MOVING FROM MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL: 
MAKING SENSE OF THE FRESHMAN TRANSITION

A thesis presented
by
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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Educators have noticed students moving from eighth grade middle school programs to ninth grade high school environments encounter difficulties during the first year of the transition. Students who do not successfully transition to high school run the risk of repeating ninth grade, falling behind their peers and possibly dropping out of high school. The purpose of this study was to better understand how students make meaning of their freshman year to develop better programming to assist students during this vulnerable point in their academic career. This study was guided by a theoretical framework consisting of critical education theory and self-efficacy theory. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach, four ninth-grade students were interviewed three times each over the course of the second half of their freshman year to better understand how students make meaning of the experience. The interviews were transcribed and the data were analyzed in multiple cycles to determine the findings. Analysis included making initial notes, developing emergent themes, finding connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case and then finding patterns across cases. These patterns were the super-ordinate themes that helped explain how students make meaning of their experiences during the freshman year. Students spoke of anticipating high school, adjusting expectations, navigating landscapes, overcoming academic difficulties, participating actively, planning for the future, and reflecting on the year. Each student who participated had unique experiences, but they also had commonalities that connected their experiences as they moved through the first year of high school.

Key words: freshman transition, freshman experiences, making meaning, moving from middle school.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As September approaches, another group of students prepares to enter high school as ninth graders. For these students, the move to high school represents a significant step towards adulthood; it is a time when young people look forward to more autonomy and expanded academic, athletic, and social opportunities. Unfortunately, the ninth-grade year can prove to be a stumbling block for some students as they transition to a new educational setting with new academic and social routines. Many students struggle slightly, eventually adapting to the new expectations and routines. Other students face greater challenges in the freshman year that may cause them to fall behind their peers. This can mean not being promoted with their classmates and not making progress towards graduation. These are serious life-long consequences for problems that manifest during the ninth-grade year.

In many districts, a move from eighth to ninth grade means a physical move from a middle school building to a different high school building. With the physical move comes a range of new expectations, new routines, and new personnel for freshmen to adjust to in a short time period. Many ninth-grade students struggle initially, displaying poor time management skills, low homework completion rates, and few strategies for managing class expectations. To address this problem, I am examining the experience of four transitioning ninth-grade students. With this research, our school personnel may be able to develop better programs that help ninth-grade students make the transition between middle school and high school.

Significance of the Problem

While many critical transition points exist in the journey through elementary, middle and high school, the transition between middle school and high school is especially important as a
major milestone in the American model of schooling (Neild, 2009). Many students struggle
during that transition; a struggle manifested through lower grades and lower attendance rates for
students in ninth grade in comparison to their eighth-grade year (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello
& Miles, 2003). The ninth-grade year also features higher rates of suspensions and expulsions
than any other year in high school (Smith, Akos, Lim & Wiley, 2008). Students can be affected
emotionally as well as through lowered self-esteem, increased need for friendships, and
decreased coping skills (Letrello & Miles, 2003). There may even be a connection to higher rates
of symptoms of depression in the first year of high school (Newman, Newman, Griffen,
O’Connor & Spas, 2007). Smith et al. (2008) point out that there is little evidence that
adolescents experience more stress than people moving through other life stages, but the
transition to high school represents a significant educational transition which triggers normal
feelings of anticipation and anxiety. Dealing with those feelings can provide the student with a
trying ninth-grade year, but if not addressed, the student may be impacted beyond freshman year
as well.

Academic credits for graduation requirements begin to be tallied in ninth grade, and
students have to pass their ninth-grade classes to move on to tenth grade (Neild, 2009). Failing to
do so can put students behind academically, reduce their chances of graduating from high school
in four years and potentially increase their chance of dropping out (Alspaugh, 1998; Roderick &
Camburn, 1999). Students who drop out of high school risk economic effects from low-paying
jobs that can disadvantage them throughout their entire lives, especially if they drop out before
tenth grade (Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996). Clearly, a poor transition between eighth and
ninth grade can have long range effects for students.
In order to address this problem, many schools are implementing transition programs for ninth-grade students. There are a variety of programs being offered in high schools across the nation, but the literature lacks an examination of how students make meaning of their freshman year. Without this data, it is difficult to determine exactly what types of programs are effective and what types are not. By understanding how students make meaning of their freshman year, better programs can be designed to meet the needs of these students. The gap between what the students need and what they are getting providess the driving force of this study.

**Purpose**

This research project is designed to achieve two goals. The practical goal is to better understand what the incoming freshmen experience as they transition to the high school and move through their freshman year. With this insight, better programming can be developed by the school personnel and other concerned parties to create successful support systems for our ninth-grade students. Many resources can be wasted if programs are developed that do not adequately address the actual needs of students. This work is intended to help make the transition to freshman year easier and less stressful for our students.

The second goal is intellectual. I was very surprised at the lack of qualitative research done in this area in the literature. The large numbers of quantitative studies show that there are difficulties during the transition to ninth grade, and now it is important to better understand what makes it such a potentially hazardous point in a student’s academic career. This project is designed to add depth to the existing body of research by completing a qualitative study that
examines the experiences of students through their own words. This study will add the voices of actual students to the numerical data that currently represent the scholarly work on the topic.

**Research Question**

This project is focused on determining how freshman students make meaning of their experiences as they transition to the high school and move through their ninth-grade year. The central research question is: *How do students who have moved from middle school to high school make sense of the freshman year?* To investigate this question, a qualitative approach known as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with students to better understand what they experience as they transition to the high school and progress through ninth grade. The end result of this type of study is to discover how people make meaning of a major experience in their lives (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This study was designed to accomplish both my practical goal of helping the freshmen at my high school as well as adding to the body of scholarly knowledge that attempts to understand this problem.

**Theoretical Framework**

The problem of freshman transition can be approached from many different angles and using many different lenses. This study has a theoretical framework consisting of critical education theory and self-efficacy theory. Critical education theorists believe that students are part of a world where people are not free and where contradictions abound (McLaren, 2002). They also believe that power is not shared; instead, it is held by a dominant group in society that works to maintain its own power and privilege (McLaren, 2002). According to critical theorists, schools can play an important role in perpetuating the power and privilege awarded to members
of the dominant cultures, which in turn prepares students for their predestined places within the hierarchy of modern American society (Freire, 1970). Critical education theory is an important tool for examining the power dynamics that may be impacting students as they make the transition to freshman year.

Self-efficacy theorists believe that people guide the outcomes of their endeavors through their positive or negative thinking about the activity (Miller, 2002). Students with higher levels of self-efficacy persist in the face of challenge or rejection, while students with lower levels of self-efficacy fail to complete challenging activities (Miller, 2002). High self-efficacy levels in students are necessary for them to become self-directed learners, which is often crucial for success in high school courses (Miller, 2002). Students’ perceived self-efficacy can also influence their choice of activities and their persistence once activities have begun (Bandura, Adams & Beyer, 1977). Self-efficacy is an important lens for examining why some students have more difficulty during the transition from eighth to ninth grade than others.

Using these lenses together in the framework will allow for an examination of both the external and internal factors that may affect the transitioning students. Critical race theory posits that students are treated differently based on their external traits: race and gender most obviously, but socioeconomic class has subtle external markings that can set students apart as well (McLaren, 2002). Self-efficacy theory focuses on the students’ individual internal motivations and abilities, and those factors may be affected by how they are perceived due to their external factors. If students belonging to non-dominant social groups are continually sent messages about their place in society through authority figures in public education, it would not be surprising to find that those messages affect their self-perception. Using the theories together
allows for a better understanding of the whole student, from the external forces acting on him or her to the internal skills he or she develops during the journey through public education.

**Critical Education Theory.** Critical education theory encompasses many different theorists’ beliefs about how and why the American education system is failing its students. The theorists do agree that American public schools are not neutral institutions where equal opportunities exist for all students (Giroux, 1982). Giroux (1982) posits that through the first half of the twentieth century there was a common belief that public education was the best way to promote economic growth and economic equality for all of the country’s citizens. He believes that the raucous politics of the 1960s and 1970s changed people’s minds about that idea and led to a series of theories and reforms to correct the wrongs of the public education system (Giroux, 1982). Different critical theorists approach the problem from a variety of perspectives, but all agree that power relations within schools teach students much more than that which appears in the published curricula.

Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), outlined his ideas about those who have a dominant role in society and those who are oppressed. Freire drew his inspiration from various philosophers and revolutionaries ranging from Sartre to Che Guevara, and in turn, his ideas have inspired and guided the critical theorists over the past forty years (Freire, 1970). Freire’s (1970) original definition of the oppressed was a class-based definition; he believed that there were no monolithic assumptions that could be made about racial groups, but that members of economic class groups shared similarly valued places in society. This theory has support in the literature of the freshman transition where socioeconomic class plays a large role in how well a student transitions.
While some theorists agree with Freire’s class-based oppression in society (Aronowitz, 2004; hooks, 1994), other theorists have highlighted the role race and gender also play in the oppression of groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Weiler, 1988). Critical theorists do agree that schools are social institutions that help perpetuate dominant societal values and behaviors. Aronowitz (2004) views schools as merely credentialing institutions preparing students for their life of work in industrial or corporate settings with little emphasis on discovery, critical thinking, or analysis. Through what is taught and how it is taught, schools may be sending hidden messages to students.

Critical theorists see the knowledge imparted to students in schools as neither neutral nor objective (McLaren, 2002). Instead, it is socially constructed to further the goals of the dominant society (McLaren, 2002). Its emphasis and exclusions allow it to be ordered and structured in particular ways that give ascendancy to certain subjects and curricular material (McLaren, 2002). No curriculum is ideologically or politically innocent, and trying to wipe it completely free of bias makes it abstract and unhelpful (McLaren, 2002). Instead, the critical theorists work to understand how knowledge is constructed and how to educate students to deconstruct that knowledge themselves to recognize the power structure hidden within (McLaren, 2002).

Along with what is taught, the way material is taught can reinforce power structures within the classroom that reflect the hierarchy found in society. Freire (1970) saw the dominant pedagogy being used as teacher instructing student, the emphasis being on memorization and recall of “facts” with no room for critical thinking or analysis. He witnessed no dialogue and no recognition that the previous knowledge and experiences that students bring to a classroom have value and importance, and instead, teaching is seen as a way for the teacher to indoctrinate the
students into the ways of the dominant class (Freire, 1970). Ninth-grade students might not have
the insight to see how this style of teaching affects them, but some of the difficulties they face in
the transition may have their roots in critical education theory.

**Resistance theory.** One area of critical theory that has particular relevance for a study of
the ninth-grade transition is resistance theory. Resistance theory offers explanations about why
some students from non-dominant groups attempt to resist the academic and social norms of the
school and what the probable results are (McLaren, 2002). Resisting the expected behaviors in a
school is seen as an act of defiance by the students, but in reality it keeps the students in a
subordinate position in relation to the dominant group (McLaren, 2002). Instead of liberating
themselves, resistance, without the requisite understanding of power structures, actually cements
their place outside of the dominant group (McLaren, 2002). For example, when freshmen in
lower-level classes refuse to do homework or to study for tests, they are actually guaranteeing
that they will remain in lower-level classes. This may discourage them and could eventually lead
to them dropping out of school. What they see as a defiant act can merely keep them in a
subordinate position as preferred by the dominant class and have long-lasting consequences that
could haunt them into adulthood.

Resistance theorists believe that acts of resistance are attempts to bring some aspect of
the home or street culture into the schools (McLaren, 2002). It may be that students do not feel
that they have legitimate access to the academic culture that surrounds them and therefore they
attempt to deviate from it (McLaren, 2002). As students resist the culture of academia, they are
distancing themselves from that which discomfits them. McLaren (2002) believes that this
distance helps students from non-dominant cultures to actively cultivate a passion for ignorance
where new ideas are rejected, and students retreat further into their home or street culture. This suits the purpose of the dominant class who does not want other groups to think about, analyze and criticize the way society is structured (McLaren, 2002). As students resist in school, they may be setting themselves up for a lifetime of being marginalized in society.

Critical theory is an important tool to use when examining the problem of freshman transition because important influences affect students even though they may not be consciously aware. Schools are societal institutions, and the transition to high school can be a moment when society’s expectations and values begin to weigh on students and encourage them to make the choices that will reinforce their place in the social hierarchy. Society’s pressure is most likely invisible to all involved: the students, their parents, many of the school personnel, all of whom may look to the characteristics of the individual student to explain difficulties rather than examining the important role of society. Critical theory can help to highlight some of those forces working against students and give better insight into why some students falter so greatly during the transition to high school.

**Self-Efficacy Theory.** Albert Bandura has been a leading proponent of the self-efficacy theory since the late 1970s. Miller (2002) provides Bandura’s formal definition of self-efficacy: “beliefs in one’s own capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 188). The courses of action may involve behavior (academic, social or recreational), thoughts, and emotions (Miller, 2002). Students may have the skills necessary to complete certain tasks, but if they do not perceive themselves as able to complete them successfully, they may fail or fail to attempt to complete the task (Miller, 2002). Freshman year is a period when students are facing new academic responsibilities and social freedoms
(Neild, 2009). If students do not perceive themselves as being efficacious, they may fail in their endeavors or may fail to even try. This can lead to serious academic consequences that may derail a student’s academic career in high school.

Perceptions of self-efficacy can be developed through four means: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (Bandura et al., 1977). Performance accomplishments are the successful completion of previous tasks to add to one’s own personal mastery (Bandura et al., 1977). These would be the tasks students had done well on in the past to give them positive feelings about that type of undertaking. Less impactful to the student than performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences can lead to perceptions of self-efficacy by watching others successfully complete tasks (Bandura et al., 1977). Another’s success leads to beliefs about one’s own ability to cope with a particular challenge; for students it may be witnessing a peer achieve success in some academic task or assignment (Bandura et al., 1977). Also less influential than performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion leads one to believe that one can successfully cope with a task through persuasive suggestion by another (Bandura et al., 1977). For students, this may mean being verbally encouraged by teachers that a task is manageable and successful achievement is possible. Emotional arousal can also affect perceptions of self-efficacy because people rely on physiological cues to tell them when they are stressed; people are likely to assume they are less efficacious when they are feeling symptoms of anxiety (Bandura et al., 1977). If students believe they perform worse when feeling anxious, and they feel the symptoms of anxiety when taking a test, they may perceive themselves to be less efficacious in taking tests.
Perceptions of self-efficacy are important because individuals with high self-efficacy and individuals with low self-efficacy think, feel, and act in different ways (Bandura, 1989). People who perceive themselves as being efficacious view difficult tasks as tasks to be mastered rather than avoided, set challenging goals for themselves and maintain their commitment to them, and make things happen rather than inactively observing what is happening (Bandura, 1989). Students who are highly efficacious set demanding personal goals for themselves, and use their self-monitoring and self-judgment skills to stay on track while pursuing these goals (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). People who have low perceptions of their self-efficacy avoid difficult tasks, have low aspirations and little commitment to the goals they set, and tend to dwell on personal shortcomings (Bandura, 1989). Inefficacious students tend to exert little cognitive energy in processing new information and give up easily in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1989). The beliefs students carry into high school about themselves may play a large role in how successful they are in their freshman year.

Bong (2002) found that self-efficacy can be measured in very specific units. Researching students’ self-efficacy, Bong (2002) found that students differed in their self-assessments of confidence when faced with problem-specific, task-specific, and subject-specific measures of self-efficacy. Students were more likely to have higher rates of self-efficacy when completing problem- and task-specific actions (Bong, 2002). Students reported lower levels of self-efficacy when asked about subjects in general (Bong, 2002). This indicates that students may be able to handle specific tasks and problems, but may feel less efficacious when thinking about an academic subject as a whole. This is problematic because Caraway, Tucker, Reinke and Hall (2003) found that general self-efficacy was a significant predictor in students’ grade-point
averages. As mentioned later, a decrease in grade-point average is a common effect of the transition to high school. The transition point seems to be a moment when students’ self-efficacy can dip, leading to academic consequences.

As children develop, different social groups impact their self-efficacy. A young child relies more on his or her family for messages about his or her efficacy (Miller, 2002). During middle childhood, peer groups and school contexts become more important in a child’s perception of his or her abilities (Miller, 2002). Peer groups can have a profound effect on a student’s social and emotional efficacy, while schooling influences the student’s intellectual efficacy (Miller, 2002). As students continue to develop, they face new challenges to their self-efficacy, which causes them to recalibrate their perceptions (Miller, 2002). People’s beliefs about their self-efficacy continue to develop as they move through the life stages, thus making self-efficacy a very dynamic force in a person’s life (Miller, 2002). The transition to high school may be one moment for students when they need to recalibrate their perceptions of their own efficacy.

Along with developing students’ beliefs about their intellectual self-efficacy, schools are important contexts for students developing perceptions of their social efficacy (Newman et al., 2007). The transition period is a time when students’ social networks are shifting, causing them to face new relationships with their families, peers, and school adults (Newman et al., 2007). This may cause students to reevaluate their sense of self-efficacy, causing changes from middle school. As students form new perceptions of their self-efficacy, it may cause changes in their moods and behaviors (Bandura, 1989). Bandura (1989) points out that people who believe they cannot deal with certain situations feel anxious and depressed more than self-efficacious people. Often girls possess lower levels of social self-efficacy which can lead to higher rates of
depression in girls than boys (Miller, 2002). Anxiety and depression may affect students’ academic careers negatively, in extreme cases being the first step towards a student deciding to leave school altogether (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Beliefs about self-efficacy can affect students, though they must be combined with other factors to guarantee success for students.

While self-efficacy is important in determining a student’s willingness to persist and the probable outcome of a task, it is not the sole determinant (Bandura et al., 1977). A student’s expectations about his or her own achievement will not produce the desired outcomes without having some of the necessary competencies to complete the task (Bandura et al., 1977). For example, a student cannot write an excellent research paper on Napoleon without some knowledge of both the mechanics of writing and the life of Napoleon; the mere belief in his or her ability will not be enough to successfully complete the task. Also, students may have the necessary capabilities to complete a task while lacking sufficient incentives to do so (Bandura et al., 1977). Students who do not care about grades or being retained in a grade may fail to complete academic tasks even if they have the necessary skills. However, given adequate capabilities and sufficient incentives, efficacy expectations are likely to play a large role in people’s choice of activities, how hard they strive and how long they persist (Bandura et al., 1977). High schools may need to examine how they motivate students to blend students’ self-perceptions, competencies and incentives to help students successfully achieve goals.

**Collective efficacy.** Closely related to self-efficacy is collective efficacy which is “…a group’s shared belief in its ability, through collective action, to produce valued outcomes” (Miller, 2002, p. 191). A school can be developed as an efficacious institution through the idea of collective efficacy (Miller, 2002). In a school, collective efficacy usually is demonstrated
through strong academic leadership by the administration, high academic standards and beliefs that students can meet them, and instruction by teachers that encourages students to exercise control over their performance (Miller, 2002). Howard (1991) encourages American educators to instill in students the philosophy that they can “get smart” (p. 12). Instead of relying on outdated ideas about inherent ability, Howard (1991) believes schools can develop an ethos that every student can achieve. Collective efficacy can empower individuals, and individuals can then increase the collective efficacy of a school (Miller, 2002).

Along with improving academic performance, collective efficacy can help with the social aspect of high school as well. For example, collective efficacy could lead to change in gender roles and ensure gender equity, which may help reduce the social anxiety facing girls, leading to a more successful transition to high school (Miller, 2002). Caraway et al. (2003) found that students who feel less efficacious are less engaged in school, leading to lower involvement in school activities. The inadvertent messages broadcast to students through the behaviors of administration and teachers may impact how they calculate their own ability to succeed during freshman year and beyond. Collective efficacy could be an important means of building a school culture where all students, including freshmen, are seen as active contributors to the overall experience of high school.

Self-efficacy theory is also an important tool to use when looking at the transition to high school for young people. By examining the messages that students receive from their previous performances, what they have been told by parents and teachers, and what the general message of the school is, a better understanding of how students’ perceptions of their abilities will be able to be developed. Understanding their perceptions of themselves may have a powerful impact on
how students face challenges in their educational careers, including the major challenge of moving from middle to high school. As well as understanding societal influences on students, it is important to understand how they think about themselves as they move to ninth grade.

The framework of this study is based on these two theories. Each of them allows for a closer examination of one aspect of the transitioning freshman student; critical education theory allows for an examination of the students’ experiences based on their external traits, while self-efficacy theory focuses on the internal factors that affect students’ experiences. This framework provided the structure needed when examining the literature. From a vast array of studies on the topic, studies were selected that addressed the external and internal traits that seemed to impact ninth-grade students’ transition experiences. Using the framework in this way allowed for a coherent winnowing of the large number of published studies that are found in the literature.

The framework also provides a basis for the research design. The phenomenological design of the study is meant to understand how freshmen make meaning of their experiences. To develop this understanding, both external factors and internal factors need to be probed to provide a deeper understanding of the experience. While the phenomenological nature of the study benefits from the theoretical framework, this method requires careful usage of the framework. The research design section of this proposal describes how the framework will be handled through the data analysis stages of the research. The two theories blend into a strong theoretical framework that provides the structure for this research study.

**Research Design**

As mentioned, this was a type of phenomenological study known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This research method is designed to better understand how
people make meaning of the experiences in their lives and is based primarily on the work of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). One of the strengths of the method is the focus on using the participants’ words to highlight important aspects of an experience (Smith et al., 2009). Since a primary goal of the study was to add students’ voices to the discussion of the freshman transition, this method was appealing. By carefully going through the steps of an IPA study, a better understanding was developed of how freshmen make meaning of their ninth-grade year.

Four students were interviewed three times over the second half of their freshman year. The students were purposely chosen to participate, and, along with their parents, signed the informed consent document. Students were chosen who differed in terms of their ethnicity, gender, and academic levels. They were each asked similar questions from a previously prepared list of questions, though there was also the flexibility to pursue other lines of questioning with each student. The interviews were recorded on a laptop, and then each interview was transcribed. Each interview’s transcription was completed before the next occurred, which allowed a quick check-in with students at the beginning of the next interview to make sure their thoughts were adequately captured in the interviews.

Once the interviews were completed and the transcripts were prepared, the formal data analysis process became the focus. The guidelines suggested by Smith et al. (2009) were used and which included several cycles of analysis. The cycles included six steps that encouraged close reading, taking initial notes, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case and looking for patterns across cases (Smith, et al., 2009). While doing the data analysis, it was necessary to move back and forth between the steps, leading to the conclusion that the data-analysis process was cyclical in nature. The outcome of the data analysis
cycles was that seven super-ordinate themes emerged that connected the experiences of the research participants, though each had experienced the year in a unique way. Their unique versions provided the quotations used later in the study to explain the super-ordinate themes. Completing each step of this IPA provided a better understanding of the research question and led towards achieving the established goals of the project.

**Limitations**

As with any study, there are many limitations to my work. Schools and students differ so greatly it would probably be nearly impossible to conduct a study that answered every question about the freshman transition and ninth-grade experience. I worked with a very small number of students from a suburban high school outside a large urban center. While I have developed a better understanding of what the students experience as they move through their freshman years, that understanding is far from comprehensive. There was variance even in my small sample which indicates that other experiences of the ninth-grade year exist that my study did not uncover. As I carried out my research however, I tried to keep in mind these limitations and keep the scope of my findings to the local level.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The collection of studies related to the transition to high school has developed into a rich body of literature. Researchers have examined the problem of practice from a wide variety of perspectives, studying nearly all possible aspects of this important transition point. Studies are focused on students, parents, school personnel and outside support networks and their expectations of, roles in, and experiences with ninth-grade transitions. Research spans the range of transition from the general experience of transition to the differences between freshman grades in math and science. Examinations of students’ mental, physical and emotional health have been completed, as well as measures of everything from school-connectedness to the level of academic press in schools. Studies range from small, school-based inquiries to examinations of huge, nation-wide sets of data.

To narrow the vast array of studies that can be found on the topic, I chose to ask two questions of the literature based on my theoretical framework:

1. To what extent do external traits, including race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and other categories affect a student’s ability to successfully transition to ninth grade?

2. To what extent do internal traits, including self-perception, motivation, persistence and other traits, affect a student’s ability to successfully transition to ninth grade?

Before looking at the evidence for the specific questions, it is important to define what is meant by an “easy” or “difficult” transition. The researchers defined the ease of transition in different ways, but the two major trends involved the students’ academic progress or social/emotional health. The most common, perhaps because it is easiest to quantify, is measuring academic progress. These measures included shifts in students’ grade-point averages
(GPAs), failure of ninth-grade classes, promotion to tenth grade and progress towards graduation. Researchers generally found that a change in one aspect of a student’s academic data did not necessarily indicate a “difficult” transition, but the combination of several changes generally led to the conclusion that the student had not handled the transition well. For example, the common theme throughout the bodies of literature was that students’ GPAs declined during the transition year (see Benner & Graham, 2009; Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2010; Gillock & Reyes, 1996; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Roderick, 2003). No matter what the focus of the study was, most researchers found that students earned lower GPAs during the transition year than in their middle school years.

Since declining GPAs seems to be a fairly common occurrence for transitioning students, that factor alone is not enough to categorize a student’s transition as “difficult”. While this decline may upset students, many are able to adjust and progress normally through ninth grade and successfully complete high school (Neild, 2009). The transition year becomes problematic when students experience a combination of academic challenges that lead to failing ninth-grade courses and not being promoted to tenth grade. This can put them on the track to graduate late from high school or to not graduate at all (Neild, 2009). These are the students that have a difficult transition.

The results of studying students’ social/emotional health are less definitive, mainly due to the multitude of factors researchers can focus on. Researchers have studied the change in students’ levels of anxiety as they transition to high school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell & Feinman, 1994), measured their self-esteem across the transition (Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996), checked for an increase in depressive symptoms
(Newman et al., 2007), and assessed the effects of transitioning to high school on students’ self-perceptions (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus & Sanchez, 2000; Silverthorn, DuBois & Crombie, 2005). With differing emphases for the studies, there is not a definitive finding for students’ social/emotional health that can be measured as easily as the student’s GPA. For example, Benner and Graham (2009) found that students’ levels of anxiety remained consistently high throughout high school, but Seidman et al. (1996) found that students’ self-esteem remained high across the transition to high school. These findings cannot be directly compared, and the social/emotional health studies lack a standard method of calculating distress in a student.

Even though there is not a uniform measure for social/emotional health, it can be a significant component in how well a student transitions to high school. Many students experience an increase in stressors during the first few months of ninth grade, though as they get acclimated to a new environment, the stressors tend to decline in the second part of the freshman year (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Again, the problem does not lie with the majority of students who experience some stress related to the transition, but instead with those students whose stressors prevent them from making adequate progress towards tenth grade. With a better understanding of what constitutes an easy or difficult transition, the results of the questions asked of the literature are better defined.

**External Traits**

The first question was asked to determine whether there were certain external traits that students possessed which would affect their transition to high school. By this, it was intended to find traits that are inherent or nearly inherent in a student: race, gender, socioeconomic class or other categories, and then examining how students possessing these traits fared during the
transition period. This question stemmed from the critical education theory that is a framework to this study. The goal was to try to uncover power structures in schools that might affect students of different races or genders as they transition to high school. The literature revealed that there are two demographic traits that are connected to a more problematic transition to ninth grade and may have serious implications for a student’s high-school career.

**Socioeconomic status.** The first demographic trait that indicated a student would have an increased chance of a difficult transition to high school was a student’s socioeconomic class. This outweighed most other demographic differences like race or gender. While some researchers found that different racial or ethnic groups seem to have trouble with the transition (Benner & Graham, 2009; Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981), these results were scattered and not definitive. Some researchers found that girls might have a slightly easier time transitioning to high school (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Roderick, 2003), though other researchers found that gender was not a significant factor in the difficulty of transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Seidman et al., 1996). Instead, what many researchers found to be one of the definitive traits was the socioeconomic class to which a student belonged. Freire and other critical theorists who work or worked with social class issues may have predicted this outcome from the literature, but it was not anticipated to be a dominant factor.

Students who belonged to a higher socioeconomic class faced less difficulty in adjusting to high school and progressing at a normal rate towards graduation. Heck and Mahoe (2006) used data collected from a national survey that followed eighth-grade students for six years to try to better understand the transition experience and what normal progress towards graduation meant. With their sample of over 12,000 students, they found that when socioeconomic class was
controlled for, African American students were significantly more likely to make normal progress from eighth grade towards graduation than other groups, including white students (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). They also found students who belonged to higher socioeconomic classes in general made more normal progress towards graduation, overriding many other factors (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). A higher level of socioeconomic status seems to privilege students in their ability to transition to high school and progress towards graduation.

Other researchers found similar results: a higher socioeconomic class generally meant an easier transition to ninth grade and a smoother path through high school. In their study, Akos and Galassi (2004) found little evidence of difficulty during the transition to ninth grade, and they attribute it to the fact that the district they studied is one in which most students go on to postsecondary education. This indicates a certain level of socioeconomic comfort and expectation for the students in the district (Akos & Galassi, 2004). They also cited a high level of academic expectation for students, which one can infer comes from parents and community members who are well-educated professionals themselves (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students coming from more economically advantaged backgrounds seem to make an easier transition to high school.

Rubin (2007) followed several students throughout their freshman year, interviewing them and observing them in classes. Though this was a small study, the in-depth nature of her study allowed her to get a view of the entire freshman year and the students’ experiences moving through it (Rubin, 2007). Two of the students she followed had attended eighth grade in small, private schools to which their parents had paid tuition (Rubin, 2007). She found that these students had an easier time adjusting to ninth grade either academically or socially, while the
other students whose families had less economic means were struggling either academically or socially or both (Rubin, 2007). The two students who had attended private school and were adjusting more successfully had another advantage as well, both students’ parents were actively engaged with their child’s school, teachers and academic progress (Rubin, 2007). Other researchers have also found that different forms of parental support appear to be important factors for a successful transition to high school. While parental support is not only found in families with more wealth, there does seem to be a connection between students’ socioeconomic statuses and the level of parental support they receive.

Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis and Trickett (1991) found that family support showed the most consistently strong and beneficial influences for the transitioning students. Family support can take different forms, but seems to play a key role in the level of success a transitioning student experiences. Chen and Gregory (2009) highlighted the importance of students’ perceptions of parental expectations in a study of a small group of students classified as low-achieving. Students’ perceptions of high parental expectations led to higher engagement in classes and higher GPAs across the transition to ninth grade (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Parents’ expectations included the short term goals of earning good grades in ninth-grade courses along with long term goals for future attainment of advanced degrees (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Interestingly, this study highlights the fact that students’ perceptions of their parents’ expectations influenced their academic engagement. They found though that it was only the students’ perceptions that were important; more active involvement by the parents in the schools did not translate into higher GPAs for the students (Chen & Gregory, 2009). This indicates that
students internalize verbal or nonverbal messages communicated at home, even if they do not respond to their parent’s involvement in the school (Chen & Gregory, 2009).

Along with expectations, parents can also demonstrate their support for a transitioning student by the amount of freedom the student has. Neild (2009) writes that entering ninth grade can be a signal to parents to give students more autonomy to engage in adolescent activities, though this may have a detrimental effect on students’ academics. In a study examining a cohort of students moving from a K-8 laboratory school to a laboratory high school in Illinois, Isakson and Jarvis (1999) found that parental support, defined as allowing less autonomy, led to better academic outcomes by the end of ninth grade. Students who had lower autonomy in ninth grade reported feeling more connected to the high school than their peers with more autonomy and earned higher GPAs over the course of their freshman year (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

Though neither of these studies focuses explicitly on socioeconomic status, some basic assumptions can be made. Both research sites feature specialized programs which the student could be enrolled in with parental approval (Chen & Gregory, 2009; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). This indicates some level of school involvement on the part of parents, which logically points toward an interest in a student’s educational career. Though this is not the sole province of economically advantaged families, it does suggest that these parents knew how to help their students. Roderick (2003) found that students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds often dropped out or withdrew from school in part due to a lack of support from family members. These students felt that their families could not or did not know how to support them as they made the transition to high school (Roderick, 2003). Researchers have revealed that along with a
possible dwindling of parental support, other factors also hinder students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds during the important freshman-transition year.

These factors manifest themselves with the aforementioned effects on students’ academic and social/emotional progress. The overarching reason for a difficult transition seems to be that students from less wealthy backgrounds have more challenges in their personal lives that affect their ability to concentrate on academic progress, though the specific details differ according to student. Seidman et al. (1996) posited that the lack of any ethnic or gender differences in their study was due to the more pressing stressors associated with high rates of poverty. Their study focused on students in some of the poorest neighborhoods of New York City, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, neighborhoods where most residents lived below the poverty line and where students experienced academic challenges as they transitioned to high school (Seidman et al., 1996). These stressors are myriad but appear to include situations that could be solved with more financial resources.

Several examples of the difficulties faced by students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds can be found in the literature. Isakson and Jarvis (1999) point out that many freshmen face stressors as they transition to high school, but for economically disadvantaged students, the stressors go beyond the school walls (Seidman et al., 1996). Rubin (2007) highlighted one type of stressor that may be facing students: heavy responsibilities at home. One of the students she shadowed had to look after her younger brothers and sisters after school because her mother was terminally ill and needed help maintaining the household (Rubin, 2007). The transitioning student was trying to keep things running at home while navigating a new school with new academic and social challenges (Rubin, 2007). Though the student expressed a
desire to graduate and go to college, there were few adults in her life who could help her make the decisions she needed to achieve that goal (Rubin, 2007).

Another difficulty that students with lower socioeconomic status face is frequent disruptions in their living situations (Roderick, 2003). In her interviews with male students on Chicago’s South Side, Roderick (2003) found that many of the youth disengaged from school were often moving from place to place, either with their families or with different relatives. Though they expressed an interest in finishing high school and continuing to college, the frequent disruptions in their home lives caused them to get off track (Roderick, 2003). This echoes Heck and Mahoe’s (2006) finding that higher mobility during high school decreased the odds of a student graduating from high school. These are just two examples of challenges students from lower socioeconomic status households are facing while they are trying to adjust to a new school and new expectations. These, along with a host of other difficulties, can help a student lose his or her way when making the transition to high school.

Beyond the socioeconomic status of the individual student, other factors can affect a student’s chance of making a successful transition to ninth grade. The socioeconomic status of the neighborhood where the school is located may also be a factor in a student’s transition experience. Schools in neighborhoods where more residents are at or below the poverty line may have trouble attracting and retaining certified and experienced teachers (Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008). Neild and Farley-Ripple (2008) found that ninth-grade students are more likely to have teachers who are new to a building, professionally uncertified or both. This phenomenon was especially prevalent in high schools in low-income neighborhoods and non-magnet high schools indicating that freshmen in those schools may be getting the least experienced teachers in the
district (Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008). This is problematic because more experienced teachers have more access to informal networks that may allow them to better develop their instructional practices and gather materials for their classrooms (Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008). Again, a difficult transition in ninth grade can lead to disastrous consequences for the students later in their high school careers, especially for students who come from backgrounds with lower socioeconomic status.

Zvoch (2006) found that students who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to drop out of school than students who have some economic stability. Economic disadvantage appears to be more strongly related to dropping out than other external factors like ethnicity, age and academic achievement (Zvoch, 2006). Neild, Stoner-Eby and Furstenberg (2008) found that a student whose family receives welfare benefits has a 50% higher chance of dropping out of high school than a peer whose family is not on assistance. Again, the socioeconomic status of the school’s population can also impact the educational outcomes for students. Students who attend schools with more students on free and reduced lunch (a standard measure of economic disadvantage) and whose families are economically disadvantaged face a greater chance of dropping out (Zvoch, 2006). In contrast, there is no difference in the odds of dropping out for economically advantaged and disadvantaged students if they attend an affluent school (Zvoch, 2006). This is problematic because dropping out of high school can continue the cycle of economic disadvantage for students and prevent them from making economic gains as they grow older (Teachman et al., 1996). Clearly, the socioeconomic status of the students and the high schools they attend play key roles in the transition to high school, but another external factor also has implications for a successful transition to ninth grade.
**Age.** The second external trait that seems to affect a student’s successful transition to high school is the student’s age. This was a surprising finding; it was not one of the categories anticipated to be meaningful for a student. The research clearly indicates that age is a significant factor though. When a student is overage (older than fourteen) for ninth grade, he or she faces more difficulty in making normal progress towards tenth grade and graduation (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). A student could become overage for ninth grade by starting school later, being retained before freshman year or not gathering enough credits to be promoted to tenth grade once in high school. Some parents choose to keep their children out of school before starting kindergarten which could lead to the child being older than his or her peers, though this does not appear to have adverse effects. Either of the other two scenarios, however, can lead to students experiencing more difficulty in their freshman year and cause them to fall behind peers.

Academic trouble before high school puts students on a path to have less success as they move into high school. Neild and Balfanz (2006) found that students who were 15 years or older when entering high school had a higher chance of not being promoted to tenth grade, even when they controlled for academic achievement and attendance. Roderick and Camburn (1999) found that overage students had a greater risk of failing one or more core classes that freshmen need to pass to be promoted. Having an extra year in ninth grade does not seem to get students back on track either. In their study, Neild and Balfanz (2006) found that 60% of students repeating freshman year had still accumulated only half or less than half of the credits needed to move on to tenth grade. Not being promoted to tenth grade has longer-term effects for students as well; it affects their progress towards graduation.
Heck and Mahoe (2006) report that students who had been retained before high school were half as likely as non-retained students to be making normal progress towards graduation. The researchers point out that this is problematic because students who fell behind their peers by tenth grade were six times less likely to graduate from high school (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Zvoch (2006) also found that being overage for grade level was a significant factor in dropping out. He found that students who were overage for grade level were 35 times more likely to drop out than average age students (Zvoch, 2006). Neild, Stoner-Eby et al. (2008) estimated that each additional year older a student is as he or she enters high school more than doubles the odds that student will drop out. Not graduating from high school has serious implications for students in terms of their future economic earnings and may affect their future mental well-being (Teachman et al., 1996). The implications for an overage student transitioning to high school can be dire in terms of successfully passing ninth grade and making progress towards graduation.

The socioeconomic status of the student is clearly a focus of critical education theory, part of the framework of this study. Class has complex influences on students that are difficult to unravel. This echoes the work of Paolo Freire (1970) who wrote that the parallels between people of the same economic class superseded any racial or ethnic differences. This finding was supported by the literature, finding that students who come from less economically advantaged backgrounds had similarly difficult transitions to high school. The age finding is more difficult to connect to critical education theory unless students are somehow treated differently based on their age as they transition to high school. The literature seemed to indicate that students who are older as they enter high school may have struggled academically (unless their parents kept them out a year before kindergarten), so it seems that there is more of an academic achievement factor
at play rather than a discriminatory one. More research might uncover a closer connection between age and critical education theory.

**Internal Traits**

The second question asked of the literature stemmed from the self-efficacy theory that forms part of the framework to the study. Researchers agree that students face academic difficulties as they transition from middle to high school and have focused on the different ways students respond to those challenges. Students begin laying the foundation for their high school transition while they are in eighth grade, and many expect to have a positive high school experience (Stein & Hussong, 2007). The reality, however, can take getting used to for transitioning students. Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers and Smith (2000) discovered that many of the students they interviewed found ninth grade to be more academically challenging than they had anticipated, citing more homework assigned, more studying required and more responsibility needed in order to do well in high school. These students also mentioned needing to adjust to the social life of a new school and the importance of forging new relationships, especially with teachers (Newman, Lohman et al., 2000). The goal was to uncover the internal traits that students possess which affect their transition to high school.

**Self-perception.** The first internal trait that seems to have an effect on students as they transition to high school is the student’s self-perception. Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman and Smith (2000) found this trait to be so important that low-performing ninth-grade students would avoid trying and therefore possibly failing to preserve their self-perceptions. Students claim to be able to complete the assignments, but by not trying they do not have to challenge their perceptions of themselves by demonstrating that the work is beyond their abilities (Newman,
Myers et al., 2000). An examination of the literature revealed that self-perception can affect several aspects of students’ school experience as they transition to high school. Self-perceptions can even affect the students’ ideas about high school before they officially enter ninth grade, as well as influence their academic achievement once in high school. Self-perceptions also seem to be closely linked to students’ social interactions, which can have both positive and negative effects on students.

As mentioned, many eighth-grade students anticipate having a positive high school experience, even those who are considered to be at-risk for leaving school early (Stein & Hussong, 2007). Students seem to base those positive feelings towards high school on their own perceptions about themselves, rather than on tangible factors like their course grades for eighth-grade classes (Stein & Hussong, 2007). This is reflected in the fact that expectancies were not associated with a change in functioning between eighth and ninth grade (Stein & Hussong, 2007). Stein and Hussong (2007) found that eighth-grade functioning was a predictor of ninth-grade functioning, rather than what students predicted their ninth-grade experience and achievement would be. Other researchers have also made links between self-perception and academic achievement in high school.

Several researchers have found connections between students’ perception of their academic ability and their performance in ninth-grade classes. Schiller (1999) found that students’ self-reports of high mathematics grades in eighth grade were predictors of higher mathematics grades in ninth grade. In fact, she found that success rates for many ninth-grade students varied according to their perceived ability prior to high school (Schiller, 1999). Silverthorn et al. (2005) uncovered similar results, finding that pre-transition perceptions of
ability contributed to achievement during the first year of high school, especially in math and science classes. They caution however that the link may not continue past the first year after the transition, and in some cases, a negative relationship could develop between self-perception and achievement as the student progresses through high school (Silverthorn et al., 2005). The evidence points to the fact that self-perception plays a significant role in a student’s transition to high school in terms of academics and may play a part in the social interactions of students as well.

Entering high school is a moment when students may want or need to refigure their social worlds, perhaps separating from middle-school friends or extending existing social groups. Smith et al. (2008) found that eighth-grade students were excited about the expanded social opportunities that high school would afford them. How students perceive themselves likely plays a role in the peer groups students choose as they navigate the new social environment of the high school. Rubin (2007) highlighted this social hurdle with one of the students she followed. The student was biracial (white and African American) and struggled to find a group of peers with whom she felt comfortable (Rubin, 2007). She felt she had to choose between having mostly white friends or mostly African American friends (Rubin, 2007). She chose to hang out with mostly African American students, though her academic aspirations often were at odds with other members in her group (Rubin, 2007). Since she perceived herself as more African American than white, this student felt she was pushed toward a specific peer group as she made the transition to ninth grade (Rubin, 2007). Self-perception may affect whom students choose to socialize with as they move to high school and these groups may have positive or negative influences on transitioning students.
In general, it seems that higher-achieving students tend to develop friendships with students who are supportive of their academic aspirations. Another student in Rubin’s (2007) study expressed the need to choose friends wisely so they do not have a negative influence on one. He chose to surround himself with a racially mixed group of friends who were involved in sports to keep his grades up and his focus on athletics (Rubin, 2007). Newman, Myers et al. (2000) found that the “high-performing” students they interviewed, those who earned GPAs above 3.0, were the only ones who mentioned having friends who encouraged their academic achievement. Students who perceive themselves as academically focused may logically seek out others with similar goals as they transition to high school.

On the other hand, peers may play a negative role as a student transitions to high school. In a study of teen substance abuse, Estell et al. (2007) found that ninth-grade students who saw themselves as popular and aggressive (labeled “Tough” for the study) had the highest rates of substance abuse as they transitioned to high school. This contrasts with students who were more academically focused or those who struggled academically; students with a high social self-perception were more willing to engage in risky behaviors including alcohol and drug consumption (Estell et al., 2007). While this may not have immediate implications for the student, again the long term effects can be devastating. Neild, Stoner-Eby et al. (2008) found that students who reported having multiple friends involved in more risk taking activities greatly increased the odds of that student dropping out of high school. Self-perception may draw certain students together as they transition to high school, though the results can be negative for the transitioning student. A student’s self-perception seems to influence expectations, performance and peers during the ninth-grade transition. Self-perception can only take the students so far.
though; many students find they need to further develop their academic skills as they move
through freshman year.

**Skill development.** Students often find high school more difficult than they had
anticipated which leads to the necessity of utilizing different skills than they possibly have
needed before in their academic lives. It appears that the students who are able to develop more
independent work habits and skills may have an easier time adjusting to the rigors of high
school. Roderick (2003) interviewed students who were able to persevere and graduate when
many of their peers did not. These students expressed the need for successful students to take
responsibility for building skills and finding support to help them through their academic
challenges (Roderick, 2003). This finding is supported by other researchers in the field.

In a study measuring motivation as students transitioned between middle and high school,
Otis, Grouzet and Pelletier (2005) found that most students experienced declines in both intrinsic
and extrinsic motivation throughout the transition period. However, those students who had
higher levels of self-determined motivation (displaying self-regulatory habits and personally
valuing the outcome of doing the work) experienced a better adjustment to high school (Otis et
al., 2005). Those students who experienced a decrease in amotivation (feelings of incompetence
and futility) across the transition also adjusted more easily to the high school (Otis et al., 2005).
On the other hand, students who experienced general declines in both intrinsic and extrinsic
motivation had the hardest time adjusting to high school, even beyond the freshman year (Otis et
al., 2005). Students who successfully transition to high school need to recognize the academic
challenges that face them and may have to tap into their inner resources to build new work
habits.
Once students recognize the new academic environment, many find they need to alter their academic routines. Researchers found that some students start developing their independent study skills while other students engage more actively with the school. Newman, Myers et al. (2000) found that students who were considered “high-performing” were better able to increase their self-regulatory habits. The students indicated that they needed to prioritize, focus, study, use time wisely, and even study over the summer (Newman, Myers et al., 2000). Students considered “low-performing”, those who earned GPAs below 3.0, cited becoming more behaviorally engaged with their classes as a key to success (Newman, Myers et al., 2000). These behaviors included going to class, paying attention, and doing assignments (Newman, Myers et al., 2000). Though the results of their changes may have differed, both groups of students found that they needed to make adjustments to meet the new demands of high school.

Another researcher found that the type of goals students set for themselves may help them adjust to the transition more successfully. Gutman (2006) researched the difference between setting mastery goals, which focus on learning new material, developing new skills and improving on past performances, and performance goals, which value performing better than others and earning normatively high outcomes, in math classes. Gutman (2006) found that those students who set mastery goals earned higher grades during the transition period in their math classes than those who focused on performance goals. Interestingly, highlighted in this study was the fact that the students set the type of goals for themselves individually and did not appear to be influenced by efforts made by the teacher to encourage one type of goal over another (Gutman, 2006). Though goal-setting may not be influenced by teachers, teachers appear to be important figures in students’ transitions to high school in other ways.
Several researchers have found links between successful high-school transitions and good relationships with teachers. Langenkamp (2009) found that students who bonded more with their ninth-grade teachers had higher GPAs during their first year of high school. Newman, Myers et al. (2000) found that low-performing students in their study especially needed more support from teachers. These students cited developing relationships with teachers as another of the habits students needed to build in order to be successful in high school (Newman, Myers et al., 2000). Roderick (2003) found that resilient teens who were able to graduate, even when surrounded by many peers who did not, mentioned building relationships with teachers as a key element of their success. These students found that knowing teachers, and being known as individuals by teachers, allowed them to progress through the ninth-grade transition and eventually graduate from high school (Roderick, 2003). Fostering relationships with teachers seems to have an impact on a student’s transition to high school and can be meaningful for his or her long-term academic success.

Though the connection between students and teachers may be beneficial, it is not a skill every student has as he or she enters high school. Sansone and Baker (1990) discovered that the freshman students in their study could name a helpful staff member at the focus high school, but none of the students mentioned classroom teachers as their helpful staff member. The students, who represented a mix of academic achievement levels, found the high school too big and too impersonal, and they had few resources for building connections with teachers (Sansone & Baker, 1990). Seidman et al. (1996) found that students transitioning to high school perceived less support from teachers as they moved from eighth grade to ninth grade. This is problematic because the researchers found that the changes in relationships with school personnel can be
more influential on academic behaviors than their relationships with peers (Seidman et al., 1996). Students do not always necessarily know how to reach out to teachers, and yet the evidence is clear that doing so can aid their transition to high school.

Self-perception and skill development both relate to the self-efficacy theory in the study’s framework. Students need to assess their capabilities and then adjust their behavior in order to achieve their goals as defined by Bandura (Miller, 2002). In this case, the goals are transitioning to high school with as few bumps as possible and making academic progress towards tenth grade and graduation. Self-perception can affect a student’s academic performance and social interactions. Many freshmen find the first months of high school, at the very least, a challenge and the transition period may test their self-perception. When this occurs, they need to develop new skills and habits to get the grades or credits they desire. Those who fall short put themselves at risk for possible non-promotion to tenth grade and potentially dropping out. The transition to high school is a moment when the student’s self-efficacy will be tested and how the student responds can have implications beyond freshman year.

The two bodies of literature provided ample evidence that there is something occurring during the freshman transition that affects the students. Most students experience a dip in GPA when they enter high school, which can be just one of a host of other problems facing the students. The literature reveals that more serious problems can affect students from less wealthy families and overage students. These external factors are not the only things affecting the transition. Internal traits like self-perception and skill development also play a part in the successful transition of a ninth-grade student. Though much is revealed by the literature, one factor is missing: the voices of the students.
The body of literature is primarily made up of quantitative studies which feature statistics computed from school data or surveys. Reading so many of these studies makes the reader question what is really going on with the students and possibly yearning to hear the stories behind the numbers. For every statistic about failed classes or early drop outs, there must be a series of events that explain the numbers in a more human context. This research study was designed to give students’ voices a place in the scholarly literature of the topic through the use of phenomenology. While the literature clearly demonstrates a problem in a student’s educational career, a gap needs to be filled with qualitative studies that probe for a deeper understanding of the problem and the students involved.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Research Question

The problem of the freshman-transition point is well-documented, yet schools still struggle to find adequate solutions. Perhaps every district has a unique set of students and circumstances that do not allow for a generic response to the problem. Unfortunately, tailoring specific programs to specific circumstances takes time, energy and money. On the other hand, without determining the specific needs of the students the time, energy or money spent could be wasted on ineffective programming.

To prevent a waste of resources, it is vital that the needs of the students are thoroughly understood and addressed. To uncover this within my own district, I was interested in hearing what the students themselves had to say about the experience of transitioning to high school and making it through the year. To achieve this goal, I used a qualitative approach. Within the qualitative methodology, phenomenology was the method used to uncover more about the experience of the ninth-grade transition. Briefly, a phenomenological study “…describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Phenomenology allows the researcher to use the actual words of the research participants to better understand the experience of a phenomenon, in this case using students’ words to explore the experience of transitioning to high school. This definition is the driving force behind the main research question and informs the design of this research project.

Moustakas (1994) reminds the researcher, “in phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (p. 104). My interest in the problem of freshman transition led to the creation of an overarching research question. The main
research question for this study is: How do students who have moved from middle school to high school make sense of the freshman year? Interviews were used to gather the data to answer this question. The qualitative nature of the study allowed the use of open-ended questions to give the participants a chance to express their thoughts and feelings (Creswell, 2007). The question was designed to learn more about the phenomenon of transitioning to high school and surviving their freshman year through the experiences of those who actually lived it. The phenomenological nature of the study allowed the specific words of the involved students to provide the platform for discovering more about the main research question (Creswell, 2007).

**Methodology**

A qualitative approach was chosen for this project because the bodies of literature examined had a surprising lack of qualitative studies within them. An overwhelming number of the studies use quantitative methods to measure changes in academic performance or emotional well-being. Roderick (2003) used a mixed-method approach to examine the extenuating circumstances of students who failed or thrived in an urban Chicago school, bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative. Rubin (2007), Newman, Lohman, et al. (2000), Newman, Myers, et al. (2000) and Sansone and Baker (1990) were the few purely qualitative studies I found in the freshman transition literature, outnumbered greatly by the quantitative studies. Hearing directly from the students involved in the transition to high school seemed like an important step towards understanding and addressing the problem of how students make meaning of the freshman transition and their ninth-grade year, and will fill a hole that exists in the literature.
Many methods exist within the qualitative discipline, but I chose to use phenomenology to discover how freshmen think about their transition and ninth-grade experiences. This method is mainly derived from the philosophical work of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, though others have also aided in its evolution (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Sokolowski, 2000). As Sokolowski (2000) defines it from the philosophical standpoint, “phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (p. 2). Phenomenology has roots in classical philosophy, but the modern version appeared near the beginning of the twentieth century (Sokolowski, 2000). Phenomenology attempts to understand experiences by examining the parts, but also the context in which the parts belong (Sokolowski, 2000). It is also concerned with what is present in an experience, along with what is absent (Sokolowski, 2000). Social science researchers used these philosophical roots to develop a qualitative methodology that could expand the research field.

Phenomenology as a distinct research method appears to have begun in the field of psychology in the mid-1960s (Creswell, 2007). It became more utilized in other disciplines in the social, behavioral and health sciences throughout the late 1900s and early 2000s (Creswell, 2007). In research, phenomenology is used to examine the meaning of something (event, role, process, status or context) from the point of view of someone or a group who actually experiences it (Locke, Silverman & Spirduso, 2010). Phenomenology places the research participants at the focus of the study, and uses their words to shape a general understanding of the experience (Creswell, 2009). The participants and their words drew me to phenomenology.
In a school system, adults control nearly all of the decisions, often without consulting or listening to the students. It is not feasible, of course, to have students weigh in on every decision, but perhaps paying closer attention to students would develop more effective programming. Teachers and administrators see the problems freshmen have adjusting to the high school and recognize a need to reassess current programming, but there has not been an in-depth examination of what the students actually say about the experience to guide the decisions being made; however, the decisions fundamentally affect those students. While this is a trend in my own school, it also represents a gap in the scholarly literature on the topic.

As mentioned, very few research studies feature interviews or direct quotations from students. On the other hand, Lincoln (1995) argues strongly for the inclusion of student voices in social-science research for several reasons. She writes that students have long had a social and legal right to be heard, their voices are valued for scientific research and that being heard is a fundamental democratic lesson that students should learn at an early age (Lincoln, 1995). While students are sometimes asked to stand up in a court of law and decide which parent will be granted custody in a divorce case, they are often marginalized when it comes to being heard in a school (Lincoln, 1995). I wanted to really hear what students had to say about the experience of moving from middle school to high school to add richness to the dialogue about how to improve our schools.

To achieve this long-term goal, this study applies an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is “…a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). This type of phenomenological method was chosen to engage students as they reflect upon their experiences
moving from eighth to ninth grade (Smith et al., 2009). IPA focuses on the detailed experiences of a few participants to try to really understand the experience and how each participant makes meaning from the experience (Smith et al., 2009). This means a double layer of interpretation exists in IPA: the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of the experience, but IPA also allows for a detailed investigation of a particular case (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was chosen for its focus on meaning making and level of detail to illustrate the depth of transitioning ninth graders’ experience.

**Site and participants.** The research site was a medium-sized high school of about 800 students in a suburban district of southeastern Massachusetts. The high school houses grades 9 through 12, with a majority of its freshman students transitioning from the town’s middle school. I selected this site because it is the high school where I work, and one of my practical goals in doing this research is to improve the freshman transition programming that we currently offer. Thus, it is my hope that my work will directly impact the students with whom I work.

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to study a particular phenomenon, which means the sample must be made up of people who are experiencing or have experienced the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) remind the novice researcher that “…samples are selected purposively (rather than through probability methods) because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience” (p. 48). My research sample needed to be purposely selected from the pool of students transitioning to ninth grade in the fall of 2011. In a phenomenological study, the sample represents a perspective on the phenomenon rather than having to reflect a whole population (Smith et al., 2009). In fact, Smith et al. (2009) recommend developing a fairly homogeneous sample to be able to form a
more reliable picture of the phenomenon as it is experienced. With this in mind, I selected students who attended eighth grade at the town’s middle school to ensure one common factor among the student participants.

From the group of eighth-grade students transitioning to ninth grade, I had to narrow down my potential participants further. Though I did not find anything specific in the literature that forbids it, I eliminated the students I had in class from the potential group. Creswell (2007) points out the general risks of researching within your own workplace, and I did not want to place the students or myself in a potentially compromising situation. I did not want any misunderstandings to arise on the parts of students or parents if one of my students was involved in my research. Therefore, I chose from students who were assigned to the other ninth-grade team for my participant pool.

Creswell (2007) cites Polkinghorne’s (1989) recommendation of a sample size containing 5 to 25 people. However, Smith et al. (2009) recommend a smaller sample size of 3 to 6 participants or to keep the number of interviews between 4 and 10. Their justification for this small size is that the detailed nature of the data takes a long time to analyze and the purpose of the research is to write in detail of the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). Creswell (2007) concurs, adding “…the intent in qualitative research is not to generalize the information…but to elucidate the particular, the specific” (p. 126). I recruited four students to ensure that I would have enough data to analyze as my project progressed.

I asked both the school administration and another ninth-grade teacher, who works with the other ninth-grade team, for participant recommendations and I contacted students from the list of recommended students. Smith et al. (2009) call this method referral, where contact is
initiated by the researcher with the help of various gatekeepers. Though I did not need a representative sample of the population, I wanted students who would have different perspectives to offer on the freshman experience. I also needed to reach out to students who would be comfortable talking to an adult and to commit to the time requirements, because I would be asking the participants to interview three times over the course of their ninth-grade year to talk about their experiences with the transition.

To initiate that process, I sent a letter home to potential participants’ parents or guardians (see Appendix A). Along with this letter, I sent the informed consent document (see Appendix B). Creswell (2007) recommends including a detailed description of the project and the process, the right to withdraw from the project, a statement of confidentiality, any known risks to the participant and any benefits that might accrue. Through my letter and informed consent document, I introduced myself and included Creswell’s (2007) recommended information. I also included contact information for myself, my academic advisor and Northeastern University’s Institution Review Board (IRB). The IRB recommended that I offer potential participant’s the choice to either “opt in” or “opt out”, each choice with a specific box to check to be certain that the potential participant was actively accepting or declining involvement with the study. I also required the signature of both the parent or guardian and the participant to further ensure that the choice reflected the desires of the potential participant.

I sent two copies of the informational letter home along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the potential participants to return one copy of the material to me. The other copy was for the family’s personal records. I gave the potential participants a deadline of two weeks to return the paperwork, either opting in or opting out. If I did not hear from them after that
deadline, I made one call to the family to follow up or answer any questions the parents or guardians might have (see Appendix C for a script). If I could not reach any one at home, I left a brief message with a reminder about the paperwork and reiterating my contact information. If I did not receive anything from the potential participant, I sent out new requests to a different group of potential participants. I sent out three sets of informational letters to five or six potential participants in each set. It took me from mid-December to mid-January to recruit the research participants.

My sample included four students with different characteristics: three boys and a girl; three white students and one African American student; and two honors students and two non-honors students. Though I did not specifically ask about it, the students seemed to come from mid-level socioeconomic classes based on their home addresses. They were not from the poorest or richest areas of the town. This sample gave me the multiple perspectives that Creswell (2007) recommends while still maintaining a thread of homogeneity as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). To protect their anonymity, I assigned pseudonyms to the students chosen to reflect their gender and ethnicity.

I had little interaction with the four students who chose to participate before the interviews began. Gabriel was an African American male who was mostly in College Prep I (CP I) level classes, with one honors-level class. CP I classes are the standard level classes at our school, a step below honors in terms of expectations and workload. Though I knew this student’s older sister slightly, I had never had her in class, and I did not know the participant at all. Aidan and Liam were in the highest level of classes our school offers for freshmen: the Academy team. This program requires students take four core academic classes at the honors level: math,
English, science and history. It is not required, but many students also take an honors foreign language class, giving them a heavy workload during their freshman year. Aidan and Liam were related to each other, and I did not know them before the interviews began. Meghan was female and in all CP I classes. I had her older sister in class, and I met Meghan once or twice before when she attended a club meeting in my classroom with a friend. These students, with their varied ethnicities, genders and academic levels, provided a sample that seemed like it would offer different perspectives. I looked forward to hearing about each of their unique perspectives on transitioning to high school as we began the next stage of the study.

**Data collection.** To answer my research question, I needed to gather data from the students who were actually making the transition. Phenomenology is a research method that “…will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). To accomplish this, I conducted three interviews with each of my research participants spaced out over the course of the second semester. Though a few studies focus solely on the short transition period at the beginning of ninth grade (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009), most follow the students over the course of the year or beyond (Davis et al., 2010; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Roderick, 2003). I interviewed students once at the beginning of third term, once at the beginning of fourth term and once at the end of the year. This allowed me to capture the impressions of the students of the first half of the year, as well as how they experienced the second half of the year.

The interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient time for the researcher and the participants. Participants often had commitments to take into account when scheduling interviews, so I gave the participants a range of dates and allowed them to pick when they could
meet with me. The interviews were conducted in the library, either in the reference section or an available computer classroom or lab. These areas are public, but offered quiet spaces where interviews could be easily recorded. These spaces were also easy to monitor to make sure the participants would not be overheard by faculty members or other students.

Smith et al. (2009) note that this type of research requires a verbatim record of the data collection method—in this case interviews. All of the interviews were recorded onto my personal laptop computer using Audacity software. This software is free and available for download by anyone and was easily used in the school setting. After each set of interviews, I transcribed the audio files verbatim. Though Smith et al. (2009), mention that non-relevant parts of the interview do not have to be transcribed, as a novice researcher I wanted all of the data to be transcribed to aid me later during analysis.

Each of these interviews was designed as a one-to-one, semi-structured interview. Smith et al. (2009) encourage using interviews or diaries to allow the participants to share their thoughts, feelings and stories. Ganeson & Ehrich (2009) used data from diary entries that students wrote during the first ten weeks of the transition period, but I preferred a more interactive method. Smith et al. (2009) describes qualitative interviews as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57). To help achieve my purpose, I used a semi-structured interview method to allow the participants’ responses dictate the flow of the conversation, and which allowed me to follow up on the individual points that were pertinent (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Though the interview should be flexible, Creswell (2007) warns that interviewing for a novice researcher can be frustrating and harder than expected, and thus encourages the use of some structure.
Smith et al. (2009) propose a good solution to the question of “designing” a flexible interview, they recommend the use of an “interview schedule” (p. 58). The interview schedule is a way to organize questions that a researcher would like to ask and decide on a logical order before the interview begins, but it is understood that the interview may deviate from this loose agenda (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) outline a few steps involved in drawing up an interview schedule: choose questions that will answer the research question, think about the range of topics to cover, put the topics in a logical sequence, formulate questions that are appropriately open-ended for the study, and edit and revise the questions as necessary. An additional benefit to using an interview schedule is that the researcher can also prepare proper prompts that will elicit more information if a respondent has trouble expressing him- or herself (Smith et al., 2009). I prepared an interview schedule for each of the interview sessions that reflected the point in the year that the interview was taking place and, in the case of the later interviews, built upon the information gathered in the previous interviews (see Appendix D).

Being prepared for an interview does not guarantee successful data collection however. Getting useful data requires good questions, but also patience. Moustakas (1994) recommends starting the interview “…with a social conversation or a brief meditative activity aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). As the interview progresses, Smith et al. (2009) point out the need to be an active listener and be willing to part from the interview schedule to follow up on interesting or important ideas the participants say. Moustakas (1994) also emphasizes the need for the researcher to veer from the planned questions as the conversation with the participant progresses.
To get the best data possible, I created detailed interview schedules for each of the three interviews. I thought about my research question and wrote questions that I hoped would help me answer it. I wanted to make the questions as open-ended as possible to allow the participants to respond freely. I intended for the students to take the interviews in different directions according to how they were experiencing their freshman year. For each question, I also wrote several prompts to probe for a deeper understanding of the participant’s response. I found that I did not usually need the generic prompts though; instead, I could ask more specific questions based on the participant’s answer. After the first set of interviews, I edited some of the questions on the interview schedule for the second interview. I repeated this process with the third interview schedule as well, trying to gather as much data about different aspects of the experience as possible.

Aside from the general difficulties of interviewing people, an additional challenge was that I interviewed adolescents. While teenagers may spend endless hours with friends talking about everything under the sun, they can become remarkably laconic when speaking with adults. I anticipated several difficult issues in interviewing young people. The first was making students comfortable with a teacher, who is not their teacher, so that they could answer questions fully and truthfully. One technique I used was to reiterate the purpose of the interview, and how much they were helping me out with my scholarly work. I shared how I was feeling about the interview process—excited, nervous, or relieved—to show that we may have been feeling similar emotions, even though we had different roles.

The second difficulty I foresaw was helping the students feel relaxed enough to share information about themselves and their experiences. To mitigate this, I designed the interview
schedule to ask questions that may be easy for the students to answer during the first part of the initial interview. These questions focused on their experiences in the middle school to give them a topic which I anticipated that they would be more comfortable with, and then we moved on to the questions about the high school which may have been more difficult to articulate. I thought the high school experiences might be more difficult because they were experiences that were continuing to unfold for the students.

Along with trying to make students feel comfortable enough to talk about these topics, I needed to be mindful of the energy level of the students being interviewed. These interviews were conducted in the afternoon after the students participated in a full day of school. To try to lessen this fatigue, I scheduled the interviews to begin about twenty minutes after the final bell. This allowed the students to relax a little after their last class, socialize with friends, or see teachers for extra help if needed. I also brought bottles of water, small bags of pretzels and pieces of candy that I offered the participants in case they were thirsty or hungry after a full day of school.

An additional problem could be starting the subsequent interviews after the first one. Maxwell (2005) reminds the qualitative researcher that developing a relationship with research participants is not a one-time task; instead it requires renegotiation as the researcher and participants come together again. After the initial interview, there was a time gap before the second interview, and again before the third interview. Before each interview started, I engaged in small talk with the participants, usually as I was setting up my equipment. Before I started recording, I asked them about their day, their athletic season or anything else to try to establish and then reestablish the relationship. I began the recorded portion of the second and third
interviews with a review of what we covered in the previous interview. This reminded the students of what we discussed in the previous session and provided a basis from which we could begin. I shared parts of my data analysis that were relevant to the student to discern whether the student felt it accurately reflected his or her experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1982) call this “member checking” and point to its importance in maintaining the validity of a qualitative study. It also allowed me to clarify anything I was unclear about from the original interview.

After each interview, I wrote down my own thoughts and impressions of the interview. Lincoln and Guba (1982) call this type of reflective writing “reflexive journals” (p. 11). The purpose is to highlight evolving perceptions and to capture personal introspections that will be useful in the data analysis phase. Maxwell (2005) calls this type of reflective writing “memos”, but the idea and purpose are similar (p. 12). Maxwell (2005) states the goal is to use “…this writing as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight” (p. 12). He reminds the researcher that he or she will not remember the initial thoughts and impressions once the data analysis phase begins, emphasizing the importance of these writings (Maxwell, 2005). Since there were gaps in between the interviews, recording my impressions helped me to remember what transpired in the interview and what I thought about the interview. Lincoln and Guba (1982) and Maxwell (2005) also agree that these writings should be filed with the other raw data to aid in the data analysis process.

**Data analysis.** Creswell (2007) gives an overview of the steps to follow when engaged in data analysis for a qualitative study: preparing and organizing the data; reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and representing data in tables, figures or a discussion. King and Horrocks (2010) posit that the transcription of the original
interview is actually the first step of analysis in any qualitative research. Smith et al. (2009) lay out their recommended steps for an IPA study more specifically: reading and rereading the data, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case and then looking for patterns across cases. Though these are the steps they recommend, the authors point out that the data analysis stage “…is an iterative process of fluid description and engagement with the transcript. It involves flexible thinking, processes of reduction, expansion, revision, creativity and innovation” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 81). So while there are steps to follow, the researcher must be willing to move back and forth between the stages for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the data (Smith et al., 2009).

The first step of analysis in an IPA study is to read and reread the original data (Smith et al., 2009). I accomplished this through several stages. For the first stage, I listened to and transcribed the interviews verbatim as recommended by King and Horrocks (2010). I chose to transcribe the interview fully, not leaving anything out since I was not sure what would end up being significant (King & Horrocks, 2010). To do this, I listened to the interviews and typed the questions and what students were saying onto a Word document. This required careful attention and slow progress as I listened to each interview in five to ten second segments to ensure I was capturing what was being said on the recording. I often had to listen to the same segment several times to transcribe it faithfully. I finished transcribing each interview before I conducted the next interview with the participants.

Once I had transcribed the whole interview, I began the second stage. I went back and listened to the entire interview again while following along on my transcript. This allowed me to check for errors, but also gave me a better sense of the entire interview in context.
prepare for the next set of interviews, I reread the interview and typed a list of the major points we discussed. I used this list for the member checking in the next interview. Even after the third interview when I would not have the chance to member check with the participants, I followed the same procedure of creating a summary of the points we discussed. Both Smith et al. (2009) and King and Horrocks (2010) emphasize the importance of becoming very familiar with the data when beginning the data analysis process.

The third stage of the reading and rereading step came after I finished transcribing all twelve of the interviews. I read through each interview without making any notes on the transcripts. The only writing I did was to write a reflective memo after reading each set of interviews—the three interviews with each student. This allowed me to read the interviews in their different contexts: one context as a single interview, another as part of a three interview series by a single participant, still another as part of a three interview series at a particular time in the freshman year, and finally as part of the larger twelve interview data set. Smith et al. (2009) call this “active engagement with the data” (p. 82). At this point, I moved on to the next step, though the subsequent steps also involved continual rereading of the data.

The second step of analysis for the IPA study is making initial notes on the interview transcripts. Smith et al., (2009) inform the researcher that this step is very detailed and takes much time. The authors recommend using a hard copy of the transcript, but I chose to do it on the computer on a Word document since I generally work directly on my computer (Smith et al., 2009). To begin this step, I created a table and inserted the interview text in the right hand column. I then created a column on the left for the exploratory comments. I chose the same labels for my exploratory comments as recommended by Smith et al. (2009): descriptive,
linguistic and conceptual. Descriptive comments focus on describing what is being said in the interview, linguistic comments note how language is used and conceptual comments are often questions that may or may not be answered by the text (Smith et al., 2009). Using these three types of notations ensured that I read each line of transcription and engaged with it fully.

For each interview, I reread the transcript and highlighted pieces of the interview according to the three types of comments. I highlighted text that was descriptive in yellow, I used green for text I thought showed interesting uses of language, and I highlighted text that inspired conceptual comments in purple. Descriptive comments usually included some aspect of what the participant said like “Almost not like teachers, like family instead”. The linguistic comments struck me as being important ways of using language like when one student said he was “friends” with many teachers. Conceptual comments generally help the researcher move away from the explicit words of the participant towards to a better grasp of the participant’s overarching understanding of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). An example of one of my conceptual comments was “Predisposed to expect drama so sees it everywhere?”

Once I finished one interview, I went on to the next one with the same participant. After the third interview, I moved on to the next student’s interviews. Once I was done with all of the interviews, I went back through each of them to repeat the process. I wanted to be certain that I had noted the important aspects of each interview. This required not only a rereading of the interview transcript, but also a rereading of my comments to make sure they connected to the text and reflected my thoughts about the conceptual aspects of the participant’s experience. Once I was satisfied with my exploratory comments, I moved on to the next step of data analysis.
The third step of data analysis for the IPA study is to develop emergent themes. Smith et al. (2009) says that in this step “the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity” (p.91). To do this, I needed to work with the data from the transcript, but also the expanded data that included the notes from the second step of analysis. I added a column to the right of the transcript column for my emerging themes. Then as I reread the transcript and the exploratory comments, I created a brief, yet acute statement of the important segments of the text (Smith et al., 2009). I then recorded these statements in the new column, thus producing a three-column table that had the exploratory comments on the left, the original transcript in the middle and the emergent themes on the right. Once I captured the emergent themes for one interview, I moved onto the next interview with the same participant. After I completed all the interviews for one participant, I turned to the next set of interviews. I went through all of the interviews twice in this systematic way to tease out the emergent themes as thoughtfully as possible.

The fourth step of the data analysis process is to search for connections across emergent themes. King and Horrocks (2010) recommend making a list of all of the themes found and then look for meaningful ways to cluster the themes. As the researcher groups certain themes together, repetitions appear, allowing for some themes to merge (King & Horrocks, 2010). I completed this step in two stages. For the first stage, I sorted themes into general categories according to what aspect of the school experience they related to. These were loose categories like “General middle school,” “Academic aspects,” or “Social aspects”. Smith et al. (2009) call this type of categorization “Abstraction”, which is a basic way of grouping similar themes (p.
This allowed me to look more closely at the themes as they related to the different aspects of the students’ world at school. Using abstraction allowed me to categorize themes in a more general way; to push my analysis to a higher level, I chose to use another method of organizing themes (Smith et al., 2009).

My second technique was to take the themes and then “contextualize” them (Smith et al., 2009, p. 98). This method gathers groups of themes according to a temporal or narrative thread (Smith et al., 2009). I chose to arrange the themes as chronologically as possible, though it was difficult to truly assign a chronological order to themes relating to friends versus themes relating to athletics. In general though, I tried to sort themes according to the time of year, for example “Before entering high school”, and by the flow of the school day, like “After school activities”. I then tried to create a title for each set of themes that summarized how the student had spoken about that part of his or her experience.

Since I was working with four participants and twelve interviews, I needed to complete step five of the data analysis: moving on to the next case. Smith et al. (2009) encourage the researcher to bracket off the findings from the previous interview when proceeding to this step. Once I finished one interview, I followed the same procedure with the previous steps of analysis, moving from interview to interview, then participant to participant. Though I heeded the warning about approaching each interview with an open mind, I found most of the themes from all of the interviews fit into the same 6-8 general categories in the abstraction stage of analysis.

I did find that some rounds of interviews had more themes under certain headings than other rounds. For example, the first round of interviews with all of the students had more themes clustered under the “General middle school” heading than did subsequent rounds. For the last
round of interviews, I needed to create a new heading called “Tenth grade” to capture the emergent themes of that time in the school year. Also the final round of interviews had more themes relating to the “Technology” heading than the other interviews. While the general headings remained the same, the number of themes listed under each heading differed depending on the student and the interview.

The greatest variation occurred in the second stage of analysis: the contextualization phase. Though the general headings remained the same for each student, the specific themes listed under those headings were very different. For example, each of the students talked about how they felt about entering high school in the summer before high school started, but each student described their emotions very differently. One student was just nervous; another was nervous and excited, while another admitted to having many different emotions as the first day of school approached. In this second stage of analysis, I worked very hard to capture the nuances that separated each student’s experience as he or she moved through the freshman year.

The final step of the data analysis for IPA is looking for patterns across cases. The challenge in this process is to find overarching themes that apply to all or nearly all of the cases while maintaining faithfulness to the individual cases (Smith et al., 2009). Though this task seemed overwhelming at first, I realized that when I searched for the patterns they were there. In the end I found seven super-ordinate themes that answered my research question. The super-ordinate themes were: anticipating high school, adjusting expectations, navigating landscapes, overcoming academic difficulties, participating actively, planning for the future and reflecting on freshman year. These themes allowed me to find the predominant connections that highlighted the students’ experiences both individually and as a group.
The theme of anticipating high school related to the perceptions, emotions and preparations of students before they entered high school. Adjusting expectations ended up being one of the richer themes as students struggled to reconcile their preconceived notions of high school with their actual experiences. Navigating landscapes included both themes concerning the physical landscape of the school and themes related to navigating the new academic and social landscapes of high school. Overcoming academic difficulties could be linked to the previous theme, though it also included many of the work and study skills students developed as they moved through the second half of the year. The theme of participating actively captured the students’ feelings about being involved in the school and community. Planning for the future included themes about sophomore year, but also the goals students had for college and careers. The last super-ordinate theme, reflecting on the year, was created to include summarizing themes students expressed as their freshman year was drawing to a close.

To organize the subordinate themes under these super-ordinate themes, I created a chart. I divided each super-ordinate theme into three parts: general high school, academics and social aspects, and created a column for each student. Though these secondary headings were fluid and not exclusionary, organizing the chart this way gave me a graphic way to look at how the subordinate themes fit under the super-ordinate themes. All of the students had emergent themes that fit under every super-ordinate theme, though they did not all have themes that fit under the subdivisions of general high school, academics and social aspects. Some subdivisions did not have any themes, but when I investigated more closely, I found that those aspects were closely related to a different super-ordinate theme. For example, I did not find any subordinate themes for the “general high school” portion of the “overcoming academic difficulties” super-ordinate theme.
theme. But I realized that the themes that might have belonged there were also well suited to the “navigating landscapes” category. So while creating the distinct super-ordinate themes, I also saw that there was some overlap and fluidity between the themes. I found that as I was writing about my findings I also moved themes around as they seemed to fit better under a different super-ordinate theme. The data analysis cycles were indeed fluid and iterative.

Throughout the data analysis process, my main goal was to use the IPA method to give voice to the experiences of my participants. While I was looking for overarching patterns that would help me understand the general experience of my transitioning students, I was also looking for the specific details that highlight how the experience is different for each student. This is the difficult task of doing IPA with a sample size greater than one, it “…constantly involves negotiating this relationship between convergence and divergence, commonality and individuality” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 107). Keeping this tension in mind, I made a faithful effort to draw parallels between experiences while maintaining individual voices.

Creditability and Transferability

With any study, issues of credibility and validity must be considered. Qualitative research can sometimes be examined very closely for creditability and validity to insure that the research and methodology is sound. Lincoln and Guba (1986) created qualitative versions of the accepted measures of validity for quantitative work to address the question of validity. The authors equate internal validity, from traditional quantitative studies, to creditability in qualitative work, external validity to transferability, and reliability to dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). They describe creditability as the prolonged engagement, frequent observations, and methodical fact-checking needed to make sure the research is carried out correctly (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).
Transferability is shown through a well-constructed narrative that allows other researchers to decide whether they can apply your findings to other research contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Lincoln and Guba (1986) remind the qualitative researcher that these criteria flow from the quantitative paradigm, thus other measures that are more specifically designed for qualitative methods should also be employed.

Smith et al. (2009) also believe that qualitative work should not be assessed in exactly the same way as quantitative data. Instead the process should take into account the special features of qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). The authors recommend using Yardley’s (2000) criteria for assessing quality (Smith et al., 2009). There are four: “…sensitivity to context,…commitment and rigour,…transparency and coherence,…and impact and importance” (quoted in Smith et al., 2009, p. 180-183). These are useful for assessing the quality of an IPA study because they emphasize how to be careful and thoughtful when working very interactively with research participants and their words.

For a researcher to demonstrate sensitivity to context, he or she must show that he or she understands the social context of the study, the greater body of work that has been done on the topic, and how to interact with the participants without causing harm (Smith et al., 2009). One advantage of doing research in the school where I teach is that I was sensitive to the social context in which the participants spent their days. I first reached out to them through letters sent to their homes, not through personal contact at school. Once the interviews began, I took my cues from the students, if they spoke to me in the halls, I responded, but tried not to call attention to the fact that I was working with them. By the end of the research period, the participants
seemed very comfortable talking to me in the halls and stopping by my classroom in between classes.

My interest in the participants and their experiences stemmed from my research into the existing body of work on freshman transition. As previously mentioned, few qualitative studies that focused on how students thought and felt about the transition to high school. When I noticed that gap in the literature, I realized that I wanted to give students a voice in the scholarly literature. When interviewing students to hear about their experiences, I used many of the same skills I use as a teacher to make students feel safe and comfortable in my classroom. I asked them about things they were interested in to put them at ease. I made lame jokes much like I do in my own classroom. And more importantly, I conveyed my genuine interest in them as people, not just as research participants. All four elected to finish the interview process, and I believe that I did not cause them harm. My understanding of the work that came before and the school where I did my work displays the sensitivity I had to the context of my study.

Commitment and rigor are evidenced through well-conducted, in-depth interviews as well as the care and thoroughness of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). As mentioned previously, I prepared my interview schedules for each of the three interviews and had them approved by the IRB. On each of the interview schedules I included a note that the questions may change depending on the course of the interview as mentioned by much of the literature about conducting qualitative studies (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Once I went through the first round of interviews, I revised the questions for the second round and followed the same procedure for the third round. I also tailored some of the questions for each of the students individually. For example, one student spoke a lot about the social drama that she
was experiencing, so my second and third interviews with her included questions about the drama in her social world to deepen my understanding. When I got to the data analysis stage, I carefully followed the procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009) and King and Horrocks (2010) for an IPA study. As stated, my main priority was always to remain true to the experiences of the students. In each phase of data analysis, I continually asked myself whether my findings truly reflected what the students had shared with me about their freshman year. My emphasis on the experiences of the students through the data collection and analysis phases demonstrate my commitment and rigor.

A researcher needs to demonstrate transparency and coherence by clearly explaining the research study, the process and the analysis in a way that is easy for the reader to follow and grasp (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) emphasize that an IPA is a multi-layered method where the researcher is making sense of how the participants are making sense of the experience, and then the reader must make sense of the researcher’s sense-making. It is a complex process, and the researcher needs to keep in mind the reader of the final product (Smith et al., 2009). In writing about my findings, I have again employed my teaching skills. Teachers need to constantly assess whether their students have understood the material presented. When students do not understand, teachers need to find different ways to explain concepts. When writing about this study, I have used my critical teacher’s eye to see where understanding might be difficult and how I can explain things more clearly. I have also shown drafts of my work to others to get feedback on the clarity of the explanations and the quality of writing. Though I can never be sure of the experience of the reader, I have employed methods that I think have aided in the transparency and coherence of the final work.
The final criterion is impact and importance which is shown by telling the reader something important, interesting or helpful (Smith et al., 2009). I believe my work will impact the school where I teach. As a small example, we recently conducted an orientation evening for freshmen and based on the work I did, I suggested giving the students a chance to walk around the school to find their classrooms. This allowed the incoming ninth-grade students to walk around with their friends and locate classrooms and hallways without the pressure of the first day of school. This was an addition to the freshman orientation program that stemmed directly from the conversations I had with students who had found navigating the school to be challenging. I am hopeful that my work will be helpful in other areas as we continue to develop programming to help our freshman students.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Previously, I mentioned some of the ethical issues facing me as I conducted a qualitative study at the school where I teach. My guiding principle was to avoid any harm to the involved students as emphasized by Smith et al. (2009). The authors remind the qualitative researcher “ethical research practice is a dynamic process which needs to be monitored throughout data collection and analysis” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 53). Moustakas (1994) and Smith et al. (2009) suggest letting participants know the purpose and potential outcomes of data analysis at the very beginning of the study, perhaps even before they sign the informed consent form. I attempted to be clear with both the parents and the students of the purpose and outcomes of the data analysis in the letter I sent to obtain informed consent. I did not start the interview process without getting informed consent from the students and their parents or guardians. Once I got the informed consent paperwork I also met briefly with the students in person to explain the procedures and
what would be required of them. I also reiterated the purposes and the outcomes with the students at the beginning of each interview session as we were preparing to begin the recorded interview. I guaranteed the students anonymity in my final work and I did not allow school officials, or anyone else, to see my raw data without names removed as recommended by Smith et al. (2009).

Creswell (2007) adds another element to the ethical nature of my proposed study: the hierarchical nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Creswell (2007) points out that the interviewer often controls the interview and shapes what data is provided by the interviewee. The interviewee may not fully articulate his or her thoughts and experiences depending on his or her interactions and relationship to the interviewer. To complicate the matter further, I am a teacher at the school and my participants were students at the same school. An inherent inequity of power between those two roles existed, and I needed to work to mitigate it to get useful data.

I tried several methods to try to lessen the difficulty of interviewing students. As mentioned previously, I did not interview any of the students who were enrolled in my academic classes. I chose to avoid potential situations where a student may expect his or her participation to reflect positively in our classroom relationship. Another strategy I used was to plan interview questions ahead of time, practice them and refine them to be prepared as much as possible ahead of time (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). The third strategy was to state and restate before each interview that I would not repeat their comments to their teachers, other teachers or the administration, unless the student’s health or safety is at risk. I am a mandated reporter in my role as a teacher, and I did not think that ended when I became a researcher. I
emphasized that the students were helping me complete my scholarly work, and I would not violate their trust. Thinking about these issues ahead of time helped me avoid or address them as they appeared in the course of my research.
Chapter Four: Report of Research Findings

One of my goals in doing this study was to understand what incoming freshmen are experiencing as they move through their first year of high school. By analyzing the data in the steps outlined above, I found that my research participants each experienced their ninth-grade year in a unique way; though overarching themes connected their experiences and illuminated some important aspects of the freshman year. These super-ordinate themes were experienced by the students in different ways, but all of the students spoke to these aspects of their freshman year in the interviews. The super-ordinate themes were anticipating high school, adjusting expectations, navigating landscapes, overcoming academic difficulties, participating actively, planning the future and finally, reflecting on freshman year. It became evident that the themes related to one another naturally, so I placed themes together that appeared to be connected. Organizing the themes in this way helped me better understand how students made meaning of their experiences when transitioning to high school.

Anticipating High School

One of the ways that students make meaning of the experience of moving from middle to high school is by anticipating what the high school will be like before they cross the building’s threshold as freshmen. The literature points out that people experience many transition points throughout their lives with the move to high school being just one. As is true in many cases, the students made meaning of the experience by anticipating what being a high school student would be like while they were still in middle school. Their expectations appear to be formed by a complex blend of experiences with the middle school, personal impressions of the high school, personality traits and comments about the high school from others. Each student related his or
her experiences differently, but the commonalities emerged as I went through the data analysis phases.

Anticipation about the high school seemed to be forming whether the students realized it was happening or not. When a person is in the middle of an experience, it may be hard for him or her to see the thought processes that are occurring. Though the high school is a looming physical presence across the street from the middle school, Gabriel stated “I don’t think I thought of the high school that much while I was in middle school.” It became clear from his interviews, however, that he had begun to form perceptions of the high school before his freshman year. Gabriel was perhaps better able to reflect on his thinking after gaining some distance from the experience itself. He articulated that his perceptions of high school were mostly negative, based on his limited experience with the high school and other people’s comments about the high school.

The middle school in my district is a new building which opened only a few years ago. In contrast, the high school is an old building. It has had additions and renovations, but it is very clearly not a new building. The contrast between the two schools struck Gabriel:

Like sometimes when we used to come here in the auditorium for plays, and we’d see like the older kids, sometimes I thought it was like, like a bad school for some reason… by the way the school looked, because it looked old…

While he did not think he was thinking about high school, the physical condition of the school left him with a negative impression and led him to think the school was bad. He was already anticipating a bad school before he left middle school based on his observations. Though he
developed more positive views of the high school as a student, the condition of the facilities was a common point he came back to in the interviews.

This student also received mixed messages from older people about the high school. From his sister, he heard “it was fun there” and that “you have a lot of things to do”. On the other hand, teachers and guidance counselors were trying to prepare the students for a change in expectations. This added to his negative perception of the high school experience:

…when they’d talk about it, it sounded like it would be a lot of work, and like when the guidance counselors came to the school, to the middle school, they said so much electives and all this, I thought it was going to be like so much for me to handle...

Not only did he think the high school was a bad place, he also started to doubt his abilities to cope with the academic and social aspects at the high school. He admitted “I felt a little scared…” and when questioned about feeling scared, he mentioned he was afraid of getting lost at the high school because it was so big and being afraid he would not know many people because he thought some of his friends were leaving. He did not seem to have any other sources for information other than his sister and middle school personnel, but combined with what he saw of the high school, he entered high school anticipating that it was going to be a bad place for him.

On the other hand, for Aidan, the high school looked to be a welcome change. He was the most negative about his experiences in middle school and looked forward to the move across the street:
[After] three years of being in the middle school, I was kind of sick of it already because of how strict they were there and so I was kind of glad to get out of there, so overall I was excited…

He mentioned the strictness of the middle school several times and seemed to chafe at the ordered structure of the middle school. He did not specifically mention any incidents that caused his annoyance with the middle school, but he was very clear about how restricted he felt there. Added to his personal feelings were the comments of his older neighbor, a recent graduate of the high school, “…he told me I was going to love it…”, referring to the high school. Combining his dislike of the middle school and the positive comments of an older teen, Aidan seemed to be anticipating high school with eagerness.

Though he was ready to leave the middle school, as the first day of school approached Aidan admitted that nervousness crept in. “I was also excited about starting at a new school. But I was also nervous about that also. I was also really nervous for my math class, because everybody told me that Ms. E’s class is very hard.” He seemed to be struggling to balance his emotions about entering high school, on one hand excited, on the other nervous:

‘Cause there were some things that I realized were kind of nerve wracking, but then I also realized there were a lot more things to be excited about like new teachers and a new school and having an excuse to be late to class for the first couple of days.

It is difficult for many people to enter any new experience without feeling some anxiety, and he appeared to be trying to remind himself of the positive aspects while feeling the nervousness. Although he did not seem to have a negative perception of the high school, he still experienced some apprehension as the time drew near for him to enter the building as a student.
Liam also started building his perceptions of high school well before the start of ninth grade. To him, entering high school was an event for the distant future and had an element of the unreal about it. He equated entering high school with growing up:

Like I always went to the middle school, like for those three years and I’d see the high school like walking by every now and then, and I just didn’t really think I’d ever make it here, like come here. I always thought I’d stay a kid.

The literature pointed out that moving to high school is often seen as an important rite of passage, and Liam’s comment reflects that idea (Neild, 2009). At a different point in the same interview, he revisits the growing up aspect, “And then right when I showed up, it was like I was done being a little kid and I liked it a lot.” Being in high school has meaning in our society; it is recognized as a step on the path to adulthood. Part of Liam’s anticipation of high school was that his role as “kid” would be changing, and he continued to talk about negotiating this shift from being a kid to being a young adult in the subsequent interviews.

Much like Gabriel, Liam had also formed a negative impression of the high school based on the physical appearance. Instead of thinking the high school was a bad school however, Liam anticipated how going to the high school would make him feel physically:

Well, I was expecting, from like the tour we had, like everyone seemed so tired and like bored, so it was completely different from the middle school, and the colors like of the walls and stuff, they’re kind of darker compared to the middle school, so it just kind of seemed a little sad compared to the middle school, but…uh…I was kind of expecting to be bored all of the time and just dragging myself through the day…
Liam was able to visualize himself at the high school and make a prediction about how the atmosphere of the school would affect him. He did not seem to make the large generalization that the whole school was bad, instead he personalized the observation. This expectation was only one piece of his anticipation of high school, however, and it did not seem to overshadow his overall enthusiasm for the high school.

Like Aidan, Liam wavered back and forth between being excited and being nervous. He received mixed reviews from older cousins and their friends, though he chose to mostly focus on the positive:

But, um, a lot of them were actually positive reviews about it, like they said you get a ton of freedom here. And you get to pick your own classes and stuff. They said that it was a good time here.

As the summer before ninth grade moved towards fall, he continued to anticipate good things about the high school:

I started to like get a little excited because it was a new school, like I was going to school like with the seniors, those were kids I haven’t been to school with since I was in like in the third grade, so it was interesting to see those kids. And, uhhh, I just pretty excited to be in a new like environment for school and stuff.

In general, Liam often took a positive view of things. Throughout the interviews if he said something negative, he often followed it directly with something positive, so it was not surprising that he was optimistic about entering high school. He did admit to being nervous about certain things at the high school, “Uh, I was a little nervous because like I’d be with… a lot more older kids, uh I’d have more work, I’d have to be more independent about what I was doing.”
This nervousness remained in check through most of the summer, until the night before the first day of school, “Um, up until that point, I—it’d been more excitement, but then right when it got to the night before, that’s when it was really kicking in and I got real nervous then.” Though the student had been building a positive anticipation of the high school for a while, the prospect of the first day of school still inspired apprehension.

Meghan’s anticipation of the high school was mostly based on the comments of others. She had heard some good things about the high school, but unlike Liam she chose to mostly focus on the negative elements of the high school. This may be because she did not seem to have a positive experience at the middle school. “And I really don’t like the middle school…” she mentioned in the first interview, though she did not explain her comment at that point. She had older siblings who attended the high school, but heard negative things from her friends “…like all I—I actually heard like good things kind of from my sister and that’s it. Like all of the bad stuff I heard, was from my friends…” Though her sister had attended and graduated from the high school, she relied on the messages of friends her own age that did not have any direct experience with the high school:

They said like it’s just really, it’s like a really bad high school but like I don’t know why I thought this, but like if I went to __________ High, the colleges would be like “Ohhh, she went to ___________ High…”

When asked about these perceptions, she was not even sure what aspects of the high school her friends thought were bad “Um, I think I meant like the kids were bad or like, I think they were talking about the style of the school too or something, umm. A little of the academics…” She
continued to give credence to what her friends thought and said, a pattern that seemed to complicate her experiences throughout the freshman year in other areas as well.

Unlike the other students, Meghan expressed a lot of worry about the social aspects of freshman year even before she became a ninth grader. She anticipated that a lot of social drama would occur when she got to the high school, a concern that started well before high school:

Um, what I thought about…I thought it was going to be weird being in high school because it’s like “Whoa, I’m so old now!”, but since like—you know in every movie about high school how it’s always like drama with the cheerleaders I was just worried about that in seventh grade.

When questioned more about where the expectations for drama came from, she replied “Mmm, just based on movies, but it’s actually kind of true, like I’ve been experiencing it a lot.” Again, she was basing her expectation on something far removed from the experience of her actual high school: the movies. Her worry continued through her final year of middle school and into the summer between eighth and ninth grade. Perhaps not surprisingly, social drama did end up playing a large role in her life during her freshman year.

While Meghan seemingly dismissed positive comments from her sister, she did build some of her anticipation of freshman year on at least one negative aspect her sister shared. When asked if she had concerns about being at the high school with older students, she answered affirmatively “Oooo, um I thought it was going to be tough because my sister told me again that everybody hates the freshmen…” While the other students in the study seemed to have slight concerns about upperclassmen, this student expected to be actively hated by the upperclassmen.
As with the social drama piece, how she anticipated high school was similar to how she experienced it:

Everyone does hate the freshmen, so I always thought that they were going to like look down on us, and just be like “Oh I hate you,” but it is kind of like that, but they don’t really show it. I know that they do not like us at all, but…

Even though she could not point to an incident that demonstrated that the older students did not like freshmen, she was still convinced that they did. Unlike the other students, Meghan anticipated mostly negative things about the high school and found them to be true as she moved through the year.

Meghan expressed her feelings as the time for starting high school approached as a “…ballet of emotions.” She borrowed the phrase from a movie, and used it to try to articulate how she was anticipating the beginning of school to be, “I felt okay at first. I was like ‘Okay’ and then sometimes I would be like ‘Oh, I’m kind of nervous here’ and then I’d be like ‘Okay, okay.’ It would just switch off, it was weird.” She flatly denied being excited about any aspect of the beginning of school, though she did express a similar reflection to Liam on the meaning of entering high school as being representative of growing up:

…it was different, it was like “Okay, I’m going to the high school. What is happening?” Because it’s just—like I thought back to like elementary school and it was like yesterday, and then now I’m in the high school and it’s like “What has happened to me?”

When anticipating the high school, Meghan took the messages of those around her and built upon the negative ones. She began the high school expecting certain aspects to be difficult and found that many lived up to her expectations.
Whether they recognized that they were doing it or not, all of the students started to anticipate what transitioning to the high school would mean. While it could be possible that they did not know they were doing it at the time, it was clear when talking to them later that they all had built up their expectations. Perhaps having the time to reflect or having the actual experiences with the high school helped crystallize their pre-high school thoughts and feelings in a way that might not have happened in interviews at an earlier time period. Some common themes ran through their anticipations of high school like how they built their expectations and the emotions they were feeling, however each of their individual experiences remained unique. Based on the interviews of my participants, I believe that anticipating high school is one of the first steps towards making meaning of the experience of freshman transition.

**Adjusting Expectations**

Another important theme when making meaning of the freshman transition for the research participants was the process of adjusting their expectations of high school to the reality of their experience. Often people build up an idea of something in their head, only to have the actual thing turn out to be completely different. Closely tied to the previous theme of “anticipating high school,” students had to come to terms with the expectations they had formed before high school. Again, this ranged from expectations about the high school in general to academics and the social aspect of being in high school. All of the students spoke of adjusting expectations, though some seemed to struggle with the shift more than others.

Gabriel spoke the least about the process of adjusting his expectations of the high school. Though he entered the high school with a negative perception, it did not take him long to shed it, “Well, yea, by the end of the week, I felt like the high school was a cool place to be…” He kept
that attitude and mentioned it when we spoke in January, “The high school right now, I think it’s like, it’s better than I thought it would be, and it’s pretty fun here…” Gabriel had based some of his academic expectations on his classes last year, and what he had been told by his middle school teachers. He discovered that he needed to adjust those preconceptions when he was in his academic classes, “I, I found it a little bit easier… my math class this year is easier than my math class last year and my English class is way easier than my English class last year.” Gabriel did not speak about adjusting his social expectations, though he repeated several times that he liked the social scene at the high school. He did not address the process of how his expectations changed, but he did form a much more positive view of the high school when actually at the high school as a ninth-grade student.

Aidan mentioned several times that he had built up his expectations about the high school, only to have the reality be much better. His main concerns were about the academic rigors of ninth grade, especially since he had been assigned to the Academy team. He did not come into the high school with a very bright outlook on his upcoming experience with the Academy, “And my English teacher last year described like how hard the Academy was supposed to be, so I thought like it would basically be like being at prison being here…” With that expectation, he seemed to spend a lot of time the first weeks adjusting his perspective on how hard the year would be. After the first day, he recounted, “I didn’t really mention how hard I thought any of the classes would be since I was already building anticipation for them to be hard, and just from the syllabus and stuff, most of them seemed easy.” The process of adjusting his expectations continued throughout the first few weeks:
Well at first I knew it was going to be hard, then I found out, I thought it would be easy. After the first week I thought it would a little harder than I expected after the first day, just because math class she gave us like two big worksheets for homework and I was like “Ugh, am I going to be up this late for homework every night?”

As he struggled with managing the work, he also struggled with being placed appropriately on the Academy team:

Well at first, it seemed like it wasn’t going to be as hard as I expected, and then the second week I realized the work wasn’t going to be as easy as I expected, and I considered switching into like mostly honors…

In the end, his friend convinced him to stay in the Academy, which he felt ended up being the right choice. Aidan expected the Academy to be hard, but once he got to the high school, it took him some time to pin down how hard the classes were actually going to be.

Unlike Gabriel, Aidan spoke about a specific social aspect of the high school that defied his expectations, the upperclassmen. When questioned about his expectations for high school, he stated, “Well, I kind of expected it to be like a stereotypical high school where like all the upperclassmen like gang up on freshmen and stuff…” He had also been warned about the upperclassmen before coming to the high school, “…because of the completely incorrect stories my English teacher told me last year. She said how scary upperclassmen were supposed to be and how I should never listen to any of them…” He found his actual experience with upperclassmen to be much better than he had anticipated. He was recruited by his senior Peer Leaders to run cross country, and his cross country team was made up of older students. (Peer Leadership is a group made up of juniors and seniors who apply and are selected to work closely
with the freshmen over the course of the school year. I am one of the faculty advisors for Peer Leadership, though I did not specifically ask about Peer Leaders. I did not address the issue unless the research participant mentioned them first). Being on a mixed grade sports team gave him more access to upperclassmen and he seemed to develop a good relationship with them:

…but I was glad when I found out that was a completely wrong stereotype, and most of the seniors, like overall like all the seniors that I know are really nice, and the same with like the sophomores and juniors.

Aidan articulated very clearly the concerns he had about the upperclassmen before he entered the high school and shared that his actual experiences with them did not match his expectations.

For Liam, the main adjustment to his expectations of the high school was the amount of freedom students had at the high school. He had expected some freedom at the high school based on the comments of his older cousins, “I’d heard like some things like ‘You’re going to like __________ High because you get so much more freedom’… like they said you get a ton of freedom here…” . What he found was even more freedom than he expected, starting with the first day of school:

And then, I just remember sitting down, and my teacher gave me my lock for my locker, and I went out and just chose some random locker, because usually they assigned you a locker at the middle school, and they were like “Here pick whatever one you want” and I was like “Really? Wow!”; it just seemed kinda cool that they gave me the decision to do that.

Though picking your own locker might seem trivial, for a student who is used to the structure of the middle school, it marked a change in procedure and was a signal that students would get to
make more choices on their own. Liam recounted another seemingly minor part of the school day that left an impact:

And I showed up to lunch, and like they have so many options, like you can get a salad, a sandwich, like whatever the daily lunch is, where at the middle school it was just like pizza or whatever the daily lunch was.

He agreed that the extended choices for lunch also seemed like more freedom after his experiences at the middle school. When asked to reflect on how his expectations were different from the reality of high school, he said, “Um, when they told me that I’d get a lot of freedom at the high school, it was like even more than I expected, so that completely blew away my expectations…” If even the minor incidents like these stuck in his head to talk about in February, nearly four months after the fact, it is clear that the amount of freedom at the high school required an adjustment of his expectations.

Like Aidan, Liam had shifting expectations about what it would mean to be on the Academy team. Even the name was intimidating, “Yea, like hearing like the name ‘The Academy’ and like…, it just made it sound so scary and stuff…” As he worked on his summer work before ninth grade started, he was trying to ready himself:

…like I got asked to be in the Academy and I said yes to it and I heard, like I had real like high fears about the Academy, like I heard it was going to be so tough, and all summer I was just kind of preparing to be in this really tough academic program…

It is clear that he was at least slightly intimidated by the Academy just by its reputation. Liam credited his inflated expectation of the Academy program being helpful once he entered the high school though, “And when I got here, I think because I had high standards set up, it wasn’t as
bad as I thought, but it definitely was like..., it’s a lot of work to do...” When asked about how he felt about the difficulty of the classes, he spoke about his expectations again:

When my classes started, like my expectations were for my..., like how much work I had to do, it was not as bad as I thought, and I was expecting to get like four hours of homework every single night... I think, um, it was not as bad as I was expecting for my classes and how much work I had to do.

He added that it really helped when he learned the schedule because then he could plan out his homework more effectively, thus cutting down on the amount of time he was spending on assignments each night. Liam had built up his expectations of the Academy so much that the actual experience of the Academy proved to be much easier, and he had to adjust to that reality.

Liam had another similar expectation as Aidan: he too expected the upperclassmen to be unfriendly and dismissive. He admitted, “...I was expecting like seniors and juniors to be like mean and scary...” Instead, his Peer Leaders reached out to him and other students, encouraging them to go out for the cross-country team. He seemed to have good experiences with the older students he encountered, and they did not live up to his expectations, “I was not expecting some of them [upperclassmen] to be so nice and open to me, and like be like ‘Welcome to my school’ and like ‘How’re you making out here?’ And like they were just really helpful...” When asked if other upperclassmen ever gave him trouble, Liam answered in the negative and even provided his rationale of why:

...No one’s going to bother a freshman because like I think they remember when they were a freshman and they were like in the same position I was, so like either they help
you out or they just kind of stay away from you. They’re not going to do anything negative though.

Many students might have been too intimidated to join a team that was made up of upperclassmen, but Liam found that doing so shifted his expectations about older students.

Meghan also talked about the relaxed atmosphere at the high school. She entered the high school with the expectation that it was going to be more like the middle school, “…everyone told me it was going to be like so strict, like the middle school teachers, but it’s not at all.” She provided an example to illustrate her point, “It’s just like, they told us in the middle school like if we miss homework, then they’re [the high school teachers] not going to give you another chance, you have detention—not at all!!! They give you like another day…” As she worked to adjust her expectations, Meghan seemed to resent that her middle school teachers had told her it was worse than it was. Later in the interview sessions, however, she admitted that she reconsidered and actually thought the middle school teachers had prepared them well for high school.

Like Liam, Meghan was able to recall small incidents from the first day that demonstrated to her that she would have more freedom, “Like, I felt like everything was so laid back and I didn’t have to worry about it, because like in classes, they wouldn’t flip out if you chewed gum…” She mentioned that they could not chew gum or eat food in class at the middle school, so this small privilege felt significant. She commented, “I did no—did not like the middle school. It’s like a jail.” While teenagers do tend to use hyperbole occasionally, clearly a minor detail like being able to chew gum stood in stark contrast to her experiences at the middle school. When asked what advice she would give to eighth graders, part of her answer included this theme, “…the high school is way better than the middle school, plus it’s way more laid back.”
Like Aidan, her experiences with freedom during ninth grade gave her a much more positive outlook on the high school.

Meghan did not talk much about her academic expectations, but she did discuss needing to adjust her expectations about social drama. Though she had expected some drama at the high school as part of anticipating high school, the amount and the impact of it caught her off guard, “Like it just hit me in the face, it was so bad…” She continued to describe her early experience with drama like a physical blow, “Yea, in the beginning of the year, the drama like socked me in the face, which was surprising.” When it was pointed out that she had been expecting drama since seventh grade, she admitted that she did not fully appreciate how much she was going to be affected by it. While she stated that she never really understood the drama, she came to expect the drama to continue through the end of the year, “It’s probably going to con-continue, it’s high school…” For Meghan, her expectations about social drama proved to be too low, and she needed to respond to more drama as her freshman year went on.

Since anticipating the high school was such an important part of students making meaning of freshman year, it is not surprising that the need to adjust their expectations was also important. Whether they had been fully cognizant of their expectations as they entered the high school building, by the end of their second term, the students were able to discuss how those expectations had or had not been met. For most, it was a positive experience where they found that their experiences were much better than they had anticipated. The atmosphere was less restrictive than the middle school, classes were easier and upperclassmen were nicer. For Meghan, however, the social drama was much more difficult to deal with than she had anticipated. From talking to these students, a reasonable assumption is that students transitioning
to the high school are calibrating their expectations to match the reality of their experience, especially in the first few weeks.

**Navigating Landscapes**

Once students actually enter the high school, they face the task of making their way through the new landscapes of the high school. An important one is the physical landscape of the high school itself. As mentioned, it is an old building with multiple wings and additions, and with sprawling hallways housing different subject area classrooms. The middle school, on the other hand, has two wings and a floor for each grade. Added to a sprawling school is a rotating schedule where classes meet at different points during the day and week. Students find it difficult to establish a routine in the first few weeks between finding their classes and adjusting to the schedule. The new academic landscape also has classes that are leveled by ability; teachers’ expectations are different and grades count toward accumulating credits. This year, the academic landscape for ninth graders was slightly different because the school instituted a freshman teaming model where the four core academic teachers worked together to monitor the progress for a set of students. Finally, and arguably the trickiest for teenagers, students need to navigate the social landscapes that might incorporate more freedom and older students. Again, though the students discussed their experiences differently at times, it is evident that for them to make meaning of their transition included learning how to navigate these varied landscapes.

While Gabriel expressed some concerns over the size and layout of the school, his main challenge was figuring out the rotating schedule. When asked how long it took him to find his way around the school, he replied “It took about like two days, yea because it’s a big school. It took me about two days to know where everywhere was.” This was considerably faster than the
other research participants, but he kept revisiting the complicated nature of the schedule as opposed to the layout of the school:

I normally asked the teachers that I had before and like once I got so confused with the schedule right after lunch, I accidentally went to the wrong class and then when I got to the other class, I got a little late. Yea. That was a little confusing with the schedule.

This difficulty with the schedule is not surprising, because it is a rotating schedule with seven class periods though only five classes meet per day. This means that each class period does not meet twice during the seven-day rotation. Gabriel mentioned that it took him several days to get the hang of the schedule because of those dropped periods:

Yea, it took me like three days, ‘cuz like after the first day I saw that I didn’t have two classes and the next day I had those two, but not another two, and then I got the hang of it.

The order of the class periods and the days of the rotation can also be difficult. Aside from the class schedule, this student also found it difficult to figure out the lunches, “The, well the, how the lunch schedule, how like some days you’re with your friends, some days you’re not. And like how the, like math is third lunch, and English is first lunch…” What lunch a student has depends on his or her fourth block class, so a student has lunch at one of three different times throughout the rotation. While Gabriel expressed having little difficulty with the physical layout, he made it evident that the schedule was harder to grasp.

Gabriel admitted to having trouble with the schedule, but he was fairly optimistic about the way he navigated the academic landscape of high school. “I think I am a little better than eighth grade because I’m getting more As and Bs than last year.” When questioned more closely
about his experiences, it was clear that he struggled with the academics more than he expressed. One example of this inconsistency occurred while he was talking about midterm exams. When asked how he prepared for them, he said “I would normally just look like at my homeworks and like a couple pages in books. Yea, that’s it.” It took a bit of coaxing for him to admit how much he had studied for midterms; he finally came clean with “Like 2 minutes…or less.” When asked about his results on these tests, he admitted, “My engineering and my world history I didn’t do so good.” Though he perceived that he was doing better academically in high school than in middle school, it is clear that some areas still remained challenging for him.

One group of people who at times helped students navigate both the academic and social landscapes were the teachers. Gabriel had a very positive view of his teachers, “And, yea, and the classes were, the teachers are very nice and all that.” He seemed to have a very good relationship with his teachers, “…and the teachers are nice.” He emphasized his positive relationships with teachers throughout his interviews, “I know a lot of teachers. I’m friends with a lot of people, friends with a lot of teachers…” Though teachers would probably not say they were “friends” with students, his use of the word “friend” does suggest a level of comfort and ease with his teachers. Gabriel shared an example of how teachers could help navigate the landscapes of the high school:

…like not too long ago I had a friend who was getting bullied so I knew a teacher that was close, so I went to her and I told her and she reported it and then everything was fine, and he didn’t know it was me and I was okay with that because he didn’t want me to tell nobody, and it was like anonymous and it was good.
Gabriel felt comfortable enough to report this bullying incident to a teacher, confident that this teacher could both get results and keep it confidential. Perhaps remembering this example, part of his advice to eighth graders at the end of the last interview session was to encourage them to “…get to know your teachers…” His comments about his teachers did not only focus on academics, instead he seemed to view them as being part of his social world as well.

Gabriel was the only African American student in my study, though he never mentioned anything about race in the interviews. Our high school is becoming more ethnically diverse, but tensions between groups still exist. However, Gabriel only had positive comments about the social landscape at the high school. He pointed out that there were times to meet friends throughout the day between classes, at lunch, and after school. When asked what he would tell a prospective student considering going to our high school, he mentioned that the social aspect is good, “There’s like friends everywhere, all the kids here are nice to you, they won’t be like, they won’t bully you or anything…” Over the course of the interviews, this student reiterated that the social life at the high school was good, and he did not seem to have as much trouble navigating the social landscape as other students.

Navigating the physical landscape was a huge concern for Aidan. Although the eighth-grade students take a tour of the high school in the spring before they officially enter the high school, finding his way around remained troubling for Aidan, “I didn’t really have a full image of what I was going to have to deal with for navigating, like I didn’t know where the library was, I didn’t even know there was a D-wing actually…” When asked what he talked about when he got home after the first day, he mentioned getting lost. It even superseded concerns about academics and teachers, “Umm, after the fact, I would have to say that was my greatest concern,
just navigating the school.” Although it was a big concern for him, he seemed to find his way to most classes relatively quickly:

I was worried a lot about navigating around the school, because from the tour, I can’t even remember how we got from place to place. But um, after about three days of struggling and being about 5 minutes late to every class, I finally figured it out.

When questioned more closely about this, he said that it had taken him longer to find certain areas of the building, “…that stuff took me a little longer than the first like week of school to figure out, but then I had it down like, kind of quickly.” We talked about this in late January and it had apparently been so stressful that he remembered it from the first days of school. He mentioned navigating the school at several times throughout the interview, indicating its importance in his early experience at the high school.

Aidan did not talk much about the difficulty of the rotating schedule, but he did find another aspect of navigating the high school to be a challenge. At several points in the interviews, he mentioned how much more freedom there is at the high school in comparison to the middle school. As stated, he disliked the strictness at the middle school, yet he still had trouble adjusting to the freedom at the high school. When asked what the worst or hardest part of being a ninth grader was, he replied after a brief pause, “I would say like adjusting to like the whole new atmosphere, how like we have so much more freedom.” When prompted for an example, he mentioned being able to socialize in the hallways in between classes at the high school in contrast to going straight from one class to another at the middle school. He also mentioned how much more laid back the administrators and teachers are at the high school, which he felt added to the free atmosphere. This echoed some of the findings of other researchers
who found that the freedoms of high school can be overwhelming to students (Estell et al., 2007; Roderick, 2003; Rubin, 2007). Although he admitted that it was difficult to navigate the new freedom, he added, “Yea, but I’m not complaining, I love it!” Though it took him time to adjust to the atmosphere, he still appreciated it in contrast to the middle school.

Unlike Gabriel, Aidan valued the teachers’ help in navigating the physical landscape of the school. When talking about being late to class, he felt he knew who would be lenient and who would be stricter, “…I know some of my classes if I just explain it, the teacher won’t require a pass…” He also spoke about teachers who could help him out, “…I know like which teachers if I’m running late for a class can like—will just give me a pass, no questions asked…” For Aidan an important component of knowing his teachers seemed to be “reading” them: being able to tell what they expected of him. For example, understanding how teachers expected him to behave at certain times:

…like I can tell when it’s fine to just talk and not really be like all uptight, but like—and I know when I should just be like sitting there—I know when to be quiet and sit down and shut up.

Aidan seemed to appreciate knowing how to read those cues from his teachers, and to understand their expectations as he was navigating the landscapes of the high school. He credited knowing his teachers as contributing to his overall comfort level at the high school, “Um, I’m actually really comfortable, like I know my teachers really well…” This student appreciated the relationships he had with teachers, especially those which helped him navigate and become more comfortable at the high school.
Like Gabriel, Aidan had difficulties in preparing for midterm exams. When asked what advice he would give to incoming freshmen, he said:

Um, I’d tell them to actually study for their mid-terms, ‘cuz there was one—my wood shop midterm actually…and then my wood shop test, I just saw the study guide in my folder, then I just put it aside, I was like “Oh, it’s just wood shop, it won’t be too hard…” And then the next day, going into the test, I thought it would be really easy, and then he handed out a test. I didn’t know half of the things on there…

There may have been the idea that the wood shop midterm would be easy since it was an exam for an elective, but Aidan specifically mentioned it as a difficult test. In middle school, students do take midterms, but the tests are given as part of their regular school day. At the high school, there are two midterms scheduled each day for four days with an early dismissal so students can prepare and teachers can grade. Aidan added more advice about this period:

Like not hang out after every midterm, because I did that on the first day, and then I had to go straight to practice after I went out to eat with my friends, and that didn’t leave me much time to do anything…

While there is some overlap with the “navigating landscapes” and “overcoming difficulties” super-ordinate themes, it was clear that the midterm exam period required some navigating as students learned how to balance reviewing material and the study time with their personal schedules.

Aidan found navigating the social landscape at the high school more difficult than Gabriel. For one thing, he was placed on the Academy team, which meant he had four of his seven classes with the exact same group of students, and when asked if he got to know more
people, he answered, “Umm, like a lot of people in the Academy with me. I didn’t really know them too well in middle school.” Besides not knowing a lot of the people he was going to be spending much time with, he said it was also a challenge to see his old friends:

Um, at school, at first I didn’t see many of like my friends that I hung out with outside of school um, but then like, we realized each other’s schedules, and then the way I’d walk after that I’d like run into them…

Part of navigating the physical space of the high school appears to include trying to navigate the social aspect of seeing his friends. He mentioned further difficulties in seeing his friends because of their conflicting sports schedules, “But here, I can really only hang out with my friends like Fridays and Saturdays, half days and then sometimes Sundays depending on the amount of homework.” Though Aidan does not speak of social concerns like being bullied or not having friends, it appears that the social landscape did require some navigation as he got used to the new routines of the high school.

Liam spoke of the difficulty of navigating both the high school building and the rotating schedule. Like the other students, Liam took a while to get used to the layout of the building, “Um, well I knew like the first day when I walked in the door, I knew I was going to get lost, there’s like so many hallways and stuff…” He even joked a little about the mysteriousness of the landscape, “I could have sworn that the next day the hallways completely changed because I got lost all over again.” Unlike the other students, Liam spent a longer time not knowing his way around, “…I still got lost. It took me probably like two or three weeks until I finally found my way around.” Compared to the middle school, the high school is a difficult building and there is often no easy way to explain to a student how to get to another area of the building. One factor
that may have prevented this student from finding his way around is that he was part of the Academy team of students, which means the group has at least four classes together. He could easily have relied on other people to find the way to classes and lunch, thus not needing to learn the routes himself.

Along with problems with the layout of the building, Liam discussed his troubles with the rotating schedule. Though the middle school teachers had tried to put in place a rotating schedule in seventh grade for one team of students, he confessed that it took him a while to catch on to the high school schedule, “Um, I caught on probably after like two weeks, I had to like look in my agenda book and count off my fingers to see which day it was…” Aidan showed him the trick of the schedule, though not until after the first month of school, “I actually didn’t realize ‘til October that the days were named after the first class of the day, which [Aidan] had to point out to me, and I was like ‘Oh, that makes everything so much easier.’” Again, he seems to have developed skills to cope with not completely knowing the schedule, perhaps because he could easily tag along with others from the Academy team.

Liam was the most frank about the difficulty he had adjusting to the academic landscape of the high school. Part of his trouble was due to the fact that he did not have a firm grasp of the schedule:

Um, the first couple of days, I was doing all of my homework every night because I didn’t know which class I would have the next day, and my worst fear was like within the first week of school to forget to do a homework assignment. So then I was always doing my homework every night until I finally figured out the schedule…
When asked about using the school-issued agenda book, Liam replied that he did not like the format of the high school agenda, so:

Uh at first, I didn’t use the agenda too much this year… Then, uh, like at the beginning of the year, I started like having to text my friends or ask my brother what the homework was because I wasn’t writing it down, uh and so I decided I had to start using it [the agenda] and it was pretty helpful…

Liam’s experiences demonstrate the difficulty some students have while navigating the academic landscape. Surprisingly, he estimated that it took him quite a long time to adjust to the grading and classroom management of his teachers, “Yea, like sort of the first term and then half of the second term, I was still like kind of getting used to their grading method, like the way they graded and just how they run the class…” This is a student who was in the highest level of honors for freshman year, yet it still took him roughly 15 weeks to acclimate himself to the academic routine of high school. It is perhaps reasonable to assume that other students may take even longer to find their way through the high school’s academic landscape.

Like Gabriel, Liam seemed to view teachers as bridging the gap between academic and social landscapes. While he spoke some of the academic help his teachers had given him, he too focused on his relationships with the teachers. After switching electives at the semester and getting new teachers, he worked to maintain ties with his former teachers:

I like all the teachers that I’ve had, like since my electives have changed since last term, like I still see some of the teachers I had last semester, and I’ll say hi to them, and it just makes it more comfortable…

Liam, much like Gabriel, saw his teachers as something more than teachers:
Um, a lot of the teachers I like here, I think most of them are really nice, and I can talk to them, like almost like they’re not teachers, just like they’re like family or something.

They’re really easy to talk to, so I like the teachers here…

Again, I am not sure that teachers would use words like “family” when describing students, but using that kind of language is an indication of the closeness this student perceived. He made it clear that this was a change from previous years “…I did also like a lot of the teachers at the middle school, I just didn’t really get as close with them, compared to the teachers here.” His advice to eighth graders also included a recommendation for getting to know teachers, “…but just kind of get to know some of the teachers…like a lot of teachers that are cool to talk to.”

Again he emphasizes how easy it is to talk to teachers, encouraging other students to use teachers to navigate landscapes of the high school.

Part of navigating the social landscape for Liam was being on the Academy team, which meant a smaller pool of classmates. Up until the first day of classes, he was unsure exactly who was going to be in his classes:

Um, I knew a couple over the summer, like I knew who was going to be in the Academy, uh, but I wasn’t—like we all knew who, that we were in the Academy, we just didn’t know which team we were going to be on.

Along with trying to figure out the layout of the building and the schedule of classes, part of the first day was figuring out the social landscape in which he would be spending much time:

I was trying to look at all the faces that were in my class and because I was like “I’m going to be with these kids for the next ten months, I need to make sure I get along and work well with all of them.”
He ended up being one of only a few boys on his Academy team, so he mentioned he got really comfortable working with girls. The Academy team is structured a little differently from the rest of the ninth grade since the same group of students has the exact same schedule for at least four classes. It appears that this structure could be good or bad; it is good if you like the people who you are with, but could be bad if you do not like the other students.

Liam spoke more about using upperclassmen as mentors than the other students. Both he and Aidan were recruited for cross country at the beginning of the year by their Peer Leaders. All of the other members of the cross-country team were upperclassmen and Liam seemed to have developed a good rapport with them, “…like it made it a lot more fun and meeting older kids because I—[Aidan] and I were the only freshmen on the team, so I got to interact with like seniors, juniors and sophomores, so…” He also credited them with helping him adjust to the high school more quickly and easily:

Um, through the second week was when I started to get more comfortable because like I opened up to the kids on my cross-country team and they were three sen—four seniors on the team who were like real nice kids and they like told me “Oh these--this is a good teacher to have” and “This is a good class to take” and they were just kind of giving me advice on what to do for my high school years. So that’s when I started to finally get comfortable and kind of sink in and enjoy high school more.

Though some students may worry about upperclassmen, having a connection to the older students in the school seemed to help Liam navigate the various landscapes of the high school more easily.
Meghan also found both the layout of the school and the rotating schedule challenging in the beginning of her freshman year. She anticipated the size of the school would be a problem and found out that it was:

…but I knew the first couple of days were going to be hard because it’s such a big school and I don’t know where I’m going, but then those days turned into weeks and I was like “Where do you find this room?” Like finding places in the school is like…, I was always late.

Being late for the first weeks of classes did not seem to upset her too much though. When asked how she found her way around those first weeks, she replied “There’s a map on the agenda, so that’s how I was—found my way around, but if I didn’t find it on the agenda, I would be like ‘Where is this room?’” She explained that she asked “random people” how to find things, including both students and teachers. While freshmen usually ask teachers for directions in the first few weeks, it is less usual for them to turn to other students, especially if they are not classmates or friends. Unlike Aidan and Liam, the majority of her classmates did not move from class to class together, so she did not have the option of following a group of students throughout the day. She admitted that it took three weeks or more to find her way around and she continued to use the same methods for finding her classes:

I did the same thing as I did on the first day, I was usually late to classes, I looked at my map, I asked people where to go and I wrote like the room number just down in my agenda.

As she anticipated, navigating the school proved to be a big challenge for her as she was transitioning to ninth grade.
The rotating schedule also tripped up Meghan. She had no idea that the schedule rotated or that there were different days which meant different classes met before she entered the high school, “I thought it was going to be the same thing every day.” Along with the changing class schedule, lunch came as a surprise:

I was confused about the lunches, because I was like “Wait, what lunch is this?” because I thought it went by grades, but it turns out everyone’s mixed up, so I was so confused I was like “Where am I going?”. And I didn’t know the lunches yet, like if you had world history you had…. I was confused on that, but I actually like it better because it’s like you get a different lunch.

Clearly “confused” was her main descriptor of the lunch period, experiencing it much like Gabriel. When asked about whether she liked freshman teams, she answered that she did not see any difference between teams at the middle school and teams at the high school, and emphasized “I just felt like I needed to get used to the schedule…” When describing her first week, she explained how she felt, “Still a little confused about the days because I didn’t know the schedule yet, or the lunches, or where to go…” Questioned about how long it took to feel like she knew the routine, she replied “More than three weeks, it’s—it takes a long time but like you definitely get used to it.” Though she spoke of this matter-of-factly, it is clear to see that this could be a stressful beginning to the freshman year for any student.

Like Aidan, Meghan seemed to appreciate the teachers helping her navigate the physical landscape of the school. When speaking about the challenges of finding her way around the school, Meghan emphasized the help she received from the teachers, “…and the teachers were like ‘Oh so—okay you’re in my class, alright come on.’ They’re like so laid back…” Asked
about her teachers’ reactions to her being late to class for the first couple of weeks, she replied, “They’re like ‘Aw, you’re new, it happens.’ But the biology teacher was like ‘I don’t even know mine--way around here.’ Because she was new too.” Meghan retained a good opinion of her teachers beyond the first weeks of school, “I still think all the teachers are like laid back and nice. I-I can uh get-get along with them. I feel pretty good about it.” Meghan appeared to appreciate the relaxed attitude of her teachers both as she was learning her way around the school and afterwards.

The academic landscape seemed to be challenging for Meghan because she had conceptions of what she needed to do to have a good future, but she struggled to perform consistently in her classes. She explained that she had started trying harder in middle school to get ready for high school. She knew she wanted to do well in high school, “Yea, I was told that colleges look at like your grades in high school. So I was like ‘Oh. I don’t want my life to be bad,’ so now I’m trying.” Meghan spoke a great deal about college and her future, though she did not seem very clear on exactly how to get there. “Like, I’d always get mad if I got like a C, I was always worried about getting like a C+ just not making it, because someone said if you get like a C+, then that’s not good…” She relied heavily on what she had heard about college from other people, much like she had when anticipating high school. I did not get the sense that she was hearing these messages from the direct experience of her older siblings, instead she explained they were coming from “The um guidance teachers, when they come into the class and talk about um grade average and colleges.” She also took the opportunity to ask me about Advanced Placement classes during our first interview. She was the only participant who seemed to see me as a possible resource for information, asking me several questions of that nature throughout our
sessions. Since her notions about getting to college were vague, that the academic landscape proved to be a challenge for her is not surprising.

Meghan repeated several times that she needed to get good grades, but she did not appear to be consistent academically. When thinking back to the first few weeks, she reiterated that she was “…not really knowing what to do, just knew I had to like get good grades.” Her assessment of her first three terms lacked confidence, “I guess I was doing good, but sometimes I would slack off, which wasn’t really good and I got like one C+ on a term, I was really sad about that…” Her perception of her self-efficacy seemed to be low. Asked about what she was doing differently to try to avoid another C+, she gave a vague reply, “Like listen, like try to listen more and try to be more interested, think about what’s ahead and not like now.” While her ideas about getting into college seemed incomplete, she also did not seem to know specifically how to improve her academic performance. Throughout the interviews she emphasized the need to get good grades and work hard, but she did not appear to know exactly how to accomplish that for herself. Navigating the academic landscape continued to be something she worked on throughout the year.

For Meghan, navigating the social landscape was much more treacherous than for the three boys. This was a major theme for her throughout the three interviews. Popularity and the social hierarchy of the high school were primary concerns of hers; the boys, however, only alluded to the social distinctions between freshmen and upperclassmen. Meghan was very aware of where people fit in the social atmosphere of the high school, as well as her own place as she perceived it. Describing her best friend, she said “…I mean I have a friend that’s on a much higher like class than me, she’s more popular, but she gets—she has her group of friends and like
me and her are like best friends…” When asked about friends on her softball team, she made it very clear that there was a specific hierarchy and where she was in it:

Yea, I’m not like best friends with them, ‘cuz, it’s hard ‘cuz most of them are sophomores that are like really popular and maybe one…And one extremely popular freshman, they’re just in their group and I can’t really like talk to them because like a barrier is around them…

As we were wrapping up our last interview session, I asked her about drama over the summer. Her opinion was that it would probably be calmer, unless “…there might be like a party and something might go down….With like other groups, I don’t think I would like ever get invited, but…” She clearly saw herself below other teenagers socially, and the divisions between them were very real and important to her. When one place, like a high school, makes up nearly your whole social world, the perceived importance is understandable. For Meghan, the social landscape appeared to be a very tangible place where people’s level of popularity was absolute and unchanging.

Another obstacle in the social landscape for Meghan was the amount of social drama that occurred at the high school. She considered it the worst and hardest part of being in ninth grade, and she felt it was a negative year socially for her. It was not just with her and her friends, she perceived that “Everyone has drama. You can’t—you can’t run from it {chuckling}, it’s going to get you.” When probed about what she meant by “everyone”, she had an interesting observation:

I-It affects the boys sometimes, but mostly it’s girls ‘cuz with boys like drama will happen, they’ll get into a fight and somehow they’ll be best friends the next day. Literally what happens and then with girls, it’s just on and on and on, it just never stops.
Meghan contrasted this with the way girls “fight”: “It-like fights don’t really happen in the class ‘cuz if they’re going to fight, they’re just going to ignore each other like ‘We’re in a fight,’ and then they’re not going to speak…” She explained that she thought the major cause of the drama was people talking about one another: rumors and backstabbing. It seems to be a constant cycle, she admitted “…like with my friend group, all they do is like fight with each other…” Meghan was not only an outside observer of the drama swirling around her; she had also been caught up in it herself.

Though Meghan had anticipated drama at the high school, it caught her off guard when it first occurred. “High school was like big on drama, I understand that, but like this like came at me out of nowhere, and it was so bad. October was like the worst month ever.” While a person can try to anticipate something before it happens, it is impossible to fully understand in advance how it will affect you. She conveyed some of the stress that she was feeling when the drama first hit in October:

I guess I was kind of like in the middle of it all, they’re like “Which side, which side?”

“You’re coming with me, you’re going with him”. But in the beginning, I was like corrupted, talk—talking about everyone, it was horrible. And then I finally snapped, I was like “What am I doing, why am I talking about people?”

The internal battle she was fighting was evident; on the one hand how her friends wanted her to act, on the other how she felt she should act. This can be a difficult balancing act for anyone, let alone a young teenager who is also trying to adjust to other new landscapes. It seemed to be an ongoing battle for her in the early months of high school, but she eventually chose to do what she felt was right:
So in the end, I just ended up telling the truth, and I got like my confidence, I was like “I want to do this, I’m not going to do this because you want me to.” And I told my friends the truth and I was like “Enough is enough.”

This was one of the few times in the interview sessions when she spoke with confidence and assertiveness which lent credibility to the idea that she was acting out of her own beliefs.

Meghan reflected on and spoke about the drama that had dealt such a blow in October when we met in February. She had gained time and perspective on it, though the pain she had experienced from the earlier time period still showed.

A factor that seemed to compound her terrible experiences with social drama was the fact that Meghan felt like she had been changing as a person and it was clear that she was not happy about it. Along with the social drama, Meghan spoke about changing as being one of the worst things about freshman year. She felt she had been a very different person at various times over the past several years, starting in middle school and continuing in high school:

Yea, seventh grade, I used to be extremely crazy, eighth grade I didn’t really talk to anyone, I don’t know why, it was really weird. I didn’t even mind at all, all I did was like daydream, it was weird. And then ninth grade, I was like “Boom”, and like—and then I-and then I’m going kind of slowly up I think.

Though she reported that she had changed in a matter-of-fact tone, it was evident that it caused her distress, “Um, well, I’ve—like a lot of people used to talk to me, but then they really didn’t, and I was like not even—I wasn’t funny anymore, I wasn’t happy anymore, just didn’t really know who I was.” She talked about not knowing the right thing to say in social situations, and it
was clear she wanted to say funny things, but she felt awkward. When asked if she thought the
change was temporary as she was adjusting to being a teenager, she replied:

Unh, I don’t know. I-hopefully I—hopefully I’ll like go back to what I used to be,
because like people definitely used to talk to me and I-I was just like—I didn’t even
know I was going to miss that, well I did, but…

It is difficult to say whether her feelings of awkwardness will wear off in time or not, but they
certainly colored her perception of herself and her ninth-grade year. It is hard enough to deal
with an entirely new social landscape as it is, but adding the extra component of trying to figure
who you are or want to be can be deeply troubling.

For Meghan, another part of navigating the social landscape was figuring out a role for
herself within her friend group. In the first interview, she mentioned her religion and said that
going caught up in the drama made her feel guilty. She repeated several times that she tried to
stay out of the drama because she did not like how it made her feel, “I really try not to like, I just
try to say like positive things and not like negative things, ‘cuz I’m like a person who can’t really
handle that, because it’ll eat away at me, that’s really bad…” She appeared to be trying to play a
mediating role with her friends:

Who knows, but I just try to kind of take like both views or perspectives and try to figure
out a solution. If I don’t do that, then I just kind of like let time play out and see what
happens.

Meghan seemed to be purposely trying to set herself apart from the drama-filled situations, “Cuz
if I like step in, then I’m going to get dragged in and then it’s just going to be chaos.” The
“chaos” appeared to be within her, her struggle to do what she thought was right. For Meghan,
navigating the social landscape meant trying to balance her friends and their interactions with her own sense of self.

As the students made meaning of their experience of transitioning to the high school, it was clear that they needed to learn to navigate new landscapes. Some of the new landscapes had formed part of their anticipations of the high school; the research participants knew these areas might prove to be difficult ahead of time. Other areas were unexpected and created challenges where none were anticipated. As with the previous theme, common aspects existed amongst the four students, though the individual experiences varied widely. Based on the information the students shared with me, it looks as if learning to navigate new landscapes is an important aspect of making meaning of the freshman transition and ninth-grade experience.

**Overcoming Academic Difficulties**

This theme is closely related to “navigating landscapes” and emphasizes how students worked to develop the necessary academic skills to be successful in high school. This theme was especially prominent in the sets of interviews that took place after third term ended. The literature made it clear that students struggle with academics as they transition to high school, though the underlying reasons were not as evident. The difficulty level and the pace of classes seemed to pick up in the latter half of the year, causing the need for students to stretch themselves and gain new academic skills. Again, though students were in differently leveled classes and had different experiences, they spoke of some common experiences as they tried to overcome their difficulties with the academic aspect of freshman year.

Gabriel was the first to admit that third term had been more challenging than expected. When asked what the hardest part of being a ninth grader was, he quickly replied, “Like, third
term work, it’s a lot, I just do a lot more—a lot more homework and tests and quizzes are even harder, so I have to study a lot more, yup.” At other points in the interviews, Gabriel had a tendency to pause before answering, seeming to gather his thoughts. This time however, he spoke without hesitation. He did not point to specific classes being harder, but he did think that things in general were getting harder “I still do homework, but like in certain classes, it gets a little harder, you put like more work into it, and more things you have to remember.” Third term seemed to be a turning point when he realized the need to increase his efforts to adjust to the greater demands of his classes. When asked how he had changed his work habits, he replied, “…and like when I get home, I mainly go straight to the homework instead of watching TV first or playing video games, so I can finish that.” It appears that it took time for Gabriel to incorporate new skills into his academic habits to deal with the challenges of high school.

For Gabriel, assessments remained a challenge throughout the year. When asked for advice for incoming freshmen, he mentioned, “…you have to study for the test and quizzes, only they can bring your grade down a lot…” This implies that perhaps he did not need to study as much for tests before ninth grade, which may be why he emphasized it for the eighth graders. It also can be concluded that he took tests and quizzes for which he was not prepared, thus lowering his grade. When probed about finding better ways of studying, he admitted, “Yea, I need to work on that.” By April he had found one new academic habit that he felt was helpful, “Well, for me, the only way I can actually study is to like stay after school or come before school so I don’t have a distraction at home, that’s the way I get to study.” He mentioned previously that he has several younger siblings, so he found he needed space away from them and other distractions to concentrate on studying. It seems to be one thing for a student to complete a
homework assignment when there is a distinct beginning and end, but it takes time to develop the skills needed to prepare for tests and quizzes since there is a less defined procedure.

Another aspect of high school academics that was difficult for Gabriel was projects. Asked about what surprised him about high school, Gabriel was again quick to reply, “The projects that we do. We have a lot of projects that we have to do and turn in like by next week and a lot of like oral projects we do in front of the classroom.” He agreed that students did not do as many projects at the middle school, so he found it especially difficult to manage the timelines for completing projects. Giving a specific example, he reiterated his concern over the due dates, “…well maybe for-sometimes Spanish when we’d have to do like some projects for his class, we had to like make a PowerPoint and make a worksheet about it, and like by like three days, like so soon…” At the time of the last interview, he was facing a deadline for an English project that he had not started. When asked how he was planning to tackle the project, he had evidently developed some strategies for initiating projects over the course of the year:

I just like might text some friends and ask them for some ideas that they’re not using and like try to find out-like look in a book and look at our study guides that we did to find some ideas and work from that.

The fact that the interview took place on Friday and the project was due on Monday indicated that he was still working on managing deadlines. Though projects in general were stressful for him, he did mention that he liked doing the hands-on building projects for his elective classes like wood shop and engineering.

Aidan, on the other hand, found that the skills he developed for one class could be helpful for other classes. Geometry was a class that remained challenging for him throughout the year.
He explained that he was lost at the beginning of the year when trying to figure how to use theorems in geometric proofs. He admitted, “Like…, and at first I didn’t understand any of it, and that was the one thing that I had to go to [Liam] for help cuz somehow it all—he understood it all within like one day.” This was one of the few times either Aidan or Liam spoke about using each other as a resource even though they had four classes together. The proofs continued to be a problem well into the school year:

It took me until like October of—October or like November to really understand it, because up until then I was looking at it and kind of figuring it out and then I figured out how to do the proofs and then by November I figured when and where in the proof I could use the theorems, which was the hard part, because until then I was slapping them down on the paper just about anywhere and hoping to get by.

Aidan used proofs as an initial example, but then generalized more broadly about his other classes, “…like there’s always that one little thing that’s like a little speed bump that gets hard when I need to slow down for, and every class has something like that.” Prompted to explain that idea further, he continued:

Um, before I used to like fly through it and like leave them behind me, and hopefully I’ll do good on the test for that, but now I realize I should probably like slow it down and look at that part of a certain section more in depth than I do for everything else, and it’s made the tests a lot easier for that type of--; on like the material that I do that for.

It took him well into the first term to make the adjustments he needed to in Geometry, but then he was able to apply the skills he had learned to other classes.
One factor that compounded the academic challenges for Aidan was his involvement in sports. He found that he needed to develop different study habits depending on his athletic season. By the beginning of fourth term, he had to adjust his habits to accommodate a varied lacrosse schedule:

It’s a little harder to deal with homework since we have two-hour practices after school. And sometimes they can be at like 3:00 or sometimes they’ll be at like 6 or 7:00…and when it’s one of the later practices, it’s hard to accomplish a lot of homework before I go home, I mean after I get home and before practice, but I just kind of have to deal with it.

Aidan had played two other sports as well, but they tended to have a more regular practice schedule, though he mentioned that days with meets could be late evenings. Added to a changing lacrosse schedule was the feeling that geometry had ramped up a little at that point in the year:

Um, we’re covering some hard stuff in geometry right now, that’s making the homework harder of course so sometimes I don’t get as much sleep as I was like term 2 and, actually term 2 I got a lot of sleep…

It is implied here that the way Aidan coped with the increased demands on his time was by staying up later and sleeping less. Though he was not explicit about how he changed his study skills, by the last interview he was crediting playing sports with helping him learn to manage his time better:

I thought it helped me manage my time pretty well, like I knew “Oh I have a track meet tomorrow” during the winter, and we didn’t get back until like 8:00 from those, and I’d be like “Oh I have a track meet tomorrow, but I don’t have math, maybe I should do my math homework tonight so I don’t have any math tomorrow night.”
By the end of the year, he was able to use the schedule to his advantage to plan his homework around his sports schedule. Balancing activities and school can be difficult as students need to shift their skills to match the demands on their schedules.

Aidan also struggled to deal with projects at the high school in an efficient manner. Aidan pointed to an English project that he had neglected to complete in a timely fashion as an example, “I realized I procrastinated this big English project, and then I had to-I had to read a book and do a project on it in one weekend…. it was not a fun weekend.” When asked if he learned anything from that experience, he said, “I realized I should probably have took-taken her [the teacher’s] advice and got some reading done over February break.” He continued that he learned to “Um, do them [projects] when I have the most amount of free time, which is usually over a break or a long weekend.” Later in that interview, when asked about something he would change about the first three terms, he replied, “Um, I would’ve worked on scheduling my time for projects…” Managing projects appear to be difficult for freshmen as they work to develop the skills to complete them.

Liam, much like Gabriel, emphasized the need to study for quizzes and tests much more at the high school. He explained his middle school experience:

In the middle school, uh to be honest yea, I really didn’t study that much for tests because I still like-I got As for most of them, I don’t know how, I think it was just like being in the classroom was enough to learn the material…

He found that it was no longer enough to just sit in class when he got to the high school:
…but it’s so much different, like studying is so important now, like and I think that was what I was doing wrong the first two terms, like some tests I’d get As, but then some I’d get like Cs or Bs, so it would drop the grade down overall.

Liam admitted that it had taken him a while to understand the importance of quizzes and tests in term of their impacts on his class grade, “But, now it kind of hit me that you need to study for everything because it’s so important if you want your overall grade to be high.” Liam had also developed some specific study strategies for preparing for quizzes and tests, “…like in the math book if she gives you a homework assignment the night before a test, like review some problems, do some other problems that she never assigned for homework.” While Liam found studying for quizzes and tests more important in high school, he also developed some skills to help improve his grades on assessments.

Along with the other boys, Liam also struggled to manage projects effectively. When asked about the workload in the Academy, he volunteered, “The only difference between like workload from last year and this year is that we get a lot of projects for high school…” He went on to explain, “But uh like there’s probably only like two weeks total in each term where there’s no projects due in each class, like I feel like every time I turn around there’s another project to do.” This student did add that he liked doing projects as a change from doing regular homework, but he had had some negative experiences with procrastination. He explained using an example of an English project:

I left it ‘til the weekend before it was due, so I ended up staying in the whole weekend, I finished reading the book that Sunday morning like the Saturday night, and then I finished the project the Mon-the next Monday because the project was due Tuesday…
He felt bad about having to stay in that weekend to finish the project, but he said the time leading up to that weekend was also stressful:

…e-even the fact that I was procrastinating it, like the whole month that we had had it assigned, like just the fact that it was there at the back of my mind was just kind of stressful, so for a while, I was just like stressed out even thinking about that…

Part of what encouraged his procrastination was the fact that he had been working on other projects in the weeks leading up to the due date of the English project, so he put off starting to give himself a break. Asked what he learned about managing project timelines, Liam said that he tried to spread them out and do a little each night, especially if it was a project that required a presentation. He explained the ideas behind his new project habits:

Yea, like doing it all at the beginning, like I’m not going to say it’s just as bad as doing it all at the end, but it’s definitely better, but it’s still not as good as doing it all spread out over time.

It took at least one stressful project experience to help him learn that he needed to change his approach to complete projects in a timely manner.

Meghan did not spend much time explaining her academic difficulties. She complained a little about certain grades and agreed with the other students that projects could be stressful. She did not however explain how she had developed new academic skills. Often her comments about how she planned to or was working towards improving her grades were vague and without specificity. She often talked of doubling her effort without explaining what that entailed, “Um, study TWICE as hard!” and “I’m going to work twice as hard.” When pressed, she did not give examples of what she would be doing differently. Meghan seemed satisfied with her academic
performance and was moving up to honors-level classes for sophomore year, but she did not spend much time in the interviews explaining her changing academic habits.

Part of making meaning during the freshman year seems to be developing an understanding of how academic requirements are changing, and how to adequately adjust study habits and skills to meet those requirements. The students spoke a lot about the importance of academics in high school, and most reflected upon and spoke about how they learned to manage the academic expectations of high school better. The students talked about developing the skills needed for handling homework, studying for quizzes and tests, and effectively completing projects. This theme is linked to the “navigating landscapes” theme, but it addresses more than just the challenges students faced. Using their words, it is clear that students need to actively change some of their habits from middle school to be successful in high school. Part of making meaning of the transition experience for the freshmen seems to be developing new academic skills to overcome difficulties.

**Participating Actively**

The next super-ordinate theme that emerged from the students’ interviews was “participating actively”. Part of making meaning of the freshman year seems to be finding activities to get involved in beyond the regular school day. All of the students spoke of the importance of getting involved, although actual participation varied by student. The students recognized the importance of getting involved, not just filling their time during freshman year, but also to start building their resumes for post-high school life. The freshmen were already looking ahead to college and had heard they needed activities for their college applications. Students who were involved in activities found that participating enhanced their freshman year.
Gabriel was the least involved student, yet he spoke about the merits of being involved often. He often reiterated what his sister had told him about the high school, “…‘Oh it’s fun there’ and ‘You have a lot of things to do…’,.” When asked what advice he would give to incoming freshmen he replied, “…and there’s a lot of um clubs and electives and sports to try out for…, yea.” These were his words of wisdom, though he did not belong to any clubs or do any sports. When asked in the first interview if he was involved in any activities, he replied, “I thought about it. I’m still thinking.” He mentioned that there were not any clubs that really interested him. At one point he revealed that he had thought about joining the track team, but chose not to in the end. When asked why he did not join, initially he repeated the excuses suggested to him before getting to perhaps the real reason, “Yea, kind of, yea. I didn’t know nobody on the team and I think like the uniform, the pants are like extremely short.” There seemed to be an element of modesty that prevented his joining the track team even though he mentioned that he liked running.

In the second interview which took place in April, he still was not involved in anything, and did not give a reason why even when pressed. The most he said was “I’m not really interested in activities.” Later in that same interview, he repeated what his sister had told him about the high school, “It’s a fun place to be, got a lot of activities and more electives for next year, and a lot of things to do.” He had the perception that there was a lot of fun stuff to do, even though he did not participate in it. It is perhaps a little surprising that he was willing to engage in this research project since he was hesitant to get involved in anything else, though he may have wanted the community service hours that were offered as compensation. While he did not
formally join any groups, he did seem to be satisfied with his expanding social circles at the high school, so perhaps he did not feel the need to join a club or sport to meet new people.

For Aidan, being involved in high school activities was a critical part of his experience. In the first interview, he explained that he was surprised by sports at the high school, “I really never planned on ever playing any sports in high school, then a week and a half in, I started off doing cross country…” He went on to run indoor track in the winter and play lacrosse in the spring. Aidan became a three sport athlete despite not expecting to play any sports at the high school. For him, this became one of two highlights of the whole freshman year, “I’d say like doing sports and just meeting new people…” And while he did meet new students in his classes, he emphasized that he met many new people by playing sports, “And then there’s also people on my sports teams, since most of my friends don’t do track, I had to meet like a lot of the new people on the team that I never knew before.” Sports also allowed him to meet older students, “…like mostly upperclassmen, because I knew most of the people in my own class.” Sports seemed to be one area where freshman students could interact with sophomores, juniors and seniors more regularly since they did not have classes together. His two highlights of the year are closely related, playing sports allowed him to meet many new people at the high school.

Along with getting to know upperclassmen better, Aidan believed that sports were beneficial in other ways during his freshman year. He credited them with helping him develop skills for time management, “But like the first week like really taught me how to manage my time better, like homework and sports and stuff.” By the winter, he was able to cope with both the rotating schedule and his sports schedule to efficiently complete his homework as mentioned earlier. Aidan also used sports as a way to relieve stress, “Um, usually at least cross country and
track helped me a lot…” He explained further, “Well like cross country and track, it’s just that running around, just helped clear my mind…” Instead of feeling burdened by the time requirements of sports, Aidan found being involved with sports actually helped him manage his freshman year more effectively.

Aidan’s main advice to incoming freshmen was to get as involved in school as possible. He recommended, “Uh, definitely get in sp-- involved as possible, like I wish I started off with getting involved with my class at the beginning of the year when they were asking people to…” He joked that if the students were not athletic, they could do cross country like him, and he listed other activities if they did not want to be involved with sports. When asked what the school could do to improve life for freshmen, he advised, “Um, I’d say encourage like their extracurricular activities, like what they did today with like having a meeting about every fall sport we offer…” Aidan really stressed how important it was to get involved and not just for the social aspect. When questioned about that emphasis, he stated, “…because I think those [activities] are just as important as schoolwork since colleges look at those.” The guidance staff gave several presentations to the students about high school and college planning, and their messages were obviously sinking in. Aidan continued to expand on the college theme:

…colleges will look at an average student who plays more sports and is very—not just sports, but is very involved, with some of the other things they can be, colleges will take them over somebody who just does their homework and then just sits-sits around and doesn’t do much.
This seemed to bring him comfort since he described himself as an “average” student. For Aidan, being actively involved had social and academic benefits, plus he felt like he was starting on a good path towards college.

Liam also saw numerous advantages to being involved at the high school. He also had not thought that he was going to be an athlete in high school:

And I was like “I don’t know if I’m going to play sports when I’m in high school, I’d rather just go home and do my homework,” but then after like the first week of school, I got so bored. And then, I joined the cross-country team, and now I do track and all the running sports and stuff and it’s so much fun.

He too was recruited by his Peer Leaders for cross country and then went on to play three sports, though he spoke of the initial recruitment as being momentous. He credits cross country as being the foundation for all of the positive things that happened during his freshman year:

Um, the best thing that happened was probably when I got recruited to do cross country, joining the team. Yea, that was definitely the best thing that happened, because without that, that was sort of the basis for like everything I did…

He developed a good relationship with the older students on the team and also mentioned learning how to balance sports and schoolwork:

I would sort of plan ahead, like for example, if I knew I had a cross country meet, then I would do all of my homework the night before, so that way I would have less to do when I came home from the meet later that day…
It might seem counterintuitive, but for several of the students being busier actually helped them manage their time better, an important lesson to learn during the first year of high school. For Liam, sports paved the way for other successes during his freshman year.

Liam was also active in his class, though again he had not expected to be. When speaking of what surprised him about freshman year, he stated, “Um, I didn’t expect to be as involved as I am, but I’m glad I’m involved because I didn’t really get involved in the middle school too much, which wasn’t really a good thing, but…” Even though he was not very involved at the middle school, his peers voted him to be one of their class officers. He tried to downplay the achievement:

Um, I’m not in any clubs, but I’m part of student government, I’m the, well uh on paper it says I’m [a class officer], but we all do the same amount of work, so it’s not that, like it’s not as good as it sounds, but it just looks good on paper.

Being freshman class president means attending weekly meetings and participating in fundraisers to build up a good bank account for the later years of high school. Despite his self-deprecating words, being the freshman class president does involve time and effort. He indicated that he might not have run for class office if he had not been encouraged by his cross-country teammates. Clearly for Liam, being involved in one activity led to involvement in several others.

Liam also pointed out the importance of actively participating in the high school for his later plans. He was enthusiastic about trying out new activities, in part to prepare for life after high school, “I want to get involved with the high school because I know it looks good for college if you get more involved, so I just want to try to get involved and join groups and stuff
like that…” He too credited the guidance department for that advice and had his own to offer to incoming freshmen:

They need to join the band or chorus or a sport or just do something. Because like when it comes time to apply for college, they’re not going to want to see that like you just uh like went home and did your homework and just kept good grades up, they want a well-rounded individual like someone who can maybe play an instrument or like is good at soccer or something.

This point came up several times throughout the interviews. Liam revisited this message in his final interview:

…getting involved is important, like staying well-rounded is just so important, so that way, come college, once you have to like apply for college, they’re going to love to see that you like got all As, but on the side you were like playing basketball or hockey or something like that… Just like staying well-rounded is really important I think.

Even though the students are only freshmen in high school, they are being taught to look ahead and plan for the college application process. College does not seem to be their sole motivation for getting involved, but it was in the back of their minds throughout the freshman year.

Unlike the other students, Meghan came into the high school planning to play at least one sport. She was still surprised by the opportunities for involvement at the high school:

Well, I--I knew I was going to do like softball, I didn’t know I was going to do basketball, I didn’t—like I knew there was clubs, but I didn’t know there was like such a variety of clubs…
Meghan did take a while to get involved though, she did not find anything in the early weeks of school, “Nothing really was—was really going on, I wasn’t really interested in anything…” Her older sister suggested she try out for fall cheerleading, but Meghan was not interested and admitted, “I was thinking about like fall sports, but I never got to it.” She did not join a sport until she was recruited for the freshman basketball team by the coach, who happened to be her math teacher. Although the team was horrible and many of the girls had never played before, she said she had great fun playing basketball. While Meghan had planned to play one sport, she found that other opportunities arose when she got to the high school.

Meghan also advised potential ninth graders to get involved with the school and get started on their community service. She did not explicitly state it, but the implication also seemed to be for college applications, “Just do as much as you can. Play a lot of sports and do a lot of volunteer work and just do, just try as hard as you can join clubs and everything.” She was the only student who mentioned doing volunteer work, even though the high school has a community service requirement to graduate. She spoke about it several times, explaining that she had gotten some done this year and wanted to get even more done next year. She talked a great deal about having a good future, often connecting good grades to a good future, but she found being involved in the school to be important as well.

All of the students talked about participating actively in extracurricular groups at the high school. Part of making meaning of the freshman year seems to be figuring out ways to be involved in the school beyond the classroom, as part of the larger school community. The students found expanded opportunities for involvement at the high school when compared to the middle school. Even the one student who did not join any activities spoke of the many clubs and
activities offered at the high school. Students who did not expect to be involved found activities that interested them. Several of the students mentioned academic and social benefits of being involved, but they saw other benefits also. Most of the students either implied or explicitly stated that activities were fun, but they also looked good for college. While the students were making the transition to high school, many of them saw it as one step on a longer path that was leading to college and beyond.

**Planning the Future**

The next super-ordinate theme was “planning the future”. This tied in closely with the previous one since most of the students spoke of the long term benefits of actively participating in the high school. Part of making meaning of the freshman year seems to be fitting freshman year into a bigger picture of a student’s life. The students were very conscious of life after high school, though they were only in the initial stages of completing their high school education. For some students, planning the future was as simple as deciding which classes to take as a sophomore. For others, it was planning for sophomore year and beyond. As mentioned, the guidance department worked with freshmen last year to emphasize the importance of thinking beyond the freshman year. From the interviews, it seemed evident that students were thinking about and trying to act on those messages.

Gabriel talked the least about college and life beyond high school, and instead, focused more on planning for sophomore year. As a freshman, he had been in all College Prep I classes except for honors Spanish. When choosing classes for sophomore year, he struggled with whether or not to take Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History, “And for history, my options were CP I history or AP history and AP’s a little hard I heard, I’d go to honors, but a little too
much.” He did not seem to understand the difference between AP and honors, if honors seemed too much, AP would be quite difficult. Later in the same interview, he brought up the AP option again:

And when [the principal] came to talk about AP classes, said it’s going to be a lot of work, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle that, and he said it’s going to be a lot of work and I’ll have to remember more for tests and quizzes, and I’m not a great studier, so…

Knowing his weakness as a test taker, he chose not to take AP history as a sophomore, but did elect to stay in honors Spanish. Though he did not speak about college, it appears that he knew it was good to try to take challenging courses.

Gabriel had concerns about sophomore year and what he wanted to improve. His main concern was about his teachers. After a year of feeling that he knew his teachers, he was worried about having all new teachers. This worry was compounded by what his sister had told him about teachers:

Well, some teachers I don’t know, like I’d rather have some teachers than others, from what my sister was telling me, like some teachers that are nicer than others, and I’d rather get some of the other teachers that I want.

This had been a concern he had mentioned about moving to the high school as well, so perhaps every new school year triggered a similar fear about unknown teachers in him. Though he claimed to be satisfied with his academic performance freshman year, he did have a few areas he wanted to work on sophomore year. World History and English seemed to be the classes that challenged him the most, and he was looking to improve upon them in the coming school year,
“Trying to st-work harder in English, and try to do more work in history, yea.” When asked about plans for tenth grade, Gabriel spoke about moving levels, wanting to maintain good relationships with his teachers and improving his performance in several classes. Even though he did not explicitly speak about college and life beyond high school, Gabriel was taking his experiences from freshman year and looking to build upon them for sophomore year.

Aidan evaluated his performance in his freshman classes to choose his classes for sophomore year. He too struggled with the decision to take AP classes, in the end choosing to take one in a subject he felt strong in:

Uh, I decided to take chem-honors chemistry, because AP Bio I thought was going to be too hard, and I knew if I wanted to take it, I could take it as a junior. And then I’m taking AP history because history’s just like comes naturally for me, and I understand that easily.

AP Biology and AP U.S. History are the two AP classes that are typically offered at our school for sophomores, though juniors and seniors can also take AP Biology. By passing up AP Biology for his sophomore year, he was not necessarily shutting himself out of the class since he could take it down the road. Aidan talked a great deal about his geometry class throughout the interviews, often indicating that it was a constant challenge for him. Even though the class remained difficult, he elected to stay in honors math for sophomore year based on his teacher’s recommendation for him. Surprisingly, though he had not talked too much about the difficulty of it, English was the one class he chose to drop down a level, “And I took CP I English because English is so hard for me.” Aidan seemed to reflect on his academic experiences freshman year and adjusted the levels for his tenth-grade classes to better match his abilities.
Though Aidan spoke about college mostly in terms of being involved in the school, he was starting to map out his later high school years. When talking about how much he liked the high school, he predicted that he would get better electives later on, “And, I can’t wait for like junior and senior year, because I can already tell like they have more options for electives, like for gym class they can like work out for an hour every day, so…” Aside from electives, he knew that working hard earlier in his high school career would pay off, “I’m excited for like later years because I know if you do well now, it’s more rewarding later on.” Even though students had done some work on college exploration in the middle school, Aidan felt it was more pressing at the high school. Along with planning out his classes for later years, he was also thinking of the college timeline, “Yea, like even though I was only a year younger, it does seem a lot closer, especially because technically I only have like sophomore year, then I’ll be looking at colleges junior year.” He agreed that he would have to start preparing to take the SATs and think about college applications soon. As Aidan selected his classes for sophomore year, it was evident that he was also thinking about long term plans as well.

Liam was the student who spoke the most about planning for the future, starting with the first interview. In January, he was already thinking about his classes for the next year, “I’ve been thinking a lot about what classes I’m going to take next year, and how I want to take a couple AP classes, just so it will look good on college and stuff like that…” Most students probably do not spend much time thinking about their sophomore courses when they have just finished their midterm exams, but he knew he was ready for the challenge of an AP class. Not only was he thinking about sophomore year, but the advice he would give an incoming freshman demonstrated that he was already thinking much longer term than that:
Definitely always challenge yourself, like don’t take the easy way out in the end it will pay off, like for your career when you get older, and just like they need to remember that now that you’re in high school, the grades count, like people are going to see your high school grades for the rest of your life pretty much, so like no more messing around like in middle school.

He reiterated this later in the same interview, “…like you need to make sure you keep your grades up so that you get into a good college, and do a good career when you’re older.” For Liam planning for the future did not just mean choosing sophomore courses, instead it meant thinking quite long range, to college and then beyond to a career.

Liam continued to speak about the future in the subsequent interviews, making it clear that it guided many of his choices. He even addressed the fact that it might seem odd that he was already thinking about life beyond high school:

Um, like I know it’s still a long way to go, and it’s weird to be thinking about this stuff now, but I feel like the more I plan ahead, like the easier it will be once I’m older, so I’m just trying to keep college in mind, just in case.

He credited the guidance department with helping him plan ahead. When asked if the messages about post-high school plans were coming from home, he replied:

Uh, it’s more from here, like when the guidance counselors will come in and they’ll talk to us about preparing for college, and it just kind of helps me out like to know if I’m doing things right, and what to do if I’m not doing something right…

He indicated that he better understood what colleges are looking for due to the guidance seminars, “…so now like I know like colleges will see—like they won’t see my term 3 grades,
but they’ll still see like my freshman year final grades…” Though he struggled like many other freshmen to get his bearings during the first weeks of school, Liam was also planning for his future beyond the freshman year.

Meghan also spoke about college, though her emphasis was on getting good grades. She was involved in activities, but she mostly talked about how her academic career would impact her college choices. In the second interview which took place in early May, she said that she felt good at the high school and what she needed to do, “…I just know what I need, like good grades and that’s basically it…” In the next interview, she talked about how hard she had tried freshman year and felt it would pay off, “I mean, eventually they’ll pay off, like good grades will eventually pay off…” When asked where the messages about good grades were coming from, she also credited the guidance department:

The um guidance teachers, when they come into the class and talk about um grade average and colleges, and I keep on hearing that like colleges look at the freshman year’s final grades, so I’m just like trying to work as hard as I can, so…

In her advice to eighth graders, Meghan continued to talk about doing well freshman year, “…and ninth grade really counts, so I’ve been told that um freshman year is really important, so work really hard in freshman year…” Her other piece of advice was for students to challenge themselves:

Oh-oh yea, if-if you get recommended for an honors class, take the chance, ‘cuz colleges will be like at least you tried. But if you want to like keep it safe, then like they’re not going to want you apparently…”
She was taking her own advice by moving into two honors classes for sophomore year: history and chemistry. Her understanding of the importance of freshman year on the college application and acceptance process seemed to be taken directly from the guidance seminars, but indicates that she was impressed by the information and had started to integrate it into her world view.

At times, Meghan also spoke more generally about life beyond both high school and college. When talking about doing better in her English class, she mentioned that she was trying to plan ahead and not just fixate on the present, “Like what’s-like what lies ahead for my future, I want to do good now so I ha-can have a good fe-uh future.” Though she did speak about college, she also had a longer view on her later life as well. She agreed that she was focused on doing well to have a better life after high school, “Yea, because you’ve got the rest of your life ahead of you.” This may have been because she had older siblings and may have been told by them or watched their experiences and decided for herself. Whatever the reason, she saw working hard in high school as a step towards a better future after high school.

For all of the students, freshman year meant more than a year in ninth grade. All of them spoke about what comes afterwards. They spoke about their choices for sophomore classes which seemed influenced by their experiences during freshman year. They also talked about how freshman year fit into long term plans for going to college—the importance of doing well academically and getting involved in the school. Several of the students spoke about the connection between freshman year and having good careers and comfortable lives as adults. While students are coping with the adjustment to high school, they also have one eye on what comes afterwards. Planning for the future seems to be an integral step in making meaning of the freshman year as the students fit the year into the larger context of their lives.
Reflecting on Freshman Year

Reflection has become an important part of life in our modern society. For the research participants, reflecting on the experience of freshman year seemed to be the final piece of making meaning of the transition experience. The third interview in particular allowed the students the chance to think and talk about the year as a whole. Again, students varied in their responses, but they all had much to say about the year in its entirety. And, for the most part, they were ending the year feeling pretty good about their ninth-grade experiences. Making meaning of the experience included the final super-ordinate theme of “reflecting on freshman year”.

In reflecting on the year, Gabriel felt like he had a good year. He saw it as an improvement over the middle school, “It’s a good experience ‘cuz you get to learn more things than middle school, like there’s new things in the high school that weren’t in the middle school, it’s good to learn from and all that.” In the last interview, he admitted, “Yea, I’m more comfortable now because like in the beginning of the year, I didn’t like really want to come here… but now, it’s just like just—just an easy thing to do I guess.” When asked about the best part of the year, he talked about the projects in the engineering and shop classes as mentioned. In contrast, when asked about the worst part of the year, he said that nothing really bad had happened. It could be that he could not think of a negative incident or aspect of the year on the spot or chose not to share one, but it seemed to be a good sign that he did not immediately have something come to mind. Asked about what he was proud of this year, he did not hesitate:

For science class, biology, last year I was horrible at science, but now, I started with a C, and then I got to a B, now I’m at a A. I’m proud of myself for doing so much work and working hard in that class.
He directly addressed the issue of self-efficacy and expressed his pride in what he had been able to achieve over the course of the year. Aside from biology, he did admit to a few other academic bumps along the way:

I’m happy, but not so ‘cuz for like English, I could have done better but I got Cs all four terms, and for Spanish, I was doing great, but now I’m not doing so great, I need to work a little harder on that to get back to an A…

He knew he was going to have to improve his performance in some areas sophomore year, but he continued to reiterate that ninth grade was a good year for him.

Gabriel seemed to have a very good year socially. Throughout the interviews he talked about meeting new people and getting to know more people during his freshman year, “I know a lot of people…I’m friends with a lot of people.” He said his friends really contributed to him feeling comfortable at the high school, and in each interview he spoke about new social ties, “I’m getting to get to kn—I’m getting to—I’m getting to know more people as the terms go by…” In his last interview, Gabriel said he had expanded his social circle in high school, “I made more friends, yea in high school than middle school, yea.” His main advice to incoming freshmen was to work hard and “…get to know your teachers, learn new-learn new friends, or know new friends, um, yea.” While Gabriel indicated that academics at times were a struggle, he remained very positive about his social life in ninth grade.

Aidan also had positive things to say about freshman year when reflecting on the year in its entirety. When asked about his impressions of the year in the last interview, he felt good about all of the aspects of his freshman year, “Um…overall I’d say it went pretty well, I mean my grades were good, I was able to balance work with school with sports with a social life…”
His proudest achievement of freshman year was surviving the Academy team. Though he joked, “…maybe I should get a T-shirt like they do at like Disney ‘I survived the Tower of Terror’”, he was obviously proud that he had stayed on the Academy team and earned honor roll every term. He admitted:

…it was kind of bad at some points, but like going in with like I’ve said about the Academy as a whole, going in with like such high like expectations made it good just-just to like go in to something and do as well as I did…

The only negative things he mentioned about the year were a few low grades, but he did not think they were that much to worry about. He struggled with the decision early on whether to drop down a level or not, but by the end of the year it was clear that he did not regret his decision, “Uh overall, I thought it was mostly positive experiences all year though.”

He had been challenged by several classes, but he was able to persevere and succeed.

Liam also had positive things to say when reflecting on the year and was the most enthusiastic about his experience in ninth grade. Comparing it to other years, he declared:

…I think it was definitely a really good year, so far my favorite year of school I’ve ever had, um yea, it was definitely good with sports and with school work and everything, and the teachers, I liked it all.

Throughout the interviews, Liam had often spoken very positively about the high school and his year. He was the student who was the most involved in school activities and seemed to have the least trouble with classes or grades. When asked what he was most proud of in his freshman year, his answer encompassed many aspects of life at the high school:
...I stayed on high honors all year, I was just happy that I was able to balance that out with like so many extracurricular things like class president stuff, doing community service, um get—uh getting involved with sports and stuff like that, and even balancing all that off with like kind of getting to know more kids and staff.

He contrasted this with his middle school experience where he was not very involved and only concentrated on his grades. Liam took advantage of many of the new opportunities offered at the high school and seemed to really enjoy the experiences.

Meghan had a more mixed reaction to her freshman year than the boys did. Overall, she seemed to have a positive view of the year, but the social piece really tripped her up, “This year was...I keep on thinking this year was a pretty good year, but then I think it over and it’s like—drama wise it was terrible, I’ve never encountered so much.” When asked what she was proud of during her freshman year, she said, “Trying.” When pressed for more details, she expanded, “Trying like to get—to do um good on work, trying to get good grades, definitely, and trying to be fair and good for my friends.” Other aspects of the year were also good. She seemed to enjoy her softball season and she related a story about a fun Saturday she had recently had with friends. There were clearly positive aspects of her year, though the negative elements loomed large as well.

All of the students took a moment or two to reflect on their experiences during freshman year. This seemed to be another important part of making meaning of the freshman year, pausing to think and then speak about what occurred over the course of the year. Most of the students had good things to say about the high school and the experience of being a ninth grader. Even the student who spoke the most about her negative experiences initially categorized the year as a
good one. Assessing and summarizing their feelings about ninth grade appeared to also help the students fit the year into the larger context of their lives, much like making plans for their futures. Reflecting on the year also gave the students a sense of closure as they prepared to depart the high school for the summer and the future that stretched beyond.

By carefully conducting the data analysis on the research data I collected, I found these seven super-ordinate themes. Each student brought a unique perspective and experience to the interview sessions, yet by conducting three interviews with each participant, I was able to discern some patterns to help me better understand how ninth-grade students make meaning of their ninth-grade year. The transition seems to start well before September as students anticipate what the experience will be like, and then once school starts, they seemingly need to adjust their previous expectations to match the reality of high school. While students are doing this, they appear to also be learning how to navigate the unfamiliar landscapes of the high school. As they get settled, students seem to be working to develop skills to overcome the academic difficulties that arise throughout the year and finding activities in which they want to participate. As the freshman year continues, students appear to start looking at and planning for the future. As the year winds down, it looks as if pausing and reflecting on the experiences of ninth grade is important to students. These themes and the data that support them better help me understand the problem of freshman transition and how students make meaning of their experiences.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

This research study was guided by the central research question: *How do students who have moved from middle school to high school make sense of the freshman year?* This phenomenological study was designed to allow students’ voices to be heard, using their own words about the experience of entering the high school and moving through their ninth-grade year. Using student voices adds the views of an important stakeholder group to the conversation about freshman transition. The data collected were analyzed to highlight the important findings about the freshman transition experience. Following are discussions of findings from the study as they relate to the foundations of my project: the theoretical framework, the literature review and the research design.

Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Frameworks

**Critical education theory.** Underpinning these findings was the theoretical framework of my study, which was made up of the critical education theory and self-efficacy theory. According to the critical education theory, it would not be unusual for students who did not belong to the dominant group at our high school to be excluded from classes, activities and experiences that welcomed other students (McLaren, 2002). Using this lens to examine my findings, it does appear that the student of color and the female student had the most difficulty transitioning to the high school. Gabriel was African American and Meghan was female, and both seemed to have more difficulty with academic and social aspects of the transition than their white, male counterparts. Aidan and Liam were white males who were enrolled in the highest-level honors classes offered freshman year and seemed to have less difficulty with all aspects of the transition. It may be that these two students had more support as part of the Academy, but it
was not addressed in the students’ responses in the interviews. These external factors may have affected the way each student experienced the year.

Gabriel seemed to have several challenges as he moved through the year. He always spoke optimistically about his grades and his academic performance, but when he gave more details in the interviews, it was apparent he struggled in classes more than he admitted. He also was the only student who did not register for any higher course levels when scheduling his classes for sophomore year. Perhaps more importantly, he also was the only student who had not gotten involved in any activities at the high school. He often spoke of the fact that he spent time with his friends and was able to expand his social circle while at the high school, but he did not join a club or play a sport. Gabriel explained that he did not participate in school activities because none of his friends were involved with clubs or sports team he was interested in joining.

As our high school has become more ethnically diverse, there traditionally has been a gap in participation rates between white students and students of color, which may be explained by the resistance theory within critical education theory (McLaren, 2002). As a student of color, Gabriel might not have found any activities that matched his interests or that he felt comfortable joining. He may not have felt welcomed on a sports team if few or even no other student of color had joined. Though he was positive about the year, Gabriel may have faced more challenges due to external factors as compared to other students in the school.

Meghan had a more difficult year than other students who participated in the research study. She seemed to be happy with her academic progress, though she was not very specific about her performance. She spoke about being quiet in class and not wanting to participate actively, especially in the beginning of the year. Boys are often louder and more boisterous in
class, thus attracting more attention from teachers (hooks, 1994). Girls who remain quiet can easily be overlooked by teachers, limiting how much help and guidance the teacher offers in those first few weeks (hooks, 1994). She was able to move up to honors classes in two subjects for sophomore year, though she needed to override her teacher’s recommendation for one class. Her academic potential was possibly overlooked due to her reserve in the classroom. This may have led to a slightly more difficult transition based on her external factors.

On the other hand, Aidan and Liam appeared to both have very good years. They were in the top-level honors classes and each chose an AP class for their sophomore years. They were recruited by older students to run cross country in the fall and then continued with other sports, each becoming a three-sport athlete. They were also chosen to be co-captains for the cross-country team during their sophomore years, an honor usually reserved for juniors and seniors. Liam was also elected to be a freshman class officer. These two students were very clearly members of the dominant group in society and may have had a less difficult transition because of that membership.

The critical education theory may explain some of the differences between the students’ experiences. While the two students who were not members of the dominant group in society had some difficulties with the transition, the other two students did not appear to have many problems. It may have been the external traits that influenced the experiences of Gabriel and Meghan while they transitioned to high school. Both students experienced some academic difficulties and Gabriel may have felt unwelcome in school groups or teams. Aidan and Liam both seemed to handle the academic and extracurricular aspects of the transition much better, possibly based on their membership in the dominant social group of the school. Further research
could be aimed at examining this finding, possibly connecting the experiences more closely to external traits.

**Self-efficacy theory.** The second theory forming the theoretical framework of my study was the self-efficacy theory (Bandura et al., 1977). This theory is centered on the idea that students’ self-perceptions can greatly impact their performance. Looking at my data with this lens indicates that students seemed to find it difficult to accurately self-assess their abilities and performance. Though I did not look at their academic records as part of the data, most of the students revealed inconsistencies in the interviews between their perceptions and their actual performance. These may have been minor incidents, but they do show that it may be hard for students to improve their self-efficacy if they cannot accurately assess their performance.

Gabriel always had positive comments about his academic performance throughout the year, though it did not seem that he performed consistently well in his classes. Gabriel did mention raising his science grade over the course of the year by changing some of his habits. In this case, his perception of increased self-efficacy seemed to stem from his own performance accomplishments as defined by Bandura et al., though other means cannot be definitively ruled out (1977). By employing different homework and study strategies, Gabriel increased his grade and therefore raised his perceived level of self-efficacy in at least one class.

On the other hand, he mentioned several other areas of academic concern like his midterm exams, certain classes, and certain assessments that he struggled with throughout the year. Even as the school year was drawing to a close, he continued to struggle with effective study habits for tests and quizzes. This was problematic because he still had to take the required statewide Biology exam and all of his final exams. Another indication that demonstrated that he
might not be doing as well as he projected was the fact that he was not recommended to move up to honors by any of his freshman year teachers for tenth grade. He did remain in honors Spanish for sophomore year, but that was his only honors class for both his freshman and sophomore years. Though he always portrayed his academic record as positive, he struggled in academic areas at times.

Aidan also seemed inconsistent in his self-assessment. He was enrolled in the highest-level honors program for freshmen, yet in one interview he described himself as being an average student. He spoke about the challenges he faced in Geometry class throughout the interview sessions, but he chose to drop down a level for sophomore English only. He maintained his standing on honor roll every term, but indicated that he did not spend much time studying for tests and quizzes. He was also going to move up to AP for sophomore U.S. History. His perception of self-efficacy was difficult to assess, so it is hard to see which of Bandura et al.’s categories fit him (1977). It may be that this student was consciously self-deprecating when talking about his performance and academic successes, but he had difficulty gauging his abilities and understanding where they positioned him in the larger scholarly context of the school.

Liam was the only student who did not have any apparent inconsistencies when talking about his academic skills. He seemed the most reflective about the connection between the effort he put forth and the results he earned. He spoke about specific ways he changed his study habits to improve his grades. Again with this student, it seemed that performance accomplishments in his freshman honors classes increased his perceptions of his self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1977). Liam also gave the best example of self-efficacy when he spoke about taking AP classes. He mentioned that he would have never thought in the middle school that he would be able to take
an AP class, but he realized taking a tough honors schedule freshman year made him ready for the challenges of AP classes. He felt that was the level that best matched his academic skills after working hard freshman year in his honors classes. His self-efficacy had expanded to include being able to handle the rigors of an Advanced Placement course and he was able to articulate that shift.

Meghan was the vaguest about her academic self-assessments. She only mentioned one specific grade that she earned, but she talked frequently about doing better and working harder. She did not spend much time discussing classes that were difficult though she did have a few complaints about specific concepts they studied. She was very tuned into doing well to be successful later, but she rarely included specific details about what that entailed. She did choose to move up to two honors classes for her sophomore year, one of which she was not recommended for by her ninth-grade teacher. She had to go through the override process which took some initiative on her part. For this student, it seemed that vicarious experiences and some verbal persuasion may have impacted her perceptions of self-efficacy, though again, performance accomplishments and emotional arousal cannot be eliminated from consideration (Bandura et al., 1977). The increase in class levels indicates that she must have felt some confidence about her abilities in that subject.

On the other hand, Meghan spoke a great deal about her social efficacy. She felt she had changed from a vibrant, outgoing seventh grader to a much more withdrawn and awkward ninth-grade student. She expressed a desire to be funny and say the right things in social situations, but felt that she often missed the mark. She felt tongue tied and isolated from people who she had previously interacted with socially. Meghan also had a low self-perception of her level of
popularity in the freshman class, which may have further complicated her feelings of awkwardness. Meghan’s friends did not always seem especially supportive of her at this time either. She spoke a great deal about the fights between her friends, and she mentioned one friend who was mean to her and brought her down. She had trouble articulating why she remained friends with this person, though loyalty appeared to play a role. Her perceptions of her academic efficacy were difficult to tease out, but it was evident that her social self-efficacy was quite low.

Self-efficacy posits that students affect their performance through their beliefs about their own abilities (Miller, 2002). For most of the students, this seemed to be difficult to measure as students appeared to have trouble assessing their own performance. Often they seemed to contradict themselves during the interviews, especially when talking about their academic performances. It was not always clear whether they were being efficacious about handling tasks, since it was difficult to pin down how they thought they should perform. On the other hand, Meghan was more reflective about her social self-efficacy. She believed she was less popular than other students based on her difficulties in interacting with other students. These internal traits were difficult to assess from the outside, but further research might uncover more about the effects of student’s self-efficacy during freshman year.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review**

When conducting my literature review, I asked two questions of the literature, each connected to one aspect of my theoretical framework:

1. To what extent do external traits, including race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and other categories, affect a student’s ability to successfully transition to ninth grade?
2. To what extent do internal traits, including self-perception, motivation, persistence and other traits, affect a student’s ability to successfully transition to ninth grade? According to the body of literature, two external traits appear to affect transitioning students, while several internal traits are important. I compared my findings to the findings in the literature to see how my work may fit into the larger context of scholarly literature.

**External traits.** Critical education theory corresponded to the external traits that I found in the body of literature about the freshman transition. The literature suggested that students’ socioeconomic class and age were the most important factors that affected a student successfully transitioning to the high school (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Rubin, 2007; Zvoch, 2006). All of my research participants earned enough credits to move on to sophomore year, which indicated that the freshman year was academically successful for each of them. I did not ask my students about their socioeconomic details, so I do not know if that played a part in the transition experience of these students. I also did not specifically ask about their ages, though three of them spoke about being old enough to get their driver’s licenses during their sophomore year, which would mean they turned fifteen at some point during their freshman year. Perhaps the small nature of my study contributed to the fact that the findings from the literature review did not entirely match the experience of my study.

Though the literature did not support it, I did find that the one girl in my study seemed to have a much more difficult time adjusting to the social experiences at the high school than the boys did. Some studies in the body of literature suggested that girls actually had a somewhat easier time transitioning than boys did (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Roderick, 2003). In my study, however, I found that the young woman I interviewed had a much more difficult time, especially
with the social aspects of the high school. Meghan did speak of enjoying expanding social opportunities that seemed to go along with life in high school; she felt she was allowed more social freedom by her parents since she was in high school as seen in the literature (Neild, 2009). However, she did not enjoy the amount of social drama she was involved in throughout the year. It seemed to start during the second month of school and continued to affect her overall experience of ninth grade over the course of the entire year. For this reason, she was not ready to categorize the year as a complete success when she reflected on her freshman year.

There may be several reasons why my findings do not entirely match the reported results in the body of literature. For one, my study only included one female student. If I had interviewed more young women, I may have learned that social drama was not as widespread as Meghan seemed to think it was. Many of the studies included in the body of literature had more participants, which might mean that those who experienced much social drama were more balanced out by students who did not experience as much. Another reason for the anomaly may be that many of the other studies were quantitative ones where numerical data was emphasized. Meghan passed all of her classes, was promoted to tenth grade and was moving up to honors level courses in two subjects for her sophomore year. If my focus was merely those types of factors, I could count her transition as a success. By conducting three interviews with her, however, other factors affecting her transition to the high school were present. These factors may have been difficult to tease out in a study that featured only quantitative methods.

**Internal traits.** Some of my findings resonate with the internal factors I discovered as being important from my examination of the body of literature. As Isakson and Jarvis (1999) found, my students did seem to be experiencing fewer stressors as the year progressed, though
they faced significant stressors in the early months of the school year. As detailed above, the students’ self-perceptions were difficult to pin down definitively, but they did seem to affect the students’ performance in their academic and social spheres. The students spoke about developing different study skills at the high school, though with varying levels of specificity. Since I did not request their academic records as part of the data, I cannot accurately label the students as “high-performing” or “low-performing” (Newman, Myers, et al., 2000). However, some students spoke about changing personal habits and learning to study more effectively, while others pointed to becoming more engaged in class and completing homework assignments as paths to academic success, echoing some examples from the literature (Newman, Myers, et al., 2000). My findings for these areas were similar to those documented in other research studies in the body of literature, while other findings in my research appear to have expanded on the information gathered from previous studies.

Student motivation was one aspect of the internal traits category where I felt my study expanded a little on what I had found in the literature. The literature included studies about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, but few explanations of what drove the students’ motivation other than possibly grades (Otis et al., 2005). Without specifically mentioning motivation, the students in my study revealed that they wanted to do well in school to have good lives beyond high school. Most of them stated a desire to get into college after high school, and some even spoke of having a good career or a comfortable life based on doing well in high school. Interestingly, they pointed to information from the guidance department as being a major influence on their thoughts about life after graduation, rather than from parents or siblings as highlighted by Chen and Gregory (2009). In the case of my research participants, the motivation
for doing well and getting involved in high school was to get into college and have a good life as an adult. This seemed to add depth to some of the research studies that reported about motivation without examining some of the underlying factors contributing to either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation.

Another area where I felt my study expanded upon what I found in the literature was the relationships students built with teachers. In the literature, studies seemed to indicate that relationships with teachers impacted the academic aspect of students’ transition experiences (Newman, Myers et al., 2000). From what my participants discussed, it was possible to better understand how teachers affected their ninth-grade years. All of my students talked about their teachers positively. Especially by the last interview, all appeared to have a good rapport with most of their teachers. Several students mentioned going to teachers with non-academic problems and receiving help in resolving difficult situations. One included a bullying incident, which was handled successfully. Students described teachers as friends, or even being like family, and advised any incoming ninth-grade student to get to know their teachers. While the academic piece is important, students found help from their teachers for questions beyond learning and studying. My study may have added more specific information about the teachers’ role in the students’ ninth-grade transition experience.

One area of difference between the body of literature and the results I found concerned students’ expectations of their academic performance in high school. The literature indicated that many middle school students are confident that they can handle the workload in high school without difficulty (Stein & Hussong, 2007). They have positive predictions about their academic performance in high school (Stein & Hussong, 2007). My results showed that while our students
did build up their expectations of the high school, they often believed that the high school would be much more difficult than it turned out to be for them. Most of the students in my study believed that the work at the high school would be very hard for them to manage, mostly based on the reports of their middle school teachers. When they arrived at the high school, all of them spoke of the work and amount of homework as being more manageable than they had anticipated. The research in the literature seemed to suggest that students found work at the high school to be harder to manage, though many of these students had predicted they would have academic success at the high school. While students in my study did struggle with certain classes or certain types of work, they seemed to enter high school with a lower expectation of success than do students from other middle-school programs.

There may be a couple of reasons for this difference. One is that our one middle school feeds into one high school in our district. Therefore, all middle school students are possibly getting a more consistent message about the difficulty of the high school based on the perceptions of their middle school teachers. In a larger district with multiple middle schools feeding into one or more high schools, the cues about what to expect might not be as uniform. Another reason why it might be that our students find the workload more manageable is that our schedule differs greatly from the middle school’s daily schedule. At the high school, students have five classes a day for a longer period, whereas in the middle school they meet all seven of their classes each school day for a shorter time. Students at the high school “drop” two classes each day, meaning that the classes do not meet. This allows students some flexibility in planning and completing their homework since they do not have all of their classes every day. Students may feel the workload is more manageable since they do not have to do seven classes’ worth of
homework every night. Whatever the reason, the expectations of difficulty of our students are clearly different from what other researchers have found.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to Research Design**

My research question for this study was: How do students who have moved from middle school to high school make sense of the transition during freshman year? This was designed to be an interpretive phenomenological analysis study, with the data coming from three interviews with each of the four participants. Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, several cycles of data analysis were performed. By completing the cycles of data analysis, I discovered that the students participating in my study seemed to make meaning in specific ways as they lived their freshman-year experiences. There were not rigid boundaries between the categories; instead, the students’ thinking seemed to develop throughout the year. The phases were interconnected and often one was very closely related to another, with enough distinction to merit separation. Each student’s experience was unique, but each student also spoke about each of the phases to some degree.

The first aspect of making sense of the transition was anticipating the high school. I found that the students began to form opinions about what the high school experience would be like well before they started in the autumn of their freshman year. In some cases, students do not even realize they are doing it, and yet they all articulated the impressions they had of the high school before they were enrolled as students. Students were much more aware of their emotions as the moment to enter high school approached. These emotions ranged from the easily predicted feelings of nervousness and excitement to the less anticipated feeling that they were growing up. Worries included everything from getting lost in the building to how difficult classes were going
to be to concerns about the older students in the building. Students try to make meaning of the transition well before the transition actually occurs.

The second category was closely related to the first. Once the students were at the high school, they needed to realign their expectations of high school to match the reality of their experiences. Most of the students found that they had built up their expectations too much; the reality was much simpler than they had anticipated. The high school offered much more freedom than many of them had previously thought, the classes were not as difficult as predicted, and the upperclassmen did not shove freshmen into lockers as seen on television. This is not to say that students did not face challenges as they moved through the year, but the high school was a more benign place than many had anticipated. Since students built up expectations before the year started, another part of making meaning of the freshman year was adjusting those expectations to match the reality that they experienced.

The third theme of the transition process was navigating the new landscapes of the high school. These included the physical, academic and social landscapes that were different for the students coming from the middle school. Students had difficulty finding their way around the school since their classes were spread throughout the building. Closely related to this was the difficulty students had figuring out the rotating schedule that is a unique feature of our high school. The academic landscape is also addressed in the next category, though midterms seemed to be a challenge that most of the students needed to navigate. The new social landscape of the high school varied for each student. Some seemed to move through it easily while one student had a very difficult time. Interestingly, the students seemed to view their teachers as helpful with
all three landscapes, not just the academic one that might be supposed. Part of making sense of the freshman year is navigating through the various landscapes that make up the high school.

The next category for students was overcoming academic difficulties. Again, clearly connected to the previous phase, this related to how students found they needed to adjust their work habits to meet the increasing demands of their courses. For the most part, the areas where students found they needed the most changes were in studying for tests and quizzes and completing projects in a timely fashion. The research participants spoke about their changing habits in varying degrees of specificity, from the vague “work harder” to specific exercises for studying. The students also talked balancing school work with playing sports and doing other activities. Overcoming academic difficulties was something students were evidently working on throughout the entire year as they adjusted to the increasing demands of their classes each term. Making sense of the transition meant adjusting habits to meet the academic challenges of the high school.

The fifth theme that students spoke about was participating actively in the high school. The high school offers many types of extracurricular activities for students, clubs, councils for the school and each class, and sports. All of the students talked about the importance of being actively involved in the school, though not all of the students found something that interested them. The most popular activities were sports, which students seemed to enjoy for both athletic and social reasons. Aside from the enjoyment of being involved in the school, students were very aware that participating in school activities would look good on college applications. As the year went on, students spoke increasingly about the importance of being actively involved for their
post-high school plans. Part of making meaning for the freshmen in my study was participating actively in the high school outside of the classroom.

Another category of the freshman experience was planning for the future. As students were navigating through their ninth-grade years, they had one eye on the future. This included the near future of tenth grade and the much more distant future of adulthood. The students picked their classes for sophomore year during the course of our interviews and all communicated that their choices were influenced by their ninth-grade experiences. Most students chose to take at least one class at a higher level to challenge themselves. This drive to move up levels seemed to be motivated by the desire to demonstrate to colleges that they were willing to challenge themselves. Most of the students spoke about college and building a good resume to apply for college in a couple of years. Some students even mentioned that working hard now would pay off later by having a good career or a good life. Making sense of the freshman year seems to include fitting it into the larger context of a student’s life by using the experiences to plan for the future.

The final phase, which really encompasses all of the others, was reflecting on the whole transition experience from beginning to end. The students all spoke about the year in its entirety and what it meant to them. The final verdict for most of the students was positive, feelings ranged from thinking it was better than the middle school to thinking it was the best year of school ever. Only one student had some reservations about the year, mostly related to her social experiences as a freshman. As the students were winding down the year, it seemed important to them to think about their experiences and draw some conclusions about the year. The final piece of making meaning of the freshman transition experience seemed to be reflecting on the year.
These findings helped me answer my research question. The students seem to make meaning about the transition in a fluid way throughout the year. Each had unique experiences, but those experiences fit into common categories that all of the students experienced. Using the phenomenological method allowed me to keep the focus on the words of the students and use data analysis methods to uncover these commonalities between very different students. I better understood how students made meaning of their experiences as they moved through the year and will be incorporating these findings into my teaching practices.

Limitations

As mentioned in the first chapter, limitations exist with this study. Many of the studies included in the body of research for this topic deal with either urban schools or with large national sets of data. My study took place in a medium-sized suburban high school of about 800 students and involved a very limited number of students. While the data I gathered helped me better understand what my students experience as they move from the middle school to the high school, my findings probably do not represent the whole range of experiences that students face when making this transition in my own or other districts. Larger districts have students coming from more middle-school programs, whether from traditional middle schools or programs in a kindergarten through eighth-grade, elementary school into bigger high schools. The challenges facing urban districts are well-documented and different from those facing suburban and rural districts. My research pool was very small as fitting for this type of study, but it also may have limited the range of experiences in the data. While my findings may help address the problem of freshman transition at my school, they definitely do not answer the questions raised in every district.
Aside from the number of my research participants, the students who chose to participate add another limitation to my study. I sent out a number of information packets to students who colleagues had recommended for my research, including students from a range of backgrounds and academic levels. Many of these students chose not to participate. They either did not send back their signed consent forms or sent it back opting out of the research study. The students who chose to participate were self-selected because they returned their informed consent paperwork, actively opting in to the research study. They were students who returned the forms, indicating a certain level of responsibility and an inherent interest in either the study or the community service hours offered to them as compensation. The students who chose to participate were in CP I and honors level courses as well, which means they had at least moderately good academic records. They were also students who were willing to sit down and talk with an unfamiliar adult about their freshman year experiences, indicating they felt some level of comfort in that kind of social situation. Students who could have had wildly different experiences during their freshman year may have chosen not to participate, thus limiting the data I collected.

Another limitation of my study was the timeline for my data collection. I conducted the interviews during the second semester of the school year. The first interview session took place after students had finished their midterm exams, the second took place in April and early May and the last session was in June. That means I missed the initial impressions of students as they were in the first weeks of the school year. Though they seemed to recall very vividly some of their thoughts and emotions from the time leading up to and including the first months of high school, it might have resulted in slightly different findings if I had interviewed the students earlier in the school year or even started when they were at the middle school. Their impressions
may have been sharper and their experiences clearer in their minds. The students seemed to have gained some perspective on the year by the time I interviewed them, but getting their impressions while they were new to the school may have added valuable data to my research.

Implications for Educational Practice

**Scholarly Significance.** One of my goals in doing this type of study was to insert the students’ voices into the discourse about the freshman experience. Choosing phenomenology as my method required me to set aside my beliefs, to the degree that is possible, about the problem and really focus on the experiences of the students. As I analyzed the data, it was the students’ words that were highlighting the themes and super-ordinate themes that became the foundation of my written work. When writing up those findings, I was able to use the quotations of the actual students to illustrate the path that my participants followed as they entered the high school and moved through the educationally important ninth-grade year. In doing that, I have added a small qualitative study to a body of work where quantitative studies are dominant.

Another area where my work may have significance for the larger scholarly community is through my use of phenomenology. As mentioned, its roots were in the field of psychology and its use has slowly been branching out into the other fields of social science. The specific type of phenomenology I used, interpretive phenomenological analysis, is not being widely used in educational studies yet. Though I may have misinterpreted some of its nuances, my use of this particular method might be of some value as other researchers work with it. I felt it was good for my work because it allows for recognition that a researcher cannot completely strip his or her perspective from the work being done (Smith et al., 2009). Having been a freshman student, having taught freshmen for over a decade and having researched the freshman transition
literature, I felt it would be difficult to entirely remove myself from the study. This was one of the reasons I was drawn to it, and I hope this study is helpful to others who use this particular method for educational research in the future.

**Practitioner Significance.** Though my research study involved a very small number of students, it helped me better understand how students make meaning of their freshman year transition experience, which was another of my goals in doing this work. As mentioned, the transition between middle school and high school is a problem that we have been working on in our district for the past several school years. We have worked with several models of teaming to help students manage the transition better, and tried to increase the amount of time freshmen spend with key adults and older student mentors. We put these programs in place as possible solutions, without sitting down to hear what the students had to say about their experiences and their needs. Conducting three interviews, even with a small group of students, and carefully analyzing the data has allowed me to see where students have commonalities in their experiences and trace a path that many of our students follow over the course of the freshman year. Being a freshman team teacher has already allowed me to use some of my research to impact the experience of freshmen transitioning this year.

Each August we hold a freshman orientation evening that students can attend to get their schedule, their x-block classes and their lockers. Though it is not a mandatory event, there has been reasonably good attendance the last few years. After analyzing my data, I saw that students spoke a great deal about not being able to find their way around the building easily, especially since their only formal tour occurs during the spring of their eighth-grade year. For the freshman orientation this year, I suggested that time be given for students to walk through their schedule a
couple of times to find their classrooms. The freshman orientation provided an opportunity for students to help each other find their classes in a relaxed setting, without older kids being around. It was added to the program for the evening, and the students seemed to find it helpful. I do not know if it aided any students on the first day of school, but it was a suggestion that I could make coming from the data I had collected.

With my research in mind, I also changed the way I approached the first couple of days with my students. I teach social studies on one of the two freshman teams, so I come into contact with roughly half of the freshmen each year. This year I took the time to go over issues that my research participants had mentioned as being problematic in the first days of their ninth-grade year. In each of my classes, we went over the schedule together, and I asked them to point out some of the patterns that they could find in the schedule. I have an interactive whiteboard in my classroom, so we were able to highlight the patterns as students pointed them out. Students had a visual cue to go along with the auditory discussion. Also, I showed each of classes one of the shortcuts that can help them navigate the school more easily. We physically walked the shortcut while I pointed out important locations to them. Again, I do not know if I relieved their confusion, but I was more aware of what aspects of the high school might be causing them trouble. I became more conscious about not assuming that they knew things about the high school or about the way the school operates.

As the year continues, I hope to continue to use my research to help others better understand the experiences of transitioning freshman students. As mentioned, I work on one of the freshman teams. We meet several times during a seven-day cycle, and I plan to share my findings with my colleagues at one of these meetings to get their perspective on other things we
could do to ease the transition. Since our main focus is the freshmen, I expect that they will have some good ideas based on my findings that we can put into place either this year or in coming years. We also work very closely with the guidance department, and I anticipate that they will be interested to hear how their college workshops are affecting the freshman students. Other opportunities may also arise for me to share my work with interested parties as the district continues to address this issue.

**Conclusion**

When starting this research project several years ago, all I had was an idea for something to research: the problems our freshman students have while moving through the ninth grade. Over time, the project has shifted and changed until it became about how students make meaning of their experiences during their freshman year. Using phenomenology, I discovered that students apparently experience the following themes of meaning making throughout the year:

- Anticipating the high school
- Adjusting expectations
- Navigating the landscapes
- Overcoming academic difficulties
- Participating actively
- Planning for the future
- Reflecting on the year

Each student has individual experiences throughout the year, but their experiences relate to the categories listed. There were relationships between my findings and the theories that made up my theoretical frameworks. There were often similarities between my findings and the other
research studies that form the body of literature for this topic, though I felt my work also expanded on some elements found in the literature. Some of my findings differed from other studies, especially concerning girls’ social experiences during the transition. Whether the findings are similar or different from other researchers’ results, some natural areas for furthering the examination of the freshman transition suggest themselves.

To expand my findings, it would be informative to include the students’ academic records in the data to compare the students’ descriptions to their actual performance. It might provide a clearer picture of students’ self-perceptions and their academic efficacy. It might also highlight which types of study skills are most effective for academic success. Another avenue to pursue would be to examine more closely how preparing for college is affecting the motivation of ninth-grade students, especially since the guidance department is expanding resources to inform students about planning for college. Another study that would be interesting to conduct would be looking more closely just at the relationships between teachers and students as they make the transition to the high school. We have programs like an advisory period and ninth-grade teaming that are designed to foster these relationships, and it would be interesting to see how effectively they are working. Another line of inquiry could be to examine students’ expectations when they are still at the middle school and how they are developed to get a better view of the anticipation of the transition experience. Again, these are only a few of the many possibilities that exist to further this research.

There are also areas to examine where my findings conflict with those in the literature. One area that would be important to examine is whether social drama is a feature of the high school that mostly affects girls. I did not specifically ask the boys in my study about social
drama, though I did ask them about social aspects of freshman year. They did not volunteer any information about any kind of drama, but that does not mean that it does not exist. Another area to pursue would be whether all, or even most, freshman girls do experience this level of drama, or whether this student’s experience is an outlier from the norm. My research participant had the perception that social drama affected all freshmen, though that might not truly be the case. A third area might be to research the different categories or levels of social drama. The student in my study seemed to be talking mostly about girls not talking to each other or saying mean things behind each other’s backs. With the increased scrutiny on the role bullying is playing in teenagers’ lives, it might be important to understand the different gradations of social drama and how they affect students.

This research project was centered on understanding how ninth-grade students make meaning of the experience of moving from the middle school to the high school. While students experience events uniquely, there seems to be similarities in how the students make meaning of the year as they are living it. This may be one step in better understanding what our students are going through as they enter the high school and engage in the experience, which may help us develop better programs for helping students transition. While this may help understand the experience better, there are other avenues for research that might shed light on this important moment in a student’s educational career.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Parent Information Letter

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Rachel Dudley

Dr. Kelly Conn, Principal Investigator

“Moving from Middle to High School: The Problem of Freshman Transition”

Dear [Name],

My name is Rachel Dudley and I am a social studies teacher at [High School]. I am working on my doctorate degree in education at Northeastern University and will be conducting a small research study at the high school this year. The topic I am working on is the experience of ninth graders as they move from the middle school to the high school. Your [Name] was recommended to me by the staff here at the high school as a student who might be interested in participating.

If you agree to have your child participate, I would interview him three times over the course of the year. These interviews would take place after school in the library and will most likely take about 45 minutes to an hour. I would be audio-recording the interviews for transcription and analytic purposes only. I am going to use the information from the interviews to write my dissertation, and I will be the only person who is working with the data. Your child would have complete confidentiality (unless there is a cause for me to be concerned about his safety) and his identity will be entirely masked in the written product. All copies of the data would be destroyed once my dissertation is complete and I have earned my degree.

I do not anticipate any risk to your child. He may withdraw from the project at any time. For his participation, I am authorized to give community service hours to your child. He will earn one hour for each of the first two interviews and 2 for the final interview, thus earning a total of 4 hours. (Students need 40 hours in order to graduate). It is hoped that the information your child provides will also help the school develop programs that help future freshmen as they transition to the school.

Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary and if he and/or you should choose not to participate, this decision will have no effect on his standing in the high school. Even if your child initially decides to participate he can opt out of the study at any time. The Assistant Principal John Murray is aware of my research and supports the study. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions and I do hope that your child will participate.

There is more information about the study on the enclosed informed consent documents. If you wish to have your child or children participate, please check the “Opt In” box, sign and date one of the copies and return it to me in the prepaid envelope enclosed. The other you can retain for your records. If you do not wish to have your child participate, please check the “Opt Out” box, sign and date it and return it in the prepaid envelope enclosed. Please return the forms to me no later than January 18th, 2012.

Thank you for your time today and please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions!

Rachel Dudley

rdudley@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Rachel Dudley

Dr. Kelly Conn, Principal Investigator

“Moving from Middle to High School: The Problem of Freshman Transition”

Informed consent to participate in a research study

Your child has been invited to take part in a research study at High School. My name is Rachel Dudley and I am a teacher at the school, as well as a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. This letter is to explain the research study and process. If you do not wish your child to participate, you do not have to sign this form. If you give your child permission to participate, you can sign the form and have your child return it to me at the high school. Your child must also sign to indicate his or her willingness to participate.

Purpose of study and why your child is eligible

The purpose of the study is to examine the experience of students as they transition from middle school to the high school. The eighth grade to ninth grade transition can be challenging for students, and I am studying it in order to better help our transitioning students. Your child has been recruited for this study as a current ninth grade student experiencing the transition.

What your child will be asked to do and time commitment

If you agree to let your child participate, I will be interviewing him or her three times over the course of the year. I will be interviewing the participants once during the first semester (December/January), and twice during the second semester (February/March and May/June). These interviews will last approximately forty-five minutes to one hour and be conducted in a public place, most likely the high school library. The interviews will take place after school and be scheduled for a date that is mutually convenient. The interviews will be recorded as audio files on a laptop for transcription and analytical purposes only. No one besides me will have access to the files.

Potential risk and confidentiality

I do not anticipate any risk for your child. All of his or her responses will be kept completely confidential, unless a concern for your child’s safety arises. In that case, I am mandated to report it to the school administration. I am the only person who will work with the data and this data will be used in my doctoral dissertation. No written reports will identify your child, you or the school; each student will be assigned a number that masks his or her identity. Once my dissertation is accepted, I will destroy the audio files and paper copies of your child’s responses.

Voluntary participation and withdrawal

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

**Questions and concerns**

If you have questions or concerns about your child’s participation, you can contact me at: rdudley@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Kelly Conn at: k.conn@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about you and your child’s rights in this research, you may also contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617-373-4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Community service hours**

I appreciate your child’s participation and he or she will earn community service hours for each of the interviews he or she participates in: 1 hour for each of the first two interviews and 2 hours for the final interview.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter. If you wish to have your student participate in this research project, please check the “Opt In” box and sign and print your name and have your child sign and print his or her name. If you do not wish to have your child participate, please check the “Opt Out” box and sign and print you and your child’s names. Please retain one copy for your records and send one copy back to me in the preaddressed stamped envelope enclosed.

**OPT IN: I agree to have my child take part in this research.**

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<th>Signature of parent/guardian</th>
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<th>Printed name of parent/guardian</th>
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<tr>
<td>Signature of child</td>
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<td>Printed name of child</td>
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**OPT OUT: I do NOT want my child to take part in this research.**

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Appendix C: Telephone Script

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Rachel Dudley

Dr. Kelly Conn, Principal Investigator

“Moving from Middle to High School: The Problem of Freshman Transition”

Hi,

This is Rachel Dudley following up on a packet you should have received in the mail. I have not received your reply regarding your child’s participation in my research study about freshmen transitioning to high school. Are there any questions I can answer for you or concerns you may have that I can address about your child’s participation? If you are willing to have your student participate, I need the informed consent form returned to me with you and your child’s signatures. If you are not willing to have him or her participate, I thank you for your time.
Appendix D: Interview Schedules #1-3

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Rachel Dudley

Dr. Kelly Conn, Principal Investigator

“Moving from Middle to High School: The Problem of Freshman Transition”

Interview Schedule #1*

Housekeeping: explain procedure, test equipment, share how I’m feeling, reminder of anonymity, no right or wrong answers

1. What were some of your favorite things about _______________Middle School?
   Prompts: Can you tell me more about that? Can you describe that more?

2. When you were in _______________Middle School, did you plan to come to _______________High School?
   Prompts: If yes, onto next question; If no, what did you plan to do after _______________Middle School?

3. When you were in eighth grade, what did you think about _______________School?
   Prompts: What had you heard about the high school? From parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, etc. What do you remember thinking about _______________High School?

4. Before you started at the high school, how did you feel about attending _______________High School?
   Prompts: What emotions were you feeling? Tell me more about that.

5. What did you expect the high school would be like?
   Prompts: academics, social life, athletics/clubs, upper classmen, organization; Can you tell me more about that? What else were you expecting?

6. How did you prepare for high school?
   Prompts: Orientations, talk to students, etc.; Tell me more about that.

7. On the night before high school started, how would you describe how you were feeling?

8. How would you describe your first day at _______________High School?
   Prompts: What impressions did you get about the school on the first day? How were you feeling emotionally and physically? Tell me more about that.
9. How would you describe your first week at _______________ High School?
   Prompts: Did your initial impressions remain? How were you feeling emotionally and physically? Tell me more about that.

10. Describe how the high school did and/or did not meet your expectations.
    Prompts: What things did you expect that do occur at the high school? What are some things that surprised you about the high school?

11. How do you feel about _______________ High School right now?
    Prompts: Emotions, things you like, things you don’t like; Tell me more about that.

12. How do you expect the rest of the year will go?
    Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics, etc. Describe that a little more.

Debrief: Is there anything you would like to add? Explain the procedure from this point on.

*These are the types of questions and the points I want to address. All of the literature on phenomenology reminds the researcher that interviews need to be flexible and may develop in different ways.
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Rachel Dudley

Dr. Kelly Conn, Principal Investigator

“Moving from Middle to High School: The Problem of Freshman Transition”

Interview Schedule #2*

Housekeeping: explain procedure, test equipment, share how I’m feeling, reminder of confidentiality, reminder of ground covered in last interview: member checking

1. What do you think now of the impressions from your first weeks at _______________High School?
   Prompts: Do you still feel that way? How have they changed?

2. How would you describe your level of comfort at _______________High School right now?
   Prompts: Feelings of being settled, knowing your way around, etc.; Can you explain that more?

3. What contributes to your level of comfort at _______________High School?
   Prompts: Friends, routines, athletics/clubs; Tell me more about that.

4. What are your thoughts on your first three terms at _______________High School?
   Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics/clubs, upperclassmen, organization, etc; Tell me more about that.

5. What do you think might be different about your last term at _______________High School?
   Prompts: Are you going to make any changes? What might you do differently at the end of the year?

6. What has been the best or easiest part of being a ninth grader? Why?
   Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics/clubs, upperclassmen, organization, etc.; Expand on that a little please.

7. What has been the worst or hardest part of being a ninth grader? Why?
   Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics/clubs, upperclassmen, organization, etc.; Tell me more about that.

8. What has surprised you the most about _______________High School?
   Prompts: What did you not expect that happened, what did you expect to happen that didn’t? Can you tell me more about that?
9. How do you feel about _____________ High School right now?
   Prompts: Emotions, things you like, things you don’t like; Tell me more about that.

10. If you went to the middle school tomorrow to talk to the eighth graders, what would you tell
    them about _____________ High School?
    Prompts: Why is that? Can you give me more details?

11. When you scheduled your classes for next year, did your experiences this year influence your
    choices for next year?
    Prompts: In what ways?

12. How do you expect the rest of this year will go?
    Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics, etc.; Describe that a little more.

*These are the types of questions and the points I want to address. All of the literature on
phenomenology reminds the researcher that interviews need to be flexible and may develop in
different ways.
Housekeeping: explain procedure, test equipment, share how I’m feeling, reminder of confidentiality, reminder of ground covered in last interview: member checking

1. What did you think about the following aspects of _____________ High School?
   - Freshman teams
   - Netbooks
   - Agendas
   - Blackboard
   - X-block
   Prompts: Were they helpful, not helpful? How did you use them differently than other years?

2. How would you describe your level of comfort at _____________ High School right now?
   Prompts: Feelings of being settled, knowing your way around, etc. Can you explain that more?

3. What contributes to your level of comfort at _____________ High School?
   Prompts: Friends, routines, athletics/clubs. Tell me more about that.

4. What are you looking forward to next year at _____________ High School?
   Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics/clubs. Can you explain more about that?

5. What do you think might be different about next year?
   Prompts: Academics, social life, athletics/clubs. Can you expand on that a little?

6. What was the best thing that happened this year?
   Prompts: In school, outside of school; Tell me more about that.

7. What was a bad thing that happened this year that you want to share?
   Prompts: In school, outside of school; Tell me more about that.
8. What did you find stressful this year? How did you manage stress during your freshman year?
   Prompts: Different from other years? Can you give me more details about that?

9. What is something that you are proud of yourself about this year?
   Prompts: In school, out of school, athletics, academics, socially

10. Overall, how do you feel the year went for you?
    Prompts: Feelings, performance, experiences. Can you give me more details about that?

11. How do you feel about _______________ High School right now?
    Prompts: Emotions, things you like, things you don’t like; Tell me more about that.

12. What advice would you give an incoming freshman student?
    Prompts: Why would you give that advice? What experience taught you that? Tell me more about that.

13. What suggestions would you make for improving life at _______________ High School for freshmen?
    Prompts: Activities, social groups, etc.; Can you explain a little bit more?

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