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Middle School Transition: faculty and parent perceptions of the academic, procedural,

and social changes that occur between elementary and middle school

by

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Abstract

This purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of parents and faculty regarding the transition from a private special education school to the middle school environment. Research was conducted using a mixed methods design to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of those directly involved with the transition process. Seventeen participants, nine parents and eight faculty participated in both the interviews and questionnaire processes. Social competence, academic competence, procedural challenges, maturational readiness and program planning were dominant themes in this study. The study examined the academic, procedural and social changes that occur in middle school from the stage-environment fit and adolescent development theories. This study found that while both parents and faculty experience anxiety and excitement about transition all participants perceived the social and academic domains as the most difficult for students with special needs. This study also examined the experiences of parents and faculty in the transition planning process. This study identified a need to develop curriculum that supports parents and faculty before, during and after this important transition process. Policy that mandates a series of coordinated activities for transition is recommended.

Dedication

I want to thank the three most important, influential women in my life, my daughters Erin and Lauren and my mom, without whom success would have no meaning. Erin, thank you for knowing who I am and helping me to see the importance of balance in life. Lauren, thank you for keeping me aware of who I could be and helping me see the power of hope. Mom, thanks for always telling me "can't means won't". I wish you were here so see the fruits of your wisdom.

B.J.M.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

As students make the transition to middle school from the highly
organized, single teacher, self-contained configuration they have
experienced in elementary school, they are often confronted with less
structured, more impersonal, competitive academic and social settings
where multiple daily transitions are the norm (Akos, 2002; Mullins &
Irvin, 2000). According to Mullins and Irvin (1997) this transition is
typically one in which students move from smaller, closely-formed
communities to larger and often less personal ones. In most elementary
school configurations students spend the majority of their day with the
same peers, in the same classroom, with one teacher who teaches all of
the subject areas. In these classes there are structured daily schedules,
with clear teacher expectations. Transitions that occur during the day are
by cohort and guided by a teacher. Typically, students in elementary
school only need to learn the expectations of one teacher, respond to a
single instructional style, and interact with the same classmates on a daily
basis. Parents have one primary connection, the classroom teacher where
important home school connections are made.

In contrast, students entering the middle school environment rotate
independently through multiple classes each day often with differing
schedule types (block, multi-day, e.g.), adapting to different teaching

styles, peers, and academic and social expectations that change with each class change (see Appendix A).

Typically, each middle school class has its own set of expectations, teaching style, and social dynamic to which students must adapt each class period. Middle school characteristics change dramatically from those of elementary school, as well as simultaneously with changes that occur as a result of adolescence. This is the time between the ages of 10-13 when "at no other time in development is a student likely to encounter such a diverse number of problems simultaneously" (Letrello & Miles, 2003, p.212). Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, and Kumar (2002) reported that these changes in middle school characteristics often do not match the changes in adolescent development of the middle school-aged child.

The instructional context found in middle school, the number of classes in a day, the pace of instruction, the increased content load, a greater emphasis on grades, competitive peer relationships, and less individual attention characterize typical middle school academic environments (Midgley, Middleton, Gheen, & Kumar, 2002). Middle schools place greater emphasis on discipline and academic success with less opportunity for individualization and fewer opportunities for faculty to develop close relationships with parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). The need to respond and react to these academic, environmental, and social changes happens at the same time that parents are experiencing a shift in involvement in their child's life. "As

adolescence approaches, students experience rapid social, emotional, cognitive and physical growth" (Carter, Clark, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2005, p. 9). It is during this time that parents become less involved in their adolescent's life, socially and academically. "We understand that early adolescence is an incredibly important period for the negotiation of autonomy-related changes in the parent-child relationship" (Steinberg & McCray, 2001, p.3).

Odegaard and Heath (1992) specified that the transitions from kindergarten through elementary school, followed by another transition to middle school, and yet another to high school are major transitions not only for the student but for the parents. When these transitions occur between schools, elementary school faculty may need to support parents. Thus, the transition process for both parents and faculty should be considered when implementing support programs. While each transition is marked by significant changes none is more so than the transition to middle school because of associated developmental changes of adolescence (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Chung, Elias, and Schneider (1998) and Odegaard and Heath (1992) have reported that these transitions have associated difficulties for faculty and parents that are complicated by instructional, behavioral, and physical changes occurring in the middle school-aged student and the middle-school environment.

Alspaugh (1998) found a "statistically significant achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary school to middle school"

(p. 25). A noted loss in achievement for those students entering high school from grades 6-7 contrasted with those students making the transition from elementary schools that ended in grade 8. Additionally, high school dropout rates were reported to be higher when students made more than one transition during their elementary school years (Alspaugh, 1998). "There is a growing awareness that early adolescence is the critical turning point…and one of the last real opportunities to affect educational and personal trajectory" (MacIver & Epstein, 1993, p. 521).

The changes that make the transition to middle school difficult for adolescents can be complicated for students with special needs who present a more complex cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral picture that impacts academic and social success throughout their educational career. According to Carter, Clark, Cushing, and Kennedy (2005) the gap for this at-risk population widens as the instructional and social context of middle school changes. Downing (1999) found that students with special needs exhibited social skills deficits when compared with their age mates. Also, Carter et al. (2005) reported that "any sense of belonging enjoyed during elementary school may give way to feelings of isolation in middle and high school" (p. 9). This sense of belonging is also complicated for the parents and teachers. Elementary school characteristically allows for the formation of parent-teacher bonds that typically do not occur in middle school. The single line of communication between a classroom teacher in elementary school and the parent is

complicated by the middle school system of multiple faculty members for each child. "The potential impact of this transition on the young person may be a source of stress and concern for parents, teachers and the students themselves. Such difficulties can be exacerbated for students with special educational needs" (Weldy, 1995, p. 5).

Numerous studies about the move from elementary school to middle school have suggested that a mixture of excitement, worry, fear, and curiosity are associated with the change for general education students, faculty, and parents (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Davy, 2009; Lipps, 2005; Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Also, research in the field of transition has suggested that the move to middle school is often associated with negative changes in attitude, engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983). For some students, moving into middle school represents independence and growing up. For others however, "the obstacles in the path of adolescence can impair the physical and emotional health, destroy motivation and ability to succeed and damage personal relationships" (Carnegie Council, 1995).

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, a seminal report on middle school published by the Carnegie Task Force on Education (1989), provides a framework for designing the middle school structure to insure that academic, social, and family considerations for adolescents are in place. These recommendations include:

- Large middle grades schools should be divided into smaller communities for learning.

- Middle grades schools should be organized to ensure success for all students.

- Middle grades schools should teach a core of common knowledge for all students.

- Families should be allied with school faculty through mutual respect, trust, and communication.

These recommendations are supported by the literature (see Chapter II) that described the important changes in cognitive and social-emotional development for adolescents, and the concomitant academic, procedural, and social changes that define the characteristics of the middle school environment. Leonard (2008) reported that middle school students are more successful in environments that are sensitive and responsive to the developmental needs of the adolescent and are configured according to the tenets recommended in the Carnegie Report. Additionally, research findings by Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, and Flowers (1997) suggested a greater need for recognition of those recommendations for students who are at-risk.

<center>**Statement of the Problem**</center>

There are a number of studies that have described both positive and negative perceptions of public school parents and faculty that are experiencing the transition to middle school. These studies suggest that

parents approach the middle school transition with fear and excitement and are concerned about changes in school participation and academic achievement for their student. Studies related to faculty engaged in the middle school process for general education students in a public school setting suggest concern about academic, social and procedural differences between elementary and middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Harter, 1981; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991;). The few studies conducted with at-risk students in public school inclusion and/or self-contained classrooms suggest that the middle school transition process represents an even greater time of increased risk for students with special needs (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Carter, Clark, Cushing & Kennedy, 2005). The transition to a new structure with new rules, relationships, and expectations can be challenging for all students, but especially for those students for whom cognitive and social development are risk factors (Carter et al. 2005). This is also the time when the role of the parent changes, and when lines of communication between school and home are not as clear as they were in elementary school. Little transition research exists that adds to the knowledge base regarding perceptions of parents and faculty in the private school special education environment or that support transition planning. The important variables found in the literature in the general education environment, academic, social, and

procedural characteristics of middle school are studied for faculty and parents in a private special education school setting.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of transition faculty and parents regarding the academic, procedural, and social changes that occur in the transition from elementary to middle school in a private, special education, school setting. A second purpose of this study was to add knowledge to the existing literature describing factors for developing effective transition programs for faculty and families in a private, special education, school setting. Theories regarding the complicated developmental changes that occur during early adolescence, and the role of parents and faculty in those changes along with the academic, procedural, and social changes that occur in the middle school environment, provided the framework for this study.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study has two parts: (a) Are there common academic, social and procedural considerations in the transition process for faculty and parents in a private special education school as students move out of their elementary school and into a new middle school environment? (b) Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school in a private special education setting that can inform program planning?

The secondary research questions that this study seeks to answer examine three factors.

1. Academic factors. (a) How do elementary school transition faculty in a private special education school describe academic considerations for students making the transition from elementary to middle school? (b) Are there parental concerns regarding student academic readiness as their children transition from elementary to middle school?

2. Social Factors. (a) How are transition faculty preparing students for changes in social characteristics of middle school?

(b) Are there parental concerns regarding changes in social characteristics between the elementary and the middle school environments?

3. Procedural Factors. (a) How do transition faculty help students prepare for the procedural changes in middle school?

(b) How do parents describe excitement/concern about the changes in procedures for their children who are transitioning to middle school?

The quantitative research questions in this study are:

1. How do transition faculty rank academic, procedural and social factors when students transition from elementary to middle school in a private special education setting?

2. How do parents rank academic, social and procedural factors commonly associated with the characteristics of the middle school environment?

Conceptual Framework

The stage-environment fit theory that describes the impact of environment on achievement for adolescents was explored in relationship to developmental theories for this study on transition. Literature and research on cognitive, social, physical, and behavioral changes that occur during adolescence provided a theoretical framework for looking at the impact of procedural, social, and academic changes that are often characteristic in middle school models from the perspectives of faculty and parents involved in that transition.

Specifically, the literature and research reviewed in Chapter II illustrates the impact of the changes that occur between the developing child and the changing middle school environment. Important literature from Piaget and Vygotsky, each of whom view cognitive development from differing lenses, provided the framework for understanding studies that focus on cognitive changes that occur during the adolescent years. The work of Watson, Skinner, and Bandura were considered when reviewing research on developmental changes in behavior that occur during adolescence. The significance of behavioral development in the context of changes that occur between elementary and middle school were explored in relationship to the procedural characteristics faced in middle school. Stanley Hall's 1904 publication, *Adolescence*, provided a basis for reviewing studies that explored the impact of physical characteristics associated with the developing adolescent that is attempting to navigate

the middle school environment. Social-emotional health, when explored from the Freudian theory of development, served to frame research on changes in social relationships that occur between elementary and middle school environments.

Chapter II provides detail about each of these important theorists and subsequent research that explored cognitive, social, and behavioral changes that occur in adolescence. The developmental models that were explored relate to literature on the mismatch between the elementary school environment and middle school characteristics. A review of stage -environment and person-fit theories provided an understanding of how changes in adolescence are complicated when environmental changes are considered. The environmental changes under study are those that typically characterize the changes between elementary and middle school: procedural, social and academic.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on academic, procedural, and social factors identified by researchers as they sought to understand the perceptions of parents and faculty about the transition to middle school in the general education environment. These theoretical and conceptual frameworks were chosen from other possible frameworks based on their relevance in adolescent, middle school, and transition literature and their significance for special needs students. Chapter II provides a detailed review of the literature and research on these theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

This study focused on the perceptions and experiences of faculty and parents of students who are transitioning out of their private, special education, elementary school environment into a new middle school environment. There is a need to understand the academic, procedural, and social characteristics of the elementary school context that includes faculty and parents regarding the transition to middle school in a private, special education, school environment to better understand programmatic interventions that will support transition for this specialized demographic.

Study Design and Methodology

In my career as a speech pathologist and Head of School in both public and private schools I have been committed to supporting faculty and families of students with special needs for 20 years. Witnessing the difficulty that parents have in navigating their children's transitions throughout their educational paths I have observed that the place where faculty and parents have the least amount of support is in the transition from elementary to middle school. This has been particularly apparent in the approved private, special education, school environment in New York City for schools that do not offer middle school programs. Parents are forced to face the challenge of finding a middle school that meets the needs of their children. While preparing students for the academic rigor of middle school, faculty also face the challenge of preparing students for social and procedural changes that occur in the transition to middle school. Despite these challenges, federal special education law that

provides transition support in both early education and as students move through high school to post-secondary environments does not provide for those students making the transition from elementary to middle school (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Acts, 2004). The question of why there are no federal mandates for this particular age group sparked my interest in studying whether or not parents and faculty are experiencing transition in a unique way in the special education environment.

The purpose of this case study is to understand transition factors that are important to parents and faculty through the lens of developmental theory. I examined the relevance of several factors related to both positive and negative aspects of the move from elementary to middle school since the literature suggests a mismatch between the developmental needs of adolescents and the middle-school characteristics. Analyzed data sought to answer the questions: (a) Are there common academic, social and procedural factors in the transition process for faculty and parents as they navigate the transition process from elementary to middle school for the students they serve? (b) How do differences between faculty and parents regarding the transition process to middle school implicate program planning? I used a mixed methods study in an attempt to discover the experiences and perceptions of parents and faculty as they navigate through the process of transition from the elementary school environment to the middle school environment. Four

sources of data, consisting of two quantitative surveys and two qualitative interviews, were analyzed.

Quantitative data was collected from ranked responses on questionnaires that were administered to parents and transition faculty at an approved private, special education school in a large urban area whose students were transitioning in the 2013-2014 school year. To triangulate the data, information obtained from the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews was gathered from nine parents and eight faculty who work directly with the transition program. These participants were guided through a semi-structured interview process and gave consent to having their responses recorded prior to the interview. The participants were selected equitably from all faculty and parents with students enrolled in the 2013-2014 transition class at an approved, private, special education school in New York City. Forty three percent (n=9) of the total number of potential parent participants participated in both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study (N=21). One hundred percent of faculty responded to the questionnaire and consented to be interviewed (N=8). Participant responses were coded, analyzed thematically, and reported in both numerical and narrative formats. Codes were assigned to discrete pieces of data in an attempt to discover themes that arose from the responses. To insure validity, observations of transition meetings, field notes, and a review of relevant documents was also completed.

The instruments that were used to collect quantitative data were adapted with permission from questionnaires developed by Dr. Patrick Akos of the University of North Carolina based upon his previous research on school transition for general education students. These questionnaires organize perceptions into subscales for academic, social, and organizational domains with reported internal consistency estimates ranging from .72 for the academic subscale, .81 for the social subscale, and .52 for the organizational subscale (Moore, 2009).

Chapter III provides details about the population, sample, instrumentation, and data collection, analysis and reporting methods.

Significance of Study

This study has significance for educators, parents, administrators, and policy makers seeking to understand the challenges perceived by parents and faculty who are transitioning to middle school from a private, special education, elementary school in New York City. By examining these perceptions and gaining greater understanding of the impact on transition planning, administrators can support curriculum development, parent support programs, and faculty training to support these stakeholders in the transition process to middle school. Policy makers can examine transition program planning mandates for this school-aged group.

By analyzing the perceptions of each of these groups I identified thematic similarities and differences between each stakeholder group that

will add to the literature on transition planning for students with special needs who are entering middle school. Currently, little is understood about this process for parents and faculty of students in a private school setting. Results of this study may be useful to administrators as they analyze the needs of the incoming middle school parents and students in developing transition programs to meet their needs. It may also provide information to district and state policy makers when considering transition planning mandates in special education, given that there are no mandates on transitioning from elementary to middle school. Currently, federal mandates exist only for special needs students transitioning from pre-school to elementary school and high school to adulthood (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The results of this study, when positioned in the transition literature on general education, will provide a broader understanding of the transitional needs for parents and faculty and support transition planning programs in special education.

Limitations

Potential limitations in this study are related to the nature of qualitative research and potential researcher bias. Specifically, qualitative researchers become "part of the setting, context and social phenomenon" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 16) and therefore are subject to a lack of objectivity. As such, I needed to explore my personal beliefs, values, and experiences and conduct interviews with an awareness of those factors. A second limitation of this study is related to the use of

questionnaires when conducting research. According to Ackroyd and Hughes (1992) people respond differently based on their own interpretation of the question and the context in which it is being experienced. I needed to be certain that respondents understood the meaning of each question when conducting the research.

Another limitation involved the nature of the specialized school that serves special needs students exclusive of the general education population as it relates to diversity.

Delimitiations

This study was limited to an approved, private, special education elementary school located in New York that exits students at the end of the fifth grade year. The researcher recognizes that the use of questionnaires and interviews to gather information is a delimiting factor. In addition, this study was conducted during the initial phase of the transition process when parents and faculty are beginning to discuss possible placements.

Definition of Terms

Academic concerns: in this context these concerns are related to changes in academic expectations between elementary and middle school.

Adolescence: the transition stage between childhood and adulthood described by key developmental stages spanning ages 10-24. The ages between 10-14, used in this study, are considered the early adolescence stage (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2011).

Cognitive development: a stage theory that has several stages of development, where, at each stage children are faced with challenging situations which they must deal with and overcome through increased mental abilities (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Committee on Pre-School Special Education (CPSE): a committee that coordinates special education evaluations and services for children ages 3-5.

Committee on Special Education (CSE): a group comprised of a classroom teacher, school psychologist, parent advocate, parent and specialists as needed convened at a minimum annually to develop the individualized plan that reflects service delivery needs of a special education student.

Comprehensive Services Team (CST): faculty responsible for supporting parents whose students are transitioning out of this private special education elementary school. In this school, the school psychologist chairs the CST.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): a written program plan specifically designed for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in an annual meeting that addresses the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided along with and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel involved in instruction (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., Sec. 300/D/320).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): this act, first enacted in 1975 mandates that children and youth ages 3–21 with disabilities be provided a free and appropriate public education. Reauthorization of that act in 2004 mandated transition planning for students aged 16 and older.

Middle school: the structure that exists for grades 6-8 or 7-9, sometimes referred to as Junior High School which represents the final grade point before entering High School. While varying middle school configurations exist, the grade 6-8 configuration, the most prominent in middle school models is used for this study.

Procedural concerns: relating to issues dealing with differences in classroom and/or school organization and size such as locker use, getting lost, getting to class on time, materials and time management.

*School Transition***:** a change in grade level that occurs simultaneously with physical, social, cognitive and emotional developmental changes. (Kindle, 2000).

Social concerns: issues that gain importance in middle school such as making new friends, belonging, independence.

Special needs: any individual child with a disability who needs special education and related services, even if the child has not failed or been retained in a course or grade, and is advancing from grade to grade [I.D.E.A. §300.101I(1)].

Stage-environment fit theory: the theory that states that shifts in the environment during adolescence can help to explain academic motivation,

educational achievement and social-emotional well-being (Eccles & Midgely, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 1999).

Summary

Students experience multiple transitions throughout their K-12 education. Researchers have noted possible relationships between the number of school transitions and academic achievement. It is important to discover the issues associated with middle school transitions and to understand how faculty and parents perceive school transition issues to gain an understanding of how these issues impact students with special needs, their parents and faculty. Research suggests that the middle school transition process represents a time of increased risk for students with special needs associated with declines in academic and social achievement related to the complex changes in both the middle school environment and the changing adolescent (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Carter, Clark, Cushing & Kennedy, 2005). It is important for educators to insure a successful transition to middle school and to support parents in this process to reduce this potential risk and increase the educational outcomes for students with special needs.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Chapter II outlines two important theoretical frameworks, adolescent development and stage-environment fit theory and describes the conceptual framework on transition in general education that provides the basis for this study.

This chapter reviews important literature on the subject of transition and begins with the theories that spawned the middle school movement followed by the history of school configurations that resulted in the present day middle school model. The remainder of the chapter reviews literature on transition studies in both the general education and special education environments followed by program planning recommendations that result from the literature.

The stage-environment-fit theory that describes the impact of environment on transition for adolescents was studied in relationship to developmental theories for this study. Literature and research on cognitive, social, physical and behavioral changes that occur during adolescence provided a theoretical framework for looking at the impact of procedural, social and academic changes that are often characteristic in middle school models from the perspectives of faculty and parents involved in that transition.

Studying the perceptions of faculty and parents from prior research conducted by Akos and Galassi (2004) in the general education setting allowed examination of three identified transition concerns in a special education environment: academic, procedural, and social for parents and

faculty. By extending this research for parents and transition faculty in a private, special education setting I hope to broaden the perspective on this important topic for an otherwise under-studied population and add to the knowledge base on the transition to middle school.

Chapter II provides an overview of adolescent and middle school theories and the literature and research related to transitions to middle school. It is divided into sections that include (a) literature review process, (b) theoretical frameworks, (c) middle school characteristics, (d) history of school configuration, (e) transition studies in general and special education, and (f) program planning.

Literature Review Process

The review of the literature related to transition from elementary to middle school for students with special needs was conducted using a number of resources found in the Seton Hall University library database, peer reviewed journals, texts, and websites. Computerized databases included: *Academic Search Complete, Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI), EBSCOhost Research Databases, ERIC research databases,* and *ProQuest.* Search terms included: adolescents, at-risk learners, middle school, special needs, transition, and transition programs. The style guidelines used in formatting this dissertation were obtained from the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition (2010).

The review of the literature includes important themes relative to the problem statement which include:

- Changes in academic demands that occur between elementary and middle school.

- The increased number of transitions that occur daily in the middle school environment.

- Implications of structural changes on social competence.

- Perceived gaps in programmatic support for transitioning to middle school.

Theoretical Frameworks

Adolescent development has been viewed through a variety of theoretical lenses throughout history. Major cognitive, social, physical, and behavioral theories are presented as a framework for understanding the transition needs for adolescents.

Cognitive Theory

Two important cognitive theorists, Piaget and Vygotsky, viewed intellectual development from opposing lenses. Both agreed, however, that intellectual developmental stages over-lap with individual variations in the timing of development.

In Piaget and Inhelder's (1969) cognitive development theory, individuals move through four distinct stages in sequential order. Characteristics that define early adolescence span the concrete operational (ages 8-11) and formal operational stages (ages 11-14). During this

sequence of development children begin to think abstractly and are developing logic yet do not have the skills required for adult thinking. Piaget believed that learning should be experiential, not repetitive and described the importance of engaged, active learning for the early developing adolescent. School, according to the Piagetian model of learning, has an important role in providing learning opportunities that match each of the developmental stages.

In contrast, sociocultural cognitive theorists do not believe that development must precede learning. In this construct, cognitive development is affected by the interaction between relationships and culture. In Vygotsky's (1978) seminal work on social learning theory he underscored that learning comes from experiences that are influenced by individual development that must be scaffolded towards independent thinking. According to sociocultural theories the teacher has the capacity to act as the medium through which academics are interpreted through societal values and customs. "Learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90).

The National Middle School Association's (NMSA) important position paper entitled, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003) summarized some of the important cognitive-intellectual changes that occur during adolescent development:

- Commonly face decisions that require more sophisticated thinking skills.

- Prefer interaction with peers during learning activities.

- Thinking skills may shift from concrete to abstract depending on the context.

- Show increasing interest in self with less interest in academic learning.

Social Theory

Psychoanalytic theories that view adolescent changes from the lens of social-emotional health and well being stress the importance of conflict-resolution between internal desires and external pressures (Freud, 1856-1939). According to Freud (1935), authority figures, particularly parents and teachers have the capacity to control the amount of freedom that allows the adolescent to mature emotionally. This control of freedom is often perceived as oppression by the developing adolescent and may result in internal and external conflict.

Erikson's (1968) eight stages of development expanded on the psychoanalytic theory by defining specific characteristics of change throughout a person's lifespan. Erikson proposes that in the industry versus inferiority stage (age 6-11) that defines the early adolescent phase of development, children learn that specific society rules and skills are what determine acceptance by peers and adults. Erikson considers feelings of acceptance and belonging critical aspects in social-emotional

development. In psychoanalytic theories, persons with authority act as the external force that insures that emotional maturation occurs in a nurturing environment (Puckett, Black, & Trawick-Smith, 2004).

Some of the important social-emotional changes outlined by the NMSA (2003) position paper include:

- Have a strong need for approval from peers and to belong to a group.

- Are torn between dependence on and independence from parents.

- Are often pre-occupied with self.

- Believe that their problems are unique and are highly sensitive to personal criticism.

- Become increasingly aware of the differences between themselves and others.

Physical Theory

Gessell (1880-1961) and Hall (1884-1924), early maturational theorists, described physical changes in adolescence as genetically predetermined. They explained maturation as a product of age viewing the environment as a minor player in the developmental process. According to maturation theory, early adolescents undergo bodily changes related to puberty, a phase that affects maturation rate at different times for different people. According to physical theory, hormonal changes that occur during maturation cause simultaneous changes in sleep patterns and the need to expel excess energy. Maturation theories are concerned with

physiological changes that occur during each stage of growth and stress the importance of genetics over environment as the root cause of development.

Behavioral Theory

In contrast, behavioral theorists like Watson (1878-1958), Skinner (1904-1990), and Bandura (b. 1925) view environment as a critical influencer on development. Modern day theorists such as Ilg and Ames (as cited in Puckett et al. 2004) also view the environment as an important factor in changes in adolescent behavior. In the late 20th century the important influence of environment on adolescent development was described by ecological systems theorists like Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005). Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that human development should be viewed from a systems approach in which each system influences development in its own way. The importance of this theory is that it stresses that an individual's growth and development is not static or sequential, rather it is influenced by context (i.e. school, community, family) that can change over time. According to this theory systems that define an individual's daily environment impact that person's development.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2008) synthesized these important theories in its description of adolescence (ages 10-24). Each developmental stage within the 14-year span of adolescence is characterized by cognitive, social-emotional, and

physical changes associated with specific developmental age ranges. According to the AACAP, the early adolescent stage (ages 10-14) is characterized by cognitive changes that can include: increased interest in self, greater consideration for the present, and a growing sense of morality. Social emotional characteristics associated with early adolescence can include: increased conflict with authority (especially parents), a need for independence, and a growing importance in friendships. Physically, the early adolescent is undergoing hormonal changes that impact feelings of awkwardness and result in concerns about belonging. According to Kaplan (2004), adolescence is second only to infancy in the rate of developmental changes that occur in a person's life span.

The topic of middle school transition has its roots in the aforementioned early-developing theories of adolescence. Stanley Hall's 1904 publication titled, *Adolescence*, while challenged by modern developmental theorists, is widely considered the beginning of the field of scientific research of adolescent development that set a course for middle level education. In Hall's seminal work he viewed changes in adolescence as a period of "storm and stress" marked by inconsistent changes in emotion, behavior, and social exploration; a time marked by greater attention to peers than parents (Hall, 1904, p. 186). During the course of the 20th century, following Hall's publication, greater emphasis was placed on middle school education. Two publications, *The Middle*

School (Eichorn, 1966) and *The Emergent Middle School* (Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, & Kealy, 1969), directed the attention of education leaders to the educational needs of Hall's early adolescent as distinct from other age-grade academic and social needs. Alexander et al. (1969) noted, "...the emergent middle school may be best thought of as a phase and program of schooling bridging but differing from the childhood and adolescent phases and programs" (p. 5). Over time and with increased knowledge derived from adolescent research and theory, school policy makers began to take notice of the educational needs of this unique population. The transition report of the Carnegie Council, *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* (1995) that provided transition data over 10 years helped to move policy on adolescent transitions higher on the nation's agenda for action.

Recommendations from that report stressed the importance of creating programs that are responsive to the needs of adolescent students, faculty, and families as they navigate the transition to adulthood because of "the profound biological, physical, behavioral and social transformations that...correspond with the move to middle school" (The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995, p. 4). To understand the relationship between the environment and developmental changes, researchers that drew from cumulative stress (Blyth, Simmons & Carlson-Ford 1983) and person-fit (Hunt, 1975) theories analyzed the perceptions and experiences of faculty and students transitioning to middle school.

Research on these theories has suggested that the timing of transition, the perceived changes in environment, and adolescent development are related to declines in academics and delays in social-emotional development (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983). Research conducted by Barber and Olsen (2004) focused on the perceived changes in the middle school environment and the associated impact on academic performance. They found that parents and teachers perceived decreases in the quality of the middle school environment that were reflected in decreases in both achievement and social emotional function (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Their findings related these decreases to the changes in the procedural aspects of middle school, specifically the change from smaller to larger classes and the perceived change in teacher support resulting from the less personalized setting. According to this study "perceived change in several elements of the school environment did significantly explain changes in levels of academic, personal and interpersonal functioning" (Barber & Olsen, 2004, p.21).

In "Schools, Academic Motivation, and Stage-Environment", Eccles and Roeser (1999) broadened the concept of timing as they described the middle school environment as one that emphasizes academic and social competition, de-emphasizes decision-making and choice, and reduces the connection between student and teacher when adolescents are experiencing "a time of heightened self-focus…when the desire for control is growing and at a time when adolescents may be in need of close

adult relationships outside of the home" (Eccles & Roeser, 1999, p. 404).

It is evident from the literature that there are environmental changes that occur simultaneously with developmental changes in adolescence that include decreased parental involvement and increased academic and social demands. These co-occurring changes often result in a mismatch, such that the fit between the middle school child and the classroom and/or school environment increases the risk of negative outcomes "especially for adolescents who are having difficulty succeeding in school academically" (Eccles & Roeser, 1999, p. 421). Thus, early adolescent children are experiencing cognitive, social, and physical life transitions at a time when they are also being asked to transition to middle school with its own characteristic changes. It is important to understand middle school characteristics in relationship to adolescent changes to gain perspective on factors associated with transition for the early adolescent child.

Middle School Characteristics

In an attempt to explain how changes in adolescence are related to declines in academic and social functioning researchers have explored the important connection between the characteristics of middle school programs and the developmental changes associated with early adolescence.

While there is some variation in how middle schools are structured, common characteristics are important to consider for the adolescent

learner. Most middle schools enroll students from a variety of smaller elementary schools and are, therefore, larger. The number of transitions increases each day as students move from classroom to classroom. Students need to establish new relationships that change from classroom to classroom. There are more students and multiple teachers than in elementary school. Greater self-management skills are expected. Elementary students leave the senior rank at their elementary school and enter middle school as the lowest of the rank. Schedules are more complicated and students are required to manage more materials. Students are exposed to a variety of instructional styles as academic demands increase.

Neisen and Wise (2004) described the middle school environment as, "less nurturing, larger, more departmentalized, more competitive and more demanding academically. Middle school students are generally expected to be more independent and responsible for their own assignments…" (p. 163).

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Eccles and Midgley (1989) proposed the stage-environment fit theory based on Hunt's work (1975) to describe the characteristics that create a disconnect between the needs of the developing adolescent and the opportunities afforded them by home and school. Hunt argued that both the developmental framework and the environmental framework were keys to understanding the needs of the adolescent learner. Wigfield,

Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, and Midgley (1991) extended Hunt's theory and suggested that the changes in motivation and behavior, and the need for autonomy that are often attributed to developmental theories could also be influenced by the educational environments that may not be responsive to those changes.

According to the stage-environment fit theory, psychological, social-emotional, and cognitive characteristics associated with the middle school student are influenced by what the individual brings to the environment and what the environment offers to the individual. "In essence we are suggesting that it is the fit between the developmental needs of the adolescent and the home and educational environment that is important" (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 92). In their article titled, "The Impact of Stage-Environment Fit on Young Adolescents' Experiences in Schools and in Families" (1993), the authors presented three important characteristics of middle school (procedural, academic, and social) that differ significantly from elementary school.

Procedural characteristics cited include the manner in which discipline and teacher control are characterized, reporting evidence that indicates that elementary school faculty spend less time maintaining order and more time teaching than their middle school counterparts.

The academic characteristics described by the authors reflect a shift from individualized or small group instruction in elementary school to large class and between-class models of middle school that impact

achievement.

Social differences occurred as a result of changes in the number of peer interactions that happen during the day as students change classes and the reduced number of personal teacher-student relationships that result from being assigned multiple faculty throughout the day.

Eccles et al. (1993) provided evidence for the impact of classroom environmental changes in a longitudinal study they conducted over 2 years in 12 middle-income school districts in southeastern Michigan. Fifteen hundred middle-school aged students and faculty were recruited as part of a study designed to discover the impact of teacher confidence on teacher-student relationships in elementary and middle-school aged programs. Results from questionnaires and reviews of academic performance showed a decline in teacher confidence between elementary and middle grades with an associated decline in student self-perception and academic achievement for students. Of the 1,329 students included in this analysis, 78% of those students for whom academic performance declined had transitioned to classrooms with low confidence faculty in middle school from classrooms with high confidence faculty in elementary school. The researchers, concerned with the connection between educational environments and the developing adolescent, concluded from their study that teacher self-confidence, classroom organization, instruction, grouping practices, and teacher-student and student-student relationships contributed to the declines in achievement and motivation.

This qualitative study, one of the first empirical studies to analyze classroom and school environments across grades and schools revealed six patterns that change between elementary and middle school age programs resulting in a "mismatch" between environment and adolescence: teacher control, student decision-making, class organization and assessment, teacher self-efficacy, level of classwork, and, grading (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). According to stage-environment fit theory the procedural, academic, and social changes that characterize middle school environments are not aligned with the biological, cognitive, and social changes of adolescence.

Theorists who are interested in transition research are concerned with procedural, academic, and social changes that occur in middle school and suggest that administrators and policy makers promote developmentally responsive educational environments based on the needs of the adolescent described in the literature to ameliorate against academic and social challenges. According to Schiller (1999), transition is "... the process during which institutional and social factors influence which students' educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations" (pp. 216-217), suggesting that both environmental and developmental needs must be considered during transition.

History of School Configuration

Given that the transition to middle school during a time of

significant adolescent development is connected to procedural, academic, and social changes, it is important to understand the historical framework for the development of the middle school model. An overview of changes in school configurations throughout educational history provides the backdrop for understanding school transitions.

The one-room schoolhouse model that dominated the educational landscape in the early 19th century was adopted to provide instruction to students across all ages in a single room with one teacher. This configuration developed in response to the environmental needs of the small, rural, agrarian community in which the importance of work out-scored the importance in education. Like most changes in school configuration, the one room schoolhouse model changed in response to new environmental, social, and political reform movements.

During the 1950s, following World War II and a marked boom in birth rates, families moved from rural environments to newly developed suburban neighborhoods (Pratt, 1986). In response, educational reformers proposed that access to curriculum and resources would be better met in centrally located, larger, graded schools spawning the K-8, 9-12 configurations.

During the early 20th century educational reformists began responding to Hall and others and exposed inadequacies in the K-8 configuration for the middle grade adolescent student (Gruhn & Douglass, 1956). During this time the beginning of the movement to separate age-

grades began with the junior high-high school configuration. In this model students were educated in three distinct stages: K-6, 7-8, 9-12. By the end of the 1950s this separate configuration predominated the educational landscape. According to Lounsbury (1960), only one such configuration existed in 1909, but by 1960 over 6000 junior high schools were in full operation. According to Styron and Hyman (2008), the junior high school model was designed as a way to ease the transition between elementary and high school.

During the late 1960s and early 70s sharp declines in both school enrollment and academic achievement paved the way for yet another change: the advent of the middle school configuration. This configuration, beginning in 1970, was in response to an increased awareness of the needs of the adolescent learner in educational reform (MacIver & Epstein, 1993). Psychologists, developmental theorists, and educational researchers advanced the notion introduced by Stanley Hall (1904) that young adolescents have unique characteristics that require specialized educational models that are sensitive to their academic and social needs (Piaget, 1960; Thornburg, 1990). At the same time, educational reformists and policy makers raised concerns about the increased failure rate of high school students, making the climate for the growth of middle school ripe during the 20th century. Nationally, school districts began altering the junior high model in favor of the middle school movement (Clark & Clark, 1994; Cuban, 1992; Gruhn & Douglass,

1956).

Throughout the course of history the changes that coincided with societal and educational reform movements also altered the transition landscape in education. While there are currently states reconsidering the middle school model in favor of the K-8 configuration (West & Schwerdt, 2012), the middle school model continues to predominate school configurations today. According to research by McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (1995) there was a 55% increase in the number of middle school configurations from K-8 models over 30 years prior to their study. Elvowitz (2007) reported that 61% of the 14,107 middle-level schools in operation in the United States begin in either fifth or sixth grade, after which students move into high school. The implication for understanding transition is clear: unlike the history of school models that preceded it, modern day school configurations are creating multiple transitions for students during their K-12 educational journey. The developmental and environmental work of Hall and others frames the need to understand the impact of middle school transitions.

Transition Studies: General Education

Akos (2004) and Akos and Galassi (2004) sought to understand the perceptions of students, parents, and faculty about the transition to middle school in the general education environment. They based their work on the three major themes in the middle school transition process reported in the literature (academic, procedural and social) and connected their

findings with gaps in transition program planning. Their research was among the first to include the voices of students regarding the impact of transitioning and transition planning.

In a study conducted by Akos and Galassi (2004), 493 students, 144 parents, and 29 faculty in an affluent suburban area of North Carolina were asked to complete questionnaires and to participate in an interview in order to gain an understanding of the perceptions of students, parents, and faculty involved in middle school transition and to provide recommendations for improving programming for students transitioning into middle school. This study represented one of the first in the literature that included students in the process of understanding perceptions about transition issues. Prior research conducted with faculty and administration regarding transition from elementary to middle school reported negative aspects and changes in achievement (Alspaugh, 1998), self-esteem (Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991), and psychological characteristics associated with transition (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989). In contrast, the Akos and Galassi (2004) findings presented a balanced profile of both negative and positive perceptions and offered specific recommendations for programming both before and after the transition. Their findings were organized into three categories--academic, procedural, and social that focused on concerns and anticipations of transitioning to a new school. Academic (homework) and procedural (getting lost) concerns dominated

parent response rates (47% and 34% respectively) and student response rates (65% and 55% respectively), while middle school faculty were more concerned with social and procedural issues, such as making friends (83%) and getting lost (75%). Students, parents, and faculty all identified positive aspects of transition that included the ability to choose classes (procedural) and the potential for making new friends (social).

There are a number of studies that have examined both positive and negative factors associated with the transition to middle school for students in the general education environment that support the findings of Akos and Galassi (2004). Many transition studies stressed the importance of establishing effective programming for students transitioning to middle school to ameliorate the academic problems often associated with the transition mismatch (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspalgh, 1998; Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Midgley, C., Reuman, D., Mac Iver, D., & Feldlaufer, J. (1993). Harter, 1981; Holas & Huston, 2011; Mizelle, 2005; Neild, Blafanz & Herzog, 2007; Odegaard & Heath, 1992; Parker, 2010; Ruesch, 2012).

Research conducted on transition in a variety of grade level programs extended the results of the Akos and Galassi (2004) study and demonstrated the need to understand the multi-faceted nature of middle school transition in relation to the academic, procedural, and social concerns. Ruesch (2012) examined the transition experience of students

entering single-grade, middle school classrooms from multi-age elementary school programs. This mixed-methods study, conducted in a large urban district in Chicago, analyzed interview findings and aimed at understanding three areas of concern--academic, procedural, and social engagement--and reported quantitative data on changes in social-emotional well-being as evident in the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Reusch's (2012) study was conducted in a K-5 school of 460 students. Eight of the 60 students in grade 5 completed both the Piers-Harris and the interview process (62.5% female, 37.5% White, 37.5% Hispanic, 25% Asian). Parents and faculty were excluded from this study. While a small number of possible participants responded, her findings suggested that students transitioning to middle school were concerned with the adjustment to the larger school and classroom setting (procedural), the perceived increase in academic demands (academic), and the fear of establishing social relationships with peers and faculty (social), similar to what was reported in the Akos and Galassi (2004) study.   Results also indicated that these areas of concern decreased over the course of the transitional year; findings that were consistent with previous research that implicated transition program planning needs (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Schumacher, 1998; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Reusch's study, conducted in a high-achieving school district, did not include students with special needs or previously retained students suggesting a need for further study in this area.

Holas and Huston (2011) conducted a mixed methods, longitudinal study comparing achievement, engagement, and the perceived competence of children in both transitioning and non-transitioning grades in different school configurations (K-8, K-5, K-6) reporting that "students entering middle school in 6th grade, compared to those remaining in elementary school, experienced lower classroom quality which in turn predicted slightly lower achievement" (Holas & Huston, 2011, p.334). Eight hundred fifty-five participants in 600 schools (51.5% female, 82.3% White, 11.1% Black and 6.4% Latino) were included in this study. Sixty-six students who were retained in grade 3 were excluded from the study. Classroom quality was measured by researcher observation and teacher-rating scales. Academic success was measured by performance on standardized achievement tests and student ranking by faculty. Results from this study compared the impact of classroom and school characteristics with the timing of middle school transitions (procedural), academic achievement (academic), and social engagement (social). The researchers found that changes in the middle school environment, specifically the larger class and school size (procedural), and changes in classroom instruction (academic) were the most significant factors related to the reduction in achievement and engagement for students transitioning in sixth grade. This research was important because it was conducted using a transition and a non-transition comparison group adding important information to the literature on the effects of procedural and academic

changes in the middle school transition process. According to the researchers the findings of this study "should redirect the policy and research spotlight…toward a more nuanced understanding of school characteristics and quality" (Holas & Huston, 2011, p. 344). The study, however, did not include students who had been retained or had remedial needs, suggesting the need for further study with this demographic.

In an article entitled, "Listening to Their Voices: Middle Schoolers' Perspectives of Life in Middle School," Steinberg and McCray (2012) asked the question "If you could change one thing in your middle school what would it be?" of 15 middle school students in three schools in the southeast region of the United States. The answer to this question in this qualitative study yielded three important themes about transition, students want to: establish relationships with their faculty (social); be active, not passive learners (academic); and have more opportunities to access technology in the classroom (procedural). Based on their findings the authors suggested that "educators can make simple, but purposeful changes" that will impact student engagement in middle school (Steinberg & McCray, 2012, p. 12).

Neild, Blafanz, and Herzog (2007) reported that problems in the transition to middle school signal later academic difficulty. They conducted a longitudinal study of 1400 students entering middle school and followed them through the first 2 years of high school. They found that sixth grade students with poor attendance, behavioral referrals, and

final failing grades in math and English had a 75% chance of dropping out of high school and suggested that greater attention should be given to this transition. Similarly, Mizelle (2005) found greater academic achievement in high school for students who successfully transitioned to middle school. Clyne (2007) agreed and reported that not only is it difficult to address academic challenges in the context of middle school, it is also a time when, without the necessary academic skills, student motivation and engagement decrease. These findings are consistent with the concept of stage-environment fit espoused by Eccles and Midgley, (1989) and suggest that academic achievement is compromised as a result of middle school changes.

Researchers agree that there is an overall decline in academic performance associated with the transition to middle school (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Petersen & Crockett, 1985). This was supported in a study of 440 school districts conducted by Alspaugh (1998) in which he found an increase in the number of dropouts and students needing to repeat grades associated with the number of increases in transitions that occur during a student's educational life. He reported a "statistically significant achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary to middle school" (p.20). Researchers on transition agree that when viewed from the combined developmental and environment lens that, "for young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs being met (National

Middle School Association (NMSA, 2003, p. 3). The research on middle school transition suggests that the connection between development and environment as reported in the literature is important to students, faculty and parents and is related to achievement.

Transition Studies: Special Education

The above review of transition studies for general education students in public school paints a picture of the impact on achievement and social growth the move from elementary to middle school has in the framework of academic, procedural, and social concerns reported by students, parents, and faculty. For students with special needs the picture is not as clear in either private or public school settings. Middle school transition studies that identify procedural, academic, and social concerns for students, parents, and faculty in the general education environment in public school, as presented, provide the basis for reviewing the smaller number of transition studies found in the literature for students with special needs in a private school setting. The following studies provide a sample of the transition literature relating to that demographic.

Forgan and Vaughn (2000), in their 2 year comparative study of 14 students--with and without special needs--making the transition to middle school, reported little to no difference in positive or negative factors associated with the transition. Participants in this study were recruited from a predominantly Hispanic community, from an inclusive classroom in a public school, and from a large southeastern metropolitan area. The

14 Hispanic students in the study were divided evenly between those classified with special needs and those not classified as such (*n*=7). This mixed methods study examined reading comprehension as measured by the Basic Academic Skills Sample (BASS) academic self-concept as measured by performance on the Piers-Harris Children's Self- Concept Measure and friendship building as measured by questionnaire and interview responses. Students with cognitive delays were excluded from this study.

Individual student interviews were used to understand student perceptions of the transition to middle school in the areas of middle school changes (procedural), developing friendships (social), and academics. Positive and negative factors were reported for both sets of students in the social and academic domains. Findings from this study (lower academic self-concept scores and declines in reading achievement for students with special needs) highlight the importance of research and response to academic and self-concept issues for middle school students with special needs. The relatively small sample that excluded students with cognitive delays, along with the use of a non-normed instrument (BASS), limited the study.

Parker's (2010) longitudinal research extended this study by investigating self-concept changes at multiple points prior to and during the transition to middle school. Using the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale to isolate specific self-concept domains, she recruited 78 fifth-grade students enrolled in two separate feeder schools consisting of

homogenously grouped classes in a town situated between a large city and a small university area. Participants from four distinct educational environments, namely, gifted and talented, average, below grade level, and special education were included in the study. Findings suggested an initial increase in positive perceptions in the areas of academic self-concept, social self-concept, and physical self-concept immediately after transition to middle school, with declines in these areas over time across the grades for all participants. Only one domain-specific area, emotional self-concept, did not show changes in results over time. Multiple limitations in this study are evident. Special needs participants were instructed in self-contained classrooms, while others participated in departmentalized instructional settings limiting the validity of the results. Ethnicity data was reported, but there is no data that reflects the diversity in cognitive achievement within and between these homogenous classes. Additionally, the small sample size (N=732, n=78) limits the generalizability of the results. Finally, the homogenous grouping of students according to ability level is in direct contrast to recommendations found in the Carnegie Report (year?) *Turning Points 2000* for developmentally responsive middle school structures. Of import in this study are the findings that suggest that diverse learners may be equally vulnerable to academic, social, and physical self-concept changes associated with adolescence and the transition to middle school.

Maras and Aveling (2006) studied the perceptions of transition of

students with moderate to severe emotional and behavioral difficulties in a private school setting and found that successful transitions included open communication between the parents, students and the faculty that provided support services, a recommendation consistent in transition literature for all students (Akos, 2002; National Middle School Association and The National Association of Elementary Principals, 2002). Participants in this study included four boys and two girls all age 11 at the beginning of the research. Of the four boys, three carried an emotional-behavioral diagnosis and one was diagnosed on the autism spectrum. The two females in the study carried diagnoses of Down's syndrome and Autism. Two of the students were interviewed before and after transitioning to middle school, while the remaining four were interviewed only after transitioning to a new school. This qualitative case study examined the results of two 20-minute, semi-structured interviews. Researchers found that adjusting to the increased workload and homework (academic), increased hours at school and organization (procedural), and concerns about making friends (social) dominated student responses. Limitations in this study included the small number of participants and the diversity of class placement and diagnoses among those selected. In addition, three of the six students could not be interviewed twice, which impacted the validity and the generalizability of the results (Maras & Aveling, 2006). The importance of this study is that it corroborated prior findings that suggested that transition concerns are focused on procedural,

academic, and social domains in both public and private special education school settings.

Eric Anderman, et.al (1999) examined the relationship between school type on achievement gaps in math and science and the transition to middle school for students with and without learning disabilities (LD). Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) Anderman examined a subset of participants that included 1,946 eighth grade students from 78 public and private school settings chosen because they included at least three LD students per school. Of those participating, 296 (15%) were classified as LD and 1,608 (85%) were not classified as LD. Ninety-six percent of the participants were enrolled in public school while 4% attended private schools. All school types included the following grade configurations:

Table 1

Grade configurations

K-8	7%
K-12	3%
6-12	12%
3-8	16%
6-8	44%
7-9	16%

Predictor variables considered relevant for this study included gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, grades, future plans, and student

perception of teaching quality. Teacher quality was measured by responses on a 4-point scale designed to measure agreement or disagreement related to student perception of teaching. Findings indicated that students with LD who transitioned from elementary to middle school during early adolescence performed significantly lower on math and science. It was also reported that the gap for LD students was lessened when the transition out of elementary school occurred in eighth grade. The author suggested that LD students perform better in school when they make fewer transitions and relates this to literature on concomitant psychological, social, and academic problems associated with learning disabilities and the developmental challenges of adolescence. The author did not report the data by school type (private vs. public) other than grade configuration did not include achievement methods and conducted the research using a small LD sample size. There was no reported analysis on perception of teaching quality. There was no reported analysis on the perception of family involvement. The results of this study suggested that for both public and private school the transition to middle school may be "a particularly difficult period for students who also experience learning disabilities" (Anderman, et.al. 1999 p. 136).

Adreon and Stella (2001) reported similar conclusions in their article entitled, "Transition to Middle and High School: Increasing the success of students with Asperger Syndrome." The authors described a number of specific problems encountered during the transition to middle

school that were related to the specific Asperger diagnosis. These included developmentally delayed social skills, weaknesses in comprehending and expressing language, and sustaining attention. Conclusions were not provided about the roles parents and faculty played as it related to the problems encountered during this transition.

In one of the earlier studies on the transition process for students with special needs Earnest (as cited in Maras & Aveling, 2006) reported that students with special needs had lower scores on four of the five subscales of the school attitude measures: performance-based academic self-concept, reference-based academic self-concept, sense of control over performance, and self-mastery. He reported no significant difference between students with or without special needs on this scale in the area of school motivation and suggested "the potential impact of transition on the young person...can be exacerbated for students with special needs" (p. 196).

Program Planning

Programs for general education students, faculty, and families have been recommended to support specific activities that occur before, during, and after transition in response to negative and positive factors associated with transition to middle school (Akos, 2002). Research on middle school transition that includes program planning recommendations do so in an attempt to reduce the potential anxiety, achievement loss, and concerns that surround the move from elementary to middle school. The literature

on program planning suggests that with thoughtful, proactive planning

students in the general education environment adjusted more readily to the

changes in academic, procedural, and social factors associated with

middle school transition (Adreon & Stella, 2001). Typically, activities

such as school and classroom tours, open houses, parent-nights, and

orientations are offered as means to promote transitions (Black, 1999;

Kagan & Neuman, 1998). Black suggests that while these activities are

useful, they are often static and limited in scope, particularly for parents.

She recommends that program planning needs to go beyond these

activities in addressing the academic, procedural and social elements

associated with transition to middle school (Black, 1999).

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) and The National

Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) support program

planning that can "restore the strong sense of belonging the middle school

student and parent once felt in elementary school" (Smith, 2006, p.1)).

This joint paper offers activities for parents and faculty that are related to

the academic, social, and procedural concerns found in the literature on

transition that include, faculty and parent awareness of concerns about

moving to a new school, parents and faculty as partners, and the

understanding that transition is an on-going activity that occurs

throughout the middle school process. The joint position paper,

"Supporting Children in Their Transition to Middle School" (2006) offers

specific guidelines for school leaders, faculty, counselors, and parents involved in the elementary-middle school transition process.

> In planning and implementing programs to address the needs and concerns of students moving from elementary to middle school environments, it is clear that the collaboration among all who share responsibility and concern for our children's welfare is ultimately the most effective transition strategy we can employ." (Smith, 2006, p. 3).

Repetto and Correa (1996) advocated program planning for special needs students in middle school based on well-established models that exist for early and secondary programs. They suggested that the less well developed transition plan for elementary and middle school can use specific program components from the pre-K and post-high school literature, including family and school involvement, planning for outcomes, and support from community members to create a "seamless transition model" (Repetto & Correa, 1996, p. 551). In their position paper titled, "Expanding Views on Transition," they noted that "families of students with disabilities... involved early on in their child's school career...become less involved over time, either because of poor communication with faculty or because the school takes the lead role in planning for their child's schooling" (p. 559). The authors recommend that transition planning for students with disabilities, regardless of public or private school enrollment, should encourage family and faculty involvement that consist of adapting curriculum, planning for the future, and supporting multiagency collaboration. They contend that by not

including these factors in the creation of a transition program plan schools will "perpetuate further fragmentation in curriculum, family under-involvement, dropout casualties and personnel isolation" (Repetto & Correa, 1996, p. 561).

Carter, Clark, Cushing and Kennedy (2005) offer nine steps by which parents and faculty can support the transition to middle school. These include: planning early; collaborating; preparing students well in advance; offering demonstrations of curriculum and activities through orientation and open house formats; involving middle school students as mentors; offering a shadow program; encouraging parents to discuss middle school with their children; offering pictures of faculty, students, and facilities; and encouraging parents to establish middle school routines prior to school. While they suggest that these factors are effective for disabled and non-disabled students, they agree with Black (1999) that transition planning should not be a one-time activity. However, the steps outlined by Carter, Clark, Cushing and Kennedy (2005) seemed to be static and not reflective of the longer-term planning process recommended for special needs students (Black, 1999).

Niesen and Wise (2004) suggest that, in addition to the aforementioned factors, elementary school and middle school faculty should work collaboratively to support the transition process. Elementary school faculty can do so by replicating some of the academic, procedural, and social characteristics typical of middle school models. In *Transition*

from Elementary to Middle School: Strategies for Educators, Niesen and Wise suggest that elementary school faculty should emphasize positive aspects of middle school, gradually increase the amount of student autonomy in academic work, move from competition to cooperation based learning, and encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and involvement in school decisions. They advise that middle school faculty should encourage participation in clubs and teams, promote increased parental involvement, and offer opportunities for students to visit the school and get to know other middle school students. While these suggestions are designed for students in a general education setting, the authors also suggested that school psychologists, counselors, and social workers could "address the issues of special needs children for whom the transition may present extra difficulties..." (Niesen & Wise, 2004, p. 165).

Maras and Aveling (2006) discussed a number of interventions in recognition of the difficulties reported for students with special needs. Their review of the transition program literature for students without special needs highlights the importance of collaboration with parents and faculty, providing social and academic supports, and peer-peer programs. Their research on transition programs for students with special needs reflects the individualization necessary to support diverse learners in all areas of development. They recommended that in addition to the traditional supports provided in transition planning to middle school,

consideration must be given to the individual needs of these students. "Schools and local authority services assisting in the transition process need to…plan interventions that are tailored to individual needs and concerns" (Maras & Aveling, 2006, p. 201).

Summary

A number of transition studies for both general education and special education environments were reviewed that indicated that the transition into middle school comes at a time of significant physical, cognitive, and social-emotional change that requires an understanding of the changes that occur in the school environment. An increase in the awareness of the difficulties associated with transition warrants the involvement of faculty of both the elementary and middle school environments and engagement of the parents in the process. Theories that view academic and social changes from the developmental and environmental lenses were explored as they relate to the mismatch that often occurs between elementary school and middle school characteristics. Research studies that found decreases in self-esteem, academic achievement, and motivation, along with increases in behavioral difficulties following the transition to middle school were reviewed. The combined problems of motivation, academic performance, self-esteem, and psychological stress associated with contextual changes in middle school were presented from the stage-environment fit theory. Research has found that the structure of the educational environment places

students at risk for failure as they are not matched to the developmental needs associated with the middle-school aged child, the needs of the parent, or the involvement of the faculty between the two school configurations. Intervention programs designed to ameliorate this mismatch were presented for both general education and special education environments. Chapter III will describe the methods by which these factors will be explored in a private special education school for parents and faculty.

Chapter III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Procedures and methodologies used to collect data are included in Chapter III. This chapter describes the (a) population and sample to be studied, (b) instrumentation to be used, (c) data to be collected and (d) description of how data will be analyzed and reported.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of transition faculty and parents regarding the academic, procedural, and social changes that occur in the transition from elementary to middle school in a private special education school setting. A second purpose of this study is to add knowledge to the existing literature describing factors for developing effective transition programs for faculty and families in a private school setting. Theories regarding the mismatch between the complicated developmental changes that occur during early adolescence and the academic, procedural and social changes that occur in the middle school environment associated with this age group provide the framework for this study.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study has two parts: (a) Are there common academic, social and procedural considerations in the transition process for faculty and parents in a private special education school as students move out of their elementary school and into a new middle school environment?   (b) Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school in a private special education setting that can inform program planning?

The secondary research questions that this study seeks to answer examine three factors.

1. Academic factors. (a) How do elementary school transition faculty in a private special education school describe academic considerations for students making the transition from elementary to middle school? (b) Are there parental concerns regarding student academic readiness as their children transition from elementary to middle school?

2. Social Factors. (a) How are transition faculty preparing students for changes in social characteristics of middle school?

(b) Are there parental concerns regarding changes in social characteristics between the elementary and the middle school environments?

3. Procedural Factors. (a) How do transition faculty help students prepare for the procedural changes in middle school?

(b) How do parents describe excitement/concern about the changes in procedures for their children who are transitioning to middle school?

The quantitative research questions in this study are:

1. How do transition faculty rank academic, procedural and social factors when students transition from elementary to middle school in a private special education setting?

2. How do parents rank academic, social and procedural factors commonly associated with the characteristics of the middle school environment?

Population and Sample

Parents and faculty of students enrolled in the 2013-2014 transition

class for this study were selected from 1 of the 10 approved private, special education schools in a large urban area in New York. New York City private, special education schools are categorized as approved or non-approved by the New York State Department of Education as created by Chapter 853 of the Laws of 1976. For this study demographics for each of the 10 approved private schools located in the five boroughs of New York were sorted according to those meeting the criteria for this research project: (a) private special needs schools that offer a transition class ending grade 5 and (b) private special needs schools that do not offer middle school programs. Of the 10 approved schools 8 were eliminated based on grade configuration that did not meet the study criteria. Schools that ended at either grade 5 or were ungraded but transitioned students at the grade 5 age-level were contacted to participate in the study. Initial contact was made by an email that briefly described the research study with a request for a follow-up meeting. Of the two schools contacted, one was already involved in a research project and was unable to consent to this study. The Real School (a pseudonym), a private, special education school meeting both criteria consented to participate in this study.

The Real School is an approved private special education elementary school serving students with special needs aged 5-13. This special education elementary school serves students who are cognitively capable but require individualized, intensive instruction due to academic,

organizational, and social challenges. The goal of intervention and support at this school is to transition students to a less restrictive environment in middle school. While classes are ungraded, the instruction is aligned with the New York State K-5 standards. The total enrollment in the school averages between 90-100 students with class sizes ranging from 8-12 depending on the age and needs. Faculty members include: the classroom teacher, who provides all academic instruction; assistant teachers to support more intensive individualization and differentiation; the school psychologist, who provides social-emotional support; related service providers (speech and occupational therapists); and specialty teachers (Art and PE). There is on average a 9:1 student-teacher ratio in the content area classroom. Each classroom consists of a state certified special education teacher and one or two assistant faculty, depending on the degree of individualization needed. Each student has an individualized education program (IEP). Individual therapeutic services are offered to students in the areas of reading, speech and language, occupational therapy, and school psychological counseling. These service providers are considered part of the transition faculty at this school. During the 2013-2014 school year there were eight faculty on the transition team. A consulting pediatric psychiatrist acts as advisor to faculty in the area of behavior management but does not work directly with students.

As a state approved private school parents do not pay tuition. The

eight transition faculty, along with the 20 parents of the 11 students enrolled in the 2013-2014 grade 5-equivalent class who are transitioning to middle school were solicited for participation in the study. One hundred percent of the transition faculty agreed to participate in the study. Forty-five percent of the parents agreed to participate in the study. Selection of subjects was fair and equitable. The criteria for selection included all of the transition faculty and parents whose children will be leaving their elementary school at the end of the 2013-2013 school year to attend a different middle school.

   All parents and the transition faculty were asked to complete a survey that ranks positive and difficult aspects about the process of transition. One hundred percent of faculty completed the surveys. Forty-five percent of the parents completed the survey.

   Interviews were conducted with the parents and transition faculty who consented to participate. The transition faculty represents the three major areas under study that are supported by the literature as significant factors in the transition process: academic (classroom teachers), social (school psychologist), and procedural (occupational and speech therapists). Those participants who agreed to be interviewed were guided through the process in an attempt to promote sharing of experiences related to transition with the goal of generating data for this study and informing future research.

   The interview process, as reported by Patton (2002), provides the

researcher with a method to discover "what is in and on someone else's mind" (p. 341). Merriam (2009) also supports the need for interviewing as part of a qualitative study to "discover and uncover" the experiences of the participants (p. 93).

I developed the interview questions based on important themes found in the literature on transition. In an effort to validate these questions there were two separate reviews. A professor from Seton Hall University and a professor from Pace University reviewed the questions. In addition, a jury of experts that included five parents who were not part of this study, but who have experience with the middle school transition process reviewed the questions for clarity and applicability to the research questions.

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their school, geographic location, school, and participant names have been assigned pseudonyms.

Table 2

Parent Participant Profiles

Parent Name	Childs Age
Anne B.	11
Mark J.	11
Carol M.	12
John P.	11
Sarah M.	11

Theresa L.	11
Carolynne S.	12
Elizabeth E.	11
Carmen H.	11

Anne B. is a single parent whose son has attended this same elementary school since kindergarten. She has three children, only one of whom attends a private, special education school. He is the oldest child, making this her first middle school transition experience. Transition experience for her two other children occurred between pre-school and kindergarten.

Mark J. is married and has one child who is currently exiting the school to move to a middle school. He and his wife are currently in the process of interviewing at a number of middle schools in Manhattan, both private and public. Their daughter attended two other elementary schools prior to coming to this school. He is a member of the parent teacher association and is actively involved in the school community.

Carol M. is a single parent. Her son started elementary school late because of developmental delays. She has no other children and her son has never attended any other school. She has not yet begun to look for a middle school for her son.

John P. is married and has three children, two of whom are in college and a daughter who is transitioning to middle school from this

elementary school. He and his wife indicated that they would like to find a public middle school that will meet their daughter's academic needs. They are currently involved in the Committee on Special Education (CSE) process to develop an IEP that will support that placement. His daughter has always been enrolled in a private, special education school.

Sarah M. is married and has twin daughters, one of whom is enrolled in this private, special education school. Her other child has never been identified as a student with special needs and attends a private elementary school. She and her husband indicated that they would like both girls to be in the same school someday and are hopeful that the transition to middle school will support that goal.

Theresa L. is divorced. She adopted her daughter at the age of 18 months from a foreign country. She has no other children and her daughter has been receiving special education services since the age of 2. She is looking for a middle school closer to her home so that her daughter will not have to ride the school bus to school.

Carolynne S. is a single parent with two children in this private, special education elementary school. This year will be her first experience in the transition process as neither of her children attended pre-school programs.

Elizabeth E. and her partner moved to New York 2 years ago and enrolled their daughter in this private special education school after several schools exited their daughter. They are currently working with

an advocate as part of the process of transitioning their daughter to middle school.

     Carmen H. is married with two children. Her older daughter attends a private, parochial K-12 school considered to be one of the top schools in Manhattan. Her younger son has been in special education, private settings since pre-school with significant speech/language and sensory needs.

Table 3

Faculty Participant Profiles

Name	Profession	Years Experience	Years at Real
Ellen	SPED teacher	12	12
Carol	Asst. teacher	15	5
Beverly	Asst. teacher	4	1
Anne	P.E. teacher	1	1
Brenda	Art	3	3
Sara	OT	5	4
John	School Psych.	3	3
Alison	Speech therapist	4	3

     Ellen has been the head teacher for the transition class since coming to the Real School. She is responsible for the entire core content curriculum in the transition classroom.   Her curriculum, grounded in the

New York State Standards, is now moving to meet the requirements of the Common Core State Standards. Individualized classroom modifications and curriculum accommodations are made based on the information obtained from each student IEP when they enter her class in the fall. She acts as the key communicator for parents of the students she serves and participates in all educational meetings conducted by the CSE. She is responsible for instruction and assessment of progress and reports this data on a quarterly basis as part of the IEP process. In addition, she is a member of the Comprehensive Services Team (CST) at this school whose role is to support the transition process. Due to a high number of individual needs, two assistant teachers support her this year.

Carol is one of the two assistant teachers in the transition class. Given her seniority her placement in the transition classroom is consistent year to year. Her specific role as an assistant teacher is to provide small group instruction in writing and reading under the direction of the classroom teacher, manage the day to day procedural aspects of the classroom, and support the classroom teacher in classroom management. She has a bachelors degree in a non-education field, having gotten into education when her children were younger. She has been trained in a number of programs in reading and writing to support her role. She has been employed at this school longer than any other staff member with the exception of the director of the school.

Beverly is the other assistant teacher assigned to the transition classroom for the 2013-2014 school year. Her specific role is to act as a management paraprofessional for a student with sensory needs. She has been an individual paraprofessional before in a school for behaviorally challenged students. This is her first year at the Real School.

Anne is a first year Physical Education teacher who is trained in adaptive physical education. She is responsible for the physical and health education of all 90 students enrolled in the school and works closely with the classroom team on individualizing instruction and providing carry-over activities that are included during non-academic times. She provides whole class instruction to the transition students twice per week. She consults regularly with the occupational therapist.

Brenda provides art instruction to all students one day per week. Her art curriculum is aligned with the content of the classroom so that students can be provided with multi-sensory experiences in learning new knowledge. Student artwork is displayed in every area of the school and art shows are held annually for the parent community.

Sara's role as Occupational Therapist is to provide direct, individual instruction to those students for whom organization, executive function, and sensory needs are impacting learning based on the IEP mandates. She is also responsible for collaborating with the teaching staff in each classroom on adapting the environment, providing sensory breaks, and organizing the day and schedule. She sees many of the Real

School students privately at parent request and expense. She is a member of the transition team.

John is the school psychologist responsible for delivering mandated counseling services. He is one of three school psychologists on staff and the only one who serves the needs of the transition classroom students. He chairs the CST and provides on-going communication to parents regarding the social-emotional needs of the transition students. He conducts monthly workshops for parents on a variety of topics relating the growing child. He conducts individual and small group sessions, one of which is the weekly "lunch-buddy" group for the transition class students.

Alison is one of three speech-language pathologists at the school. She is responsible for providing speech and language services to students based on their mandated IEP needs. She helps teachers prepare assignments and tests to insure that the language complexity matches the development level of each student. She does annual evaluations of progress and participates in the CSE meeting to identify needs. One of her major responsibilities, as it pertains to the transition class, is to help students understand figurative language, slang, and nuanced communication in support of the social needs of students as they move to middle school environments.

Instrumentation

The instruments that were used to collect data were adapted from

questionnaires developed by Dr. Patrick Akos (University of North Carolina) from his previous research on school transition for general education parents and faculty. Permission to use and adapt these forms was granted by Dr. Akos on August 17, 2012 (see Appendix B). Dr. Akos' questionnaires organized perceptions into subscales for academic, social, and organizational domains. He reported (as cited in Moore, 2009) internal consistency estimates of .72 for the academic subscale, .81 for the social subscale and .52 for the organizational subscale. Scoring for these instruments was modified into a 5 point Likert scale that enabled me to explore positive and negative aspects of academic, social, and procedural factors of transition for each of the respondent groups. The faculty perception questionnaires used for this research contain 30 questions (see Appendix C). The instrument that was used to measure the perceptions of parents regarding their role in the transition process contains 30 questions (see Appendix D). Individual faculty and parent questionnaires were administered and returned by U.S. Mail and in-school mail systems. Stamped, self-addressed envelopes were provided for convenience.

Interview questions were asked of parents (see Appendix E) and faculty (see Appendix F) to gather information about academic, procedural, and social considerations in the transition from elementary to middle school. To triangulate the data I used the questionnaires, interviews, IEP's, and transition meeting notes.

Interviews were conducted in person and by phone to insure participant availability. I used Patton's (as cited in Merriam, 2009) six types of questions in the interviews to gain information about participant experience, opinion, feelings, knowledge and background in relationship to the middle school transition process (p. 96). The exact instruments used were made available to those with an interest in the findings.

Methods and Data Collection

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Executive Director of the school by letter on June 27, 2013. All parents and faculty of students enrolled in the transitioning classroom were solicited for this study via a flyer posted in the main office. A presentation regarding the study was offered for those interested in learning more about the study. An informed consent letter describing the interview process was sent home to the parents via U.S. mail. Questionnaires were also sent home in this manner. Parents received these forms in the second week of December and returned them by the third week of that month. A SASE was included for convenience to the parents.

Faculty consent was solicited by providing informed consent forms to individual faculty at school. They received questionnaires in sealed individual envelopes placed in their individual school mailboxes and were asked to return them to a locked "questionnaire return box" located in the faculty room. I am the only person with a key to the box. A total of 17 questionnaires (8 faculty and 9 parent) were returned.

The interviews of parents and faculty took place during December and January of the 2013-2014 school year. Audio recording of each interview was done to insure accuracy of transcription. For the purpose of this study eight faculty and nine parents consented to be interviewed. Transition faculty members were interviewed at the end of the workday at a mutually identified location within the school. Parents were interviewed either by phone or in person depending on parental preference at a mutually convenient time and location. The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions.

Quantitative data was analyzed according to descriptive statistic methods. Qualitative data was categorized into meaningful units to identify emergent themes. Follow-up interview questions for each of the respondent groups were asked if needed for clarification. According to Seidman (1991) this allows a researcher to describe and not infer meaning. Interviews were transcribed solely by me to provide the database for this study. Documents that were reviewed were transition meeting notes and classroom schedules.

Review of transition planning meeting notes was conducted and fieldwork diary entries recorded. Assigning codes, using margin notations, and categorizing themes was an iterative process during analysis of the data. My data set is organized in response to the research questions and coded according to emerging themes.

To triangulate and provide validity the interviews are aligned by

 themes, research, and theory.

Validity and Reliability

While construct validity was obtained for the questionnaires used in this study, qualitative research does not allow for that same level of objectivity (Merriam, 2009). In an attempt to increase reliability and validity I triangulated the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews and compared and cross-checked data among and between participant groups. Responses generated by the interview process were subject to member checking as necessary to enhance reliability. In this study, the match between environment and development was triangulated with the academic, procedural, and social domains for parents and faculty. According to Merriam (2009), reliability is difficult to achieve in the interview process:

> Because what is being studied in the social world is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted and highly contextual, because information gathered is a function of who gives it and how skilled the researcher is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative study precludes a priori controls, achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible. (p. 222)

Despite the lack of reliability inherent in qualitative studies, if replicated, the validity construct of this study may support the study design and result in replicable outcomes.

Interview questions were designed to support the research questions under study and were aligned with theoretical constructs that provide the framework of the study (see Tables 3-4). As such, both the questionnaires and interview questions are representative of the academic, procedural, and social concerns noted in the literature describing the transition to middle school.

Data Analysis

This dissertation looks at factors related to transition in an attempt to examine perceptions of parents and faculty. The study also seeks to discover how faculty and parent experiences can inform transition-planning programs.

The questionnaires allowed me to study the importance of certain factors in the transition process for both faculty and parents. The interviews allowed for deeper analysis of thematic topics related to the transition process.

Descriptive statistics were used in analysis of parent and faculty responses to questionnaires. For each of the questions I used a Likert five-point ranking scale that allowed me to describe the participant groups in this study. Ranked questions included each of the three factors under consideration in the research questions of this study. I reported how parents and faculty ranked, from most to least positive/difficult the challenges and anticipations of transitioning to middle school regarding the academic, social, and procedural factors of this study. I analyzed the

data by creating an index of the items by categorical group (academic, social, and procedural). This allowed me to compare the positive and negative aspects perceived by parents and faculty to gain a greater understanding of factors implicating transition.

Qualitative analysis was conducted following completion of semi-structured interviews. Data was categorized into meaningful units to identify emergent themes. Analysis of the responses for each of the subjects was coded to determine if there are emerging themes within and across the groups. All individual interviews were conducted in person with faculty and parents or by other means necessary (e.g. telephone) with parents according to their schedule and availability.

Table 4

Parent Interview Question Alignment with Research Questions and Theorists

Interview Question	Research Question Supporting	Theorist(s)
Please describe your feelings about your child moving to middle school.	Social Factors Parental Involvement	Bandura, Erikson Akos
What are you most looking forward to as a parent for your child as they enter middle school?	Procedural Factors Program Planning	Repetto, Correa, Halsey
What concerns you the most as it relates to the changes in middle school?	Social, Academic Organizational Factors	Repetto, Correa
What involvement have you had in the planning process for the transition of your child?	Transition Planning Academic Factors	Bandura Kagan, Neuman, Black

Interview Question	Research Question Supporting	Theorist(s)
How are you helping your child to prepare for this transition?	Stage-environment fit	Eccles, Midgely
Can you tell me about the planning process and your specific involvement in that process?	Transition program planning	Akos, Adreon &Stella
How do you communicate with school psychologists regarding the social changes that occur when transitioning to middle school?	Transition programs Parent engagement Social development changes	Akos, Galassi Joint Position Statement: NMSA, NAESP
How are parents informed of organizational differences between elementary and middle school?	Procedural changes Changes in school configuration	Eccles, Roeser, Midgely
Describe your concerns regarding academic changes for your child.	Student achievement Academic readiness	Eccles, Roeser Anderman
How do you communicate with teachers regarding the your concerns academic, social and/or organizational changes?	Collaboration Procedural readiness Social readiness	Niesen ,Wise Bandura
Interview Question	**Research Question Supporting**	**Theorist(s)**
How would you describe the support you have received from your child's school regarding the changes that occur as a result of transition?	Parent involvement Belonging	Akos, Masina, Lunetta-Creamer
Are there any changes in that process that you think would help to improve that process?	Parental concerns Transition planning	Maras & Aveling Akos, Queen, Lineberry
Is there anything that I have not asked you that you believe will enable me to understand the	Additional factors	Sheldon, Epstien

transition process?		

Table 5

Faculty Interview Question Alignment with Research Questions and Theorists

Interview Question	Research Question Supporting	Theorist(s)
Can you discuss your connection to students who are transitioning to middle school and whether or not you think that connection is significant to the process?	Role of the teacher	Halsey
Please explain your relationship to parents regarding transition discussions. Are those relationships initiated by you or the parent?	Parental support Parent-teacher relationships	Eccles, Roeser
Interview Question	**Research Question Supporting**	**Theorist(s)**
What are the main concerns that you have for students who are leaving your school? Do you think middle school addresses these concerns?	Stage-environment theory	Eccles, Midgely
Please describe any changes in the social/organizational/academic factors for your students as they move into middle school.	Stage-environment theory	Eccles, Midgley
How do you prepare all	Developmental	Piaget, Hall

Interview Question	Research Question Supporting	Theorist(s)
students given the differences in development for the social/organizational/academic changes?	theory Achievement	Alspaugh
Can you tell me about the planning process and your specific involvement in that process?	Transition program planning	Akos, Galassi Arowosafe, Irvin Carnegie Council
How do you communicate with parents regarding transition issues?	Parent communication Authority	Freud, Erikson Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield,
How do you communicate with the faculty regarding the social/organizational needs of the transition students?	Program planning	Halsey Akos & Galassi
Please describe the process from beginning to end of how students are transitioned out of your school. Do you think this process is effective?	Transition Program planning	Bronfenbrenner
Please describe any changes in that process that you think would help to improve that process?	Transition Program planning	Akos & Galassi
What are the organizational changes that you believe are important for your students to succeed in middle school?	Developmental stage theories Student readiness	Eccles, Midgley, Roeser MacIver, Epstein
Interview Question	**Research Question Supporting**	**Theorist(s)**
How do you become familiar with the choices parents make regarding the academic programs offered at middle schools ?	Middle school models	Carnegie Report
What are your feelings about the changes in the social dynamic in middle school for your students?	Social learning theory	Vygotsky
Is there anything I have not asked you that you think will help me better understand the transition process?	Education context	Eccles, Lord, Midgely

Table 6

Codes for Data Analysis

Code	THEME	Explanation
AcaC	Academic competence	Academic changes in middle school
Acc	Social competence	Acceptance
Adl	Maturational readiness	Adolescence
Anx	Maturational readiness	Anxiety
BUL	Social Competence	Bullying, safety
Chc	Maturational readiness	Choice
Cog	Maturational readiness	Cognition
Comm	Program Planning	Communication
CurrE	Academic Competence	Curricular expectations
Dmd	Procedural Challenges	Demands
DEV	Maturational readiness	Development
EmoC	Social Competence	Emotional changes
Env	Procedural Challenges	Environment
FR	Social Competence	Friends
FRE	Procedural Challenges	Freedom
Grd	Academic Competence	Grades
HWK	Procedural Challenges	Homework
IND	Procedural Challenges	Independence
LGS	Procedural Challenges	Larger School
MNF	Social Competence	Making new Friends
Code	**THEME**	**Explanation**
MNG	Procedural Challenges	Time, materials management
MNT	Procedural Challenges	Meeting new Teachers
PI	Program Planning	Parent Involvement
Prtp	Procedural Challenges	Participating in new activities
Code	**THEME**	**Explanation**
Press	Social Competence	Peer Pressure
Pers	Maturational readiness	Personal Factors
PTC	Program Planning	Parent-teacher contact
PROC	Procedural Challenges	Procedural changes
SEG	Social Competence	Social-Emotional Growth
SSC	Social Competence	Student- Student Contact
STC	Program Planning	Student-teacher Contact

The analysis of the data examined all responses in relationship to the research questions and important theoretical constructs. Using the research questions and the responses taken from the questionnaires and interview questions the data was coded and

triangulated. Results are reported for both qualitative and quantitative data. Codes were assigned based on categorical responses taken from the interviews. Categories were created to support the thematic data discovered.

Code categories will be responsive to the purpose of the research and help answer the research questions. They shall be exhaustive- all the data that related to each topic will comprise the contents of each category. The codes shall be mutually exclusive with a piece of data fitting into only one category. They shall be sensitized so an outsider can read the categories and gain some sense of their nature. (Merriam, 2009, pp. 185-186)

Ethical Considerations

As a qualitative researcher, I needed to be aware of ethical issues inherent in the researcher-participant process when collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data. Confidentiality was preserved by using pseudonyms as identification when reporting data. When interviewing participants I needed to be aware of any personal biases based on my own experience and/or research. Prior to conducting observations I made participants aware of my role and the rationale for the study. To insure trustworthiness and establish credibility as a researcher, full disclosure of the purpose of my research study was provided to all participants.

Summary

Chapter III explains the elements of both quantitative and qualitative research design that was employed in this study. This includes a description of the population, sample, instruments, and methods used to conduct the research. The process of data collection and data analysis are also included. In addition, the chapter reviews the ethical considerations important in consideration of my research.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I present the findings of the faculty and parent questionnaires, interview responses and analysis of the data. The findings are based on the following over-arching research questions:

1. Are there common academic, social and procedural considerations in the transition process for faculty and parents as students move out of their elementary school and into a new middle school environment?

2. Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school that can inform program planning?

The secondary research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. Academic factors. (a) How do elementary school transition faculty in a private special education school describe academic considerations for students making the transition from elementary to middle school? (b) Are there parental concerns regarding student academic readiness as their children transition from elementary to middle school?

2. Social Factors. (a) How are transition faculty preparing students for changes in social characteristics of middle school?

(b) Are there parental concerns regarding changes in social characteristics between the elementary and the middle school environments?

3. Procedural Factors. (a) How do transition faculty help students prepare for the procedural changes in middle school?

(b) How do parents describe excitement/concern about the changes in procedures for their children who are transitioning to middle school?

The quantitative research questions in this study are:

1. How do transition faculty rank academic, procedural and social factors when students transition from elementary to middle school in a private special education setting?

2. How do parents rank academic, social and procedural factors commonly associated with the characteristics of the middle school environment?

Chapter IV is organized according to the qualitative and quantitative data obtained from the 17 study participants. The qualitative data is organized based on major themes that emerged from the coding process for the 17 participants of this study. The quantitative data is organized according to ranked results for the 17 participants.

The major themes that emerged from coding responses to the interviews for both faculty and parents are:

- Academic Competence: concerns about the increase in academic demands that occur between elementary and middle school;

- Social Competence: implications of environmental changes on developing relationships;

- Procedural Challenges: the increased number of structural changes that occur in the middle school environment;

- Maturational Readiness: the need to understand and address developmental changes in adolescences in the context of middle school

- Program Planning: gaps in programmatic support for transitioning to middle school.

These themes are discussed as they relate to academic readiness and expectations, specifically harder classes and increased homework; preparing for social-emotional challenges that include making friends and responding to peer pressure; new procedures for both school and classroom organization related to environmental changes; the role of development as it relates to maturity; and program planning as it relates to parent and teacher support in the transition planning process. Analysis of these themes is described in relation to how changes between elementary and middle school relate to adolescent development.

Academic Factors: Readiness and Expectations

Research questions**:** How do elementary school transition faculty in a private school describe academic considerations for students making the transition from elementary to middle school? Are there parental concerns regarding student academic readiness as their children transition from elementary to middle school?

Faculty

A primary concern emerged in the faculty interview process around quantity of work, testing, grades, and the support needed to be successful academically. As described by the respondents, in this elementary school classroom work is structured around breaks that occur at the end of each subject taught. Homework is carefully scheduled across the week so that students do not get more than one

content class of homework each night. There is no homework given over the weekend. Each day, students are provided feedback on their homework by one of the three classroom teachers assigned to this transition class (one head teacher and two assistants) and those students needing additional support for their classwork and/or homework are provided that because of the student-teacher ratio.

According to faculty responses, the curriculum is standards-based, but there is much room for teacher creativity in how instruction is delivered and how students are assessed. Classroom work is ability-based and with the small student teacher ratio there is the opportunity for differentiation of instruction. Most work is project-based and includes multiple opportunities for using concrete materials.

Respondents expressed concern about how students who were used to more concrete instruction, individualized attention, and immediate feedback would be supported academically in a middle school environment that emphasizes academic competition.

Ellen, the head teacher, spoke about particular areas of academic instruction that concern her:

"Yes, since my students are used to a project-based learning approach and do not typically take tests or quizzes, yes I am afraid they will be overwhelmed. Because there will be more teachers in middle school I think the classes will be harder for my students. There will be more pressure to get good grades and they will be taking high stakes tests that they are not used to. I

think those children who will be in a public middle school with high-stakes testing will be particularly challenged."

Faculty were able to identify academic areas that they feel will pose the greatest challenges:

Alison, SLP: "the amount of homework, the student-teacher ratio and the amount of academic support our students receive."

Sara, OT: "I do feel that our students will be overwhelmed by all the new demands and expectations even though they are the typical expectations for their ages. We have a lot of organizational needs here."

John, School Psychologist: "more homework, less flexibility, less support."

Carol, Asst. Teacher: "I worry about math. I think the high expectations may end up being very overwhelming for them."

To address primary research question 1, how do transition faculty rank academic, procedural, and social challenges when students transition from elementary to middle school, an analysis of the faculty questionnaire was completed.

When analyzing responses from questionnaires that sought information on academic challenges, faculty ranked the academic concern of getting good grades as the least positive aspect of transitioning to middle school. This is related to the type of instruction, assessment, and individualization characteristic of this elementary school. Primary academic concerns that ranked highest on the

questionnaires were: having to take harder classes, feeling pressure to do work, concern for getting good grades, frequency and difficulty of homework, and individualization. Only one faculty member ranked getting good grades as a positive academic aspect of moving to middle school.

Parents

When analyzing research question 2, how do parents rank order academic, social, and procedural factors commonly associated with the characteristics of the middle school environment, 50% of the parents ranked getting good grades as a positive factor.

Academic factors ranked as difficult by parents included harder classes, pressure to do well, amount of homework and, getting good grades. Two parents ranked getting good grades as positive aspects of transitioning to middle school.

Parent interview responses were consistent with concerns about getting good grades, having harder classes, more homework, and an increased pressure to do well in middle school. On analysis, interview responses reflected the complex, multi-faceted concerns of parents. One parent, Carolynne S. reported: "my biggest concern, for the first time, I really had to consider not only academics but the social environment. Also, K-5 can be a wonderfully nurturing place and middle school doesn't feel that way." One parent expressed concern about keeping up with the math work. Three parents specifically discussed their fears about whether or not their child was ready for the academic demands of

middle school. John P. commented: "My concern is whether he is prepared for this challenge at this time. He presents as young for his age."

Unlike faculty responses there was one parent respondent who reported looking forward to the academic challenge. Mark J: "having my student learn to adjust/be flexible to the various demands and teaching styles of multiple teachers and learning to remain consistent in her dedication to her schoolwork regardless of her feelings about the instructor."

Social Factors: Preparing for Social-emotional Challenges

Research questions: **(a)** How is transition faculty preparing students for changes in social characteristics of middle school? **(b)** Are there parental concerns regarding changes in social characteristics between the elementary and the middle school environments?

Faculty

This elementary school offered a number of social intervention supports given that social-emotional delays are primary factors for their students. These included friendship groups, social competency training, social role-playing, social skills training, and supportive counseling for building relationships. Some of faculty respondents expressed positive aspects of moving onto middle school that included opportunities to: make new friends, attend school events,

and be around older students. Yet, despite the attention given to developing social skills most faculty concerns were about the significant social-emotional changes that occur between elementary and middle school as it relates to changes in adolescence. These concerns were characterized as: not having the skills to make new friends, leaving long-time friends from elementary school, and being able to get along with other students. One faculty member expressed concern around students needing support as they mature sexually. One faculty member expressed concern about social media, and three faculty members reported concerns specifically around students being made fun of, being safe, or being bullied. Eight interview responses were related to fitting in and peer pressure.

Ellen, Head Teacher: "I know, and I am excited that they will have a bigger circle of friends to choose from. My big worry for these kids is not having specific life skills or social skills programs in middle school. Or field trips in the community to teach social skills outside of school, real life things. They don't have that."

Brenda, Art Teacher: "I think teachers should visit potential middle schools. I worry about coping and social skills. I would want to know if social skills programs are available in those schools. I feel like there might be a lot of bullying and social media stuff our kids don't know about."

Alison, SLP: "almost all of our students receive individual speech/language therapy. The social dynamic of middle school may

be overwhelming for them as most of our students have a lot of social language difficulties. The social factors and size of middle school worries me, our students' pragmatic language delays and difficulty keeping up academically in larger classrooms."

John, school psychologist reflected on preparing students for the social challenges of middle school:

"I try to address anxiety, fears, expectations that may not be realistic; individually and in small groups, present positive reassurance; make experiences more concrete through role-playing and stress management. Social and sexual maturity varies within any middle school group. Essential to have enough support and structure to keep students safe while fostering development and independence."

Faculty ranked making new friends, participating is sports or clubs, and attending school events as positive social aspects of moving to middle school. One social factor, having older students in the school, was ranked least positive when transitioning to middle school. When analyzing social factors considered to be difficult for students as they transition to middle school faculty identified students being made fun of, getting along with other students, safety or being hurt by other students, fitting in or making new friends, and peer pressure as the most difficult aspects of making the transition to middle school.

Parents

Analysis of parent interviews revealed that parents looked forward to their children making new friends and participating in clubs or sports in middle school. Parents recognized that the larger school environment offers these social opportunities, but expressed concern about their children fitting in to the new social dynamic of adolescence. Parents expressed concern about social maturity. They expressed that they were not being prepared to help their child navigate the complex changes of moving into middle school and adolescence. This was compounded by concerns regarding peer pressure and vulnerability because of their children's special needs and social immaturity. In particular, given that this school transitions students to non-special education schools or other less restrictive environments, parents expressed fears about how to help their children navigate the changes.

Social-emotional concerns voiced by parents included their children: not being accepted, being unable to find a peer group, being unable to navigate the social scene, and not knowing anyone in a new, larger school environment. Two parents expressed concern that because their children would have multiple teachers they may not know who to talk to when they encountered difficulty. Two parent responses exemplify these concerns.

Theresa L:

"As a mom you realize that you no longer have a small child, that the work and demands will be harder and more important.

My daughter must advocate and find her own way for the first time. Hard to let her make mistakes, I want to protect her, put her always in a safe environment. It's most concerning that my daughter may not be socially accepted, bullied, not find a safe, happy peer group. One without negative influences. I don't know if she is up to the pressures of new demands."

Carmen H:

" I have fears that as my son moves on to middle school, I mean, I know academic and social expectations will rise. I am looking forward to him gaining greater independence – he needs guidance as to how to manage that. I guess there is a fear of the larger school too and maybe not having the resources there. Sure, I am apprehensive to leave the nurturing environment of this elementary school. At the same time I am fiercely proud of him and happy to be able to mark this transition."

When ranking social factors on the questionnaire, parents indicated that making new friends, attending school events, and participating in sports and clubs would be positive factors of moving into the new structure of middle school. Parents ranked being made fun of, getting along with other students, safety or being hurt by other students, fitting in or making friends, feeling pressure to do things, new, and more students as difficult aspects in moving into the larger, more complex middle school environment.

Procedural Factors: Classroom and School Organization

Research questions: **(a)** How do transition faculty help students prepare for the procedural changes in middle school? **(b)** How do parents describe excitement/concern about the changes in procedures for their children who are transitioning to middle school?

Faculty

Procedural factors relating to the change in environment were viewed both positively and negatively on both the ranked and interview responses of faculty. On interview faculty expressed some excitement about the opportunities afforded in larger schools that include participation in sports and clubs, more choices at lunch-- which allows for increased decision-making, the ability to attend school events, and over-all increases in independence.

Concern was expressed when analyzing both the interview and ranked responses. Faculty was most concerned about the new rules and expectations that their students will face when transitioning to middle school. This concern was related to having multiple teachers and not knowing who to seek out for support. Faculty also expressed concern about students getting lost in a larger building, getting to classes on time, and the amount of homework and class work that needs to be managed in the middle school environment. Faculty reported that students are not always ready for the significant changes that occur when leaving elementary school.

Sara, Occupational Therapist: "I try to have my student's role-play meeting new teachers and students to learn how to be respectful and adjust to new rules and expectations. They have so many organizational difficulties that managing everything- materials, time, is a challenge. There are also increased handwriting demands that worry me."

John, School psychologist: "These students will be more immature than their new peers and will have more difficulty managing their feelings. We talk about this a lot as faculty – it really is about management-time, materials, feelings, it's all hard. I am not sure there will be support through social skills and a counseling like there is here."

Ellen, Head Teacher:

"Organizational changes that my students will need to know have to do with things like binders, agendas, being responsible for their work. I try to help them by using some multi-subject notebooks and planners but this area is going to be a challenge because there will be many more teachers and probably with different management expectations. Also, my students are allowed to take breaks when needed, they still need them at this age. They earn rewards, I don't know if they will be able to do that as they get into higher grades. I think the middle school needs to be structured and set limits if these kids are to be

successful. That's hard in middle school because of the way classes are organized."

Faculty ranked procedural factors of being in a larger school and having new teachers evenly between most and least positive. New rules and expectations and, getting to class on time were ranked difficult by all faculty respondents.

Parents

Parents also expressed concerns regarding the procedural changes that their children would encounter as they transition to middle school. Parents who were excited about a larger environment with more students were also concerned about how that environment would impact academic and social achievement. Students in this elementary school spend each day with the same small group having developed friendships over time. Parents expressed concern about their children having to develop new friendships upon entering middle school and having to adapt and adjust to a different set of students with each class change. Many parents reported trying to help their child understand what middle school would be like without adding undue anxiety to the process. They perceived their children as too young for the demands of middle school and wished that their current school offered grades through high school.

The concerns most expressed by parents were about the number of class schedules, different teachers with different expectations and teaching styles, fewer teachers in each classroom, changing classes,

and managing all of the work and materials. They also expressed concern about managing study skills and homework at home.

Sarah M:

"I try to show her photos or brochures of different middle schools I have visited but it doesn't really show how complex it can be. The process is anxiety causing for parents, I need to be careful that it's not anxiety causing for her. I guess I am kind of looking forward to some interesting aspects of a new school but I am worried about how the middle school will help her minimize her worries about the core curriculum. She has lots of friends here and her sister, but she won't have them at a new school or maybe some of them."

Anne B:

"Meeting new friends and being in a new environment will definitely be hard for him. He has play dates now, but I won't know the new parents for a while so that will be hard. I tell him he can always return to this school and visit. As far as helping him, explaining to him how exciting this will be, that his school will be closer to mom and dad's job. Helping him with his homework as much as I can. I know it will be challenging, it was for me as well but I know in the end it will be fine. My role is as a motivator and cheerleader for my child. Keep him on track and constantly uplift him. I want him to know there is nothing to be afraid of."

Carolynne S: "I am considering the increased academic load and how that would affect my son's overall emotional welfare. I will bring in

more academic support after school to help him. Transitions are challenging for most children, but as we know, children who have special needs really have a hard time with change – and there will be so many in middle school."

John P: "I have a lot of fears as we move into a new middle school because there are so many changes – probably more than I even know. My concerns are whether he is prepared for the challenges, he is so young."

Rankings

When analyzing ranked responses, both parents and faculty identified positive and negative factors associated with the transition to middle school. In ranking positive responses no statistical significance emerged between parents and faculty for procedural, social, or academic factors of transition. In the social domain parents and faculty agreed that more students, attending school events, and participating in sports/clubs were positive factors associated with the transition.

Both parents and faculty ranked changing classes, getting good grades, and being able to choose classes as the top three most positive academic aspects of moving to middle school.

When ranking procedural aspects parents identified having more freedom, being in a larger school, and older students as the top three positive aspects of transition, whereas faculty identified older students, having lockers, and being in a larger school as the top three positive procedural factors (see Tables 6-8).

Table 7

Ranking of Positive Social Aspects

Parent Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)	Faculty Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)
1	More students (2.44)	1	More students (2.35)
2	Attending school events (2.00)	2	Participating in sports, clubs (2.0)
3	Participating in sports, clubs (1.75)	3	Making new friends (1.37)

Table 8

Ranking of Positive Academic Aspects

Parent Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)	Faculty Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)
1	Changing classes (3.00)	1	Getting good grades (3.75)
2	Getting good grades (2.88)	2	Changing classes (3.25)
3	Being able to choose classes (2.33)	3	Being able to choose classes (2.25)

Table 9

Ranking of Positive Procedural Aspects

Parent Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)	Faculty Ranking	Average(Std.Dev.)
1	More freedom (3.50)	1	Older students (3.0)
2	Being in a larger school (3.33)	2	Having lockers (2.75)
3	Older students (3.00)	3	Being in a larger school (2.62)

When analyzing negative aspects of transition a statistically significant difference was found between parents and faculty in the social and academic domains. Parents identified getting along with other students, new and more students, and older students as their top three

social concerns. Faculty, however, identified safety and being hurt by others, older students, and feeling pressure to do things as the top three concerns.

The top three most difficult academic factors identified by parents were getting good grades, hard or unfriendly teachers, and pressure to do well, whereas faculty identified harder classes, pressure to well, and amount of homework as the most difficult aspects.

The top three procedural aspects identified by both parents and faculty as being most difficult were using a locker, riding the bus, and getting to class on time. Differences between faculty and parents on procedural aspects were not statistically significant (see Tables 9-11).

Table 10

Ranking of Most Difficult Social Aspects

Parent Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)	Faculty Ranking	Average (Std. Dev.)
1 Getting along with other students	1.77 (.971)	**1** Safety and being hurt by other students	1.62 (.517)
2 New and more students	1.55 (.726)	**2** Older students	1.5 (.5324)
3 Being made fun of	1.33 (.500)	**3** Feeling pressure to do things	1.25 (.462)

Table 11

Ranking of Most Difficult Academic Aspects

Parent Ranking	Average (Std.	Faculty Ranking	Average (Std. Deviation)

	Deviation)		
1 Getting good grades	2.33 (1.00)	**1** Harder classes	1.5 (1.41)
2 Hard or unfriendly teachers	2.00 (.707)	**1** Pressure to do well	1.5 (.755)
3 Pressure to do well	1.55 (.527)	**2** How much homework	1.0 (0.00)

Table 12

Ranking of Most Difficult Procedural Aspects

Parent Ranking	Average (Std. Deviation)	Faculty Ranking	Average (Std. Deviation)
1 Using a locker	3.00 (0.00)	**1** Using a locker	3.75 (.886)
2 Riding the bus	2.55 (.881)	**2** Riding the bus	3.50 (.755)
3 Getting to class on time	2.11 (.333)	**3** Getting to class on time	1.62 (.517)

Table 13 shows mean scores and standard deviations for positive

and difficult factors in each of the three categories under study.

Aggregate procedural, academic, and social scores were converted to a

scale of 100 to compare parent and faculty responses.

Table 13

Aggregate Procedural, Academic and Social rankings

Positive aspects of transition by parents and faculty

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Parent Mean (Std. Deviation)	Faculty Mean (Std. Deviation)	Difference in mean $p \leq .05$?
Procedural	54.8	14.50	59.9 (12.8)	49.1 (14.9)	N
Social	36.2	9.91	38.1 (7.03)	34.3 (12.3)	N
Academic	57.9	18.80	54.7 (19.9)	61.6 (18.0)	N

Difficult aspects of transition by parents and faculty

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Parent Mean (Std. Deviation)	Faculty Mean (Std. Deviation)	Difference in mean $p \leq .05$?
Procedural	42.5	3.14	41.7 (2.9)	43.5 (3.33)	N
Social	25.6	3.73	27.0 (4.44)	24.1 (2.08)	**Y**
Academic	30.1	7.63	33.7 (7.24)	26.0 (6.04)	**Y**

Transition Planning Process: Faculty and Parent Involvement

Research question: Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school that can inform program planning?

Faculty

Changes in the organizational structure implicate changes in the type and amount of involvement in the transition planning process to middle school. Involvement in the transition planning process was not consistent across faculty who responded to the question, how involved are you in the transition planning process for students in your class? Two faculty members, the head teacher and school psychologist, reported being extensively involved, while the remaining transition faculty indicated being only occasionally or somewhat involved. One teacher reported being involved "only if the parent contacts me directly about it" and another reported, "I listen to parent input." One faculty reported being involved only in that she is responsible for insuring that parents get reports needed to apply to middle school.

Extensive involvement of the school psychologist and head teacher was reported in transition meeting notes. The school psychologist had the primary responsibility for facilitating all of the paperwork needed as parents began to seek and apply to other schools. Additionally, he is the main point of contact for the transition faculty, parents, and middle schools to which parents are applying. He described his role as follows:

> "I am the main contact for parents and main source of emotional support for students. I prepare students by giving them individualized attention about transition based on need primarily through counseling sessions. I start with looking at old yearbooks that leads to expressing thoughts and feelings re: what they think they will like/dislike/fear/look forward to."

Despite the important role he plays in this transition planning process he reported that he is "not very familiar" with the programs offered at middle schools.

According to transition team notes, tasks assigned to Ellen, the head teacher, included responsibility for reporting academic, behavioral, and academic skills requested on application forms submitted to her by the school psychologist and/or parents. She reported, "I have filled out several forms due to parental request but have not exactly spoken directly to parents about schools they are interested in."

When asked what specific activities should be included in the transition planning process, faculty responded that they would like to see programs that allow students to meet new teachers and peers before they start their middle school year, let teachers visit potential schools to support parent decision-making, lead parent training, and establish meetings for parents with former parents to discuss transition. One faculty member responded, "we should let former students from our school return and talk with our present students."

Parents

In this elementary school parents described their involvement with teachers, administrators, and other parents through on-going communication, participation as class parents, and involvement in the PTA. Parents reported having access to the classroom teacher and related service providers through email, daily communication logs, phone calls, and meetings. Parents reported having open communication with the school, constant communication of changes that children go through, and access to the administration as needed.

Parents expressed concern about how they would build relationships with so many teachers once their child entered middle school, what the communication would be like between home and school, and what role they would have in the larger school community. Parent responses reflected a sense of frustration with the transition process. One parent stated, "the elementary school has done little other than to provide written information on the process

of selecting a new school from available choices." Three parents were particularly concerned with the Department of Education (DOE) placement process that requires their participation at Committee on Special Education meetings, developing a new IEP, visiting schools for those middle schools recommended by the CSE, applying to schools that may not be recommended and consulting with special education lawyers as necessary. One parent noted, "The school could help if they can find a way to get the DOE to agree to what we want."

Parents reported visiting middle schools, attending open houses, and taking tours as part of the transition planning process. They indicated that they needed support for answers to all of the complicated questions that arise during this process.

Elizabeth E: "...finding a nurturing school that can stimulate my child's involvement."

Sarah M: "...at this time I'm not excited, more worried. I don't know how middle schools support or communicate with parents who are worried about this move. This is a big move. I need open communication with my child's teacher, school."

Theresa L: "...need involvement with school, to be proactive, openly communicating with teachers. Will middle school let me do that and with who?"

Parents stated the following when asked what changes they would make to improve the transition planning process:

John P: "... preparing for transition a year in advance, gradually leading to day one of a new school."

Anne B: "...develop a plan that includes goals and lists pros/cons of transition, and keep updating it."

Carmen H: "Prepare for transition with plenty of time to establish an emotionally neutral atmosphere for both parents and children. Everyone needs to be on the same page, including outside professionals who work with our kids."

Carolynne S: "Schools need to be more open to creative approach to suit each student. Open houses are all about the school, not the student."

Carol M: "There could be a journal for parents and students who are going through this process. Keep a journal with thoughts that you share with staff. Then everyone can be on the same page, involve the student in all phases of planning."

Summary

In Chapter IV, I reported the qualitative and quantitative findings of this study in an attempt to answer the over-arching research questions: (a) Are there common academic, social, and procedural considerations in the transition process for faculty and parents as students move out of their elementary school and into a new middle school environment? (b) Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school that can inform program planning?

Three important findings emerged from this study that related to the academic, social, procedural and program planning themes. The first finding is that there are positive and negative aspects of transitioning to middle school, as reported by both faculty and parents. The second important finding is that both faculty and parents are concerned that students may not ready for these changes. The third important finding is the lack of transition planning and preparation in which faculty and parents are engaged.

The findings also indicate that there is some disagreement as to which factors are most important in the process of transitioning between elementary and middle school for faculty and parents. Findings from faculty indicate that there are significant concerns about how curriculum is delivered and the amount of individualization available in middle school. For the first time students will be exposed to high stakes testing and the competition of getting good grades with decreases in individual attention and support. Students may not be ready for the increased number of classes, teachers, and homework that they will be exposed to in the middle school environment. Parent findings indicate that while parents see grades as a positive aspect of moving into middle school they worry that their children are not ready for the pressure to do well that comes with academic achievement. Parents see the larger school environment as one that offers increased opportunities, but do not know if their children are ready for the complex demands of that environment.

This study examined the mismatch between environment and development related to changes in academic, social, and procedural factors of moving into middle school. Aligning these factors with stage-environment fit theory and developmental stage theory I reported that both faculty and parents agree that the changes that occur from elementary to middle school create a mismatch for the developing adolescent.

In Chapter V, I summarize findings of this study in relation to the research questions and the theoretical frameworks that define the study. In addition, I provide recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Chapter V summarizes the findings of this study of parents and faculty regarding transition from elementary to middle school in a private, special education school. I will discuss the relationship between previous research and the findings of this study and make recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

The primary research question in this study has two parts: (a) Are there common academic, social and procedural considerations in the transition process for faculty and parents as students move out of their elementary school and into a new middle school environment? (b) Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school that can inform program planning?

The secondary research questions that this study sought to answer are:

The secondary research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. Academic factors. (a) How do elementary school transition faculty in a private special education school describe academic considerations for students making the transition from elementary to middle school? (b) Are there parental concerns regarding student academic readiness as their children transition from elementary to middle school?

2. Social Factors. (a) How are transition faculty preparing students for changes in social characteristics of middle school?

(b) Are there parental concerns regarding changes in social characteristics between the elementary and the middle school environments?

3. Procedural Factors. (a) How do transition faculty help students prepare for the procedural changes in middle school?

(b) How do parents describe excitement/concern about the changes in procedures for their children who are transitioning to middle school?

The quantitative research questions in this study are:

1. How do transition faculty rank academic, procedural and social factors when students transition from elementary to middle school?

2. How do parents rank academic, social and procedural factors commonly associated with the characteristics of the middle school environment?

The theory of stage-environment fit was used to frame this study of transition and guide the development of the research questions.

Primary Research Question 1

Are there common academic, social and procedural considerations in the transition process for faculty and parents as students move out of their elementary school and into a new middle school environment?

This study produced two findings relative to stage-environment theory aligned with the themes of social and academic competence and procedural challenge from the perspective of both faculty and parents. The first finding is that there are common positive and negative aspects of transitioning to middle school. Parents and faculty agreed that moving into a larger middle school environment offers opportunities not available in the smaller, self-contained, elementary environment. Available experiences such as sports, clubs, and a larger social network were offered as positive aspects of a larger school. The ability to experience

different types of classes was also considered to be a positive aspect of moving to a more complex environment.

The second finding is that both faculty and parents are concerned that students may not ready for these changes. Each of the positive aspects noted were contrasted by concerns about the larger environment from a developmental perspective. Parents are fearful that their children do not have the level of maturity needed to navigate the complex social and procedural environment of middle school. Faculty expressed worry that students may not be prepared for the increased academic demands found in the competitive school environment.

Stage-environment fit theory suggests that school transition should be responsive to the maturing adolescent. (Eccles & Midgely, 1989). This framework draws on person-environment fit and self-determination theories (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hunt, 1975), but places emphasis on adolescent development in the context of middle school. Based on the findings of this study, parents and faculty are concerned that the contextual changes are not responsive to the needs of the special education students transitioning to middle school. At the same time they report having limited knowledge of the contextual changes due to lack of program planning involvement.

Primary Research Question 2

Are there qualitative differences between parents and transition faculty regarding the transition process from elementary to middle school that can inform program planning?

An important finding of this study is the lack of transition planning and preparation in which faculty and parents are engaged. There are perceived differences between parents and faculty regarding their role in the transition process. While there are transition meetings that include parents, parents reported having little to do with the process other than requesting information to complete middle school applications. Two members of the eight-member transition faculty, the school psychologist and the head teacher, have primary roles in transition planning according to the transition meeting process established at this school. However, the major responsibility falls on the school psychologist who acts as the liaison between parents and middle schools. The head teacher reported having little direct contact with parents other than providing academic and behavioral reports. This disconnect between parents, staff, and the transition planning process increases concern for parents who were trying to navigate finding a school, attending open houses, and complying with federal special education mandates that guide placement decisions.

Planning discussions begin at this elementary school in late October of the transition school year with public school applications due in December. Many private middle schools accept applications beginning in February. This short time frame produces anxiety in parents who are not

familiar with the transition process. Research on transition planning indicates that transition activities should begin early in the school year and occur before, during and after transition. These program planning recommendations are made in an attempt to reduce potential anxiety, achievement loss and concerns for social challenges faced by transitioning students (Akos, 2002).

Secondary Research Question 1: Academic Factors

1. How do elementary school transition faculty in a private school describe academic considerations for students making the transition from elementary to middle school?

Middle school characteristics differ significantly from elementary school regarding the academic considerations for students transitioning from elementary school. Research on academic challenges focus on the highly competitive environment, increased high stakes testing, classwork and homework demands. Holas and Huston (2011) reported declines in academic achievement associated with the middle school transition. Additionally, research describes the challenges reported by teachers that Include: grading standards and procedures, long range assignments, changing classes, and academic independence for students making the transition to middle school (Schumacher, 1998).

Faculty in this study described concerns about changes in academic demands that support these findings. Specifically, academic competence required for success in middle school, that includes understanding

different teaching styles, managing classwork, high stakes testing, and homework, were considered to be barriers to successful achievement in middle school. In addition, concern about students needing to be responsible for their learning was reported by faculty in this study. Two faculty indicated fear that students would not be allowed to take breaks during their academic classes when feeling overwhelmed.

2. Are there parental concerns regarding student academic readiness as their children transition from elementary to middle school?

Parental concerns in this study regarding readiness are related to research on adolescent development and stage-environment fit theories. Cognitive, physical, social, and behavioral theorists, while viewing development from different lenses, agree that the period known as early adolescence is marked by cognitive, social, and physical changes that are characterized by "profound biological, physical, behavioral and societal transformation that …correspond with the move to middle school" (Carnegie Council ,1995, p.4). Adolescents are beginning to become increasingly responsible for their own learning as they enter middle school. This is a time when adolescents are at the same time striving to be independent and under-going psychological and physical changes associated with puberty. Research also suggests that while students at this age seek independence they also desire personal relationships with their teachers (DeFur & Korinek, 2010).

A number of concerns were reported by parents within the domain of maturational readiness. Parent participants in this study expressed

concern about their children being mature enough to navigate the complex academic changes characteristic of a middle school environment. Parents were worried that their children would not be able to keep up with the demands of different teachers; the homework load, that increases as a result of different classes; and the testing environment, that differs from middle school. Piaget believed that learning should be experiential not repetitive, and he described the importance of engaged, active learning for the early-developing adolescent. School, according to the Piagetian model of learning, has an important role in providing learning opportunities that match each of the developmental stages.

Parents reported concern about the difference in instructional methods offered at middle school that are less experiential. Only one parent reported looking forward to the academic challenges of middle school as a step towards independence.

Secondary Research Question 2: Social Factors

1. How are transition faculty preparing students for changes in social characteristics of middle school?

According to Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages of development early adolescence is a time when children need to cope with and adapt to new social demands that happen primarily at school. Success at this stage leads to self-confidence while failure leads to a weak sense of self.

While faculty participants in this study expressed concern for the social changes that students would encounter in middle school there was little preparation reported to address these changes in this study. Only two faculty participants reported conducting specific activities around learning new social skills. The school psychologist conducted individual sessions to discuss feelings about social changes. The speech therapist conducted group therapy sessions on pragmatic or social language. Since there were only 11 students in this class who travelled together as a cohort and did not change classes other than for specialty classes such as Art and PE, there was little opportunity for students to expand their social relationships in preparation for the changes at middle school. The middle school social environment is frequently changing since students do not travel as a cohort but change classes based on their schedule. Placement in core content classes is random based on the number of students enrolled, maximum class size limits, and options for elective classes. Schedules for students with special needs in less restrictive environments are additionally based on the need for pullout services as described in the IEP. This change is difficult to prepare for in this cohort model elementary school because of the smaller number of students and limited classes that are offered.

2. Are there parental concerns regarding changes in social characteristics between the elementary and the middle school environments?

The primary concern of parent participants in this study centered around social factors in the transition to middle school. There were some positive responses reported that included increased social opportunities such as attending after school events or being involved in sports and clubs. Additionally, parents reported positive feelings about the possibilities of making new friends that a larger environment offers. However, most parents reported feeling anxious about maturational readiness and the impact of being unprepared for the social changes of both adolescence and the middle school environment. Given that the mission of this school is to transition students into a less restrictive environment, parents are faced with the reality of larger, less structured, social settings. They worry that their children have not developed the skills required to be accepted socially, or that they have not reached a level of maturity that will insure their social success. Parents, like faculty, expressed worry about the effects of peer pressure and the lack of social readiness. Additionally, while parents seemed to recognize the positive aspects of growing up, they seemed to feel unprepared for the changes that accompany adolescence and are concerned about the lack of support that they and their children will receive. Parents also expressed concern that their children might experience difficulty getting along with other students who might not understand their individual differences. Researchers have reported declines in coping skills as a result of the simultaneous changes in environment and maturity that are echoed in the parent voices in this

study (Petersen & Crockett, 1985). Stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgely, 1989) along with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model support the challenges of the changing environment on social competence expressed by parents.

Secondary Research Question 3: Procedural Factors

1. How do transition faculty help students prepare for the procedural changes in middle school?

A limited number of faculty are assigned the formal responsibility of preparing students for the changes that are associated with transitioning to middle school. Many of the procedural factors that were identified in this study and supported by the literature on middle school characteristics are difficult to replicate in the smaller elementary environment. These include being in a larger setting, getting lost, riding the bus, having new teachers, and changing classes. Those factors that might be under the control of the elementary school faculty in preparing students for the change include new expectations, more freedom, using a locker, and getting to class on time. However, these factors were not reported in how faculty prepare students for the procedural changes that characterize middle schools. Faculty members do try to help students become more organized with materials management in an attempt to support procedural challenges. According to faculty members, students do not visit middle schools and do not meet other students who will be attending middle school as part of the transition planning process. Students do not attend transition-planning

meetings and, other than the social-emotional and social communication groups identified by the school psychologist and speech therapist, there is no reported process for preparing students for the procedural changes.

The primary purpose of the transition planning team at this private, special education elementary school, as it relates to procedures, has to do with completing applications, submitting reports, and providing lists of middle schools to parents. The school psychologist who heads the transition planning team provides emotional support for students, but he does not have a role in preparing students for the procedural changes. Researchers have reported that students who have difficulty with the procedural challenges associated with the transition to middle school show declines in academic achievement and behavior. According to the stage-environment and developmental theories these declines are related to changes in the environment that are not aligned with adolescent development (Eccles & Midgely, 1989; Erikson, 1968).

2. How do parents describe excitement/concern about the changes in procedures for their children who are transitioning to middle school?

Two aspects of procedural concerns surfaced for parents of students with special needs during this study: (a) concern about how new procedures will be communicated and (b) frustration about the transition planning process. Parents expressed positive feelings about their level of understanding, communication, and involvement with the

day-to-day procedures at this elementary school. They described faculty and administration as being accessible and cited several ways in which open communication occurs. They seemed to view themselves as positive forces in the school, participating in ways that allowed them to understand and reinforce the procedures that define this elementary school.

As a result, they are concerned with the changes in procedures in middle school because they seemed to believe they would have less involvement in their child's school. They expressed concern that there would be too many teachers to be able to form significant working relationships. Parents wanted to establish a consistent home-school communication system but were unsure that it could work in the middle school environment. Studies, however, suggest that parent involvement declines in the middle school even for parents who had established strong home-school relationships (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). A number of factors associated with this decline are related to the procedural changes associated with middle school. These include: the less personal structure of middle school and the middle school model that supports increased independence over parental engagement (Barber & Patin,1997;Berla, 1991).

Major Themes

- Academic Competence: concerns about the increase in academic demands that occur between elementary and middle school;

- Social Competence: implications of environmental changes on developing relationships;

- Procedural Challenges: the increased number of structural changes that occur in the middle school environment;

- Maturational Readiness: the need to understand and address developmental changes in adolescences in the context of middle school; and

- Program Planning: gaps in programmatic support for transitioning to middle school.

Stage-environment Fit Theory: Relationship to Themes

It is evident from the literature that there are multiple changes for students' transitioning to the middle school environment. Contextual changes that require academic and social competence occur simultaneously with developmental changes in adolescence. In developing the stage-environment theory, Eccles and Midgley (1989) explored many facets of the middle school context and the co-occurring influences the educational environment has on the developing adolescent. Five themes emerged in this study based on the connection between stage-environment fit and developmental theories: academic competence, social competence, procedural challenges, program planning, and maturational readiness.

Academic Competence

Academic motivation has been connected to the decline in academic achievement in the middle grades, especially for students who transitioned

from a self-contained model to the departmentalized structure that characterizes middle school (Alspaugh, 1998; Petersen & Crockett, 1985;). According to Alspaugh (1998), children who do not make effective transitions will be less likely to succeed both academically and socially in middle school. Alspaugh also reported that the academic achievement loss was significant for those students transitioning from the sixth grade, as opposed to those who transitioned in eighth grade.

The results of this study reflect concern about academic competence for students with special needs as it relates to the connection between academic motivation in the context of the highly competitive middle school environment and the cognitive adolescent learning characteristics espoused by Piaget and others. Progressive theorists such as Dewey, Kilpatrick, Ward, Pierce, and others have identified the importance of connecting the curriculum to the nature and needs of the learner relying on human development theory to understand the various stages of growth (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). The findings of this study suggest that there is a mismatch in the curricular components that differentiate the elementary school model from the middle school model.

According to the stage-environment theory, the academic characteristics of middle school reflect a shift from the type of individualized, ability-based instruction described by the faculty in this study to a structure that has the potential to negatively impact academic achievement. This study found that both parents and faculty fear that

academic competence will be compromised by the simultaneous changes in environment and development that may be delayed as a result of special needs.

Social Competence

Both parents and faculty expressed the greatest amount of concern about the social competence needed to be successful in middle school. They are worried about how students will cope with an increasing number of peer interactions throughout the day as they change classes. They expressed concern about their children understanding the social norms or fitting in with peers. Students in this school present with social-emotional delays that complicate the mismatch between environment and social development. The importance of being accepted is critical to social-emotional health, according to Erikson's psychosocial theory, placing these students at risk for developing social competence. Erikson (1968) contended that at this stage in development adolescents are beginning to learn that understanding social rules can determine acceptance into a peer group. Kagan and Neuman (1998) also believe that during this stage of development students are establishing the social-emotional foundation that will guide them through life. Many of the changes outlined by the NMSA (2003) position paper are at the root of social competence: a strong need for approval, belonging to a peer group, and balancing dependence on and independence from adults. Developmental literature for this age range emphasizes the influence of relationships on learning.

Parents and faculty responses in this domain reflect concern with the ability of their special needs students to develop the social competence needed to make friends, avoid peer pressure and feel part of a peer group.

Procedural Challenges

Research indicates that the structure of the educational environment places students at risk for failure if they are not matched to the developmental needs associated with the middle-school aged child, the needs of the parent, or the involvement of the faculty between the two school configurations. Stage-environment fit theory describes the importance of the connection between the increased organizational demands and decreased parental involvement of the middle school environment with the challenges of adolescence. Students with special needs often have associated difficulty with sensory development that can be exacerbated by the overwhelming size and structure of the middle school setting. According to Eccles and Midgley (1989), the fit between the developing adolescent and the classroom and school environments increases the risk of failure, especially for students with special needs. Maras and Aveling (2006) reported that procedural challenges experienced in middle school for special needs students negatively impact academic, social and behavioral development.

Parents and faculty respondents support the research on the impact of procedural changes when students transition to middle school. The

study found that both parents and faculty see both positive and negative sides of this change. They look forward to having students exposed to more educational and extra-curricular experiences, but worry about how students leaving the supported environment of this private special education school will manage the quantity and type of changes they face in middle school.

Maturational Readiness

Developmental theorists describe adolescence as a time of change and confusion. Developing adolescents desire control over their own lives, yet tend to act impulsively due to physical changes; have greater interest in friends than family, yet continue to need a primary adult bond due to under-developed social-emotional competence; have a strong need to belong, yet are often fickle; are self-conscious, yet are increasingly ego-centric; and think of themselves as adults while not yet developing the skills required for adult thinking (Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1904; NMSA, 2003; Odegaard & Heath, 1992; Vygotsky,1978). The cognitive, social, and physical changes that occur during early adolescence are not the same for each child and vary in degree from child to child. How the developing child responds to these changes is complicated by individual characteristics and is influenced by peers, parents, and culture. For students transitioning to middle school this is further complicated by changes in the middle school environment. For students with special needs this is compounded by developmental delays.

Students enrolled in the Real School are cognitively capable, but demonstrate learning differences due to language, social, and organizational challenges. There are no delays in physical development for these special needs students; a concern reported by parents and faculty regarding social-emotional maturational readiness for the move to middle school.

Stage-environment fit theory, when applied to this study, places special needs students at greater risk for a mismatch. This theory proposes that individuals have changing needs as they mature and that these needs must be matched to the context of schools. Schools, it is argued need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are going to be responsive to the social, personal and academic maturation process (Eccles & Midgely, 1989). Adapting in developmentally appropriate ways for at risk students adds a layer of complexity for responding to those processes.

In "Schools, Academic Motivation, and Stage-Environment," Eccles and Roeser (1999) discussed the relationship between the timing of adolescent development and the transition to middle school. They described the move to middle school as non-responsive to the developmental needs of the adolescent, a factor complicated for special needs students. The middle school context reduces the connection between student and teacher and teacher and parent at a time when

"adolescents may be in need of close adult relationships" (Eccles & Roeser, 1999, p. 404).

Parents and faculty responses in this study reflect the disconnect described by the stage-environment fit theory. Specifically, there were concerns regarding the academic and social context of middle school, the number of classes in a day, the pace of instruction, the increased content load, a greater emphasis on grades, competitive peer relationships, and less individual attention. These are the factors that may be inconsistent with the maturational readiness of these special needs students.

Middle schools place greater emphasis on discipline and academic success with less opportunity for individualization and fewer opportunities for faculty to develop close relationships with parents, factors identified as concerning to parents and faculty in this study.

Program Planning

Transition planning at the Real School begins in late October with discussions with individual parents who will be applying to private or public middle school programs. In New York City every fifth grade student attending a New York City elementary school receives a customized middle school application that lists all of the eligible middle school programs based on geographic location. Students are asked to rank the schools in order of preference. Students are matched to school by the Department of Education. Public middle school applications are due the third week of December with decision letters made available in May of

the same year. According to the New York City website, students with disabilities have the option of applying to all schools and/or programs subject to the same admissions requirements as their general education peers. "Once a student is accepted to a middle school, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team at the school may convene to develop a plan that will meet the special education needs of the child at that school. Middle school students receiving Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) or Special Class services do not necessarily attend class together each period of the day" (www.schools.nyc.gov, 2013, para. 3)

Unlike students transitioning from pre-school to elementary school or from high school to adult life, special needs students transitioning from elementary to middle school do not have the benefit of a prescribed planning process supported by law.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) mandates transition that requires that a team develop a coordinated set of activities that focuses on improving academic and functional skills that facilitates success after high school. IEP Teams must include transition planning in the first IEP that will be in effect when the child is 16 years of age.

Public Law 99-457 requires early intervention programs to address the transition to pre-school. There are also prescribed steps that must be taken to insure that all stakeholders are involved in the process. According to this law the plan must describe parent training, procedures to prepare the child for the change, steps to assist the child before and

during the transition, and a system for transferring student information (Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986).

Transition planning at the Real School consists of one to two meetings with each parent of a student who will be applying to middle school. These meetings are led by the school psychologist and involve the head teacher and the parent(s). The goal of these meetings is to help prepare the application. Related service providers are involved as needed and provide written reports to support the application process. The primary activities are the preparation of reports, completion of applications and discussion of middle school options. The teacher reports on behavior and academic progress. Parents are provided with a list of middle schools both public and private. The parents are responsible for submitting all necessary documents to the Department of Education.

Summary

This study examined the factors relating to the transition process from the perspective of faculty and parents in a private special education school. Seventeen participants, nine parents and eight faculty, provided responses to questionnaires and interviews about their experiences and perceptions regarding transition. A number of commonalities between parent and faculty responses emerged for both anticipation and anxiety about the transition to middle school. Academic competence, social competence, procedural challenges, maturational readiness, and program planning were the common themes that emerged for all participants. The

influence of stage-environment fit theory as it relates to transition from elementary to middle school was used to explore these emerging themes.

This study found that the impact of transition for parents and faculty are closely related to simultaneous changes in adolescent development and changes in the middle school context. The positive and negative factors perceived by parents and faculty were found to be influenced by the degree to which parents and faculty participated in planning for that transition. This research underscored the limitations in mandated policy and practice for the complex transition from elementary to middle school for students with special needs. The mismatch between the emerging adolescent and the challenges faced in the new middle school context were revealed in this study.

This study found that while both parents and faculty experience anxiety and excitement about transition, all participants perceived the social and academic domains as the most difficult for students with special needs that are complicated by maturational readiness. An additional mismatch emerged in this study between the transition planning process for parents and faculty and the timing of transition for students leaving the elementary school context. This study identified a need to develop curriculum and policy that supports parents and faculty before, during, and after this important transition process.

Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation revealed a number of positive and negative factors associated with the transition to middle school for parents and faculty in a private special education elementary school. This study illustrated that there are a number of middle school characteristics that do not always match the maturational readiness of the pre-adolescents making the transition causing concern for parents and faculty. Research was presented that identified the negative impact of academic achievement on this mismatch. A discussion of the planning process revealed that there is a narrow set of planning activities in which faculty and parents engage in the transition planning process. Finally, this study showed that limited legislation exists that would support transition-planning activities.

This study can be expanded for future research by examining the role that the program-planning process takes in outcomes for successful transition. Given that program planning activities are not mandated by legislation exploring different transition planning models will allow for a greater understanding of the impact of planning on transition outcomes.

This study can be further expanded by seeking to understand the student perspective on the transition to middle school. Parents and faculty view the transition from elementary school to middle school from the lens of the developing child. A qualitative study that seeks to understand the voices of those most directly affected by the transition could add important information to understanding this complicated process from the perspective of the child with special needs.

Expanding this study to include analysis of outcomes for students after they enter middle school can be considered. A mixed methods study that seeks to understand changes in academic and social performance over time is recommended.

Recommendations for Policy

Federal legislation mandates specific, sequential activities for transitioning students from pre-school to kindergarten and from high school to adult life for students with special needs. These activities involve the parents, faculty and students in the process of planning. These activities begin a year prior to the transition and included as part of the Committee on Pre-School Special Education (CPSE) and Committee on Special Education (CSE) processes governed by federal legislation. Those students "caught in the middle" have no such protections for facilitating the process of transition from elementary to middle school. It is recommended that policymakers define the activities that comprise effective transition practices many of which have been outlined in research and literature on middle school. It is recommended that policy be implemented to support a coordinated set of activities between elementary and middle school environments that focus on improving academic and social skills following transition.

Recommendations for Practice

The ability to adjust to the changes in middle school has been reported as a significant factor relating to academic achievement.

Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) reported that this adjustment often lasted as long as six months. A number of researchers have identified that students are fearful of the transition long before it actually happens (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi (2004); Akos, Queen & Lineberry (2005). Alspaugh (1998) reported declines in academic achievement in the transition from elementary to middle school with a greater decline reported for students with special needs. Researchers have also concluded that increasing the knowledge base of parents and school staff about the needs of early adolescence in the context of transition improves student achievement and decreases drop-out rates (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Given these and other related findings elementary and middle school administration need to support the collaborative development of a comprehensive transition curriculum that spans the time frame from the middle of fourth to middle of sixth grade. A consortium of principals, teachers, school psychologists, and parents working together across grade levels could address the identified concerns associated with transition for special needs students. This curriculum should be developmentally aligned with each age range; take into consideration the social, academic, and procedural differences in each environment; and include many of the middle school reform recommendations that relate to instruction, environment, and involvement. By involving the staff and parents from sequenced grades in the development of this curriculum there is an increased awareness and knowledge base on the impact of early

adolescence and contextual changes. The curriculum should address how to prepare students for a new environment, teach study and materials management skills, directly address fears about rules and procedures, offer real-life experiences in middle school prior to transition, and make peer-peer and parent-to- parent connections. The over-arching curricular themes would address factors identified in this study and other research and literature bases on academic competence, social competence, procedural challenges in the framework of maturational readiness.

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Appendix A

Elementary and Middle School Schedules

Elementary School
Weekly Schedule

Teacher: Kristin
September-June 2013-2014

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday

8:05-8:20	(HB)	(HB)	(HB)	(HB)	(HB)
8:20-9:00	Music	P.E.	Art	P.E.	Home Letter
9:00-9:40	Science/Social Studies	Science/Social Studies	Science/Social Studies	Social Skills (Second Step)	Computers
9:45-11:00	Math	Math	Math	Math	Math
11:00-11:15	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess
11:20-12:40	Literacy	Literacy	Literacy	Literacy	Literacy
12:40-1:10	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:10-1:50	DEAR/Read Aloud	DEAR/Read Aloud	Science/Social Studies	Science/Social Studies	Science
1:50-2:25	Project Work	Project Work	Project Work	Project Work	Science
2:25-2:40	Pack-up Routine(HB)	Pack-up Routine(HB)	Pack-up Routine(HB)	Pack-up Routine(HB)	Pack-up Routine(l-IB)
2:40	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal

Middle School Weekly Schedule- Term 1.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	MONDAY
Period: 0	-I- – -I-	-I- – -I-	ZQSGW /19 Small Group Wednesday Aubry /415	ZQSGR /16 Small Group Thursday Feraco /403	-I- – -I-	-I- – -I-
Period: 1	FSSM7/1 Spanish 7 Aidala /404	RQSM7/1 Engineering 7 Hubbard I 401	FSSM7/1 Spanish 7 Aidala /404	RQSM7/1 Engineering 7 Hubbard I 401	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam /305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam /305
Period: 2	HSSM712 Social Studies 7 Aubry /415	AQSM7/1 Art 7 Martin I 501	EQSM7/ 1 Philosophy 7 Hartman 1414	AQSM7 / 1 Art 7 Martin /501	EQSM7/1 Philosophy 7 Hartman /414	EQSM7 /1 Philosophy 7 Hartman /414
Period: 3	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam /305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam /305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam/305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam /305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam/305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam /305
	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	MONDAY
Period: 4	MMSM712 Math 7 Thiam/305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiam I305	MMSM712 Math 7 Thiam /305	MMSM7/2 Math7 Thiam I305	MMSM7/2 Math7 Thiam /305	MMSM7/2 Math 7 Thiaml305
Period: 5	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman I 414	GASM7/4 Advisory Hartman I 414	PPSM7/2 Phys Ed 7 Delcia I WGYM	GQSM714 Study Skills Robin /414	PPSM7/2 Phys Ed 7 Delcia I WGYM	PPSM7/2 Phys Ed 7 Delucia I WGYM

Period: 6	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman /414	GASM7/4 Advisory Hartman I 414	PPSM7 /2 Phys Ed 7 Delucia I WGYM	GQSM7/4 Study Skills Robin /414	PPSM7/2 Phys Ed 7 Delucia I WGYM	PPSM7/2 Phys Ed 7 Deucia I WGYM
Period: 7	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I
Period: 8	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez/CAF	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez I CAF	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez/ CAF	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez/CAF	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez /CAF	ZL7/4 Lunch Perez/ CAF
Period: 9	EESM7 /2 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman I 414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman /414
Period: 10	EESM712 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM712 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman /414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman I 414	EESM7/2 English 7 Hartman I 414	EESM712 English 7 Hartman I 414
Period: 11	SSSM7/2 Science 7 Feraco /403	HSSM7/2 Social Studies 7 Aubry /415	HSSM7/2 Social Studies 7 Aubry /415	HSSM7/2 SocialStudies 7 Aubry /415	HSSM7/2 Social Studies 7 Aubry /415	HSSM7/2 Social Studies 7 Aubry /415
Period: 12	SSSM7/2 Science 7 Feraco /403	SSSM7/2 Science 7 Feraco /403	SSSM712 Science 7 Feraco / 403	SSSM7/2 Science 7 Feraco /403	SSSM7 / 2 Science 7 Feraco 1403	SSSM7/2 Science 7 Feraco 1403

Appendix B

Permission from Dr. Akos to use questionnaires

From: Akos, Patrick [mailto:pakos@email.unc.edu]
Sent: Friday, August 17, 2012 2:26 PM
To: Barbara McKeon
Subject: RE: perception of transition survey

Barbara -

the surveys were in that email I believe and you are welcome to use them (they are questionnaires really as you need to tailor them to fit the community).

I really have wanted to get grant funding to study and come up with programming around the IEP process when moving from elem to middle - middle to high. While transition planning is required later in high school - I think the legislation should mandate transition services when moving between schools.

good luck in your work - and if you decide you would like to pursue funding or write some policy or research from your work - I would be happy to support you as a second author.

best.

Dr. Patrick Akos
http://soe.unc.edu/academics/med_sch_counseling/
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
SOE - Box #3500; Chapel Hill, NC 27599

Appendix C

Faculty Perception Questionnaire

Transition to Middle School

In an effort to understand transition needs, we would like to know more about *your views* about the move from elementary school to middle school. Please help us by completing the questions below. Write **"N/A"** next to any questions that don't apply.

As faculty please rank the following items from the **most positive** to the **least positive** aspects of moving to the middle school for your students.

1-most positive 2-positive 3-neutral 4-not positive 5-least positive

	1	2	3	4	5
1. being in a larger school					
2. older students					
3. getting good grades					
4. more freedom					
5. making new friends					
6. more students					
7. having new teachers					
8. more choices at lunch					
9. being able to choose classes					
10. participating in sports, clubs					
11. attending school events					
12. changing classes					
13. having lockers					

As faculty please rank the following items from the *most difficult* to the *least difficult* aspects of moving to the middle school for your students.

1-most difficult 2-difficult 3-neutral 4-not difficult 5-least difficult

	1	2	3	4	5
1. finding their way around or getting lost					
2. being made fun of					
3. using a locker					

4. getting along with other students				
5. harder classes				
6. riding the bus				
7. pressure to do well				
8. new rules and expectations				
9. getting to class on time				
10. safety or being hurt by other students				
11. getting good grades				
12. older students				
13. fitting in or making friends				

14. feeling pressure to do things				

15. new and more students				

16. hard or unfriendly teachers				
17. how much homework they will have				

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

Appendix D

Parent Perception Questionnaire

Transition to Middle School

In an effort to understand transition needs, we would like to know more about *your views* about the move from elementary school to middle school. Please help us by completing the questions below. Write **"N/A"** next to any questions that don't apply.

As a parent please rank the following items from the **most positive** to the **least positive** aspects of moving to the middle school for your child.

1-most positive 2-positive 3-neutral 4-not positive 5-least positive

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1. being in a larger school					
2. older students					
3. getting good grades					
4. more freedom					
5. making new friends					
6. more students					
7. having new teachers					
8. more choices at lunch					
9. being able to choose classes					
10. participating in sports, clubs					
11. attending school events					
12. changing classes					
13. having lockers					

As a parent please rank the following items from the ***most difficult*** to the ***least difficult*** aspects of moving to the middle school for your child.

1-most difficult   *2-difficult*   *3-neutral*   *4-not difficult*   *5-least difficult*

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*

1. finding their way around or getting lost				
2. being made fun of				
3. using a locker				
4. getting along with other students				
5. harder classes				
6. riding the bus				
7. pressure to do well				
8. new rules and expectations				
9. getting to class on time				
10. safety or being hurt by other students				
11. getting good grades				
12. older students				
13. fitting in or making friends				

14. feeling pressure to do things				

15. new and more students				

16. hard or unfriendly teachers				

17. how much homework they will have				

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

Appendix E

Interview Questions: Parents

1. Please describe your feelings about your child moving to middle school.

2. What are you most looking forward to as a parent for you child as she/he enters middle school?

3. What concerns you the most as it relates to this move?

4. What involvement have you had in the process of transition in your child's school?

5. How are you helping your child prepare for this transition?

6. Can you tell me about the planning process at your child's school and your role in that process?

7. Please describe the communication process with teachers and related service providers who work with your child as it relates to transition.

8. Please describe your relationship with each of these faculty members.

9. What role, if any does the administration play in the transition process?

10. What characteristics of middle school are you looking for when applying   out of this school?

11. Do other parents and/or friends play a role in this decision?

12. Please discuss the academic needs of your child as it relates to moving to a new school.

13. What has the school done to support you and your child in this transition process?

14. Are there any changes in that process that you think would help to improve transitioning to a new school?

15. Among the faculty you regularly come in contact how many do you feel you can discuss transition concerns with?

16. How do you feel the move from elementary school to middle school will be for your child?

17. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you believe will enable me to understand the transition process?

Appendix F

Interview Questions: Faculty

1. Please describe your role in the transition process.
2. How would you characterize students' feelings about moving to middle school?

3. What concerns you the most as it relates to this move?

4. What involvement with parents have you had in the process of transition?

5. How are you helping your students prepare for this transition?

6. Can you tell me about the planning process at your school?

7. Please describe the communication process with other faculty who work with the students in your classroom as it relates to transition.

8. What role, if any does the administration play in the transition process?

9. Are you familiar with the academic and/or social programs offered at middle school?

10. Are there particular areas of academic instruction that cause you concern about the changes between elementary and middle school that your students will face?

11. What are your feelings about the social dynamic in middle school for your students?

12. What are the organizational changes that you believe are important for the middle school to address? How do you prepare students for them?

13. Please explain how you prepare all students for middle school given their differences in development.

14. What types of activities/services/programs should be provided in your school for students and/or their families to help make the transition to middle school a smooth one?

15. How do you feel the move from elementary school to middle school will be for the students with whom you work?

16. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you believe will enable me to understand the transition process?