THE PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF ADVISORY BY MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INCLUDED IN THE CURRICULUM REVISION PROCESS

A thesis presented

by

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Abstract

During early adolescence, children experience development in four major areas: physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory-motor. As a result of all of these simultaneous changes, the middle school years are often considered the most turbulent developmental years of adolescence and have a profound impact on teaching and learning. The middle school concept embraces the uniqueness of adolescence and provides a model for addressing the needs of middle school students. Three preeminent educational reform initiatives, Turning Points 2000, This We Believe (2003), and Breaking Ranks in the Middle (2006), addressed the challenge of meeting the needs of adolescents by recommending beliefs, practices, characteristics, and strategies specifically focused on the middle school student.

One area of prominence in these reform documents is personalized learning, which includes the implementation of advisory programs in the middle school. Advisory programs are driven by the primary purpose of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult. Studies have shown that schools have a difficult time planning, implementing, and sustaining this element of the middle school concept.

The focus of this qualitative study was to investigate middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of advisory as a means to utilize the insight gained to improve the advisory program at the researcher’s school and to provide other middle schools with pertinent data to support their programs. Through a phenomenological approach, the researcher sought to derive meaning from an experience as described by the individuals who have experienced it.

Key Words: Advisory program, personalized learning environment, student-centered relationships, middle school concept, curriculum
Acknowledgments

The completion of this doctoral work is not based upon my individual effort but rather a collective effort of many individuals without whom this work would not have come to fruition. First and foremost, I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Lynda Beltz, who supported me throughout this entire process with her words of encouragement, belief in my abilities, and unwavering commitment to my successful completion of this doctoral project. To my second reader, Dr. Kristal Clemons, I express my gratitude for her words of advice, especially with regard to the design of the study. I am grateful to Dr. Donald Holder, my third reader, for his honest feedback and thought-provoking conversations.

I am blessed to work in an outstanding school district, which embraces and values the professional development of its employees; and to be the principal of its outstanding middle school. I am thankful to the superintendent, Mr. Robert O’Brien, for allowing me to conduct this study in my school. I am indebted to the three faculty members and six students who agreed to participate in this study and provided me with honest and insightful interview responses. I extend my appreciation to Mrs. Catherine Swanton for being present during the student interviews in accordance with Northeastern University’s IRB protocols.

I, along with several colleagues, embarked on this journey eight years ago as members of the first cohort of this program. I wish to express thanks to the Smithfield contingency of this cohort for supporting me as we experienced the trials and tribulations of doctoral study, for challenging my thinking during our many profound conversations, and for keeping me focused on the light at the end of the tunnel.

For as long as I can remember, I have dreamed of earning my doctoral degree and I am thrilled to have achieved it. While the path I traveled to get here had its occasional bumps and
potholes in the road, I arrived at the destination with the satisfaction of not only knowing I fulfilled a lifelong dream but, that I have reached what I believe is the summit of educational study. To me, the doctoral degree symbolizes the epitome of scholarly learning and validates one’s commitment to continual growth as a learner and as a leader. The premise of this study was based upon the belief that schools can ensure the full growth of all of its students only through knowing the children individually. What better way to demonstrate my commitment to this belief than through the completion of my doctoral studies, which afforded me many opportunities for self-reflection and growth; that is, knowing myself. By taking this personal knowledge and applying it to my role as an educational leader, I hope current and future middle school students experience similar self-awareness.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not recognize and thank my family. First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, Elizabeth and Joseph, for raising their children to value education even though neither one of them attended college. They encouraged and expected us to graduate from college. My parents did not have an easy life and suffered through the loss of two children who were afflicted with muscular dystrophy. My older brother, Thomas, and my younger brother, David, both succumbed to this disease just shy of their sixteenth birthdays. While undeniably tragic, I know our brothers influenced the women my sister and I have become. It is unfortunate that they, along with my father, are not here to witness this achievement but I know they would be proud of what I have accomplished. My sister, Linda, has always been there for me and supported me through this process with words of encouragement and an occasional, “You can do this.” I have always been able to bounce ideas off of her and, in turn, receive meaningful feedback. Her support has been invaluable and I am grateful to her for all that she has done for me over the years.
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Chapter One: Introduction

A heavy-set man clad in a nondescript suit and tie walked down the steps, opened the door to the establishment, and entered the room. He no sooner took a step or two when all those present in the room shouted in unison, “Norm”. This was a customary occurrence at Cheers®. If that scene is familiar to you, you are probably humming the theme song to the television show in your head right now.

“Making your way in the world today takes everything you’ve got
Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.
Wouldn’t you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name,
And they’re always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows your name.
You wanna go where people know, people are all the same.
You wanna go where everybody knows your name.”
Cheers® Theme Song

Imagine if you will, the same scene occurring as students enter both a school building and classrooms. As the theme song of Cheers® indicates, each of us strives to connect with people who care about us, help us with our challenges, celebrate our successes, recognize our uniqueness and sameness, and know us as individuals. Students in middle school are no different. If anything, middle school students need to feel a sense of connection more than any other age group as the middle years (ages 11 to 14) are considered the most turbulent developmental years.

During early adolescence, a child experiences development in four major areas: physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory-motor. The physical stage of puberty brings upon a multitude of physiological changes from body hair to growth spurts. Cognitively, adolescents begin to shift their thinking from concrete to abstract, understand actions have consequences, and, through the development of reasoning and problem-solving skills, recognize information
can be interpreted in different ways. Social-emotional changes include the adolescent’s desire to be more independent, make his/her own decisions, develop a sense of self, and belong to a group (identity). The sensory-motor development correlates with the physiological development as the brain and body adjust to the changes occurring. As a result, adolescents may appear awkward and clumsy.

Figure 1.1: Author’s View of the Areas of Impact and Influence on the Middle School Student
As Tyack and Cuban (1995) noted, in 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development warned: “a volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of adolescents. … In this new setting, teachers and classmates will change as many as six or seven times a day. This consistent shifting creates formidable barriers to the formation of stable peer groups and close, supportive relationships with caring adults.” (p. 73). How then do middle school personnel breakdown these barriers so the school’s organization and curriculum match the needs of the adolescents? John Dewey (2001) argues that society is not an entity unto itself but rather a collection of the individuals within the society; an entity that is contingent upon the full growth of the individuals to achieve its goals. Since schools are part of the society, how can an educational institution ensure its commitment to the full growth of its students? What is meant by the phrase, full growth? Can a student’s full growth be achieved without knowing the child well? I argue one cannot ensure full growth without knowing the child.

We need to create a supportive educational environment that will serve the needs of all learners, not just most learners. The focus of personalization is to create an educational environment where the development of each child is of primary concern. As noted in Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform (2006), definitions of personalization revolve around assisting students to develop a sense of belonging, a sense of ownership over one’s learning, and the ability to make choices through informed decision-making skills. Marcel Proust so eloquently stated, “The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” (Caine, R. N. and Caine, G., 1997, p. 146). Educators must see their students (or shall I say pupils) through a multitude of lenses. This can only occur through a personalized learning environment.
The creation of a personalized learning environment is a multi-faceted process that requires a pedagogical shift in a school’s culture. Evans (1996) has defined culture as “the construct that gathers these other phenomena into a unique, profound structure. To call something ‘cultural’ is to say not only that it is shared but also that it runs very deep, that it is stable, and that it is integrated into a larger gestalt. Culture implies that rituals, climate, values, and behaviors [form] a coherent whole.” (p. 42). School culture encompasses the same elements but within an educational institution. It permeates the educational experiences of both students and adults. Its impact on the learning environment bears deep understanding.

A school culture characterized by positive relationships between the adults and the students warrants the attention of all educational institutions. An emphasis on this critical element of school culture enhances an institution’s ability to meet the needs of all learners. The middle school learner adds another dimension to school culture. The trials and tribulations of adolescent development warrant an environment conducive to addressing these unique needs embedded within its school culture; that is, a student-centered focus. As Dewey (2001) wrote, “Now the change which is coming into our education is the shifting of the center of gravity. It is change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun. In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized.” (pp. 23-4)

Certainly, the idea of knowing a child well is not a new concept. Back to the days of Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, and Johann Friedrich Herbart, knowing the child was deep-rooted in their beliefs and educational theories. One of Pestalozzi’s educational principles was the creation of a loving family relationship with the child, that is, a child-centered environment.
He believed the aim of education was to educate the whole child and sought to create equilibrium between three elements: head, hands, and heart.

Similarly, Froebel’s understanding of the importance of play lends itself to the development of the creative spirit within children. He believed in the importance of activity embedded in learning. This idea of having fun whilst learning (Anderson-Levitt, 2003, p. 129) was important to Froebel. It is an ideal that most educators would embrace. A teacher who creates learning activities that are educational and fun at the same time is focused on engaging students in the lesson. If students can internalize a concept or standard through the use of an engaging, fun activity, then why not present it in that manner? World culture theorists “hypothesize an increasing interest in learner-centered pedagogy, active learning, and small cooperative learning groups.” (Anderson-Levitt, 2003, p. 8)

Herbart, known as the Father of Pedagogy, believed in a clearly defined instructional methodology that warranted the development of lessons geared to the interests of the students, which connects prior knowledge and experiences to the new learning. So once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

At the middle school level, students are developmentally changing in many dramatic ways. Inherent in this hormonal turmoil is the middle school student’s search for his/her own identity. We want to develop the learner in each child, but I now see the importance of developing the grower in each child. When I think of some of the students who seem to struggle developing as a learner, they seem disengaged, are task avoiders, and have low self-concepts. Perhaps the best way to assist these students as learners is to assist them as growers first. These
students need opportunities to see the contributions they can make to school – they need to experience success. Tapping into the self-grower within them can achieve this.

By capitalizing on a student’s area of strength, we will provide him/her with an opportunity to experience success and, in turn, assist the student in seeing how he/she can “process life”. All too often, it is during the middle school years that some students become disenfranchised with school. We can no longer allow this to happen. We must invest the time and energy to grow them, not just teach them. The ability to take control of one’s own destiny has a dramatic impact on the life one leads. So once again the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? The answer is: knowing the child.

**Problem Statement**

A middle school reform recommendation from *Turning Points 2000* was to organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose. One vehicle for achieving this aim is an advisory program. Advisories are a critical component of the middle school concept driven by the primary purpose of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult. Over the years, Anfara has conducted numerous studies on middle school education and, particularly, advisory programs. Anfara (2006) has learned that schools have a difficult time planning, implementing, and sustaining this element of the middle school concept. His findings indicate that a number of elements must be addressed for the successful implementation of an advisory program including “a well-defined advisory curriculum, a feedback/maintenance loop for program review and revision, and the transformation of the school’s cultural norms.” (p. 56).

It is easy enough to schedule advisory time into the school day but quite another task to implement a quality program that truly maximizes the opportunity to positively impact the lives
of students. Niska’s (2013) recent study on advisory programs included data from a review of evaluation reports from the State of Rhode Island’s Commissioner of Education’s Office. This coupled with his personal observations of advisory programs in the state concluded that some programs are “faring well while others are in a fledging state of development and need assistance.” (p. 1).

Even though my school has had an advisory program since 2005, we are struggling with the aforementioned well-defined curriculum and subsequent feedback/maintenance loop. While the original curriculum materials supported our initial program, they are no longer viable tools for our program. In essence, we have outgrown their usefulness. I seek to facilitate the revision of my school’s advisory curriculum by including both teachers and students on the curriculum committee. If the true intent of an advisory program is to ensure each and every child is well known by at least one adult in the school, why should only the adults design, implement, and revise the curriculum? I wish to study how middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of an advisory program are impacted when the students are included in the curriculum revision process.

**Research Questions and Goals**

Since this project is focused on students’ perceptions and understandings of an advisory program, the following questions are critical to the nature of my project:

1. What perceptions and understandings do students currently have about their advisory program?
   
   a. What is the students’ understanding of the purpose of the program?
   
   b. How do the students feel about the focus/curriculum of the program?
   
   c. What elements of the program do the students like the most and least?
d. Do students feel they should be included in the curriculum development process? If not, why not? If yes, then in what manner?

Significance of Advisory Programs

Following the dissemination of the Turning Points 2000 recommendations, the National Middle School Association (now Association for Middle Level Education) identified fourteen school practices and cultural characteristics that create successful schools for young adolescents and aligned them with the recommendations. Of the fourteen characteristics published in the NMSA’s This We Believe (2003), three of them align to the aforementioned recommendation: organizational structures that support meaningful relationships for learning, an adult advocate for every student, and multifaceted guidance and support services.

The structure of most advisory programs involves the creation of small groups of twelve to fifteen students assigned to one adult, usually a teacher or administrator. Most advisory groups stay together throughout the child’s middle school tenure. Through the use of a variety of activities, the advisor is able to develop a true understanding of each advisee; that is, know the child well. Erb (2005) emphasizes the importance for each student to believe his/her advisor is genuinely and unequivocally committed to his/her growth as a learner and as a person. So, once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

“When the advisory program is connected to the central mission of the middle level school, students and teachers are more likely to participate fully in its development and operation. Further, parents and community members can more easily see the links of the advisory program to the most desired outcomes of the middle level school: high levels of achievement, good citizenship, strong self-concepts based on important attainments, and
productive behavior for all students. It's a program worth having, but only if it takes on an important role in achieving the school's mission, and only if we decide to do it well.” (Johnston, 1997, p. 9). The final eight words speak volumes as both Anfara in 2001 and, more recently, Niska in 2013 note advisories are often the most difficult of the middle level concepts to implement and sustain.

The 2002 passage of the federal government’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) certainly had an impact in the state of Rhode Island as evidenced by the initial passage of Rhode Island’s Regulations of the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education K-12 Literacy, Restructuring of the Learning Environment at the Middle and High School Levels, and Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements (PBGR) at High Schools in 2003 and most recent revision in 2015. Within the Regulations’ Preamble, it was noted “Far too many students pass through Rhode Island middle level schools and high schools without being known well by at least one adult within each school, resulting in a lack of awareness and understanding on the part of the school staff about specific challenges and needs of individual students.”

In Rhode Island, middle school advisory programs are now mandated by the Board of Regents. In addition, each child beginning in grade six must develop an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). Within the plan, each student develops goals across academic, career, and personal/social domains. The role of the advisor is to assist students in the development of their individual plans and to provide guidance and feedback. Most ILPs require students to write goals on a quarterly basis and to review and reflect upon them. The overall intent of the document is to create schools that enable ALL students to meet the demands of the modern world and support high levels of both student achievement and personal growth. So the question
still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

**Vincent J. Gallagher Middle School’s Advisory Program Information**

My passion for the development of student-centered learning environments, particularly advisory programs, has been influenced by a few notable individuals; Dr. John Niska, Rhode Island College, Dr. Russell Quaglia, formerly of Endicott College, and Mawi Asgedom.

Dr. Niska is a leader in the field of middle level education and a strong advocate of advisory programs. Dr. Quaglia has conducted research studies on the topic of student aspirations and published materials based on his *Eight Conditions for Student Learning*, the first of which, is a sense of belonging. Mawi is an Ethiopian refugee who overcame tragic childhood experiences and graduated from Harvard University. His organization has developed materials to support his *Five Secrets for Teen Success*, a goal-setting program. My school has the distinguished honor of being the first Rhode Island school he visited to share his message. The work of these individuals has been instrumental in the development of my school’s advisory program.

Smithfield Junior High School housed students in grades seven and eight until 1997 when the sixth graders were moved to the school. The school’s name was then changed to Vincent J. Gallagher Middle School. The school experienced a variety of growing pains as it transformed itself from a junior high school to a middle school. However, the evolutionary process never seemed complete as one of the key components of the middle school concept had not been implemented: an advisory program. Several teachers had expressed an interest in learning more about the process and attended a variety of professional development programs. In addition, developing an advisory program was written into our school improvement plan. However, no further progress was made toward implementation.
Program Development and Implementation

The development and implementation of an advisory program required leadership involvement and organization. In 2004, as the assistant principal of the school, I spearheaded an advisory committee and guided the school through the process. The following process for implementing an advisory program was utilized by my school. At first, a core group (a school counselor, two teachers, and I) attended a thirty-hour advisory course offered by Dr. John M. Niska of Rhode Island College. As we worked through the advisory development process, an integral component was to gather feedback, thoughts, and opinions from your staff and students. Through these measures, the faculty was involved in the process from its inception. The core group did not develop the program to then provide it to the faculty as a predetermined, canned program. The information and feedback provided by the faculty and students were a critical component of the program’s development. At the end of this process, we had a clearly developed plan of implementation.

As part of the plan, a larger committee of an administrator, guidance counselors, and teachers not only developed and compiled the curriculum resources but also created a professional development session. The professional development sessions were designed for eight hours of training spread out over two days. Each member of the advisory committee presented some portion of the training with the bulk of it being presented by the administrator (me).

This interactive training session incorporated the rationale, purpose, and current research on advisories; opportunities for groups of faculty to discuss and share their questions and concerns about the process; “getting to know you” activities; a review of the materials and resources provided; presentation by guidance personnel on how to handle the issues that should
not be addressed in the advisory sessions; a funny video on facing one’s fears; and concluded with a four court volleyball battle of the “fruits” (this refers to an activity that identifies one as a banana, orange, grape, or melon based on one’s self-identified personality traits – it is eerily very accurate).

The professional development process did not end with the aforementioned session. We dedicated our monthly faculty meetings to the advisory program. It was through this commitment and dedication to the program that we were as successful as we were. The faculty felt supported throughout the process – we worked on the issues and concerns as a collaborative group. As the designated leaders of the school, the principal and I made a deliberate decision to structure professional learning around the advisory program for the entire school year. If this was not provided, I strongly believe our program and our students would have suffered.

Anchor Time, our advisory program, consists of biweekly half-hour sessions. During the 2014-2015 school year, it was reduced to one weekly half-hour session. The decision to change was based upon several factors including increased academic demands, additional student support and recognition programs, and wanting advisory curriculum. Currently, we have forty-six groups of ten to fifteen students engaged in a variety of activities to ensure each student is well-known by at least one adult in the building. The students will be connected to the same adult for their three years at the middle school. Each teacher, both administrators, and the school nurse have an advisory group. The latter three began having groups during the 2008-2009 school year. In recognition of the possibility of these individuals being pulled away from advisory time for unforeseen circumstances, the three school counselors are each assigned to cover one of these groups. Additionally, the three school counselors along with the school psychologist and school social worker provide support to our groups on an as needed basis.
The scope and sequence of our advisory program has continued to evolve and change since its inception. Supporting this commitment to our program is the fact that, in Rhode Island, middle school advisory programs are now mandated by the Board of Regents. In addition, each child beginning in grade six must develop an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). We incorporated the ILP mandate into our advisory program (see appendix I). Each student has an ILP, which is developed and reviewed during advisory time.

Program Evaluation

As an assessment tool for our first year of implementation, we utilized faculty and student surveys. Surveys were conducted in both October 2005 and March 2006. In appendix A, I have included a sampling of the student survey data collected in our initial year. The adage, out of the mouths of babes, certainly was true for us. What better way to judge a program’s effectiveness and impact than from the people it was intended to serve?

So once again the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? The answer is: knowing the child. In the view of Turning Points 2000, three critical common structures are present in successful middle schools: small schools, teams, and advisories. All three of these structures are intended to ensure each middle school student is well-known. Middle schools must implement these structures with fidelity; otherwise “the structures become a foundation for a house that is never built.” (p. 144).

The focus of this research study is limited to advisory programs. The following concept map provides a visual depiction of the author’s understanding and perception of advisory programs.
Figure 1.2: Author’s Concept Map for Middle School Advisory Programs
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The overall premise of advisory programs is generally understood to be one of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult. While seemingly simplistic in nature, a middle school’s ability to fulfill such a premise is indeed a multifaceted complex undertaking that requires long-term commitment. Based on the literature, this review will be separated into three areas: (1) barriers to successful advisory programs, (2) program effectiveness and evaluation, and (3) student-centered relationships.

Barriers to Successful Advisory Programs

Literature on advisory programs often discusses the common barriers to successful programs. The barriers focus on the initial planning and implementation, advisors’ skills, maintenance, and the role of school administration. Over the years, Anfara has conducted numerous studies on middle school education and, particularly, advisory programs. Anfara (2006) has learned that schools have a difficult time planning, implementing, and sustaining this element of the middle school concept. Similarly, Ayres (1994) described a dichotomous universe whereby middle schools have difficulty implementing and maintaining an advisory program despite the perceived value and importance of such a program.

When middle schools are planning to implement an advisory program, the development of a clear conceptualized framework is an essential first step in the process. Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (May 1997) stress the importance of asking and answering key questions with respect to the educational need intended to be addressed by the program, the specific goals of the program, and what a successful program will accomplish. The challenge lies in identifying a single or manageable number of needs to be met by the program. As a result of their examination of advisory programs, these authors differentiated the programs based on the type of need they
addressed and created *A Typology of Advisory Emphases*. They identified six types: (1) advocacy—attends to students’ individual needs; (2) community—serves students’ social or belonging needs; (3) skills—delivers a developmental guidance program; (4) invigoration—provides an opportunity for students to have fun through informal interactions; (5) academic—meets students’ cognitive educational needs; and (6) administrative—addresses housekeeping tasks.

Table 2.1 *Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1998) A Typology of Advisory Emphases*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Goals &amp; Focus</th>
<th>Advisor Skills</th>
<th>Sample Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>Adult-student relationship</td>
<td>Personal qualities — interest and concern for students</td>
<td>Individual student conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>implementation time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>Group identity</td>
<td>Personal qualities — group management</td>
<td>Group discussions, projects, intramurals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>implementation time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Affective and</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>Personal qualities — group management, group</td>
<td>Decision making, stress management,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>“prep” and</td>
<td>guidance</td>
<td>facilitation</td>
<td>race relations, values clarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>implementation time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invigoration</td>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Minimal “prep”</td>
<td>Relaxing, recharging</td>
<td>Personal qualities, enthusiasm</td>
<td>Intramurals and clubs, parties, informal “fun” activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>Personal qualities, teaching</td>
<td>Study skills, silent reading, writing, tutoring</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>implementation time</td>
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<td>Administrative</td>
<td>Minimal “prep”</td>
<td>General school business, “house-keeping”</td>
<td>Clerical, organizational</td>
<td>Announcements, distributing school materials, collecting money</td>
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<td>and implementation time</td>
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To assist schools with navigating the typology, Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox also created a card-sorting activity whereby twenty-four advisory descriptor cards (four per type) are sorted into three piles: highest priority, next highest priority, and lowest priority. The first two piles can only contain four cards each. The selected cards are compared against the types of advisory to determine which type is the predominant choice. Schools are encouraged to have not only their faculty complete the task but groups of students as well. The intent is to assist schools in reaching consensus relative to the focus of their advisory program (it may not be just one type).

While schools may reach consensus relative to the focus of their programs, it is critically important to ensure their advisors (teachers) have the necessary skills to implement the program with fidelity and commitment. Through her research conducted in a Midwest school district transitioning to the middle school model, Ayres’ (1994) concluded teachers’ buy-in is critically important for any program to be successful. Esposito & Curcio (2002), Rappaport (2002) and Ayres (1994) classify many of the teachers’ concerns as fears. The most common are: (1) fear of being ineffective, that is, lacking the skill set needed to connect with students on a broader scale; (2) lack of commitment from colleagues; (3) fear of parental objections; (4) fear of the unknown; (5) discomfort with straying from subject matter expertise; (6) fear of personal information students would share with them. The latter is the oft-stated, “I’m not a guidance counselor.” Ironically, Rappaport (2002, p. 118) found the opposite to be true – “The most common problem for advisors in fact was not an outpouring of deep secrets but rather dealing with the suspicious silence they encountered in 80 percent of groups in the initial phase.”

So how does a school alleviate these fears? The advice from the field clearly indicates the need for ongoing professional development and training for your advisors. Esposito and Curcio (2002) stress the importance of educating teachers as to the differences between group
facilitation and counseling. Teachers are not expected nor encouraged to provide counseling to students; however, teachers do need to understand the school’s referral process if they feel a student needs counseling support. Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1998, p. 49) recommend “periodic supervision and occasional booster training and sharing sessions” as a means to support the ongoing professional development of advisors’ skills. Ongoing professional development training focused on meeting the specific needs of the adolescents in the school, practicing group facilitation techniques, and nurturing student-centered relationships is essential for the success of an advisory program.

A twenty-year veteran middle school teacher was quoted as saying, “Out of all the foundation blocks of a middle school, the advisor-advisee program is the most difficult to implement and the most difficult to maintain.” (Ayres, 1994, p.10) One way to increase a school’s odds of successfully implementing and maintaining an advisory program lies in the hands of the school principal. The principal’s knowledge and support is essential to the success or failure of a program. This support must continue well beyond the implementation phase. Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1997, p. 317) wrote that “there is a theory that the top-down effect of a principal’s lack of enthusiasm for advisory time will influence teachers and undermine the program.”

The principal’s commitment to the tenets of the program from the initial planning stage to the maintenance stage must be demonstrated through his or her actions. It is crucially important for the principal to continue to embrace the program with both words and deeds. It is one thing to voice the importance of advisory and quite another to make the belief a reality in his or her school. Rappaport (2002, p. 114) believes a program’s success depends upon whether or not the
leader is one “who champions the cause and tenaciously works through the obstacles and logistics.”

Regardless of how long a school’s advisory program has been in existence, implementation and maintenance of the program are never-ending. Over time, changes may occur in areas such as school staffing, school improvement goals, and the needs of the students. As a result of such changes, advisory programs need to be monitored, evaluated, and modified as needed.

Program Effectiveness and Evaluation

Program effectiveness and evaluation are inherent elements to sustain an advisory program. How does one evaluate a program’s effectiveness? Herein lies the challenge for schools and school leaders. The issue is compounded by the very fact that the overall premise of advisory programs is generally understood to be one of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult, that is, the ongoing nurturing of a student-advisor relationship. How does one evaluate a relationship to determine whether or not it is effective?

While research and literature on advisory programs is growing, Makkonen (2004), Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1997), and Anfara (2006) concur there is little systematic research conducted to determine the effectiveness of advisory programs. Much of the research is indirect, inferred, or based on methodologically weak studies resulting in limited comprehensive data on program outcomes. While advisory programs are present in many middle schools, the inherent uniqueness of each program is as varied as the schools themselves. Anfara (2006, p. 57) concluded that, “few researchers have systematically probed the subjective experiences of participants in advisory programs as disclosed by both students and teachers.” Furthermore, advisory is not a stand-alone strategy designed to support students and promote personalization;
it is merely one strategy implemented in a school to fulfill that objective. As such, the ability to discern the impact one strategy has from other strategies is challenging due to the natural interconnectedness of multiple personalization strategies.

In the review of research conducted by Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1997), they discovered a variety of flaws within the research studies. One study conducted by George and Oldaker concluded there was a decline in the number of disciplinary referrals, in particular, suspensions and expulsions since the school transitioned over to a middle school; however, it was based on anecdotal information as no records of suspensions, referrals, or expulsions were used to draw such a conclusion. To compound the matter, the reorganization to a middle school resulted in the implementation of a variety of middle school elements making causational conclusions difficult. Similarly, another study by Felner and his colleagues reported lower levels of stress and overall better school adjustment for students who participated in a specific prevention model of which advisory was one component.

Makkonen (2004, p. 2) found many narrative accounts attesting to the overall positive impact of advisory programs on school climate ranging from improved student-teacher relationships and an increased sense of trust and belonging to better communication among members of the school community. He suggests schools design local assessments that will provide feedback on specific aspects of their programs as a means to determine the effectiveness of them. “Methodologically speaking, research suggests that the best advisory evaluations consider participants’ subjective impressions in conjunction with objective indexes.” (p. 5)

As the research or lack of research demonstrates, a school’s ability to evaluate the overall effectiveness of its advisory program appears to be a difficult and daunting task that is often eclipsed by other more pressing issues such as subject-matter standards and curriculum, state
assessment results, teacher evaluation, school safety, and budgetary matters. While the
evaluation of an advisory program may be considered less pressing, its importance to the well-
being of middle school students should not be overlooked. Once again, the overall premise of
advisory is built on the ongoing nurturing of a student-advisor relationship. To fulfill this
premise, a school must commit to the development of an environment characterized by student-
centered relationships.

**Student-Centered Relationships**

While program development that overcomes the barriers to success and addresses
effectiveness through evaluation is essential, student-centered relationships align to the overall
premise of an advisory program, that is, ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult.
Middle schools are generally comprised of students aged 10 to 14 who are entering the turbulent
years of adolescence. It is critically important that middle school teachers understand the
nuances of this developmental stage as well as possess the requisite skill set to appropriately and
effectively interact with middle school students. Brinthaupt, Lipka, and Wallace (2007, p. 211)
describe the teacher as the “significant other” in the lives of middle school students and reference
important behavioral descriptions of effective teachers, which include:

- "They are by no means perfect, in the sense of doing and saying just the right
  thing at all times. (. . .which students can live with as long as the core person is
  basically fair and decent.)"

- They make a point to know their students as individuals and to respond to them as
  individuals; they go beyond simply seeing them as students.

- They are able to challenge without being offensive and to encourage without
  being condescending; more importantly, they challenge when that is appropriate
  and they encourage when that is needed.

- They work on developing a positive rapport that serves as the interpersonal
  medium within which high, but reasonable, expectations and constructive, critical
  feedback can be transmitted.”
Students need to feel a connection with their teachers. Anfara and Brown (2001, p. 9) remind us that “. . .real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom.” While advisory is not a subject area per se, it delves into the social-emotional domain and the ability of the advisor to create a community of learning is still an essential element. Communities are social structures that bond people together and are characterized by purpose, trust, respect, commitment, acceptance, belonging, and shared responsibility. An advisory community must be a safe-haven for students by providing them a true sense of belonging fostered by a caring advisor. The advisor must develop a relationship with the group of advisees as well as individual advisees and encourage the development of a positive advisee-advisee relationship. This aligns with the brain research of Caine & Caine (1997) who developed twelve brain/mind learning principles. Principle 2 states the brain is a social brain. “It is now clear that throughout our lives, our brains/minds change in response to their engagement with others—so much that individuals must always be seen to be integral parts of larger social systems. Indeed, part of our identity depends on establishing community and finding ways to belong. Learning, therefore, is profoundly influenced by the nature of the social relationships within which people find themselves.” (p. 104-5)

In her year-long case study, Davis (2006) explored how the quality of student-teacher relationships impacted student motivation and achievement. She reviewed survey data from over nine hundred students and twenty-five teachers, interview data from six students and six teachers, and journal data from twenty-eight teachers in a rural middle school. Students in her study reported that “the most motivating relationships were with teachers who talked about their
experiences in middle school, their own difficulties learning, and their families; spoke informally with students; and allowed students time for socializing with peers.” (p. 214)

While having a good relationship with a teacher is ideal, Davis recognizes it is important for students to learn how to interact with teachers with whom they do not get along. Students need to develop the interpersonal skills that enable them to manage challenging relationships both with adults and with their peers. Davis (p. 217) concludes that “social-emotional learning programs add to the curriculum by making explicit norms, behaviors, and strategies for interactions with teachers and among peers.” Similarly, Ayres (1994) and Poliner & Lieber (2004) found advisory time helped students create stronger bonds with their peers by establishing a positive peer group support, which assisted students to develop a positive sense of belonging.

Often, advisory groups cut across exclusionary social cliques as the groups have students who may not have otherwise interacted with each other. By expanding the social circle of students, advisory provides students an opportunity to learn to accept and embrace others who may have different interests, ideals, beliefs, strengths, challenges, and experiences than themselves. As such, advisory provides an opportunity for students to practice important life skills from collaborating with others to appropriately advocating for one’s beliefs.

In his research, Bruce Johnson (2008) examined the relationships between teachers and students as it pertained to the concept of resilience and to determine what teacher behaviors contribute to student resilience and what behaviors undermine it. This qualitative longitudinal study followed a group of 55 at-risk students in Australia for nine years. The students were interviewed once annually for five years, and then, again four years later. Johnson’s conclusions from the analysis of his data resulted in the conclusion that the ‘little things’ was what mattered to the students. These ordinary little things included being available, listening, teaching the
basics (students want to be taught effectively), being positive (through encouragement and 
modeling positive self-talk), intervening on behalf of the student when necessary, and other 
human connectors, that is, teachers who like to have fun, enjoy a joke, remember personal events 
in the lives of their students, and are themselves. Within his study, he referenced the previous 
work on resiliency by Luther and Zelano in which they concluded “resilient adaptation rests on 
good relationships.” (p. 386). While schools have a duty to provide students with the best 
education possible, we often equate this with academic rigor and relevance and omit the third R, 
relationships. As Xin Ma (2009) concluded in his analysis of student survey data, interpersonal 
relationships are integral to students’ positive sense of belonging in school, which supports 
Poliner & Lieber’s (2004, p. 14) belief that “advisory programs can become powerful vehicles 
for breaking down anonymity and fostering a sense of belonging.”

The overall premise of advisory programs is generally understood to be one of ensuring 
each child is well known by at least one adult. While seemingly simplistic in nature, a middle 
school’s ability to fulfill such a premise is indeed a multifaceted complex undertaking that 
requires long-term commitment. First and foremost, schools must overcome the barriers that 
inhibit a successful program and the school leader plays a vital role in ensuring the processes are 
in place for a program to flourish. The school leader must be a champion of the cause for the 
benefit of the students. The ability to evaluate the effectiveness of the program remains a 
daunting task, however, it is essential for a school to review its program and make appropriate 
modifications and adjustments to meet the needs of the students. For an advisory program to 
realize its premise, a school’s ability to create and maintain a school climate and culture focused 
on the cultivation of positive student-centered relationships is of the utmost importance. So,
once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Advisories are a critical component of the middle school concept driven by the primary purpose of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult. How exactly does one ensure that each and every student in the middle school is well known by at least one adult? How does a middle school foster the development of a positive student-centered relationship for each and every student in the school? While the premise behind an advisory program is clear, the processes to reach and remain at that destination are not clearly delineated paths. The uniqueness (climate, culture, administration, faculty, staff, students, parents, etc.) of each school dictates the type and style of advisory program. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, there are defined processes and areas of consideration to assist schools in traveling down the advisory program path.

The intent of this research study is to investigate middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of an advisory program in order to utilize the insight gained, from the very students the program is designed to support, as a means to improve the advisory program at the researcher’s school and to provide other middle schools with recommendations for their programs. According to Moustakas (1994) and Lester (1999), the aim of a phenomenological approach to qualitative research seeks to derive meaning from an experience as described by the individuals who have experienced it. The following questions are critical to the nature of this qualitative research project:

1. What perceptions and understandings do students currently have about their advisory program?
   a. What is the students’ understanding of the purpose of the program?
   b. How do the students feel about the focus/curriculum of the program?
c. What elements of the program do the students like the most and least?

d. Do students feel they should be included in the curriculum development process? If not, why not? If yes, then in what manner?

**Methodology**

The method of research for this study is a qualitative approach designed to explore and understand the perceptions and experiences of middle school students involved in an advisory program. Qualitative research is inductive in nature as it focuses on specific situations or people and places emphasis on words instead of numbers. Creswell (2009, p. 4) states that “those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation.” As Maxwell (2005, p. 23) describes it, qualitative researchers “tend to ask how x plays a role in causing y, what the process is that connects x and y.” In other words, I am studying how students are connected meaningfully with our advisory program and wish to discover or “uncover” students’ perceptions and understandings of advisory as an element of the middle school concept.

Maxwell (2005) delineates five intellectual goals and three practical goals for qualitative research. The former include understanding how the participants make sense and attach meaning to the experience; understanding the context with which the participants act as well as how the context influences their actions; identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences by responding to them with openness and flexibility; understanding the process by which the events/actions take place; and developing causal explanations. The latter include generating results that are more understandable to practitioners than quantitative analysis; conducting
evaluations intended to improve practice versus assessing merely the value of a program; and engaging in collaborative research with practitioners or participants.

These intellectual and practical goals align with my research study, as I want to learn how students (and teachers) view advisory, what it means to them, and how their experiences in the program influence their views of it. By analyzing the data generated, the expected outcome is the development of practical recommendations and strategies designed to assist middle schools in improving their advisory programs for the benefit of their students.

The design of this research study is based upon a phenomenological inquiry approach. Lester (1999, p. 1) sees phenomenological methods as “particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions.” The aim of my research is to determine what advisory means for the students and teachers involved in the program by asking them open-ended interview questions. To accomplish this, I will study a small sampling of subjects, six students and three teachers, over a 45-60 minute interview, which will be recorded to ensure all of the participants’ thoughts and descriptions are accurately captured.

**Site and Participants**

Vincent J. Gallagher Middle School is a public school set in a suburban, relatively affluent community, and serves approximately 550 middle school students in grades six through eight with 50 teachers and two administrators. Of the 550 students, 47.7% are female and 52.3% are male. For this research study, the researcher focused only on students in grades seven and eight. Students in sixth grade were not considered for this study as the students are still in the transitional phase to the middle school and the researcher’s own advisory group consists of sixth graders. Of the 380 seventh and eighth grade students, 330 are white (87%) and 50 (13%) are
non-white under the federal designation (29 are Hispanic/Latino; 7 are Asian; 4 are Black/African American; 1 is Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander; and 9 are two or more races). Historically, my school has approximately 15% of all students receive subsidized lunch; however, it is currently the policy of the district to limit access to that data to district administrators and food-service personnel.

The study participants will include six students (three female and three male) and three teachers. Three of the six students will be eighth graders and three will be seventh graders. One of the six students will be of non-white ethnicity. Socio-economic status (subsidized lunch) and state assessment scores were not utilized in the selection of participants. Since the students are under the age of eighteen, a faculty member, who has volunteered to do so for the researcher, will be present for all meetings with the student participants. In addition to the students, three teachers who volunteered to serve on the advisory curriculum committee (at the beginning of each school year, teachers complete a survey indicating which committee(s) they are interested in serving on for that school year) will be selected to participate in this study. Since the teachers on the committee have all had advisory groups for several years, each teacher has experience working with advisory students at all three grade levels.

To assist with the recruitment of the student participants, I will meet with the seventh and eighth grade school counselors to ask for their input in compiling a list of possible student study participants per each grade level. I will then select three students in each grade level based on the aforementioned selection parameters and contact the parents/guardians of each of the students via letter to ask their consent for their child to participate in this study. Upon return of the signed parental consent form, I will meet with each student individually and in the presence of the faculty member volunteer to describe the research study and the role he/she will have in
the study. I will answer any questions the student may have. I will then ascertain an interview
date/time and confirm this with the parent via phone call. At the beginning of the digitally
recorded interview, each child will give verbal assent to participate in the study.

From the advisory curriculum committee list, I will ask three teachers to volunteer to
participate in this study by placing a letter in their mailboxes. Teachers who volunteer will be
asked to sign the consent form at the beginning of the interview so no additional meetings will
take place. They will have the chance to ask any questions before signing the form.

**Data Collection**

The purpose of this study is to ascertain middle school students’ understandings and
perceptions of the school’s advisory program through the students’ personal experiences as a
participant in the program with the intent of utilizing the information to revise the program’s
curriculum. Similarly, the researcher will ascertain middle school teachers’ understandings and
perceptions of the school’s advisory program through the teachers’ personal experiences as an
advisor in the program. Interviews will be the source of data collection for this study as a means
to “illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors
describe, the intent of an open-ended phenomenological interview (conversation) is to gather a
study participant’s personal perspective and interpretation of the phenomenon through the use of
an informal and interactive process in which a relaxed and trusting atmosphere has been
established. The interview is considered an opportunity to learn something important about the
phenomenon from each participant by letting the participant talk, redirecting only when
necessary.
The student participants will be interviewed individually for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews will take place in the school office conference room and will be scheduled before or after school hours based on the participant’s preference and availability. Each interview will be recorded on a digital recording device. During the student interviews, a volunteer faculty member will be present as an adult observer only and will sit at the other end of the table. The student will be informed of the reason why the adult observer must be present. In addition, the student will be assured the adult observer will not be taking any notes nor participating in the interview in any manner.

Likewise, teachers will be interviewed individually for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews will take place outside of the teacher’s normal working hours at a mutually agreed upon time and place. Each interview will be recorded on a digital recording device.

The student and teacher interview questions were developed to gather information about: (a) words and phrases they would utilize when they think of advisory; (b) how they feel about advisory; (c) how they would describe the program to new students (or new teachers); (d) their experiences in the advisory program; (e) ways advisory has changed them as a student (or teacher); (f) what they believe is the purpose of advisory; and (g) what they believe should be included in the program’s curriculum and who should be responsible for developing it. The interview will consist of open-ended questions designed to maximize the participants’ willingness to share their honest understandings and perceptions of the advisory program.

At the start of each interview, I will create a relaxing and trusting setting by engaging the participants in a social conversation. The goal is to continue this conversational style throughout the interview process so the participants feel comfortable responding to the questions honestly and openly. Since the student interviews will be in the school office conference room, we will
sit at the far end of the conference room table so we are less visible to anyone walking by the room and will sit in close proximity to maintain that conversational tone.

Access to the data collected for this research study will be limited to the researchers, the thesis team, and requesting authorized individuals such as members of Northeastern University’s IRB. I will assign each study participant a pseudo first name and code the information gathered accordingly. I will store the participant and correlated pseudo first name list in a locked location (file drawer). The data will be used to complete my research study. The findings of the study will be incorporated into the revision of my school’s advisory curriculum.

The data, which includes the recorded interviews, notes taken during the interviews, transcriptions of the interviews, and data analysis results will be kept in my possession and, when not in use, will be secured in a locked location (file drawer). Once my research is complete and my research project has been defended, all digital recordings will be erased. Links to participant identification, research notes, and analysis data will also be destroyed at that time.

The signed consent forms will be maintained in a sealed envelope and will be locked in the school safe, which is located in a locked closet. My secretary and I are the only individuals who have access to the school safe. The envelope will be marked with *destroy on this date* (the date will be three years from the conclusion of the study) clearly written on the front. On the date indicated, the envelope will be removed from the safe and shredded. In the event I leave my current position in the district, I will take the envelope into my possession and store it in a locked location (file drawer) at my home until the date indicated; it will then be shredded.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis of phenomenological research data has been described as “necessarily messy” (Lester, 1999, p. 2) as the data does not tend to fall into neat categories. The first step is
to read through and get a sense of what is being said and begin to identify key themes. It is important for the researcher to commit to a whole-part-whole method of analysis. Vagle (2014) describes this method of analysis as stemming from “the idea that we must always think about focal meanings in relation to the whole from which they are situated—and once we begin to remove parts from one contest and put them in dialogue with other parts, we end up creating new analytic wholes that have particular meanings in relation to the phenomenon.” (p. 97).

The data analysis steps delineated by Vagle (2014) and Creswell (2009) are similar in nature with the first step of organizing and preparing the data for analysis, i.e., transcription of interview data. Once the data is ready for analysis, the next step is to holistically read through the data to obtain a general sense of the information. After this has been done with all interview transcriptions, the coding process begins. Coding refers to the organization of the information into categories or topics in order to identify emerging themes. Once the coding process is complete, I will generate a description of the categories and themes for further analysis. The next step is to represent the data into a qualitative narrative, that is, back to an analytic whole. The final step of interpretation is where the researcher makes meaning of the data. “This enables the researcher to ‘intrude’ more into the study by making interpretations and linkages, relating the findings to previous research or commentary, to personal experience or even to common-sense opinions, and developing tentative theories.” (Lester, 1999, p. 3). Figure 3.1 shows a graphic of Creswell’s (2009) interpretation of data analysis in qualitative research.
Figure 3.1 Creswell’s (2009): Data Analysis in Qualitative Research

Reliability, Validity, and Credibility

The researcher is the principal of the school in which the study was conducted. While an assistant principal in the same school, she led the development and creation of the advisory program during the 2004-2005 school year and its subsequent implementation in the 2005-2006 school year. During the first three years of the program, the researcher was behind the scenes guiding and supporting the program. Beginning in the 2008-2009 school year, she began
assigning herself an advisory group of students. While Creswell 2009, (p. 177) would define my research as “backyard research that involves studying the researcher’s own organization, or friends, or immediate work setting.” (Creswell, p.177). In light of this, it is imperative that the researcher employ strategies to eliminate questions of validity and credibility. However, Maxwell (2005, p. 38) believes “these experiential data should not be ignored because of the usual canons governing research (which regard personal experience and data are likely to bias the research), for these canons lead to the squashing of valuable experiential data. We say, rather, mine your experience, there is potential gold there!”

While I have a passion for advisory programs and my school’s program is close to my heart, I want to conduct this study to improve my school’s program. As I recognize that our program is in flux and in need of improvement, I see the research as a critical component of providing my school a direction with which to proceed to improve our program. I am not looking to “sugar coat” the results of this study–I seek and need the honest truth from the students and teachers to effectively guide the program’s improvement. I am aware of my bias toward the merits of advisory programs but that is not the focus of my study. The focus of my study is to ascertain my middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of advisory as a means to improve the program to meet the needs of the students.

Qualitative validity refers to the means by which the researcher checks for accuracy of the findings by utilizing certain procedures. This will be accomplished by following Creswell’s (2009) reliability suggestions, which include checking transcripts for accuracy as well as maintaining and consistently coding data utilizing clear definitions of the codes. In addition, to ensure validity, I will clarify any bias I bring to the table (as disclosed above). I will also present any negative or discrepant information that diverges from the themes.
Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher completed the computer-based training course entitled “Protecting Human Research Participants” through Northeastern University in May of 2009. As a result, ethical challenges have been considered from the inception of the design of this study. While this study only consisted of conducting interviews, the researcher did contemplate the potential risks to the study participants.

For the students, given that the researcher is the principal of the school, the student participants may be anxious participating in the interview. As a school principal, I believe it is vitally important for my students to feel comfortable speaking with me about any issues or concerns they may have. Visibility and approachability are paramount for this type of atmosphere to be established – I do not want students to fear “the principal’s office”. However, I recognize the students may be uncomfortable sharing their feelings about the advisory program. To safeguard against this potential risk, prior to asking the first interview question, I will read the paragraph stating what I am doing and why, how the information will be kept confidential, and how this has no impact on their school performance. I will inform them they can pass on answering any question and can stop at any time. I will then answer any questions they may have. Each child will give verbal assent on the recording before I begin any interview.

For the teachers, given that the researcher is their immediate supervisor, the teacher participants may be anxious participating in the interview and may not be comfortable sharing their feelings, thoughts, or opinions about the advisory program. To safeguard against this potential risk, prior to asking the first interview question, I will read the paragraph stating what I am doing and why, how the information will be kept confidential, and how this will have no impact on their job performance. I will inform them they can pass on answering any question
and can stop at any time. I will then answer any questions they may have. Each teacher will then be asked to sign the consent form.

Summary

This research study utilizes a phenomenological qualitative research approach to ascertain students’ understandings and perceptions of a middle school advisory program in which they participate. By conducting this study, the researcher hopes to gain insight into how the experiences of middle school students in their advisory program can be utilized to improve the program. The program is designed for the students and what better way to improve a program than to listen to the participants served by the program. While there are no direct benefits for any participant, the potential benefits for the field include knowledge about the subjective experiences of participants in advisory programs as disclosed by students and teachers, guidance regarding maintaining and revising an advisory program, and strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of advisory programs.
Chapter Four: Report of Research Findings

This qualitative study was conducted to gain insight into the perceptions and understandings of advisory by middle school students. The evidence source is interview data and analysis of six student interviews and three teacher interviews. The interview data was recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. Notes were taken during the interviews to assist the researcher with the interpretation of the data.

Data Collection

The six student participants were students in grades seven and eight. There were three eighth graders, two males and one female, and three seventh graders, one male and two females. None of the six students were in the same advisory group. In accordance with the protocol described in Chapter 3, the selected students had parental consent to participate in the study and each student also consented at the start of the interview to participate in it. The students were interviewed on a day and time that worked best for their schedules. Three students were interviewed before school and three students were interviewed after school. The average length of each interview was 22.38 minutes with the longest one lasting 30.17 minutes and the shortest lasting 16.43 minutes. Each interview took place in the office conference room and, since the students were under the age of eighteen, a faculty member, who volunteered to do so for the researcher, was present for all interviews with the student participants.

Each of the three teacher participants taught at a different grade level so all three grade levels were represented. There was one male teacher and two female teachers. In accordance with the protocol described in Chapter 3, I placed a letter requesting the teacher’s participation in the study. Upon contacting me to express his/her interest in participating in the study, the teacher and I selected an interview date, time, and place. At the start of the interview, the teacher
signed the official consent form. One teacher was interviewed before school and two teachers were interviewed after school. The average length of each interview was 25.64 minutes with the longest one lasting 27.42 minutes and the shortest lasting 24.72 minutes.

In the following sections, I will introduce the student participants and the teacher participants. I will then discuss the three themes that emerged from the data collection: program purpose, curriculum design, and personal impact.

**Student Participants**

For the protection and anonymity of the participants, the names used were not the actual names of the participants. The eighth grade participants were Greg, Bobby, and Jan. The seventh grade participants were Marcia, Cindy, and Peter. The teacher participants were Tom, Ruth, and Rosie. A description of each of the participants is provided below.

**Greg** is an eighth grade male student who is active in a variety of school activities from sports to student government. He is a strong student who excels in school (top 20% of his class) and is very comfortable speaking with adults. This year as a student government representative, Greg routinely interacted with me to present and discuss student government ideas and plans. He is well- respected by the adults in the school as well as his peers. Greg was very comfortable speaking with me during the interview and his responses were honest and forthright.

**Bobby** is an eighth grade male student who is also active in a variety of school activities from sports to student government. He is an above average student who excels in school (top third of his class) and is also comfortable speaking with adults. As another representative of the student government, he also routinely interacted with me. He has a great sense of humor and a quick wit. He is always respectful with adults and his peers. At first, Bobby seemed slightly
reserved with his answers but as the interview progressed he opened up and provided specific examples when answering questions.

**Jan** is an eighth grade non-white female student who is quiet and reserved in school. She is involved on a limited basis in school activities. She struggles in school (bottom 25% of her class) and has some reading deficits. She moved to the district in fifth grade and came from a community different from Smithfield. Jan’s responses to the questions were not as detailed as the other students; however, she was just as insightful and provided an interesting perspective.

**Marcia** is a seventh grade female student who is active in school activities. She is an above average student who excels in school (top third of her class) and is comfortable speaking with adults. She is well-respected by adults and her peers. She is reserved and on the quiet side but easily engages in conversation and expresses her thoughts in a straight-forward approach. She is well-spoken and freely shared her thoughts and opinions with me.

**Cindy** is a seventh grade female student who is very active in school activities especially with community service. She is an above-average student who excels in school (top third of her class) and is quite comfortable interacting with adults. While she is small in stature, she is strong in personality, drive, and determination. Whenever a volunteer is needed, Cindy is the first to respond. Cindy was very comfortable speaking with me about the advisory program.

**Peter** is a seventh grade male student who is active in school activities especially those more academic in nature. He is a strong student who excels in school (top 20% of his class) and is very comfortable speaking and interacting with adults. He is respected by adults and his peers. I have known Peter since he was an infant as one of his parents is a teacher in the district. As such, he is extremely comfortable speaking with me. During his interview, he at first confused the advisory program with his group guidance class and he asked to start the interview over after
the second question, which we did do. Throughout the interview, Peter would ask if his answer was a good response as he was worried about providing me with enough information that would help me “pass”. I would reassure him that he was doing fine.

**Teacher Participants**

**Tom** is an eighth grade core subject area teacher who has worked in the district for 9 years and has always been an advisor. He is involved in many aspects of school life including coaching and a variety of faculty committee work. He readily connects with middle school students on their level and commands their respect. Tom never has classroom management issues and his students are engaged from the onset of his lessons. He is an advocate of the middle school concept including the advisory program. We have a great working relationship and I respect him as a teacher in my school. Tom was very comfortable during the interview and was honest and forthright.

**Ruth** is a sixth grade core subject area teacher who has worked in the district for 12 years and 11 years as an advisor. She is involved in a variety of school activities and faculty committees. She is continually improving her craft and is involved in a variety of subject-area professional development opportunities. Ruth was a member of the advisory committee who attended the thirty-hour training program, which led to the development of our program. As such, Ruth was very comfortable speaking with me about our advisory program and provided me with honest and up-front responses.

**Rosie** is a seventh grade special education teacher who has worked in the district for 13 years, eight at the elementary school level and five at the middle school level (so five years as an advisor). She has a bubbly personality and is an extremely positive person. She is quite comfortable speaking with me as we have had many conversations about students, our special
education delivery model, and school initiatives. She serves as the unofficial chair of the special education department. Rosie is a strong advocate for students. During the interview, Rosie shared specific information and was honest and candid.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this qualitative research study followed the suggested protocol for analyzing phenomenological as described in chapter 3. First the recorded interviews were uploaded to my computer utilizing the Sony Sound Organizer software provided for the recording device. Each interview file was flagged to demarcate the beginning and end of each question and that of the participant’s response. Each recording was then played to be transcribed using the Dragon Dictation app on my iPad. Each recording was then played again slowly several times to allow me to correct each transcription as necessary. Once this was complete, each participant’s transcribed text was printed and the analysis process began.

I holistically read each transcription individually to gain an understanding of that participant’s views on the advisory program. I then reread it and highlighted words, phrases, and sentences that encapsulated the participant’s responses, which then allowed me to generate a list of emerging themes. I first examined the students’ transcriptions to generate student themes and, then, examined the teachers’ transcriptions to generate teacher themes. Once both lists of emerging themes were compiled, I compared the two lists to generate a list of common themes between the two groups of interrelated participants. The next step involved the interpretation of the meaning of the data from the common themes.

**Results**

The intent of this qualitative research study was to investigate middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of our advisory program in order to utilize the insight gained
from the very students the program is designed to support as a means to provide our middle school and others with program recommendations. My first interview question was written to ease the participant into the interview process and make him/her comfortable in the setting. The first question asked the participant to give me three words/phrases that come to mind when you think about advisory. While I did not utilize this information as a source for an emerging theme, I found it interesting that five of the nine participants used the word, fun or enjoyable, half of the students indicated it was helpful, and two of the three teachers described it as relaxed. The analysis of the data from all other questions resulted in three common themes: program purpose, curriculum design, and personal impact (refer to table 4.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Program Purpose</td>
<td>A. Academic vs. Problem-Solving</td>
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<td></td>
<td>B. Mission</td>
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<td>• Curriculum Design</td>
<td>A. Variance</td>
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<td>B. Individual Learning Plans</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C. Student Involvement</td>
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<td>• Personal Impact</td>
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**Table 4.1 Summary of Emerging Themes and Subthemes**

Program purpose refers to the participants’ overall understanding of why middle schools have an advisory program. The students were asked, “Why do you think we have advisory?” After answering that question, as part of the next question, the students were shown a copy of the school’s advisory program mission statement. I purposefully wanted to hear why the students
thought we had the program without giving them a “guide”, so to speak, to utilize to answer the question. It should be noted that the mission statement for the advisory program is posted in the main entrance of the school. The teachers were asked the same question as to why we have the program but were not asked the same question relative to the mission statement.

The program purpose theme was broken down into two subthemes: academic versus problem-solving and mission. The former refers to the significance of the program for the individual whereas the latter refers to the charge or task of the overall program. When students were answering the “why advisory” questions, three of the students viewed the program from an academic perspective. Marcia stated, “I think the purpose of it would have been or was supposed to be like to get more of a chance to look over work and use it as an extra kind of interventions period where the teacher can assign stuff that's related to their subject or let you study. I just think it was kind meant for more academic kind of purpose.” Peter described a specific incident when he was stuck with a mathematics problem and his advisor who happens to be a mathematics teacher helped him understand the formula. “I’m like I have no idea, and he got up and showed me how to do it and that has really helped me. Yeah, that's probably why you have it, just to help.” Jan felt students could ask their advisory teacher for help with a subject they are struggling with and, “they can give you feedback and help you on how to do it.”

The other three students and Peter viewed the program from a problem-solving perspective where the advisor guides them. Bobby stated the we have advisory “to build bonds between certain groups of students and teachers. It gives you a teacher in the building that you feel like you can talk to if you had to.” Greg also indicated the advisor was someone you could talk to especially for students who “don’t feel comfortable coming down to, you know, they don't feel their issue is big enough to come down to guidance and talk with a guidance counselor.”
Cindy stated, “I think that advisory is to teach kids stuff about like what they should do and what they shouldn’t do.” Peter saw it from both perspectives when he added, “they can help you with any problems that you have. They will obviously advise you what to do in a situation.”

The teachers certainly came to the table with years of background knowledge and experience with the program. They not only addressed the academic and problem-solving purpose; they also addressed it in reference to what their role is as an advisor. Rosie summarized why we have advisory in this manner, “Basically to foster relationships with this group of students and have them be able to come to you for advice, hence the name advisory period….So I think that's why it was developed, for a deeper relationship in a school setting,” Tom shared, “I think it's important because it looks at other elements of learning and how kids grow because it's not just academics. Advisory is an important program because it allows us to see the kids in a different realm, you get to see them in a different way, and that's important. That's truly the thing because you get to keep them for the three years; you build that bond.” Tom and Rosie provided a list of the roles the advisor takes on in their responses. They included a leader, a role model, and a listener. “You are a point person who can provide advice and guide them,” added Rosie.

While Ruth also mentioned a needed connection with an adult in the building, her response focused more on how our program has evolved from the teachers’ perspective by stating, “I think the teachers have gotten better at doing advisory. I think the teachers were pretty green at first, I think they also were very nervous that they were going to have more work and all that stuff.”

The students were shown the school’s mission statement for the advisory program (see Appendix H) and were asked what the statement meant to them. Half of the students attacked
the question by going point by point and the other half provided more of a summarized response. I found it interesting how the students were much more detailed in their response to this question than the aforementioned question – I believe the mission statement triggered other thoughts they did not think of on their own.

Peter expressed how he was going to attack the statement, “So I’m going to read it aloud and then I’m going to break it apart (Peter read the mission statement aloud). So social emotional growth, that would be like learning how to deal with like social problems and, maybe if you're really shy, just being more social and learning social skills like don't be rude and stuff like that. To make connections with other students, like my advisor, I feel I could always go to cause he knows me better than some teachers because some of the other teachers do not have time to get to every single student and they have 25 of us in a class, there’s like 10 people in advisory and he gets to know us each very well and he could always help us with our problems. So in a supportive environment, that probably means that he is always positive, he will always support us if you need help. Promotes a sense of belonging - letting you know that you belong here, you should be here, it’s not like you're a misfit or anything. Personal decision making skills helping you make decisions because in life you will not always have an adult to help you there or teachers or parents, they won’t always be there for you and you have to learn to make good decisions. So connecting to our larger community – well, instead of just being focused like in our little room or school, like connecting us to the bigger picture.”

Bobby mentioned, “At the point where it says to create meaningful connections with our students in a supportive environment that promotes a sense of belonging that’s kind of what I said. How it gives you a group of not only a teacher but people you can talk to if you had to. When it goes on to say develops personal decision-making skills, that's kind of an ILP
(individual learning plan) and you can decide on what you want to do. And fosters social emotional growth and connect us to a larger community that falls in with the charitable events and what not.” Greg added an interesting perspective about teachers with respect to making meaningful connections. He stated, “I think that really shows that the teachers are almost getting down on a level with the students; they're no longer the leaders, the teachers, they’re more the same I guess.”

Marcia described it this way: “And since the teachers are like really nice and supportive, and they’ll help you, I think that makes more students like comfortable and kind of succeeds in the social and emotional growth part of it. And it kind of opens the students up to being more comfortable or less shy with more people.” Cindy described how her group of friends is different because of advisory. “I become closer with some people in my advisory based on just being there and I think that's a good part of it.” I asked her, “So do you think you would've chosen some of those people as your friends if you weren't in the advisory group with them?” She shared, “I don't think so because most of my good friends are from my old school. I enjoy going to anchor because I get to see a different group of friends that wouldn’t normally be friends with each other because we’re all in different groups of friends.” Jan, who was less outspoken than the other students, stated, “Like in advisory, you show your emotions and your feelings and it helps you like speak out more. Talking to kids in your class, opening up, and connecting with other kids in your school that you don't usually talk to.”

This interview data is reaffirming to me as it demonstrates both the students’ and teachers’ understanding of the primary purpose of advisory aligns with the components of the middle school model. One of the middle school reform recommendations from Turning Points 2000 was to organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development
and a caring community of shared educational purpose. Advisories are a critical component of the middle school concept driven by the primary purpose of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult. Once a program is established, the next step is to determine what exactly will take place during the advisory sessions, that is, the curriculum design, the second theme.

**Curriculum Design**

The theme of curriculum design was divided into three subthemes: variance, individual learning plans, and student involvement. Variance refers to how the participants’ descriptions of the curriculum showed there are discrepancies and inconsistencies with our school’s advisory program curriculum. One of the state-mandated tasks that is included in our advisory program is the development of individual learning plans (ILPs). In our school, students are required to write three goals per year and write subsequent reflections on how they did or did not achieve their goals. While I intentionally did not ask a specific question about the ILP, each of the participants did mention it. The final subtheme, student involvement, refers to how students can be included in the curriculum development process.

**Variance**

The students were asked to describe what typically happens in their advisory. Cindy indicated on days when they are not working on ILPs, they can usually catch up on work and sometimes “we’ll get to know each other a little bit more and become more comfortable with each other.” Marcia described it this way: “We usually are just kind of left to go off on our own and do kind of whatever we can like that’s appropriate for school and so we could either choose to study, we could choose to read, we can choose to finish work, we can go on our Chromebooks and kind of look at resources for something.” Peter expressed, “You walk in, he lets us sit wherever we want, and then we are allowed to (student ended thought here and went to next
sentence). So you have to do ILPs; if we have to do those or if we haven't finished anything and other than that sometimes he will make us do like, what do you call it where you get to know each other, like a group building, trust building exercise or something like that, or hangman. Other than that he just leaves us to do either reading or like any work that you have to do not homework from the night before though - he does not allow that. And yeah that's basically what we’ll do on a typical advisory day.”

Bobby shared, “Teacher will typically ask us what we’ve been up to and we’ll go around and answer. And then after that, if we have to do ILPs that will start shortly. If not, then we basically have the time to catch up with each other because I don't really get to see a lot of the students in there because they’re on the other team. So that’s about it.” Marcia told me, “We play board games sometimes. My advisor (student actually stated advisor’s name) has us do a zumba class for 10 minutes or we’ll visit another advisory class and we’ll watch a video with them, we’ll talk about the weekends, sometimes we’ll bake, sometimes we’ll color, or we’ll do the goal sheets.” Greg revealed, “We probably get in there and attendance would be taken and just either someone would have a topic whether it be politics, whether it be something that happened in sports, or if no one really has anything to talk about, the teacher might bring up a subject, you know, what did you do over the weekend; if it was like a holiday, what did you do during the holiday, and it basically just go around the room doing that, but most typically it’d be someone would just start talking about something and that’d branch off into different conversations about whatever.”

The teachers were also asked what typically happens in their advisory and, as with the students, the information was varied. Tom described his advisory sessions as including the following tasks/activities: writing ILPs, reading articles, running a tic-tac-toe tournament,
creating a time capsule, discussing topics such as bullying and being safe online. Tom also liked incorporating The Code by Asgedom. Ruth begins her sessions by greeting her students, asking them how their week is going, discussing their grades if it is progress or report card time, working on a craft or seasonal activity, or discussing a topic (Ruth has teen topic cards that she randomly selects for the discussion topic). When asked what she meant by a seasonal activity, Ruth described a Valentine’s Day activity, “I gave them a list of all their names on a sheet of paper and, even if they didn't know everyone in the room, I had them write one nice thing about each name and then, typically, I would collect them all and I would cut them into strips so that all of one student’s comments would be in a pile. Then the next time we meet, they’d have a cutout heart and they could glue them on there and then they get to take that Valentine for themselves.”

Rosie described her typical advisory session as being student-driven. She’ll go by what they would like to do but always has something prepared. She included walking outside, helping them with their school work, playing board games, and making a bucket list (the students actually painted a bucket and placed the list in it). She stated, “it's just like activities that I can pull for them that I think are going to be interesting and exciting where they’re not sitting there for, you know, the half-hour wasting time. And I do feel like it gives them a break, a breath of fresh air, no pun intended, well, actually pun intended.”

Ruth and Rosie both provided their thoughts about the curriculum across the building and how they feel there is limited consistency within the advisory groups. Ruth conveyed it this way, “I'm thinking that it's not consistent in the building. I'm thinking that you don't want to make the faculty feel like it's another lesson they have to teach, another thing they have to do, but I also feel like the experiences the kids are having in advisory are varied. And I have to say that
sometimes it's a de-motivator for me, why am I busting myself to get all the stuff prepared and get it ready. And on the other hand, everyone that I have shared stuff with has shared stuff with me too so that's kind of nice. So going back to the original question, I think that maybe having more continuity is a good thing. Without it being mandated, I know it's a tightrope. It’s an opportunity for kids to talk about things, to relax, I like the relax part because it's almost like the intellectual recess. I also think that it needs to be a little more purpose-driven.”

Similarly, Rosie voiced, “I feel like everybody does a different thing, I don't think anybody is really focused on one curriculum. I feel like it's all over the place, it's more of a social-emotional curriculum then I would say a set curriculum where it is more academic or skill-based. But in terms of like across the school, I know we're all doing a lot of different things.”

*Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)*

As stated previously, individual learning plans were state-mandated by the Board of Regents for all students beginning in grade six. While schools had the ability to develop their own plans, there were requirements for academic, career, and personal social elements to be addressed in the plans. All but one of the participants (student Greg) mentioned the ILPs in at least one of their responses. Of the five students who spoke about ILPs, three of them described the ILP as their least favorite activity. One student said it was her favorite activity and the other student spoke about the ILP at the end of the interview when I asked if there was anything else she wanted to share. All three of the teachers referenced the ILPs as their least favorite activity.

The students who felt the ILPs were their least favorite activity were Bobby, Cindy, and Peter; although Peter’s answer was ambiguous. Bobby disclosed, “They seem extremely tedious. I don’t know if we really get that much out of it. Seems almost a little bit like busy work.”
Cindy shared, “My least favorite is probably having to do ILPs every single quarter because I feel like it just kind of gets annoying to do.” In a follow-up question, I asked, “So, is there a particular part about the ILPs that you don't like or just in general?” She responded, “Usually writing three steps to the goals because sometimes I feel like my goal can’t have three steps. I usually don't have enough steps to fit in for the goals.” While Peter stated the ILPs were his least favorite thing, his response was unclear. He expressed, “My least favorite activity is the ILP but, I mean, I know the ILPs are there for a reason and they have helped me organize myself because my big thing is organizing. I made it my goal to organize myself and I got that done and I feel much better about it but that's probably my least favorite. But, I mean, I don’t really mind it.” I followed with, “So what part of it is the least favorite part?” He clarified, “Doing the goal. Actually, carrying through with the goal because that's what takes time but I mean it’s all for a good reason.”

Both Marcia and Jan felt positively about the ILPs. Marcia revealed, “…because it's kind of fun to just think about something that you can actually set a goal for yourself and it kind of distracts you from any kind of stress that any other classes may be putting on you.” Jan shared, “I actually like the goal sheets. Maybe tweaking it a little because some pieces on the goals I don't get; I somewhat get what they say, but not really.”

The three teachers clearly indicated it is not that they dislike the ILP process, but rather, they dislike the reaction they get from the students. Tom provided this explanation: “I just think the kids become overwhelmed with elements where they have to write and they kind of get stuck with analyzing themselves. I think it's important that they do the reflections, I think it is just difficult for them to see the value of it without them knowing that oh, what did I do wrong, how did I do this wrong. They don't really buy into that and it’s tough to get them to see that; that's
the most difficult part of that I think.” Ruth expressed, “I think sometimes when I tell them that we have a deadline and we have to do ILPs, I get the groans but I try to spin it so that this is important that you’re doing it and it’s something that your guidance counselor and parents can look at and you should be reflective about what you're doing academically.” Rosie described it as a “double-edged sword” because “at this age it's difficult to write a reflection. I think it's greatly improved since we've given them that template. So I think that that's good, but they are not happy, I have disgruntled clients in front of me.”

*Student Involvement*

The last subtheme of curriculum design focused on student involvement in the process. While we had a focus group of students participate in the development process when the program was originally started, their involvement was limited to the card-sorting activity described in Chapter 2 and referenced in table 2.1. The students were not involved in developing the specific elements of the advisory program. As part of this research study, I wanted to determine the students’ interest in participating in the curriculum development process as well as the teachers’ perspective on including the students. All but one of the participants (Peter) felt the students should be included in the process. Peter elaborated, “Well, at least at my age, some students are immature and they will just make some stuff up. I don't know if they will have any experience, they have been in advisory but they don't have any experience being an advisor. So the big thing is they don't have the experience and they’re also younger, they don’t have any experience out in the real world.” Ironically, Peter is very mature and reflective for his age.

Bobby expressed that he felt all of the advisory groups should participate by suggesting a couple of proposed ideas and vote on them. Greg suggested we have a “board of trusted students”. When I asked him to clarify how this board of trusted students would be selected he
provided two options. “You could do it two ways. You could hand select them, who really would want to benefit the program, who would think of these things that would really benefit the students. Or you could just ask the advisory teachers to pick a student who you feel really cares about the program, cares about school as a whole, and would really like to benefit the student body in the way that they would think of the topics for everyone. This way they’d feel like they're helping build something.”

Marcia felt the students could suggest major ideas by submitting them to the office or to the person who controls the curriculum. Cindy believes the best way to involve students in the process is through a student survey. Jan’s interpretation of the question led her to suggest a question box be created by the advisor who could look at it to plan for the class in the future.

The three teachers all expressed an interest in having students involved in the process of developing the curriculum. Tom suggested, “Having meetings where they’re able to contribute things. In the business world, they used to call them focus groups where they ask customers what they thought was important. I think the greatest good comes from the eighth graders because they’re willing to talk about it. They will talk about stuff like that and, if you tell them they can change things, they might be more willing to do that. You know, have a focus group with kids from every perspective, you know, your lower learner, your intermediate learner, your high learner, kids that are outgoing, your sports kid, your dance team kids, your government kids, all those kids. I think there should be an element of all incorporated.”

Ruth believes some of the eighth graders should be involved in the process. “Some students who have some good ideas or that have had experiences and might be able to drive advisory in a different direction or fine-tune it a little bit.” While Rosie felt the students should be involved, she cautioned that she did not believe they should be involved in writing the
specific elements of the curriculum. “Not maybe developing the curriculum, but giving input. Basically what you're doing, interviewing them and asking them what they like to do during advisory time. Because like I said, I keep going back to this, I do think it's a time that they really enjoy during the week.” She added that some students might be willing to come in at the end of June or over the summer to give their feedback.

**Personal Impact**

The last theme to emerge was personal impact. Advisory programs are developed to support students in school by ensuring the students are well-known by at least one adult in the building. While the specific focus of the program can vary from school to school, the overall goal of personalization is to create an educational environment where the development of each child is of primary concern. In analyzing the interview data, it was evident by the students’ responses that the program is fulfilling that goal. The best way to express the impact the program is having on the students is to share it their own words, that is, from the mouths of babes.

Bobby stated, “It’s made me more comfortable with teachers and students around the building. It’s kind of showed me that as long as you talk to people and let them know what’s going on, then it's kind of all going to work out. You’ll be alright.” Greg responded, “I would say I've learned kind of how to deal with issues. If someone has an issue that I don't have but maybe comes up the week later, I now know how to fix it, and, of course, I’d always go to the teacher if necessary. And, you know, how to deal with conflict and it is almost like a lesson; someone has an issue and the teacher tells them how to solve it. I now know if I have that same issue, how to solve it and, if friends come to me with an issue, I can help them because of what I've learned in advisory. So it’s almost like a therapy lesson.”
Marcia, who is quiet by nature, shared, “I think it made me more open to teachers and kind of made classes a lot easier because during advisory the teachers are usually like really nice and you can ask them for help on something and they'll gladly help you. And then that kind of made me feel comfortable with asking more teachers during other periods.” Cindy expressed the program has impacted her “because it makes me think more about my future and like what I want to do in the future by looking at the ILPs and stuff.” Jan disclosed that the program provided her with information about activities that were available to her. She added, “I actually like advisory class because you can open more” (meaning open up more). Peter was pleased the program has made him more organized and helped him think about his goals.

The program also has an impact on the teachers. Tom quipped, “I have benefited from advisory because I've gotten to make a relationship with kids that I wouldn’t normally make and I've seen them kind of blossom into young adults and it's funny because I've had students that I've only had in advisory. And I met them out in public or at the high school and they still remember me and I’ve never had them as a student but they know me through advisory and that's another element of, like my role in my life, that's important to me like how many more kids can I affect. You know, I did baseball for a while, so I had those kids kind of under my wing, they appreciated me for that. But now I have this other element where these are kids that I might never ever have in class but I influence them and I see them for three years so it's a big portion of their life, you know, it's important for me too, kind of, I see value in that. I like that, having the ability to meet other kids, learn more about the kids, and have them be like my subgroup of other kids that I have besides my normal students every day. It's nice to have that and you bond with them and grow with them too.”
Ruth was reflective about the skill set she has developed as a result of advisory. She stated, “I have, I think I've gotten better at directing the kids to whom they need to talk to when there is a situation. For example, when a kid is falling apart or had a bad experience with another teacher, I've gotten better at saying “what was the problem and how do you think you can handle it” or I've been able to call the guidance counselor and I’ve done that a couple times when the situation has come up that is a general worry that they all have. I called guidance and asked if the counselor could come down and just talk to the group about this topic, if not that day then on a future day, and that has happened a few times over the course of anchor. I've definitely used that.”

Rosie disclosed, “Well, I think in some respects, like I said, you really get to know the students in that class and you have three years of just their personality. I feel like we’re not in almost like a school persona mode in that advisory period. So as a teacher, I'm able to relax in that period a little bit and be myself. So I'm a bit type A, so it definitely allows me to maybe let down my guard too as well so it's just like more of a back-and-forth relationship instead of I want to know about you as the teacher. They actually want to know about me and I think I'm more forthcoming with them than I would be to another group of students that I had in front of me that I want them to see me as a serious person.”

Summary

The results of this study revolved around three main themes: program purpose, curriculum design, and personal impact. Program purpose encapsulated how the participants’ viewed the overall premise behind the advisory program based on their experiences within their advisory group. Curriculum design shed light on the inconsistent curriculum being utilized, the dislike for the ILPs from both the students and the teachers, and discovered students’ thoughts
about and ideas for the involvement of students in the design of the advisory program’s curriculum. In the next chapter, three findings generated from the themes are discussed in further detail.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

The perceptions and understandings of advisory by middle school students involved in
the curriculum revision process was the focus of this study. The study was conducted in the
researcher’s own school and consisted of interviewing six students and three teachers. Through
an analysis of the data, the emerging themes were program purpose, curriculum design, and
personal impact. As Vagle (2014) indicates, phenomenological analysis is committed to a
whole–parts–whole process. After examining the data in its entirety, the researcher breaks it into
parts based on emerging themes, and then reconstitutes the analysis into a coherent
understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994, p. 49), “the
challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus
discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the
experience.”

My investigation predominantly focused on students’ views of their school’s advisory
program with the hope of gaining knowledge and insight about our school’s program from the
beneficiaries. Our program has been in existence for eleven years so it has become entrenched in
the culture of the school but has not been evaluated or modified, other than the number of days it
meets, since its implementation in 2005. The purpose was to utilize the information gained to
recognize both the strengths and challenges of the program in an effort to improve the program
for our students. This aligned with Lester’s (1999, p. 4) description of phenomenological
approaches as “good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard. …many organisations
value the insights which a phenomenological approach can bring in terms of cutting through
taken-for-granted assumptions, prompting action or challenging complacency.”
Findings

The results of this study provided evidence to support the need for my school to review and revise our advisory program to meet the needs of our students. While the results identified areas of strength, the results also uncovered areas of challenge warranting action. As stated in Chapter Two, program effectiveness and evaluation, and student-centered relationships have been discussed in the literature about advisory programs. The findings from this qualitative study align with these areas of focus.

It is difficult to conclude whether or not Gallagher Middle School’s advisory program is effective based on the data and the fact that the overall premise of advisory programs is generally understood to be one of ensuring each child is well known by at least one adult. How does one evaluate a relationship to determine whether or not it is effective? While the focus of this study was not centered around determining the effectiveness of relationships, it did support my first finding of the importance of building meaningful connections. In addition, the results highlighted the curriculum discrepancies that exist within our program. As such, my second finding was the need for a clear and consistent curriculum. While Individual Learning Plans represented the one area of consistency within our curriculum, it was the facet most talked about by both participant groups. The majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with its current format and structure. This led to my third finding for increased opportunities for student engagement in self-reflection.

There were three findings from this qualitative study: the importance of building meaningful connections, the need for a clear and consistent curriculum, and increased opportunities for student engagement in self-reflection. Each is discussed in further detail below.
Finding One: Importance of building meaningful connections

In examining the data from the program purpose and personal impact themes, the importance of building meaningful connections surfaced as a common thread. The student responses during the interview demonstrated how the advisor and advisees had built a connection and a relationship with each other. The connections and relationships were not limited to advisor to advisee but also included advisee to advisee (for example, Cindy indicating she had made friends with students in her advisory whom she wouldn’t normally have) and advisee to school (Jan sharing she learned about activities available in the school).

Additionally, the advisors have also made connections with each other as demonstrated by the sharing of activities as well as the occasional merged advisories for a group activity.

What is not affirmed by this study is whether or not teachers utilize the same processes to build the meaningful connections with the students they teach in their subject area classes.

The finding aligns with the Turning Points 2000’s recommendation for middle schools to organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose and the NMSA’s recommendation for organizational structures that support meaningful relationships for learning, an adult advocate for every student, and multifaceted guidance and support services. Erb (2005) felt it was important for each student to believe his/her advisor is genuinely and unequivocally committed to his/her growth as a learner and as a person. The brain is a social brain principle generated from the brain research of Caine & Caine (1997) concluded that learning is influenced by the nature of relationships. Considering adolescent development revolves around three areas: physiological (includes brain development), psychological (focusing on self), and social (concerned about sense of belonging), healthy relationships with adults is paramount to the adolescent’s development.
So, once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

**Finding Two: Need for a clear and consistent curriculum**

As with any educational program, there needs to be a clear and consistent curriculum to ensure all of the students in the program experience the same learning opportunities and meet the same expectations. The curriculum must be clearly written with specific learning standards and suggested implementation activities. This theme brought forth three subthemes: variance, individual learning plans, and student involvement.

This study provided evidence that our program lacks a clear and consistent curriculum (As teachers stated, advisors are not focused on one curriculum, doing different things in the building, not purpose-driven). Anfara (2006) found successful implementation required a well-defined curriculum with a built-in process for review and revision. While building relationships is the central purpose of an advisory program, the activities and experiences that occur in the program must be designed to assist the advisor in fostering the connection to the students in the group. Without a clear and consistent curriculum, each advisory group has been left to its own devices to create and develop its curriculum solely based on the individual advisor who may or may not have the requisite skill set to attack such an undertaking, that is, the teachers’ fears as espoused by Esposito & Curcio (2002), Rappaport (2002), and Ayres (1994).

As reported in Chapter Four, five of six student participants felt the students should be involved in the development of the curriculum in some capacity. While the students described such involvement differently, having a voice in the generation of ideas was the commonality among the answers. The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) conducts an annual student voice survey focused on their eight conditions that make a difference. In the 2014 My
Voice National Student Report (Grades 6-12), QISA concluded, “While schools should take time to celebrate and learn from their accomplishments, they must simultaneously commit to needed improvements. By listening to, respecting, and responding to the voices of students, educators can create learning environments that will allow students to reach their fullest potential.” (p.15).

So, once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

**Finding Three: Increased opportunities for student engagement in self-reflection**

It was clear from the data that the ILPs remain a challenge area for our students and faculty. While the format and structure of the plan has undergone changes over the years, we have still not managed to create a document and process that truly has meaning for the students. As an advisor myself, I have seen how the students struggle with the process and, as a result, dislike completing the document. Integral to the Individual Learning Plans is the ability for the students to reflect upon their academic progress and assess their areas of strength and challenge. This crucial step surfaced as the stumbling block for the ILP process.

In order for students to grow as learners, it is essential for them to be able to engage in self-reflection. We have been expecting students to complete this task without providing the advisors and students a means for developing the skill set needed to become a reflective learner and person. The concept of personalization as noted in the **Breaking Ranks**’ (2006) document included assisting students to develop a sense of ownership over their learning and the ability to make choices through informed decision-making skills. The goal setting component of the ILP requires the students to examine their previous learning, identify areas for improvement, and write a goal and subsequent steps designed to address the identified improvement area.
Our ILPs require the students to reflect on the previous year’s learning, identify areas of strength and challenge, write three academic goals per year, and one personal/social goal per year. For the three academic goals, the students are required to write a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) goal and identify 3-4 steps needed to achieve that goal. At the end of that goal period, the students must write a reflection as to how and why they did or did not meet the goal they had set. Then we repeat the process for the next one. I believe the students struggle and dislike the goal-setting portion of the ILP because they are not self-reflective. Although we have added a bank of goals and steps, the students are not necessarily selecting a goal based on self-reflection and need but rather just picking one to get the task done. As Bobby stated, “They seem extremely tedious. I don’t know if we really get that much out of it. Seems almost a little bit like busy work.”

On a side note, I found it ironic that, while the student participants were program-reflective as evidenced by their comfort level in sharing their thoughts and feelings with me in response to my questions, our students in general often struggle being reflective about their own learning, strengths, and challenges. While this may align with typical brain development, we need to provide an opportunity for the students to develop the ability to be self-reflective.

So, once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

Implications

While this qualitative study was conducted in only one middle school and involved a small sample of students and teachers, its results are not only pertinent to the study school but to other middle schools tackling the important Turning Points 2000 and This We Believe (2003) recommendations for organizational structures that support meaningful relationships for learning
and an adult advocate for every student. Reared from the 2002 NCLB Act, the State of Rhode Island mandated advisory programs for middle schools and high schools along with the ILP.

As Johnston (1997) stated, the program is worth having but only if it is done well. This study demonstrated how one school’s program is faring based upon information gathered from both the service provider, the advisor, and the clients, the students. Even though elements of the program such as student-centered relationships and a sense of belonging seem to be realized, the curriculum has not. Anfara (2006, p. 56) learned that schools have a difficult time sustaining advisory programs and stressed how “a well-defined advisory curriculum, a feedback/maintenance loop for program review and revision” must be addressed.

The results of this study validate how the lack of such elements impacts the program and the very students it is designed to support. The challenge for middle schools is not in developing and starting advisory programs but rather in maintaining a viable program that continues to evolve over time. Middle schools must commit to a systematic cycle of review and revision of their advisory curricula. That being said, the review and revision must involve advisors and advisees as both have pertinent and invaluable information to share. As Peter so eloquently stated, “I think our advisory is a really good program and it is good for the students. I like the last part where I said “good for the students” – it just popped into my head.”

So, once again, the question still remains: how do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer.

Conclusion

The three key findings from this study were the importance of building meaningful connections, the need for a clear and consistent curriculum, and increased opportunities for student engagement in self-reflection. Throughout this report, the researcher has asked the same
question: How do schools ensure the full growth of all of its students? Knowing the child seems to be the answer. Advisory programs provide a vehicle for the child to be known by at least one adult. However, it must go beyond knowing the child as the child must know himself or herself.

This idea of self-discovery and self-reflection is paramount for the full growth of a child. If schools utilize advisory as an opportunity to develop the skill set required to be self-reflective and discover how one is “wired”, then the program must have clearly delineated processes that will lead to such results. The students in this study certainly described how they have connected with their advisor and the other students in their group, how the program has impacted them as a student, and how the activities conducted within the advisory are varied and inconsistent from group to group.

Recommendations from this study include:

- Districts must continue to support advisory program development and modifications by providing professional development time for teachers and administrators.
- A commitment to the program from school administrators is paramount to a successful program.
- Schools need to support the development of an advisor’s repertoire of needed skills to deliver the established curriculum. This includes providing professional development in the areas of adolescent development, conflict resolution, general nuances of school counseling, and group dynamics.
- Schools need to have a plan to provide new advisors with appropriate training and support.
- Schools need to have an individual to oversee the program to ensure fidelity to the developed curriculum, periodically conduct evaluations (particularly, observations,
surveys and interviews) to ascertain relevant data aligned to the mission of the program and its curriculum, recommend periodic curriculum reviews and revisions, and provide pertinent advisor and advisee training.

- Schools need to provide parents with pertinent information about the advisory program to ensure they understand the rationale and purpose of the program.

- Students need to have a voice in the process. While writing the specific curriculum is not a task students need to participate, it is important to learn how the students feel about the program, what they like and dislike, and seek ideas for improvement.

- Advisory activities and tasks must be tied to the curriculum and students must be developmentally ready for them. Where applicable, the students can assist in the development of a particular activity or task.

- Further research should be considered for the following areas:
  
  a. The development of evaluation tools for advisory that provide schools with an efficient way to assess the program’s effectiveness and its impact on the school culture and the students.

  b. An analysis of the quality and effectiveness of “canned” curricula for advisory programs would assist schools in the development of their own curriculum.

  c. The impact advisory has on other middle school elements or programs including whether the student-centered relationships transfer to the general classroom setting.

  d. A comprehensive study of the status of advisory programs in other states throughout the country.
References


Appendix A: Sampling of Student Survey Data from ‘05-‘06

Survey Question #2: I feel like I belong to my Anchor Time group.

October 2005

March 2006

Average For All Grades Over Both Surveys

Strongly Agree/Agree Disagree
Survey Question #3: I feel that my advisor is getting to know me.

October 2005

March 2006

Average For All Grades Over Both Surveys
Survey Question #11: How would you describe Anchor Time to next year’s sixth graders and their parents? This was an open response question.

- That if you need help you can always trust your advisory teacher to help. No matter what the problem, you can trust him/her.
- You will love it.
- A time where you get organized, and fix problems, or answer questions.
- I would describe Anchor Time as fun and exciting. To the parents I would say you don’t have to worry about your child being lonely.
- The Anchor Time class is a fun class where you learn how to be a better you.
- It’s a good way for your kids to feel welcome.
- It’s awesome.
- An understanding of yourself and others
- It is an activity, and learning fun class we go to and it helps us know about our classmates, school, and the world around us.
- Anchor Time is a place for kids to be able to count on a teacher and talk with other kids.
- Anchor Time is a time to relieve the stress of other classes, have an adult learn about you, spend time with friends, and most of the time have fun.
- Anchor Time is an opportunity to get to know other students and a teacher better and also it helps you to feel more comfortable.
- Anchor Time can be fun but you must participate to have a good time.
- I would say that they shouldn’t be worried about it and it is fun!
- It’s fun and educational at the same time, who can beat that?
- Anchor Time is a great opportunity to relax and learn about fellow students and the teacher. It’s a time where you build friendships and it gives you a sense of belonging. Anchor Time is my favorite class. I love it more than lunch.
- In a PowerPoint presentation
- It is a way to feel important in school.
- A good chance to just unwind
- Anchor Time is a way to find the right path, and stay on it. Your advisor and group members are always there for you.
- It helps your kids make the right decisions.
• To look forward to it and don’t be afraid to speak out. It’s a good learning experience.

• A great program that should be in every school; it’s a time where we have fun and get to know one another.

• It helps make you feel like you belong. It’s a good experience.

• Anchor Time is a fun activity where kids can be themselves and talk about their problems or what’s on their minds

• It’s a good experience for everybody.
Appendix B: Parent/Guardian Recruitment Letter

March 22, 2016

Dear Parent/Guardian of __________________________,

I am a student in a doctoral program at Northeastern University. I have completed all of my coursework and have only my research project to complete. As part of a review of our advisory program at Gallagher Middle School, I am conducting a research study. The goal of the study is to determine how middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of advisory are impacted when they are included in the review process.

I am asking your permission for your child to participate in this research study. Your child was selected as he/she is a seventh/eighth grader and has participated in advisory since sixth grade. The research will consist of an interview. The interview will take place at an agreed upon time before or after school. It will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

The questions will be asked by me personally. The responses will be kept confidential in a locked drawer. This will not affect your child’s performance in school. The interview will be recorded using a digital recording device. This will ensure that I do not miss anything your child shares with me.

For participants under the age of 18, I am required to have another adult with me during the interview. Mrs. Catherine Swanton, school counselor, will sit in the room during the interview. She will not be participating in the interview.

Although your child will not benefit directly from participating in this study this year, the information learned may assist Ms. Beauvais in leading the revision of Gallagher’s advisory curriculum. Your child will not be paid for participating.

Please review the enclosed consent form. If you give consent for child to participate in this study, please return the signed consent form to me at your earliest convenience. If I do not receive the signed consent form from you, I will assume that you do not volunteer your child to participate. Even if you consent, your child will still have the opportunity to decide whether or not he/she will volunteer. You and your child can say no without worry of any repercussions. I will not contact you again regarding this study.

If you have questions or comments about this project you may contact Laurie Beauvais, beauvais.l@husky.neu.edu or at 401-949-2056.

Sincerely,

Laurie E. Beauvais
Appendix C: Parent/Guardian Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, Graduate Education Department
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Lynda Beltz, Principal Investigator (Advisor to Ms. Beauvais)
Laurie E. Beauvais, Student Researcher
Title of Project: The Perceptions and Understandings of Advisory by Middle School Students Included in the Curriculum Revision Process

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting your child to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but Ms. Beauvais will explain it to you first. You may ask her any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell her if you want your child to participate or not. Your child does not have to participate if you do not want him/her to do so. If you decide to participate, Ms. Beauvais will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why is my child being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking your child to participate in this research study since he/she is a seventh or eighth grader at Gallagher Middle School and has participated in the advisory program since grade six.

Why is this research study being done?
As part of a review of our advisory program at Gallagher Middle School, Ms. Beauvais is conducting a research study to determine how middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of advisory are impacted when the students are included in the review process.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide your child can take part in this study, we will ask your child to participate in an interview. Your child will be asked questions about his/her experiences in the advisory program as well as his/her thoughts/opinions about the program.

Where will this take place and how much of my child’s time will it take?
The interview will take place at Gallagher Middle School at a mutually agreed upon time before or after school and will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded utilizing a digital recording device to ensure Ms. Beauvais does not miss anything your child shares with her.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to my child?
Given that Ms. Beauvais is the principal of your child’s school, your child may be anxious participating in the interview. He/she may be uncomfortable sharing his or her feelings about the advisory program.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
Although your child will not benefit directly from participating in this study this year, the information learned may assist Ms. Beauvais in leading the revision of Gallagher’s advisory curriculum.
**Who will see the information about me?**

Your child’s part in this study will be confidential. The only time Ms. Beauvais will have to break confidentiality is if your child shares information that could harm himself/herself or someone else. In that case, Ms. Beauvais will follow safety procedures in accordance with policies of the Smithfield Public Schools which include DCYF contact in the case of suspected child abuse.

Only the researcher on this study will see the information about your child. No reports or publications will use information that can identify your child in any way as being part of this project. A made up first name will be used in the research document. Once the research project is complete and approved, the recorded interviews will be erased and research notes will be shredded.

In rare instances, authorized people may ask to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only allow people who are allowed such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**If I do not want my child to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

If you do not want your child to participate in this study, your child will not participate. Your child will also be asked if he or she would like to participate. He or she can say no without any worry of repercussions.

**What will happen if my child suffers any harm from this research?**

If your child feels anxious or uncomfortable after the interview, he or she can speak with you or school support personnel (school counselor/social worker/psychologist) to lessen his or her feelings.

**Can my child stop his/her participation in this study?**

Your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. Your child does not have to participate if he/she does not want to participate. He/she can refuse to answer any question. Even if your child begins the study, he/she may quit at any time. If you do not want your child to participate or if your child decides to quit, he/she will be allowed to do so without any consequence.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions or comments about this study, please feel free to contact the researcher, Laurie E. Beauvais, beauvais.l@husky.neu.edu, 401.949.2056. You can also contact Dr. Lynda Beltz, l.beltz@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my child’s rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your child’s rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

Your child will not be paid for participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There are no costs to participate.

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<th>Is there anything else I need to know?</th>
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<tr>
<td>In accordance with the Institutional Review Board’s guidelines for study participants under the age of 18, another Gallagher Middle School staff member will be present during the interview. This individual will not be an active participant in the interview.</td>
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<th>I agree to have my child take part in this research.</th>
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<td>Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Printed name of person above</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</td>
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Appendix D: Student Assent Paragraph

Student Assent Paragraph

This will be read verbatim and will be recorded on the audiotape as part of the interview recording.

Good Morning/Afternoon.

I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my research project. The topic for my project is middle school advisory programs. I am seeking information about students’ experiences in advisory. With the information I collect, I hope it will help me make changes to our advisory program that will be beneficial for students.

Anything that is discussed in this interview will not be discussed or shared outside of this room. I will be asking you questions that I have already prepared so I will be reading from a paper. I am asking that you share your opinions and past experiences as they relate to the questions. There are no “right answers” just honest ones.

I will be recording this interview so I can be sure I do not miss any information you share. I will also be writing some notes down as you talk. My role today is as a student, like you. The research paper that I am writing will help me finish my program at Northeastern University. I want to know what your thoughts and opinions are, what your experiences have been, and how we can make the advisory program better. Your perspective is important since you have participated in the program for two or three years.

Again, there aren’t any right answers, just honest ones. Nothing that you say will be used to evaluate you, and your honest opinions, positive and negative, are what I hope to learn. If you prefer to not answer a question, you may do so. If you wish to stop the interview at any time, you may do so.

I also want to remind you that I will not share your name with anyone. I will not be using your real name in my research paper. The only time I have to tell someone is if I learn about something that could hurt you or someone else.

Since you are under 18, I am required to have another adult sit with us. Mrs. Swanton has volunteered to do that for me. She is not going to participate in this interview. She will not be taking any notes and will not share any information.

Do you understand what I’ve explained to you? Do you have any questions? Would you like to participate in the interview?
Appendix E: Teacher Recruitment Letter

March 22, 2016

Dear __________________________,

As you may or may not be aware, I am a student in a doctoral program at Northeastern University. I have completed all of my coursework and have only my doctoral research project to complete. I am asking you to consider participating in my research study. As part of our efforts to revise the curriculum for our advisory program at Gallagher Middle School, I am conducting a research study to determine how middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of an advisory program are impacted when the students are included in the curriculum revision process.

I am asking you to participate in this research study since you have volunteered to serve on our advisory curriculum committee. In addition, you have been a teacher and advisor at Gallagher for several years. Your participation would consist of participating in an interview. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon time. The interview will take place outside of normal working hours and at any location you choose off the school site. The interview will last for approximately 45-60 minutes.

The questions will be asked by me personally, and the responses will be kept confidential in a locked drawer, and in no way will be associated with your job performance. The interview will be recorded utilizing a digital recording device to ensure I do not miss anything you share with me.

Although you may not benefit directly from participating in this study this year, the results may assist the researcher in leading the revision of Gallagher’s advisory curriculum which will benefit all students at the school. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this research project.

If you agree to volunteer to participate in this study, please contact me to schedule your interview time and designate a location. If I do not hear from you within the week, I will assume that you are choosing not to volunteer to participate. I will not contact you again regarding this study.

If you have questions or comments about this project you may contact me at beauvais.l@husky.neu.edu or at 401-949-2056.

Sincerely,

Laurie E. Beauvais
Appendix F: Teacher Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, Graduate Education Department
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Lynda Beltz, Principal Investigator (Advisor to Ms. Beauvais)
Laurie E. Beauvais, Student Researcher
Title of Project: The Perceptions and Understandings of Advisory by Middle School Students Included in the Curriculum Revision Process

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but Ms. Beauvais will explain it to you first. You may ask her any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell her if you want to participate or not. If you decide to participate, Ms. Beauvais will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to participate in this research study since you are an advisor to a group of students at Gallagher Middle School and you have volunteered to serve on the faculty Advisory Curriculum Committee for this school year.

Why is this research study being done?

As part of our efforts to revise the curriculum for our advisory program at Gallagher Middle School, Ms. Beauvais is conducting a research study to determine how middle school students’ perceptions and understandings of an advisory program are impacted when the students are included in the curriculum revision process.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview. You will be asked questions about your experiences in the advisory program as well as your thoughts/opinions about the program.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The interview will take place at any location off school site you choose at a mutually agreed upon time outside of regular work hours and will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded utilizing a digital recording device to ensure Ms. Beauvais does not miss anything you share with her.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There will be no foreseeable risk or discomfort to you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

The information learned may assist Ms. Beauvais in leading the revision of Gallagher’s advisory curriculum which will benefit all students at the school and, in essence, all advisors as well.

Who will see the information about me?

Your participation in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher on this study will see the information you provide. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being part of this project. A fictitious first name will be used in the research document.
research project is complete and approved, the recorded interviews will be erased and research notes will be shredded.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

- **If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
  If you do not want to participate in this study, you will not participate.

- **What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
  There is no risk or discomfort associated with your participation in this project.

- **Can I stop my participation in this study?**
  Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you decide to quit, you will be allowed to do so without any consequence.

- **Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
  If you have any questions or comments about this study, please feel free to contact the researcher, Laurie E. Beauvais, beauvais.l@husky.neu.edu, 401.949.2056. You can also contact Dr. Lynda Beltz, l.beltz@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

- **Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
  If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

- **Will I be paid for my participation?**
  You will not receive any compensation for participating in this research project.

- **Will it cost me anything to participate?**
  There are no costs to participate.

- **Is there anything else I need to know?**
  This study is being conducted in accordance with Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board requirements.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

<table>
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Appendix G: Guide for Student and Faculty Interview Questions

I. Introduction: To ensure consistency, this will be read verbatim.

Hello. I first want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview process and my research project. As you already know, I am interested in learning about students’ experiences in our advisory program and hope the information I gather will help me guide our school through a revision of our advisory program. Please be assured that anything discussed during this interview will not be shared outside of this room. I will be recording this interview so I can be sure I do not miss anything you share with me. No one else will be listening to the audio recording.

Today, I am going to ask you some questions about our advisory program. I only want you to give me your honest opinions and thoughts; I am not looking for particular answers. What you share with me will not be used to evaluate or judge you. As you are talking, I may write some notes to help me focus on what you are sharing.

During this interview, I am not in my role as principal but rather as a college student. My research project is the last step of my program of study. I want to listen to both the positive and negative things you have to say about our advisory program. It is important that you are completely honest as your perspective is important to me. Please remember I will not share your name with anyone nor use your real name in my report.

Do you have any questions about what I just read? Do you understand and agree to what I have explained?
II. **Student Interview Questions**

1. Give me three words/phrases that come to mind when you think about advisory.

2. Do you feel differently about going to school on advisory days?

3. How would you describe advisory to a new student?

4. Tell me about your experiences in advisory.
   a. Describe what takes place during a typical advisory session.
   b. Describe your favorite advisory activity/task. Why is it your favorite?
   c. Describe your least favorite advisory activity/task. Why is it your least favorite?
   d. Imagine you are the advisor. Describe what would take place during your typical advisory session.

5. **For eighth graders only:** How has advisory changed from when it was 2 times per week to the current 1 time per week? How many times do you prefer it meets? Why?

6. Describe one way advisory has changed you as a student.

7. Why do you think we have advisory?

8. Show the student the mission statement of our school’s advisory program and have the student read it to him/herself. What does this statement mean to you?

9. Tell me what you know, if anything, about the word *curriculum*.
   a. Here’s a definition of curriculum (this will be read and provided to the student in writing): Curriculum refers to the lessons and academic content taught in a school or in a specific course or program. An individual teacher’s curriculum, for example, would be the specific learning standards, lessons, assignments, and materials used to organize and teach a particular course. (The Glossary of Education Reform). Tell me what the definition means to you.
b. Thinking about advisory, what do you believe is its curriculum?

c. Who should create the curriculum for advisory?
   i. What about students?
   ii. How could we involve students in the process?

d. If you could create the curriculum for advisory, what would you include?

10. Is there anything else about advisory that you would like to share with me?

III. Faculty Interview Questions

1. Give me three words/phrases that come to mind when you think about advisory.

2. Do you feel differently about going to work on days that you meet with your advisees?

3. How would you describe advisory to a new teacher?

4. Tell me about your experiences in advisory.
   a. Describe what takes place during a typical advisory session.
   b. Describe your favorite advisory activity/task. Why is it your favorite?
   c. Describe your least favorite advisory activity/task. Why is it your least favorite?

5. How has advisory changed from when it was 2 times per week to the current 1 time per week? How many times do you prefer it meets? Why?

6. Describe one way advisory has changed you as a teacher.

7. Why do you think we have advisory?

8. If you could change the program in any way, what would you do differently and why?

9. Now let’s focus on the curriculum for advisory. Share what you are thinking about this topic right now.
   a. What do you believe is its curriculum?
   b. Who should create the curriculum for advisory?
i. What about students?

ii. How could we involve students in the process?

c. If you could create the curriculum for advisory, what would you include?

10. Is there anything else about advisory that you would like to share with me?
Appendix H: School’s Advisory Mission Statement

The mission of the Vincent J. Gallagher Middle School Advisory Program is to create meaningful connections with our students in a supportive environment that promotes a sense of belonging, develops personal decision-making skills, fosters social and emotional growth, and connects us to our larger community.
Vincent J. Gallagher Middle School
Individual Learning Plan
Academic Goal Setting and Progress Review

Name: ____________________________ School Year: ____________ Grade: ____________
Advisor: ____________________________ School Counselor: ____________________________

Student Reflection: Reminder you should be specific include specific skills or talents

Strengths (be specific):

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Challenges (be specific):

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Reflect on your previous school year by considering the following:

What were some of the things that you were successful/proud of last year?
What were some of the things you had difficulty with last year?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What would you do differently this year to be more successful?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Parent Reflection: Reflect on your child's previous year:

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Parent concerns/wants for your child this school year:

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Parent Reminder: Please review your child's goal (on the reverse side of this sheet) as they set sail this school year.
Guidelines for writing a “SMART” goal:

S – Specific and clearly stated
M – Measurable and based on data
A – Academic
R – Realistic/Attainable
T – Time bound

* Your goal should be written using a complete sentence that is grammatically correct
* This is a formal document, use pen
* Be legible; use your best penmanship (cursive optional)

Setting Sail

Academic Goal 1: ____________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

Steps to achieve goal: 1. ____________________ 2. ____________________

3. ____________________ 4. ____________________

Parent Comment & Signature: ____________________________________________

Teacher Comment & Signature: ___________________________________________
### Staying the Course

**Reflection Goal 1:**

---

**Academic Goal 2:**

---

**Steps to achieve goal:**
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

**Teacher Comment & Signature:**

---

### Last Leg

**Reflection Goal 2:**

---

**Academic Goal 3:**

---

**Steps to achieve goal:**
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

**Teacher Comment & Signature:**

---
VINCENT J. GAUGNER MIDDLE SCHOOL
Individual Learning Plan
Personal and Social Information

Name: ________________________________

Advisor: ______________________________

I live with: ____________________________

Siblings: _____________________________ Age ______________

Age ______________

Age ______________

Age ______________

I participate in the following activities or sports: (grade 6)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

I participate in the following activities or sports: (grade 7)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

I participate in the following activities or sports: (grade 8)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Class of: __________ Team: Grade 6 Sapphire Turquoise

Grade 7 Jade Onyx

Grade 8 Emerald Garnet

Elementary School: LaPerche McCabe

Old County

Winsor

Other ____________________________

List activities you would like to try: (grade 6)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

List activities you would like to try: (grade 7)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

List activities you would like to try: (grade 8)

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
What do you want to be when you grow up?

Grade 6:  
Grade 7:  
Grade 8:  

Grade 6:  
Favorite subject:  
Favorite person:  
Favorite activity/sport:  
Favorite TV show:  
Favorite music group:  

Grade 7:  
Favorite subject:  
Favorite person:  
Favorite activity/sport:  
Favorite TV show:  
Favorite music group:  

Grade 8:  
Favorite subject:  
Favorite person:  
Favorite activity/sport:  
Favorite TV show:  
Favorite music group:  

Which high schools are you interested in attending?

Grade 6:  
Grade 7:  
Grade 8:  

Grade 6: Write one personal/social goal for this school year.  
Example: Make new friends, be more assertive, get involved in ....  

Grade 7: Write one personal/social goal for this school year.  
Example: Make new friends, be more assertive, get involved in ....  

Grade 8: Write one personal/social goal for this school year.  
Example: Make new friends, be more assertive, get involved in ....  

Perceptions and Understandings of Advisory by Middle School Students