Academic Achievement Across the Middle School Transition:

The Preadolescent Boy’s Perspective

Doctoral Thesis

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Presented to Northeastern University

In partial fulfillment of the degree of

Doctor of Education

January 25, 2019

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Abstract

Although it is considered a normative transition, the move from elementary to middle school can have a serious effect on a student’s academic and social future. This transition moves students to a completely new learning environment while they are maturing physically and psychologically at a rate greater than during all other developmental periods, except infancy. These changes in both personal development and academic environment makes this transition a period of substantial academic risk. Because a poor transition can set in motion a series of events that can negatively affect future academic and social success, supportive transition-year programs are vital. Guided by Eccles and Midgely’s theory of developmental-stage—environmental-fit and using Seidman’s three-interview protocol for in-depth phenomenological interviewing, this qualitative study described how academically successful boys experience the transition to middle school. The goal was to inform the creation of successful transition programs for boys. Thematic reduction of interview transcripts from 15 boys who had maintained educational success at suburban middle schools during their transition year resulted in 14 themes that answered the study’s central question and two subquestions. Six themes described the transition experience: initial fearfulness, many unfounded fears, a quick adjustment, the importance of character, reasonable expectations from parents, and boys are treated differently, but do not have different academic expectations. Participants perceived four supports for academic achievement: friendships, the availability of help at school and at home, the teaching ability of their teachers, and holding high expectations of themselves. Four themes emerged to describe hindrances to achievement: classroom pacing, less attention from teachers, cooperative grouping, and distractions and disruptions.

Keywords: middle school, transition, boys, academic achievement, academic supports, transition programs.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Annie V. Cumbie. It was in your living room library that my love of learning began. I cherish the memories of combing through those bookshelves, jumping from one topic to another. The hours I spent exploring the world through those pages sparked not only a love of learning, but a passion for sharing knowledge with others. As a life-long learner and educator, I can only hope that I influence futures generations in the same way that you have inspired me. I love you.
Acknowledgements

This process was a team effort. I know many of my “teammates” did not realize how much I relied on them or how important their support has been. To you all, a few words here could not begin to fulfill the debt of gratitude I have to each of you, but please accept my sincere appreciation as a start.

First, I’d like to thank my fifteen participants and my committee for their invaluable input. To this study’s participants, thank you for your time, your willingness to share your story, and most importantly your candor. Your voices spoke volumes and taught me much. To my committee, Dr. Monica Savoy, thank you for your guidance; I so valued your direction throughout this process. Dr. Kristal Clemons, thank you for your enthusiastic feedback. Dr. Michael G. Thompson, our brunch conversation about the lives of boys in school was the catalyst for this study. Thank you for your inspiration and encouragement to pursue this work.

Next, I’d like to acknowledge my colleagues. Dr. Robert Voors and Eric Osborn, without your support this research could not have been done. You have permitted me to take on the role of scholar-practitioner to inform my practice in the most beneficial way; for that I am truly grateful. To the world’s best teammates: Betsy, Carrie, Jenny, Katie, and Mary. I couldn’t think of another group of educators I would be prouder to work beside. Thanks for making the south hallway my home away from home.

And finally, a special thanks to my family. The time I have spent “writing” meant sacrificing time with you. I love you for understanding. Meg and Cub, thank you for encouraging me through this experience. I love you both, bunches. And lastly, My Michael, your confidence in me has meant everything. You often had more faith in me than I had in myself and that belief never wavered, you cannot understand how much that has meant. I love you, and always will.
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Research Questions

Participants

Participant Descriptions

Thomas
William
Jared
Zach
Kevin
Aidan
Isaac
Gabriel
Reo
Douglas
Kyle
Mike
Collin
Vihaan
Tyler

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People make the difference
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Each year a new cohort of students makes the transition from the elementary classroom to the hallways of middle school. This normative transition to secondary education, which nearly 88% of all U.S. students make (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010, can be a major stumbling block in a student’s academic career. Transitioning from elementary school to middle school occurs while preadolescents are concurrently dealing with other significant changes in their lives. It is during this period that children “undergo major changes in every aspect of their being” (AMLE, 2010, p. 669). At the same time as students are maturing, both physically and psychologically, at a greater rate than during all other developmental periods except infancy, this transition moves students into a completely new learning environment. These changes to both their personal development and in their school environment make preadolescence a period of significant academic risk. While much research has been done on the transition (see Eccles, 2004 for a review), more research is needed into students' perceptions of their learning environment (Tyler, Stevens-Morgan, & Brown-Wright, 2016). Studies that gain an understanding of the individual student’s perspective of the transition are few, and those looking to gain the specific perspectives of boys are even fewer.

Middle School Transition and Boys

The transition to secondary school has the potential to significantly disrupt the academic and social trajectories of preadolescent boys (Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015; Coelho, Marchante, & Jimerson, 2017). Research has identified significant decreases in academic performance and achievement, as well as psychosocial development and well-being, among boys during the transition year to middle school (Akos et al., 2015; E. Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Boys experience a significant drop in their intrinsic motivation to learn,
academic self-efficacy, and grade point averages during this transition (L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993; Simmons, 1987).

Psychosocially, it is during this period that boys begin to seek out peers rather than adults -- particularly their parents -- for emotional and social support (Coelho et al.; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991) and to develop their own social identity (Adams, 2008). Research also finds that there is an increase in drug and alcohol use, promiscuity, depression, delinquency, and an increase of adherence to traditional masculinity roles during the transition year (Akos et al., 2015; Rogers, Delay & Martin, 2017; Simmons, 1987).

**The Middle School Context**

The elementary and middle school environments are often vastly different. Students typically move from the intimate learning environment of elementary school to the much more formal environment of middle school. Students who are accustomed to a small group setting, with one teacher, transition to having a group of teachers in different classroom locations. Differences between the elementary and middle school context not only include multiple teachers and classrooms, but often also include a change in curriculum, teaching practices, school structure, classroom groupings, and assessment systems.

**Transition Programs**

The literature demonstrates that this period of life needs to be met by an educational context the meets the unique developmental needs of preadolescents if they are to continue or improve their academic trajectory (AMLE, 2010). Since the late 1980s, in response to this research and to meet these needs, middle schools and districts have developed and implemented transition programs. These programs can take many different forms; some take place before the transition year, while others take place during the year. Programs prior to the transition year
include visiting the middle school campus, meeting the middle school principal, or having a middle school counselor or administrator come to the elementary school to answer questions about middle school. Programs during the transition year can include formal scheduling structures. For example, some feature a school-within-a-school, in which transition year students do not fully participate in the wider school context. Others involve social programs that pair transitioning students with an older buddy to help with the transition. Programs can be organized and systematic, or they may be a less formal series of events or programs that schools make available to their transitioning students (Arowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Greene & Ollendick, 1993).

Because attitudes and motivation toward scholastic achievement in middle school are a predictor of future academic success, it is imperative to develop transition-year programs that keep students engaged and thriving academically (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). Understanding the elements that support or challenge boys’ academic success is vital to creating transition-year programs that assist them academically through the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004a; Arowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Odegaard & Heath, 1992).

**Context and Background**

Site Middle School is located in the suburb of a large city in the western United States. This school of nearly 900 sixth through eighth graders has received statewide recognition 3 times in the past 20 years. Site is a federally designated school-wide Title I campus. It receives financial assistance because nearly half of the students enrolled are children from low-income families. All Site faculty are fully credentialed, and they are classified as highly qualified under the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) statute. All Site faculty members teach within their subject matter of competency. According to state records, during the 2016-2017 school year, 62.05% of Site’s students met or exceeded state standards in English language arts, while
48.88% did so in mathematics. Demographically, Site serves a population that is 53% Latino, 33% White, 6% Asian, 2% Filipino, and 2% African American. The remaining 3% of students identify as two or more races.

To serve their sixth-grade students during the transition year, Site developed a school-within-a-school. This program, put into place in 1992, was modeled after a nearby middle school that had based its own program on the recommendations of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development’s 1989 publication *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*. The sixth-grade class is split into two villages. Each village has a team of core-subject teachers who share a common planning period and workspace; village classrooms back up to a common hallway that is an adult workspace not available to students. This team of teachers works together to plan interdisciplinary curriculum, to avoid overwhelming students as they schedule large assignments and tests, and to give students a small base they can feel part of. Each student has a homeroom teacher who acts as the home-school liaison and communicates weekly with parents about each student’s behavior and academics.

**Research Problem**

This study sought to understand the meaning of experiencing academic success through the middle school transition year, as perceived by preadolescent boys. Their perceptions of the transition year and the challenges and supports of their academic achievement as they move from the elementary to the middle school classroom offer insight into characteristics of the transition. Because this is a period of significant academic stress, understanding how boys successfully navigate the transition, given that the majority of their peers do not, is something that can inform academic, social, and physical programs on middle school campuses. The problematic school behaviors that peak in high school are often the result of difficult adjustment while transitioning
to secondary school (Greene & Ollendick, 1993). The middle school transition plays a significant role in future academic performance (Bellmore, Villarreal, & Ho, 2011; Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; West & Schwerdt, 2012), but it is hindered by all the elements that are associated with vulnerability (Akos et al., 2015). Failure to navigate this transition successfully may impair future academic performance (Green & Ollendick, 1993).

**Justifying the Problem**

At the end of each first semester, the parent-teacher calendar begins to fill up with requests for meetings. The first semester’s grade reports have been delivered, and the arrival of this document seems to propel many parents into action for their student. In the last decade, the overwhelming majority of the sixth-grade parents who have requested meetings have had sons enrolled at Site. For example, in the two-month period after the semester’s conclusion in 2017, 22 conversations took place: only two of them were for girls. It is common to hear a parent worrying about a boy who did great in elementary school, but who seems to have fallen apart academically upon reaching middle school.

Transitioning to middle school is a normative development process that can greatly disrupt a student’s academic and social progress (Akos et al., 2015; Coelho et al., 2017; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993). Habits that are formed during this time will affect a student’s future academic and career success (Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, Sherman, & Hoogstra, 2001). During this transition year, grade point averages often show a significant decline and students experience a drop in in their intrinsic motivation to learn (Akos et al., 2015; L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Simmons, 1987). As a boy’s desire to learn for learning’s sake decreases, he is less likely to engage academically. Academic disengagement has been linked to drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, depression, and delinquency (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Achievement in
middle school predicts success in later education, and lack thereof is a positive indicator for dropping out of school (Akos et al., 2015; Coelho et al., 2017). Succeeding in school is a central life-task of adolescence, and failure can seriously limit future possibilities.

The development of supportive transition-year programs is vital because a poor transition can set in motion a series of events that can impede future academic and social success (Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011; West, Sweeting, & Young, 2012). Individual schools must implement transition programs that are tailored to their student populations if they are to meet the concerns of their student body (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). Contextual evidence supplied by understanding this experience from the male student’s perspective will help improve programs designed to meet the needs of Site’s boys as they transition from elementary to secondary school. Dahl (1995) suggested: “We need to listen to them, pay attention to what they show us about themselves and their views” (p.124). The typical school interaction does not provide for the time to have deeply meaningful conversations with students. By taking the time to truly hear their voices, adults will have more relevant understandings and acumen for working with their students (Dahl, 1995).

**Deficiencies in Evidence**

Little is known about either individual differences in preadolescent boys’ reactions to the transition to middle school or the associated contextual elements that academically impair this transition for some boys. The literature on middle school transitions omits the transition as seen through the perceptions of early adolescent male students as they begin secondary school (Baker & Narula, 2012). Research has confirmed the need for programs that are focused on assisting students through the middle school transition; however, the environmental elements that boys perceive as particularly supportive through the transition still require investigation.
Relating the Discussion to Audiences

Understanding the dynamic involved in mediating academic change is imperative to tailoring programs that will support success (Grolnick, Farkas, Sohmer, Michaels, & Valsiner, 2007). Learning the specific elements that preadolescent boys perceive as challenging or supporting their academic engagement as they move from the elementary to the middle school classroom will inform the creation of transition-year programs designed to support academic engagement and achievement as these preteens make the transition. Such programs will foster academic engagement and performance.

Gaining an understanding of student perspectives about how Site’s environment influences sixth-grade boys’ academic achievement will allow sixth-grade teachers at Site to adjust classroom elements to support more of them through the transition. Similarly, this knowledge will allow Site’s counselors to plan their guidance sessions and change environmental elements within their purview to facilitate the transition for these young men. Site’s administrative team can use what is learned to guide their decisions regarding the school-within-a-school village program, sixth-grade course scheduling, home-school communications, and the school-wide discipline system, all of which are integral parts of Site’s transition-year program.

Beyond Site’s campus, the district administration can apply this information at the other district middle school campus. Understanding boys’ perspective of the environment may help faculty and staff at the elementary schools that feed into Site prepare these boys for the transition as they complete their last year of elementary school. Beyond this district, schools with similar contexts can use this research to inform their own practices and improve the middle school transition for their own male students.
As a sixth-grade instructor at Site and in Site’s Early Start Program -- where sixth-graders from low-income families come to campus for two weeks prior to the start of school to prepare for the year ahead -- the researcher is situated to make immediate changes to practice based on her scholarship. The administration and faculty at Site have proven themselves amenable to program modifications that are in the best interests of students and that are based on research.

Significance of Research Problem

Site’s demographics have significantly changed over the past decade, with the numbers of low socioeconomic status (SES) and Hispanic students having increased every school year. This demographic change means that for Site to serve its current population, a population that many may not be familiar with, their voices need to be heard.

Site Middle School was founded in 1966 in a predominantly White, middle class suburb. For the first 40 years, the student body nearly matched the surrounding neighborhoods and Site’s staffing. According to the U.S. Census, the city is approximately 75% Caucasian (U.S. Census); however, according to the most recent state report, the school’s students are 43% Latino, 41% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 2% Filipino, and 1% African American.

On the NCLB-based school rating scale, Site’s annual yearly performance (AYP) score was 854 out of 900. Site serves nearly 900 middle schoolers, with 65 staff members, including a faculty of 44. State data show that 31 of the faculty are women, one is African American, one is Asian, and nine are Hispanic; (SDE, 2017) the remaining faculty members are White. Both the principal and vice principal are Caucasian males, and both guidance counselors are Latinas.

During and following the Great Recession of the mid-2000s, Site underwent a radical change in demographics. Due to severely declining enrollment, and in an effort to avoid closing schools and laying-off personnel, the district opened up its schools to all students in the region
through a program called District of Choice (DOC). This program allowed parents in neighboring districts to enroll their children regardless of district boundaries.

DOC does not regulate the enrollment of students by race, SES, or gender; it is designed to encourage market-based competition and alternatives for students who have been attending underperforming schools (Cobb & Glass, 2009). DOC was meant to encourage districts to vie for students by offering more competitive and innovative programs. Several cities adjacent to Site Middle School (and outside of its district borders) had low-performing school systems with high rates of dropout and problem school behavior. Parents seeking an alternate school environment for their students took advantage of the state’s program and enrolled their students outside of their home district.

Researchers often point out that school choice can exacerbate “White flight” from poorer, more racially diverse neighborhoods to more homogeneous, affluent suburbs. The demographic changes Site has experienced have a different dynamic: while some White flight has occurred, the predominant shift is the increasing number of Hispanic, African American, special education, and low SES students. The current school population no longer reflects the community that the school is in, nor does it reflect the demographics of the adults who work there. For Site to successfully serve its population, there first needs to be an understanding of how students perceive the experience.

As Anyon (1981) described, the reproduction of aspects of social class manifests itself differently in schools. Highlighting the differences in work activity he observed at schools, Anyon (1981) clearly detailed the differences in the two populations that are coming together at Site. Anyon’s description of the “affluent professional” (p. 122) school closely matches the student body that resides within the district and attends Site, as well as the faculty and staff who
work there, while students enrolling through the DOC program are often coming from schools that Anyon (1981) described as “working class” (p. 119). Since the inception of the District of Choice program in 2008, Site’s socioeconomic demographics have changed considerably. The school is now designated as a Federal Title I school, with more than 40 percent of students receiving federally subsidized free or reduced-price lunches (an indicator of poverty).

Along with changing demographics, Site has also experienced a great deal of change in its sixth-grade transition year program since its inception. While there is a framework for the program, members of the Site sixth-grade faculty and administration have interpreted it differently through the years. The foundation of the transition program remains strong, but staffing, scheduling, and budgetary issues have changed or eliminated several policies and procedures that were designed to aid both students and parents through this transition.

Scheduling challenges have broken down the village system, causing some students to be a member of multiple villages. This means they no longer have a small home base to identify with (AMLE, 2010) nor the support of their village homeroom teacher to help with other courses, as teachers in different villages are not teamed and do not receive planning time to work together for these hybrid students, as they have become to be termed. Each village’s faculty works in concert for its students. Over time, the villages have taken on different procedures, which make their practices different. These differences add to the confusion for students. Many practices have been done away with in response to faculty preferences rather than in response to research or the needs of the students or their parents.

**Interest in Middle School Transition Difficulties**

Having spent the last 14 years teaching social science to sixth-graders who transition to middle school at the end of their fifth-grade year, I have witnessed the classroom struggles that
many preadolescent boys experience during this transition first-hand. In my experience, students who disengage academically at the transition from elementary school often reset their academic trajectory to one of scholastic underperformance. They eventually become noted for behavior problems throughout their middle school tenures. Often, evidence of an intrinsic motivation for learning is absent from these students’ classroom repertoire, and structured interventions fail to amend this trajectory.

In addition to my duties in the social science classroom, I also codeveloped and teach in our Title I Summer Program and sixth-grade early start program. It was my work with the students enrolled in these programs that first focused my interests on the pedagogy of normative transitions and the programs designed to facilitate them.

Valsiner (1998) posited that school transitions are a time of coconstruction; this researcher acknowledges an understanding that knowledge is coconstructed and socially created. Personal observations and interactions with students who have been given the opportunity of added supports or challenge-based interventions through the transition period underscore my belief that understanding the challenges preadolescent male students encounter upon their entrance to middle school will lead to the creation of school transition systems that meet the individual needs of boys as they start this phase of their educations.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research was to understand the environmental elements that moderate academic engagement among preadolescent boys during the year in which they transition to middle school. To gain this understanding, this study captured the experience of boys who were academically successful before and during their transition. This study documented the environmental elements of the middle school context that moderate academic achievement.
Research that provides insight into the challenges young men experience and overcome during this period is vital for designing and implementing transition-year programs that effectively support preadolescent male students academically during this oft-difficult period.

**Research Question**

This research inquired into the perspectives of male students to discover the elements in Site’s environment that enabled them to continue their academic success through the transition year, a time when many of their peers were experiencing significant declines in achievement.

**Central Question**

How do academically successful preadolescent boys understand and experience the transition to middle school?

**Subquestions**

What environmental elements do boys perceive as supporting their academic achievement during their transition to middle school?

What environmental elements do boys perceive as impeding their academic achievement during their transition to middle school?

**Theoretical Framework**

**Developmental-Stage–Environment-Fit Theory**

Early adolescence is a unique time in a student’s growth, due to the sheer number of changes that occur across the familial, academic, social, and physiological contexts of their lives (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). The relationship between early adolescents’ developmental needs and their social contexts is in a state of constant transformation. In 1989, Eccles and Midgley (1989) proposed the developmental-stage–environment-fit theory (SEF), “which simultaneously views schools as a context where human development takes place and [emphasis added] the changing...
physical and psychosocial development needs of students as they move through these institutions,” (p. 125,). They stated that “negative developmental changes result from the traditional junior high schools [which] do not provide developmentally appropriate educational environments for young adolescents.” (Eccles, 2004, p. 140). Often the environments students find when they enter middle school directly conflict with their developmental characteristics, which include increasing independence, heightened self-consciousness, developing cognitive abilities, and evolving relationships with peers (Eccles, Lord, & Roeser, 1996).

The following subsections explain the two principal components of the theory: stage-environment mismatch and the changing scholastic context at the time of entrance to middle school. A review of the history and background of the theory, its tenets, and its applicability to this research problem complete the chapter.

Components of SEF.

Stage-environment mismatch. According to the stage-environment perspective, the risk of negative outcomes increases when a preadolescent’s development and context are in mismatch (Eccles, 2004). One common mismatch in preadolescence is the disruption to the parent-adolescent relationship. Changes such as a decrease in emotional closeness and time spent together and an increase in parent-child conflict are common throughout early adolescence (R. Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). According to Eccles et al. (1993), this suggests that there may be a mismatch between the adolescent and the family environment. Building on that commonly understood mismatch between context and development, Eccles and Midgley (1989) described another interruption that found as students move from elementary to middle school. They found
that as organizational, social, and academic processes change during this transition, a preadolescent’s scholastic motivation, engagement, and achievement decreases (Eccles, 2004).

**Change in educational context.** Eccles and Wigfield (1993) posited that it may be the change in the school context that leads to the motivational declines and academic problems seen during the transition to middle school. Research has suggested that the lack of fit between the needs of adolescents and the middle school environment could explain declines in intrinsic motivation, academic self-concept, and interest in school. Eccles and Midgley presented some developmental mismatches that are common in middle school contexts. They argued that middle schools reduce opportunities for student decision-making as students’ desires for independence are increasing. In addition, middle schools emphasize competition and social comparison as adolescents are entering a time of heightened self-consciousness. Many middle schools have a structure that disrupts peer relationships at a time when preadolescents are chiefly worried about social connections (Eccles & Wigfield, 1993). Concurrently, while students’ higher-level thinking skills are developing, middle schools emphasize lower-level cognitive strategies (Eccles & Wigfield, 1993).

SEF theory argues that because students have changing needs and goals as they mature, schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that motivates students’ interest and engagement as they mature. The stage-environment fit perspective posits that when environments change to meet the needs of early adolescents, students will experience positive outcomes (Eccles and Midgley, 1989).

**History and background.** Researchers use SEF to help explain decline in academic achievement across the transition to middle school. In 1989, Eccles and Midgley published their seminal work on SEF, drawing from ideas related to person-environment fit, which is based on
Kurt Lewin’s equation (1936). Lewin’s equation states that human behavior is a function of a person’s individual characteristics and the environment. Person-environment theory posits that if a person’s needs are congruent with opportunities presented by the situation, positive cognitive and social outcomes will result.

Eccles and Midgley’s work was based on numerous studies that followed this standard environmental influence approach, as well as a variant to person-environment theory that accounts for the developmental stage of the person in the environment (Eccles et al., 1993). Notably referenced are Higgins and Eccles’s (1983) observation of the differences between elementary and middle environment’s effect on adolescent socialization, Eccles, Midgley, and Adler’s (1984) proposal of a mismatch between school environment and student psychological development, and Hunt’s (1975) model of matching person and environment interactions to desirable outcomes in education (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016).

Eccles and Midgley focused their work on the “fit” of the middle school environment to preadolescents, contending that they have changing needs as they mature and that schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of context that makes continued academic achievement and engagement possible (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Tenets. SEF emphasizes the importance of considering adolescents’ changing developmental needs along with the environment presented to them. It not only requires consideration of present needs, but rather needs as they change along a “developmental continuum” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 92) that reflects their developing maturity. The theory considers two trajectories: the developmental needs of adolescents as they progress through adolescence and the change in educational context across the elementary to middle school transition (Eccles et al., 1993). Eccles and Midgley (1989) formalized broad categories of
changes during early adolescent development and common changes between the elementary and secondary classroom. These are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1

Trajectories of Adolescent Development and Changes in School Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early adolescent development</th>
<th>Post-transfer school environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased desire for autonomy</td>
<td>Increase in extrinsic motivational strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased salience of identity issues</td>
<td>More rigorous grading practices resulting in lower average grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing need for safe environment in which to explore autonomy and identity</td>
<td>Increase in practices likely to incur social comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased peer orientation</td>
<td>Ability grouping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-focus and self-consciousness</td>
<td>Whole-class instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased cognitive capacity with movement toward formal operational thought</td>
<td>Normative performance grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and hormonal changes associated with pubertal development</td>
<td>Competitive motivational strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in teacher concern with control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in teacher trust of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in opportunity for student participation in classroom decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in student autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in teacher self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial decrease in the cognitive level of tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: From Eccles and Midgley (1989)*

Synchrony of these trajectories results when a “facilitative and developmentally appropriate environment that has a positive impact on children’s perceptions of themselves and their educational environment” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 92) is present. It is through this synchrony that positive motivational consequences will result. Eccles and Midgley posited that negative academic motivation and engagement stem from inappropriate educational contexts for early adolescents. According to Eccles and Midgley (1993), to test SEF, person-environment fit must be assessed and then this fit must be related to changes in adolescents’ motivations and self-perceptions through the transition.
According to Eccles and Midgley (1989), a set of theoretical and descriptive questions align with the paradigm. Scholars must first ask what the developmental needs of the adolescent are. The second question is understanding what kind of environment is developmentally appropriate at each stage of development. Last is the question of what environmental changes are most commonly experienced by preadolescents as they transition to middle school, and are these changes compatible with the physiological, cognitive, and psychological stages students find themselves at during this period.

Eccles and Midgley continue to study the middle school transition and the variables that impact it through this paradigm. Additional scholars continue to conduct research using the framework.

**Opposing Theories**

One counterargument to SEF is the incremental theory of intelligence, in which it is presumed that core beliefs set up different patterns of responses to setbacks. Dweck and Leggett (1988) argued that students may have different “theories” of how intelligence works: some may see it as fixed, while others see it as changeable. Research has shown that students with equal intellectual ability will shape their response to academic challenges based on their belief of their intelligence’s malleability. V. L. Henderson and Dweck (1990) studied students going through the junior high school transition and found that students who perceived their intelligence as changeable with effort performed better academically than their peers who did not. V. L. Henderson and Dweck and others have shown that theories of intelligence can be manipulated in real-world contexts and have an impact of academic achievement outcomes.
Rationale: SEF and This Research

Eccles and Midgley addressed two tenets in their theory: developmental stage and school environment. Both tenets were necessary for this study. As the developmental stages of students throughout the transition will change, the policies and programs that are in place to provide academic support must also change if they are to remain congruent. It is imperative to understand a student’s developmental stage in order understand his reaction to the challenges and successes that confront him through the transition.

It is the researcher’s personal and professional opinion, based on 13 years spent teaching the transition year to middle school and an educational background in child development, that as students make the transition to the secondary school level, it is often overlooked that they are at a far different developmental level than some of their older schoolmates. It is often forgotten they that are only 11-year olds! It is also common for them to come from an environment where they had much more freedom than they do in the secondary setting. Ensuring that transition-year programs are designed to meet the academic challenges that these students will face is imperative for preparing them for successful scholastic careers. The findings from this study, which developed an understanding of how academically successful boys experience the transition environment, can be applied to on-going classroom programs and policies to help ensure that educational environments support academic achievement at this developmental stage for all students, regardless of their academic success.

Summary

SEF simultaneously examines educational institutions as settings where child development takes place and the changing developmental needs of students. The theory posits that a person-environment mismatch develops over time if the school environment does not
change to fit the changing early-adolescent. As presented in the research, when this mismatch occurs the result will be declines in academic achievement, psychosocial development, and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993).

**Conclusion**

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on middle school transitions, early adolescent development and academic achievement, and preadolescent boys as relevant to the transition to secondary school. Chapter 3 describes the research study.
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

Leaving elementary school and transitioning to secondary school is analogous to a child developing into an adolescent. It is a time of great change and challenge, which can have lasting effects on the academic achievement and psychosocial development of the early adolescent boy. This transition typically involves moving from a small elementary classroom environment, where close relationships with teachers is the norm, to much larger campuses with multiple teachers with different practices and procedures seen for short periods of time each day (Eccles et al., 1991; Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007).

In this review, the transition to middle school refers to the period from fall to spring of the first year of secondary school. While the terms middle school and junior high can be used interchangeably to describe these years, for the purposes of this study, unless specifically noted, the transitional timing will reflect the student’s transition period and not the exact grade level or school type at which the transition took place. Children in the developmental stage of early adolescence range in age from 10 to 14 years old, with girls typically entering this stage ahead of their male classmates (Eccles, 2004). This period is marked by changes in biology, physiology, learning environment, peer groups, and parental connectedness (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Students spend more time in school than most other places besides home (Eccles, 2004). Understanding the effect that the transition to middle school has on the psychosocial development and academic achievement of early adolescence is vital if we are to provide the kind of social and educational environments within which students will remain motivated and engaged in learning. Research has shown that there are many variables at play during this
transition period, including age, school grade configuration, race, socioeconomic status (SES), and gender. Research on the coupling of these elements has been very general.

**Middle School Transitions**

Transitions have been defined by researchers in various ways, though most agree that it is a period that involves significant life changes and has potential for stress and distress (Grolnick, Gurland, Jacob, & Decourcey, 2002; Shell, Gazelle, & Faldowski, 2014). Overall, school transitions are an aspect of schooling that negatively influences preadolescents’ over-all academic motivation and interest in school (Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber, & Jozefowicz, 1999). They experience declines in self-esteem, class preparation, and grade point average (Blythe, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; E. Seidman et al., 1994) that may last well after the transition (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010).

Middle school transitions have been studied through the general characteristics of the institutions or approached from the specific content or motivational forces at work (Eccles, 2004). Studies based on the first approach have found that, during the transition year into middle school, academic achievement drops, absences increase, achievement-related attitudes and beliefs decline (Akos, 2002; Schwerdt & West, 2011), and behavioral problems increase (Alspaugh, 1998; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). This makes this transition the most significant in a student’s academic career (Akos, 2002).

Preadolescents are particularly vulnerable during the transition period to middle school (Eccles et al., 1999). Although these transitions are normative, the movement of students from elementary to middle school is *discontinuous* (Frisco, 2007), as it is an abrupt and sudden change in context rather than gradual. During this period, students are confronting both “external contextual changes and internal pubertal changes” (Akos, 2002, p. 339). How children navigate
this transition has implications for later adjustment and academic performance (Eccles et al., 1999; West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010).

**Early Adolescent Development and Academic Achievement**

Most research into psychosocial attributes of the middle school transition has focused on elements that relate to maladjustment. The emotional, physiological, and social adjustments that confront boys during this transition can potentially affect development long after the transition period. Elements such as physical development, anxiety, stress, depression, motivation, and peer and family relations must be considered in order to understand their development, particularly as it influences their academic achievement through the transition to middle school.

**Physical and Psychological Development**

American psychologist Stanley Hal first identified preadolescence or early adolescence as a unique growth stage in 1904 (Arnett & Craven, 2006). Many variables - race, gender, culture, family- influence development. Each characteristic can influence the others, bearing that in mind there are some generalizable developments that occur in early adolescence (Scales, 2010).

Researchers report significant growth within the brain during this time period. The area of the brain that handles executive functions continues to develop, and gender-specific differences are evident in young adolescent brains (Lenroot & Giedd, 2010). Intellectual development includes the transition to higher levels of cognitive function, including metacognition, abstract thought, and reflective thinking, and young adolescents tend to be curious about a wide range of topics (Kellough & Kellough, 2008). Physically, growth accelerates and follows no set pacing. Significant growth occurs in internal, skeletal, and muscular systems, with growth in boys appearing about two years after their female peers (Kellough & Kellough, 2008). Puberty also
begins during this time period, as hormones trigger the start of both primary and secondary sex characteristics.

Self-esteem scores decline during the transition to middle school (Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Self-concepts for abilities in math, English, and social activities decline during the transition period, as do perceptions of sports ability (Wigfield et al., 1991).

**Anxiety, stress, and depression.** Studies have found that a high level of stress among early adolescents is so frequent and widespread that the period can be characterized as a time of continual widespread anxiety. (Akos, 2002; Knesting, Hokanson, & Waldron, 2008; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Students report more anxiety during the middle school transition than during other schooling intervals, with levels of anxiety increasing in students who believe they are unable to achieve academic success (Knesting et al., 2008; Rudolph et al., 2001). Though persistent, this anxiety decreases during middle school, especially for boys (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010; Rudolph et al., 2001). Anxiety about the middle school environment is also common. It is not uncommon for students to express anxiety about getting lost, tardiness, and school rules and procedures (Akos, 2002; Duchesne et al., 2014; Knesting et al., 2008; Rudolph et al., 2001). Parents with children who are entering middle school often communicate about the negative aspects of school by providing warnings rather than positive and productive information about middle school: this is another source of anxiety about the transition (Akos, 2002; Bronstein & Duncan, 1996).

The literature also reveals that the transition period is exceptionally stressful. Students report higher levels of stress, particularly if they believe they were incapable of influencing school success or have little investment in their own academic success (Booth & Gerard, 2014;
Knesting et al., 2008; Rudolph et al., 2001). Boys who are less engaged in school report stress regarding adult expectations, difficulty of curriculum, school work load, and navigating the physical environment of middle school. These students also report receiving ongoing stressful reminders about their difficulties from adults. These reminders were found to exacerbate stress and lead to higher levels of depression for all students (Rudolph et al., 2001; Shoshani & Slone, 2013).

Traditionally, boys are given more autonomy throughout early adolescence than girls (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Positive associations have been found between participation in family-decision making and self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment (Eccles et al., 1996, Yee & Flanagan, 1985). Although researchers have reported minimal gender differences regarding the effects of decision-making on early adolescent academic outcomes, they have found that increased youth decision-making was related to decreased depression for boys (Gutman & Sameroff, 2004).

Academic disengagement has also been linked to increased depression after the transition. Students who experience depression symptoms are less likely to engage in schoolwork with the goal of acquiring skills and mastering understanding. These students are generally vulnerable to psychiatric disorders, including anxiety, stress, sadness, and depression (Bronstein & Duncan, 1996; Rudolph et al., 2001; Rueger, Chen, Jenkins, & Choe, 2014; Shoshani & Slone, 2013). In a study that looked at depression, school transitions, and peer groups, researchers found that students selected friends with similar levels of depressive symptoms after the transition (Goodwin, Mrug, Borch, & Cillessen, 2012). In addition, research suggests that boys are less likely than girls to seek out support when depressed (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991, 1993).
**Motivation.** Motivational paradigms such as interest in school (Epstein & McPartland, 1976), confidence in academic abilities (Wigfield et al., 1991), mastery goal orientation (Anderman & Maehr, 1994), classroom engagement (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, Connell, Eccles, & Wellborn, 1998), and a sense of school connectedness (L. H. Anderman, 1999) all decline throughout the transition period. The transition process has been found to interact with pre-existing negative motivational beliefs and higher levels of internalizing behaviors (Bronstein & Duncan, 1996; Rudolph et al., 2001).

Achievement goal theory, the predominant approach to understanding what motivates engagement in learning, divides the motivation for learning into mastery goals (developing ability over time and learning new skills to improve those abilities) and performance goals (seeking to maintain a positive image of ability). As conceptualized, both an individual’s disposition (personality, general motives) and the immediate environment affect motivation (Duchesne et al., 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013).

The motivation for learning declines sharply during early adolescence, and this decline is more pronounced during the middle school transition for students who were not mastery goal orientated in elementary school (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Compared to girls, boys’ motivation during the initial transition is directed more toward intentions to outperform others or to hide academic limitations, rather than competency (Duchesne et al., 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; Ryan et al., 2013). Students who are more mastery goal oriented throughout the transition are slightly more anxious (Duchesne et al., 2014), and those with attention problems identified by both mothers and teachers are more likely to exhibit performance-avoidance goals, although these goals are not stable throughout the transition (Duchesne et al., 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993; Odegaard & Heath, 1992; Ryan et al., 2013). Importantly, students who feel a lack of
control over their academic accomplishments are less likely to focus their efforts toward academic success. The intrinsic value of school work is at its lowest level for Caucasian males during the transition. Black and Hispanic children performed and experience less academic growth across the transition than Caucasian and other non-White students. This is true for children living with one parent versus two, and for special education students versus general education students (Akos et al., 2015; Duchesne et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2013).

**Peer Influence**

The possibility of new peer relationships appears as elementary students move into the larger middle school setting. These possibilities can bring about both positive and negative outcomes. Students express concerns about being at school with older students, bullying, peer pressure, popularity, and coolness (Bellmore, Villarreal, & Ho, 2011; Fenzel, 2000; Hardy, Bukowski, & Sippola, 2002; Odegaard & Heath, 1992; Ryan et al., 2013). Because boys are less adjusted to peer pressure, they are more vulnerable to the harmful effects of peer relations during the transition (Akos, 2002; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Fenzel, 2000). Although boys are less sensitive than girls to the contextual influences of peer relationships and issues of friendship, they report lower levels of self-worth around their friends, just as girls do (Hardy et al., 2002; Ryan et al., 2013).

Early adolescents who feel they can make friends prior to the transition period are less vulnerable to peer strain and need less support during the transition to secondary school (Akos, 2002; Fenzel, 2000). Boys and girls have similar numbers of self-identified friends and reciprocated friends at the beginning of the transition, and both lose old friends and identify new friendships at the end of the transition period. However, boys report being less concerned about friend issues across the transition (Hardy et al., 2002). The problem behavior of friends also
contributes to a decrease in academic achievement throughout middle school (Veronneau & Dishion, 2011). Association with friends who are highly engaged prior to and throughout the transition period provides some compensation for the negative effect associated with friends who display problem behavior (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Veronneau & Dishion, 2011). Though mutual friendships increase, and friendship quality does not change across the period, peer acceptance declines significantly across the transition (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). Early adolescents’ pre-transition social interactions play a key role in their academic success following the transition, as students with peer acceptance receive emotional and academic support that facilitates their classroom engagement (Kingery et al., 2011). Akos and Galassi (2004a) stated, “adjusting to the social aspects of a school transition may be equally as important as adjusting to its academic demands… [and] these two aspects may well be intertwined” (p. 220). Middle school transition programs that include a peer element would likely lead to improved psychological adjustment and better school acclimation across this transition (Kingery et al., 2011). Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes (2012) found that as the importance of peer relationships increases throughout the transition period, positive peer group associations may be a stronger predictor of academic success than connectedness with school adults.

**Family Influence**

Developmental changes throughout early adolescence disrupt the parent-child relationship. Both time spent with family and emotional closeness decrease during this period, while family conflict increases (R. Larson et al., 1996; Laursen et al., 1998; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). The developmental changes of adolescence precipitate strain relations within the family and are likely to undermine adolescents’ mental health and behavioral outcomes (Eccles et al., 1996). Because children’s problems with school are often related to the structure of the
family, research has posited that the structure of boys’ families can create differences in their transition to secondary school (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005; Hines, 2007).

Parents are the primary socializers in the home and have a significant effect on adolescent development. Most early adolescents look to parents to assist them in the transition to middle school, with much of the help with school activities provided by the mother (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Bronstein et al., 2005; Kim & Fong, 2014). Wentzel (1998) found that familial connection predicted interest in school and learning and mastery goal orientation. Greater parental involvement cushions children against declines in academic grades and self-perceived confidence over the transition period; this involvement also moderates declines in reading and self-worth (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000).

Research focusing on divorce and adolescence has found that boys take longer to recover from divorces (Hines, 2007) and that when divorces happen within three to five years before the transition period they may be struggling to process both the divorce and the transition to the new school setting simultaneously (Bronstein et al., 2005; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). When compared to children from traditional family structures, boys from divorced families show lower levels of academic achievement, struggle more with following middle school rules, and exhibit less psychological and social adjustment than their female counterparts during the transition period (Akos & Galassi, 2004a; Akos et al., 2015; Bronstein et al., 2005; Hines, 2007; Lansford, 2009).

Positive family roles protect against drops in academic achievement, self-esteem, and self-concept and contribute to lower levels of depression, higher GPAs, and lower incidences of psychological and behavioral problems during the transition (Bronstein & Duncan, 1996; Bronstein et al., 2005; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010).
Single mothers show the lowest levels of involvement with their children’s schools. Lack of parental involvement in the school setting is consistently associated with negative school outcomes, including reduced academic success, lower grades, and poor class behavior (Akos et al., 2015; Bartle-Haring, Younkin, & Day, 2012; Bronstein et al., 2005; Hines, 2007; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). Ineffective parenting is significantly greater in single-mother households: students from these homes report difficulties related to family connectedness and these parents are much less likely to be closely involved in their student’s educational activities (Bronstein et al., 2005).

Male non-White students whose mothers had lower levels of education have more problematic discipline histories, with greater increases in discipline problems during the transition than their classmates (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Overall, early adolescent boys from divorced families display the lowest levels of academic adjustment to changes in educational context (Akos et al., 2015; Hines, 2007; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008).

Duchesne et al. (2014) found that parents need to maintain a secure attachment relationship (available, responsive, and encouraging) with preadolescents throughout the transition and need to recognize the transition for the stressful event that it is for this age group.

Implications

Although the transition highlights psychosocial concerns that may later dissipate, it is important to consider their impact on academic achievement across the transition. Because this period is a time of high anxiety, transition programs that focus on the interaction between a student’s disposition and school context should be considered to better assist boys’ motivation across the transition to middle school (Duchesne et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2013). While peer influences on academic achievement during the middle school transition still need investigation,
inclusion of peers in transition intervention programs is implicated due to their importance during this time (Akos, 2002; Akos et al., 2015; Bronstein et al., 2005; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Shim, 2014). Research has found that the effects of living in nontraditional homes are different for boys, and that nontraditional family structures are associated with lower levels of academic and social success (Bronstein et al., 2005). The promotion of academic success in the middle school can be aided by paying attention to changes in peer relationships and by encouraging participation in activities that promote interactions with positive peer role models and include opportunities to make friends (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Research into the individual student’s social context is needed to better prepare transition and academic programs for the social variables that incoming middle school students bring.

**Other Variables Relevant to Academic Achievement**

**School Subjects and Academic Performance**

Students who believe they are unable to control their academic success or who feel this success is of low importance may become overwhelmed by the secondary setting and its new demands. Growth in academic achievement across the transition does not maintain the trajectory set by the elementary years of schooling (Akos et al., 2015). Boys show a smaller magnitude of growth in academic achievement than girls across the transition period (Akos et al., 2015; Hines, 2007; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, Passmore, & Falkmer, 2014). The trajectory of academic achievement for boys is less than that for girls in many areas: across the transition boys underperform in reading, English, language arts, social studies, and science, excelling above their female classmates only in adjustment to learning math and physical education (Akos et al., 2015; Hines, 2007; Knesting et al., 2008). Boys identified as gifted out-performed all other boys academically across the transition, while boys with learning disabilities
or who received free and reduced lunch (an indicator of low SES) performed the worst (Akos et al., 2015; Hines, 2007; Knesting et al., 2008; Vaz et al., 2014).

Grade point average is often used as a gauge for academic success. Research has highlighted several concerns for male early adolescents as they make the transition. While GPAs for both genders and all ethnicities persistently decline across the first year of middle school, boys’ GPAs are lower overall than girls, with boys seeing a more significant drop in academic achievement (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998). African American boys have the lowest GPAs during the transition, followed by Latinos and Caucasians (Akos et al., 2015; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Ryan et al., 2013; Simmons, 1987).

**School Setting**

A primary difference between elementary and middle school structure is the rotation of classes and an increase in the number of adults with whom the student must interact. Upon entering middle school, students leave the home-like quality of the elementary classroom for multiple new classrooms with different subject matters, policies, and procedures. Middle school classrooms have been found to be less emotionally supportive than the elementary classrooms that students are transitioning from (Shell et al., 2014). Middle school boys are less adjusted than their female classmates to the authoritative procedures of middle school and are slightly less adjusted to middle school rules. In addition, they are less adjusted to the larger school size and take longer to adjust to teacher expectations, school functioning, and school workload (Akos et al., 2015; Fenzel, 2000; Hines, 2007; Knesting et al., 2008; Martinez, Aricak, Graves, Peters-Myszak, & Nellis, 2011; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). Male students with mild learning disabilities will take longer to become familiar with school routines, teacher expectations, and will need more adult support through the transition than their general education peers (Knesting et al.,
2008). Boys also report a lack of assistance with academic needs throughout the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004b). As students learn to cope in larger and more impersonal school environments, they need to be supported by programs that take factors like gender into consideration (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Hardy et al., 2002).

**Teacher Influence**

The literature supports the positive influence of teachers on young adolescents’ academic adjustment and social-emotional adjustment during the transition (Akos, 2002; Rueger et al., 2014). Both the pretransition and transition year teachers play a vital role in preparing students throughout the transition. Pretransition teachers have developed relationships with students in the elementary setting, setting them up to be trusted informants about the middle school transition (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992). As students form an identity separate from the family, teachers become more important for school support during the transition year (Akos, 2002). Perceived academic support from teachers positively predicts mastery goals and guards against detrimental scholastic habits (Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2015).

**Extracurricular Activities**

GPA, student’s feelings of connectedness, and school transitions are improved by extracurricular activities. Several studies, however, have found that these activities must be developmentally appropriate and supportive of the early adolescent’s psychosocial development to positively influence the transition process (Akos, 2006; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Haselhuhn, Al-Mabuk, Gabriele, Groen, & Galloway, 2007; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). Competition should not be emphasized in middle school sports programs or other extracurricular activities. While student enthusiasm for these activities fosters positive school connectedness, competitive activities potentially interfere with peer relations at the middle
school level (Akos, 2006; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). Interestingly, middle school teachers indicate, more so than elementary teachers, that competition among students is encouraged and students who get good grades are pointed out as examples to their peers (Haselhuhn et al., 2007). Haselhuhn et al. (2007) stated that, “even though honor rolls, awards for high achievement, and competition may appear particularly appropriate in this time of high stakes assessments, such practices have a detrimental effect on student achievement in the long run” (p. 18).

Implications

Although students who are entering middle school at times exhibit adolescent characteristics, it is vital to remember that these early adolescent students still need a straightforward orientation concerning rules and procedures, such as absence procedures, proper between-class transition activities, and keeping one's hands to one’s self (Akos, 2002; Duchesne et al., 2014). Expectations and responsibilities are of primary concern to students and should be addressed early and often throughout the transition. Noncompetitive athletic or other extracurricular offerings that emphasize positive and intentional learning experiences may be useful in promoting academic achievement (Akos, 2006). With respect to the academic aspect of the school transition, research indicates the need for educators to address stressors specific to workload and school procedures early in the transition period. Middle school teachers need to directly focus on the demands of academic environment, being careful not to focus on competition and recognition. It is important that academic experiences that fit with the improving cognitive abilities of the students also fit with the development changes that are in play during this period (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Fenzel, 2000; Lane, Oakes, Carter & Messenger, 2015).
Needed for Further Study

Social Supports

While it is understood that perceived social support aids in student adjustment and positively influences adolescent motivation and learning, the relative importance of different social agents (parents, peers, and teachers) is not clearly understood, nor are the consequences of differing social supports or student’s motivational beliefs on perceived social support and academic achievement (Song et al., 2015). Investigations into the mechanisms of selection and socialization processes that contribute to the preadolescent social dynamic are needed so we may understand the microsocial processes of the middle school peer system (Farmer et al., 2015).

Further examination of the needs of boys when they transfer to the middle school setting is needed to promote stronger feelings of connectedness, which may help deter boys’ achievement declines (Akos & Galassi, 2004b). Emotionally supportive classrooms are also needed to promote healthy adjustment as students become accustomed to the challenges of early adolescents and a new school context (Shell et al., 2014).

Academic Supports

Very little is known about individual differences in adolescent boys’ reactions to the transition and the associated variables that support academic performance across this transition. The literature on academic achievement during the middle school transition is significantly lacking in the area of how the transition is perceived by early adolescent males as they begin their journey into secondary school. Research suggests that sociodemographic variables affect academic growth in content areas in dynamic ways, but school districts need to examine local data in context to develop an understanding of early adolescent boys’ perceptions of the experiences that support or challenge them academically (Akos et al., 2015). This understanding
is vital to creating transition-year programs that support these young men academically through the promotion from elementary to secondary education.

**Middle School Gender Gap**

Studies have shown that the gender achievement gap widens in middle school (Fahle, 2016). Boys are less academically self-disciplined than their female peers and spend less time and energy on academic work (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Jacob, 2002). In their study of the gender gap in middle school, Clark, Flower, Walton, and Oakley (2008) determined that middle school boys not only need encouragement to recognize their possible academic selves, but they often fail to recognize the academic skills and efforts their peers put forth. Instead boys maintain a more present orientation, often only aspiring to largely unreachable future roles like rock star or sports hero (Clark et al., 2008).

**Conclusion**

The educational transition to middle school is one of the most challenging periods in a student’s academic career. The achievement drops that transpire through the transition into middle school are far larger than the decline between middle to high school. This suggests that the transition has a long-term detrimental impact on student academic performance. Academic success during this period also predicts school drop-out (Schwerdt & West, 2011). Studies have found that boys enjoy school less, have less academic interest, and spend less time on schoolwork then their female peers (see Kessels, Heyder, Latsch, & Hannover, 2014). Considering that boys graduate from high school at a rate much lower than girls (Véronneau, Vitaro, Pedersen & Tremblay, 2008), any challenges that hinder achievement deserve investigation.
The next chapter will discuss the research design for this study. It will detail the research approach, methodology, and data collection and analysis. In addition, it will consider trustworthiness, researcher bias, and the limitations of this study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

This study developed an understanding, from boys’ perspectives, of what in the middle school environment enables them to continue along a trajectory of academic success during a period when many of their peers are seeing significant declines in achievement. Hearing in his own voice the elements that contribute to a boy’s academic success during the transition-year is vital to the creation of academic policies and procedures that will support boys during this time. This project’s goal was to understand academically successful boys’ perceptions of how the school environment impacts their academic success as they make the transition to middle school.

The following sections describe the study’s methodology and design. The Methodology section outlines the research tradition and the rationale for its use. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the techniques used for inquiry, analysis, and presenting the study’s findings. A section on design identifies the participants, recruitment, and study procedures. This is followed by a discussion of trustworthiness, biases, assumptions, and confidentiality. Finally, foreseen limitations to the study are detailed.

Research Question

The central question was: How do academically successful preadolescent boys understand and experience the transition to middle school? The two subquestions were: (a) What environmental elements do boys perceive as supporting their academic achievement during their transition to middle school? and (b) What environmental elements do boys perceive to impede their academic achievement as they transition to middle school?

Methodology

Qualitative methodology allows for the in-depth study of academic achievement during the transition year. Qualitative studies strive for a working understanding of the subjective world,
rather than predictive laws. Qualitative studies aim to understand the specific circumstances, how and why things happen in a complex world (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This study was based on subjectivist assumptions of gaining knowledge about the world, including the researcher as an instrument of the research, contextual dependency, focus on understanding, interpretive analysis of data, and data in the form of words instead of numbers (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Studies in the interpretivist paradigm seek to understand the world as it is lived from the perspective of an individual who is experiencing it. The goal of this study was to understand the elements that moderate academic achievement for preadolescent boys during the middle school transition year and to create a rich description of each participant’s experience.

Research Tradition: Phenomenology

Phenomenological research focuses on the whole of the experience through a search of the meanings and essences of the experience, rather than through measurements and explanations (Moustakas, 1994; Reiners, 2012). Phenomenologists believe the interactions between researcher and participant produce knowledge (Reiners, 2012). Like other qualitative research approaches (e.g., ethnography, heuristic research, and hermeneutics), phenomenology recognizes that quantitative approaches are not acceptable for research into the human experience. According to Van Manen (1997), “a good phenomenological test has the effect of making us see something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experiences.”

Philosophical underpinnings. The underlying philosophy of phenomenology is that reality consists of occurrences and objects that are understood in the human consciousness and are not independent of consciousness. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research method (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). Phenomenology as a philosophy is seen as a way of returning to and exploring the reality of life and living. It is
referred to as a study of the *life-world* or *lived experience*. It explores experiences and how we experience. It is a way of describing phenomena as they appear to the person experiencing them (Dowling, 2007; Moutsakas, 1994).

**History.** Edmund Husserl is acknowledged as the father of phenomenology. Husserl introduced this movement at the beginning of the 20th century (Henriques, 2014; Moran, 2000). There are three schools of phenomenological methodology: realistic, Husserl’s descriptive (Reiners, 2012), and Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenology. Realistic phenomenology is based on Husserl’s work prior to the early 1930s. After a split with his long-time colleague Martin Heidegger, we see the emergence of Heidegger’s interpretive, existential, or ontological phenomenology and Husserl’s descriptive, transcendental, or epistemological phenomenology.

**Branches.** There are several additional branches of phenomenology: interpretive, ethical, hermeneutical, and linguistic (Wertz, 2005). Heidegger’s interpretive, existential, or ontological phenomenology focuses on being and being-in-the-world rather than on knowing the world. This methodology seeks to understand the phenomena under study through a shared knowledge and experience by the subject and the researcher. Researchers do not bracket their own experience prior to the study. Stemming from Husserl and Heidegger’s work, and originating with Max Scheler and Knud Logstrup, Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical phenomenology moved beyond the ideal of Husserl’s transcendental ego and Heidegger’s being to look for meaning in otherness and responses to the vulnerability of otherness (van Manen, 2011). He found these responses were experienced as a responsibility to the other, which is an ethical experience. Hermeneutical phenomenology is interpretive, rather than purely descriptive. Heidegger’s student Hans-Georg Gadamer further developed hermeneutical phenomenology by exploring the role of language in understanding. A student of Husserl, Paul Ricoeur, developed a
hermeneutical phenomenology that explores how meanings are made through cultural institutions such as myth, religion, art, and language (van Manen, 2011). Derrida’s approach to phenomenology aimed to show that all meaning is first linguistic; thus, linguistical phenomenology focuses attention on the importance of language.

**Descriptive phenomenology.** The purpose of a study must be considered when choosing among methodologies. When the aim of a study is to explore and describe a phenomenon, descriptive phenomenology is an appropriate choice (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). This methodology is appropriate when the researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand and has individuals who can provide descriptions of what they experienced.

**Themes.** The basic themes of Husserl’s descriptive, transcendental, or epistemological phenomenology are “intentionality, eidetic reduction, and composition of meaning” (van Manen, 2011, p. 3). The critical question driving research becomes: What do we know as persons? Descriptive phenomenologists working with an epistemological focus to understand perceptions of people’s experiences. Meaning is at the core of transcendental phenomenology, which is a design for acquiring and collecting data that explains the essence of human experience (Moerew-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). It is called transcendental because the researcher sees the phenomenon “freshly, as for the first time and is open to its totality” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This is accomplished by researchers bracketing their prior experiences with the phenomenon in order to eliminate presupposition and prejudget (Moutsakas, 1994). This fresh approach results in the acquisition of new knowledge that is derived from the essence of experience. Everyone in the research will describe the same phenomenon from her own unique perspective (Moustakas, 1994).
**Rationale for using the methodology.** Descriptive, transcendental phenomenology aligns with the purpose of this study. This research uncovered the meaning of experiences from the perspective of the persons who lived the experience in an effort to gain knowledge of the phenomenon from a first-look perspective (Tuohy et al., 2013). Descriptive phenomenology develops an understanding of an experience through listening to the subjective stories of the participants. Its focus is on understanding the phenomenon *as if it is being seen for the first time.* By bracketing past experience, the meaning given to the phenomenon by the participants is seen with fresh eyes and not clouded by the researchers’ past experiences. This method allows for deeply rich descriptions of an experience by the people who experience it; it allows the voices of the participants to be heard.

Merriam (2009) stated, “A phenomenological research approach is well-suited for studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p. 26). Given that the middle school transition includes all of that, the tradition of descriptive phenomenology was appropriate for this study. It is truly the voice of boys that we want to hear to gain our understanding of the academic success across the middle school transition. We do not often have the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with students; this study expanded the knowledge base by providing them a place to express their voices.

**Method of Inquiry**

Phenomenological inquiry requires empirical and reflective methods (van Manen, 2011). Empirical inquiry explores a range and variety of experiences, aiming to collect examples of experiences in order to reflect on the meanings that may permanently exist within them. Reflective methods seek to clarify and make specific the meaning of the lived experience (van Manen, 2011). It is the objective of phenomenology to gain access to the participants’ life world;
this is the world of their experiences, where their consciousness exists (Patton, 2002). The objective is to uncover the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon under study. Interviews allow for a deeper appreciation and understanding of the complexities of people’s experiences and are the key to many forms of qualitative research (Dilley, 2004). They lead to a more conscious awareness of environmental context; an interview “provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (I. Seidman, 2006, p. 10). In-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing were used for this study (I. Seidman, 2006).

I. Seidman (2006) advocated the interview process designed by Dolbeare and Schuman, which includes three distinct interviews with each participant. According to I. Seidman, “this method combines life history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenological and especially from Alfred Schutz (1967)” (2006, p. 15). This series of interviews allows a researcher to find meaning and understanding in the participant experiences as the interviewees put their behavior “in context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (I. Seidman, 2006, p, 17). These three interviews are designed to interrogate the meaning of an experience by putting it into context (I. Seidman, 2006). Each interview in the series has its own focus. The first interview focuses on the participant’s life history. The questions in this interview focus on putting a participant’s experiences in context by asking him as much as possible about himself “in light of the topic up until the present time” (I. Seidman, 2006, p. 17). The second interview focuses on the details of a participant’s experience. This interview seeks to elicit details about a participant’s current experience with the topic. The third and final interview focuses on how a participant makes meaning from the experience and how it influences her present life. Its purpose is to give the interviewee an opportunity to reflect
on the meaning of the experience and to give an interviewer an opportunity to extrapolate the meanings of the experience that may be hidden within the language of the first two interviews. It is an opportunity for a researcher to take the time to flush out a participant’s personal interpretation of the phenomena.

**Method of Analysis**

This study organized and analyzed data using the modifications to the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method proposed by Moustakas (1994). According to Moustakas (1994), analyzing phenomenological data must follow a rigorous path. The transcendental phenomenological data analysis process is highly structured: it works from the more detailed to the general (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Phenomenological studies pursue the essence of the experience through a researcher’s immersion in the world of the experience, a period of reflection to gather awareness and understanding, and synthesis of the themes of the experience to create understanding (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of the experience is created during analysis and grounded in the data. A researcher goes beyond the words that are said in order to “work out structures and relations of meanings not immediately apparent in the text…[this] is achieved by a methodological or theoretical stance, recontextualizing what is said in a specific conceptual context” (Dilley, 2004, p. 11).

**Epoche.** Rossman and Rallis (1998) stated that phenomenological data analysis requires that researchers approach the data with an open-mind, seeking only meanings that emerge from the text. Prior to looking at any data, researchers must set aside all prejudgments by bracketing previous experiences with the phenomenon. By going through the process of putting aside their own views on the phenomenon, the only focus is the perspective of the participant (Lodico et al., 2010). This process, termed *epoche*, allows researchers to hear the subjects’ perspectives without
using their own lenses of thinking and feeling (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). This process ensures that the results are not a researcher’s views on the phenomenon, a researcher’s experience with the phenomenon, or theoretical descriptions of the phenomenon, but rather are the lived experiences of the ones who had the experience. This place the meaning of the experience in the context of those who have had it, instead of being drawn from the imposition of others’ interpretations of the phenomenon.

**Horizontalization.** According to Creswell (1998), phenomenological data analysis first requires a methodology of reduction. This step of data analysis involves collecting significant statements from interview transcripts that provide details about the participants’ transition experience. Called horizontalization, this process’s intention is to learn how individuals viewed the phenomenon under study (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Moustakas (1994) described this process as the “grounding condition of the phenomenon that gives it its distinct character,” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95).

The next step in the analysis is to eliminate the statements that are either irrelevant or repeated. Only statements that contain moments of the experience that are necessary for understanding it or that can be labeled and abstracted are kept (Moustakas, 1994). After this culling, the statements that remain provide the textual meaning of the phenomenon.

Next, a researcher examines the statements and codes them into themes. Using these themes, a researcher describes the phenomenon and how it was experienced by the participants. Two descriptions arise from this examination, one textual and the other structural (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Meaning is extrapolated from these statements in a format akin to: What did the subject experience during the experience (textual description) and in what context did the subject have the experience (structural description) (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004)?
Next, through intuitive integration, the individual textual and structural descriptions are synthesized with the data from other subjects into a composite description, or the core themes of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Essence.** *Essence* is consistencies in the human experience (Patton, 1990). Because the focus of a phenomenological study is to create descriptions of what people experience and how they experience it, the analytical goal is to identify the shared experiences that lie beneath all the variations in the experience (Patton, 1990). The integration process allows researchers to identify an objective “essence” (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 23) of the phenomenon by aggregating the subjective experiences of a number of people who have had the same experience. The systematic procedures of descriptive phenomenology are consistent with the philosophical view of balancing both the objective and subjective approaches to knowledge and rigor in analysis (Hycner, 1985).

**Presenting Findings**

According to van Manen, “to write phenomenologically is to write poetically” (1997, p. 132). The key to presenting phenomenological findings is to describe, and to describe extraordinarily well. Phenomenological studies can produce rich descriptions that authentically reflect the participants’ experiences. These descriptions must be presented with credibility and depth (Moustakas, 1994). These reports must include examples and quotations from the data to illustrate the points made, as this helps demonstrate rigor and reliability (Halling, 2002). Findings can be presented by theme or by using quotes or extensive passages of conversation from interviews to clarify the conclusions. In place of an emic perspective, the researcher strove to “represent clearly and richly” (Rossman & Rillis, 1998, p. 48) what was analyzed and to script
interpretations of the participant’s understandings of the middle school transition that captured
the detailed essence of the participant experiences.

Design

Participants

Research site. Site Middle School is a federally designated Title I, State Distinguished
School in the western United States. This public school serves nearly 900 sixth, seventh, and
eighth graders. The school is staffed with one principal, one vice-principal, two guidance
counselors, and a faculty of 36 general education teachers and five special education educators.
The student body enrolled at Site is 53.8% Latino, 32.8% Caucasian, and 6.1% Asian. The
remaining student body is Filipino (2.2 %), African American (1.7%), or claim more than one
race (3.2%).

According to the state, 52% of Site’s students have not met the state standards for
English/language arts and 63% have not met the state’s mathematics standards. In the sixth
grade, 63% of students have not met the state standards for English/language arts and 89% have
not met the state’s mathematics standards.

Again, according to state data, within Site’s significant subgroups, 40% of African
American, 44% Latino, 11% of Asian, 42% of Filipinos, and 25% of students who claim two or
more races have not met the state standards for English/language arts. In mathematics, 72% of
African American students, 60% of Latino, 18% of Asian, 36% of Filipinos, and 29% of students
who claim two or more races have not met the state standards.

For students who are considered economically disadvantaged, 51% have not met the state
standards for English/language arts and 64% have not met the state’s mathematics standards. In
the sixth grade, 60% of low SES students have not met the state standards for English/language arts and 76% have not met the state’s mathematics standards.

When comparing English/language arts proficiency by gender, 32% of female students have not met the state standards, while 47% of male students do not have proficiency. Among sixth graders, 44% of girls and 45% of boys lack proficiency. In mathematics, 51% of all girls and 52% of all boys do not have proficiency. In the sixth grade, 53% of girls and 67% of boys do not have proficiency in mathematics.

**Sampling procedures.** A purposeful sample of participants was invited from the seventh-grade class at the research site. Using criterion sampling, participants who met a predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2002) were sought. Inclusion criteria included seventh-grade male students who matriculated from the sixth grade at the research site with a positive record: good grades, citizenship, and work habits as identified by school report cards.

**Participants in the sample.** Careful choice of participants was imperative as it was their experiences with a successful academic transition at Site that were composed into a “common understanding” (Creswell, 2013, p. 83) of the lived experiences of boys who make successful academic transitions. Preadolescent boys at middle school onset who experienced academic success through the transition year were sought for participation. Academic success was characterized by a grade point average of 3.0 or higher maintained through the sixth-grade year following an academically successful completion of elementary school as indicated by teacher remarks and report cards. In addition, only students with classroom citizenship and work habits grades of Satisfactory or above were invited to participate.
Recruitment and Access

The decision to engage in a phenomenological study necessitates that all participants have experienced the phenomenon. For this study, a successful academic transition from elementary to middle school while attending Site Middle School (Creswell, 2012) was required. Review of student report card data provided a pool of students to invite to contribute. Letters of invitation to participate in the study were emailed to all students who met the inclusion criteria, as well as to their legal guardians. Potential participants who responded positively to the email were invited, along with their legal guardian, for a short meeting with the researcher to discuss the study and the receive the Participant’s Informed Consent to Participate document.

Before commencement of participation in the study, each participant’s written permission to join in the study was obtained (Creswell, 2012). Each participant was asked to acknowledge his consent to participate on the Participant’s Informed Consent to Participate document. Because the participants were minors, their legal guardian’s permission was also obtained via the Participant’s Legal Guardian Informed Consent form. Participants could not participate in the study until and unless both informed consent forms were obtained by the researcher.

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected via three semistructured interviews with each participant. Interviews were conducted using in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing (I. Seidman, 2006). Interviews were conducted in the middle of the seventh-grade year (the year following the transition year). The interviews were spaced approximately 3-4 days apart and lasted approximately one half-hour. All interviews were recorded for later verbatim transcription by the researcher. Transcription took place soon as possible after each interview. Each participant was given an alias, known only to the researcher, that was used in the transcript.
At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher wrote a vignette noting the significant details of the interview to help create the narratives that would be associated with detailing the participant’s meaning-making of his experiences.

**In-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing.** Three interviews comprised the in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing process. The first interview focused on establishing the contexts of the participant’s experience by allowing him to share as much about himself as possible regarding the topic of academic achievement. Questions related to early schooling and his elementary learning experiences helped him place his perceptions of the learning environment in context with his life. Semistructured interviews were based on the following prompts:

- What to you first remember about first “going” to school?
- How did you get prepare to begin school?
- Describe your earliest school memories.
- Describe what you enjoyed about elementary school.
- Describe what you did not enjoy about elementary school.
- Tell me about favorite year/class in elementary school. Why was this your favorite?
- Describe the types of activities you liked to get involved with when you were in elementary school.
- Looking back at your time in elementary school, could you describe for me any significant events that made you like or dislike school?
- How, if you did, did you know you were doing well in school?
- Describe your feelings about any recognition for your academic achievements in elementary school (awards, prizes, honor rolls, etc.).
• How did you prepare for/accomplish major academic assignments?

• Describe for your discovery of grades, what they came to mean to you, and what they meant to others in your life.

• Describe the organization system you used in the fifth grade.

• Describe for me your support system in the fifth grade.

• Describe for me your personal expectations for your grades in elementary school.

• Describe for me things your fifth-grade teacher did that were to get you ready for middle school.

• Describe any rules or procedures that were meant to get you ready for middle school.

• Describe for me any conversations you remember having with your peers about what middle school would be like.

• At the end of fifth grade did you feel “ready” for middle school? Describe what that “readiness” felt like.

• Can you describe for me your experience with gender in elementary school?
  • Do you think all genders were treated equally in the classroom?
  • Do you think expectations were set at the same standards for all genders?
  • Do you think you were treated differently because you were an academically successful boy, perhaps differently than your classmates that were not as successful academically?

The second interview was used to get the details of the student’s experience as an academically successful, sixth-grade, male middle school student. In this interview, participants were asked to detail their school week and their experience with certain significant components of academic achievement, including school work, relationships with teachers and classmates,
campus activities, and the desire to learn for learning’s sake. Semistructured interviews were
based on the following prompts:

- Reflecting on our first interview together, is there anything we talked about that after you
  have had some time for reflection you would like to tell me more about?
- Describe what you thought sixth grade was going to be like before you got there.
- Describe for me any activities with the school you were involved in, prior to the first day
  of school.
- Describe the process you went through to get prepared to begin the sixth grade.
- Describe what you remember about your first few weeks of the sixth grade. Include your
  experience learning the system of middle school or the system of the sixth grade.
- Describe how prepared you felt academically when you started sixth grade.
- Describe how socially ready you felt you were for the sixth grade.
- Describe what you enjoyed about the sixth grade.
- Describe what you did not enjoy about the sixth grade.
- Describe your favorite lesson last year. Why was this your favorite?
- Describe a typical school week in the sixth grade.
- Describe a typical school day in the sixth grade.
- How did you prepare for/accomplish major academic assignments?
- Describe the types of activities you liked to get involved in at school.
- Describe the activities you were involved in outside of school.
- Describe your discovery of grades, what they came to mean to you, and what they meant
  to others in your life.
- Describe the organization system you used in the sixth grade.
• Describe for me your support system in the sixth grade.

• Describe your feelings about recognition for your academic achievements in the sixth grade.

• What part of the sixth-grade program at Site would you want to make sure stayed in place for future students?

• What changes would you make to the sixth-grade program at Site?

The third interview focused on making meaning of being academically successful during the transition to middle school. This required the participants to “look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (I. Seidman, 2006, p. 18). Participants were asked to reflect upon the meaning of their academic success in the middle school context. This questioning sought to illuminate the context of the student’s academic success and his perceptions of experiencing success in that environment. Semistructured interviews were based on the following prompts:

• Reflecting on our two interviews together, is there anything we talked about that after you have had some time for reflection you would like to tell me more about?

• Describe how Site met your expectations of what middle school was going to be like.

• Describe the opportunities/events/things you expected at Site but that did not materialize.

• Describe what being academically successful means to you.

• Describe for me why you are academically successful.

• Describe the most important habits you have formed to help you be successful in school.

• Describe what you need to be academically successful.

• Describe for me why or why not you feel Site supported you in your academic success.
• What have been some of your experiences with gender at school? In your opinion, how are boys treated differently in classrooms, on the playground, or in other spaces on campus?
  • Can you share with me some examples?
  • Do you feel behavior expectations the same for all genders?
  • Do you feel academic expectations are the same for all genders?
• Do you feel academically successful boys are treated differently than academically successful girls?
  • How so?
• Do you consider yourself a role model as an academically successful boy? If so, for whom and in what ways? If not, why?
• From your perspective, how is your school experience different when compared to boys who are less academically successful than you are?
  • Can you describe some differences you have seen?
• What advice would you give other boys who want to be academically successful?
• Describe for me what you expect your academic success in middle school can do for your future.
• Reflecting on your learning how would you finish this sentence: My first year of middle school was…?
• Reflecting on our three interviews together, is there anything we talked about that after you have had some time for reflection you would like to tell me more about?

Participant as coresearcher. After each interview, the participant was asked whether there was anything related to the topic he would like to add that he was not asked about. This
gave the participant the opportunity to share information that may be relevant to understanding
his perception of the transition, but that had not been specifically solicited. This gave the
participant an opportunity to be a coresearcher by inviting them to introduce other parts of the
experience that were not specifically inquired about.

Data Analysis

The procedures for organizing and analyzing data in this study followed the protocol
proposed by Moustakas (1994). This process requires deep reading and reflection upon the
interview transcripts. All interviews were read from start to finish prior to any analysis being
done. Next, each interview transcript was coded. Coding is the process of identifying themes and
meanings within the interview data. This allows for systematic review and comparison of data
within and across interviews and interviewees. Codes identify all instances of similar content.
Throughout the coding process, a list of codes that emerged was maintained. These codes came
directly from participants’ words, as the researcher sought only codes that were grounded in the
data rather than from the researcher’s presuppositions.

Coding process. Coding was accomplished using the qualitative data analysis program
MAXDQA. This software allowed interview transcripts to be uploaded for coding and let the
researcher search for particular words and notate passages with analytic memos.

During what I. Seidman (2006) described as a “dialectical process” (p. 126), codes were
taken from ideas generated by the boys’ voices in the transcripts’ passages. Preconceived
categories were not used. Instead, the categories were created through eidetic reduction (studying
the essences with the goal of identifying the basic components of the phenomenon) during
logical and reflective reading of the transcript. Coding was conducted through four processes.
The first involved precoding, or noting particularly detailed passages and quotes, to ensure their
inclusion in the research data. Secondly, descriptive coding was used. This process entails using a word or phrase to describe the basic topic of passages of qualitative data. Next, the process of in vivo coding was used. This process creates codes out of the participants’ own words or phrases. Lastly, the process of pattern coding was utilized. This coding highlights the emergence of patterns across interviews.

**Analytic memos.** During the process of coding the interview transcripts, the researcher constructed analytic memos. These memos served to reflect upon how the researcher related to the participant and the phenomenon, emergent categories, patterns, themes and concepts, code choices, and descriptions. This journal was used during the analytic process as a record of new interpretations, questions that arose, and connections to other data as they occurred.

**Presentation of Data**

The researcher generated themes by linking reoccurring instances of codes through the interviews. The themes gleaned from the aggregated coded interviews formed the narrative about the data the group of interviews produced.

Results from the analysis of interview data are presented in the Research Results section of Chapter 4. That section presents the participant profiles, defines the major themes and subthemes that arose from the data, and reviews the data supporting each theme. The researcher’s interpretation of the data and the themes that emerged is presented in Chapter 5.

**Data Storage**

The goal of phenomenological inquiry is to make the essence of the experience of others accessible. As it was necessary to use quotes or excerpts from the interview data, the researcher notified participants regarding the extent to which their words appear in the final study. Care was taken in guarding participant identities in all written and audio files. Pseudonyms were assigned
to all participants and only these pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Access to all materials generated through this study was limited to the researcher; participant names and details that could specifically identify students in the study are known only to the researcher. All files are being stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office, with one back-up digital file of each stored with password protection on a flash drive kept in the researcher’s personal safe. All documents and files will be kept for seven years after the successful defense of the researcher’s dissertation; they will then be destroyed by the researcher.

**Trustworthiness**

**Validation Strategies**

As suggested by Creswell (2012), several validation strategies were utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of the research project. The strategies include vivid descriptions, including the participant’s own words, sharing contradictory evidence, peer review of emergent themes, and the researcher’s analytical action with personal biases and assumptions. First and foremost, a rich description of the participants’ experiences during the transition and the themes that emerged throughout the study was written. These descriptions are full of details that allow readers to transfer the information to their own context “because of shared characteristics” (Enderson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993, p. 32, as cited in Creswell, 2012). According to Patton (2002), one strengthens the validity and credibility of research by creating a “trail of evidence” that includes the participants’ experiences in their own words. Included within the rich descriptions are quotes from the participants that help demonstrate trustworthiness. Sufficient information, including the participant’s words, is presented to allow the reader to determine whether the researcher’s interpretations were supported by the data (Anderson, 2010). In addition, the researcher reported on both the positive and negative evidence to provide the most realistic
assessment of the contextual elements that mediate academic achievement at Site (Creswell, 2012). Not all evidence supported the researcher’s codes or themes, and validity was increased by sharing these pieces of contradictory evidence that surfaced during data analysis and interpretation. In addition, the researcher engaged with members of a community of practice for a peer review of the research project. This review strengthened validity as it allowed for the challenging of assumptions, refinement of themes, and strengthening of arguments based on review from a peer who was an expert in the field (Shenton, 2004).

Lastly, as suggested by Ravitch and Riggan (2013, p. 144), the researcher “critically engaged” with personal biases. By carefully uncovering her presumptions about preadolescent boys’ transition into middle school and the middle school environment, the researcher endeavored to make this study as trustworthy as possible. As Carlton Parsons stated, “in research, the positionalities of researchers and the researched are pertinent” (Carlton Parsons, 2008, 1129). The fact that “one always brings one’s history, experiences, and categories to bear when trying to understand new situations” (Briscoe, 2005, p. 26), illustrates that researchers must understand themselves before they can understand others.

**Potential Research Biases**

**Researcher assumptions.** The researcher is a Caucasian female who is a sixth-grade teacher at the research site. Although the researcher bracketed her experiences with transitioning students, the researcher had assumptions that could have influenced the results (Akos, 2002). Specific assumptions of the researcher included: middle school academic success is moderated by middle school environmental elements, successful students can articulate what makes them successful, and middle school boys who are academically successful are more interested in the academic processes of the middle school transition than in the social ones.
In addition, the researcher is a proponent of maintaining formal transition programs that are based on the developmental needs of the transitioning student and are different from subsequent grade configurations. The researcher believes that during the transition year, research-based programs that recognize and support the differences in physical, cognitive and socioemotional development of students as they leave the elementary setting and enter the secondary level are imperative to students’ successful academic transitions.

**Personal Bias.** Education has always been important to me and I have a favorable bias toward those who share an appreciation of and attribute importance to educational endeavors. Academics took precedence in my family, and my parents set high expectations for my academic achievement. I enjoyed schooling and value the experiences and opportunities afforded to me by educational institutions. As a parent, I set high expectations of scholastic engagement for my children and was an active participant during their scholastic careers. Finally, my background as an educator and life-long learner strongly biases me toward the long-term benefits of education.

Although this qualitative research study was undertaken from the etic or “outsider” perspective, fully representing the subjective experience of the participants was not achievable. As a member of the sixth-grade faculty at the research site I was in the position of knowing many of the subjects as I had been their history or summer school instructor the previous year. This made me an *insider*, as defined by Moore (2012), due to my membership in the social group being studied. A further area for bias comes from my knowledge of the research participants.

As a Caucasian, I could not allow my familiarity to “lead to the recycling of dominant assumptions” of White students, nor could I “impose my own worldviews [of other cultures] uncritically” (Kelly, 2014, p. 247). As a female, I also could not let my preconceived notions of gender influence my work.
Cognizant of my own positionality, I needed to consciously develop my research and then interact objectively with its results. It was imperative that I adhere to “ethics as a framework for quality” (Mockler, 2014, p. 156) in my research and be open to all facts that I uncovered through my inquiry. My engagement with, reaction to, and interaction with the participants and data generated in my work required me to objectively engage with issues of power and meaning-making so the participants could communicate their perspectives. For my work to be useful in planning transition programs at Site and to the wider academic community interested in academic transitions, this had to be done without inflicting my values on their evaluations (McGinity, 2012; Takacs, 2003).

Coupled with diligent reflection, my role as a teacher researcher has created a collaborative knowledge-making environment. Given my purpose of providing credible research that will inform educators, keeping my positionality at the forefront helped prevent researcher bias from compromising my inquiry (Machi & McEvoy, 2009).

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. All information was self-reported through interviews, which has its own inherent problems, including participant reluctance to share experiences fully, participants sharing only what they think the researcher wants to hear, and a reliance on the researcher's interpretation of the participant’s responses. As with all qualitative work, this study did not produce principles that are “true all the time and in all conditions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 38). Because this sample is from one middle school, in one suburban school district, it may lack generalizability to other middle school contexts. This study’s findings address modifications beneficial to transition programs, but they may not be applicable middle schools with different environmental contexts.
Summary

It was the goal of the study to gain an understanding, from the preadolescent boy’s perspective, of how the middle school environment affects his academic achievement during the transition year to middle school. A phenomenological research approach incorporating I. Seidman’s (2006) interviewing protocol and Moustakas’ (1994) approach to analyzing and presenting phenomenological data was used.

The next chapter describes the results of the data analysis and defines and explains the themes that emerged through analysis.
Chapter 4: Research Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain insight into middle school boys’ perceptions of the middle school transition and the environmental elements that influenced, supported, or hindered academic achievement during their transition year. Data for this qualitative inquiry consisted of interviews with 15 boys who had completed the transition while maintaining academic success. This chapter revisits the research questions, identifies the participants, explains the data collection and preparation techniques used, and presents the themes that arose from data analysis.

Research Questions

One central and two subquestions were asked to help describe the participants’ successful academic transition to middle school. The central question was: How do academically successful preadolescent boys understand and experience the transition to middle school? The two subquestions were: (a) What environmental elements do boys perceive as supporting their academic achievement during their transition to middle school? and (b) What environmental elements do boys perceive as impeding their academic achievement during their transition to middle school?

Participants

Fifteen boys who maintained academic success through the transition to middle participated in this study. Each participant attended sixth grade and was enrolled in seventh grade at Site Middle School during data collection. All had maintained a 3.0 or higher GPA throughout sixth grade and through the first semester of seventh grade, with no Needs Improvement or Unacceptable grades in work habits or citizenship.
Participants were recruited through a targeted email to all students at Site Middle School who met the participant criterion. The first 15 respondents were asked to participate, and all 15 consented.

To maintain confidentiality, all participants were given a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were chosen with the intent to include any cultural significance of the participant’s birth name. For example, if the participant’s first name was Hispanic in origin, a Hispanic pseudonym was given. If the participant’s name was not culturally reflective, a name from the Social Security Administration’s list of Popular Names in 2004, the year that most (14 of 15) participants were born, was selected. Names were chosen from the top 100 names after the actual names of the participants were excluded from the list.

**Participant Descriptions**

I. Seidman’s in-depth phenomenological interview protocol framed the engagement with the participants. For each participant, a brief narrative was created. Each participant was asked to respond to two questions, one asking why they were successful, the other asking what advice he would give to a boy transitioning to middle school. Their replies end the narrative and provide an example of each boy’s voice. Following the narratives, Table 2 provides demographic information for each participant, Table 3 highlights each participant’s academic biographical information and Table 4 illustrates the frequency of relevant biographical data.

**Thomas.** Thomas was 13 years old and described himself as “half Thai, [and] half [from] around Europe.” He lived with both parents and had no siblings. Thomas attended school as part of the district’s DOC program. Thomas attended Feeder 4 Elementary School for Kindergarten and then completed all other grades at Feeder 1 Elementary School. Thomas was identified for the district’s gifted and talented education (GATE) program in the third grade. In his free time,
Thomas stated he liked to “watch TV, play sports, play video games and read. I read like, two books a week. [I enjoy] reading fantasy books.”

Thomas’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standard for mathematics and met the standards for English/language arts. He averaged a 3.55 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade, he earned a 3.87 GPA. When asked why he was academically successful, Thomas replied:

because my parents help me with my work. And I think I do good on test even if I do bad on homework. I think I do better because there are less distractions in school than at home…. I work on my homework, [I] never [get] to class like, tardy or [am] absent that much.

When asked for the advice he would give to future sixth graders, Thomas said he would tell them:

It wasn’t as hard as they thought. They could, and they would learn a lot, that would affect their future and for college. Respect the teachers. Because I got in trouble once [for being disrespectful to a teacher], if I did better, I wouldn't gotten in trouble and I wouldn’t had any worries at school or at home.

**William.** William was 13 years old and identified as African American. He lived with his mother. He had one sibling, an older brother. William attended school as part of the district’s DOC program. William attended Feeder 2 Elementary School for all elementary grades. He said that in his free time liked to draw, but mainly he liked to play basketball.

William’ standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standard for mathematics and met the standards for English/language arts. He averaged a 3.00 GPA in the
sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade he earned a 3.17 GPA. When asked why he was academically successful, William replied:

I feel like I am a hard worker. I feel as if I don’t give up. I’m like dedicated to it…. My mom, a lot, my brother, and my dad, they help me whenever I ask them. They’ll, usually my mom, they’ll help me a lot with homework. The make sure I’m on task doing the homework. And they help me keep my grades up. Also, I am always trying to stay on task, and oh, and [be] respectful and [listen] to the teacher.

William said if he were to give advice for future sixth graders, he would tell them that it is:

A harder experience than elementary but, you get to meet a lot more people and it can really help in the long run. The teachers, they help you a lot, they try to make things easier for you. I would say they are great. They care about you. I would say [Site] is full of average students, like the kinda the same as the elementary school. It's just the same students, but they become a little more social…. Work hard, ask for help when you need it. Don’t just sit there and think that you can do it all by yourself. [Because], if you think like that you usually can’t do it. Asking a parent, or a teacher, or maybe even asking a friend that is a little better than you or something like that, for help. [Try] your best, always try, always.

**Jared.** Jared was 12 years old at the time of his interviews. He described himself as “Hispanic and White…White from Irish and British.” He lived with both parents and his younger sister. Jared was a resident of the district and attended Feeder 3 Elementary School. Jared was the only participant to have repeated a grade: his parents held him back in Kindergarten. In his free time Jared enjoyed “reading, watching movies, playing on the phone, [and] watching videos.”
Jared’s standardized testing results from sixth grade met the standards for mathematics and exceeded the standards for English/language arts. He averaged a 4.00 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade he earned a 4.00 GPA. When asked why he was academically successful, Jared attributed his success to:

My parents definitely… They teach me how to be a good student, how to be respectful, and they always help with stuff like history and English. Getting my assignments in on time, being a good student, that is my primary focus…. One thing, I think that [helps] this is, like planning out how I would do projects, or just planning out how to do my homework…. For projects plan out each day, how much I’ll do for it, kinda, of pacing myself, but, but not really going really slowly, but going at a good pace in my work and making sure it’s all done

If asked to give advice to future sixth graders, Jared said he:

Would tell them to just ask for help. And just kinda work harder and kind of pay attention and don’t just always mess around in class. Maybe don’t focus, umm, maybe focus more on your classes than on other things. I would probably tell him to prepare for just all the different classes and not to stress out over anything, that everything will be okay. Everything in the end will be fine. I would tell [them]…not worry too much, that everything is going to be okay. You just gotta take everything one step at a time and you just really need to focus. You can’t just go, you can’t just mess around constantly, you have to be ready. You shouldn't freak out too much about the whole transition. And everything’s new, it’s just kind of, just, just, take everything one step at a time.

Zach. Zach was 12 at the time of the interviews. When ask with which race he identified with, he replied, “I’m not too sure, I’m not quite sure myself… I guess [I am] American and
Hispanic, but I don’t know the rest.” He lived with his parents and had no siblings. Zach attended Site as part of the DOC program and attended Feeder 1 Elementary School for his entire elementary career. He was identified for the district’s GATE program in the second grade. In his free time, Zach said he liked to “play games on the computer, mainly just computer stuff. Besides the computer, I guess it would be reading. I’ll be doing one of the two.”

Zach’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for both mathematics and English/language arts. He averaged a 3.5 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade, he earned a 3.5 GPA. When asked why he was successful in middle school, he answered, “I don’t know, I don’t think I changed… I changed my judgement of how much effort I used on my assignments.” He stated that he has “constant but minimal amounts of pressure” from himself and his parents, to do well.

Zach said that if he were speaking to future sixth graders, he would tell them to be prepared for a larger campus. He stated:

One thing I did struggle with from almost the first day of school is that my classes were literally, they were the whole school apart, and I still have that this year, and that was hard. I would tell [them] to prepare for that…like silly little things. Oh, like, I tripped on the very first step on the very first day of school, and um, but I would tell [them] not to do that.

Kevin. Kevin was a 13-year-old who described himself as “Hispanic.” He lived with his mom, step-dad, and step-sister. His step-sister was a year older and attended Crosstown Middle School. He was a resident of the district and attended fourth and fifth grade at Feeder 1 Elementary School. His earlier elementary years were in a neighboring district. In his free time, he liked “to play games. [He played] basketball…and video games. And yeah, that's it.”
Kevin’s standardized testing results from sixth grade nearly met the standards for both mathematics and English/language arts. He averaged a 3.00 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade, he earned a 3.00 GPA. When asked why he was successful, he answered:

Because I work hard, and I study, and I try my best, and I don’t get in trouble in class. I always do my homework straight when I get home, so I won’t forget, or anything can happen, so I can’t do it. I study a chapter, even before they announced the test. I like to study it advance, like read the chapter, or my notes, in advance, before I even know when the test is.

Kevin’s’ advice for future sixth graders focused on working hard, saying that to be successful they should:

Stop goofing around with their friends, if they do. And like, do your homework and not just like, do your homework fast, so you can do something else, but do your homework and I [would] tell them to pay attention in class… but [also] that you need to work a little bit harder because you’re not used to switching periods and getting all the information in lots of different classes. So, you have to work harder than just someone who’s already been in middle school. Also, honestly, I just I think they just need to work hard. Because anybody can do it.

Aidan. Aidan was 12 years old at the time of his interviews. He described himself as “Hispanic and African.” He lived with his parents, his younger sister, and, he said, “the occasional grandma.” He also had an older brother and step-brother who did not live with him. Aidan was a resident of the district and started his elementary education at Feeder 5 Elementary School. He was recommended for the GATE program in the third grade. He was homeschooled
for his fourth and fifth grade year through the district’s homeschool program. He was the only participant who did not attend a traditional fifth grade classroom.

Aidan’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for both mathematics and English/language arts. He averaged a 4.00 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade, he earned a 4.00 GPA. When asked why he was successful, he answered:

Because I always work the double…. I always work double what they ask me, usually, for some reason…. I do over the top stuff. I just don't do what the criteria asks me. I do that and more…. Well, I always keep up with my teachers. Well, I ask them if I missed any homework. I do the homework straight when I get home. Most people, like my mom, tells me, most people go on the TV. She doesn't want me to do that, or something like that, so I just do my homework, and those are the really only two things that I see helping me…. Oh, my mom always kept telling me to keep up my interactions with the teachers, like keeping good relationships with teachers always. That always helped me, so that was something I kept doing for seventh grade and that was something that has really helped me.

Aidan’s advice to future sixth graders was to:

Study, and push on your limits. Always do with the teacher asks. Make great connections with teachers, that something that’s always, like, really help me this past years. I guess you [can] never be lazy and if you know you don’t like school, then something’s wrong, and like, you [have to] fix it with your teachers, or someone…. Do your homework. Most of the time, kids fail because they don't do homework, and go a little extra on your projects.
Isaac. Isaac was 13 at the time of his interviews. He described himself as “Syrianic, but I come from Arabia.” Isaac lived with his mother, step-father, and two brothers; he was the middle child. Isaac was a resident of the district and attended Feeder 3 Elementary School.

Isaac’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for mathematics and met the standards for English/language arts. He averaged a 3.55 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade, he earned a 3.83 GPA.

Isaac was the only participant who was not born in the United States. He immigrated to the United States from Syria when he was 2 years old. Isaac entered school unable to speak English. He credited his Kindergarten teacher for his successful introduction to school:

My teacher knew that I did not know English very well, so she gave me easier tasks. So, maybe that’s why [I do well]. I got a really good boost into school. I was treated, like, well and the way I was supposed to be.

He said that in addition to the “boost” from his Kindergarten teacher, he was academically successful because he has:

Had the right help, I guess. Because with effort, and with support from friends, or family, or administrators, you can be successful no matter what. If you’re like really bad at something or if you’re really good, even if you’re gifted, you could still need help so maybe that’s the reason…. I’m definitely, like, disciplined, at least, a little, like something as little [as] like when [I] do homework, and getting stuff done, can be important and help you a lot, and like as you progress, and as, like, you make yourself more disciplined… You see yourself do better, and become more successful, so, you like, it it’s self-discipline. I have that, it, self-discipline.
If he were giving advice to future sixth graders, Isaac stated that he would advise them to get help and not:

Try to do it all by yourself, get help you can, it’s really simple. Or you can, like, look it up online to see. Like, if you’re struggling for something, you can like research it and maybe like you can find an answer. So, like I say, get help, but put effort into it…. I would also say have a lot of friends and a good reputation with teachers. Don’t, like ever, [try] to, like, to fail an assignment or procrastinate one. Just like do it, like, by chunks…. And if you do that, you become successful. And if you want to do outside things, like videos or games or some sports, you can always make time for them, but don’t like put off school for those things. And, yeah, try to do your best at school and if you want, have some, like, have hobbies to do, as well, in your free time.

Gabriel. Gabriel was 12 at the time of the interviews. He identified as “American and Mexican.” He lived with his parents and two brothers. In his free time Gabriel said, “I usually go on my xBox, or, um, watch Netflix.” He attended Feeder 3 Elementary School through the fourth grade and then was transferred to Feeder 2 Elementary School for the fifth grade; he attended Site as an inter-district transfer student.

Gabriel’s standardized testing results from sixth grade met the standards for both mathematics and English/language arts. He averaged a 3.33 GPA in the sixth grade. In his first semester of seventh grade, he earned a 3.33 GPA. When asked why he was successful, he replied:

I try. I don’t know, really…. I always do my homework after school. I like to do my homework right after school, well, I do get a snack first and then do it…. [I am] persistent, hard-working, sometimes. But, I try, I do try, I try.
Gabriel’s advice to future sixth graders was focused on how important he thought it was to try:

Don’t get on the teacher’s bad side. Be prepared, have your supplies too. Do what you have to, like, turning homework in on it on time, and paying attention…. Just try, mostly that’s what you have to do, you have to try. I don’t think there’s other advice, it’s just you’ve got to try.

Reo. Reo was 13 at the time of the interviews. He identified as “Japanese and Black, with a tiny bit of European.” Reo lived with his parents, younger brother, and a friend of his mother’s. Reo was a resident of the district and attended Feeder 3 Elementary School from Kindergarten through the fifth grade. In his free time, he liked to “play video games, go outside, and watch TV.”

Reo’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for mathematics and met them for English/language arts. He averaged a 3.33 GPA in the sixth grade. He earned a 3.17 GPA in his first semester of seventh grade.

When asked why he was successful, he replied, “I try hard, and I like school, and I like what I’m doing. Hmm, doing my homework in a certain order, like math first and then the history. Because it’s from hardest to easiest.” Reo’s advice to future sixth graders was based on his experience in needing to stay focused on managing his workload. He said to:

Stay focused on your work, so you can get it done fast. Because if, like, assignments can, and do, [pile] up and that creates a burden on you. That’s based off of my experience, and I, I needed to learn, better how to focus on my assignments, because that’s something I have trouble with…. I would say be confident, and still just turn in your assignment because they will pile up…. [You] should organize [yourself], stay on task, and stay
focused. Use the library homework club for help. It's really useful. Pay attention to your grades because that could actually really, really help, that's the other advice.

**Douglas.** Douglas was 12 at the time of his interviews. He identified as being “from near the equator in Vietnam.” He was born in the United States. He lived with his parents and younger sister. He attended Feeder 4 Elementary School for first grade, and Feeder 1 Elementary School for second through fifth grade. Douglas qualified for the GATE program in third grade. In his free time, Douglas said he liked “to watch TV, and play video games, and hang out with my friends, and maybe do a little studying or homework. And build models, like tanks and warships.”

Douglas’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for both mathematics and English/language arts. He averaged a 3.83 GPA in the sixth grade. He earned a 3.67 GPA in his first semester of seventh grade. When asked why he was successful, he replied:

> I am academically successful because at my house my dad, even though we already went through the lesson in class, he goes over the lesson with me, and I usually take lots of notes because I know it's going to help me on the test [be]cause most tests I've taken you get to use your notes on it. Also, I usually do my work, and all the reviews, and we usually use two days to go over the lesson, just to make sure we have it. … [I] write down things inside my planner, so that helps me a lot, and then I usually do my homework right when we get home, so I don't forget about it and like, last minute, have to do it and then, I have myself organized with different folders for different work and I usually pay attention in class.

Douglas’s advice to future sixth graders focused on behaviors that supported academic achievement. He advised them:
Always do your homework, even if you don't get it, you can always ask for help, take good notes, pay attention in class, instead of, like, playing around with like whatever fad is out, and always… take very detailed and good notes, and annotate texts, and do examples, look at examples in books.

Kyle. Kyle was 13 at the time of the interviews. He identified as “Hispanic” and lived with his parents, an older brother, and two younger sisters. He was a resident of the district. Kyle attended Kindergarten through the fifth grade at Feeder 3 Elementary School. Kyle participated in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program at Site. In his free time, he enjoyed sports and video games.

Kyle’s standardized testing results from sixth grade met the standards for mathematics and nearly met them in English/language arts. He averaged a 3.25 GPA in the sixth grade. He earned a 4.0 GPA in his first semester of seventh grade. When asked why he was successful, he replied:

Well, not procrastinating and putting everything off until the last second. Doing my homework, the day I get it. Working on my projects that have a due date later, yeah, well and whenever there’s something big coming, sorta going to the library during lunch with my friends and forming a study group.

To future sixth graders, he recommended seizing the opportunities available to them at Site. He encouraged them to:

Take every chance you get that and every opportunity that you have, to get help. Like tutoring, or just asking a teacher, or another student. Like just a question on how to do this. I would tell them just to get ready for having multiple teachers, and moving around more, and memorizing, your, your classes.
Mike. Mike was 13 at the time of the interviews. Mike lived with his parents, older brother, and younger sister. He identified as “Hispanic.” Mike was a resident of the district, having moved from a neighboring district in the middle of his fifth-grade year; he attended Feeder 2 Elementary School. In his free time, he liked to “play on my phone and play baseball.”

Mike’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for mathematics and met them in English/language arts. He averaged a 3.67 GPA in the sixth grade. He earned a 3.67 GPA in his first semester of seventh grade. When asked why he was successful, he gave credit to his family, saying:

I think my family for just pushing me to the point where I don’t hate school, but where I’ll be like, "All right I have to do this!" And it’s more like alright I have to do this! It is just adjusting to it…. I look forward to the reward or something and that’s what my parents always taught me, success in life comes from doing work, but you get a reward, like you’re not doing something for nothing. I mean sometimes you will do something on your own to be good and then it will make you make you feel good about yourself and it’s not a real reward, but you know you did something that makes you feel good about yourself. And you’ll feel really good about what you did, and that is what I really like, along with everybody supporting you.

Mike advised future sixth graders to:

Do all your work and have fun. Because in middle school, it is harder it will not be just like one class or one teacher, and you get stressed out…. Expand [your friend group.] just know everybody, get to know everything, get to know everybody, and do your work…. Just try to be the best, do all you can. Get in on Pre-AP classes, get in on AVID. And then
maybe it is the little things, like doing his homework, studying a little bit more, doing his extra credit. But it pays off in the end.

**Collin.** Collin was 13 at the time of the interviews. He identified as “Caucasian.” He lived with both parents, a younger sister, and a younger brother. Collin was a resident of the district and spent his elementary years at Feeder 3 Elementary School. He was recommended to the district’s GATE program in his third-grade year. When he has free time, Collin said, “I play video games. I read. I do Kahn Academy.”

Collin’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for mathematics and met them in English/language arts. He averaged a 4.0 GPA in the sixth grade. He earned a 4.0 GPA in his first semester of seventh grade. When asked why he was successful, he replied:

Because I am organized, and I study. All because I am organized, I just follow a certain amount of steps when I need to. Studying for tests, keeping the planner and using it every night for a checklist, organizing my backpack, that would be all.

Collin’s advice for future sixth graders was that organization was an important skill for the change to middle school. He stated:

You have to be organized…. It was manageable for me because I was organized, I had organization and that was a really big key; to my success that was the key… You just try your best. You gotta try to do that…. You should be confident and don’t be scared, because really, it’s just fun.

**Vihaan.** Vihaan was 12 at the time of the interviews. He identified as being an American Indian, meaning that his family was from India and he was American, not that he had Native American heritage. Vihaan lived with his parents and older sister. He was a resident of the
district and attended Feeder 2 Elementary School from first through fifth grade. He attended Kindergarten at a private school in the town where Site is located. Vihaan was identified for the district’s GATE program in his second-grade year. When asked how he liked to spend his free time, he replied, “I either like to read play a little bit of video games, just for some entertainment, read, or play soccer, and maybe study a little.”

Vihaan’s standardized testing results from sixth grade exceeded the standards for mathematics and met them in English/language arts. He averaged a 4.0 GPA in the sixth grade. He earned a 4.0 GPA in his first semester of seventh grade. When asked why he was successful, he replied:

I would always do my homework first. I would always organize my things the way they should be. Like every day and like on, the weekend, like on Friday. So, when I’m doing homework for Friday, because like, I had some in some classes, so I would really work homework, and I would usually just [organize], and on, or on, Saturday [or] Sunday, if I was bored I would just organize. I would organize my binder, I would organize [and] if I found like straggling, like the missing assignment[s,] so, that’s why I would, that is why I would organize every weekend. Because like, if I would organize every month, and I [found] a missing assignment that I can’t turn it in as fast. And I would check [the on-line grade portal] every other single, other day, so yeah.

Vihaan advised future middle schoolers that they should be social, but at the appropriate times, saying that they should not:

Be scared because the teachers out there are trying to help you. And also, if you're being like, I don't know, you're being a little too playful, you should study more. Okay, so you should always be respectful, be socialized, so don't just like be respectful to [classmates]
around you, be respectful to the teacher. Also, socialize more often, so you can have more friends, more groups. Because, if you have more groups, you can have a group for playing, you can have a group for studying, [and] you can have a group for everything.

**Tyler.** Tyler was 12 at the time of the interviews. He identified as “half-Mexican and half, I believe, I can't remember the name of my mom's race, but it’s a White one.” Tyler lived with his mother and older sister. He had attended Feeder 2 Elementary School since the second grade. He attended Kindergarten and first grade in a neighboring district; he attended Site as part of the DOC program. In his free time, Tyler said he liked to “go outside with my friends and I do like to play video games with other people, or just by myself.” When asked why he thought he was academically successful, Tyler said:

I always try to do my best, always. Whether it's tests or projects or just regular homework and classwork, I always try and do my best on it…. I like having my family be proud of me, like, “Oh, Tyler, good job, you did this, and you did this,” or it would be maybe friends at school, if they see what I've achieved, they would probably be all, “You did good in this, or you did good in that.” I … try to ... not to be, “It’s all about me,” but have people sometimes be nice to me, and comment on it.

Tyler’s advice to future six graders focused on finding something of interest at school to help them do well. He advised:

Get help, and make sure you find something that you like. I found a subject that I very enjoy, and I like it a lot. Maybe, if they find their subject, and they do well at that, that would make them strive to do well at the other subjects…. Make sure you find the best [friend] group, and the best subject that you're good at and that you enjoy, so maybe you could go and try to do the other subjects and get it.
### Table 2

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial self-identification</th>
<th>State racial identification</th>
<th>Household Residents</th>
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Table 4

*Frequency Data*

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**Data Collection**

The 15 participants in this study were enrolled at Site Middle School for the sixth grade (the transition year). Each boy also had completed his first semester of the seventh-grade at Site.

Before their participation, each student and his parent signed a consent form. Prior to each interview, the participant was asked again for his consent to participate, reminded of informed
consent protocols, and asked for permission to record the interview. Interviews took place in a school conference room or, for three participants, in the local municipal library’s conference room. Along with the interviewer and participant, one of two adult witnesses attended all interviews. These adult witnesses were in the room during all interviews, but they did not contribute to data collection, they were not related to or known by the participants, nor were they staff members at Site Middle School.

**Interviews**

Each participant sat for three interviews, following the interview process designed by Dolbeare and Schuman and advocated by I. Seidman (2006). This process allows for an understanding of the participant’s experience as it exists in context. The first interview focused on the participant’s experiences in school prior to the transition. The second interview focused on the details of the transition. The final interview focused on the meaning-making the participant had engaged in and what it meant to him to be academically successful through the transition to middle school. Interview data was analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological reduction. This analysis is explained in the next section.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process included several steps, as detailed in this section: transcription, coding, organizing of codes, and the development of themes.

**Transcription.** Each interview was transcribed as soon as possible after its completion. The transcription was accomplished with the assistance of Dragon Naturally Speaking (Dragon) voice recognition software. Each interview was first played aloud. Dragon produced a text file from the spoken words. Next, while listening to the interviews again, the interview text was
proofread and any necessary adjustments to the transcript were made. After these adjustments, each transcript was listened to and read three times. This allowed for focus on each individual’s words rather than on the process of transcription. These repeated readings provided an immersion into the data, as recommended by Creswell (2013), and helped build an understanding of the participants’ perceptions.

**Coding.** After the third reading, each transcript was printed, reread, and annotated. This step included notating in the margins, underlining key terms, and highlighting significant statements that stood out from the transcript. After annotation, the transcripts were imported into the MAXQDA analysis program. Using the written transcripts as a starting point, the transcripts were coded. After this initial coding, each transcript was reviewed for elements that were relevant to the study’s central and subquestions. The coding process generated 2,808 codes.

Next, the codes were reviewed and codes of similar meaning were combined. As the combining progressed, overarching themes, and subthemes that supported them began to appear in the coding matrix. These codes were then sorted into groups that answered each research question.

**Themes.** After the phenomenological reduction was completed, several themes relating to the research questions emerged from the data. Six themes appeared in response to the central research question: (a) *Fear of the middle school unknowns*, (b) *Fear didn’t last long*, (c) *There was a quick adjustment to middle school*, (d) *The expectation of parents*, (e) *Academic success is more than just good grades*, and (f) *Gender observations*. Four themes arose in response to Subquestion 1, elements that supported the boys’ academic success in the transition year: (a) *Friendships*, (b) *Getting help*, (c) *Teachers*, and (d) *High expectations of self*. Finally, four themes emerged in response to Subquestion 2, elements that hindered academic success: (a)
Pacing in the classroom, (b) Less attention from teachers, (c) An added workload when working with classmates, and (d) Distractions and disruptions in the classroom.

The following sections discuss these themes as they relate to each of the study’s research questions. Throughout each section, participant quotes are used to illustrate the themes and to provide support for the answers to the research questions as interpreted during data analysis. These themes are used to describe the participant’s experiences as an academically successful boy during the transition to middle school.

**How was the Transition Experienced?**

The study’s central question explored how the participants experienced the transition. Six themes emerged from the analysis to answer this central question. The first of these themes was the fear of the unknown elements of middle school. This theme had four subthemes that revolved around fear: (a) Mean teachers, (b) Getting in trouble, (c) Academic rigor, and (d) Attending multiple classes. The second theme was that their initial fears of transferring to middle school were unfounded. The third theme was being able to quickly adjust to middle school. The fourth theme was that students perceived that their parents did not expect them to get perfect grades during the transition year. A fifth theme was that they believed that being academically successful was more than just getting good grades. The sixth and final theme was gender observations, which revealed that students perceived different treatment on campus for boys and girls; however, they validated the need for this differing treatment. These themes are discussed in the following subsections.

**Fear of the Middle School Unknowns**

Each participant noted being very nervous as he started his sixth-grade transition, and these experiences were often described in terms of fear. Most participants mentioned being
fearful or intimidated by the unknowns of middle school. Vihaan started off sharing his experiences of the transition with the statement: “I thought sixth grade would be a little intimidating.” After listing several things he was nervous about during the initial transition period, Aidan commented, “And I was scared, yeah scared, just in general!” Gabriel noted, “I was nervous because I didn’t really know what was going to happen.” Thomas referred to the start of the transition as a time of “anxiety, no fearfulness, fearfulness, I was pretty scared.” Kevin remembered, “I was really scared, I didn’t want to go, yeah, I was, ah, so scared.” While participant fears revolved around several different elements of the middle school environment, four items were mentioned most often: mean teachers, getting in trouble for breaking the rules, the amount and difficulty of academic work, and attending multiple classes.

**Fear of mean teachers.** Several participants expressed fears about the teachers they would have. Mike stated, “I was really, kinda nervous of the teachers and the staff.” Douglas was concerned about “if the teachers were going to be nice or mean.” While discussing his initial transition, Isaac stated, “I felt like every teacher would be mean.” When discussing his worries about his transition, William stated, “I thought the teachers were going to be really mean.” He explained his concern by saying, “[Be]cause if they were mean, you’re stuck with them for the whole year. When teachers are mean, it, it is kind of hard to work with them.” In addition, Zach was concerned about the number of teachers he would now be dealing with: “Like [we had] a different teacher for every subject, we had multiple teachers, all with different personalities. I didn’t know what to expect. Who was going to be nice, calm, and who was going to be not nice?” Reo advised, “[There is] no need to fear the teachers. At first like I thought the teachers were to be like very, very, very, strict and they are strict, but not as much as I expected, and in a nice way.”
Fear of getting into trouble. Reflecting on his feelings as he entered sixth grade, Gabriel stated, “I was kinda nervous, a little bit, because I didn’t want to mess up.” Jared stated, “I tried to make sure to pay attention to different rules, so I wasn’t like, breaking a rule by accident.” Kevin noted that the school-wide discipline system’s policies were confusing, and he feared the consequences of not meeting an expectation on campus:

The discipline system, I wasn’t used to that. I never had that before, and, like, I was always afraid to get in trouble. I was really afraid to get my first card pull. I didn’t realize that you needed to get like three card pulls, like three, in like, the week, to get detention. So, I was really worried for that.

Tyler noted a similar fear of breaking the rules:

I was a very nervous, well afraid probably, that I was going do something wrong.

Because like, the teachers, they were kind at the beginning, but after the, well, about the first week-and-a-half they were like treating us like we had been there for a long while; they expected us to know [the rules] and so that was a little bit nerve-racking.

Fear of academic rigor. Participants expressed fear over the amount and complexity of the work they were going to be expected to do. William reported, “I was thinking about more and more homework, really a lot of homework.” Aidan stated, “I thought it would be huge stacks of homework and not as fun as elementary school.” While discussing his fears at the beginning of the transition year, Collin stated, “I didn’t know if I was going to be like able to do my homework, enough. Because they said there can be a lot more homework.” Tyler contributed:

People always said at the beginning of middle school, “[the work’s] gonna be so much,” I was worried. I always thought in my mind, like “Oh it’s going to be so hard,” but, I mean
I knew it was going to be a change, probably a big one, and so I remember preparing…I was mentally preparing.

While discussing the workload he had predicted for sixth grade, Mike reflected:

So, the workload is a big part of the transition. I mean that scared me, I mean I figured like it was going to be crazy hard, but I predicted way too much. Before I went to middle school, I was like, “Gosh 14 pages of homework every day!” But, actually, it wasn’t that much!

Several participants expressed fears over how difficult their school work was going to be. Jared shared, “I thought [the work] was going to be very difficult…and I thought it was going to be very different.” Kevin stated, “I was just scared of what we were going to learn. I thought it was going to be really hard.” Gabriel shared his fear, reporting:

I kinda felt like, I wasn’t sure if I could do [the work]. I felt like since it was sixth grade, well, I thought it was going to be a bigger jump. A bigger jump, like, in how hard the work was going to be.

Isaac had great concerns over the complexity and said:

I thought like that we were going to have to do like high school-standard work, and like, we’d be expected to be able to do, like, a lot more…I thought would have to like write essays every single day. And be, like gifted, in every single subject, and kinda, like, you know, it was like a little nerve-racking to feel, like, I can’t do that!

Aidan and Thomas each expressed fear that the amount and difficulty of the work he was going to face was going to impact his ability to get good grades. Aidan stated, “I was scared that I wasn’t to be able to do my homework on time because there would be so much and then I was
scared that I wasn’t going to get good grades.” Similarly, Thomas stated that he thought “it was going to be really hard. I thought I was going to get really bad grades.”

**Fear of multiple classes.** In addition to fears about the amount and complexity of the work they were going to be expected to do, several participants related a fear of having multiple classes. Collin focused on the need to move between classes in a timely manner, relating: “The transition with the classes, I thought like there wouldn’t be enough time. But, as I did it, there was more than enough time to do what I needed to do.” Jared expressed a fear of keeping organized, saying: “We would have a whole class, have a separate class dedicated to PE every day. We have separate classes for every subject. I thought it was going to be very different and maybe difficult to keep straighten, um, organized.” Kevin revealed that he feared getting lost as he navigated between multiple classes:

I thought it was going to be like super hard, like math, and changing classes, and that it was, like, going to be bad…. I was worried. Switching periods that was scary to me… I thought it was going to be like really different. I thought I was going [to be] lost with lots of different periods, but it wasn’t bad, really, it was easy to find the rooms and it was not that bad.

Isaac admitted that he thought having to go to six classes was a “joke” that was being played on him, disclosing:

Something intimidating, I think, was the class, like, the six-class system, like that… I thought it was a joke, like people were messing with me. Like six classes really? Like, no, that can’t happen, like one class is all you need…. When it came, and I actually like saw it [my schedule] and I’m like, I actually have to go to six classes. And I was like
scared, not like totally scared, but like really surprised. I, like, never totally expected to
go to six different classes and I was sure it was going to be so hard.

Collin said he was concerned that having multiple classes would be, “Tough, because, like, you
had to get to class, and you had to remember everything, and it was like all different homework
assignments.”

**Initial Fears of Difficulty Unfounded**

Each of the participants related that though he was very concerned about the amount and
difficulty of the work that was going to be expected of him in sixth grade, but many found that
their fears were generally unsubstantiated.

Zach offered, “Academically, my first half of middle school has been simple, nothing
surprised me, it was actually quite underwhelming, not only academically, but the [middle
school] concept… Learning has been quite easy with an occasional problem here or there.” Reo
stated:

I thought the work, I thought it was going to be hard and different. It was a lot different,
but it's easier than I thought it was going to be. I also expected more homework, like,
basically, it’s kind of the same or just a little more than it was [in fifth grade].

Jared needed some self-talk to calm his nerves:

I didn’t feel like I was going to do very well, at first. And then I realized that I just had to
tell myself to calm down. I would take it one step that one step at a time and I realized
[the work] wasn’t as difficult as I thought it was going to be.

After discussing his fears of the amount and difficulty of the work he was expecting,
William related:
It was real confusing at first. Then, after a couple of weeks, you get it. You realize what you’re supposed to do and what you’re not supposed to do…. I had expectations, but none of them were met… they said the teachers were going to give you homework in every period, and like two projects, and, and, I realized none of that was true.

Kevin contributed that he was sure:

[The amount of work] was like going to be bad. But that was like all wrong, it was all fine, and I got used to it, and like the math wasn’t really that hard. I, I just had to get used to it and then no problem.

Thomas expressed that after the first few days he realized:

It was going to be fine and that I was probably going to get good grades. First, I was a bit anxious, and nervous because it seemed, it seemed new to me. And so [the] school, it was bigger than my elementary school…when I got there it was just it was just elementary school in a little bigger [building] and it was a different grading system, so I felt better about it after.

Isaac recalled:

I felt like we were supposed to have like high school-standard work, and I was pretty scared, but at the end of the day, it wasn’t. I was really well prepared for it. It wasn’t anything I couldn’t do. And I’m really thankful for that… I thought like maybe I wasn’t ready for that much, but as it turned out that never happened, everything went well…. It was fair. I didn’t really think we had too much or too little. But like a project once in a while, but then again, those weren’t that difficult. So, yeah, I think the teachers give us a good amount not too little not too much.

Vihaan related:
[At] first, I thought my homework was going to take way too long. At first, it didn’t take too long, it was just moderate. It was more than elementary school, but it’s not too much more, and it wasn’t like higher grade, like high school-level homework.

Collin revealed that his fears about school work did not materialize either. Instead, he claimed:

I felt good because, like, those first few days, they like helped us to get to know which classes to go to, and the, like all the subjects, were pretty easy… I mean occasionally there [were] times where there seems like there’s not enough time or there’s days that seem like every class has something big going on. So, it’s feels like a little much, but it usually stays in a very good place. I think it’s doable…. it’s really easy once you get into the habit of going to each class. It was something that could be “done.” (participant used air quotes around the word done).

Kyle summarized: “Nothing is expected by us that we are not capable of. I mean there’s nothing that they expect from us that we can’t do, I don’t think that pressure is there.”

**Adjustment Does not Take Long**

Many participants expressed that it took time to get used to the new environment of middle school; however, several noted that the adjustment did not take very long. While discussing his first few weeks in the sixth grade, Tyler revealed: “I remember catching on pretty quickly, I think it was just like my schedule, I did pretty well learning my schedule and that made it easier.” Douglas thought, “After a week or so I felt more comfortable and better. It felt normal to go to school and do all the activities after that…It didn't really take me that long.”

Kevin shared:
[For the] first couple weeks it was different, but I got used it really fast…. but I got used to it. It wasn’t like too bad after a while, like may be two weeks… Sixth grade is not that bad, you like you get used to it, just like you got used to fourth grade or other grades. Like, middle school is different, and you have six periods and stuff, but you’ll always get used to it

Isaac spoke of how he felt that he:

Was jumping into the new system [and it] was totally weird. But, like, over just a little time, like, you adapt to it. And it becomes natural. And you go on from there. After a few days, like I knew everything. Like, [I had] a good grasp of what was going on. I thought to myself, like “Yeah, like, I can handle the six classes and everything else that’s coming at me and keep myself organized.” Like I said, over time you get you get used to it, and you go on from there.

Kyle explained:

[I] felt nervous for the transition, but then I got comfortable after a short while. And then nothing, nothing really changed much. Except, I had to move around more to get from class to class and [I had to get] used to all the new faces that were around me. It didn’t take long to get used to middle school.

Mike shared:

It’s kinda like anything. In your head there’s like an imprint like you already know things are easy, but everything is not at first. When you do it, it just gets easier. It is like a higher road with just more steps that you’re taking, but it gets easier and easier because you get used to it.
Expectations to Do Well, but Not for Perfection

The third theme that emerged while discussing their academic success as they transitioned to middle school was not being held to a perfect standard. Many participants shared that while their parents expected them to do well, they did not expect or pressure them to get straight A’s. Mike shared that his parents were:

Really, really cool, how they never … said like “I expect you to get this grade,” they were always just really cool about it…. My parents were always like you need to do your schoolwork, but you have to be a person too. You can’t just devote yourself to [school]. You have other things to do, but school’s first… But my parents were never really like, “You have to do this and if you don’t blah, blah, blah, we’re gonna punish you if you don’t do this.” It was, like, you do what you have to do to be successful, and it’s like, if you do this, you’ll have a reward.

Gabriel shared that though he didn’t know exactly what his parents expected, rather inferring: “I was supposed to get like Bs or higher. It was kinda just, it wasn’t really discussed with me…. I think, so, I just kind of knew what they wanted from me.” Jared explained that from his parents he:

Didn’t really feel too much pressure to get good grades, uh I just really want to, I didn’t wanna just fail too much…. I think they didn’t care too much that I, was, um, like they were proud of me for like getting good grades, but they weren’t, uh pushing me really hard. If I didn’t do great in a subject, like, they weren’t, they would still push me, but like, they wouldn’t like, go crazy if I got like, a B in a grade, uh, in a class.

William shared, “My mom wanted me to get fours, like As, all the time, but she didn’t get mad if I [didn’t]” Similarly, Aidan shared about his mom:
I know some kids they tell me that their parents expect them to [get good grades,] but my mom is different. She was like, “I know you can get A’s very easily, but if you ever get a B on the report card that’s okay. I know you tried your best.” So, she was very understanding if I had not a good grade, but I would, I would exceed myself to make her happy and so then I would, generally, would get good grades.

Like Aidan and William, Vihaan expressed that while his parents did expect him to do well they:

Wouldn’t be mad if I got like, a B+, they would get mad if I got a B- because they want me to be over exceeding, not just average…. So, I always have to get above an A- for [my parents] to be really happy, but they wouldn’t let me buy, like, my video games or toys if I didn’t get an A- or higher.

**Academic Success is More than just Good Grades**

As the participants discussed their middle school transition experiences, many shared that they saw being academically successful as something other than just getting good grades. While the participants did set (and worked to maintain) passing grade point averages for themselves, they also believed that qualities like character, grit, trying, and attitude about school were important elements of academic success. While discussing what his academic success meant to him, Jared shared:

It means to not only focus on grades, but to also be a good student, not to be like a jerk to anyone, not to be a bully, just kind of make sure I get good grades, but also [to] be a good person and mature…. [My grades] have come to mean to me, a very important something that leads to success. So, good grades are a big part of success, but they’re not like everything.
Zach shared that grades were important, but that his academic success was an indicator that he was meeting “the requirements or above…[and] I am doing a good job and keep[ing] up the good work. It reminds me, don’t slack off and keep following the rules, keep doing good work habits and citizenship too” According to Aidan, academic success “means making the teacher happy. Not getting all A’s, but learning more than what you're supposed to know.” Kevin stated that his academic success not only meant, “getting all A’s and B’s and not failing any class.” but also that he shouldn’t “be getting in trouble and not getting any Ns [in citizenship or work habit grades]” as well.

Reo described academic success as: “Trying your best and trying your best to get good grades. It’s about doing your work all the time.” Collin also described his academic success in terms of “trying his best,” saying: “[Academic success] means trying my best and getting the best grades possible.”

Mike shared that his academic success meant that he had:

Good grades and good behavior. And I kind of feel that when you’re academically successful they have like a stereotype where you are like quiet, smart, and you don’t hang out with people. And I kinda don’t like that and I feel like you can be academically successful and actually have a social life. Being social is part of being academically successful, or success at all.

**Observations of Gender Differences**

While discussing the concept of gender in the classroom, none of the participants perceived that their female classmates were treated differently in the academic classroom, or that they had academic opportunities or expectations that their female classmates did not, or vice versa. In addition, none of the participants reported that they felt that they had to do well because
of being a boy. Both Jared and Mike stressed that this expectation did not exist at Site in their opinion. Jared shared, “It’s not like that, we are all expected to do well, not just boys, it’s not like that.” Mike said:

I am not expected to do well because I am a boy, I am just expected to do well, because that’s what is expected of everyone, period. Being a boy has nothing to do with it…nobody treats anybody, like, girls are expected to do more, and boys are treated like they’re expected to do less.

Collin concurred, stating: “We get to do the same things and have the same expectations of what we [are] supposed to, can do. It doesn’t depend on the gender…it’s not because they’re a boy or a girl.”

Though they did not perceive that they had different expectations academically due to their gender, many of the participants did note differences in the way each gender’s behavior influenced how they were treated on campus. Several participants shared that they perceived boys were treated differently on campus. Mike shared:

I feel like boys sometimes are treated a little more, like, as a challenge because we act a little more tough. Whereas girls are treated more like adults because they act more like adults. I mean some girls don’t, but most do in my opinion…. It is more I think boys are treated more like children because we act more like children sometimes. I think girls are more mature. I mean if you do something, if you act like that, and I think boys are like little kids, so they can get treated like that more.

Jared also touched on maturity while discussing how he perceived the genders are treated differently on campus, saying: “Sometimes the boys could be a little more, like, like more young. Sometimes, like, they just act like little kids.” Thomas agreed that girls were “not [treated]
differently in terms of like, classwork, but the boys are more disruptive. They get in trouble more.” Kyle related that, “from my perspective, boys are treated the same [in class]. The only reason I think [it is different] is in the library, is because we are typically louder than other people, so boys are quieted more than girls.”

Douglas discussed two spaces where he saw a differing treatment of girls than that of boys on campus. He first shared about the lunch area, saying: “I see the lunch aide usually just getting boys in trouble, instead of just both boys and girls…. Some girls do the same thing that the boys are doing… but they never get in trouble.” He also pointed out a difference in PE, saying:

In gym when we play, like, dodge ball, the girls sort of get an unfair advantage at dodge ball 'cause they get way more people than the boys 'cause I think the PE teacher thinks the girls need help, but the boys usually get taken out, like, get out first, and the girls usually just still end up beating us, so I think the girls just get an unfair advantage.

Three participants shared observations of a gender discrepancy on campus. As Jared discussed his classes, he noted that he had “noticed, well maybe, it’s just a little uneven in more advanced classes, just because there seems to be more girls in those classes, so it seems just to be a little uneven there, but otherwise [the opportunities] seem to be pretty even.” Reo offered:

I notice there's more girls, like doing better. It may just be just out of chance, yeah, there's more girls that do better academically. Maybe it's because I noticed that a lot of, well, it's usually the boys that are distracting.

When discussing issues of gender on campus classroom, Aidan highlighted: “Yes [the treatment was the same], although all the teachers were female.”
Summation of the Transition Experience

From the participants’ perspectives, the transition to middle school was initially a time of fear, with worries about teachers, academic rigor, getting in trouble, and multiple classes. A major influence on academic success for the participants was that many of the fears and worries they had about transition to middle school were unfounded. Participants communicated that many of the things that caused them fear about the transition never materialized. They revealed that the teachers were not mean, the work was manageable, and attending multiple classes was easier than they had foreseen. In addition, the group expressed that they did not feel pressure from their parents to be perfect students or to achieve straight A’s. They also maintained that academic success was something more than just good grades. Qualities of character and behavior were stressed as being an important part of academic success, as well. Finally, they experienced an environment where academically they felt they were treated no differently than girls at Site.

The next section discusses the themes found in response to Subquestion 1, the supports for academic success during the transition.

Supporting Academic Success

The first subquestion explored the environmental elements the participants perceived as supporting their academic achievement during their transition to middle school. Four themes emerged from the data to answer the study’s first subquestion. The first was the importance of friendships. Two subthemes emerged for this theme: (a) A goal was wanting to make friends and (b) Friends provide academic and emotional support. Next, participants voiced that getting the help and support they needed was an important element that supported their academic achievement. Two subthemes emerged for this theme: (a) Getting help at school and (b) Receiving support from family members. Third, their teachers’ ability to teach their subject
matter played an important role in their academic success. Participants noted that their teachers being good at their jobs was an important element for success. Finally, analysis revealed that the participants held high expectations for their own academic achievement. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: (a) *Working to actively maintain good grades* and (b) *Not getting behind on their school work*. Each of these themes is presented in the following subsections.

**Friendships**

The social aspect of middle school and friends was referred to often in the interviews. Many of the participants shared instances of how their friendships influenced their transition. Two themes about friendship emerged during analysis. First, a goal of many was to make friends once they got to middle school. The second theme was that their friendships provided both academic and social support.

**Making friends is a goal.** Several students were nervous because they did not know anyone. Aidan noted that, since he was homeschooled in sixth grade, he feared his classmates would have “a social advantage, you know they would have friends that they made back in elementary school.” He explained:

All my friends I [had] were going to go to Crosstown Middle School. I didn’t know anybody, and I was quite scared, but and I ended up making friends within the first few, within like the second or third week basically, that made a difference. Without having the friends…it would be really hard.

Thomas shared a similar problem: “I only had a couple of friends that went to [Site.] the rest of them went to Crosstown Middle School. So, so my social goal, it was just talking to more people and making new friends.” Kevin shared that it was making friends that he “was most nervous about, but [I]…made friends. I was scared that people were going to be mean… Yeah, I
really thought they were going to be mean. But no, they turned out, like, they're nice, they're nice to me.” A reason Reo gave for his transition being successful was: “I made new friends I met new people. I met a lot of people, [making friends] wasn’t that hard to do it.” Mike explained that he:

Didn’t really know anybody because I’d just [started district] schools. But nobody that went to my elementary school were in any of my classes, so I was kind of freaked out…. I didn’t have that one friend. I had to kind of had to [find a friend] on my own. But I like got my friend group, that like took me in, and we were all new which was just what was crazy about middle school. Everybody didn’t have their stylish friend group yet. We were all looking for a friend group. It was my friends that helped me get used to everything, without them, I don’t know, sixth grade would have been really hard.

Vihaan wanted to make more friends. He disclosed that he wasn’t really popular in elementary school:

I wanted to make new friends because I only had like three or four friends at my old school, and so I wanted to make friends. So, like, the first few weeks, I didn’t make any, so I was just still getting used to the school, but, but when I found my friends, the ones that I needed, the ones I wanted, the ones that fit me the most, it was great because then I felt I had, actually, actually had friends around this place and I wasn’t going to be just alone… I made some very good friends, like, like later on in the year, very good friends, I still hang with them these, these days.

As he was starting the sixth grade Tyler said he was:
Ready to meet new people. I think it was pretty fun to meet new friends. Before at school, I think I had like one or two friends, but I had friends that went to other elementary schools. So, I had fun seeing them, like being at the same school that I was at. Douglas shared that he too:

Hope[ed] to make friends that I can ... know when I get older. [Be]cause, I know having lots of friends is good, because then the bullies won't pick on you, but you have a bigger group of friends, and you don't like hook onto one person and then they just end up not being a good friend.

**Friendships provide academic and emotional support.** Having friends who could support them also influenced the participants as they transitioned to middle school. Zach mentioned:

In all six of my periods, I was, I had, two friends. They went with me to all six periods for the whole year. It was a great experience. It could get annoying at times, but it was a great experience. Actually, there were five of us that all had the same classes through the whole year. It’s just that three of us where friends….it helped with small things. Like if you were absent, of course, and if you didn’t understand something, they are there, and if they don’t understand something you’re there. It’s beneficial, to both of you.

Thomas stated that even though he knew he could get help from his teachers, he would often go “to a friend because I am most comfortable around them, and they’ve helped me before.” Vihaan shared:

Me and my two friends, who, we had the same classes for every single class, so that was very cool. So, we had the very same schedule, yes, the same PE teacher as well, so, so we could just go with each other the whole time and it was fun…. I would either help my
friend with their homework or compare answers and we would help each other study for a test. Because we all had the same classes, we would go in the same order, so we would help each other with each class, whether we are taking a test or going to the library if we needed something.

Kevin stated that his friends also provided academic support: “On …my first day of middle school I was well, I was nervous…and I saw my friends which comforted me…and when I miss school, I would ask a friend for assignments or notes.” While discussing the things he thought made a difference in his transition, Collin proclaimed, “For me it was my friends. My friends that were in the middle school with me…. I had friends, which helps me, so yeah [they] made [school] easier and not hard for me.” Tyler felt the same way, saying: “A lot of my friends are very helpful. Having friends made school easier.”

Isaac revealed that his friends were a valuable source of support during his transition year, helping him not only with academic needs, but psychological needs as well:

I always kept in contact with my friends. So, if, like I had some hard times, I could like, basically talk to them. So… that would keep me comfortable. And I basically, never really like got into serious trouble. I did get into trouble once in sixth grade for a not great decision in my life, but I got through them and I did fix them or most of them and, and, and like so to get myself through, I just talked to my friends. It made a difference, having them made a big difference in my time in the sixth grade. I’m not sure what it would have been like without them, maybe not so good as it was.

**Getting the Help You Need Supports Success**

Having the academic and social support they needed was a theme that appeared as the participants discussed their successful transition. Two subthemes emerged within this theme: (a)
the availability of help at Site and (b) the ability to rely on family members for support. These subthemes are discussed in this subsection.

**Availability of help at Site.** Collin said, “I had so many people to go ask if I needed any help with anything. I have so many people that could tell me what to do.” Tyler advised: “Going into sixth grade, make sure, maybe, if you need help, go to either to family around you or teachers or stuff like that. There’s a lot of help on campus.” He shared that he would “[ask] the teacher about it, or fellow students that are in the same class as me, but it is easy to get help.” Kyle concurred: “Take every chance you get, and every opportunity that you have, to get help. Like tutoring, or just asking a teacher, or another student, like, just a question on how to do this.”

Isaac stated: “If you are to be academically successful, you have to get the right support. So, you can, so if you’re not academically successful, you can be successful by getting right the right help. You need like the right aid, like when you need it.” He continued:

Support and help… without that, I’m not sure anyone can get anywhere. I mean people have gotten by without help, but I think they had it rough. Well someone who supports you, and, and, I think, like, you know, not just like, having friends and but, like having parents help you and everything. Like I said, like, support. Learning the material can be easy and if you don’t understand it, here you can easily get in contact with the teacher or a friend and asked for help…. Get the help you can, it’s really simple here.

Mike shared that he used several campus resources to get the help he needed. This included morning math tutorials and an after-school AVID tutoring session:

I didn’t go to homework club until this year, but I did the math tutorials tutoring in the morning when I didn't really understand the homework, or when I was behind on understanding something. I never did it to over-understand something, but because I
needed more help…. Then I got help in AVID tutoring. I would force myself to go, even if I didn’t want to go, because it was help, because it was just doing your homework, and if you have a question or a concept you don’t understand there, it’s cool, they’ll just explain it to you.

As he discussed his appreciation for the willingness of his teachers to offer extra help, William commented:

I liked how, if you got confused, you could ask a teacher for help. We had that, I mean I’m not sure how to explain it, we could do that in elementary school, but it was easier to ask in sixth grade cuz teachers were kinda, more, easy to get to, um, I could talk to them more.

Reo explained that he found that “the help he got at school was extremely valuable” and that he also took advantage of the help available whenever he could, sharing:

There’s a lot of math help and homework help. I see a lot of students at homework club in the library… I’m making sure to get help, if I need it. I’m doing my homework, turning in late assignments, and getting help…. It really isn’t too hard. You can get a lot of help with homework and organization here.

Jared shared that all the teachers:

Help. They help with the homework, and make sure everything is clear, and help with assignments, and homework, and stuff, and help you, like, learn everything. [There are] just a lot of ways to get help. Also, like stuff like, homework club and stuff like that is very helpful, if you need just a little help will help, you can get it when you needed it…. It seemed like the climate for learning is to, was that you, need to try your hardest and that you can ask for help, it is okay to ask for help. And you really, you should. It’s okay.
Douglas felt:

Site supported me by giving us lot of help with stuff like math tutorials in the morning, all the teachers are trained and good at giving advice. Also, sometimes…I liked how morning tutorials had the advanced math students helping you instead of just the teacher, because I understood them more than I would the teacher sometimes.

William also confirmed that getting assistance from classmates was an important type of support, saying: “I know you’re supposed to ask the teachers, but it helped to talk to other [kids]. Yeah, friends or just kids in my class, asking them helped a lot.”

**Family support for academic achievement.** Participants noted that their family members were important sources of support through the transition year. While mothers were mentioned most often, fathers and siblings were highlighted as being supportive as well. William stated that that his academic success was supported by:

- My mom, a lot, my brother, and my dad. Because they help me whenever I ask them.
- They’ll, usually my mom, they’ll help me a lot with homework. They make sure I’m on task, doing the homework. And they help me keep my grades up.

Zach also attributed much of his academic success to his mother, saying: “She’s been teaching me stuff ahead, for like two years now.” Tyler shared that when he needed help, “My habit would be asking my mom a lot, or just asking other family members.” Isaac noted his mother’s support, sharing:

- My mother, she would like, tell me, she would help me out, and sometimes if I was absent, or if I didn’t, like, get the material well, and I had to learn by myself, or if I was absent and I had to learn it, she would, like, help me, like, tell me what to do, if she knew
what it was. Like yeah, I definitely wouldn’t have gotten like this far without her, yeah, so yeah.

Gabriel shared that his mother was particularly supportive when he needed to study for tests, saying that he would “ask my Mom to make practice problems for me so like, I knew I understand it, and I would be ready for [the test].” Kevin also asserted that his mother helped him prepare for assessments:

I would study a lot. For math, my mom would make like a mini quiz and she would [make] word problems and, and questions, that were like on the study guide and if I got them all right, then I was like ready for the test.

He also shared that his parents would help: “If I was doing bad in a class, they would talk to me, and help me, like, get my missing homework, or things I needed to fix and study.”

Participants also noted help from their fathers. Both Douglas and Vihaan singled out their fathers when talking about supportive family members; Douglas claimed: “I am academically successful because at my house, my dad, even though we already went through the lesson in class, he goes over the lesson with me.” Vihaan also explained that his homework routine involved “review[ing] over it and when my dad came home, I can tell him and say, ‘Hey.’ I said, ‘Hey, can you look over my math homework and check for me, please?’” Vihaan further explained that for tests he:

Either asked [his] dad to look over my textbook and tell me, he’d asked the question and I had to answer the question, or if there’s a study guide, he’d lead me through, he’d read over the study guide, and I’d answer the questions or if I had any questions, we go online, or I’d asked my dad.
Jared and Aidan noted help from both parents. Jared shared that when he was absent, he could rely on his parents:

To get the work into the office… so they could pick it up. So, I can still do it at home so, I wasn’t like getting behind. So, I would try and finish it. Usually, I do it when I [am home] absent or something. Like, that that way I can work on it while I was sick, and get it done so I wasn’t missing too much. Usually they would contact the teacher and they would go pick it up for me.

Jared also said he sought out his parents for help in individual classes: “If I needed help like and it was history or something like that, I would go to my dad because he likes history a lot more. Then if it is like English or another subject I would go to my mom.”

Aidan explained: “If I just have trouble, I would ask my dad. He would do it for me, and my mom, she gives me extra homework from the eighth grade. So, I’m already learning eighth grade from her.” Both Isaac and Kyle noted help from parents and from their older brothers. Isaac said, “If I was stuck with something that I didn’t really get I would usually go get help from my parents or maybe sometimes my brother.” Kyle stated:

My parents were, my, were the first person I go to, then I would go to my brother because he’s kind of already experienced middle school and he could help me by showing me what I did wrong or by showing me what I needed to do. It was extremely helpful.

**Teachers Support a Successful Academic Transition**

Although an initial fear for many was that the teachers they were going to encounter at Site were going to be mean, many found that their fears were unfounded. Participants not only noted that their teachers were nice, but that they were good teachers as well. According to the
participants, the sixth-grade faculty’s friendliness, ability, and support made transitioning to with academic success much easier. Speaking about the teachers at Site, William offered:

The teachers, they help you a lot, they try to make things easier for you. I would say they are great. They care about you. The teachers there are fun, and nice, and the people there are not going to be mean to you.

Tyler shared, “The teachers are great there, they are really good at teaching.” Collin said, “All the teachers were good; there really were no bad teachers.” Aidan confirmed, “It’s a school with great teachers.” Douglas recalled:

All my teachers are pretty good…[be]cause they help us a lot, they give us class time to ask questions about the subjects …. I also liked my teachers because they were all good at their jobs and nice, and they seemed like they knew what they were doing.

While discussing who helped support his success at Site, Zach replied, “Honestly, after I got to know them, the teachers. They were pretty nice. The majority of them were calm and very good teachers.” Kevin shared, “The teachers are nice…. and helpful, and good at their teaching.” Isaac professed, “The teachers will help out with the assignment and explain it really well. I know that’s like, what every teacher is supposed to do but, but the teachers take time and they’re really good at their job doing it.”

**High Expectations of Self Support Academic Achievement.**

Several participants shared that they personally held high expectations for themselves when it comes to their academic achievement. These expectations emerged around two things that helped them be academically successful: maintaining good grades and not getting behind on their school work. These subthemes are described in this subsection.
Maintaining grades. Several participants shared that they actively worked toward keeping their grades up. Jared shared:

I really don’t want to give up. I don’t want to just, I really want to get good grades. I want to be academically successful. It’s not like something that’s just a secondary thing, like that there was something else I focus on, this is pretty much what I’m focused on…. I definitely thought I should keep my grades up for sure. I thought they were very important; that they weren’t just something like that some people ignore.

Isaac declared that he works to keep his grades:

At least a minimum of B pluses, like the minimum because I can only get disappointed if, if, I do get grades lower than that. I will put all my effort into it, I put more energy and effort into my work, and even, even though, I always do my best work, I will put more effort into it because I’m trying to get that grade back up.

Tyler disclosed:

Sometimes if I did have a low score, I tried to push myself and do the assignment that I got the next day or next week, to try to do it better, and stuff like that. I always try to do my best, always, whether it's tests, or projects, or just regular homework and classwork… I’d remember seeing my mom and my sister talk about how she did well. I think I would be like, “Ooh, I want to do that good” or maybe be better than my sister, but it was never a competition. I just wanted to push myself to be at that level as well.

When discussing the expectations, he had of himself as a student, William admitted: “I wanted Bs and higher. I was aiming for As, but I would settle for a B if I had worked hard.”

Collin related that he held high expectations for himself “because like I have gotten all of these A’s and like my parents and I know I can do well.” Douglas shared:
I want to make sure keeping getting all A's while I’m here [be]cause that would help me get into better colleges, I think, and help me get into the advanced placement, which my parents want me to be in because it helps me prepare for the next grade, instead of going over the stuff from that previous grade, and just doing half of what we’re doing next grade.

**Getting work done on time.** Many of the participants expressed that they did their work as soon as they could to avoid late or missing assignments. Isaac said, “I don’t really procrastinate. And so, I never really get stressed out or had any problems with finishing projects.” While discussing how he makes sure to complete all of his assignments, Gabriel shared:

- I always do my homework after school and, like if I’m stuck on something. If I’m stuck on a problem, I will just do it like after I’m done with everything else, I’ll try and find the answer for it then, when I don’t have to think about anything else. I don’t just forget about it.

Jared stated that keeping up with his assignments was a deliberate act:

- Getting my assignments in on time, being a good student, that is my primary focus…. I expect for myself that I need to always focus, and I can’t get distracted. And I also need to complete all my work and I can’t be late or have an assignment late. I just really always want to make sure that I can’t just mess up. I need to really focus constantly… I made sure to really focus on my homework. Some people who were not successful, would kind of do it later, and I would do it as soon as I got home and make sure that I got everything right, like double check it. I would just really make sure that I wasn’t getting anything wrong.
Mike explained why he got his work done as soon as it was assigned, saying:

I just feel that, I just never really like the feeling of being in trouble or having bad grades. It’s like being in a pickle, like having bad grades, always having deadlines. I like just doing my work and chilling after. I just kinda look at it like, after my homework I’ll be able to go to sleep, or after this project I won’t have any other big things that I’ll have to for the rest of the year, so I try to just look ahead like that, and I don’t let myself get behind.

**Summation of the Elements that Supported Academic Success**

Data analysis revealed several themes that the participants felt supported their academic achievement through the transition. First, making friends and having their support through the transition was both a goal and a matter of importance for the participants. Participants noted that their friends were very important to their successful transition. The next theme centered around the idea that participants needed and were encouraged to get help with their academics. Two subthemes emerged from that theme: the availability of help on campus and the ability of their family members to help them with their school work. The boys conveyed that getting help was encouraged on campus and that they could rely on teachers, school programs, and classmates to provide support. In addition, they revealed that help from home was needed and available. Many noted that it was their mothers who helped them achieve academic success. Next, participants revealed that perceptions of their teachers’ ability to teach their classes also supported their success. The participants remarked that their teachers were capable, helpful, and devoted to making students successful. Finally, the boys’ own high expectations for themselves emerged as a theme supporting their success. Two components supported this theme: the boys wanted to and actively engaged in improving their grades and they found it important to approach their work
with effort, grit, and focus. Most noted that they took pride in being successful and that they wanted to please their family members. The next section discusses the themes found in response to Subquestion 2, the environmental impediments to academic success during the transition.

**Impediments to Academic Success**

The second and final subquestion explored the environmental elements the participants perceived as impeding their academic achievement as they transitioned to middle school. Four themes emerged in this analysis. The first is the theme of pacing in the classroom. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: (a) *Classroom pacing was too fast, making academic success challenging* and (b) *Slow pacing influenced their academic engagement.* Second, participants felt they received less attention from teachers because they were successful. Third, they felt they did more work than their classmates when teamed with them. Finally, the disruptions and distractions made learning difficult.

**Classroom Pacing**

As previously discussed, there were many fears about the level and amount of work the participants would face as they entered middle school. Although many participants found those fears (that the work would be too hard and that there would be too much of it) to be unfounded, many did reflect about the pacing in their classrooms. Classroom pacing influenced academic achievement in two ways: participants found that the pace was faster than they preferred, perhaps leading to struggles studying for tests or keeping up with assignments, or the alternative, a pace that was too slow held up the participants’ learning and influenced their engagement in class.

**Fast pace has its difficulties.** Zach declared that the pace in the classrooms “was decently fast paced. Um, a I think it required a little more effort than most people would think.” He continued that on days “where every single period taught you something new, it made it more
difficult to keep track of what goes where on each concept.” Reo shared that while “some [teachers] are a little slower, the pace [most teachers] are going at, it is a quick pace, but if you get like maybe one or two assignments a day, it really does add up fast.” The work adding up was a pacing concern for Kevin as well. He imparted:

I think [the pace] increased a little bit from elementary. Because I felt like I was learning more stuff at middle school. It’s a lot like you have like six [classes]. And in each, you learn something, and have a lot of information to take in, in a day, so that’s like I had to start like taking notes. There’s like, a lot more that you have to remember, coming in one day… Well, I just had a lot more coming at me at once.

Aidan commented that in some classes his teachers “go way too fast, and I’m a really slow note taker… so then they go through the notes really fast, and I have to get notes from a friend or something like that, because they’ve already gone onto the next page.” William shared that the pace was difficult due to the time available in class. He found that his teachers were:

Going a lot faster that year. They didn’t have a lot of time. Like 48 minutes so they were always going really fast…. There’s a lot of different things that you need to do and a lot of things that you need to learn. It starts to get a lot faster and harder…there’s a time limit in the classes too and some of, well, a lot of the work gets harder, and you get, like you start getting more work, and more projects, and more homework, but less time in class to do it…. I was surprised, um how fast paced it is.

While discussing the pacing in his classrooms, Douglas stated that the pacing in many of his classes did not leave enough time for reviewing. He shared that his teachers:

Do not [give] enough time [to review before tests] because some kids struggle, even though you have two days to learn the subject, and that affects their grade. Some don't
really get the subject, and all we do is get is one day to review, and after, like the review
day’s over, we're just onto a new subject, and that subject usually carries over what we
learned in the previous subject, so some kids probably won’t even get the next subject
[be]cause they don’t get the previous subject.

Mike shared that the quick pacing is difficult, but it comes with some added benefits as
well. He explained:

In the beginning the pace was too fast, because it was a little too quick, but, if you don’t
really like doing a certain [lesson], it gets over with quickly, if you’re not good at that
[lesson], it gets over quickly, so it’s kinda like a you have to see the glass half full instead
of half-[empty]. It’s still pretty fast, you have to focus to keep up.

**Pace too slow, held back by others.** The participants shared that being academically
successful sometimes meant that they were further ahead of their classmates or that they could
learn class material more quickly. For several participants, this meant that they had to wait for
their classmates to catch up when they were ready to move on. Thomas said, “I mean waiting
[for classmates to catch up] is boring and I just wait for the class. I can, like, work on my
homework, maybe, and all. But I have to wait.” While discussing his experiences Douglas
shared:

I guess most people have trouble with math, so they need more help with math, but I
really am fast paced… I just look at the book and “Oh this is easy” but then she just takes
like the rest of the period to show the rest of the class it…. She has to do that [be]cause
some other kids might not get it as fast as me, so that's what I think, why she has to do
that. But I wish she would, like, if we would get it, we already got it, she would just let us
go onto homework, while she teaches everyone else.
Jared felt that his classes:

Mostly kept at a very good pace. But occasionally, it does seem like it gets a little slow with some topics. Like some topics, it just kinda slows down, and it takes some longer, when it really shouldn’t. It could possibly, it does seem to be like some students are kinda struggling at the fast pace, so it, it’s kind of, [the teachers are] slowing down with the hope that it will help the other students catch up, and make sure they really do learn it. I kind of just realize that I should just do the work and then I should let the other students catch up. I do kind of feel kind of annoyed because I do have to slow down for a student or a small group of students, to learn this stuff or to learn the topic again. And it’s just really, it just feels annoying, but I do still know that I could, I should, just you know, it will pass, and I just try to do my work.

Aidan related that he noticed this pacing slowdown particularly in his sixth-grade math class and this led him to be bored in the classroom:

Learning math took forever…. We moved, like, one topic for three days and that just slowed me down, because some topics…I would be right there, but sometimes I would get them really fast, and by the second day, I would already be bored of learning the same thing.

**Less Attention from Teachers**

Several participants noted that as academically successful students, they got less of their teachers’ attention during class time. Many expressed an understanding of this to be because their teachers needed to focus on others who did not do as well as they did. Jared related:

For me, I see [the teachers] focus more on the nonacademically successful students so maybe they’ll become more academically successful. So, I still get attention, but I’m not
like having—I don’t try to make myself the center of attention anyway—but I see that I
don’t get, I don’t really try to ask for help, I do a lot more on my own because I do see
that [the teachers] have to give [their] attention to those other people.

Vihaan explained:

Well in this school, they always…give everybody a chance which is good, but for me,
knowing because I have good grades, I don’t get the same treatment. I don’t get called on
a lot. I can answer all the questions…. I don’t get the same treatment to show it, yeah,
because my teachers can’t focus on me, they have to focus on the kids that aren’t doing
how they should.

While discussing what it was like to be a successful student in the classroom, Kyle
shared, “[Other students] who aren’t really successful, [the teachers] always try to push more
help towards them…. Sometimes when you’re academically successful and you try to get help,
they don’t really help you as much as you need.” Reo stated that students who are not
academically successful:

Are pushed more. The teachers, they tell them to stay on task or are looking at their
homework closer, or their scores or homework more. [The teachers] go over their scores
with them and they pay attention a little more to those boys. Boys who are, boys are
doing less well are getting … more attention [than I am] because they need the attention
to get their assignments done.

Tyler related an observation he had in his sixth-grade math class: “I remember [the
teacher] saying to the other boy that they had to help him more than me because I was
academically ready.” He went on to explain that, “Me and other smarter students in that class
would do something else while the teacher would help the people that needed more help in that class.”

**Added Workload When Working with Classmates**

Several participants spoke about feeling like they did more group work than their classmates due to their academic success. Gabriel related:

Sometimes, like sometimes, so like, like, when there’s a group project, like kids will try…to lean on like the smartest kids and then they’ll not do as much work. But I don’t think the teacher sees that and I have to do more than them.

Jared shared:

I feel like I do approach groups differently because I usually approach more like, okay we have got to get to work, but a lot, some, well some, people definitely approach it as, like I just get to hang out with other people, and work is kind of put off as a secondary and I take it more seriously, so I have to do more work. I’m not willing to get a bad grade.

Kyle disclosed, “Some of the students that I was kinda placed around to help, weren't very hard-working, they weren't the hard-working types. And that made it difficult for me.”

While sharing about collaborative work, Kevin disclosed:

The bad students, who just talk and don’t work, get put with smart students who actually do work, so all the groups are even, but like the bad students are actually just all talking, and you have to try to ignore them and still work, even if they aren’t…. I would choose to work by myself because there’s always the chance that like a bad student is going to keep talking and messing around and so I would rather work by myself because I’m doing most of the work anyway.
Douglas recounted, “I feel like most of my teachers use me to show other kids how to do good and like do the best they can at Site. I mean it’s not bad, but I’m not sure I like it too much.”

Disruptions and Distractions

For many, the greatest hindrances to their learning were the distractions and disruptions in the classroom. Students shared about distractions by other classmates, from office aides coming into the room, or bells ringing. Jared shared:

It seems like there’s, like, a good, they’re doing a really good job at keeping distractions down, I think the only thing would be like, like, many students just talking constantly in class, but I know that’s very difficult to control.

He says this impacted him in the classroom because:

I definitely need, I definitely think I need, to do good work, it needs to be quiet, it needs to be about a peacefulness. But like usually, what it is, is louder. I get, it can be very distracting and it’s very hard to focus and everything.

Tyler divulged that his greatest distraction in the classroom was often the other students in his classes:

Maybe there were some kids in one class that didn't want to be there. I don't want to say, “Be there,” but they didn’t think of it as a learning opportunity. Maybe just, “Oh, it’s a hang-out time with my friends.”…They’re distracting other people because other people would laugh at the jokes they’d say, or they were trying to be silly in front of the class. I’d be like, “Oh, would they just be quiet?”

Kevin informed: “The bad students make it hard to, to even to pay attention, because like a bad student’s talking to you or around you, and you can’t focus too much.” Kyle described
his ideal learning space as: “Just like having not very many, or not any at all, distractions. Nobody talking to me, like them not being off-task, disturbing the room.” Thomas stated: “A bunch of, like, distractions, like, in the class make [my learning] difficult.” He expanded:

Like when kids are disruptive in class, they should, they should like, have them be quiet, have them like, maybe have them not interrupting the class…. And then sometimes, when a loud group of kids goes like, by the doors and you can hear them so loud, and all the kids are distracted then.

Douglas shared that classroom interruption:

Makes me lose track [of what I am doing] …for me, it's every day, ’cause the office aides just the open the door like, “boom” and it distracts the whole class, and then they just write the homework down, and then when they leave the door goes “boom” again, so [it is] pretty interrupting.

Reo expressed: “Sometimes maybe there’s a kid who was distracting all of us and sometimes … The other lunch bell rings while the lesson is going and maybe there’s like somebody else distracting the teacher… it is annoying.” Jared expressed annoyance at the school bells going off during class time as well, explaining that the bell schedule to accommodate two lunches on campus caused a distraction in his fourth period class because there were “so many different bells going on around that time… There’s lot, like multiple bells going on around that time.”

**Summation of the Elements that Hindered the Transition**

Four themes emerged as responses to this subquestion. Classroom pacing was a theme that emerged. Participants shared that the pacing could be too quick, limiting their success, or too slow, which slowed down or stunted their learning. Although many felt the reason for this was to
allow their classmates to catch up to the level they were at, several noted that they began to
disengage from the classroom due to boredom. Next, participants revealed that they received less
attention from their teachers because they were academically successful. Most noted that their
teacher’s time was focused on students who were not achieving academically. Some felt that
they could be learning more if they did not have to stay on pace with their classmates. An
additional theme to emerge was that the participants felt they shouldered more of the workload
when working with their classmates. They felt that they had to work harder because their
groupmates didn’t care as much about the assignment’s outcome as they did. Lastly, classroom
distractions impeded their learning. The boys noted the talking and off-task behavior of their
classmates was their greatest antagonist.

Conclusion

This study explored academically successful boys’ perceptions of the transition to middle
school. This chapter detailed the results of the study by explaining each of the themes that
emerged during analysis of the participants’ interview transcripts. Through their responses, the
participants shared their experience of transitioning to middle school while maintaining
academic success. Although each participant’s experience was unique, commonalities were
frequent, and several themes emerged providing answers to the study’s research questions.

In response to the study’s central question, how the participants experienced the
transition to middle school while maintaining academic success, six themes arose. These themes
were: (a) a fear of the middle school unknowns, including unkind teachers, getting into trouble,
an overly demanding workload, and having to attend multiple classes; (b) their initial fears about
middle school were unsubstantiated; (c) the adjustment to middle school didn’t take them long;
(d) their parents expected them to do well, but there was not an overwhelming amount of
pressure to be perfect or to earn straight A’s; (e) their academic success meant more to them than just getting good grades, it involved being a good citizen as well; and (f) while they didn’t feel there were different academic expectations for boys and girls, they did observe that boys’ behavior often caused them to have discipline issues more often than their female classmates.

For the first subquestion, what supported academic success in the transition year, four themes emerged. These themes were: (a) friendships were important, including the ability to make friends and the support that these friendships provided; (b) the availability of academic help both at school and from family members; (c) the ability of the teaching staff at Site to teach the required material; and (d) the high academic expectations they had for themselves, including maintaining their grades and keeping up with their schoolwork.

For the second subquestion, what hindered academic achievement during the transition year, four themes emerged. These four themes were: (a) classroom pacing was sometimes too fast, but often too slow; (b) participants felt they received less attention from their teachers because they were academically successful and the teachers needed to help those who were not more; (c) they felt they were saddled with extra work when working cooperatively with classmates because they were concerned about their grades and felt they had to make-up for the effort their groupmates lacked; and (d) disruptions and distraction in the classroom made it more difficult to learn.

The concluding chapter analyzes these themes further. The findings are discussed through the lens of the theoretical framework and the literature on adolescent boys and middle school education. In addition, the significance of this research and its implications for middle school transition programs is considered.
Chapter 5: Discussions, Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This qualitative phenomenological study gained insight into the middle school transition from boys who maintained their academic achievement throughout their first year of middle school. In addition to understanding how academically successful boys experienced the transition, this study examined which elements in the environment at Site Middle School supported and hindered these boys’ academic achievement during this pivotal year.

A purposively sampled group of 15 boys who had maintained a 3.0 GPA and Outstanding or Satisfactory work habits and citizenship grades through their first three semesters of middle school participated. Each boy participated in three semi-structured, in-depth, phenomenological interviews designed to answer the study’s central question and two subquestions. Using Moustakas’s (1994) analysis protocol, interview transcripts were reduced to themes that answered the research questions. These themes represent the study’s findings; they are discussed in the next section.

Discussion of the Findings

This section describes the results of this study. First, the results will be discussed as they relate to answering the study's research questions. Each result will then be discussed as it relates to the relevant literature on boys, academic achievement, and the middle school transition.

Answering the Research Questions

The basis of hermeneutic phenomenology is the belief that each experience will have overarching and unvarying qualities that together provide an accurate description of the phenomenon. A compilation of these descriptions, or essences, of the phenomenon forms the narrative of the group’s perception (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The following subsections present the study’s findings as they apply to the central and subquestions.
The transition experience. The study’s central aim was to describe how academically successful boys experienced the transition. Data analysis revealed six themes that described their experience: (a) initial fearfulness of the middle school environment, (b) many of their fears were unfounded, (c) the adjustment did not take long, (d), academic success is more than getting good grades, (e) being held to reasonable expectations by parents, and (f) boys are treated differently, but do not have different academic expectations. This subsection explains each of these themes.

Many fears of the transition. Every participant noted he had fears about transitioning to middle school. These fears revolved around several aspects of middle school. First, they were fearful that their teachers would be “mean” and they would not like being in their classrooms. All participants expressed this concern at some point in their interviews. Second, they noted that they were afraid of “getting in trouble” for breaking the rules. Several participants mentioned a fear of breaking a rule because they did not know it was a rule. They also admitted to fear because they were expected to know and follow the rules even though did not fully understand them yet. Third, they feared the academic rigor they were going to face. The participants noted a fear of the amount and difficulty of work they were going to be expected to do. They were worried about the amount of homework and being unable to finish all that was assigned, on time. Many noted that they were sure the work was going to be much harder than elementary school and not as fun. These fears made several conclude that getting good grades in middle school would be challenging or impossible. Finally, they were fearful of attending multiple classes. Participants noted concerns about finding classrooms, getting to class on time, remembering where they needed to be and when they had to be there, and keeping their work organized.

AMLE (2010) described the transition to middle school as both exciting and terrifying. These findings support that description. Although the participants expressed feelings of
excitement, fear of the new environment dominated their narratives about the early transition period. Several studies have noted that the transition period is often met with anxiety, which manifests as fears of getting lost, punctuality, school rules and procedures, or an inability to achieve academic success (Akos, 2002; Duchesne et al., 2014; Knesting et al., 2008; Rudolph et al., 2001). All of these concerns were noted by the participants at the onset of their transition. In addition, Cox et al. (2015) found that nebulous social information at the transition onset led to more anxiety. This research suggests the importance of reducing concerns about the transition by building psychosocial interventions into transition programs, which will further reduce student concerns about academic and social issues (Cox et al., 2015).

Many participants said that they thought they might get in trouble for breaking rules that they did not know were rules. Akos (2006) suggested that all students receive a targeted and specific review of all school policies early and often during the transition to help ward off fears of the middle school environment. Students in new learning environments are unable to integrate new rules and organizational polies and structures because they do not have the background knowledge to model their understanding upon (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, K., & Dochy, 2010). Several studies have found that the cognitive abilities of preadolescents require that schools include direct instruction in rules and procedures (Akos, 2002; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Duchesne et al., 2014). Participants’ fears of breaking an unknown rule support these previous studies’ recommendations.

**Unfounded fears.** Although the students expressed many fears about the transition, they found many of them to be excessive. Instead of an environment that perpetuated these anxieties, the participants found that many of the things they feared never materialized. They expressed that their teachers were nice and caring individuals, not mean. They found that their workload
was manageable and that warnings about the difficulty of middle school work were unsubstantiated. Participants initially feared the workload in middle school and doubted their preparedness. However, all noted that those fears were unfounded. The participants reported that they felt academically prepared for middle school and were not surprised by the content they had to learn. Their fears of the amount of work was also overestimated. They related that they were prepared and able to complete the work expected of them. Participants reported that they had the same amount or a little more work than they had in elementary school and it did not take an unreasonable amount of time to complete it. Managing multiple classrooms with multiple teachers and the associated organization, punctuality, and rule-learning difficulties were easily navigated.

Several participants noted that their fifth-grade teachers told them that middle school work would be much harder. Arowsafe and Irwin (1992) found that the relationships that pretransition teachers develop with their students set them up to be trusted sources of information about middle school. The participants in this study contradict this: they initially trusted their fifth-grade teachers, but later realized that the information they provided was greatly exaggerated.

Jared shared that his fifth-grade teacher “showed us how hard middle school would be by giving up these really, really hard problems.” While participants noted that they had heard the work was going to be much harder from older siblings or their parents, they most often mentioned their pretransition teacher. By previewing overly difficult assignments, Site’s feeder schools support Akos (2002) found that information conveyed by adults to students about middle school is often negative and a source of anxiety during the transition. While this study supports Arowsafe and Irwin’s (1992) findings that the pretransition teacher plays a vital role in preparing
students for the transition, the participants also identified these teachers’ practices of previewing
middle school work as anxiety-producing and a cornerstone of the fear that the work they were to
face in middle school was going to be extremely difficult. Akos (2002) noted that these messages
often come from parents; this study found that the pretransition teacher is also an anxiety-
provoking advisee.

_Adjusted to the routine quickly._ Another experience the participants reported was that
adjusting to middle school did not take them very long. Although their adjustment times varied,
all reported becoming comfortable with the new routine quickly and adjusting to their new
teacher without much incident. Many looked back on the experience at the beginning the
transition as being not that big of a deal and something anyone could accomplish successfully.
Their advice to future sixth graders indicated this comfort, as many participants would inform
them that moving middle school was just like moving to any other grade: hard at first, but
eventually becoming the new norm. Their experience supports Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett’s
(2008) findings that transitioning sixth graders perceive the instructional climate in their
classrooms as similar to their elementary classrooms.

_Characteristics of the successful student._ The participants noted that being a successful
student meant more than just getting good grades: it also meant having good work habits and
citizenship. The participants felt good work habits meant you had to try in class. You could not
give up and you needed to put focus and energy into your work. Being a good person was
important as well. Having a nice demeanor, being social and interacting with your peers, not
bullying, respecting teachers, and following school rules were also noted as qualities of being a
successful student. Two areas of the middle school transition literature apply to this theme,
which emerged around the expectations the participants had for themselves. The literatures on self-efficacy and academic motivation provide lenses through which to discuss this theme.

Understanding self-efficacy is important to understanding a student’s motivation, self-regulated learning, and achievement (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Students’ judgements of their ability to manage the move from elementary to middle school can be defined as transition self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Though initially fearful of the transition, each participant found positive ways to cope with the transition, which allowed him to maintain academic success. The literature indicates that transition self-efficacy is influenced by the social environment and that success in the social aspect of the transition predicts school engagement (Madjar & Chohat, 2017). School engagement is positively correlated with academic achievement. Students who felt able to create positive social relationships had greater engagement in academic tasks (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). The participants’ experience at Site supports this previous research.

Past educational performance affects future academic self-efficacy (Hwang, Choi, Lee, Culver, & Hutchison, 2016). Each participant had been a successful learner, with positive educational behaviors noted by their fifth-grade teachers. That criterion was used to select participants for this study. The participants continued their academic success across the transition, matching Hwang et al.’s (2016) findings. Their study followed efficacy from the first semester of the eighth grade until their participants graduated the 12th grade. This study shows that positive self-efficacy propels academic achievement across the middle school transition and into the midpoint of the seventh-grade year. This study’s data stops one semester before Hwang et al. (2016) began.

The motivational elements at play in middle school have been widely studied. According to the literature, boys experience a significant drop in their intrinsic motivation to learn and grade
point averages during this transition (L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Duchesne et al., 2014). The participants’ experiences contradict previous studies, which have shown a decrease in grade point averages through the transition. Eight participants maintained their GPA throughout all three semesters, with four of those students maintaining 4.0 GPAs. Five participant GPAs increased over the three semesters. Only one participant’s GPA had fallen: he maintained his GPA during the first two semesters at a B, but in his first semester of the seventh grade he earned a GPA of B-.

Reasonable parental expectations. The participants noted that while their parents wanted them to do well, none of them felt they were expected to get perfect grades. Participants shared that they felt their parents were empathetic and accepting of lower grades if they had tried hard and done their best. They shared that although their parents encouraged them to do well, they did not demand that their only focus be on school work. The boys also disclosed that they did not feel stress from their parents to earn straight A’s. Instead, they believed that their parents simply expected them to do their best.

Duchesne et al. (2009) found that parents need to recognize how stressful this transition is for this age group. The participants noted that their parents’ expectations as they transitioned to middle school were achievable. Their perceptions support existing literature, which has found that being held to reasonable expectations by parents predicts academic success (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) found that students whose parents communicate academic expectations, along with other supportive behaviors, are more likely to experience positive academic and social outcomes (A. T. Henderson & Berla, 1997; Perkins et al., 2016; Schneider & Stevenson, 2000).
**Gender differences.** In the classroom, each participant felt he received the same amount of instruction as his female classmates. All felt that Site had the same expectations for academic achievement for both genders. Each confirmed that academic expectations were high for all students, and that no gender was expected to outperform the other. However, they also related their perceptions of the difference in the ways the genders were treated when it came to discipline activities. They noted that boys got in trouble more often than girls, although, due to the differences in the behaviors they had observed, they felt this was justified. Participants noted that boys got in trouble more often in the library, on the playground, and in the classrooms. Several noted that this was due to boys’ immaturity and acting out more often than their female classmates.

The participants felt that academic expectations were the same for all students in their classrooms and that their teachers did not treat their female classmates any differently than they did boys. While Jones and Myhill (2004) found that boys perceive that they are treated more negatively than their female classmates by their teachers, this perception was not corroborated by the participants.

Nevertheless, participants did perceive differences in behavioral reprimands and consequences in spaces outside the classroom. They reported that boys acted out more and received more negative attention from proctors on the playground and in the cafeteria and library. Their observations confirm Francis’s (2000) findings that middle school girls project the behavior that school staff see as most favorable while boys were presumed to present with more undesirable behaviors in and out of the classroom. Jones and Myhill (2004) concluded that boys are perceived to resist rules, overreact and react more easily than their female classmates, and are more visible and troublesome in their school environment. They also found that this behavior
may influence how school staffs respond to problematic behaviors (Jones & Myhill, 2004). The participants held similar views, many attributing it to boys being less mature than their female classmates. Their observations also support Myhill and Jones’s (2004) conclusions that boys who do not behave like their female classmates are seen as deviating from the ideal and face more aversive interactions with adults at school.

Supports of academic achievement. The first subquestion looked for the elements in the middle school environment that, from the participants’ perspective, supported the boys’ academic achievement. After reduction, four themes emerged to answer this question: (a) friendships, (b) the perceived ability of their teachers, (c), ability to get help at school and at home, and (d) holding high academic expectations of themselves. This subsection discusses the study’s findings and then views them through the relevant literature on supporting academic achievement through the transition. It highlights connections to the literature focused on supporting students during this transition.

Friendships during the transition. Friends were an important source of support during the transition. The participants expressed desires to make friends, to expand their friend groups, and the importance of having a friend to navigate the transition with. All participants indicated that their friends were a source of academic support. Friends also provided support as study partners. They were relied on for administrative functions during absences (getting notes or assignments) and as sources of clarification when procedures or assignments were unclear. Furthermore, social support from friends was also detailed. Friends provided companionship during passing periods and lunch, gave emotional support during difficult periods, and helped them feel more comfortable at school.
Making friends improves student comfort levels and satisfaction with school (Booth, Sheehan, & Ealey, 2007). This assertion is confirmed by this study. The participants explained that once they had established their friend groups, school became more routine, easier to navigate, and more fun. Of primary social concern to the study’s participants was the making of friends. Hardy et al. (2002) found that boys tended to have less concern about friendship issues doing the transition. This study adds to Hardy’s findings by showing that although boys have fewer concerns than their female classmates, friendships concerns are still very influential during their transition. When students feel competent in their friend-making abilities, they are more likely to report higher academic engagement (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009) and need less support during the transition. The participants reported that they were able to maintain old friendships, when they existed, as well as make new friends. They felt that they were not only academically successful during the transition, but socially successful as well. The participants reported having friends who had similar levels of academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to learn.

**Teacher ability.** Participants noted that their teachers were well trained, had strong content-area knowledge, provided valuable help, and were available and approachable. Several participants noted their teachers’ abilities as a critical part of their academic success. The Carnegie Alliance’s *Turning Points* stated that middle schools must be staffed with teachers who are experts in teaching middle schoolers. This study supports previous research on effective teachers. Research suggests that effective teachers are a vital component of student success (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Gallagher, 2004; Good, 1979; Good & Brophy, 1987). The participants’ perceptions that their teachers’ abilities to teach helped them succeed support this.

**Perceived support.** Having multiple sources for support at school was important to the participants’ success. Jared shared that he thought a clear message at Site was: “You can ask for
help; it is okay to ask for help. And you really you should [ask for help].” Participants highlighted the availability of academic support resources at school, especially noting their teachers and the campus programs put into place to provide academic help.

A theme that arose around environmental supports of academic success was the availability of help the boys perceived they had. Two subthemes emerged from these results: (a) participants felt supported at school and (b) participants felt supported at home. Similarly, both Hanewald (2013) and Symonds and Galton (2014) found a positive correlation between successful adjustment across the transition and students who felt supported both before and after the transition. Sixth graders’ perceptions of school support notably drop through the school year and most students perceive that they are receiving less support as they year progresses (Niehaus et al., 2012). In their study measuring perceived school support as an element of school connectedness, Niehaus et al. (2012) concluded that sixth graders performed better academically when they felt supported at school. In addition, a study by Sakiz, Pape, and Hoy (2012) found that middle schoolers who felt supported by their teachers enjoyed school more and had greater academic self-efficacy. This study reproduces those findings. Each participant reported feeling well-supported academically, and each was achieving academic success, which they attributed to the help they were able to obtain at Site or at home. Research on the impact of perceived support on academic achievement is plentiful. Researchers have found that perceptions of academic support from teachers positively predicts mastery goals and guards against detrimental scholastic habits (Song et al., 2015). Way, Reddy, and Rhodes (2007) discovered notable declines in the assessments of teacher support as students progressed through middle school. These participants did not support those findings, at least through the half-way point of their middle school tenure,
as all indicated they felt supported by their teachers and did not indicate that that support had changed as they advanced to the seventh grade.

This study also supports the literature that highlights the importance of parent support in adolescent academic success (A. T. Henderson & Berla, 1997; Hanewald, 2013; Mattingly et al., 2002; Perkins et al., 2016; Symonds & Galton Randall, & Shin, 2014). Bronstein and Duncan (1996) found that supportive parenting behaviors aided in student adjustment across the transition and that a supportive parenting style was a buffer against a decline in academic performance across the transition period. Studies link parents who help with homework with students who have academic success (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Kim & Fong, 2014). Supporting these studies, homework help was the most noted support this study’s participants needed and received from their parents. Upon their extensive review of the literature on parent-school involvement, A. T. Henderson and Berla (1997) concluded that the students whose parents support learning and are engaged in their child’s learning are the most likely to achieve academic success. This study supports A. T. Henderson and Berla’s (1997) review as well as findings by Froiland and Davison (2014) and Perkins et al. (2016), all of which indicate parental support is vital to academic success.

Woolley and Bowen (2007) found that when students perceived support from the adults in their lives, they reported higher levels of school engagement. School engagement and academic achievement are positively correlated. The participants confirmed these findings.

**Expectation of self.** The participants were motivated to do well. The participants felt their parents held reasonable expectations for their academic achievement. However, the expectations they held for themselves were often higher than their parents held for them. Several participants noted wanting to achieve straight As, an expectation none of the participants said
their parents had for them. In addition to achieving high grades, the participants had goals to enroll in pre-AP or honors classes and all mentioned moving on to college after high school.

According to Klauda and Guthrie (2015), the most prominent motivation for students is intrinsic. The importance the participants attributed to this personal motivation to do well in school supports that research. Song et al. (2015) found that mastery goals were a guard against poor scholastic habits. If students set goals for their achievement, they were more likely to engage in behaviors that that would make goal accomplishment possible (Song et al., 2015). The participants support these findings, as all described goals focusing on future academic success, such as maintaining good grades, getting into pre-AP classes, and going to college.

The next subsection focuses on the second subquestion: hindrances to a successful academic transition as perceived by the study’s participants. It discusses connections to the relevant literature on challenges to academic success during the transition.

**Hindrances to academic achievement.** According to “A Nation at Risk” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), over half of advanced learners were not making academic achievements comparable to their tested ability. The second subquestion examined the elements in the middle school environment that, from the participants’ perspective, hampered their academic achievement. Data analysis revealed four themes: (a) classroom pacing had a varying impact on their success, (b) the boys felt they received less attention from their teachers, (c) most group-work was completed by them, and (d) distractions and disruptions in the classroom made achieving success more difficult.

Literature on poor academic achievement during the transition dominates the writings on middle school transitions. The participants in this study were all achieving academic success; however, they highlighted several perceived roadblocks to success in their school environment.
**Classroom pacing.** There was one commonality for all 15 participants: the pacing in their classrooms. Every participant noted how the pace in some of their classrooms made learning harder. Twelve participants noted having to wait for their classmates to catch up to them in their math classes. While other classes were mentioned when they discussed the speed with which their teacher covered classroom material, many indicated that once they reached mastery in their math classes they got bored or wanted to move on to other things. However, they were made to wait while their teachers made sure that their classmates understood the material as well. Many noted that they wanted to move on to homework or other classroom tasks but were not allowed to because the whole class was expected to be working on the same thing, at the same time.

Conversely, eight participants noted trouble when the pace of the classroom was too fast. Several participants expressly related concerns with the pacing of note-taking in their English, social studies, and science classes. Several stated that when required to take notes in these classes, their teachers went too quickly. They mentioned having trouble keeping up and needing to get the information from classmates when they could not do so. Another concern about the quick pace of these classes, expressed by Douglas and Reo, was that there was not enough review time for all that they were expected to learn.

Smith, Hardman, Wall, and Mroz (2004) showed that highly effective teachers maintain a faster pace than average teachers. The participants needed a variable pace to be successful. This result highlights the need for differentiation to meet the academic needs of every student. In Jackson and Davis’s (2000) update of the 1989 Carnegie Alliance’s: *Turning Points*, they advocated the differentiated classroom for all levels of learners, particularly during the middle level years, because preadolescents develop on their very own unique timeline.
Less attention from their teachers. The participants noted that due to their academic success they received less of their teacher’s attention during class. Each participant who mentioned receiving less attention attributed it to the same reason: the teacher had to focus on the students who were not achieving success. Because they did not necessarily need their teacher’s attention to be successful as much as other students did, they surmised that this was their teacher’s reasoning for not focusing on them as much as on their classmates. Reo noted that his less successful classmates not only got more attention during class lessons, they also received more of their teacher’s help with improving grades, keeping organized, and becoming better students.

Jones and Myhill (2004) found that underachieving boys dominate their teacher’s time and engage in more disruptive behaviors in the classroom. The participants perceived that this was the case in Site’s classrooms as well, and they reported that they received less attention because of this. Their perceptions contradict Backe-Hansen and Ogden (1996), who found that while underachieving boys do receive a considerable amount of their teacher’s attention, it is higher-achieving boys who dominate their teacher’s time.

Extra work when collaborating. In their responses about working with their peers, several participants noted that as successful students they are often grouped with students who are not as successful. Kyle noted that when his teacher made groups, this match-up was done purposely to make all groups even. The boys felt that when clustered in this manner for collaborative work, the onus of work completion predictably fell to them. They felt that their classmates viewed these learning activities very differently than they did. Most of the participants felt that their classmates saw group work as an opportunity for socializing. Because they were more concerned about their grades, the participants felt that they took over much of
the work. They said they took on these duties because they wanted or needed to get it done so that their personal grade would not be harmed. Reo noted that when groups were being made you could see the “bad kids looking around and celebrating when they get a smart kid in their group.”

The value of cooperative learning opportunities for adolescents is well-documented in the literature, and multiple studies have linked cooperative learning with academic achievement (Slavin, 1996). In his review of cooperative learning literature, Slavin (1996) determined that cooperative learning groups are successful when all students are learning. Individual accountability was of concern to the participants. They failed to appreciate the learning value of cooperative groups because they did not view them as cooperative. Slavin (1996) found that underachieving students tend to be off-task more often when working in groups. The views expressed by the participants support these findings.

**Distractions.** Distractions led to disengagement in the classroom. The participants noted that there were several types of distraction that recurred throughout the school day on Site’s campus. Their greatest distractions to learning came from the other students in their classrooms. Off-task behaviors, talking out of turn, messing around with other kids in class, and interrupting the teacher were the behaviors most noted by the participants among the students they consistently labeled as “bad kids.” When discussing his classmates “that weren't academically successful in school,” Tyler reflected, “They’d do different things and be the bad people.”

When students disengage from learning, a common result is classroom behavior that makes learning more difficult for their classmates (Sun & Shek, 2012). The boys in this study validated this research. The participants described these classmates, often in detail, as bad kids who came to school for all the wrong reasons. They described them as only wanting to hang out with friends and went so far as to assume that they had bad parents because they did not do their
homework and were in trouble with the teacher often. The participants reported that talking and being disrespectful to teachers were behaviors that made learning in their classrooms difficult. Their complaints align with Sun and Shek (2012), who found that students report these types of behaviors as the most difficult to learn through. Glasser (1998) stated that misbehavior in the classroom occurs when a student faces a classroom context that does not support his cognitive needs. The mismatch between the school and student needs leads to misbehavior that often impedes the learning of the other students in the room (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Maag, 2004).

**Overarching Themes**

The focus of phenomenological research is to understand experiences from the individual’s perspective (Kafle, 2011). This study gave voice to academically successful boys, allowing for an understanding of their transition from elementary to middle school based on their lived experiences. Through phenomenological reduction their stories produced 14 themes in response to the research’s central and two subquestions (See Table 5). In the previous sections, each of these themes was detailed, discussed in relation to the research question it supported and the relevant literature, and considered through the lens of the theoretical framework. After answering each of the research questions, all the themes that emerged from the participants’ responses were considered in relation to one another as a collective body. Two overarching themes emerged (see Table 6): (a) *The importance of people during the transition* and (b) *Characteristics of the boys who successfully navigate the transition*. This section discusses these two overarching themes that describe the boys as they transition successfully to middle school.
Table 5

Research Questions and the 14 Emergent Themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central: The experience</td>
<td>Fear of the unknown: Teachers, rules, academic rigor, and attending multiple classes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Initial fears unfounded</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quick adjustment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parental expectations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Academic success is more than good grades</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Different treatment on campus boys v girls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subquestion 1: Support</td>
<td>Friendships</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting help they need</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers ability to teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High expectations for their own achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subquestion 2: Hindrances</td>
<td>Pacing in classrooms: Too slow, too fast</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Less attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More work than classmates when teamed</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Classroom disruptions and distractions</td>
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Table 6

Aggregation of Themes into Overarching Themes

**Overarching theme 1: People in the middle school environment make the difference**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central question</th>
<th>Parental expectations</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Different treatment on campus boys v girls</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>More work than classmates when teamed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom disruptions and distractions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Overarching theme 2: Characteristics of a successful middle school student**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central question</th>
<th>Fear of the unknown: Teachers, rules, academic rigor, and attending multiple classes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial fears unfounded</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quick adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic success is more than good grades</td>
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</table>
**People make the difference.** Overwhelmingly, it was the people in the middle school environment who made the difference to these students. Each theme that emerged, regardless of the research question it answered, had at its foundation people. Teacher, parents, friends, and classmates all influenced the transition.

**Teachers.** Teachers were a source of both support and challenge through the transition. Participants related that their teachers supported their learning because they were skilled educators who were good at teaching the subjects they talked. They also credited their teacher’s willingness to provide help, both formally organized through tutoring intervention programs and informally through classroom or after school/lunchtime discussions. They characterized their teachers as helpful, caring, smart, fun, and supportive.

Although most of their perceptions of their teachers were positive, the participants found the pacing in their classes, which was dictated by the teacher, could challenge their academic success. The participants felt they were not learning as much as they could in their math classes because they were required to continue with direct instruction or review after they had achieved mastery. They expressed becoming bored and disengaged from the classroom conversation once they achieved the required mastery.

Additionally, the participants painted their pretransition teachers as a source of anxiety about middle school. Nearly every participant shared a story of being presented with work that they felt was beyond their ability, only to be told that it was what they were to expect in middle school. Most saw this as their teacher trying to help them, but they admitted it influenced their academic self-efficacy.
Parents. Participants noted they felt supported by their parents, regardless of their academic performance. Parents were appreciated for having reasonable expectations for academic performance and for projecting messages of “Do your best.” Participants noted how this reasonable support lessened some of the stress of achieving academic success, which in turn reduced anxiety about grades through the transition. In addition, parents provided help with homework and supported students by contacting teachers for absent work or assisting with organization of school materials.

Friends. Friends were a source of academic and psychosocial support and were the people the participants most looked forward to forging relationships with as they transitioned. All participants mentioned wanting to make new friends as they moved to sixth grade. They noted how friends supported them academically through study groups, loaning notes, or picking up absent work or them. They relied on their friends as walking partners to navigate the campus and for companionship during the lunch period. Additionally, several participants explained that when they had personal problems during the transition year, it was their friends they relied on to help them through.

Classmates. For this discussion, classmates are the students that the participants did not refer to as friends. Analysis revealed that the participants saw their classmates as a barrier to their learning. First, participants noted that classroom disruptions made engagement difficult. Participants referred most often to classmates who were constant talkers and interrupted or took over classroom conversations, making it difficult for their teachers to teach and for them to concentrate. They also felt that when their teachers designed cooperative grouping activities, they were paired with less successful students to make the groups “even.” Because they set high expectations for their school success, several noted that their classmates’ indifference to their
course grades, work habits, or citizenship marks resulted in the participant doing most of the group assignment.

**Characteristics of success.** The second and final overarching theme from this study is a description of the participants themselves. The themes that emerged form a description of a boy who maintains academic success through the middle school transition.

**Character is important.** Each participant was asked if he was successful because he was smart. Not a single participant said this was the case. Instead, their answers painted a picture of the characteristics that they believed contributed to their academic success and their successful transition. First, the boys saw academic success as more than getting good grades. They included elements of character as necessary for being a successful student. They believed that following rules, treating people respectfully, and being kind were essential elements of being a successful student.

**Goal-oriented.** These students showed that they had a growth mindset. Each one attributed his success to trying hard and not giving up. They believed they could accomplish their work and were scaffolded by a support system which they felt made it okay to fail, so long as they had worked their hardest and continued to try. The participants set goals for themselves including academic achievement. Several aimed for academic achievement beyond what they believed their parents expected of them.

**Considering the Theoretical Framework**

From the stage-environment perspective, when a middle schooler’s development and school environment are in mismatch, the risk of negative outcomes increases (Eccles, 2004). This subsection discusses the study’s findings as they support or contradict the study’s
theoretical framework. The study’s perspectives allow for an evaluation of the theory as it applies to Site’s context.

**Psychosocial fit.** When viewed through the lens of its theoretical framework, this study supports Eccles and Midgley’s (1989) assertions that environmental fit will lead to academic achievement. Transition research has suggested that a lack of fit between the needs of adolescents and the middle school environment could explain declines in intrinsic motivation, academic self-concept, and interest in school. The participants did not appear to have effected these changes. Rather, all could be characterized as having high levels of intrinsic motivation, academic-self-efficacy, and interest in learning. This may indicate that Site’s environment provides a match to the psychosocial needs of students.

**Social fit.** The social aspect of the middle school transition can provide supports and challenges to academic achievement for students. Using SEF as a framework, Tseng and Seidman (2007) found that students who may struggle socially when transitioning to middle school because the school environment does not match their developing social need for positive social processes. The participants all noted that they successfully navigated a “friend-making” period at the beginning of the transition. Each also detailed ongoing friendships with peers who supported their academic goals. This may indicate that Site’s environment provides a match to the social needs of students.

**Classroom fit.** The themes that arose around the elements that the participants saw as hindering their education were all classroom focused. Their emphasis on pacing particularly validates the SEF tenet that middle school classroom environments are not designed to support the differences in adolescent cognitive development during this time. This pacing was difficult even for the successful students who, unlike their less successful classmates, are buffered by
motivational goals, academic self-efficacy, parental and teacher supports, and positive social experiences, so it follows that these difficulties may be enhanced for students who do not have such protection.

Conversely, this study found that these young adolescents’ perceptions of the middle school classroom’s instructional climate were similar to their perceptions of their elementary classrooms. This finding contradicts the description of the middle school classroom provided by Eccles and Midgley in their stage-environment-fit theory.

Developmental-stage—environment-fit at Site Middle School. When viewed through the stage-environment-fit lens, this study’s findings give Site a mixed report card. It is evident that the participants felt comfortable and could achieve personal academic success. They spoke highly of the campus, their teachers, and their friends, and they highlighted ways that all have supported their success. Site has facilitated a match between the social and psychosocial needs of these students. However, some classroom practices were not a fit for these boys. This mismatch has not prevented the students from achieving academic success; however, one may make a case that if this mismatch was corrected two positive outcomes may result. First, the academic achievement of these students could be greater, leading to even higher grades and assessment results. Secondly, for students who are not attaining academic success, these classroom mismatches must be investigated as the potential cause for their lack of achievement. Correction of this mismatch will replace challenges in environment with academic success. The next section discusses the study’s strengths and limitations.

Strengths and Limitations

The leading strength of this study is that the research questions were answered in the voices of the participants. Ernest (1994) asserted that the key to understanding a phenomenon is to consider the perceptions of those who experience it. As designed, the study’s in-depth
phenomenological interview protocol allowed multiple interviews with each participant. This protocol strengthened the study by: (a) providing opportunities to clarify the participant's observations, (b) building researcher-participant familiarity, and (c) giving participants time between interviews for reflection. In addition, the study’s participants reflected the racial diversity that exists at Site.

The limitations to this research are due to its small sample size and single location. These results may not be generalizable to middle schools that have notably different student body demographics or are not in lower-middle-class suburban locales. In addition, many participants were former students of the researcher. Even though the participants were encouraged to speak their minds freely throughout the interviews, their responses may have been influenced by this previous relationship. Some previous students may not have returned interest cards based on this student-teacher relationship. Also, all participants volunteered their time for three interviews outside of school hours. Some possible participants may have been dissuaded from participation due to their or their parent’s after-school schedule. Finally, a limitation may exist due to the academic achievement and gender of the students interviewed. While there may be some ability to generalize these results across Site's population, studies that include both genders and at all levels of achievement would help provide the voices of all student stakeholders.

Another limitation is that while 40 percent of Site’s students participate in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program (an indicator of poverty), none of this study’s participants took part in that program. This may further limit the generalizability of this study to all boys at Site or to middle school campuses with large numbers of students from low income families.
Recommendations

This section presents two sets of recommendations. First, it discusses seven recommendations for changes or additions to current practice: (a) focusing on all students, (b) attending to the social aspects of the transition, (c) reducing anxieties, (d) teacher previews, (e) pretransition teacher activities, (f) differentiating for the whole classroom, and (g) continuing growth mindset techniques. Afterwards, it presents recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Practice

This study created a collective narration of the middle school transition by illustrating the experience for academically successful boys. Understanding the transition through the lens of those who maintained academic success provides valuable insight into the needs of this group of students (roughly 37 percent of Site's seventh-grade class). The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) conducts an annual student voice survey focused on their eight conditions that make a difference. In the 2016 *My Voice National Student Report* (Grades 6-12), QISA concluded that while schools should celebrate their accomplishments, they must concurrently address needed adjustments to their programs. Bailey et al. (2015) stated that for transition programs to be successful, they must be planned with knowledge of the student body they are meant to serve. Similarly, Akos et al. (2015) found that districts need to use local data, derived in context, to develop an understanding of the challenges and supports boys face during the transition. Because success is the goal for all students, understanding how success is achieved is a valuable resource when planning and implementing all transition programs. Using this knowledge is imperative while creating effective transition programs for the boys at Site (Akos et al., 2015).
When formulating recommendations for practice, four sources were consulted: (a) adolescent traits and environmental fit as presented by Eccles and Midgely (1989) in their theory of developmental-stage-environmental-fit, (b) AMLE’s *This We Believe* (2010), (c) Jackson and Davis’s *Turning Points* (2000), and (d) Carol Dweck’s *Mindset* (2006). These recommendations are described in the following subsections.

**Focus on all students.** Many formal pretransition programs (including those at Site) focus on underachieving students. This research suggests that students who adjust well academically still need of early-start transition experiences that focus on dispelling their preconceived, yet unfounded, beliefs about their new environment. Additionally, explicit instruction about rules and procedures (such as those done in the first week of school by classroom teachers and administrators) needs to be expanded. This research indicates that students are not getting enough information on these topics to quell fears at the onset of the transition. Strengthening this component in pretransition activities will address these concerns earlier in this pivotal period. Ambiguous information should be limited during the pretransition period because it produces anxiety (Vassilopoulos, Diakogiorgi, Brouzos, & Moberly, 2018).

Program administrators need to ensure that messages being relayed to transitioning students are explicit, accurate, balanced, and deliberately scripted. This would include training eighth-grade *Where Everyone Belongs* (WEB) leaders to present information to their sixth-grade buddies in other than anxiety-producing ways.

**Attend to the social aspects of the transition.** Many transition programs fail because they ignore the social concerns of the transitioning student (Akos, 2002; West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010). The influence friends had on the participants’ transition period validates the need to address social concerns in transition programs. Site needs to add this component to its current
transition plan. Making friends is an expectation within the WEB program; however, this connection is with an older eighth-grade student, one whom the sixth grader will often only see during planned WEB activities. Due to the importance that these participants place on making friends, Site needs to add more social components to the transition programs early in the transition, while students are working to make new friends and establish a friendship group.

**Reduce anxieties.** Vassilopoulos et al. (2018) noted the importance of reducing students’ anxieties about the transition before they begin it. Their work showed significant differences in academic and psychosocial adjustment during the transition if students participated in problem-oriented groups focused on potential transition concerns. Notably, they found a reduction in concerns about the transition among students who participated in groups that focused on social skills, interpretation reorientation, and problem-solving. When pretransition programs focus on the importance of reducing student fears and concerns before the transition, they promote academic and psychosocial adjustment during transition.

**Teacher previews.** Because misconceptions about teachers topped many participants’ concerns, opportunities for students to meet with their sixth-grade faculty prior to entering their classrooms on the first day of school may help ease this fear at the transition. To facilitate this, the school might offer activities such as: (a) middle school faculty spending teaching days in their discipline in the elementary school classrooms, (b) offering meet-and-greet socials to facilitate introductions, or (c) school assemblies at which faculty introduce themselves and their subject matter (AMLE, 2010). Introductory videos or Skype sessions may help build familiarity with a student’s future instructors.

**Pretransition teacher activities.** Many participants found that the change in work was very similar to the changes they faced moving from grade to grade in their elementary years.
Every participant noted that even though they were initially fearful, they felt that they were academically prepared to start the sixth grade. Exposure to middle school work prior to the transition by fifth-grade teachers caused anxiety about the work that participants would face once they got to middle school. While elementary teachers may have the best intentions when previewing work prior to the transition, they must be cognizant of the overarching impact it has on students. Providing elementary teachers with actual sixth-grade lessons to present to students or having middle level teachers teach a lesson at the elementary level prior to the transition would help students see that the work is like what they have been doing and will not be as abstract as they now believe it to be.

Another important area for pretransition teachers is in their dissemination of information about the structure of the middle school, the rules, and the school-wide discipline system. While reflecting on how their elementary school experiences prepared them for middle school, participants noted information they had thought were “facts” as they transitioned. For example, one participant was told the villages were split by ability. This is not correct. Village assignment is a random assignment for all except AVID students, who are automatically assigned to one teaching team. Both villages offer the same courses, except for the AVID elective class. However, William stated that he had heard that one village had all the “smart” kids, while the other had all the dumb kids. He said, “[My fifth-grade teachers] were saying that apparently Blue Village kids were for the smarter kids and that Red Village was for the dumber kids that got lower grades, and when I got Red Village that kind of scared me.”

**Differentiate for the whole classroom.** According to Watkins and Sheng (2008), advanced learners do not make enough achievement gains as they advance from elementary to middle school. The participants often felt that they had to wait for their classmates to catch up to
them; this was most often noted as a problem in their math classes. Offering academically successful students more autonomy to self-manage their learning once they achieve mastery is necessary. Jackson and Davis (2000) emphasized that student learning differences are best met by differentiating instruction at all learning levels. Similarly, in their position paper on differentiation, the National Association for Gifted Children (2014) stated that the expansive range of ability levels in the typical classrooms necessitates providing differentiated curriculum and instruction to promote all students learning. Because the desire for more autonomy is a noted preadolescent trait (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), this approach would support students both psychologically and academically. Jackson and Davis (2000) described the differentiated classroom as a student-centered space where teachers organize instruction. This classroom does not have individualized learning plans for every student; rather, it provides robust learning activities that allow students to learn at different rates with and without support from their peers or teachers. Implementation of such differentiated classrooms would allow all students to learn at their own pace and to achieve deeper levels of knowledge beyond proficiency.

**Continue growth mindset techniques.** During the 2016-2017 school year, when the study’s participants were sixth graders, Site’s faculty received focused professional development on growth mindset theory (Dweck (2006)). While there is not data in this study to support the emergence of themes regarding setting goals, holding high expectations for themselves, and trying their best to improve, the beliefs the participants shared align with the growth mindset theory. Booth and Gerard (2014) found that student attitudes about academic self-efficacy and their learning environment change as the middle school year progresses and that academic-self efficacy is directly related to academic success (Goodenow, 1993; Way et al., 2007). Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007) found that focusing on the academic potential of students to
develop their intellectual capacity, known as the *growth mindset*, provides a host of motivational benefits and can improve the academic self-efficacy of students. Dweck (2006) advocated advancing these beliefs through implementation of growth mindset techniques. Currently, teachers and staff are exploring these techniques with students on campus, but not in an organized or formal way. More targeted lessons on growth mindset might help support the creation of these beliefs.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study highlighted the middle school transition experience for successful middle school boys. However, they are only one of many groups experiencing this transition. Future studies seeking to understand the transition at Site through the experiences of other groups (e.g., girls, academically under-achieving students, or AVID students) may reveal a more complete picture of the overall transition experience for this location.

While this study illuminated the essence of the transition for academically successful boys, studies conducted in differing geographic areas may reveal a very different perspective of the transition to middle school for this group and could help to provide an overarching description of the transition from their perspective.

A study to compare girls’ observations about pacing issues would also be beneficial for several reasons. First, it would help Site’s teachers see where they may need to adjust pacing for all students who are achieving success in their classrooms. Second, it may indicate needed differentiations across all learners. Finally, research has shown that boys outperform their female classmates in mathematics classes, while female students outperform their male classmates in English/language arts. Many participants said they were often waiting for their classmates to catch up in their math classes. It would be of interest to see whether female students felt the same
way or if their proficiency was attained quicker than their male peers in the courses they tend to outperform them in, such as English/language arts. Stage-environment theory postulates that the environment of the school must change to fit the changing adolescent (Eccles, 2004). It would follow that if pacing were adjusted to fit these already successful learners, it would create a better fit in their environment and would promote greater academic growth. Also, pacing issues could be examined from the perspective of all learners, providing an overarching assessment of how pacing influences all of Site’s students. This information would be particularly valuable coming from students who are not achieving academic success.

It would be helpful to revisit these participants prior to their promotion to high school to see whether Site’s environment continued to positively influence and support their academic achievement. Such a study might also highlight challenges to academic achievement they faced in their final year at Site. Site’s faculty could use this information to evaluate the environmental-fit for the successful learners across their entire middle school career.

**Final Word**

According to Geitz and McIntosh (2014), students’ perceptions of school environments are positively correlated to success. Addressing or utilizing the environmental elements these participants highlighted may translate to greater success for the successful student and added support for those students who are not making academic progress. Finlay (2008) stated that phenomenological research provides the truth of an experience in the words of the participants. Site has an opportunity to use this truth of how the transition is experienced by those that have the most at stake—its students—to review, revise, and plan effective transition programs to support them.
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Appendix A: Participant’s Signed Consent

Participant’s Signed Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, School of Education

Principal Investigator: Jane Lohmann  Student Investigator: Lisann C. Francisco

Academic Achievement Across the Middle School Transition: The Preadolescent Boys Perspective.

Informed Consent of Participant to Participate

I am inviting you to participate in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I will be happy to discuss my research project with you before you decide if you want to participate. You do not have to participate, if you do not want to. After we discuss this form, and if you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this form and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to participate in this research?

This research study focuses on the middle school transition (moving from elementary school to middle school) from the perspective of the preadolescent boy. I would like to talk to you about your academic experiences in middle school. I am asking you to participate in this study because you have maintained a 3.0 grade point average with no Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory Citizenship, or Work Habits grades last year. I am very interested in hearing about your experiences at school.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research study is to gain a better understanding of the environmental factors of middle school that help male students reach academic success. This understanding will help guide future transition-year programs as well as inform the practice of middle school educators.
The data you provide will be used as part of a study being done in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, and may be used as the basis for articles or presentations in the future. Your name nor any information that would identify you will be used in any way or at any time.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in three interviews. You will be asked several questions, some of them will be about how you participate in your learning, others will be about the middle school environment. With your permission, I will tape record you and take notes during the interviews. You will not be asked to identify yourself on the recording.

**When and where will this study take place and how much time will it take?**

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask that you allow me to interview you three times. These interviews will take place between August 24 and October 1, 2017. Each interview will take place approximately one week apart.

I can interview you immediately after school in the school conference room or at a time and place that is more convenient to you. I will email you and your adult to set up these interviews. These interviews will last from 45 to 60 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort?**

There is no likelihood of any risk in participating in this study. If you are uncomfortable, you may end the interviews at any time.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, the information gained from your participation may benefit future boys as they transition to middle school.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your information in this study will be confidential. Only I will see any information about you. All audio recordings and transcriptions will be locked in a file cabinet in my office for three years as required, and then will be completely destroyed.

No reports or publications will use any information that could identify you in any way. I will use a pseudonym (fake name) to refer to you and only I will know your true identity. The key code linking your true identity to the fake names used will be destroyed when the study is complete.

**If I do not want to take place in this study, what choice do I have?**

Your participation in this study is completely optional. If you do not wish to participate do not return the participation permission slip.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You may end your participation at any time during the study without any negative consequences.

**Who can I contact about this study?**

If you have any questions, please contact Lisann Francisco, francisco.li@neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Jane Lohmann, jlohmann@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights as participant in this research study, you may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator for the College of Professional Studies, Human Subjects Research Protection, 906 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-390-3450, Email: K.skophammer@neu.edu. You may contact this office anonymously if you wish.

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

As a token of appreciation for your time, you will be given a $50 gift card to a location of your choice at the completion of the third interview.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

Other than your time, there are no costs associated with participating in this research study.

**I agree to participate in research study.**

I am participating on a voluntary basis and understand that I can leave this research study at any time. My participation will include three interviews. If I am uncomfortable with any question in these interviews, I do not have to answer it.

I have read and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this research study. I fully understand my involvement in this research program as a participant and the possible risks.

Signature of Participant: _______________________________________ Date: _____________

Printed Name of Person Above: __________________________________________________

Signature of Person Who Explained Study and Gained Consent: ______________________ Date: _____________
Appendix B: Guardian Consent

Participant’s Legal Guardian Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, School of Education

Principal Investigator: Jane Lohmann  Student Investigator: Lisann C. Francisco

Title of Project: Environmental Variables that Facilitate Academic Trajectory Across the Middle School Transition

Informed Consent of Participant to Participate

I am inviting your child to participate in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I will be happy to discuss my research project with you before you decide if you want your child to participate. Your child does not have to participate, if you do not want him to. After we discuss this form, and if you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this form and will give you a copy to keep.

Why is my child being asked to participate in this research?

This research study focuses on the middle school transition (moving from elementary school to middle school) from the perspective of the preadolescent boy. I would like to talk to your son about his academic experiences in middle school. I am asking him to participate in this study because he has maintained a 3.0 grade point average with no Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory Citizenship, or Work Habits grades this year. In addition, he has an excellent attendance record. I am very interested in hearing about his experiences at school.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research study is to gain a better understanding of the environmental factors of middle school that help male students reach academic success as they transition from
elementary to secondary school. This understanding will help guide future transition-year programs as well as inform the practice of middle school educators.

The data your child provides will be used as part of a study being done in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, and may be used as the basis for articles or presentations in the future. His name nor any information that would identify him will be used in any way or at any time.

**What will he be asked to do?**

If he decides to participate, your son will be asked to take part in three interviews. He will be asked several questions. Some of them will be about how he participate in his learning. Others will be about the middle school environment. With your permission, I will tape record him and take notes during the interviews. He will not be asked to identify himself on the recording.

**When and where will this take place and how much time will it take?**

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask that you allow me to interview your son three times. Once interview at the end of the quarter, at the end of first semester, and a third time at the end of the third quarter.

I can conduct interviews immediately after school in a school conference room or at a time and place that is more convenient to you. I will email you and your son to set up these interviews. These interviews will last from 30 to 45 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort?**

There is no likelihood of any risk in participating in this study. If you or your son become uncomfortable, you or he may end his participation at any time.

**Will my son benefit by being in this research?**
There will be no direct benefit to your son for participating in this study. However, the information gained from your participation may benefit future boys as they transition to middle school.

**Who will see the information about my son?**

Your information in this study will be confidential. Only I will see any information about your son. All audio recordings and transcriptions will be locked in a file cabinet in my office for three years as required, and then will be completely destroyed.

No reports or publications will use any information that could identify your son in any way. I will use a pseudonym (fake name) to refer to your and only I will know your son’s true identity. The key code linking your son’s true identity to the fake names used will be destroyed when the study is complete.

**If I do not want my son to take part in this study, what choice do I have?**

Your participation in this study is completely optional. If you do not wish to participate do not return the participation permission slip.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your son’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may end his participation at any time during the study without any negative consequences.

**Who can I contact about this study?**

If you have any questions, please contact Lisann Francisco, francisco.li@neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Jane Lohmann, jloehmann@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your son’s rights as participant in this research study, you may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator for the College of Professional Studies, Human Subjects Research Protection, 906 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-390-3450, Email: K.skophammer@neu.edu. You may contact this office anonymously if you wish.

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

As a token of appreciation for your son’s time, he will be given a gift card to a location of his choice at the completion of the third interview.

**Will it cost my son anything to participate?**

Other than your son’s time, there are no anticipated costs associated with participating in this research study.

**I agree for my son to participate in research study.**

I agree he is participating on a voluntary basis and understand that he can depart from the research study at any time. His participation will include three interviews. If he is uncomfortable with any question in these interviews, he may decline to answer it. I have read this document and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this research study. I fully understand my son’s involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks.

Signature of parent/guardian of participant: ________________________ Date: _____________

Printed Name of Person Above: ___________________________________________________

Signature of Person Who Explained Study and Gained Consent: __________________________ Date: _____________

Printed Name of Person Above: ___________________________________________________
Form adapted from:

www.northeastern.edu/research/research_integrity/facts_rates_forms/documents/temp1_signed_consent_dri.pdf
Appendix C: Invitation to Participate Letter

Text will be sent to all potential participants and their linked legal guardian’s residential addresses obtained from School District’s student information system.

Site Student and Legal Guardian

Site Student and Legal Guardian Street Address

Site Student and Legal Guardian City, State Zip

Date

Dear Site Student and Legal Guardian,

In the event we have not met before, please allow me to introduce myself. I am Mrs. Francisco, and I am a sixth-grade teacher in the Blue Village at Site. I have taught at Site for the last fifteen years.

I am in the process of completing my doctoral degree at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. As part of a research study to increase understanding of academic achievement across the middle school transition year (6th grade), I will be conducting interviews with several students to get their perspective on transitioning from elementary to middle school. This study has been approved by both the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University and the Glendora Unified School District.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. As a student who has continued to achieve academically since starting middle school, you are in an ideal position to provide information which will be valuable to my research.
Your part in this study would be completely anonymous. All of your responses will be confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed to anyone. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts for taking part in this study and other than your time, there are no costs involved in participating in this study. Your participation is entirely optional and voluntary, and the decision to participate is entirely up to you.

If you are interested in participating, I would appreciate meeting with you and your guardian for about ten minutes to discuss the study and obtain approval for you to participate.

In addition to this introductory meeting, I would like to meet with you for three interviews. The first interview would be during the first week of September. The second interview will take place approximately one week later, with the third interview following approximately one week after the second interview. These interviews will take between 60 to 75 minutes each and will be held outside of school hours. As a token of my appreciation for your time, you will receive a $50 gift card at the end of the third interview.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at francisco.li@husky.neu.edu to set up a brief meeting to discuss your participation, any questions you may have, and to sign a consent to participate.

With best regards,

Mrs. L. Francisco
Appendix D: Participant Interest Response Email

Dear Participants Name and Legal Guardian Name,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. As my letter said, this study has been designed to increase our understanding of school environmental factors which support academic achievement across the middle school transition year.

I would appreciate meeting with you both for about ten minutes to discuss the study. If you decide to participate after this discussion, I will obtain your written consent to participate and schedule an interview.

I can meet with you before or after school in my classroom to go over these items. Or, if you prefer, I can come to a location of your choosing, at a time that would be more convenient for you. I’ve listed some dates and times I am available to meet below. Please respond to this email and let me know if any of these would be good for you. If an alternative time or location would work better for you, please do feel free to suggest it.

Again, thank you for your willingness to consider participating, my study relies on the participation of students like you. I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Mrs. L. Francisco

Proposed Meeting Dates and Times:
Appendix E: Interview #1 Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Protocol Form Interview #1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant (Pseudonym)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer: Lisann C. Francisco</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do academically successful preadolescent boys understand and experience the transition to middle school?

Part I:

Introductory Protocol

_I have asked you to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who may have a great deal to share about being an academically successful student. My research project focuses on the experience of boys as they transition from elementary to secondary school. Through this study, I hope to gain a better understanding of how boys, like you, experience academic achievement as they transition from elementary to middle school. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can create programs at Site and perhaps other schools, which support all students academically as they move from elementary school to middle school._

_Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?_

Wait for permission to turn on tape recorder.
I will also be taking written notes. All of your answers will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting you. I will be the only who will listen to the tape and it will be eventually be destroyed after I have transcribed it. To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you were asked to sign the Participant’s Informed Consent form. I want to remind you of some important pieces of information that were in that document: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not think any harm will come to you for participating in this study.

Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

Wait for response, answer participant questions.

This interview should last 60 to 75 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, I may interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete all of my questions.

**Part II: Interviewee Background (2-5minutes)**

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general background.

A. Interviewee Background

As you know, Participant’s name, I teach here at Site and I am working on my doctoral degree at a university in Boston, Massachusetts. One of the reasons I decided to go back to school to earn my doctoral degree was my concern for students as they moved from elementary to middle school. Many students seem to have a difficult sixth-grade year academically. I really want to understand what we can do at Site to help more sixth-graders be scholastically successful. Part of the requirements of earning a doctoral degree is to complete an independent research study,
and that is why I have invited you to this interview. So now, I would like to ask you some questions.

Is it okay with you to proceed with my questions? Do you have any questions before we do?

Part 2:

Before we talk about middle school, I am interested in learning about your observations of being academically successful in elementary school. I would like to hear about your experience as an academically successful student in elementary school. If you mention other people, please do not use their real names. You can make up a name or just tell me they are a teacher, or another student, etc.

Questions:

What to you first remember about first “going” to school?

How did you get prepare to begin school?

Describe your earliest school memories.

What did you enjoy about elementary school?

What did you not enjoy about elementary school?

Tell me about favorite time period in elementary school (year/class/teacher).

Why was this your favorite?

You did well academically in fifth-grade. Can you describe how your elementary school helped you with this?
Describe the learning environment in fifth-grade. Prompts: What things at school helped you learn? Was there anything that made it difficult for you to learn? Were there rules, procedures, activities, or events that helped your learning?

What advice would you give to future fifth-grader so they could be academically successful at your elementary school?

“Participant’s name”, those are all of the questions I have for you today. Do you have any questions? Do you have any questions? Is there anything that I did not ask about that you would like to share with me?

Thank you so much for your time.

Turn off tape recorder.
Appendix F: Interview #2 Protocol

Participant (Pseudonym) ______________________________________________

Interview Date: ________________ Interview Time:________________________

Interviewer: Lisann C. Francisco

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do academically successful preadolescent boys understand and experience the transition to middle school?

Part I:

Introductory Protocol

I want to remind you that I have asked you to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who may have a great deal to share about being an academically successful student. My research project focuses on the experience of boys as they transition from elementary to secondary school. Through this study, I hope to gain a better understanding of how boys, like you, experience academic achievement as they transition from elementary to middle school. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can create programs at Site and perhaps other schools, which support all students academically as they move from elementary school to middle school.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?
Wait for permission to turn on tape recorder.

*I will also be taking written notes. All of your answers will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting you. I will be the only who will listen to the tape and it will be eventually be destroyed after I have transcribed it. To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you were asked to sign the Participant’s Informed Consent form. I want to remind you of some important pieces of information that were in that document: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not think any harm will come to you for participating in this study.

Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

Wait for response, answer participant questions.

*This interview should last 30 to 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, I may interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete all of my questions.

**Part II: Interviewee Background (2-5minutes)**

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general background.

A. Interviewee Background

*Participant’s name, I am continuing to work on my doctoral degree at a university in Boston, Massachusetts. One of the reasons I decided to go back to school to earn my doctoral degree was my concern for students as they moved from elementary to middle school. Many students seem to have a difficult sixth-grade year academically. I really want to understand what we can do at Site to help more sixth-graders be scholastically successful. Part of the requirements of*
earning a doctoral degree is to complete an independent research study, and that is why I have invited you to this interview. So now, I would like to ask you some questions.

Is it okay with you to proceed with my questions? Do you have any questions before we do?

Part 2

I would like to hear about your experiences. If you mention other people, please try not use their real names. You can make up a name or just tell me they are a teacher, or another student, etc.

Questions

Describe for me what the change from elementary school to middle school was like?

Describe what it is like to be academically successful student in the sixth-grade.

Describe the learning environment in sixth-grade.

Prompts: How does the school environment help you learn? Is there anything that makes it difficult for you to learn? Are there rules, procedures, activities, or events that help or hinder your learning?

What advice would you give to future sixth-grader so they could be academically successful at your middle school?

“Participant’s name”, those are all of the questions I have for you today. Do you have any questions? Do you have any questions? Is there anything that I did not ask about that you would like to share with me?

Thank you so much for your time.
Turn off tape recorder.
Appendix G: Interview #3 Protocol

Interview Protocol Form Interview #3

Participant (Pseudonym) ________________________________________________

Interview Date: ________________ Interview Time:__________________________

Interviewer: Lisann C. Francisco

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do academically successful preadolescent boys understand and experience the transition to middle school?

Part I:

Introductory Protocol

I want to remind you that I have asked you to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who may have a great deal to share about being an academically successful student. My research project focuses on the experience of boys as they transition from elementary to secondary school. Through this study, I hope to gain a better understanding of how boys, like you, experience academic achievement as they transition from elementary to secondary school. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can create programs at Site and perhaps other schools, which support all students academically as they move from elementary school to middle school.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Wait for permission to turn on tape recorder.
I will also be taking written notes. All of your answers will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting you. I will be the only who will listen to the tape and it will be eventually be destroyed after I have transcribed it. To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you were asked to sign the Participant’s Informed Consent form. I want to remind you of some important pieces of information that were in that document: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not think any harm will come to you for participating in this study.

Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

Wait for response, answer participant questions.

This interview should last 60 to 75 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, I may interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete all of my questions.

Participant’s name, I am continuing to work on my doctoral degree at a university in Boston, Massachusetts. One of the reasons I decided to go back to school to earn my doctoral degree was my concern for students as they moved from elementary to middle school. Many students seem to have a difficult sixth-grade year academically. I really want to understand what we can do at Site to help more sixth-graders be scholastically successful. Part of the requirements of earning a doctoral degree is to complete an independent research study, and that is why I have invited you to this interview. So now, I would like to ask you some questions.

Is it okay with you to proceed with my questions? Do you have any questions before we do?

**Part 2:**
I would like to hear about your experiences. If you mention other people, please try not use their real names. You can make up a name or just tell me they are a teacher, or another student, etc.

Reflecting on your learning how would you finish this sentence: My first year of middle school was...?

What has this first-year middle school taught you about being academically successful?

What would you describe as the most important habits you have formed to help you be successful in school?

What advice would you give other students who want to be academically successful?

“Participant’s name”, those are all of the questions I have for you today. Do you have any questions? Is there anything that I did not ask about that you would like to share with me?

Thank you so much for your time.

Turn off tape recorder.