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INTERVENTION STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT
TRANSITIONS TO HIGH SCHOOL: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF BEST
PRACTICES IDENTIFIED BY MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Alabama/University of Alabama at
Birmingham in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA
2017

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INTERVENTION STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT TRANSITIONS TO HIGH SCHOOL: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED BY MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

LARRY PARKER HAYNES

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

Adolescent students experience many challenges as they navigate their way through psychological, physiological, and emotional transformations with the onset of puberty (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). Because the majority of the research investigates the transition from elementary to middle school, more research is necessary in regard to how middle school and high school environments can reinforce needs of students all the way through the middle-school-to-high-school transition (Caskey, 2011; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). The purpose of this grounded theory study was to examine middle school principals' practices and behaviors in transitioning students from middle-school-to-high-school and to create a theory of best practices for supporting a smooth transition for students from middle to high school. The central research question was "How do middle school principals in selected schools in Alabama describe best practices in implementing transition activities that nurture and acclimatize students while preparing them for the challenges they will encounter at the high school level?"

For the research study, I incorporated a qualitative, grounded theory approach with 11 successful, veteran middle school principals of high performing, suburban middle schools. Each principal participated in semi-structured interviews. The participating principals indicated a high degree of consensus in their philosophies on challenging, yet supporting and preparing students throughout their journey from middle school to high

school. Participating principals noted the importance of maintaining high expectations while providing students with continuous nurturing, support, and opportunities to develop into responsible and self-sufficient young adults. These principals built positive school environments through the promotion of a shared vision based upon regular collaboration among all stakeholders, which included teachers, parents, and students. Participating principals also affirmed the middle school concept's practice of exposing students to rigorous and engaging academic classes, a variety of career exploration and elective course offerings interwoven with opportunities to teach positive character, soft skills, and self-advocacy. Over half the schools incorporated the middle school procedure of interdisciplinary teaming.

These findings reaffirm the benefits of student-centered schools with effective administrators and teachers who seek continuous improvement, practice professional collaboration, implement student-centered programs/interventions, and make decisions based upon the best interest of the students.

Keywords: middle-school-to-high-school transitions, middle school concept, student-centered activities, interdisciplinary teaming, grounded theory, best interest of students

DEDICATION

This research dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my parents, Fred and Jeanette Haynes. My doctoral journey would have never started without the lifelong love, support, and encouragement they always provided. They instilled in me the value of education, living my life in service to the Lord, and always doing my best. Less than a year ago, prior to her passing, Mom said she would know when I finished this journey, and I am sure she and Dad are smiling in Heaven.

I also dedicate this research to the memory of my former colleague, mentor, friend, and “Hall of Fame” teacher, Miss Susie DeMent. My first year of teaching was Susie’s 50th. We spent 15 memorable years working together at Montevallo High School. Her philosophy of teaching, commitment to continuous improvement and excellence, and desire to do everything in the best interest of the students personifies the results of my research.

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To my wife, Samara Haynes – Thank you for believing in me and for always being there with your unconditional love, support, and encouragement. I could not have completed this stage of my educational journey without you.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Moving into a new school not only boosts anticipation and excitement, but transitioning to a new campus also presents challenges for students of all ages. Among obstacles encountered with the transition, students must familiarize themselves with new policies and procedures and deal with the uncertainty of learning their way around a different and traditionally larger facility. Taking new academic subjects, changing curriculum standards, getting accustomed to the methods of six to eight new teachers, and attending classes with older students, in addition to possibilities of encountering bullies, add to the concerns. Along with those distractions, students with special needs, learning disabilities, or lack of support from home face additional risk factors that could potentially contribute to failure at the next level (Letrello & Miles, 2003).

Researchers have shown that students experience achievement losses when they move from one campus to another (Alspaugh, 1999; Benner, 2011). Alspaugh (1999) acknowledged the relationship between the number of school-to-school transitions and the percentage of students who end up dropping out of high school. In regard to academic performance, other researchers confirmed that during the transition from middle-school-to-high-school, students had an overall decline in grades, particularly during the first year of transition (Benner, 2011; Smith, 2005).

Although physical maturity takes place earlier than in preceding generations (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003), children continue to experience developmental obstacles. As children move into early adolescence they need adult

supervision, guidance, and nurturing more than any other time in order to help them maintain the enthusiasm and hope that typically characterize young people. Adolescents experience numerous psychological, physiological, cognitive, biological, and emotional transformations with the commencement of puberty (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). Evidence has shown that the middle school experience has a direct correlation with continued success at the high school level and beyond (Wormeli, 2011). It is imperative that school leaders remain highly involved in providing a variety of programs to equip middle school aged adolescents to handle challenges constructively during their middle school and early high school years. As a result of this involvement, these students will be more prepared to respond positively to obstacles they encounter later in life.

Problem Statement

In addition to encountering the challenges of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, adolescents generally face two educational transitions—from elementary-school-to-middle-school and from middle-school-to-high-school (Goodwin, Mrug, Borch, & Cillessen, 2012). The apprehension of changing school environments is further complicated by additional changes such as puberty, emotional and social change, the emergent significance of peer affiliations, and the development of higher order reasoning skills (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Because the majority of research explores the transition from elementary schools to middle or junior high school settings, there appears to be a gap in the empirical research literature regarding the process of transitioning students from middle schools to high schools (Uvaas & McKeivitt, 2013). Caskey (2011) elaborated that more research is warranted in regard to how middle school and high school environments support needs of

students throughout the middle-to-high-school transition. Therefore, an examination of the best practices utilized by middle school leaders to provide successful transitional programming throughout the middle school years can be a key ingredient to helping students achieve academic and social success at the high school level.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this grounded theory study was to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by veteran middle school principals and to create a theoretical model to clarify the process. As a result of this study, school leaders may gain insight into how they can collaboratively work with students, parents, faculty, and colleagues to establish successful transitioning programs at the middle school level that challenge, nurture, and prepare students for the experiences and expectations they will encounter in high school and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

The transitional time between childhood and adulthood is known as adolescence (Smith, 1997). With exception to infancy, adolescence marks a period of life regarded as the most rapid and diverse developmental stage of a person's life (Pruitt, 2000). As their lives progress through these years, adolescents experience significant growth and change, which can lead to emotional inconsistencies (Letrello & Miles, 2003). In spite of the numerous resources and self-help books developed to assist parents and educators who work closely with young people, adolescents encounter personal and developmental obstacles for which no distinct solution exists (Abell, Feldwisch & Smith, 2006). Furthermore, during their educational experience, adolescents generally face two

transitions—from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school (Goodwin et al., 2012).

While discussing a hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) said people are motivated to fulfill basic needs before moving on to more advanced needs. Defined as the quest of reaching one's full potential and being connected with the world, from the basic to the highest level, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) includes the following:

- 1) Physiological – These include breathing, sleep, water, and food.
- 2) Safety/Security – These are made up of home, medical, job, and financial.
- 3) Emotional/Social – These comprise friends, family, and belonging.
- 4) Esteem – These consist of self-respect, achievement, attention, recognition, and reputation.
- 5) Self-Actualization – These incorporate truth, wisdom, justice, morality, and lack of prejudice.

Acknowledging that adolescents carry with them a multitude of unique needs, I adopted Maslow's Theory of a Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding conceptual framework for this study, specifically focusing on the Emotional/Social aspect of the hierarchy as it relates to middle school students transitioning to high school.

Research Questions

The central research question for the study was as follows: How do middle school principals in selected schools in Central Alabama describe best practices in implementing transition activities that nurture and acclimatize students while preparing them for the experiences and challenges they will encounter at the high school level? Sub-questions for the study were as follows:

- 1) How do middle school principals organize staff members in order to better transition students from middle school to high school?
- 2) What types of student-centered activities do principals plan and implement to successfully transition students from middle school to high school?
- 3) What types of school-to-school articulation activities take place to ensure middle school to high school success?
- 4) How do principals encourage parental involvement during the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school?

In addition to the sub-questions, I also asked probing questions during the interviews in order to clarify responses or obtain further information from the study participants.

Principals were provided the opportunity to share documents or resources utilized for transitioning activities.

Significance of the Study

As this grounded theory study was conducted, the term transition was used to describe the act of moving students from one school setting to the next and—on a smaller scale—from one grade level to the next. In addition to updating and adding to the results of previous research, the study revealed strategies and best practices implemented by middle school principals in their efforts to provide meaningful and supportive transitioning experiences for students. The study further enhanced previous research by verifying the impact of the middle school concept. The perceptions shared by participants provided additional insight into how educational leaders can improve transitioning of students.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations for the study were inherent in the fact that this was a qualitative study. As the researcher, I was the sole instrument for data collection and analysis and generalizations to a wider population were not possible. Delimitations included the fact that the study focused only on the best practices of a selected number of successful suburban middle school principals. This study does not include any rural areas, nor does the study include many schools that are not relatively homogeneous in wealth and ethnicity. As a result, data were generalized to the group being studied. An additional delimitation existed because my research focused only on middle school principals and did not include talking to high school principals. This research could have provided different results if analyzed from the perspectives of principals at the high school level.

Assumptions

As Creswell (2013) rationalized, whether they realize it or not, all individuals are instilled with particular viewpoints and assumptions to their studies. Principles are instilled throughout the process of one's life and educational journey. As an experienced high school and middle school educator, I brought certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions into this study. I consistently examine ways to provide effective transitional programming that prepares students for their experiences in high school and beyond in a challenging, yet supportive and nurturing environment. The processes incorporated into this research were value laden (axiology) and obliged me to identify my personal biases. As a researcher, I assumed that participants would honestly and accurately reflect upon and report their practices and experiences during the interviews. Furthermore, I assumed

that participants would be enthusiastic, cooperative, and informative about their experiences.

Research Design

In order to best document the philosophies, viewpoints, and best practices of school leaders participating in the study, I used qualitative research methods. According to Hatch (2002), qualitative research “seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it” (p. 7). Qualitative research reveals the personal experiences of actual participants in settings where they live their everyday lives (Hatch, 2002). According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research provides a method for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Further, this study was grounded theory in nature.

Creswell (2013) stated the following about grounded theory:

The intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory...for a process or an action. Participants in the study would all have experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research. (p. 83)

The research methods I employed involved asking study participants to respond to questions I posed to them, in semi-structured interviews, in order to explore strategies these principals used to support students as students transition from middle school to high school. The interviews took place in each participating administrator’s office or other setting in accordance to the desires of the participant. Once recorded interviews were transcribed, I incorporated member checking by sending the transcribed interviews to the respective school administrator to assure accuracy (Creswell, 2013). Integrating a

grounded theory approach, I examined transcripts looking for common words or phrases that were repeatedly mentioned using open and axial coding procedures. I coded transcripts by themes using NVivo 10 data analysis software and pattern coding to organize categories, sub-categories, and conceptual labels. This enabled me to build evidence and make interpretations in regard to the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2007).

Adapting the research philosophies of Yin (2011), I conducted the qualitative interviews under the following parameters:

- 1) The actual interviews were not completely scripted. I possessed a set of general questions, but the actual questions differed in accordance to the context and setting of the interview.
- 2) As a qualitative researcher, I was flexible in the way each interview was conducted. For example, each interview was conducted in a conversational mode and the essence of the interview led to a closer social relationship with each participant.
- 3) The most effective questions in a qualitative interview are open-ended. Each participant was provided with an opportunity to elaborate in his or her own words. (p. 134)

After participant viewpoints were gathered through the interview process, and interpretation of the data was documented, study results will provide school leaders with new insights and an emergent grounded theory regarding principal perspectives of best practices being used to successfully support the transition of students through middle school and better equip them for the expectations of high school.

Definition of Terms

Significant terms included in the study are as follows:

Adolescent: An adolescent is an individual between the ages of 10-18, depending on developmental stages attained.

Young Adolescent: A young adolescent is an individual between the ages of 10-15.

Grounded Theory: Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Best practices/responsive practices: Responsive Practices are those most commonly implemented in middle schools that directly support the developmental needs of adolescents (MacIver & Epstein, 1991). Since this study identifies the most effective responsive practices, the term best practices will be used to identify the most effective responsive practices.

Interdisciplinary team: An interdisciplinary team is comprised of teachers whereas each teacher specializes in a different core content area (i.e., English Language Arts, math, science, social studies) and share a common group of students.

Middle School: Middle Schools typically serve students from grades 6-8, but can also include grade 9.

Middle School Concept: The Middle School Concept is a structure and philosophy of effective middle level practices based upon the needs of adolescents.

Professional Learning Community (PLC): A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is comprised of a group of teachers from the same content and grade level who meet collaboratively to plan lessons and common assessments, review student data, and

focus on ways to promote student growth through the process of inquiry, problem solving, and reflection on current classroom practices.

Purposeful Sampling: Purposeful sampling represents how the researcher intentionally selected participants for the purpose of gathering meaningful information (Creswell, 2013).

School Climate: School climate refers to the school's effects on students, including teaching practices, diversity, and the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

School Culture: School culture refers to the way teachers and other staff members work together and the set of beliefs, values, and assumptions they share. A positive school climate and school culture promotes students' ability to learn.

Soft Skills: Soft skills are personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people.

Qualitative Research: Qualitative research focuses on an inductive reasoning process whereby ideas emerge based on common daily occurrences in people's lives (Yin, 2011).

Transition: The term transition describes the act of moving students from one school setting to the next and—on a smaller scale—from one grade level to the next.

Summary

Results of this study have been divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 presented the introduction of the study, which included the central research question and sub-questions. The significance of the study, research design, terms and definitions, and organization of the study were also included in the first chapter. Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive

review of the literature related to the transitioning of students, along with practices and methods utilized to support the process. Chapter 3 provides a description of the grounded theory research design I used to conduct my qualitative study and the procedures that were used to facilitate the study. Chapter 4 answers the research questions as a result of the data collected from the research process. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the implications of the study and makes recommendations for future practices.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Efforts to improve how schools meet the needs of students have been ongoing since the beginning of the 20th century. However, despite the initial success of junior high schools in the 1940s and 1950s, it was not until educators acknowledged the importance of combining high expectations and engaging lessons with nurturing and programs of support that the middle school philosophy began to become the predominate school pattern in the 1980s and 1990s. This chapter discusses the needs of adolescent students and the importance of meeting basic needs before higher level learning opportunities can take place. The review of the literature identifies obstacles faced by adolescent students and how strong middle level leaders can provide the necessary supports to meet the needs of their students and help them experience success in high school and beyond.

According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2003), successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes the following: (1) Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so; (2) Courageous, collaborative leadership; (3) A shared vision that guides decisions; (4) An inviting, supportive, and safe environment; (5) High expectations for every member of the learning community; (6) Students and teachers engaged in active learning; (7) An adult advocate for every student; and (8) School-initiated family and community partnerships. (p. 7)

NMSA (2003) further stated that successful schools need to provide adolescents with the following opportunities to support students in making the transition from the elementary to secondary levels: (1) A relevant curriculum that is thought-provoking, integrative, and exploratory; (2) A variety of teaching and learning approaches that respond to their diversity; (3) Assessment and evaluation methods that encourage quality learning; (4) Organizational arrangements that support significant relationships and learning; (5) School-wide endeavors and policies that promote health, wellness, and safety; and (6) Comprehensive counseling and support services.

Theoretical Frame

Adolescence is the transitional time between childhood and adulthood where numerous developmental changes take place (Goodwin et al., 2011). Along with their typical psychological needs, adolescents possess distinctive evolving necessities that should be addressed in the school environment (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). In spite of the numerous resources available to guide parents and educators who interact regularly with young people, adolescents encounter personal and developmental obstacles for which no distinct solution exists (Abell et al., 2006). As a result of these changes, it is important for secondary school leaders to look for available methods to promote a more student-friendly, responsive, and nurturing secondary school environment (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

In reference to a hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) said people are inspired to fulfill basic needs before moving on to more advanced needs. Defined as the quest of reaching one's full potential and being connected with the world, from the basic to the highest level, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) includes the following:

- 1) Physiological – These include breathing, sleep, water, food, shelter, warmth, and sleep.
- 2) Safety/Security – These are made up of home, medical, job, security, and financial.
- 3) Emotional/Social – These comprise friends, family, love, and belonging.
- 4) Esteem – These consist of self-respect, achievement, attention, recognition, and reputation.
- 5) Self-Actualization – These incorporate truth, wisdom, justice, morality, and lack of prejudice.

It is significant to document that Maslow (1943) extended this original five stage model to include both cognitive and aesthetic needs (1970a) prior to the level of self-actualization. In addition, beyond self-actualization at the top of the hierarchy, Maslow (1970b) inserted transcendence needs. According to McLeod (2007), the three expansions to the hierarchy of needs include the following:

- 6) Cognitive needs – These include knowledge, meaning, exploring, and understanding
- 7) Aesthetic needs – These involve appreciation, order, beauty, and balance.
- 8) Self-transcendence – These consist of the process of helping others find self-fulfillment and realizing their potential.

Acknowledging that adolescents carry with them a multitude of unique needs that must be addressed through a variety of methods, I adopted Maslow's Theory of a Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding conceptual framework for this study, specifically focusing on the Emotional/Social aspect of the hierarchy as it relates to middle school

students transitioning to high school. Maslow acknowledged that all people possess needs that are the foundation of their motivational structure. According to Maslow (1943), belonging to or being part of a group is an example of the fulfillment of man's basic desire to belong. As the lower levels of the hierarchy are met, the higher-order needs will take over as motivators. Comparing Maslow's hierarchy to the structure and support system of a middle level school, especially when effective transitioning practices enhance the students' physiological, safety/security, and emotional/social levels of need, the confidence of the adolescents in the school are increased to the level that higher-order needs take over.

Rationale for Transitioning Programs

Schools that do not provide supportive transitioning programs across grade levels may experience a loss in student achievement in addition to lower graduation rates. Alspaugh (1998) examined the significance of achievement loss associated with school-to-school transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle-school-to-high-school. Citing that prior academic achievement is a reliable predictor of future academic success, Smith (2006) affirmed that a student's achievement loss that occurred during the middle school to high school transition is associated with attrition or lack of success encountered by one during his or her freshmen year of college. Alspaugh (1998) noted previous research that showed declines in student self-esteem and self-perception associated with moving from one school setting to another. Additional research by Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996) cautioned that a difficult transition from eighth grade to ninth grade has been associated with increased behavior problems.

The Impact of Achievement Loss on Dropout Rates

Referring to previous studies, Alspaugh (1998) speculated that the loss of self-esteem and self-perception associated with changing school settings could have been a factor in the increased dropout rates. The study further revealed that students who attended schools with larger student populations were more likely to drop out of school than students who were enrolled in a smaller school. Alspaugh (1998) contended that the results of this study were “consistent with the findings of other researchers in that the instability and adjustments required of students in school transitions were associated with educational outcomes” (p. 25). Rice (2001) examined how the middle school-to-high school-transition negatively affected student performance in math and science classes. Rice stated that administrators and teachers need to provide clear expectations and continuous interventions for transitioning students. Rice further noted the importance of more parental involvement, a need to establish a stronger sense of community and belonging at the high school setting. Smith (1997) added that the incorporation of transitional programs builds confidence and boosts student achievement at the high school level. Furthermore, the movement from middle- school-to-high-school not only affects general education students, but students with learning disabilities experience even more challenges (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Students with learning disabilities revealed that they were not prepared for the demands of changing classes, block scheduling, and the lack of academic assistance from both teachers and peers.

Positive and Negative Perspectives from Stakeholders

Because the early adolescent years often involve moving from self-contained elementary schools to departmentalized middle or high schools, Akos and Galassi (2004)

developed questionnaires for students in sixth and ninth grade, along with separate questionnaires for parents and teachers at each transitioning grade level in order to explore how students, parents, and teachers viewed school transitions at both middle school and high school levels. The authors discussed how the elementary to middle/junior high school transition often presents a variety of challenges to adolescents ranging from lowered self-esteem to increased psychological distress. The authors added that during their transition to high school, some students experience negative consequences such as achievement loss, dropping out, and increased stress.

More Dialogue Needed Among Stakeholders

In response to their findings, Akos and Galassi (2004) acknowledged that more discussions about middle school need to be held with students and parents prior to the transition, with specific emphasis on the positive aspects of the school at the next level. The authors added that middle school students need further information and insight about the positive benefits of transitioning to high school. Students, parents, and teachers at both levels agreed on the importance of discussing the myths and truths about middle or high school prior to the move to the new school. The authors concluded the following: “Different types of transition programming and a different temporal sequence may be needed in order to facilitate successful adjustment to each of these components of a school transition” (p. 220). Mizelle and Irvin (2000) articulated that middle-school-to-high-school transition programs are most effective when school administrators involve multiple stakeholders. Suggested activities included (1) sharing information with students and parents about the opportunities at the new school; (2) giving students social support

prior to and during the transition; and (3) bringing middle and high school faculties together to discuss curriculum and expectations.

A follow-up study conducted by Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) replicated the efforts of Akos and Galassi (2004). Adapting the same questionnaire developed from the original study, Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) surveyed approximately 360 eighth grade students from an urban junior high school in the Midwestern region of the United States. After moving to high school the following year, with exception to some who had transferred to other schools, the same group of students completed a follow-up questionnaire. The survey administered to the students as eighth graders examined their perceptions of the middle level school, as well as their feelings about high school before transitioning. During their freshmen year, the students took the same questionnaire that was altered slightly to focus on their perceptions about high school following the transition.

After examining the responses following the second administration of the questionnaire, the researchers learned that the students reported mostly academic and procedural concerns prior to and following the transition. In reference to their procedural concerns, students cited that going through the transitioning process with classmates and having the opportunity to take a self-guided tour of the school were the most helpful supports in transitioning and adjusting to high school. The surveys also revealed the following: (1) Academic concerns should be a primary focus of a middle-school-to-high-school transitional program; (2) Teacher expectations and instruction methods should be addressed with students; (3) Study skills and organizational techniques should be taught and reinforced within the classroom; and (4) Transition supports, such as lunch

purchasing, and sharing of procedures and expectations should be designed to introduce students to routines common to the building.

Additional research by Abell et al., (2006) explored how students and parents viewed the transition from middle school to high school in a large public school system also in the Midwestern region of the United States. Parents and students were asked to complete the 35-item Perceptions of Transition Survey, a questionnaire that prompted participants to reflect the transition from middle to high school (p. 3). Students completed the survey during the last month of their eighth grade year, while parents were mailed a letter from the principal inviting them to participate in the study, complete the survey at home, and e-mail it to the researcher.

A Variety of Concerns to Address

After examining the responses, Abell et al. (2006) found similarities and differences in the perceptions of parents and students. While both groups positively anticipated establishing new friendships and increased opportunities for extra-curricular activities, students identified the desire to gain more independence. Being assigned more homework was also a joint concern expressed by parents and students, but additional student concerns included an increase in academic difficulty and not being able to find their way in a larger facility. Although students did not identify peer pressure as a negative, the majority of parents reported that negative peer pressure and pressure to do well in school were their top concerns.

In response to study findings, Abell et al. (2006) stated, “Studying student and parent perceptions prior to the transition to high school can provide schools with important information regarding the consistency, value, and impact of transition

programs and materials” (p. 6). Feedback from both students and parents provided valuable data that will help administrators plan meaningful and relevant transition opportunities. The authors added that middle and high school principals and faculty members in both settings need to share consistent messages regarding the similarities and differences in the opportunities at each level in order to maximize student successes. Methods to increase parental involvement and expectations, prior success at the middle school level, socioeconomic status, student perceptions of school, and eighth grade course difficulty were further cited as key ingredients to promote effective transitions (Ingels et al., 2002). Further findings by Morgan and Hertzog (2001) revealed a reduction in dropout rates in schools with transition programs that included the following: (1) Challenging curriculum/academic rigor; (2) Clean and well-maintained facilities; (3) Consistent expectations with safety and discipline; (4) Dedicated teachers, counselors, and administrators; and (5) Sound organizational logistics.

The Vital Role of the Principal

Onorato (2013) stated that strong leadership in schools is no less important than effective leadership in other institutions. As the instructional leader, the principal is the person responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school building. Furthermore, Onorato stated “the principal’s leadership sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching and learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become” (p. 35).

Ethical leadership of principals. Ethical leadership is another key ingredient to the transitioning process. In addition to being practical and fair with faculty, staff, and parents, ethical leaders base their decisions in regard to what is in the best interests of the

students. Ethical leaders seek to provide a fair-minded and virtuous school climate for all stakeholders. Surveying 45 randomly selected elementary, middle school, and high school principals in New York State, Sagnak (2010) addressed the relationship between transformational school leadership and ethical climate. Because principals play a critical role in determining the ethical climate of a school, transformational leaders identify methods that focus the organization's attention on ethical values and establish standards that impact actions of all employees in the school (Sagnak 2010). Furthermore, as the leader models positive behavior and ethical conduct, employees build trust and reflect the same ethical conduct standards. Sagnak (2010) defined six dimensions of ethical and transformational school leadership, which included "(a) identifying and articulating a vision, (b) fostering the acceptance of group goals, (c) providing individualized support, (d) intellectual stimulation, (e) providing an appropriate model, and (f) high performance expectations" (p. 1139).

Sagnak (2010) further asserted that strong principal leadership was positively related to caring for others, consistent policies and procedures, promoting group goals, and establishing ethical climate in the school. In conclusion, a principal's leadership has not only a positive effect on faculty and staff, but it models and inspires a culture that provides a challenging, yet safe and supportive environment for the students throughout the transitioning process (Sagnak, 2010).

Additional principal leadership traits. Despite the supportive programs, innovative schedules, or academic and elective opportunities a school has to offer, school-to-school transitioning cannot be successful without strong visionary, ethical, and character building leadership from principals (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, &

Constant, 2004; McEwan, 2003;). Characteristics of strong leaders included the ability to admit when they were wrong, trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, generosity, humility, respectfulness, and consistency. Additional traits included (a) recruiting and hiring staff members with character, (b) leading by example, not by exhortation; and (c) the ability to develop the character of students. McEwan (2003) further stated that strong school leaders “recognize the power they have to mold and shape young people, encourage and empower teachers, and respect and affirm parents” (p. 149).

Establishing the Foundation at the Middle School Level

Looking back at the early adolescent transitioning process, once students begin their journey at the middle school level, effective principals need to assure that a variety of supportive programs and a content-rich curriculum are in place for students to feel safe in a nurturing and opportunity-rich environment (McEwan 2003). One method some school leaders have used to address the diverse needs of adolescent students is restructuring from a curriculum-focused junior high school, or mini high school, to a challenging, yet student-centered, supportive, collaborative, and nurturing environment, which is considered the foundation of the middle school philosophy.

Incorporating the middle school philosophy. The middle school movement traces its roots back to 1963, when the term “middle school” was first used by Alexander during a speaking engagement at Cornell University (Lounsbury, 2009). At the time of Alexander’s speech, the organizational pattern of most American schools was 6-3-3 (elementary-junior high-high school) (McGlasson, 1973). Most educators believed that junior high schools were smaller versions of the high schools they fed, but these schools failed to meet the needs of adolescent students (Lounsbury, 2009).

According to Juvonen et al. (2004) “the number of U.S. junior high schools decreased from 4,711 to 2,191 between 1970 and 1986, while the number of 6-8 grade middle schools increased from 1,662 to 4,329” (p. 12). The middle school movement spread to the extent that by 1983, the 5-3-4 grade level configuration, which contained sixth through eighth grade middle school students, became the predominant pattern of school organization (Lounsbury, 2009).

The middle school concept, however, is not a grade configuration. The goal of a middle school is to create a responsive learning environment that encourages constructive and helpful relationships among students, teachers, and parents, and make adolescents feel a part of a reassuring, nurturing, and caring community (Babbage, 2012; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993). Mac Iver and Epstein (1993) further acknowledged that successful middle school instructional methods differed from instruction at the elementary or high school levels. Focused directly on the needs of adolescents, middle school teachers effectively engage adolescent learners when they implement interactive and discovery instructional approaches that push students to show evidence of higher level thinking skills.

Middle schools are characterized by their responsive practices that are integrated into the life of a middle school student in order to best address the challenges unique to them (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). The middle school philosophy advocates student-centered and developmentally responsive practices that promote learning across disciplines (i.e., interdisciplinary teaching units), discovery and inquiry learning, character education, interdisciplinary team teaching, exploratory programs, opportunities for remedial instruction, school transition programs, flexible

scheduling, heterogeneous grouping, and advisor-advisee programs (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

Addressing needs of middle school students. Adding support to previous research, Wormeli (2011) cited evidence that the middle school experience has direct correlation with graduation rates, especially in areas where students come from high poverty environments. Specifically, the author noted the importance of equipping adolescents to handle challenges constructively during their middle school years. As a result, those students would be more prepared to respond positively to obstacles they encounter later in life.

As a way to help middle level educators better meet the needs of their students, Wormeli (2011) shared that educators need to embrace five mind-sets in order to create successful transitioning programs at the middle school level. The mind-sets include (1) understanding students' concern about belonging, (2) getting adults to empathize with students, (3) helping faculty members and parents understand the characteristics of the age group, (4) focusing on the positive, and (5) building hope for each student. Wormeli added that "parents and teachers often offer warnings instead of hope as their way of preparing students for middle school" (p. 52). Instead of warnings, parents, teachers, and administrators need to provide a more positive view of what students can expect. Further, adults should advise adolescents on ways they can handle potential challenges, and provide students with regular assurances that in spite of the obstacles they encounter during their lives, they should never lose hope that their circumstances will eventually turn out for the better.

Identifying Challenges Faced by Young Adolescent Students

As a method to improve student success, Wormeli (2011) further stated that educators need to understand that the most pressing concerns of students transitioning to middle school are homework, demanding teachers, bullying, using lockers, and getting lost in a larger facility. Wormeli concluded that teachers can prepare students “for every success by being both proactive—for example, by focusing on experiential learning—and interactive, for example, by offering team-building experiences” (p. 53).

Another element in promoting a safe and supportive school environment for transitioning students is providing programs to reduce bullying. Farmer, Ham, Leung, Lambert, and Gravelle (2011) examined instances of bullying in 36 rural schools, 20 that included student transitions from an elementary to a middle school and 16 schools where students did not have to make a transition (K-8/K-12 schools, with no building change prior to eighth grade). The authors acknowledged that bullying is a common occurrence among young adolescent students that potentially may lead to low self-esteem, increased drop-out rates, and even suicide among adolescents.

Farmer et al. (2011) conducted a two-year study that involved 1,800 students during their fifth and sixth grade years and 152 teachers. The authors reported that while bullying is often associated with large, urban schools that are impersonal, recent studies imply that that bullying incidents occur less often in larger schools and that students in small schools may be more likely to take on the role of being the bully.

Addressing Methods to Decrease Bullying

Farmer et al. (2011) discovered that students’ interpretations of being bullied varied, depending on the configuration of the school. For example, students who

transitioned to a sixth through eighth grade middle school said they were bullied less frequently than students who attended schools without a transition. Furthermore, students who attended schools with a transition acknowledged the sixth grade peer environment was more protective against bullying than other students in the study who attended schools without a transition. The authors added that while the findings appear to be surprising, “they are consistent with research indicating that a higher proportion of students are bullies in smaller schools that do not have a middle grades transition” (p. 1113).

While Farmer et al. (2011) acknowledged their study was limited to rural settings further studies are needed to resolve whether their findings are relative to larger schools in urban areas. The authors concluded that bullying is more prevalent in rural schools where students remain in the same building or on the same campus for both elementary and middle grades. However, the authors added that the transition to middle school at another site in rural areas is “associated with a decrease in bullying and an increase in students’ perceptions of peer support to protect against bullying” (p. 1115). Furthermore, educators need to examine peer dynamics and facilitate the development of more bullying prevention programs.

Successful Transitioning Involves a Collaborative Approach

Whether the transition involves elementary-school-to-middle-school or middle-school-to-high-school, Mizelle (2005) reasoned that successful programs depend on the administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents at each school coming together to discuss programs, courses, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools. Vertical teaming promotes such sharing and provides a forum for employees at each

school to assess and align curriculum in addition to promoting consistent expectations across grade levels.

Mizelle (2005) added that bringing educators at all levels together will allow them to structure their curriculums and programs into helping students make seamless transitions into the next grade level. The results further revealed that school leaders must remain actively involved in working with students, parents, faculty, and staffs across grade levels and schools in developing meaningful transitional programming that supports students as they progress from self-contained elementary classrooms to the secondary challenges and opportunities of middle and high school.

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) maintained that continuing vertical communication among principals, counselors, and teachers at the middle and high school level is important as educators examine ways to assist students through the challenges they face with each new academic year. In addition, students and parents should also be regularly informed and given an opportunity to provide feedback in regard to the transition process.

Finally, due to the lack of evidence-based transition programs for school-wide student transitions, schools that seek to address these concerns must plan and implement programs of their own (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). In fact, no empirical studies have been conducted to evaluate the impact of one educational transition on a future educational transition (Smith, 2006). A variety of supportive transitional programs should be designed, implemented, and evaluated at each grade level in order to maximize opportunities for student success at the high school level and beyond. Schools that choose to incorporate model transition programs must consistently assess each activity to determine whether or not it is serving the purpose for which it was intended.

Summary of the Literature

The focus of this chapter reviewed literature regarding characteristics of successful schools for adolescents, a rationale outlining the need for transitional programs, the impact of achievement loss associated with making a transition, along with positive and negative perspectives of transitioning from stakeholders. The chapter also traced the evolvement of the middle school philosophy, in addition to identifying the need for more dialogue among stakeholders.

Furthermore, the literature review cited challenges faced by adolescent students, the importance of parental involvement, the value of vertical collaboration between middle and high school faculty and staffs, and the important role the principal plays in the transitioning process. However, there is a lack of recent empirical research regarding methods to prepare middle school students for the expectations and experiences they will encounter at the high school level. It is my hope that this study provides principals with additional insight into how they can collaboratively work with students, parents, faculty, and colleagues to improve the middle-school-to-high school transition process which will further prepare students for the experiences and challenges they will encounter at the high school level. The next chapter explains the methodology, i.e., the data collection and analysis strategies I used in the study.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

In order to adequately verify the viewpoints, philosophies, and best practices of middle school principals participating in the study, I applied a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research design can be traced back to the early 20th century (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Hatch, 2002). According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is a systematic research method that starts with the researcher's philosophical assumptions and paradigms, and then streams on to a meticulous process used to study the social world. Qualitative research also emphasizes the socially structured nature of reality, the situational limitations that form the inquiry, and the in-depth relationship between the researcher and what he or she is studying (Creswell, 2013). Merriam (1998) articulated that qualitative methods provide the most excellent means of contributing significantly to the knowledge base and practices of education through its focus on insight, discovery, and understanding from the viewpoints of the subjects included in the study.

Yin (2011) instituted five features of qualitative research methods: (1) Examining the purposes of people's lives, under practical conditions; (2) Embodying the opinions and outlooks of the participants in a study; (3) Involving the relative environments within which the participants live; (4) Providing insights into current or developing views that may help to clarify human social behavior; and (5) Endeavoring to use numerous sources of verification rather than depending on a single source alone.

Creswell (2013) underscored the importance of using precise methods in order to generate a good qualitative study. The author maintained that a qualitative study usually is conducted in the natural settings, which allows the researcher to gain beneficial insight about the research participants. According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative study should include the following: (1) employing thorough data collection processes using multiple forms of data; (2) outlining the study within the conventions and features of the qualitative approach such as the presentation of multiple realities, an evolving design, and using the researcher as an instrument of data compilation; (3) using a rigorous approach to data collection, data evaluation, and report writing; and (4) using a prescribed approach within a single focus. While using qualitative research, investigators try to understand the world from the perspective of those who live in it (Hatch, 2002).

Creswell (2013) asserted that all researchers possess their own set of unique values going into a study. Therefore, it is essential for investigators to clearly state those beliefs in qualitative research. The procedures I integrated into this research were value laden (axiology), which compelled me to identify my own predispositions. As a veteran high school and middle school educator, I brought certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions into this study. During my experiences first as a high school teacher and later as an assistant principal, I often worked with students who struggled in a variety of ways after transitioning to the high school level. As a middle school principal, I consistently examine methods to provide effective transitional programming that prepares students for their experiences at the high school level and beyond in a challenging, yet supportive and nurturing environment. Although I have personally witnessed the benefits

of effective middle-to-high-school transitions, my desire was to focus on the principals' experiences and best practices in regard to transitioning students.

Design of the Study

After evaluating prospective qualitative approaches for the study, I determined that grounded theory was the most appropriate design for the research problem acknowledged in this study. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is a method used to produce descriptive theories about specific observed phenomenon from the views of participants in lieu of verifying and testing a priori theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers maintained the belief that theories, or the abstract analytical schema of a process, should be grounded in data from the field, particularly the actions, exchanges, or processes through interrelating categories of information based on data collected by individuals (Creswell, 2013).

Although they were both qualitative researchers, Glaser, a sociologist, took an open-ended method to the development of theory and endeavored to make comparisons between data to pinpoint, develop, and correlate concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In contrast, Strauss preferred to incorporate more controlled analytic methods which were considered more inflexible, prescriptive, and empirically arduous than Glaser's approach (Creswell, 2013). In recent years, Charmaz (2006) asserted an additional methodological viewpoint to grounded theory by fashioning a set of strategies more reflective of a constructivist technique that accentuated flexible procedures, not operational rubrics and prerequisites.

Grounded theory research is an organized, qualitative procedure used to produce a theory that describes a procedure, action, or an interaction about an essential topic

(Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Furthermore, grounded theory research is distinguished essentially by the exclusive use of an ample quantity of participant interviews; the continuous comparative method; and a progression of open, axial, and selective coding to create a theoretical framework for the central phenomenon, which is grounded in the data gathered from participants (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Additional data sources, such as observations and documents, may be assembled to reinforce conclusions generated from participant interviews (Creswell, 2013).

This research study sought to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by middle school principals. Grounded theory is an appropriate qualitative approach for this study since it utilizes a systematic design method that is illustrated by open coding, the development of properties and their measurements; axial coding and the development of a coding exemplar; selective coding, and the development of a theory articulated in a sequence of propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Philosophical Assumptions

Creswell (2013) stated, “Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research” (p. 15). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that researchers recognize their philosophical beliefs before they initiate the research process. Four philosophical assumptions identified by Creswell (2013) include the following: (1) The ontological assumption of qualitative research associates to the type of reality and its features, which leads qualitative researchers to grasp data in the voice, activities, and knowledge of participants who may have separate viewpoints on the same phenomenon; (2) The epistemological assumption urges that

researchers seek to get as close as possible to the contributors being examined; (3) When utilizing the axiological assumption of qualitative research, the researcher makes his or her personal values and biases known concerning the phenomenon; and (4) the methodological assumption of qualitative research relies on the perspective that occasionally the research questions or other processes can change in the middle of the study to better produce the types of questions necessary to understand the research problem.

In regard to ontological assumptions, the opportunity to hear about the best practices of experienced middle school principals, in addition to learning their approaches to meeting the unique challenges of the students in their school, enriched my study as participants revealed their own realities based upon the needs of the individuals in their school. In spite of the school size or the community in which the school was located, the principals constructed their own realities based upon their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In regard to epistemology, as an experienced middle school principal, I felt a sense of camaraderie with the principals I interviewed. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a qualitative researcher will find it impossible to eliminate the relationship between himself and the respondent. Although I was involved within the phenomenon I studied, I had no problem with maintaining an objective lens when I presented the analysis from a theoretical perspective. This allowed me to build knowledge as I gathered information from the participants.

In regard to axiology, as a human instrument, a researcher is not able to separate his values from his identity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I carried assumptions and biases

into the study of the central phenomenon. However, as a qualitative researcher, I conveyed those values clearly and bracketed them appropriately during the data collection phase in order to assure my values did not manipulate the data gathered from participants (Hatch, 2002).

In regard to methodology, I developed interview protocols that incorporated general, broad, and open-ended questions for each participant. The processes included in the methodology of qualitative research are depicted as inductive, developing, and molded by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing the data (Creswell, 2013). As I went through the interview process, I was aware there could have been instances that called for me to revise the research questions to better understand the research problem.

Role of the Researcher

I, the researcher, currently serve as a principal at a large suburban middle school in Central Alabama. Prior to assuming my current position, I taught multiple subjects at a high school in the same school system for 15 years before becoming an assistant principal at the high school that receives students from the school where I am currently the principal. After 12 years of service as a middle school principal, I am constantly looking for better methods to help students transition from middle school to high school as smoothly as possible.

As principal, I have led numerous professional development sessions on a variety of topics ranging from preparing and transitioning students to intervention strategies and the middle school philosophy for administrators, teachers, and parents locally and at state-level conferences. Furthermore, I have served in multiple leadership roles and board

positions with both district and state level professional organizations. As an instructional leader who values the opportunity to work with middle school students, I looked forward to expanding my knowledge in regard to the best practices of middle school principals in transitioning students from middle-school-to-high-school.

Sample Selection

I desired to find an information-rich sample of experienced middle school principals for my study. Smith (2006) noted that transitional programs at the middle school level, not only enhance confidence, but they also heighten student achievement at the high school level. Since achievement loss is associated with transitioning students from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013), it was important to identify successful schools with the highest student achievement scores.

In order to facilitate that, I obtained the most recent (American College Testing) (ACT) Aspire data in reading and math assessed from eighth grade students in public schools throughout the state of Alabama, since eighth grade is traditionally the highest middle level grade prior to the transition to high school. ACT Aspire is a standards-based assessment administered in the spring of the school year by Alabama public schools to measure student progress from grades three through 10 in English, reading, writing, mathematics, and science (ALSDE, 2016). From that point, I scrutinized the ACT Aspire data to identify the top 25 performing eighth grade public middle school students in the state. After receiving approval to begin my study from the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Institutional Review Board, I utilized the website of the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools (CLAS), a professional organization comprised of

professional administrators in Alabama schools, to review the membership roster and contact information for principals who are members of the Alabama Association of Middle School Principals (AAMSP). I also used the Alabama Education Directory (<https://schools.alsde.edu/eddir/>), a publicly available state department data base that includes information regarding public educators in Alabama. This access allowed me to obtain contact information of superintendents and principals from school systems throughout the state.

Once the top 25 eighth grade classes and their schools were identified from the ACT Aspire data, I contacted the president of AAMSP, who had agreed to assist me in identifying the principals from the top 25 performing schools who met the criteria for my study (i.e., middle school principals with at least three or more years of experience as a middle school principal who had implemented transition programming for their students). Because of constantly increasing responsibilities and high stress levels, principal turnover rates are typically high (Rand 2004). Based on the organization's membership roster, the AAMSP president had access to the tenure of principals at their respective middle schools. To assure we had enough prospective candidates who met the study criteria, we expanded the search to include the top 40 highest performing middle schools.

After identifying potential candidates to interview, I contacted the district superintendents or his/her designee via email to request permission to conduct my study with principals in their respective districts. In some school districts, the superintendent acts as the gatekeeper, while in other instances, the local school principal has the authority to approve a research study and serve as the gatekeeper. According to Hatch

(2002) the gatekeeper's role is to help gain access to a site and to help recognize possible participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Following guidelines set by Strauss and Corbin (1998), I obtained two of three primary sources of data collection associated with grounded theory: interviews and field notes (documents). The use of these two sources of data afforded me the opportunity to collect rich, thick data. The data gathering and evaluation took place concurrently in a rigorous fashion that promoted the inductive nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

The data collection took place during the summer and fall of 2016. Once the district superintendent or designee provided permission to contact principals, I e-mailed the middle school principals with three or more years of experience in their current position with a recruitment letter inviting them to participate in my study. From the email responses, I selected the first 11 middle school principals who agreed to participate. I proposed to interview 10-12 principals, in lieu of a larger sample, due to the frequent turnover rate among middle school principals and the need to obtain information from successful principals with three or more years of experience. This type of cross section allowed me to obtain data that represented multiple perspectives from a variety of diverse middle school populations.

Once all participants agreed to participate in the study, I provided a Project Revision/Amendment form to IRB stating which systems and schools agreed to participate in the study. Interviews took place on the respective principal's school campus or an alternative location as determined by the interviewee. Principal interviews were

audio recorded and lasted between 38 minutes 59 minutes. One participant transcribed his answers to my research questions and sub-questions and emailed them back to me.

Individual interviews. I followed a semi-structured interview protocol which allowed research sub-questions to be broken down and conversational probing questions used to solicit thorough, yet causal responses from participants. I emailed the interview questions to each participant prior to their interview to allow them the opportunity to provide detailed answers. I also allowed interviewees some flexibility to take his or her discussion in any direction they desired in order to obtain honest and thorough answers that reflected their best practices in regard to the central research question.

Throughout the interview process, I took field notes and at the conclusion of each school administrator interview, I asked the principal if he or she would be willing to share any documents that could provide information regarding transitioning activities. These documents included faculty meeting agendas, leadership team meeting minutes, vertical team meeting notes, school calendars, newsletters, emails, PowerPoint slides from meetings, and walkthrough documentation. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommended technique of amassing and examining data on a zigzag basis, Several times during the coding process, I emailed additional probing questions back to my study participants to assure I had correctly interpreted their information. I continuously collected and analyzed data throughout the research process.

Individual interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Following the protocol of member checking (Yin, 2011), I sent the transcribed interview documents back to the respective school administrator to assure accuracy and obtain further

feedback, if necessary. If follow-up questions were needed, I either contacted the school administrator by telephone or email to establish a time to ask additional questions.

All data were maintained in a secured location and I was the only person with access to it. Throughout the study, I stored all data on a password protected computer which remained locked and secured at all times. The audio recorded interviews will be destroyed once the research and defense of the dissertation is completed. Neither school sites nor districts were identified by name. Participants were not identified directly or indirectly in the data collected. Each participant and school was assigned a pseudonym and was only identified by that name in subsequent reporting of the findings. After the research and the dissertation defense are completed, all data analyzed and findings noted will be erased and purged. Also, hard copy data were shredded at one location.

Data Analysis Procedures

Hatch (2002) called data analysis an orderly pursuit for meaning. The procedure for analysis with grounded theory consists of three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998, 2008). Once initial interviews were transcribed, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) process of open coding. Strauss and Corbin depicted open coding as the raw conceptualization of textual data through the labeling of phenomena and categorizing of these labels into progressively abstract and collective categories. Descriptions of the three common grounded theory coding procedures are as follows:

- Open coding is the first stage of data analysis in grounded theory studies to begin comparing similarities and differences of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

- Axial coding is the analytic process in grounded theory studies where data gathered in open coding are organized into a coding paradigm to establish theoretical connections for procedure structures (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).
- Selective coding is the process where analysts focus on “the process of integrating and refining categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p 143).

During the coding process, I used the NVivo 10 data analysis software to organize codes, themes, and sub-themes from the transcripts in addition to word-to-word and line-to-line pattern coding of each transcripts. Throughout the process, I maintained an audit trail, so I could document my process of data collection and analysis. Once I coded data from each principal, I re-analyzed all 11 transcripts to look for common themes among school administrators.

Methods for Verification

Creswell (2013) compared validity in qualitative research to trustworthiness between the researcher and the participant. Creswell added:

[a] distinct strength of qualitative research in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of a study. (p. 250)

Credibility strategies I used are as follows:

- *Member checking*: According to Creswell (2009), member checking is a method by which participants can view their interview transcripts in order to verify the accuracy of the recorded information. Furthermore, participants are extended an opportunity to review data or results to assure credibility and provide feedback.

- *Peer debriefing*: Creswell (2013) verified that peer debriefing is a process of having another person (a peer) not associated with the study review the information and provide feedback regarding his or her opinions of the study.
- *Researcher Bias*: Creswell (2009) emphasized the importance for researchers to identify potential biases at the beginning of the study. I acknowledged my potential biases earlier in this chapter. Failure to recognize personal bias could threaten the validity of the results in a study.
- *Bracketing*: Bracketing individual occurrences may be challenging for a researcher to apply because understandings of the data always incorporate the assumptions that the researcher carries to the topic (Creswell 2013). Hatch (2002) stated that bracketing necessitates researchers to put aside their own assumptions, viewpoints, and predeterminations in order to be responsive to what they are endeavoring to understand.
- *Triangulation*: Data were triangulated among a variety of sources to assure accuracy and consistency within my information (Hatch, 2002). By recording and transcribing the interviews, I was able to provide rich descriptions of the data to assure themes were credible and accurate. In addition to personal interviews, I took field notes, requested documents, and transcribed all interview information word for word.

Conclusion

While most research studies explored the transition from elementary schools to middle or high school settings, more recent empirical research should be conducted regarding the process of transitioning students from middle-schools-to-high-schools

(Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Although this study was not unprecedented, this examination of the best practices utilized by middle school leaders to provide successful transitional programming for students throughout the middle school years comes at a time when more needs to be done to assist students in achieving academic and social success throughout their experiences at the secondary school level.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

This study adhered to the qualitative research methods presented in the preceding chapter in accordance to the procedures prescribed for grounded theory research described in the previous chapter. The findings represent the views and perspectives of the participants in regard to the best practices of principals in successfully transitioning students from middle school to high school.

The chapter begins with a description of the 11 middle level principals and information about their schools. Second, the chapter sketches the development of the major thematic categories by means of open coding of the interview data. The next portion of the chapter illustrates the axial coding process applied in grounded theory methodology that breaks the major thematic categories down into sections presented in an axial coding model. The last section reveals how I used selective coding to develop a set of propositions and a visual model that represent the process associated with principals' best practices of helping students make the transition from middle school to high school.

Setting/Context

The study included 11 schools from nine school districts located throughout Alabama. Participating schools served middle grade levels that varied between sixth and eighth. One school in the sample included ninth grade students. Enrollments ranged from a low of 502 to a high of 1,142. Student populations of each school varied from 3% minority (i.e., American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American,

Hispanic) to as much as a 70% minority. All districts in which the schools were located had experienced varying increases in enrollment over the last five years. Eighth grade students in each of the 11 schools consistently scored above the state and national averages in reading and mathematics on the ACT Aspire assessment. ACT Aspire is a standards-based assessment administered in the spring of the school year by Alabama public schools to measure student progress from grades three through 10 in English, reading, writing, mathematics, and science (ALSDE, 2016). Detailed descriptions of the schools are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

School Demographics Summary

Participating School	Student Enrollment	Grades Served	Percentage of Minority Students*	Percentage Receiving Free or Reduced Meals
Lincoln Middle	1,142	6-8	34.5%	23.0%
Taylor Middle	808	6-8	35.0%	28.0%
Stewart Middle	825	7-8	47.0%	23.0%
Hamilton Middle	1,069	7-9	3.0%	0.0%
Presley Middle	913	6-8	70.0%	68.0%
Douglass Middle	894	6-8	34.0%	29.0%
Camelot Middle	503	6-8	16.0%	8.5%
Jefferson Middle	820	7-8	36.0%	19.0%
Kennedy Middle	703	7-8	46.0%	54.0%
Reagan Middle	853	6-8	15.0%	15.0%
Edison Middle	1,002	6-8	21.0%	18.0%

*Minority populations represent American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Hispanic.

Participating Principals and Schools

This section includes a thorough description of the 11 principals who participated in the study. As a means of protecting identity, each study participant chose a pseudonym that corresponded with a person from history or pop culture. The first name will relate to the pseudonym of the principal, while the last name will serve as the pseudonym for the school. All participants held Master's degrees in a subject area or in Educational Leadership. Three administrators had earned Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degrees in Educational Leadership. Five participants had Education Specialist (Ed.S.) degrees in Educational Leadership, while a Master's was the highest degree for three of the principals. Eight participants were male and three were female. Detailed descriptions of study participants are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Summary Data

Pseudonym	Highest Degree Attained	Administrative Experience	Years at Current School
Abraham	Ed.D.	11	4
James	Master's	16	11
Renee	Ed.D.	14	6
Alexander	Ed.S.	5.5	4
Elvis	Ed.S.	15	6
Frederick	Ed.S.	31	4
Guinevere	Ed.S.	15	10
George	Ed.S.	10	5
Jacqueline	Ed.D.	13	7
Ronald	Master's	12	6
Thomas	Master's	13	7

Abraham is currently in his fourth year at Lincoln Middle School. He has been a professional educator for 17 years, all at the middle school level. Abraham began his career and taught seven years at Lincoln Middle School before serving seven years as an

assistant principal at Stewart Middle School, which is in the same city school district.

Abraham has an Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) degree in Educational Leadership.

Located in Central Alabama, Lincoln Middle School is one of three middle schools in the largest suburban city school district in Alabama. With a population of 1,142 students in sixth through eighth grades, Lincoln, is the largest school included in this study.

Lincoln Middle School has 86 certified teachers, three assistant principals, and three counselors. The eighth grade students at Lincoln Middle School scored among the top 10 Alabama schools in Reading and Math on the ACT Aspire Test. According to Abraham, Lincoln Middle School has four interdisciplinary teams with approximately 100 students per team at each grade level.

Teachers at Lincoln Middle School not only have team planning time embedded into their daily schedule, but core teachers also have opportunities to meet with their colleagues in subject area Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) during the instructional day. As noted in Chapter 2, PLCs consist of teachers from the same content and grade level who meet collaboratively to plan lessons and common assessments; review student data; and focus on ways to promote student growth through the process of inquiry, problem solving, and reflection on current classroom practices.

James is in his 11th year as principal of Taylor Middle School. Before his tenure at Taylor Middle, he served two years as principal of his district's alternative school. James taught 13 years at the high school level and served as assistant principal for three years at the high school that receives his current students. With 28 years as a professional educator, James has a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. Taylor Middle School serves students in sixth through eighth grades and has a student population of 808. There

are 60 certified teachers, two assistant principals, and three counselors at Taylor Middle School. Embracing the middle school concept, Taylor Middle School students are grouped in three teams of approximately 100 students at each grade level. Teachers have both team planning and subject area PLC planning embedded into their master schedule. The eighth grade students at Taylor Middle School scored among the top 10 classes in Reading and Math on the ACT Aspire Test.

Renee has been a professional educator for 26 years. She is in her sixth year as principal of Stewart Middle School and has her doctorate in Educational Leadership. Prior to moving into the principal's position, Renee served eight years as an assistant principal at Stewart Middle School. Before becoming an administrator, Renee taught three years at Stewart Middle School's receiving high school and a total of 10 years at the community college and high school levels in a neighboring state. Stewart, Taylor, and Lincoln Middle Schools are three of the 11 middle schools included in this study and are in the same Central Alabama suburban school district. Stewart and Taylor Middle Schools feed into the same high school while the district's other high school is the receiving school for students from Lincoln Middle School.

Stewart Middle School has an enrollment of 825 and serves students in seventh and eighth grades. Stewart Middle School employs 55 teachers, two assistant principals, and three counselors. Core teachers at Stewart Middle School serve on four interdisciplinary teams of approximately 100 students at each grade level. Eighth grade students at Stewart Middle School placed among the top 10 classes in the state in Reading and Math on the most recent ACT Aspire Test.

Alexander is in his 15th year as a professional educator and fourth as principal at Hamilton Middle School. He served one year as an assistant principal at Hamilton Middle School's receiving high school before moving into the principal's position. Prior to that, Alexander taught over nine years at a suburban high school in a neighboring county school district before completing half a semester as an assistant principal at the same school. He has an Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree in Educational Leadership. Hamilton Middle School has an enrollment of 1,069 students. Unlike other schools in this study, Hamilton Middle School delays the transition to high school for its students until the beginning of their 10th grade year, which corresponds to Hamilton serving students in seventh through ninth grades.

Hamilton Middle School eighth graders placed among the top three classes in the state (first in Math; third in Reading) on the ACT Aspire Test. The school is in one of the most affluent suburban school districts near Central Alabama's largest city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Hamilton Middle School employs 83 teachers, two assistant principals, a professional development specialist who serves as a third assistant principal, and three counselors. Hamilton Middle School places only its seventh grade students on interdisciplinary teams, but all teachers have opportunities embedded within the master schedule to meet in PLC groups for planning lessons and common assessments, reviewing student data, and receiving professional development.

Elvis is in his sixth year at Presley Middle School and 23rd year as an educator. He is presently working on his Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in Educational Leadership. Elvis taught nine years at the high school level and spent eight years total as an assistant principal at the high school and middle school levels. He served one year as a

high school principal before moving to a different part of the state to serve as an assistant principal at his current school. Located in East Alabama, Presley Middle School has an enrollment of 913 students in sixth through eighth grades. The school employs 65 teachers, two assistant principals, and two counselors. Presley Middle School has interdisciplinary teams at each grade level with embedded time during the day for teachers to collaborate with team and subject area colleagues. Presley Middle School eighth grade students scored above the state and national averages in Reading and Math on the ACT Aspire Test.

Frederick is serving his 31st year as an administrator, 37th as a professional educator, and fourth as principal at Douglass Middle School. He taught fourth grade for six years before serving one year as an assistant principal at the elementary level. Prior to his tenure at Douglass Middle School, Frederick was principal at three different schools in a neighboring school district, which included an elementary, a K-10, and a seventh through ninth grade junior high school before working as an area superintendent for 20 years in the same district. According to Frederick, it was his strong desire to return to serving students and teachers that enticed him to leave his previous position at the central office level and return to being a principal at a middle school. Frederick obtained an Ed.S. in Educational Leadership.

Douglass Middle School is the receiving school for three elementary schools, and feeds one high school in a progressive suburban city school system that borders the largest city in Central Alabama. Enrollment at Douglass Middle School is 894 students in sixth through eighth grade. The school has 86 teachers, two assistant principals, and three counselors. The school embraces the middle school concept, placing students on

interdisciplinary teams and embedding both team and subject area PLC meeting times into the daily master schedule. Douglass Middle eighth grade students tested among the top eight schools in Alabama on the ACT Aspire Test in Reading and Math. The system provides students with extended time daily in math and English Language Arts at all grade levels.

Guinevere is currently serving her 26th year as a professional educator and 10th year as principal at Camelot Middle School. She spent 11.5 years as a classroom teacher, first at the high school level in a neighboring system before accepting a position at Camelot's sister middle school. After five years as assistant principal at the school where she taught, Guinevere became the first principal of Camelot Middle School when it became the second middle school in a growing suburban city school system in Central Alabama. She completed coursework for her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, and is in the dissertation stage.

The smallest school in the study with an enrollment of 503 students in sixth through eighth grades, Camelot Middle School employs 36 teachers, one assistant principal, one counselor, and a part-time counselor. Students at all grade levels are placed on interdisciplinary teams and receive daily extended instruction in English Language Arts and math. Similar to Douglass Middle School, Camelot's teachers have daily opportunities to meet with team colleagues and collaboratively plan lessons, review student data, and create common assessments with other teachers in their subject area. Camelot Middle School's eighth grade students were among the state's top three highest performing groups on the ACT Aspire Test in both Reading and Math.

George is in his fifth year at Jefferson Middle School and 15th year in education. Prior to assuming the principal's position at Jefferson Middle School, George served two years as principal at one of Jefferson's feeder elementary schools. He was an assistant principal at the elementary level for three years and taught sixth grade math and science at an elementary school for five years prior to moving into administration. George has an Ed.S. in Educational Leadership.

Jefferson Middle School is one of two middle schools that comprise a growing suburban city school system located near the largest city in North Alabama. Four elementary schools feed into Jefferson, while Jefferson Middle School sends its former students to a high school that opened five years ago. Prior to the opening of the new high school, Jefferson Middle School's receiving school was the only high school in the system. Unlike many middle schools that include sixth grade students, Jefferson Middle School houses 820 students in seventh and eighth grades. The school has 43 teachers, two assistant principals, and one counselor.

Although Jefferson Middle School placed its students on interdisciplinary teams in the past, George noted that the district currently does not have the financial resources necessary for extra teachers to place their students on interdisciplinary teams due to reductions in state funding. Still embracing the middle school concept, however, teachers are assigned common planning times within their daily schedule to meet with grade level and subject area colleagues to plan, prepare common assessments, and review data. Similar to Douglass and Camelot Middle Schools, Jefferson's students receive extended instruction each day in English Language Arts and math. Jefferson Middle School eighth

grade students scored among the top three schools on the ACT Aspire Test in both Reading and Math.

Jacqueline is in her seventh year at Kennedy Middle School and 19th year as a professional educator. Before going to Kennedy Middle School, Jacqueline served four years as principal at an elementary school in another school district. Prior to moving into an administrative position, Jacqueline worked as a district Speech Pathologist for five years and taught science at the middle school level for a year. She was an elementary school assistant principal for two years. She recently earned an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership.

Kennedy Middle School is located in a suburban city school district located in the Tri-cities area of Northwest Alabama. The school has an enrollment of 703 students in seventh and eighth grades. Kennedy Middle School employs 52 certified teachers, two assistant principals, and three counselors. Students are not placed on interdisciplinary teams, but according to Jacqueline, teachers in all subject areas have collaborative PLC planning opportunities embedded into the daily master schedule that allows teachers to provide rigorous and individualized instruction in a nurturing and supportive environment. Eighth grade students at Kennedy Middle School scored above state and national averages in Reading and Math on the ACT Aspire Test.

Ronald is in his 19th year as an educator and sixth year as principal at Reagan Middle School. His career path includes serving as a high school teacher for seven years and an elementary and high school assistant principal for a total of six years. Ronald has a Master's degree in Educational Leadership and plans to pursue an Ed.S. degree.

Located in a large and rapidly growing county school district in Southwest Alabama, Reagan Middle School houses 853 students in sixth through eighth grades. Reagan Middle School employs 44 teachers, two assistant principals, and two counselors. Similar to Kennedy Middle School, Reagan Middle School does not place students on interdisciplinary teams due to insufficient core teachers, but it still offers daily collaborative PLC opportunities for faculty members and provides a structure that operates within the scope of the middle school philosophy. Reagan Middle School eighth grade students scored above the state and national averages in Reading and Math on the ACT Aspire Test

Thomas is serving his seventh year as principal at Edison Middle School and 25th year as a professional educator. He served 12 years as a science teacher at the high school and middle school levels before moving into the role of assistant principal at the middle school where he had been teaching. When his school district opened Edison Middle School, Thomas transferred to Edison and served as assistant principal for three-and - one-half years before being named principal. Thomas has a Master's degree in Educational Leadership.

Located in a rapidly growing area in a small suburban city, Edison Middle School is one of seven middle schools in a growing county school district located south of Central Alabama's largest city. Edison Middle School has an enrollment of 1,002 students, 52 teachers, two assistant principals, and two counselors. According to Thomas, Edison Middle School previously placed its students on interdisciplinary teams. However, due to a lack of funding at the district and state levels, the school district is not able to fund the additional teachers needed to place students on teams. However, teachers

collaborate and meet in both subject area and grade level PLC groups on a regular basis. Eighth grade students at Edison Middle School scored among the top 25 schools in Alabama in Reading and Math on the ACT Aspire Test.

Open Coding

After the interviews were transcribed, I completed data analysis using the precise methods of open coding. During the first level of the data analysis, 92 concepts were coded consistently throughout the transcriptions of data. Concepts were clustered and matched with specific categories or themes. Once data from the interviews were reviewed during the open coding process, a point of saturation was met. With the coding of each transcribed interview, the responses became repetitive. The following seven categories emerged from the concepts: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration/Connecting. An analysis of the concepts that surfaced from the interview transcriptions to form the categories/themes that emerged from the open coding process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Categories	Conceptual Labels
High Expectations	Pre AP/advanced classes Engaging lessons Active learning Rigor/scope and sequence Critical thinking/analysis Varied instruction Differentiation Teaching beyond the standards Challenging curriculum Formative and summative tests
Nurturing and Support	Best interest of students Targeted intervention Advisories Peer helpers/peer mediators Interdisciplinary actions No zero policies/re-doing work Student centered Individual counseling sessions Responsive/in tune with student needs Teachers meet students before/after school Academic support
Communication and Collaboration	Administrators/counselors talk to students Strong relationship between middle school and high school Middle school-high school communicate about students E-mail blasts/newsletter/web pages Facebook/Twitter/Instagram pages School cast/blackboard calls to parents Orientation sessions Listening with respect Open-transparent goals and objectives Proactive planning Student/parent orientations Team/PLC/department meetings Interdisciplinary teams/departments Common planning among grade levels and subject areas Middle school-high school articulation Adults talk about students Continuous professional development Common Assessments Learning walks/buddy visits (teachers observing teachers) School leadership team Data meetings
School Environment	Positive school culture Positive school climate Clear vision Variety of experiences Shared vision/leadership Broad scope of experiences Quality teachers/teaching standards Sense of belonging Focus on continuous improvement Focus on respect

Categories (continued)	Conceptual Labels
Parental Involvement	PTO/PTA (Parent Support Organizations)
	Parent volunteers
	Appreciation meals for faculty/staff
	Field trip chaperones
	Dad brigade for campus beautification/supervision
	Parents help with extra-curricular/athletics
	Parent orientations/middle school to high school
	Parent advisory committees
	Parent-led fundraisers
	In tune with parental expectations
Development of Character and Soft Skills	Open House/parent night at high school
	Motivational talks/emphasis on good character
	Character recognitions
	Anti-bullying assistance
	Focusing on character traits
	Promotion of positive behaviors
	Avoiding temptations
	Anti-drug and alcohol awareness
	Student committees/Advisory groups
	Team building activities
	Emphasis on making good choices
	Being an advocate/self-advocacy
	How to treat one another
	Teaching soft skills
	Student advisory committees
	Valuing student voices/opinions
	Adult advocates for students
	Peer mentoring with high school students
	Variety of experiences
	Healthy competitions
Career Exploration and Connecting	Career Day
	Career talks
	Parents/community leaders speak about careers
	Elective classes
	Career exploration/opportunities
	Career cruising
	Club days
	Electronic portfolios
	STEM/Project Lead the Way

Figure 1. Open coding categories for intervention strategies that support middle school transitions to high school.

High Expectations

Throughout the interviews, each of the participants alluded to the significance of maintaining high expectations among teachers and students as a key factor in successfully preparing middle school students for success at the high school level. Thomas stated, “Getting our students ready for high school is a top priority and I want teachers who will challenge them.” Along with offering advanced core classes and a master schedule that provides extended time in math and English Language Arts every day, Guinevere noted the importance of challenging the students:

I think our teachers challenge our kids. We have a pretty challenging curriculum for their academic needs...We have math teams. We have three or four different math teams [and] Scholars’ Bowl. We have academic teams, too.

Teachers...encourage [students] to be here before and or after school where they can meet the needs of students academically.

All participants noted the importance of providing classes that focus on higher level learning skills, accelerated opportunities in math and other core academic subjects, in addition to competitive academic teams within their schools. Renee discussed the value of holding students accountable to high academic standards.

We offer advanced math, which is eighth grade Pre-Algebra to seventh graders and ninth grade Algebra I to eighth graders. To challenge students and promote high expectations, we have all work completed with or without credit to emphasize that the learning is important. We give work back for re-dos. We have several academic extracurricular [opportunities]: debate, Scholars’ Bowl, Science Olympiad, I-Can Engineering, Geography Bee, Spelling Bee, and Robotics.

In addition to providing daily extended time in regular and honors English Language Arts and math classes, George spoke of offering a math team class at each grade level that is even more rigorous than the honors classes. He said, “They move at a faster pace and do math team concepts...Then we also started, a couple years ago, pre-AP World History to prepare them for AP type courses or AP history at the high school level.”

Providing Algebra I to all eighth grade students, a variety of honors classes, extended class time in all math and English Language Arts classes, along with an emphasis on learning targets were among the expectations Frederick acknowledged for Douglass Middle School students. “Learning targets are big here, so we stress that,” Frederick remarked, “We debate how to best hit those objectives and make our learning targets what they need to be (to assure) we are actually practicing and giving our kids what they need in those areas.”

Offering honors classes in all core subject areas, including virtual classes that students can take from home, in addition to performing arts classes that require auditions were among the higher level opportunities Jacqueline cited that were available at Kennedy Middle School. “We’re preparing our children academically for those rigorous classes in high school,” Jacqueline commented. Jacqueline also referenced a data notebook system for students called the Kennedy Playbook. Students use the playbook on a weekly basis to chart their individual data and set goals for personal achievement.

Bringing back former middle school students from the high school to motivate and enlighten them of the challenges and opportunities ahead was an effective practice James has used at Taylor Middle School.

We bring in high school students...so the kids know them, or brothers or sisters of kids who have a lot of credence with our kids. They bring in the message of, "You need to take the hardest courses you can, but you need to work as hard as you can, and it's no longer something where you are going to have an easy way." We actually bring those kids back over on a very routine basis—two and three times a month—to meet with our kids who are struggling to make those good academic and personal choices, to counsel them only as a high school kid could counsel them.

According to Abraham, mastering core content across grade levels plays a role in helping teachers promote high expectations to students. "The first important thing that we can do as principals is help our faculty and staff to understand their own content standards," he said. "We help teachers focus on the importance of knowing their own standards and teaching their own standards and accessing their own standards, first and foremost, but then also knowing the progression to the next level," Abraham continued.

Ronald, along with several of the participants discussed sending his teachers to a summer training program entitled "Laying the Foundation" (LTF), a week-long training for third through 12th grade teachers that specializes in increasing classroom rigor, enhancing teaching strategies, and promoting hands-on and engaging lessons. "We have advanced classes designed to provide more rigor than the average middle school classes," Ronald said, "Teachers are required to attend Laying the Foundation training to help them provide more rigorous curriculum for students." Elvis agreed with the importance of offering challenging (advanced) core courses in addition to giving teachers the opportunity to attend LTF training.

Alexander reinforced the value of establishing high expectations. “Expectations for success matter a lot in our school, and I think we’re good at helping them realize that you can set high standards for yourself and achieve them,” Alexander commented. Based upon the conversations, all participants agreed that maintaining high expectations was the central component to successfully transitioning students from middle school to high school.

Nurturing and Support

Along with high expectations and a challenging curriculum, all principals discussed the value of nurturing, building relationships, and providing a strong support system for students throughout their middle school years. Participants described numerous methods they used to nurture and support their students. Seven of the 11 participants incorporated the middle school concept of interdisciplinary teaming at their schools. The remaining four principals acknowledged the value of assigning students to interdisciplinary teams.

Three of the participants previously incorporated interdisciplinary teaming at their schools, but moved away from the practice due to a lack of district and state funding necessary to provide the additional teachers needed to assign students to interdisciplinary teams. Elvis explained how teaming worked at his school.

We are set up in what is often referred to as the true middle school concept...A team would consist of the core content classes of math, English, science, and history that are assigned to a group of students, and those students rotate through those four content teachers on that team for their core subjects during the day. That’s how we are organized in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Abraham concurred and added that assigning students to teams maintains a supportive environment, assists teachers in building a deeper relationship with the students, and helps prevent students from “falling through the cracks.” Abraham said, “One of the goals with teaming is to assure that every child has a meaningful relationship with an adult in the school and has a group of adults that are very familiar with that child.” Renee agreed and said:

One of my goals is to assure every student has a meaningful connection with an adult in this school...It could be a teacher from last year, a coach, a cafeteria worker, bus driver, or secretary; just a caring relationship with an adult.

All participants acknowledged the value of assuring that their students received continuous support academically and socially before, during, and after the school day. James discussed how he provided an academic interventions class for struggling students. “They’re pulled from their regular elective, he said, “...It’s a class where there’s a lot of support. There’s a counselor, a teacher, and there are peer helpers who come in to help those kids.”

In addition to having teachers available in quiet study halls for students who needed extra help during the lunch/homeroom period, Guinevere shared how she used peer helpers to tutor struggling students when she said, “...having the peer tutors has opened up a lot of avenues academically for our struggling students who just need help.” Each participant referred to using peer helpers or peer mediator groups to provide assistance to other students.

Ronald described how he used student mentors to blend new students when he stated:

The very first thing that any student experiences at our school is usually a tour given by another student, which I think is great because they tell them about things that are important to kids that we don't think about.

Jacqueline explained how she inserted advisory classes into the daily schedule to provide students with academic help in areas where they had deficiencies. "We build targeted advisory classes," she explained. "They may be doing math every day during the 25 minutes with the same teacher or they could do reading." Alexander referred to similar 25 minute advisory type classes built into the schedule at his school where the teachers loop with the same students from sixth through eighth grade. "Academic Opportunities (AO)...encompasses a lot of different things, but that is a good way for us to find out about what our kids need because we're making deeper relationships with kids without the constraints of standards and assessments."

Thomas indicated the importance of every adult in the building being accessible throughout the day to support students and create a safe environment. "We nurture and support by being available to them, Thomas commented. "Students can get help with academics before or after school and also during lunch."

Alexander emphasized the impact of supporting students through active learning opportunities and giving them the chance to redo work that is either not turned in or does not demonstrate mastery in the following statement:

We know three things about middle years learning: One, their learning has to be active. It cannot be passive. The second thing we know about their learning is

they have got to be able to talk about it with one another. I've seen research that says 60% of classes need to be peer-to-peer discussion so we know they need to talk about it with their peers. The third thing we know about their learning at this age is that their second, their third, their fourth attempts are always better than their first, so we need to give them a chance to make mistakes.

Each principal interviewed cited the value of policies that allowed students more than one chance to complete work assignments. These policies ranged from no zeros to bringing in work late for reduced credit.

Ronald summed up the significance of nurturing and supporting students throughout their middle school years as they make significant changes emotionally and psychologically. "One thing that I try to just drive into my teachers is relationships," he said. "The students have to know that you care...and it has to be genuine because students can see right through that." All participants agreed that middle school students require a variety of support systems, encouragement, and caring, compassionate adult advocates who guide them through the challenges presented during the transition from middle school to high school.

Communication and Collaboration

Each participant voiced the importance of communication and collaboration. Principals discussed multiple areas where thorough communication practices play a meaningful role in helping students transition from middle school to high school. Communication is not only crucial within the walls of the middle school, but it is also imperative that interaction remains ongoing among the middle school and high school staffs, students, and parents.

All participants cited collaboration as an essential part of the communication process. Frederick commented, “The high school principal and I talk all the time making sure that we’re teaching what our young people will need to be able to succeed at the high school.” Alexander discussed the benefits of regular communication and collaboration between middle and high school administrators and counselors in the following statement.

The high school principal and I communicate almost daily, and we meet and talk about different things. Our counselors and the high school counselors meet regularly. A lot of it is more informal than it is a structural thing. Sometimes a subject area PLC might come to me and say that they want to work with a group of teachers at the high school, and then I will set that up.

A strong consensus emerged among participants regarding the importance of utilizing a variety of methods of communication and collaboration. Email blasts, newsletters, web pages, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, in addition to School Cast, and Blackboard calls to parents were among the communication methods touched on by principals. Abraham stated that he sends out a weekly newsletter as a school in addition to newsletters specific to each interdisciplinary team.

All participants noted the importance of maintaining a school website and keeping it updated, in addition to requiring each teacher to regularly send out information via websites, blogs, or email blasts. “We work hard to keep our website updated to where parents can go to the website and get the information that they need,” Abraham said. “If parents aren’t sure what the homework is, they can click on it and see it.” Thomas added, “It is important to keep parents informed. I encourage them to work with their child at

home to assist us in getting the student ready for high school. I also encourage them to attend every meeting concerning the transition.” In addition to using social media, Frederick revealed how he involved PTO leaders in the communication process. “Each week different parents will come up and get the information and we put it on our website or send through our PTO newsletter.”

Collaboration among core curricular subject areas, grade levels, the middle school staff, or between professionals at the middle school high schools is another form of communication. Nine of 11 participants discussed how they create common planning times for teachers to collaborate with subject area colleagues and/or interdisciplinary teams as professional learning communities (PLCs).

Elvis explained how his core teachers collaborate within their PLC groups to share best practices and plan interdisciplinary units. “Teachers develop common assessments [and] talk about best practices for instruction,” Elvis said. “They look at data to inform instruction, whether it is formative measures or from a common assessment.”

Bringing middle and high school teachers together for vertical team meetings is another method of collaboration acknowledged by participants. Jacqueline said, “We have days built into our calendar...where the middle school teachers meet with the high school teachers, which is really great for transition.” As noted by the other participants, Guinevere discussed the importance of communication and collaboration in the area of athletics and extracurricular activities. “Our coaches work very closely with the high school coaches,” Guinevere stated. “Our extracurricular folks, whether it is math team, whether it is cheerleading, majorettes, whatever it is, they work very closely with their cohorts at the high school.”

It was clear based on the conversations that participants recognized the importance of regular communication through a variety of methods, in addition to bringing teachers together in subject areas, departments, among grade levels, and interdisciplinary teams for regular collaborative communication and planning. Furthermore, each principal acknowledged the importance of middle and high school principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teachers working together to assure that middle school students experience a smooth transition to high school.

School Environment

Study participants recognized that a positive school environment, also referenced as culture, is essential to the transitioning process. All principals noted the importance of maintaining a positive school climate and culture among both students and staff through service on leadership teams or providing a voice through student government associations. Overwhelmingly, principals shared their beliefs in providing leadership opportunities for faculty members and students to create a shared vision and establish annual goals for the school.

George pointed out the importance of soliciting input from both students and staff as key to building a positive school culture. “It is very important for students and staff to be able to contribute and know that this is their school and that they belong,” George said. “When this is done, it is easier to have authentically engaged students and faculty that give 100% effort.” When parents see this, they are more likely to support the school.

James communicated how he shares leadership responsibilities with his teachers in developing his school’s continuous improvement plan [CIP], which increases teacher engagement and buy-in that will eventually benefit the students:

We have a leadership team which anybody can be on. Sometimes there are as many as 20 and 30 people on the leadership team. Sometimes there are as few as 10. We work with our school data and design our continuous improvement plan, and then they bring it out to the faculty with me. Then we decide which part of the plan we want to keep and which part of the plan we want to implement. Five or six times during the school year we meet to discuss our improvement.

Ronald commented, “One of the things that I wanted to nurture for students and faculty was a voice for every grade level and a voice for every department.” Renee discussed how she took a similar approach to giving her faculty a voice.

With our CIP, we pull a team together at the beginning of the year to help develop it. We look at data. We look at what the central office is telling us to focus on. We determine as a team, not just administrators, but teachers and literacy coaches. We determine where we want our focus to be.

Another practice used by principals to enhance school environment was giving voice to the students. Alexander discussed his method of building a positive school environment by involving students on committees and by interacting with them in the hallways. “I have focus groups of kids that I bring in and I walk the hall nonstop and ask them ‘How’s it going? What’s your biggest stress?’, and just network with them consistently.” Guinevere explained how she solicits student feedback to strengthen the school environment.

We have a group of students that we call roundtable that we meet with twice each nine weeks. We have lunch. We have three teachers, one from each grade level, and then we have a group of students. This group of students is made up from

teacher recommendations, but also, it's not your typical...It's not the SGA president. It's not our star football player. It's not the star cheerleader. It's those kids who we know are going to give us feedback, but who probably are not the most popular kids in the school. We get great information from them. That's another check and balance from us, looking at our strategic plan, our improvement plan, and monitoring them.

Each participant further noted the significance of assuring that parents have a voice. Frederick cited the significance of seeking feedback not just from staff and students, but also with parents. "We have an open door policy from the standpoint our parents can contact us," he said. "Positive community relationships are a must if you intend to grow."

Jacqueline discussed how she and her staff build a positive school community by helping students become acquainted with the "human side" of their teachers and staff by having her colleagues to record a personal biography video that includes information about themselves, their families, hobbies, and interests. Students may access the videos by using their school-assigned iPads to swipe a QR code displayed at each faculty or staff member's door.

Moreover, each participant mentioned the value of promoting a positive school environment by connecting students through electives such as band, choir, drama, robotics, and broadcasting in addition to athletic teams and clubs. Alexander articulated the viewpoints of all the participants regarding the significance of creating a positive school environment.

I don't believe students, in today's society, can learn at their best if they don't feel as if they are a part of a positive community. Years ago, when schools were preparing students for factories, it was likely better for students to be in a rigid system. That just isn't today's story. Our students need to feel a part of something bigger, to feel as if their voice matters as much as the next person, to feel valued in what they do, to feel as if the school is there to support them. I would contend that a school without a positive environment is not well suited for student growth.

Parental Involvement

In this category each participant acknowledged the important role parents play during the middle school to high school transitioning process. Principals revealed several areas where they involved parents, ranging from PTA/PTO groups and advisory committees to securing parent support in a variety of areas throughout the school. Thomas said, "Parents are always encouraged to volunteer. Our volunteers work in the main office or media center." James stressed the importance of encouraging parents to remain heavily involved in the lives of their children and engaged throughout their middle school years.

During the eighth grade year, I remind parents that this is the most important time to stay close to your children. You need to know who all of their friends are and what activities they are involved in, where they are at all times. You need to go to those activities. You need to host some of those activities. We remind them that they need to be a heavy part of their high school transition experience and that they need to stay closely involved in what their kids are involved in.

Frederick echoed James' remarks. "Parental involvement is critical and is one key to growth. Our PTO is big here. Involved parents that communicate in a positive and in a shared way will help during their child's transition," Frederick said. Alexander noted his parents' involvement through numerous PTO committees. "We have probably 30 different PTO committees that lead different things throughout the school, Alexander stated. "Parents sign a 'Willingness to Serve' form and our PTO gets them involved." Participants also discussed how parent groups provided extra support to teachers through grants to purchase classroom supplies, providing food for special occasions, and sending gift cards when teachers celebrate birthdays, weddings, or the birth of a child.

Renee expressed how she utilized parents to volunteer in several areas around the school.

When we try to move 400 kids at a grade level somewhere, we need parents to chaperone with field trips. Parents volunteer to serve if we have a breakfast or some type of luncheon for teachers and staff. We also have what is called a Dad Brigade. We outlined some needs throughout the campus and did a walk-through with 100 dads. Home Depot and Lowe's donated the materials and all the work was done by the dads on a Saturday. Parents also organize schoolwide fundraisers and volunteer within school organizations. Band parents work concession stands at football games; show choir parents work the concession stand at basketball and volleyball games. Basketball and volleyball parents bring food for the players before games and football parents come in to serve food before games. Theater parents help with sets and costumes. Parents get connected through the organizations that involve their children.

James, who works in the same school system as Renee, also acknowledged enlisting a Dad Brigade each summer to paint around the building, clear brush, and complete other projects. James further shared how he recruited dads to volunteer at the school for supervision. He explained, “We have dads that walk the halls for us in the mornings before school, just as an extra set of eyes in the hallways, making sure everybody is where they are supposed to be.”

Jacqueline acknowledged the value of inviting parents to classrooms as career speakers and relying on them to chaperone field trips. “We do a lot of field trips,” Jacqueline said. “We always have parent volunteers to chaperone for our field trips.” George added, “Our PTA gives our teachers a duty free lunch once a month where they watch the students in the cafeteria.” Principals further reported relying on parents to be involved through extracurricular activities or sports teams.

Several participants discussed how parent advisory committees provide feedback and brainstorm ideas to help improve the school. Elvis described a similar parent group at his school. “We have a parent advisory committee which meets every month,” Elvis commented. “Parents volunteer to come to the school to do reading, to help with specific events, whether it’s a banquet or an awards ceremony.” Guinevere shared how her PTO parents volunteer in classrooms, the library, plan the eighth grade awards dinner, and even operate a kiosk in the front foyer of the school. “Our PTO is very involved with us,” Guinevere said. “Parent volunteers are here all the time. We couldn’t do it without them.”

Each principal voiced the belief that parents make important contributions that not only positively impact students, but also provide support to the administration and

teaching staff. Alexander affirmed the vital role of parental involvement during the transitioning process.

I think parental involvement is crucial. Schools and communities where the adults (teachers and parents) in a student's life communicate about the successes and needs of individuals are much more successful. The more adults can share what they see, the more chances the student is held up and focused on in the proper way. Not only that, but students need to talk through their fears of transitioning to high school, and having their parents around to help is important.

Development of Character and Soft Skills

Each principal asserted that promoting positive character and soft skills was essential in equipping students to make the transition from middle school to high school. Nine of the 11 participants revealed how they emphasized character development, self-advocacy, positive decision-making skills, positive behaviors, anti-drug and alcohol awareness, and soft skills development through their advisory programs. In addition to partnering with the city government, Elvis discussed the how his faculty teaches character traits during their advisory classes.

Our city has character traits that they put up throughout the city in our banks and in stores that we emphasize in our schools. We pick from that list and feature a character ed(ucation) word that is our word of focus. This year we are still going to do character ed(ucation), but we're going to pull from *Ron Clark's Essential 55*, basically soft skills that he puts out. One example is how to shake somebody's hand firmly and how to look them in the eye when you are talking to them.

In spite of their efforts to promote positive character and soft skills, every principal acknowledged that instances of bullying increase during the middle school and early high school years. From encouraging students not to become bullies to taking a stand against bullying, each school had a method to address bullying. Along with having a hotline available to report bullying, Thomas stated how he and his staff address bullying issues before they start. “At the beginning of the year the administration and counselors meet with every student during P.E. (physical education),” he said. “In that meeting every student is required to sign a bullying contract with the consequences laid out.”

Abraham discussed how he holds an assembly the first week of school to encourage students to take responsibility for reporting bullying. “One of the first things that the kids hear me say is that having a safe school is not only the responsibility of the principals, the SRO [School Resource Officer], and the teachers, it’s the responsibility of the kids.”

Participants noted how they work with their staffs to consistently prompt students to demonstrate positive character while taking a stand against bullying. From regularly reminding students of their anti-bullying stance to counseling students on conflict resolution strategies, each principal discussed the need to take proactive steps to address bullying. Renee revealed how she established a method for students to anonymously report bullying on her school’s website.

On our website we have a bystander button that is an anonymous link to Google Forms. The students fill out all the boxes, perpetrators, what happened? Is it

ongoing? Have you told an adult? Are there any witnesses? When they hit submit, it goes to both counselors and all three administrators.

James shared how he and his teachers use a rewards system to promote positive character.

One of the things we try to do with our positive behavioral support program is to plan activities to give kids something to shoot for. We try to remind them that grades are very important, but so is attendance and so is monitoring your behavior. We have some reward programs we use throughout the year: dances right at the end of the school day, outside events where they can go outside and have fun. We've had snow cones and other things for them on those days.

Participants shared how they combine building character with the teaching of soft skills, organization skills, study skills, coping skills, building relationships, setting goals, and becoming independent learners during their advisory in addition to bringing in guests for school-wide assemblies. "This past year we did a program called Rachel's Challenge, George stated. "It's an assembly program where they (professional assembly group) come in and talk about being connected, standing up for your friends, and basically being a good peer." Alexander's students observe a weekly one-hour advisory time to teach character, soft skills, and self-responsibility. "We use that opportunity to prepare our kids for things that are outside of the curriculum: How to treat one another. What does GPA really mean?" he said. "What we do is we set up a whole lot of activities during that hour-long time to prepare them for those next stages in life."

Abraham emphasized the necessity of teaching students to become responsible for their own decision making. "We want to build independence during the middle school

years by the time a child gets to eighth grade they should be able to manage their time on their own when they get home,” Abraham commented. Jacqueline mentioned how she and her staff build character by promoting perseverance. “We try to build perseverance and endurance,” Jacqueline stated. “We work with them (students). Our counselors work with them. Our teachers work with them to try to help them be successful.”

Renee underscored the necessity for middle schools to balance high academic standards with building character and soft skills.

We’re focused on the academics, but we’re also focused on them developing sleep habits, study habits, holding them accountable, and how to be a good person. In order to make that happen, it’s not okay to get a zero because a zero doesn’t hold you accountable, especially if you are not motivated by grades.

Holding you accountable is you’re still going to complete that assignment because I need for you to demonstrate mastery.

In agreement with the other participating principals, Frederick reiterated the need for middle school students to learn positive character traits, soft skills, making good choices, and self-advocacy, in addition to maintaining a balance between their extracurricular activities and their academic needs. “We stress the importance of developing good study habits,” Frederick said. “How do you juggle being at a ball game, staying out a little late, and then being in that chemistry class the next morning and expected to perform to your highest expectation?”

Career Exploration and Connecting

Providing opportunities for students to feel connected within the school and explore career possibilities were vital essentials of helping students maneuver the

transition to high school according to all 11 middle school principals. Respondents talked about a variety of extracurricular activities available to help students connect; these included multiple elective classes, band and choir programs, career tech classes, clubs, in addition to introducing students to future career options.

“It is important for me to get each child connected to something at the middle school that they can continue to do at the high school,” Renee said. “We introduce them to the academy, band, choir, cross country, the I-Can Engineering Group for girls, Robotics Club, Science Olympiad, Coding Club, some type of activity.”

Thomas shared his philosophy of connecting students to the school community through a wide-variety of extracurricular options. “We offer more extracurricular activities than just about any middle school in Alabama,” he said. “Besides athletics, our students can get involved in fine arts, service clubs, academic competition teams, student government, and other organizations.” Eight of the 11 principals talked about observing a Career Day with numerous guest speakers. Guinevere revealed how her school coordinates an annual career day to help students examine potential careers. “This year at Career Day, we had 47 speakers come in and talk with our students about various careers,” she said.

George outlined his school’s focus on connecting students to possible career paths based upon their interests.

We have STEM day where we talk about the STEM fields and have a lot of hands-on activities. Then we have a career day where we have speakers come in and talk with our students and highlight what their career is all about. All eighth grade students take the Kuder (Career) Assessment—based on different survey

questions—to see what they might be interested in. Then our counselor has sessions to where she will talk with the students about those opportunities and that leads into course selections at the high school level as they're kind of narrowing their focus a little bit.

Offering numerous elective opportunities in addition to bringing in parents and local business professionals to share their knowledge and expertise regarding a specific career, are approaches Frederick underscored. “We also get our counselors involved in connecting students to specialized areas,” Frederick said. “If a kid is good in band, choir, math team, or robotics, we're going to steer them in the right direction.” Elvis talked about the importance of linking the middle school exploratory classes to programs available at the high school. “We try to offer exploratory classes that tie in with what will be offered at the high school,” he said. “We also have an annual career day that involves community members.”

Jacqueline discussed the career tech options and elective courses provided to connect students to a prospective career.

We offer five career tech courses where students can earn a .5 high school credit. The career tech supervisor and I work together to make sure that we're providing those foundational career tech courses and giving students an opportunity to participate in those clubs so when they get to high school; hopefully, they will continue with those career tech courses. We also offer 36 elective courses for students to explore their interests.

Each participant mentioned how their counselors work with the counselors from their receiving high school in the development of each eighth grade student's

individualized four-year plan which allows students to prepare for high school by incorporating classes that will lead to a future college major and/or career opportunity. Ronald described how his school's enrichment offerings progress from sixth through eighth grade, when four-year plans are written. "Our students take several enrichments that expose them to career exploration," he said. "It starts in the sixth grade with a basic skills course and ends in the eighth grade with Career Exploration A where students develop their four-year plans and gain a half credit for high school."

Another portion of connecting students to the high school noted by every principal was having a parents' night at the receiving high school to showcase programs offered at the high school in addition to taking eighth grade students to the high school for a tour. Prior to those events, participants discussed inviting one of the high school counselors to the middle school during the spring semester to introduce students to the career tech and elective course offerings available at the high school.

In addition to having an orientation at the receiving high school for eighth grade students and parents, Abraham described the agenda for the student orientation visit to the high school that precedes the parent orientation.

We send our eighth grade students to the high school to work closely with their counselor...[to] get them acclimated to the building, and meet some of their principals. They start off in the theater. They focus on what's a successful high school student? What are the habits of a successful high school student? What are the expectations here? What are the classes like? The students also get an opportunity to hear about the academic clubs, the academies, and the IB

(International Baccalaureate) program for students at the high school. They also hear something about athletics.

The participants all cited the significance of providing opportunities for students to examine career options in addition to offering a plethora of electives and clubs to connect students with peers who share the same interests. Furthermore, helping students familiarize themselves with the expectations, course offerings, and physical layout of the high school further connects them and is vital to assuring a successful transition.

In summary, following the interviews of the 11 study participants, seven groups of responses emerged. After the principals revealed their best practices for transitioning students from middle school to high school, it was apparent the data had reached the saturation point. The seven categories that emerged from the open coding were as follows: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration/Connecting.

Axial Coding

Once the seven major categories were identified through the open coding process, axial coding was conducted to re-assemble the open coding data into a new paradigm model. Axial coding involves identifying a single category as the central phenomenon and exploring its relationship to the other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The themes discussed in the open coding section were relabeled into new axial coding categories in order to provide an improved structural illustration of the data in regard to how the various parts correlated with one another in relation to intervention strategies that support middle school transitions to high school. The interactions between these

categories are displayed in the axial coding diagram shown in Figure 2 (see Appendix A, page 112).

In the first portion of this analysis, the subcategory of *Central Phenomenon* was identified in the axial coding to represent the balancing of high expectations with nurturing and support. The axial subcategory of *Context* was represented by preparing for high school and in-tune with student needs. The *Causal/Influential Conditions* subcategory represented in the axial coding was school climate and culture and middle school to high school articulation. The *Action/Interaction Strategies* subcategory included multiple systems of support, development of character and soft skills, and academic/instructional opportunities. The subcategory of *Consequences* was comprised of the single category of continuous improvement, which included four sub-groups: quality teachers/teaching standards, in-tune with parental/community expectations, high graduation rates, and student success. Lastly, the axial category of *Intervening Conditions* included challenges of adolescence and external influences.

Central Phenomenon

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the central phenomenon is the central idea, occasion, or occurrence, about which a set of actions/interactions is directed at managing or handling, or to which the set is related. The category *Balancing High Expectations with Nurturing and Support* was identified as the central phenomenon. Each participant recognized the importance of maintaining high expectations throughout the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school. However, principals also revealed that the elevated student achievement that results from high academic

expectations could not be accomplished without the balance of providing students with constant nurturing and support throughout their middle school years.

Each principal interviewed referenced the significance of providing a challenging curriculum, which included pre-advanced placement and honors classes, in addition to offering Algebra I at the eighth grade level. Participants also noted how their teachers often taught beyond the expectations of the state curriculum standards. However, every principal underscored the importance of being student-centered and providing support to students in multiple areas throughout their middle school years. Renee said, “We’re rigorous. There are no corners cut, but we’re able to be very student focused.”

Causal/Influential Conditions

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of causal/influential conditions is referred to as the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of the phenomenon being studied. The following two categories emerged that correlated with causal/influential conditions: school climate and culture and middle school to high school articulation activities.

Establishing a school culture that promotes collaboration among all stakeholders was identified by respondents as a vital ingredient to transitioning students to high school. Subgroups to this category included shared leadership and vision, school leadership teams, student advisory committees, and parental involvement. Each principal referred to the significance of sharing leadership and allowing faculty, students, and parents the opportunity to provide input or have a voice regarding decisions that affect the school program. Participants talked about having school leadership teams and/or

faculty advisory committees made up of teacher and/or staff representatives from each area of the school.

Participants further discussed getting students involved through student government associations, student advisory committees, or student clubs. Getting parents involved through school organizations, school-wide committees, or by volunteering in different areas of the school was also cited as significant to building a strong school climate and culture.

The axial category of middle school to high school articulation activities included the collaborative communication that takes place between the middle and high school staffs. Middle school principals talked candidly about maintaining positive and open relationships with the principals of their receiving high schools. Principals not only communicated about transitioning activities, but they also promoted meetings between their assistant principals to discuss both strengths and weaknesses of individual students, as well as the overall perception of the class rising to their high school.

Participants also noted that their counselors at both levels collaborate to discuss student data along with specific student needs and intervention plans. Furthermore, participants stated that counselors were instrumental in organizing discussions to advise eighth grade students with the development of their four-year plans and class schedules for their first year at the high school. In addition, principals noted the value of getting both middle and high school teachers together for vertical team meetings to discuss curriculum planning at each grade level and to examine data of the incoming class to the high school.

Articulation activities also included planning meetings between elective teachers and coaches at each level in order to assure consistency in regard to common procedures, common goals, and a shared vision. Participants further noted that collaborative meetings, especially among principals, assistant principals, and counselors were instrumental in planning the parent and student orientation meetings and tours at the high school for the incoming students.

Action/Interaction Strategies

The axial subcategory action/interaction strategies consist of things which individuals or groups do or say in response to a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). These actions/interactions are customarily a method of carrying out or responding to a phenomenon and how it exists under a specified set of conditions. Three axial categories of replies which typified particular actions which participants associated with the significance of balancing high expectations with nurturing and support included (a) multiple levels of supports, (b) character development, and (c) academic opportunities.

The axial category of multiple levels of support included participant responses related to the methods and/or programs established to assist students during the middle school to high school transition process. Establishing advisory programs that assure each student has an *adult advocate* to talk about concerns, grades, decision-making skills, or just to listen were methods of support acknowledged by participants.

Mentoring or buddy programs, where new students are paired with another student to help them become familiar with their new school or instances where sixth grade students are assigned to an eighth grade mentor, were among practices cited by principals. Every school in the study offered confidential assistance and a variety of

methods to report and/or respond to bullying. Finally, interdisciplinary teaming was identified as a system of support noted by eight of the participants.

The axial category of character development encompassed participant responses related to the variety of practices principals identified with helping students develop or enhance communication skills, self-advocacy, soft skills, etiquette, and dignity. Principals acknowledged the teaching of character traits and recognizing students who demonstrate positive character. Participants also talked about methods they used to teach soft skills, such as developing good listening habits, offering a firm hand shake, resolving conflicts, and looking one in the eye during conversations.

Furthermore, principals discussed how they involved student leaders in peer helper or peer mediator groups that provide a variety of services from tutoring struggling students and hosting guests during school functions to mediating minor student disputes under the indirect guidance of a counselor or teacher. In addition, participants cited their efforts in helping students grow into becoming self-advocates before moving on to high school.

The axial category of academic opportunities included participant answers related to accelerated courses available for students to take in addition to rigorous and engaging instructional activities. Participants noted offering a challenging curriculum such as honors Algebra I for eighth grade students, honors classes in multiple core courses, and programs to support students identified as gifted.

Principals discussed how their teachers collaboratively plan lessons and create common assessments, in addition to providing learning activities that promote student engagement. In addition to offering a rich variety of career exploration courses,

participants confirmed that some of their career tech classes allowed students to receive high school credit. Finally, principals mentioned that their schools offered advanced levels of music through their band and choir programs. Robotics was also reported as a popular elective opportunity that was also available at the high school level.

Context

Strauss and Corbin (2008) defined the axial subcategory of context as a specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon. For instance, context can represent the specific conditions in which the action/interaction strategies are taken to manage, handle, carry out, and respond to a specific phenomenon. Two axial categories were identified which impacted the general conditions surrounding the participants' implementation of the action/interaction strategies; these were preparing students for high school and being in-tune with student needs.

The axial category of preparing students for high school included participants' responses related to providing a variety of experiences and opportunities throughout the middle school years in preparation for the transition to high school. Principals discussed how maintaining strong academic standards while providing differentiated instruction, multiple levels of support, and chances to redo assignments built student confidence and better equipped students to be successful in their courses at the high school level. All participants cited the importance of offering a variety of extracurricular activities, clubs, and athletic teams in addition to career exploration classes and electives that exposed students to fine arts and the building of career technical skills.

The axial category of in-tune with student needs included participating principals' responses associated with basing all decisions with the best interest of students at the

forefront. Principals described how their teachers led advisory groups and collaborated with one another among their interdisciplinary team colleagues and/or among their professional learning communities to discuss student needs and come up with a targeted intervention. Student needs could range from academic concerns to social challenges. Additional methods of support addressed by faculty members included student needs ranging from the family experiencing financial problems to the loss of a loved one. Faculty members were often joined by counselors in setting up interventions to address specific student needs.

Principals also described large group activities planned by interdisciplinary teams or teacher groups to promote teamwork and cooperation. Furthermore, all principals discussed how their teachers made arrangements to open their classrooms to students before and/or after school to provide extra help to anyone who had questions about homework or an upcoming assignment. In summary, each school represented in the study had a variety of interventions available to assist students academically or to help students maneuver through the challenges of adolescence.

Intervening Conditions

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of intervening conditions is used to distinguish specific circumstances which serve to either expedite or obstruct the action strategies as those strategies are engaged to accomplish the central phenomenon. Two axial categories emerged from participant responses that linked to intervening conditions. These categories included challenges of adolescence and external influences.

The axial category of challenges of adolescence included participant responses and data associated with the numerous changes taking place mentally, physically, and externally among students throughout their middle school years. Participants talked about the obstacles students encounter and the importance of providing continuous avenues of support to meet changing needs. For example, Alspaugh (2001) cited that the loss of self-esteem and self-perception were among the obstacles encountered by adolescents. Participants referenced multiple systems of support at each grade level intended to connect, empower, and build esteem. In regard to the frequent changes students make between sixth and ninth grade, principals discussed how teachers and staff at each grade level establish expectations and support systems to effectively meet specific needs of students.

The axial category of external influences included participant responses associated with things that impact students throughout their middle school years. In spite of their age and lack of experience, middle school students make decisions that potentially have long-term effects, both positive and negative. The decision to take a particular elective class or join a club potentially can influence long-term peer groups in the same way as taking accelerated classes, choosing to remain in general classes, or participating in athletics.

Each participant discussed how both their counselors and teachers take active roles in advising students in making informed decisions and positive choices. Principals constantly affirmed the need to expose students to a variety of rich opportunities that enhance their experiences and expand their priorities to better equip them for the future challenges and decisions they may face. Participants also mentioned practices they

incorporate to promote positive character traits, assist with avoiding cliques, teach conflict-resolution skills, and provide needed support when a child's home situation is not stable or when a parent is not engaged.

Consequences

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of consequences includes the responses related to outcomes or results of the managed actions used to address the central phenomenon. While the desired outcome of the best practices implemented to support middle school transitions to high school is associated with managing the phenomenon of balancing high expectations with continuous nurturing and support, producing college- and career-ready students is the ultimate result.

Only one axial category, continuous improvement, was identified as related to consequences. However, the single category included four specific sub-groups which emerged from the responses of the participants. These sub-groups were quality teachers and teaching standards, in-tune with parental/community expectations, high graduation rates, and student success.

Striving for continuous improvement was a response registered by every participant. Principals talked about the importance of playing an active role in the identification and recruitment of excellent teaching candidates. Building staffs of strong teachers leads to higher instructional standards which directly benefits students. Most participants noted the importance of staying in touch with parent and community expectations.

Participants shared success stories that emerged from involved parents and active community participation. They also noted that continuous improvement at the middle

school level results in high graduation rates and additional opportunities for students to be successful in high school, college, and in life. In conclusion, axial coding was used to re-structure the categories developed during the open coding process to reveal how each segment of the data affected the other parts to illustrate better understanding of the central phenomenon.

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the final step in the grounded theory methodology. Strauss and Corbin (2008) described selective coding as the process of selecting the core category, validating the relationships, and filling in the categories that need further development. The selective coding process, which runs parallel with the axial coding process, is the final phase of data collection and assures that saturation has been achieved.

Identifying the central phenomenon was the first step of the selective coding process. Once the central phenomenon was selected, the other categories that had emerged during the axial coding process were interrelated and analyzed in order to develop a grounded theory. In every portion of the study, participants described similar experiences in their efforts to support middle school transitions to high school and the challenges they addressed during the transitioning process.

From that point, I evaluated the associations between the central phenomenon and the other categories that emerged during the axial coding process. A visual model of the theory is shown in Figure 3 (See Appendix B, page 114). From the correlations developed during the axial coding process, I was able to create a relational storyline which was illustrated in the previous axial coding section.

Summary of the Findings

This qualitative research study included 11 suburban middle school principals from throughout the state of Alabama. Each principal had served at least three years at his or her current school. This chapter disclosed the findings of the study in conformity with the three levels of analysis essential with grounded theory methodology: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

The open coding process of interviewing led to the development of seven categories whose primary components were grounded in the participants' shared experiences through direct quotes of principal responses as follows: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration and Connecting. The open coding categories were then re-integrated into an axial coding paradigm model that identified the central (core) phenomenon of *Balancing High Expectations with Continuous Nurturing and Support* that related to the other categories.

The relationships were illustrated through the categories as follows: (a) Causal/Influential Conditions – *School Climate and Culture* and *Middle School to High School Articulation*; (b) Action/Interaction Strategies – *Multiple Levels of Support*, *Character Development*, and *Academic Opportunities*; (c) Context – *Preparing for High School* and *In-Tune with Student Needs*; (d) Intervening Conditions – *Challenges of Adolescence*, *Lack of Home Support*, and *External Influences*; and (e) Consequences – *Continuous Improvement*. Next, the axial categories were subjected to the selective

coding process in order to validate the axial categorical relationships in order to develop a grounded theory.

Six themes emerged that described the strategies that support middle school transitions to high school: (1) Maintaining a Balance of High Expectations with Continuous Nurturing and Support; (2) Shared Vision/Leadership and Positive Climate and Culture, and Middle School-High School Articulation; (3) Multiple Systems of Support, Character Development, and Academic Opportunities; (4) Preparation for High School and In-Tune with Student Needs; (5) Challenges of Adolescence and External Influences, and (6) Continuous Improvement.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by successful veteran middle school principals in suburban schools in Alabama and to create a theoretical model to clarify the process. In the earlier chapters, I discussed the context of the study in regard to the current body of professional literature.

In addition, I addressed the precise methods exercised to execute the study and convey the findings developed through the analytic process of open, axial, and selective coding. Finally, I produced a propositional and visual model (See Appendix B, page 114) that offered a theoretical explanation for the best strategies of making middle school to high school transitions established upon the identification of a central phenomenon and the incorporation of select essential processual components to that phenomenon.

This concluding chapter contains a summary of the major findings and includes a return to the professional literature to authenticate the outcomes and exhibit how the findings can be applied to illustrate where the literature is erroneous, unsophisticated, or does not completely explain the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The results of this study do not attempt to reveal errors or concerns with previous research.

Furthermore, revisiting the literature will supplement or add to the previous research and allow for a reassessment of the research questions that directed the study to authenticate recommended connections between the study results and existing knowledge,

recommendations for professional practice, and suggestions for future research. This chapter concludes with several closing thoughts in support of sustained efforts to examine principals' best practices in helping students navigate the transition from middle school to high school.

Summary of the Major Findings

The outcomes of the grounded theory study presented the answer to the research questions posed to address strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school. The seven categories that emerged were (a) high expectations, (b) nurturing and support, (c) communication and collaboration, (d) school environment, (e) parental involvement, (f) development of character and soft skills, and (g) career exploration and connecting.

In earlier chapters I discussed the context of the study regarding the current body of professional literature. I also addressed the specific methods that were exercised to carry out the study and convey the conclusions that were developed through the methodical process of open, axial, and selective coding. Finally, I organized a propositional and visual model that presented a theoretical explanation for the best practices of transitioning students from middle school to high school that was based upon the identification of a central phenomenon and an integration of select key processual elements to that phenomenon.

Study participants were successful middle school principals who acknowledged the importance of equipping their students for the challenges and expectations of high school while navigating the physiological transformation that accompanies adolescence and puberty (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Lutz & Wagner, 2005; Wingfield et al., 2006).

Each principal revealed a commitment to the central phenomenon of balancing the highest of expectations with continuous nurturing and support throughout the middle school years. The allegiance to supporting students through every step of the transition was demonstrated by each principal's belief that the experiences students encounter in middle school correlate with their continued success in high school and beyond (Wormeli, 2011).

In regard to the conceptual framework referenced in Chapters 1 and 2, Maslow (1943) noted the significance of an individual's desire to belong to or be a part of a group, which is an example of the fulfillment of man's desire to belong. As demonstrated in the literature review and from participant responses, successful middle schools provide a variety of effective interventions that meet the needs of adolescent students and build their sense of confidence to a level that allows higher-order needs to take over.

Principals who took part in the study revealed a number of methods employed to support students during their transition from a self-contained elementary school setting, through the often-perplexing middle school years, to the higher expectations and experiences they encounter in high school. Affirming the description offered by the National Middle School Association [NMSA] (2003) of successful schools for young adolescents, the principals asserted their passion for working with middle school students and the significance of recruiting teachers and staff who share the same values and are prepared to work at the middle school level.

Participants talked about maintaining a shared vision that guides decisions in a supportive, collaborative, and safe environment where high expectations are a priority for every member of the team. However, principals interviewed also discussed the

importance of giving students second and third chances to redo work in addition to connecting students through multiple extra-curricular opportunities; elective and exploratory classes; athletics; and programs that teach self-advocacy, soft skills, perseverance, and character (NMSA, 2003). Furthermore, participants noted the value of parental involvement in order to build a stronger sense of community and belonging (Rice, 2001).

As previously stated, the principal's willingness to share leadership establishes the environment in the school (Onorato, 2013). Principals who model positive behaviors in addition to involving teachers, staff, parents, and students in building a collaborative culture positively impact the students, encourage and empower teachers, and build trust and support from parents (McEwan, 2003).

Furthermore, principals who build a collaborative culture model and inspire a culture that provides a challenging, yet safe and supportive environment for the students throughout the transitioning process (Sagnak, 2010). The participants in this study understood the importance of involving all shareholders in creating consistent policies and procedures while establishing a positive school climate and culture. The participants also shared the manner in which they relate to students, colleagues, and parents throughout the transitioning process.

In summary, the visual model hypothesized through the emerging themes in the open coding analysis and the complexity of the axial coding clearly presented an applicable process of intervention strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school. Furthermore, a smooth transitioning process during the middle school years can positively impact student success in high school and beyond (Wormeli, 2011).

It is imperative that middle school principals continue to provide meaningful interventions that effectively balance high expectations with nurturing and support to effectively impact student transitions.

Research Questions and Relation of Findings to Professional Literature

The results of this grounded theory study revealed the answers to the research questions constructed to address intervention strategies that support middle school transitions to high school. The conclusions of this study yielded the challenges of adolescence, balancing high expectations with nurturing and support, school climate and culture, middle school to high school articulation, preparing for high school, multiple supports, character development, and continuous improvement. These findings emerged from the axial coding process that identified the best practices of middle school principals in addressing student needs.

The central research question to the study was as follows: How do middle school principals in selected schools in Alabama describe best practices in implementing transition activities that nurture and acclimatize students while preparing them for the challenges they will encounter at the high school level? Two models that examined the middle school to high school transitioning process emerged from the review of professional literature.

The findings of Akos and Galassi (2004) and Uvaas and McKeivitt (2013) were consistent with the contextual, causal/influential conditions, and intervening conditions acknowledged in the current study. Both sets of researchers agreed that middle school students and parents need further information and insight regarding the positive benefits of transitioning to high school. The studies also concluded that additional types of

transition programming may be needed in order to maximize success to each component of the school transition. The conclusions of this study offered answers to the research questions as follows:

- 1) How do middle school principals organize staff members in order to better transition students from middle school to high school?

The results from this question revealed that the principals in the study organize staff members in a manner consistent with the middle school concept, which calls for the creation of responsive learning environments that encourage productive and helpful relationships among students, teachers, and parents in order to build a strong learning community. This finding corresponds with the works of Mac Iver and Epstein (1993), Pendergast and Bahr (2005), and Babbage (2012) who advocated student-centered and developmentally responsive practices that promote learning across disciplines, character education, and exploratory programs.

Seven of the 11 principals place students on interdisciplinary teams and embed common planning times for team teachers to collaborate on a daily basis, in addition to providing embedded core subject collaboration among teachers within their disciplines. However, even the four principals who did not organize faculty according to interdisciplinary teams still provided daily opportunities for teachers to meet as professional learning communities to develop lessons, review data, and create common assessments.

Additional findings of Smyth and McInerney (2007) support the results that principals need to create learning communities that are characterized by their responsive practices and integrated into the lives of middle school students in order to adequately

address challenges unique to them. Furthermore, the efforts of the principals in the study to provide all stakeholders with a voice and foster group goals ties in with the findings of Sagnak (2010). All principals in this study expressed beliefs in collaborative leadership and involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process.

- 2) What types of student-centered activities do principals plan to implement to successfully transition students from middle school to high school?

The responses to this question confirmed the significance of principals working closely with staff members to plan and create a variety of activities that support the transitioning process. Furthermore, the philosophies expressed by the participating principals agree with previous research by Mizelle (2005) and Smith (2006) that called for a variety of transitional programs at each grade level in order to maximize student success at the high school level and beyond. Another study affirmed that due to the lack of evidence-based transition programs, schools that seek to address these concerns must plan and implement programs of their own (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013).

My findings confirm that the schools in this study collaboratively plan transitional programs at each grade level that are responsive to student needs which leads to student success at the next grade level. Another area addressed by every principal in the study was a procedure to protect students from bullying. The worthiness of anti-bullying programs at the middle school level was addressed in a previous study by Farmer et al. (2011). Consistent with the related literature, the principals in this study acknowledged that bullying is a common occurrence among adolescent students and the development of bullying prevention programs is essential to building a safe and supportive school environment.

Student-centered practices cited by principals in the study ranged from teachers opening their classrooms in the mornings before the start of the school day to provide students with extra assistance with homework or assignments to schools offering free tutoring in the afternoons. Furthermore, each school in the study scheduled an advisory or intervention time during the regular school day or on different days during the week for students to receive help or opportunities to redo work on a daily or at least a weekly basis.

In addition to providing academic assistance, the teachers who led the advisories would use those times to teach character education, self-advocacy, and conflict-resolution. These support strategies align with findings by Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013), who discussed the importance of secondary school leaders to look for available methods to promote a more student-friendly, responsive, and nurturing secondary school environment.

3) What types of school to school articulation activities take place to ensure middle school to high school success?

There was a great deal of consensus among participating principals regarding the value of bringing middle school and high school staffs together for vertical team meetings to discuss not only curriculum, but also strengths and needs of each class of students preparing to transition. According to Mizelle (2005), successful transitions rely on administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents at the middle and high school coming together to discuss expectations, policies, courses, curriculum, and opportunities.

Mizelle (2005) further asserted that vertical team meetings offer an opportunity for employees at each school to come together to assess practices, align curriculum, and

promote consistent expectations at both the middle and high schools. Similarly, Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) affirmed that principals, counselors, and teachers at the middle school and high school levels need to continue regular vertical communication in order to identify methods to better equip students through the challenges they face with each new academic year. Based on previous findings, it is evident that regular vertical communication between middle and high school staff members is beneficial to students during the transition from middle school to high school.

Each participating principal in the study noted the importance of maintaining regular communication with the principals at their receiving high school. Principals spoke of bringing their teachers together at least twice a year in addition to involving their counselors and assistant principals in regular meetings with their counterparts at the high schools. Principals further discussed having the high school counselors come to the middle school to work with middle school counselors in meeting in groups and individually with students rising to the high school to discuss expectations, course selections, and develop schedules for their first year at the high school.

In addition, middle and high school staff members worked together in planning a tour of the high school for the students to see where their actual classes or departments would be located once they made the transition to the high school. The practice of bringing staff members together for a tour was also confirmed by the findings of Uvaas and McKeivitt (2013) and Abell et al. (2006).

- 4) How do principals encourage parental involvement during the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school?

Participants in the study again expressed consensus regarding the importance of

parental involvement. Abell et al. (2006) articulated the importance of getting feedback from both students and parents prior to and following the transition to high school in order to evaluate the consistency, value, and impact of transition program and materials. Additional findings by Ingels et al. (2002) cited parental involvement among key ingredients to promoting effective transitions. As noted earlier, parents who have been involved in the transitioning process can provide valuable feedback that will assist administrators in planning meaningful and relevant transition opportunities (Abell et al., 2006).

Principals explained how they constantly communicate with parents through daily email blasts via their school list serve. Participants reported using Twitter, Facebook, and other types of social media outlets to inform parents of upcoming school events and to encourage involvement in areas throughout the school. Six of the 11 participants noted sending home weekly or monthly newsletters to showcase accomplishments and announce upcoming events at the school.

Areas of parental involvement cited by principals included volunteering in the front office, leading campus beautification projects, serving as chaperones on field trips, planning dances or banquets, sending group email notifications for teachers or interdisciplinary teams, organizing appreciation meals for teachers and staff members, maintaining and managing a concession stand during athletic events or breaks during the school day, in addition to assisting teachers during team-building events, field days, or during registration.

Furthermore, principals discussed opportunities to provide parents a voice through parent-teacher organizations or by recruiting them to serve on school leadership

committees. Open House events and high school orientation nights were additional occasions designed to keep parents informed and to encourage their involvement throughout the transitioning process. In conclusion, each principal cited the significance of parental involvement through every phase of the transition process.

Recommendations for Professional Best Practice

During the course of this grounded theory study, through the stages of open coding, the creation of an axial coding model, selective coding, and theory building, I was able to construct a theory along with a set of propositions in regard to the intervention strategies principals use in helping students make the transition from middle school to high school. The resulting theory and set of propositions regarding the best practices identified by experienced and successful middle school principals and how they support students throughout the transition process was embedded in the context, the causal conditions, the intervening conditions, the action/interaction strategies, and consequences model.

This process was further supported by the research findings cited in the literature relating to the challenges of adolescence, the culture and climate of the school, the collaboration within and among the schools, the multiple supports, the preparation for high school, and the focus on continuous improvement. Through the use of grounded theory methodology, I was able to reveal the best practices of principals in supporting their students during the process of helping students transition from middle school to high school.

Findings from this grounded theory study could positively impact the methods principals implement to transition middle school students to high school. The 11

principals in the study indicated a high degree of consensus in their philosophies on challenging, yet supporting and preparing their students throughout their journey from middle school to high school. Participating principals noted the importance of maintaining high expectations while providing students with continuous nurturing and support. These principals built positive school environments through the promotion of a shared vision based upon regular collaboration among all stakeholders, which included teachers, parents, and students. Participating principals also affirmed the value of exposing students to rigorous academic classes, a variety of career exploration and elective course offerings interwoven with opportunities to teach positive character, soft skills, and self-advocacy.

Since the current study focused on the best practices of middle school principals, administrators at the middle school level should be the primary beneficiaries of these findings. The results clearly indicate the positive aspects of providing a variety of supportive practices that equip middle school students for the opportunities and obstacles they will experience during their middle and high school years. These findings are further supported by the professional literature that identifies the necessity for adults and school personnel to provide guidance and continuous support to adolescent students during their transitions from middle school to high school (Goodwin et al., 2012; Miles, 2003; Pruitt, 2000; Smith et al., 2006).

Middle school principals should continue their efforts to work collaboratively with their staff members, along with their colleagues at the receiving high school in planning, implementing, incorporating, and evaluating methods to support students through school transitions. There is a distinct connection between the literature review

and the findings of this study relative to how middle school principals can involve all stakeholders in helping students successfully transition from middle school to high school.

As noted in my earlier review of the relevant literature (see Chapter 2) and in the findings of this grounded theory study (see Chapter 4), the establishment of high expectations and multiple methods of support positively influence a smooth transition that correlates to success at the high school level and beyond. Based upon the accomplishments of their schools, the principals involved in this study appeared to be highly motivated individuals who displayed a commitment to providing the absolute best opportunities to impact the lives and encourage success for the students in their schools. Incorporating interventions and strategies such as these would be beneficial for all grade levels at any school.

Superintendents and school district leaders may also profit from the findings of this research study. While the schools represented in the study ranged from financially challenged to affluent, most of the best practices identified in the study could be replicated with little or no cost to the district. Providing academic assistance in addition to assuring every student has an adult advocate are further best practices that could be incorporated without the need for additional funding.

Although incorporating the middle school concept, complete with the inclusion of interdisciplinary teams, would require hiring more teachers at some schools, innovative scheduling practices would permit opportunities for teachers to still maintain common planning times for collaborative planning of lessons, common assessments, reviewing of data, and chances to mentor new teachers. Furthermore, district professional development

programs should be implemented to address transitioning students, help teachers to better understand the needs of adolescent students, demonstrate how to incorporate lessons that promote student engagement, and show teachers and administrators how to incorporate lessons that teach character and self-advocacy.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative grounded theory study examined the intervention strategies and best practices of 11 suburban Alabama middle school principals in helping students transition from middle school to high school. Since findings from this study potentially provide insights for future studies, this study should be replicated with principals in urban and rural settings. Future researchers may wish to expand the scope of participant perspectives and conduct a larger, grounded theory, qualitative, or mixed-methods study that includes not only principals, but also teachers, students, and parents. High school principals could also be included in a future study. It would be beneficial to learn what an expanded study with greater diversity would reveal regarding the perceptions and experiences of the additional stakeholders. A replication of this study could include schools at the lower end of the performance scale, not just the top performing schools.

A final suggestion would be to conduct a study with middle school principals in other states since, as noted during the literature review there is an apparent gap in the empirical research literature regarding the process of supporting students in their transition from middle school to high school (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Further, educational researchers may benefit by examining the impact of the middle school philosophy and/or the benefits of interdisciplinary teaming on the middle school to high school transition.

Final Thoughts

In numerous ways, the findings of this study highlight the need for principals to provide a variety of intervention supports to students throughout their transition from middle school to high school. This study reaffirms the benefits of student-centered schools with successful leaders who make decisions based upon the best interests of the students. Although this study involved only suburban middle school principals, the best practices incorporated by the principals in the study could be incorporated in rural and urban schools of any size in the nation.

In conclusion, the results of this study could be applied more broadly at the elementary and high school levels. Every school should prioritize high expectations and quality classroom instruction. However, the highest of expectations coupled with the best teaching methods lack substance when there is a lack of leadership, professional collaboration, supportive programs, student-centered interventions, and continuous improvement. Principals who place value on the education of the whole child in an enriching and supportive school environment will enhance opportunities for student success through every phase of the transition process.

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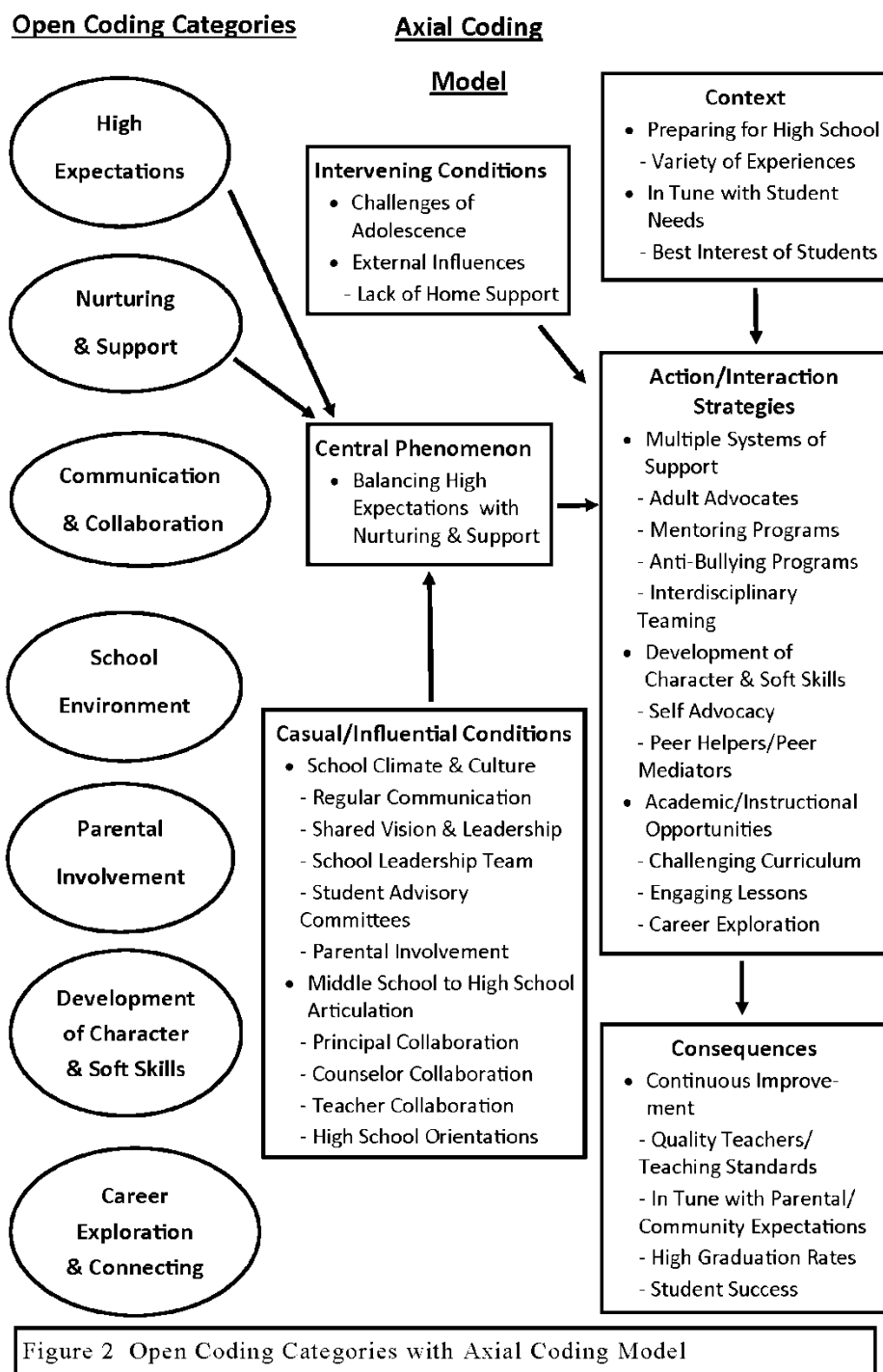
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APPENDIX A

OPEN AND AXIAL CODING DIAGRAM (FIGURE 2)



APPENDIX B

SELECTIVE CODING DIAGRAM (FIGURE 3)

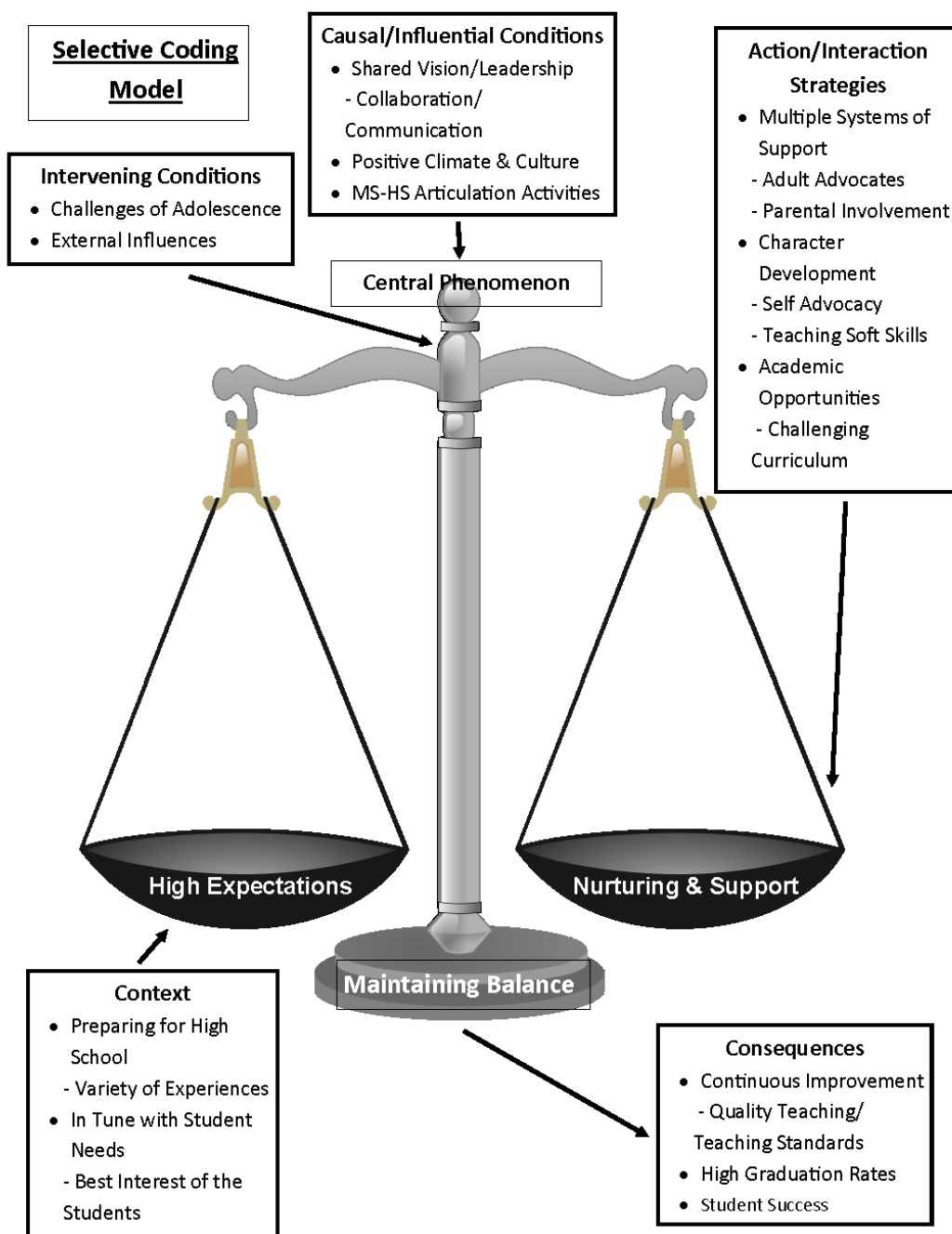


Figure 3. Theoretical model for strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school.

APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

June 28, 2016

Dear Principal,

My name is Larry Haynes and I am a graduate student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham seeking an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. I am also a middle school principal. The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting entitled, "Intervention Strategies That Support Middle School Student Transitions to High School: A Grounded Theory Study of the Best Practices Identified by Middle School Principals." The purpose of this research study is to explore middle school principals' best practices in supporting students throughout their middle school years while preparing them for the expectations and experiences they will encounter in high school.

You have been selected for this study based upon your expertise in leading a middle school whose eighth grade students were among the top 25 performing classes in Alabama in the Aspire Test in either Reading or Math. You are invited to participate in an interview, scheduled at your convenience, which will last approximately 45 minutes. This interview will be face-to-face, audio recorded, and transcribed. A copy of the interview questions will be provided to you in advance for your review. If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask if you would mind sharing any documents that could provide information regarding transitioning activities you offer at your school. These documents could potentially include faculty meeting agendas, vertical team meeting notes, sixth grade orientations, school calendars, or list-serve announcements. I will also provide a copy of your transcribed interview for your review to assure accuracy.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity and your school's identity will remain anonymous. At the time we meet for the interview I will ask you for a pseudonym which will be used when referring to you in the reporting of the data. The data from this research will be used as partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree and will be used in my dissertation. All data will be secured and kept in a locked filing cabinet at my home.

If you have any questions or concerns, please telephone me (205-515-0733) or email me at lhaynes1@uab.edu. If you agree to participate in the study you may respond to my email or call me. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the UAB Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (205) 934-3789 or toll free at 1-855-860-3789. Regular hours for the OIRB are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday. You may also call this number in the event the research staff cannot be reached or you wish to talk to someone else.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and participation. As a secondary school educator, it is my desire that your participation in this study will enhance your practice as

a school leader and provide me with valuable information and insight. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Larry Haynes

APPENDIX D
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board for Human Use

Form 4: IRB Approval Form
Identification and Certification of Research
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00005960 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56.

Principal Investigator: HAYNES, LARRY P

Co-Investigator(s):

Protocol Number: **E150717004**

Protocol Title: *Intervention Strategies that Support Middle School Transition to High School: A Grounded Theory Study of Best Practices Identified by Middle School Principals*

The above project was reviewed on 7/22/15. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This project qualifies as an exemption as defined in 45CF46.101, paragraph 1.

This project received EXEMPT review.

IRB Approval Date: 7/22/15

Date IRB Approval Issued: 7/22/15

Cari Oliver
Assistant Director, Office of the
Institutional Review Board for Human Use
(IRB)

Investigators please note:

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.

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