, you can provide valuable information from your own experiences this year. What can you tell adults, including the principal and teachers in your school, about how to help you have a more successful high school experience and a better chance of graduating?

Write an essay in which you reflect back on the experiences you have had this year and make suggestions about what you believe would have helped you be more prepared and more likely to do your best as you began your high school experience. Follow the outline in the bullets below to develop your essay.

Be sure to:

- Write an engaging introduction in which you describe the national drop out issue and its importance to your future.
- Share what you believe would have helped you be more prepared and more likely to do your best as you began your high school experience.
- Conclude by offering at least one idea or suggestion to your principal about something that would have been tremendously helpful to you this year and that will be most helpful to the students who will enter seventh grade next year if your suggestion is used.
Appendix C

Card Pile Sort Task Topics

1. Academic Support
2. Classmates
3. Classroom Environment
4. Counselor
5. Curriculum
6. Friends
7. Knowing What to Expect
8. Interesting Classes
9. Older Students
10. School Organization
11. School Safety
12. Special Programs
13. Sports
14. Supportive Adults
15. Teachers
Appendix D

Interview Protocol: Student Focus Group Interview Questions

Date:

Site:

Open-Ended Starter Questions for Student Participants

1. Tell me about your feelings and experiences as you were first transitioning into 7th grade from elementary school?

2. What could have been done to give you a better start as a learner in the new setting?

3. What have been your best experiences in this first year of middle school?

4. What have been your worst experiences in this first year of middle school?

5. Tell me how your school helps students do their best academically?

6. Tell me what aspects of your school keep students from being able to do their best academically?

7. What aspects of school do you think are most important for being able to learn?

8. What suggestions do you have for improving your school so that students will want to come to school and learn?

9. Describe the characteristics of a perfect middle school for today’s students who want to be successful in middle and high school?

10. Is there anything else you would like principals, teachers, or counselors to know about how to make school a better place for you to learn and be successful?