BODIES, BRAINS, & BESTIES: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Dissertation
by
ELIZABETH CASEY COLEMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School
Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2020
Doctoral Program of Education Leadership

BODIES, BRAINS, & BESTIES: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Dissertation
by
ELIZABETH CASEY COLEMAN
May 2020

APPROVED BY:

Chris Cook, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

Beth Buchholz, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Lucy Purgason, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Vachel Miller, Ed.D.
Director, Doctoral Program in Education Leadership

Michael McKenzie, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

Abstract

BODIES, BRAINS, & BESTIES: STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Elizabeth Casey Coleman, LCMHC, NCC, NBCT
B.A., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
M.A., Appalachian State University
Ed.S., Appalachian State University
Ed.D, Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Chris Cook, Ph.D.

Early adolescence is a time filled with transitions. Students experience a change in school location, physical and emotional development, and new social expectations and challenges. Educators at the middle grades level create transition plans that are intended to address these issues upon entry to middle school. Transition plans are also intended to focus on academic, behavioral, and attendance needs of students. Very often, the academic needs of students are thoroughly addressed while social-emotional learning is left out of the plan or included as an afterthought. Schools may even create transition programs that ultimately meet the needs of the school (daily procedures, conduct and order, proficiency and growth on standardized tests) as opposed to the developmental needs of students. Information regarding research-based transition programs that also include a strong element of student voice is lacking from the current literature.

To best address the multiple facets of this time period in a child's life, I created a conceptual framework using key theories of human development and widely accepted position statements on middle schools. The framework focuses on writings and theories by

Erikson, Piaget, Bandura and Maslow to give an overall understanding of students and their psychological and socio-emotional needs during pre-adolescence. These theories as applied to transition periods will support the constructivist paradigm that knowledge is constructed based on individual experiences and unique world views. Previous research about middle school culture from the widely accepted position statement developed by the Association for Middle Level Education, *This We Believe,* was also used to support the theoretical framework. Ideals from the children's rights movement and the school improvement movement have also been explored to create a solid conceptual framework that considers the complex nature of humans, schools, and how they interact with and influence one another.

Drawing on the information from the theoretical framework, I designed a qualitative research study using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) study to identify current challenges faced by sixth grade students. YPAR was selected as the methodology to give voice to students assist them in becoming agents of change within their school community. Data was collected through a photovoice project, observations, interviews, and student writing samples to determine key challenges faced by students as they enter middle school. Seventh grade students assisted in interpreting the data gathered and identified main challenges. Their conclusion was that students often feel isolated upon entering middle school. They also determined that the procedures and policies of the school contributed to the isolation of students. The students and I then continued researching middle school transitions and drew conclusions about activities and procedures that would address both the challenges identified (isolation) and the needs of the school (student growth and proficiency, daily procedures, student conduct). A transition plan and rubric were created based on a review of past literature and current findings of this study. The students and I shared

information with important stakeholders at the local level during the dissertation defense and our proposal was accepted for the North Carolina Middle Level Educators conference in March 2020.

Acknowledgments

The research and writing of this dissertation led to a journey of self-exploration and self-reflection unlike any other point in my life. At the beginning of this journey I spent three years, both figuratively and literally, on the mountain. During that time, I found a deeper understanding of my life, God, my purpose, my motivations, my health, and my support system. To my friends on the mountain, Sabrienna, Dania and Charlie, thank you for your continuous support as I explored who I was and what I stood for during my time with you. Kelly and Carrie, I appreciate your friendship throughout this process. Thank you for keeping me awake during class, reading endless edits of my dissertation, and for my daily, "you got this!" text. Now it is your turn!

While writing, I have researched, read, thought, questioned, changed ideas, searched, sought answers, and everything in between. I have prayed, put my life on hold, put my family and friends on hold, cried, laughed, created a personal mission statement, been selfish, felt helpless, been proud, felt accomplished...and the list goes on. To my Elkin family, thank you for caring for and feeding me for the past eight years. To my family, thank you for always supporting me and understanding the amount of work and dedication this has taken and forgiving me for missing so many family events. To my mom, thank you for talking with me on my daily drive and helping me think through my ideas. To my dad, thank you for always being there when I needed the best advice and a shoulder to sleep on at the football games. To Billy, thank you for standing by me through every crazy idea I have. You have opened my mind in ways I did not know were possible. Without your unwavering support, I would not have made it through this process. I am forever grateful for the person I have become with you.

After all the questioning and soul-searching, I determined that I must write this dissertation - not because it is groundbreaking research, and not because it will ultimately solve any or all problems, but because it is important. It is important because I am a nobody from nowhere, but I have a voice. I believe the world has more nobodies from nowhere than somebodies from somewhere. And in a society where screaming, yelling, protesting, and violence coupled with social media rants and arguments are the voices that dominate our minds and media - it is important to allow the silent voices to be heard even if it is only to a small group of educators. To my dissertation committee, thank you for being exactly what I needed. Your input was always there when I needed it and you all pushed me to write when I thought I had no words left. I appreciate your feedback and helping give voice to the students.

To all the nobodies out there in the middle of nowhere, you have a voice that deserves to be heard.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the children I have known and who have inspired me to be the educator I have become; the children who have made me a mom, an auntie, Ms. Carnitas and Almost Dr. Coleman. These children have given my life great meaning and I am thankful to have known each of them. I am grateful for the love they give despite my imperfections and shortcomings. I hope I am always able to see myself through their eyes.

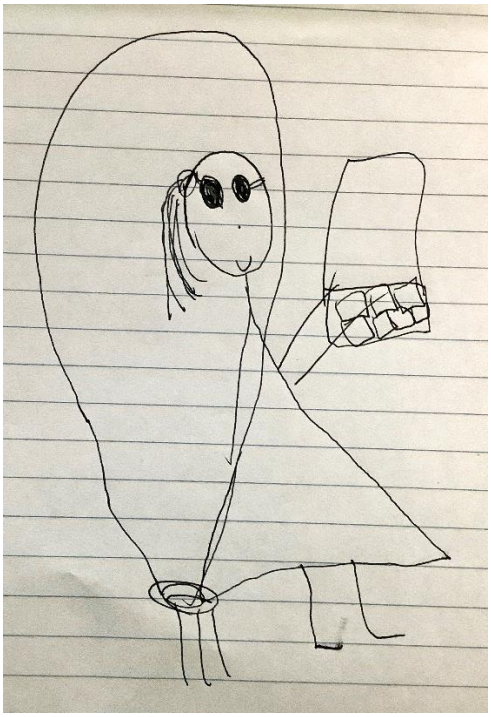


Photo Credit: M. M., Age 6

Preface

I love to tell stories. Stories are the way humans make sense of their world.
You may come to understand yourself in deeper ways.
And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. (Ellis, 2004, p. 32)

To best understand this journey and the "why" that led me down the path to this dissertation, I invite all readers to take a moment, close your eyes, and think back to middle school. If that thought horrifies you (and even if it does not) I invite you to continue reading and discover what middle school is like for students in 2020. Phrased that way, I would think we were living in the future and students were taking driver's education in flying cars. The reality of the situation is that current middle grades students see and experience the world differently than past generations. The rapid development of technology and constant digital contact through social media and other digital platforms gives students the medium necessary to access endless knowledge and experience distant parts of the world without ever leaving home. Although the ability to experience the world is different, the basic feelings and needs of students has not changed. They still undergo rapid, confusing changes to their bodies, brains and best friends. Students still get nervous when I use the words "body changes" and become mortified at the thought that their best friend will change before leaving middle school. I get mixed reactions about believing that their brain will change. I can usually convince students through scientific anecdotes based on personal reading and research that brain development is a real thing. Convincing them that they have the ability to learn new information and set and achieve goals can sometimes be a hard sell.

Teachers and parents come to me, as the school counselor, for advice when students are not motivated to learn or participate, but there is an underlying issue for many students

and it is the reason I cannot convince them of brain changes. They lack self-efficacy. They lack the belief that they have the power to change their brain. They do not know that they are in control or their learning and have the ability to construct knowledge about their world and use that knowledge to overcome challenges and grow as young adolescents. Unfortunately, schools often hinder students from developing self-efficacy skills by taking away their autonomy and practicing pedagogies that inhibit student development. Educators often use "a banking system" to deposit knowledge in students and serve as the expert in the classroom (hooks, 1994). When teachers stand (or sit) in front of a classroom and recite information to students, those students lose the ability to challenge themselves and develop confidence in their ability to succeed. They become disconnected from others, themselves, and their learning.

This dissertation explores the belief that students have the ability to construct knowledge based on their own experiences. With that knowledge comes a voice and given the opportunity they can use that voice to be agents of change. Provided the right environment and tools, students can lead other students in developing self-efficacy, motivation, and resilience skills that will promote positive transitions into middle school, bolster student success, and aid them throughout the entirety of their lives.

At this point, I would like to go back and further address the "why" behind this project. My middle school experience was unique. I am grateful that it only lasted one year. The progression of my school system meant that middle school was only seventh grade and then students were moved on to junior high school. That one year was a turning point in my development as a person. It was an anxiety-ridden experience where my body, brain, and best friends changed (some of those more than others). By the end of middle school I had an

entirely new friend group, had been shamed by a teacher for my slow physical development (I was the shortest person in school), and was placed in what I can only assume was a counseling group where the adult leader constantly reminded the participants that we were not "bad girls." Considering that I was a straight "A" student, had never been in trouble, and was terrified of the well-developed young ladies in the group, I was sufficiently confused by this statement and my required participation in the group. I was small, awkward, and nervous. This statement summarized the entirety of my middle school experience.

As an adult, I became a teacher and later a counselor. I worked at all levels from pre-K to college with the exception of middle school. I now believe I was subconsciously avoiding middle school. I even went so far as to discourage others from working in middle schools. Any time I encountered someone who wanted to work in a middle school I would respond, "Why would anyone want to do that?" I could not fathom purposely spending eight hours a day with 11 to 14-year-olds.

Life has a funny way of working out and as fate would have it, I became a middle school counselor. When fate calls in the form of your favorite administrator, you say "yes." Then you follow my middle school motto, "Fake it until you make it." For the past two years I have faked it with the best and encouraged my students to do the same. And that is my "why." It is not necessarily my own experience, although that does play a significant role in how I view, understand, and interact with my students. All of my experiences over the past decade taught me that young adolescence is one of the most precious yet confusing times in the span of human life. My own experience tells me that my students will make it to high school at the end of their three (or four) year stint in the middle grades. Talking to them every day and experiencing the highs and lows of life with them tells me that perspective is

everything. And so, through this research I want to discover that perspective. I want to see middle school as they see it and use that information to make the experience better for my future students as they transition to middle school. Further, I want to add to the current research literature by providing practical guidelines that will serve as a tool for other teachers and counselors as they work to support their students during this amazingly awkward, yet critically profound phase of life.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Progress is impossible without change, and
those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.
~George Bernard Shaw

Transitions are part of life. For young adolescents, they are a significant part of life. The personal transitions students experience are physical, mental, and emotional. As children move into adolescence, they are faced with complex biological changes at the same time they face personal and social changes (Bailey, Giles & Rogers, 2015; Swafford & Durrington, 2010). Transitions are innate, natural parts of life. Other times they are involuntary parts of cultural systems. Often there is no choice about participating in those systems. To compound the multitude of biological and emotional changes already faced by young adolescents, many American school systems require that students transition from elementary school to middle school around the age of eleven (Armstrong & Elkind, 2006). For young adolescents, participation in compulsory education systems creates non-negotiable transitions at set intervals where they must navigate changes to their personal, social, and academic lives. These transitions within schools occur whether the students are emotionally, mentally, and sometimes academically prepared. They have limited choice in participation and must make personal decisions about how to handle those transitions. External environmental factors, such as people and cultural settings, play a role in how information pertaining to transitions is processed by individual students. The key for most students when maneuvering through the challenges of becoming a young adolescent is how they process information and the social emotional skills they develop over time. Schools play a vital role in student development and largely influence a students' personal, social-emotional, and academic outcomes. Being charged with such an immense responsibility

means that educators and other school employees must be well-versed in multiple areas of child development as well as content area and pedagogy (Armstrong & Elkind, 2006).

As an educator and school counselor, I spent the past twelve years observing children of all ages and stages of development within the context of the school. Over the past two years, my role as a school counselor dictated that I plan the elementary-to-middle school transition program for incoming fifth grade students. Drawing on my knowledge of human development, educational pedagogy, and systemic processes within schools I began to wonder if current transition programs are truly meeting the complex physical, social-emotional, and academic needs of students. I recalled my own experience transitioning to middle school and had no memory of any programming, orientations, or activities that assisted me during my first major transition in life. I remember it being a difficult time to navigate and have observed similar difficulties for the students I work with. My inquisitive nature and desire to help my students succeed made me question what our school (and other schools) were doing to address the transitional period.

Overview of the Study

Students who attend traditional public schools spend approximately 1,300 hours in school each year. The sheer amount of time spent in school means it is the responsibility of schools to interact mindfully with students as they play a major role in creating an environment where students construct knowledge about the world. Students and their parents rely on schools to create plans that aid in the successful transition from elementary to middle school. The responsibility for creating these comprehensive transition plans fall to the middle school employees who are *expected* to have a clear understanding of the unique developmental needs of students between the ages of 11 to 14 (Hill & Mobley, 2016).

Schools create transition plans that benefit the system of the schools (attendance, behavior, academics) with the oft-stated goal of creating an environment where all incoming students feel safe as they grow academically as well as personally and socially. The reality is transition plans primarily address the day-to-day school operations and academic procedures, and often do not address the personal and social-emotional needs of students (Brinegar, 2015; Powell, 2005; Stevenson, 2002). Personal experience and observation have led me to believe that creating transition plans to benefit the systems of schools and disregard the social-emotional needs of students is not the actual goal of transition plans. Unfortunately, plans that address academic, behavior, and attendance policies are usually the easiest concepts to implement at a school-wide level (for students of all developmental levels and teachers of all backgrounds) and consequently end up being the primary focus.

To counteract unsuccessful transitions, schools create transition plans to aid in a students' acclimation to the school. These plans include orientations, open house events, meet-and-greet nights with teachers, tours of the school and mentor programs (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004). Some schools aim to be creative in their presentation of key information by creating scavenger hunts or using technology and social media to aid in the process and catch students' attention (Hill & Mobley, 2016). Although these plans are well-intentioned and staff at schools spend hours meticulously planning transition events, they often only serve the needs of the school. These needs often focus on student conduct, attendance, daily operations, and meeting expected goals on standardized tests. An underlying goal of transition programs is to maintain systems within the school so it will continue to function in an orderly manner according to policies and procedures (McElroy, 2000) with the hopes that students will achieve academically and

behaviorally. Limited time, resources, and knowledge of young adolescent development are also reasons schools focus on program planning that serves the needs of the school instead of child development.

Teachers, who are sometimes charged with the creation of transition plans, are trained in content area and classroom management techniques as effective ways to manage behavior and positively impact student outcomes (Eisenman, Edwards & Cushman, 2015; Flower, McKenna & Haring, 2017; Oliver & Reschly, 2010). This training does not always translate into an ability to plan transition programs that meet the social-emotional needs of students as they enter the middle school. My experience working with teachers as they navigate this period of time has been that teachers are very comfortable working as professionals in their classrooms, but are not confident in their abilities to provide proper guidance on the developmental and social-emotional changes experienced by students. Recent studies on teacher perceptions of their abilities to teach social-emotional learning in the classroom supports my observations (Anderson, 2015; Main, 2018).

Theoretical Background

The complex nature of humans insists that multiple theories of human development must be explored to form a comprehensive understanding of children as they transition to early adolescence. Prior to the 20th century children were viewed as small adults, and their unique abilities and minds were overlooked (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Inquiries into abnormal behavior led to in-depth studies of child and adolescent development. Jean Piaget (1936), Erik Erikson (1950), Albert Bandura (1986, 1993), and Lev Vygotsky (1962) all provided insight to the complex nature of child development. Drawing from their theories of psychosocial (Erikson), cognitive (Piaget), social learning (Bandura), and sociocultural

(Vygotsky) development, I create a comprehensive conceptual framework that guides the exploration of children as they navigate this critical period in life.

Constructivist theorists like Piaget (1936) believed that children construct knowledge not only as a part of their biological maturation but are also influenced by their interactions with the environment (Wadsworth, 1984). Erkinson (1950) also believed that a child's social interactions had a significant impact on their development. Similarly, Bandura (1986, 1993) believed that children developed skills and acquired information through observation. Vygotsky (1962) theorized that learning is a social process and knowledge is constructed through interactions with peers and adults. During one of the most crucial periods of a child's development (early adolescence), they construct knowledge about the world around them using social cues as a guide (Osterman, 2000). The understandings they create and the way they view the world can lead to a successful future or a life of dissonance. Six decades of research from multiple theorists have provided today's researchers with a firm basis for understanding students, how they think, and how they operate in the world. Application of these theories to the needs of today's students can help educators work with those students to enhance their experiences as they transition from elementary to middle school. By working collaboratively with students, we can develop a rich understanding of student concerns and create developmentally responsive solutions. Chapter two provides further details of each theory and how practical application of theories can have positive outcomes for students and schools.

Middle Schools

Middle schools were introduced in the 1960s (AMLE, 2010; Callaway, 1973; Gatewood, 1970–1972; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2015) to address the specific

developmental needs of early and middle adolescents (children ages 10-15) during a "period of vague, but real rights and obligations of its own" (Simmons & Blythe, 1987, p. xi). During this developmental stage children are caught between dependency on critical adults in their lives and the need to establish independence, and although "they are generally eager for more independence and autonomy...they may not be ready to navigate its more complex environment" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The establishment of independence for early adolescents comes with pressures from peers and requires complex navigation of relationships. Each of those relationships comes with an obligation to those involved and occasionally those obligations are in conflict with one another. During a time of such intense social-emotional and personal changes, students are asked to remain focused solely on academics and appropriate school behaviors which can be a daunting task that leads to increased feelings of anxiety.

Current Literature

The transition from elementary to middle school is a crucial time for students. Research shows that transition periods, like those faced by elementary-aged children, are crucial times for students and successful/unsuccessful transitions affect "educational outcomes, motivation, functioning and attitudes toward school" (Theriot & Dupper, 2010, p. 206). The intersection of physical, personal, social, and academic changes at the middle school level can be difficult for students to successfully maneuver in the school environment. According to research on middle-to-high school transitions, students who fail to integrate themselves into the system often see academic decline, an increase in the number of accumulated discipline referrals, and an increase in absences, and increased mental health concerns (Akos, Lineberry, & Queen, 2013; Bennett, 2012). These same students may also

struggle to maintain healthy relationships with their peers. The research on students' ability to successfully integrate themselves (academically, behaviorally, and social-emotionally) during the elementary-to-middle school transitions is limited, but initial studies indicate similar findings about middle school students' academics and behaviors (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004). Research in the area of student social-emotional development as they transition from elementary-to-middle school transitions is still lacking. There is even less research that explores students' perceptions about their social-emotional functioning and peer relationships, and how these affect their middle school experiences, rates of academic success, attendance, and behavior. Current research does indicate that students are worried about schedules, lockers and combinations, bullies, navigating their way through the school, and increased workload, but the literature on social-emotional transitions is lacking (AMLE, 2019; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004).

Gaps in Transition Programming

Effective transition plans should be tailored to the needs of the school and include the logistics of daily operations. They should also consider and address the personal and social-emotional needs of students as well as academics, behavior, and attendance. The nationally recognized position paper, *This We Believe,* discusses the importance of attending to students' social-emotional needs and recognizing the unique developmental level of young adolescents (AMLE, 2010). This position is supported by current research that indicates although the social-emotional needs of students are an important factor to consider, many schools are still not addressing those needs (Brinegar, 2015; Powell, 2005; Stevenson,

2002). Lack of human resources and knowledge could be a contributing factor to a school's inability to address social-emotional aspects of child development.

Educator roles and responsibilities within the school are often compartmentalized and each person attends to their specific job. For teachers, their focus is presenting curriculum, meeting the academic needs of students, and achieving state standards of growth and proficiency. Social workers in many North Carolina schools are charged with maintaining high attendance rates. School administrators handle student behaviors, discipline, budgets, and day-to-day operations. Each of these groups works directly with students each day, but it is the assumed responsibility of school counselors to specifically address the personal and social-emotional needs of all students within the school.

Appendix A outlines details on the complex role of the middle school counselor (ASCA, 2017). With a national average of 482 students per school counselor and approximately 30% of schools in the United States having no counselor, effectively meeting the mental health and social-emotional needs of all students during this crucial period of development can prove to be a daunting task for school counselors (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). It is then the responsibility of all educators and school staff members, not just school counselors, to understand and address the social-emotional needs of students. Creating research-based transition plans as part of a comprehensive school counseling program (or school programming for those with no school counselor) is part of the solution for schools and students alike.

Research

Research Problem Statement & Rationale

As a school counselor, I am "trained in child and adolescent development, learning strategies, self-management and social skills" (ASCA, 2017). My role is to use that specialized training to meet the academic, personal, and social-emotional needs of all students. While working as a counselor, I have observed that schools strive to put plans in place that meet the academic needs of all students. Schools utilize small groups, tutoring, exceptional children services and teachers, school psychologists, one-on-one assistants, classroom assistants, and school counselors to meet these needs. Schedules and activities are strategically planned around protecting valuable class time. Teachers and administrators are trained to use systemic structures, curriculum, and classroom management tools to help these students achieve academic growth and proficiency on standardized tests.

Regardless of the plans and strategies utilized, a common problem in schools across the country is the inability of students to meet academic growth and proficiency standards and the school's inability to effectively support students in this endeavor. A report from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that math scores have been stagnant since 2009 and reading scores have not improved in over 20 years (NAEP, 2019; Singer, 2017; Wexler, 2018). Over the past two decades schools have implemented systemic plans like Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to address the academic needs of students and overall low or stagnant test scores (Benner, Kutash, Nelson & Fisher, 2013; Bradley, Danielson, Doolittle, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Mahoney, 2020). In past years, RTI was intended to identify students who were struggling academically due to learning deficits. The current program being used in schools, MTSS,

considers both the learning and behavior deficits that lead to gaps in achievement. Despite the implementation of these systemic supports, schools still struggle to meet the academic standards set forth by state governments. These gaps in learning are problematic and lead to the questions: What are schools missing? What aspects of child development are not being adequately addressed by these programs?

Using my personal experience and past research on child development, I propose that a key issue is that schools are failing to adequately address one of the most crucial times in a child's life. Programs such as MTSS help identify students who are not meeting their academic, behavior, and attendance goals, but that is only once the student is enrolled at the school. MTSS and other school programs do not address the critical time when students transition from one school to another, specifically elementary to middle school. Since the MTSS process can span from two to four years for a student, there can be a disconnect that occurs when a student changes schools and important knowledge about a student's current level of functioning or need for MTSS protocols can be missed (Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Snyder & Holtzman, 2015).

Figure 1 was created using my knowledge of middle-to-high school outcomes for students who fail to successfully transition. The figure illustrates a possible cause of the inability of schools to meet academic, behavior, and attendance goals despite the use of programming such as MTSS and other evidence-based practices. The problem cannot be hidden under the umbrella of poor transition plans or the need for written plans. Challenging transitions are also not a shortcoming on the part of teachers, administrators, or counselors. Unsuccessful transitions cannot be blamed on a lack of intentional transition planning. The problem must be viewed through a more comprehensive lens that considers how all aspects

of school systems and student development work together to aid or inhibit student success in school.

Transition plans that do not adequately prepare students to meet the academic rigors, developmental changes, personal challenges, and social-emotional stresses that arise upon entering adolescence may be a contributing cause to students' academic failures. For students who enter middle school feeling underprepared and without the necessary self-efficacy skills, they may find the rigorous curriculum, personal and physical changes, and social-emotional stresses insurmountable. Failure to meet the challenges they face can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety which in turn negatively affect academic outcomes (see Figure 17 in chapter six for further details).

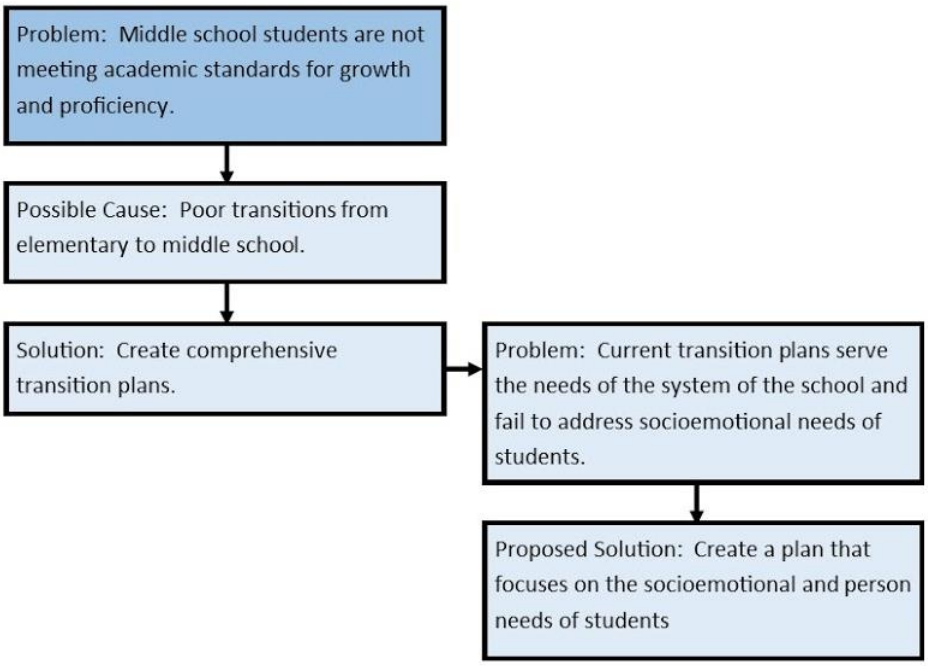


Figure 1. Flow chart of proposed problems and solutions to transition planning.

Research Purpose and Goals

Continued research in middle grades education is crucial to addressing the needs of children who are undergoing "rapid and profound personal changes" while attempting to meet the demands of schools, adults, and peers (AMLE, 2010, p. 5). It is the responsibility of schools to aid children during this challenging period of human development by providing an education that prepares students not only for college and careers, but to be productive and responsible citizens who are able to contribute to society to the best of their ability. At times schools may find it difficult to address all the needs of students because at this developmental level, students of the same chronological age can experience very different levels of "intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral" growth (AMLE, 2010, p. 6). The focus of schools is often primarily academic and meeting each student's individual academic needs is often a challenge for understaffed and underfunded schools. Schools that feel the pressure of large class sizes and increased attention to test scores/achievement rates search for creative ways to meet social, emotional, and moral student needs without losing valuable instructional time.

One tool that schools have explored to meet all areas of student development is the use of participatory action research (PAR). Analysis of PAR projects provides promising data that indicates this method could be an effective intervention with youth in schools that addresses academic, personal, and social-emotional needs of students (Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, & Kirshner, 2015; Levy, Cook & Emdin, 2019; Lewis, 2004; Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010;). Recent research suggests school counselors should integrate youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects into their comprehensive school counseling programs (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012). Adding YPAR projects to

the comprehensive school counseling program could be a solution for schools that seek to address all areas of student growth, development, and achievement. The use of YPAR to develop a comprehensive transition plan met a primary goal of this research.

Using YPAR methods research as a foundation for this project, the primary purpose of this research was to understand student perceptions of the elementary-to-middle school transition and using the data collected, work with middle grades students to create a transition plan that addresses academic, personal, social-emotional needs of students as well as the systemic needs of the school. A secondary purpose of this project was to discover students' understanding about themselves and who they are as middle school students. Personally, I wanted to know if students understood how self-efficacy, self-advocacy, motivation, and resilience affected their ability to transition successfully (although that was not a major purpose of the study). Noting and recording this information and how it applies to middle school transition programs serves the purpose of conducting future research and could potentially play a role in creating a school culture that cultivates those skills.

This research accomplished several intellectual, personal, and practical goals that contributed to my development as an educator, the school, and local community. Through the research process, I achieved a personal goal of learning more about the needs of middle school students. Using this knowledge, I can have a greater impact on students who are in a crucial stage of physical, mental, and emotional development. YPAR research indicates that students who participate as research participants in these projects also achieve intellectual, personal, and practical goals. Current research shows that student research participants develop critical decision-making, problem solving, and self-efficacy skills (Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Smith, Davis & Bhowmik, 2010). In addition,

students feel a sense of empowerment, autonomy, and increased motivation to perform in school. Their perceived sense of adult support leads to more positive attitudes toward their own education (Ozer, 2017; Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Pintrich, 1999; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Many of the students who participated in this project (see chapter 3 for full list of participants) showed development in the areas of autonomy, self-efficacy, and decision-making skills. Since this project is time-limited, it is not my intention to report full findings of student development although they may be explored in future research. The impact of this research on the school is evident and some teachers have expressed the outcomes they have seen on individual students. Again, the intention of this research is not to determine overall impact on the school community, but the integrative nature of YPAR and the dual role of counselor/researcher means that the impact of the research on the school community cannot be overlooked. The secondary findings produced from the research on the impact of YPAR on the school community are also being considered for further research.

Role of the school counselor. School counselors are responsible for creating "comprehensive programs that optimize student success" in the areas of academics, social-emotional learning and college and career planning (ASCA, 2019). Daily activities that effective school counselors engage in include: individual student planning; interpretation of tests; attendance and behavior counseling; social-emotional counseling; interpreting and analyzing student data; advocating for students with special needs and abilities; and collaborating with administration and teachers to provide effective classroom management strategies (ASCA, 2019). School counselors are essential members of a school's administrative team and many times serve as a link between students and administrators, community resources, and teachers. According to data from ASCA (2019), school

counselors provide early identification of students at-risk and evidence-based, short-term interventions for students which lead to improved behavior, improved academic outcomes for all students including those with special learning needs, higher graduation rates, and a higher likelihood of enrolling in college (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Berger, 2013; Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

The specialized training of school counselors makes them ideal candidates for planning and implementing student-centered, comprehensive transition programs. Their knowledge and expertise in the area of human development provides an ideal foundation for creating programs that meet the needs social-emotional needs of students as the transition into middle school. They are equipped to analyze data for incoming students and create specialized plans that promote the development of self-efficacy, resilience, and motivation among young adolescents. The possible implications of creating plans that focus on the development of these and other social-emotional skills, as opposed to academics or policies and procedures, is that students will show improved behavior, attendance, and academic outcomes.

Research Questions

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that researchers select research questions by examining their daily lives and thinking of questions they have about experiences and observations. Prior to creating questions and conducting in-depth research, I spent hours reflecting on and journaling my experiences as a new middle school counselor. It is my responsibility to plan transition activities for incoming fifth grade students. My first year at the middle school, I was told to organize a tour for students in the spring. This activity did not seem like an effective way to address all the needs I assumed students would have when

coming to middle school. I began the research process by reading articles about middle school transition programs. The information gathered did not give me much more insight than what I had already received from the teachers at the school. Further reflection on human development theories, current readings about student transitions, and my personal experiences helped me compose the following questions:

- What factors contribute to a successful transition?
- Why do some students transition well while others do not?
- What are protective and mitigating factors that affect a students' transition process?
- How do middle school students experience the transition process from elementary to middle school?
- How do my experiences affect how I view my role as a school counselor working with students during the transition period?

Since these questions are theoretical in nature and constitute a wide scope of interests pertaining to middle school students, they were analyzed and revised several times. I considered my desire to achieve personal and professional goals, implement a YPAR project in my school community, and contribute to current literature. The final research questions were narrowed down to the following:

- What assumptions do sixth grade students make about middle school based on their initial experiences?
- How do middle school students believe their transition into middle school could be improved?
- What types of initial experiences/activities do students believe they need to be successful throughout middle school?

Significance of the Study

This study addressed a significant problem faced by many practitioners of middle grades education. The transition from elementary to middle school is difficult for both students and educators alike. Research in this area varies in scope, and there is currently no definitive research that outlines proven best practices for creating transition programs that attend to the varying needs of young adolescents. Several studies give suggestions for transition plan activities, yet these studies address the systems of the school and not the developmental needs of students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004). Gaps in the research indicate that more studies about the effectiveness of transition programs using theories of child development combined with educational theories of middle schools need to be conducted (Cahill, 2007; Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Smith, Beck, Bernstein & Dashtguard, 2014).

This research study addressed the gaps in current middle school transition research. A transition program using research-based theories of child development and school transitions was created. An evidence-based rubric was also created to determine the potential benefits of each selected transition activity. This research was unique in that it used YPAR methods to collect data and allowed students to contribute as participants who explored the perceptions of other students. The significance of the decision to use students as research participants to explore student perceptions addressed the developmental needs of preadolescents for establishing autonomy and independence. Much of the current research about transitions is from the perspective of adults in the lives of children. Allowing the students to conduct the research and create the transition plan promoted “the growth of young adolescents as scholars, democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient

young people who are optimistic about their future" (AMLE, 2010, p. 10). Although this project was conducted by a small sample of students from one school, the project can easily be duplicated and used by middle schools throughout North Carolina and therefore have long-term, far-reaching effects.

This research project addressed several pertinent questions (in addition to the stated research questions) about the elementary-to-middle school transition period. Despite the multitude of information gathered, the overarching purpose of this project was to create an opportunity for students to act as agents of change in their school community through a YPAR project. Using YPAR as a qualitative research method to understand the experiences of students provided valuable knowledge to significant adults about the desires, anxieties, challenges, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, and abilities of young adolescents as they transition. This information gathered and analyzed by students was used to create a research-based comprehensive transition plan, a rubric for plan evaluation, has been shared with key stakeholders and will be used to make systemic changes to the school and future transition programs.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Aside from answering the research questions presented earlier in this chapter, this dissertation serves three purposes. First and foremost, it serves as a vehicle for students to express their opinions on middle school and give voice to their lived experiences. It gives them an opportunity to be heard and share their voices with a larger community. As Brittany Spears (2002) says, these students are "not a girl, not yet a woman." Speaking to the entire population of Mountain Middle School, the students are no longer children and not yet adults. They are caught in the awkward middle where they still value relationships with

adults; but they also seek out meaningful connections with peers. They need guidance to grow and mature, but often rely on their own lived experiences or the experiences of their friends to make important life decisions. Literature that addresses student perspectives exists, but literature that speaks directly to the lived experiences of sixth grade students using their own voice as they navigate middle school is lacking. At the conclusion of this dissertation, the reader should have a greater knowledge and vision of what middle school is like for students in 2020. The reader should also understand what concerns are most prevalent for students according to their stories.

Second, this dissertation serves as a practical guide for middle school educators who are charged with planning student transitions from elementary to middle school. Using the relevant literature concerning the developmental changes middle school students face, a written transition plan was created. To determine the adherence to relevant research and literature on transition plans, a rubric was created to evaluate each transition plan activity. Future research will determine if the plan and rubric are effective tools for students as they enter middle school.

The third purpose of this dissertation is to describe the use of youth participatory action research as a component of a comprehensive school counseling plan. YPAR research posits that this methodology may be effective to use with young adolescents and suggests school counselors integrate YPAR projects into their practice.

These three purposes are accomplished through a non-traditional dissertation format. Each chapter serves a distinct purpose to guide the reader to an understanding of the significance of the study, how the study was implemented and can be improved, and provide practical tools to assist in transition programming. Figure 2 illustrates the initial planning

and processes used to determine major purposes of the research and best practices for implementing the research study. The outline below gives an overview of each chapter.

- Chapter one provides an overview of the study, the research problem statement and goals, and research questions. It also addresses the significance and importance of this research for the field of middle school research and its practical use for educators.
- Chapter two explores relevant literature on the constructivist paradigm, the history of middle school, gaps in research and transition planning.
- Chapter three explains the theoretical design of youth participatory action research using photovoice as a data collection tool. The chapter provides insights to the selection of the research site and selection of participants. It addresses how validity and trustworthiness were explored to maintain the integrity of this study.
- Chapter four was specifically written to aid current education practitioners in implementing this type of programming at their school. It is written with the intention of providing step-by-step instructions of how to gather data, analyze that data, draw conclusions, and create plans based on the needs of students. This chapter also provides researcher reflection to aid educators as they make decisions for working with their specific populations. The guidelines should be easily replicated at any school and using the reflection should assist with making choices for how to implement each step effectively.
- Chapter five begins with a discussion of the results from the study. Results were analyzed first by myself, the researcher, and then independently by students. After each independent analysis of the data, I worked with the students to make

determinations about a key challenge faced by sixth grade students. The second half of chapter five provides practical recommendations for school counselors, middle schools, and transition plans. A sample of a written transition plan is included.

- Chapter six looks back on the research process and provides a reflection of how child development theories can be used to make changes in a school. It discusses limitations of the current research and provides implications for future research. This chapter also delves into my personal reflections on the dissertation and research experience.

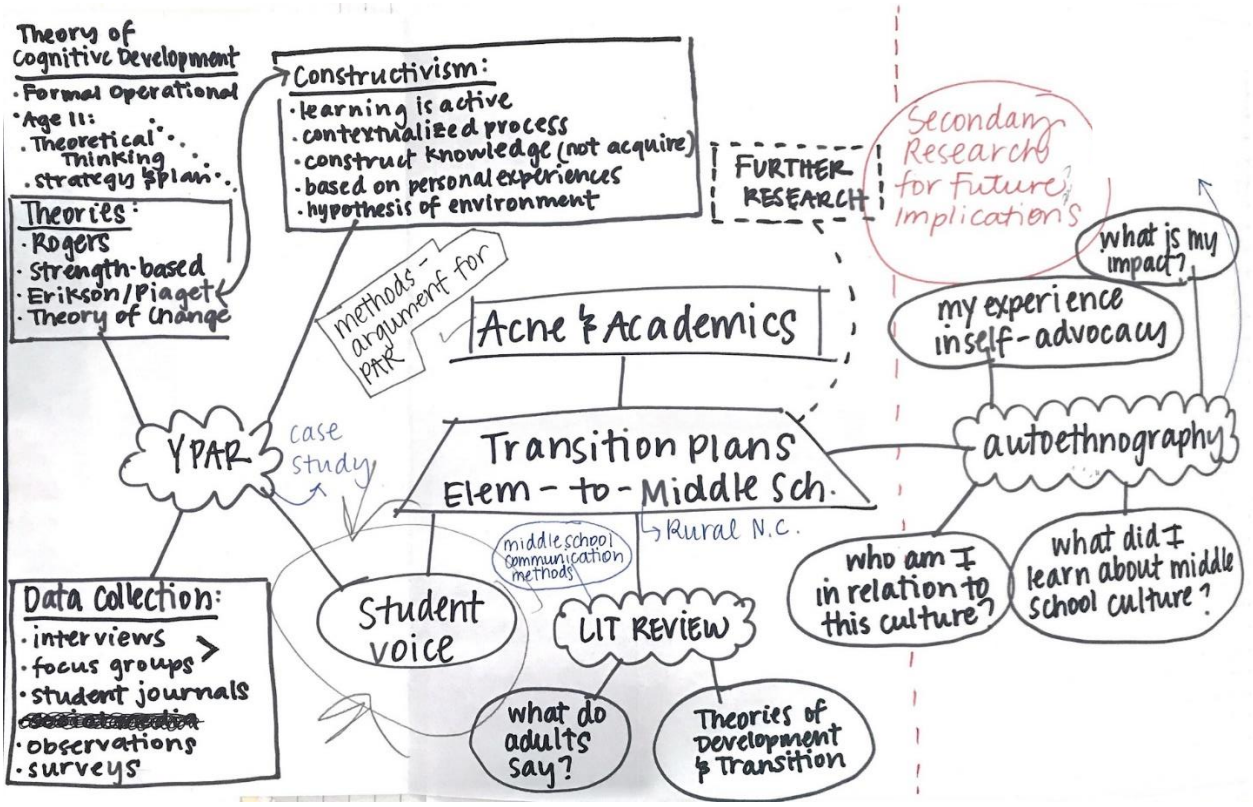


Figure 2. Original road map created spring 2018 prior to dissertation research.

CHAPTER 2: WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

How it is we have so much information, but know so little?
~Noam Chomsky

Background Experience

I have worked as a middle school counselor in rural North Carolina for almost two years. During that time, I have formed several notions about young adolescent human development and the nature of schools. Prior knowledge of human development theories and observations from eleven years total working in school systems informed these opinions. The empirical evidence gathered over the past year led me to question the effectiveness of elementary-to-middle school transitions programs. As the sixth-grade counselor, I have observed that incoming students were prepared to locate classes, open a locker, communicate via email, and walk on the right side of the hall. They seemed prepared to navigate the day-to-day life of middle school. Through conversation with students and teachers, I concluded that although students are capable of following procedures, many were uncomfortable in a new environment, displayed poor social skills, and presented with anxiety across settings. The students lack the ability to communicate their needs with adults in the building and struggle with overcoming adversity. Motivation to complete assignments and work toward achieving goals is also noted as a deficiency among sixth grade students. Notes from counseling sessions and student surveys show that anxiety, depression, and peer relationships were among the top five concerns for students. Overall students struggle with the social and emotional ramifications of their changing bodies, brains, and friends. Watching students struggle with the same issues on a daily basis and noting their inability to cope with these instances led me to ask, “What is missing as students enter sixth

grade?" Three key research questions were developed based on these observations and experiences. They include:

- Why do students excel in certain areas of sixth grade and find difficulty in others?
- Why do some students seem so well-adjusted in all areas of development while others are not able to properly adjust?
- Are schools falling short in adequately preparing students for the most significant transitions of their young lives?

I concluded that many students show deficits in social emotional development and learning. If this is the case, what then can schools do to improve student outcomes in this area? The solution must be far-reaching and comprehensive in nature so that all students' needs are met (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016). After all, meeting the needs of *all* students is generally the goal of schools. Jackson and Davis (2000) make intentional use of the word *all* when talking about the students in a school. The verbiage here is important because when educators think of *every* student, they may be more inclined to think of students in a collective rather than an individual manner. Young adolescents are in the identify formation stage (Erikson) and to group students into certain categories instead of viewing them as individuals with unique needs put educators at a disadvantage for reaching all students.

Research into middle school transitions supports my observation that schools do an adequate job of preparing students for the day-to-day processes of the middle school (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016). Schools fail to provide the necessary resources to prepare students to effectively cope with the social and emotional challenges they face upon entrance into the middle school. Since teachers focus on curriculum and

counselors focus on smaller groups of students, then it would stand to reason that a collaborative effort between all members of a school's faculty is needed to create effective transition plans that improve academic, personal, and social emotional outcomes. This collaborative effort seems like such a simple solution, but schools across the country have fallen short for many years in creating comprehensive transition plans.

Theoretical Traditions and Framework

To address the multiple facets of this time period in a child's life, I created a conceptual framework using key theories of human development and widely accepted position statements on middle schools. I will focus on writings and theories by social emotional and behavioral theorists like Erikson (1950), Piaget (1920), Bandura (1986, 1993), and Maslow (1943) to give an overall understanding of students and their psychological and social emotional needs during pre-adolescence. Theories of child development as applied to transition periods in a child's life will support the constructivist paradigm that knowledge is constructed based on individual experiences and unique world views. Several social theories will also be considered as environmental and systemic processes affect a students' ability to successfully transition, not simply from one grade to the next or academically, but personally and socially as well. Figure 3 illustrates two ways in which I plan to utilize the constructivist paradigm to create a framework for understanding elementary-to-middle school transitions.

Constructivist Theory

Constructivism developed in the 1970s from the interpretivist paradigm and recently has gained popularity in teaching and learning research in the western part of the world (Adom, Yeboah & Ankrah, 2016; Hau Liu & Matthews, 2005). It is often referred to as both a theory and a paradigm and derives key concepts from the work of Jean Piaget and Lev

Vygotsky (Hau Liu & Matthews, 2005; Meyer, D. L., 2009). Constructivism as a method of learning is highly social in nature and is dependent on learners' active participation (Phillips, 1995). Unlike the behaviorist and information-processing approaches to learning, constructivism takes an open-ended stance and lends itself to the social and interactive contexts of educational settings (Akpan & Beard, 2016; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Hau Liu & Matthews, 2005; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005).

Constructivism allows for the construction of knowledge by individuals based on their own experiences. Individuals must also actively reflect on their experience as a part of knowledge creation (Cashman et al., 2008; Hein, 1991; Honebein, 1996). Creation of knowledge cannot stop at the experience itself; the person must reflect and analyze the experience to create knowledge about a subject. Constructivist theory posits that a person must use their past experiences to create a framework for the new experience. Once a person is able to frame a new experience using old knowledge, new knowledge is created. The old and new experiences then coexist in a person's mind. In the case that old and new experiences are contradictory, a person may use a combination of the old and new to change their perceptions of the world (Adom, Yeboah & Ankrah, 2016; Kim, 2005).

At one of the most rapidly changing times in the phases of human development, young adolescents begin thinking hypothetically, abstractly, and reasoning logically. Piaget (1920) refers to this development phase as the formal operational stage of development (Wadsworth, 1984). Erikson (1950) defines this stage as identity formation vs. role confusion. During this phase, both theorists agree that young adolescents can construct their own knowledge based on experiences rather than acquire it. They use their experiences to think in theoretical terms and form schema from which they create frameworks of

understanding. Using schema to organize and code information, pre-adolescents begin to create hypotheses about life (Swafford & Bryan, 2000; Wadsworth, 1984). Although experiences at this age are sometimes limited, students use information from their home and school environment to navigate the tumultuous years between the ages of 10 to 15 (Armstrong & Elkind, 2006).

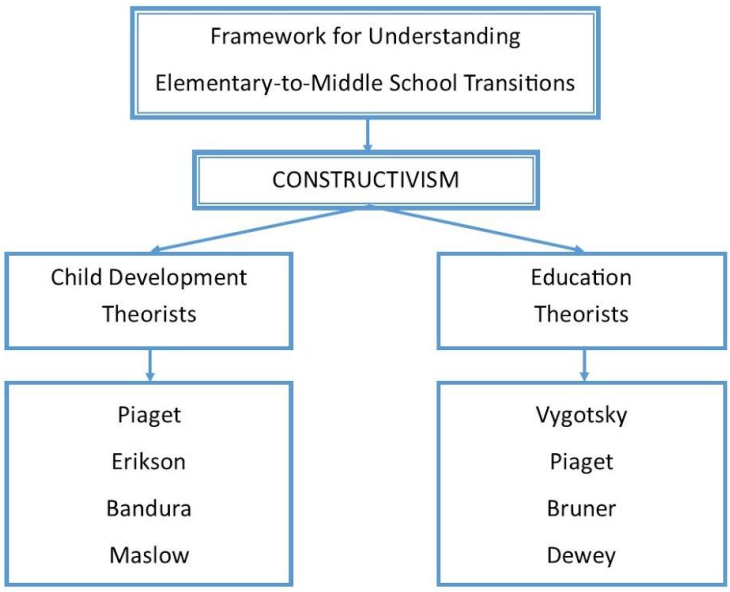


Figure 3. Visual depiction of the conceptual framework for this study. Major contributors to social emotional and education theories as a part of the constructivist paradigm used to create a framework for understanding elementary-to-middle school transitions.

Information about middle school culture from the widely accepted position statement developed by the Association for Middle Level Education, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010) was referenced. Originally published in 1995, this seminal work provides research-based best practices for creating middle school cultures where students and their strengths are the focal point of daily activity. *This We Believe*

provides educators with social emotional and academic theory to guide their practices in developing effective middle schools that nurture student success.

Constructivism in education. Constructivism is an overarching paradigm that encompasses both educational and social theories. Combining ideas from prominent theorists in these two areas help educators create a more robust understanding of the middle school mind and are thus able to create curriculum that leads to successful students. Bobu (2014) states that constructivism is not only a philosophy of learning but is also a philosophy that "teaches young people how to plan their lives in an organized manner" (p. 256). Bobu's (2014) statement emphasizes the importance of the educator in a student's life because the educator does play an influential role in teaching children how to succeed in their personal, social, and ultimately professional lives. Constructivists theorists do not ascribe to the idea that a teacher stands in front of a classroom and dispenses knowledge. Instead, they believe that learning occurs only when the learner discovers the knowledge through the spirit of experimentation and doing (Kalender, 2007). Project-based learning that allows for independent thought and discovery of new ideas is one example of constructivism in education.

Educators who use constructivism as a paradigm guide decision making and develop programs using their beliefs and the beliefs of students. These beliefs act as a catalyst for learning, whether those beliefs are correct or not. In the constructivist paradigm, knowledge is viewed by educators as dynamic and ever-changing. The ability to explore the world and change how we view it is a crucial key to learning. Learning is also seen as an active process and places the responsibility of learning on the students. Giving students control of their own learning experience creates a sense of autonomy that is crucial for the development of higher-

order thinking and problem-solving skills. Development of these types of skills is meaningful for middle school students as their psychosocial developmental levels insist upon the use of abstract thinking and hypothetical reasoning.

Students informally learn a great deal about psychosocial development through their interactions with peers and adults in a school. They learn about systems and how to function within them. This learning is all done with little to no formal planning. Although schools only have a brief window of time to influence the psychosocial development of students, that does not mean they should leave this form of development to chance. If we, as schools, carefully planned psychosocial development activities in schools and carefully consider teaching students how to cognitively adjust or adapt in any given social situation, then could we potentially maximize a students' talents and abilities (Cross & Cross, 2017; Kohn, 1999)? A careful look at Maslow's Hierarchy shows that in order for children to be successful and reach their full potential, they must first have their physiological (food, water, shelter, safety) and psychological (relationships, friendships, feelings of accomplishment) met (Gobin, et al., 2012). Gobin, et al (2012) also propose that "proper education systems should help the students to reach the very peak of the hierarchy" (p. 204) and question if the education system is able to provide children with the tools to develop into self-actualized adults (Gobin, et al., 2012). Schools are charged with this task, and it is their responsibility to "create a safe, respectful learning environment whereby young adolescents can maximize personal and academic achievement" (ASCA, 2018).

History of Middle School

Depending on the source, some authors indicate that research focusing on middle school students is abundant. Others indicate that the literature is lacking. It is my belief that

there was a surge in middle school literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the seminal document *This We Believe* was published by the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly known as National Middle School Association, which led to the development of what is defined as a "true" middle school. Prior to the release of the AMLE document, many middle schools functioned as small high schools or junior high. Schedules and classes were designed in a similar fashion to high schools. Student expectations at the junior high level are more appropriate for 14-18-year-olds as opposed to the developing minds of 11-13-year-olds. The middle school model described in *This We Believe* provides school structures meant to nurture and develop young minds in developmentally appropriate ways. Middle schools generally serve no more than three grade levels, usually 6-8. Students are departmentalized in teams, which sometimes function as family units within the school, according to grade. Mentor programs and student advocates are readily available to assist with student needs. Students are viewed as active participants in their education and are encouraged to serve in a variety of leadership roles (AMLE, 2010).

There was a second surge in literature in the early 2000s as the United States saw rapid developments in technology which led to changes in how young adolescents interacted with and understood the world around them. Jackson and Davis (2000) wrote that effective middle schools exhibit certain characteristics. Middle schools should have high expectations and standards for students. Placing high expectations on students allows students to grow in an equitable environment. When all students are given high expectations of achievement, the school meets the student where they are and aids them in rising as high as they are able. Students are not all expected to achieve at the same level; instead, they are expected to

achieve at their highest level. Schools that place such standards on students are seen as schools of excellence.

Jackson and Davis (2000) also emphasize the importance of creating learning communities within the school. These learning communities establish a sense of cohesion among staff members which is then evident to students. When teachers model collaborative communication in their own work, students are much more likely to understand how effective communication strategies enable success for everyone.

A final component of excellent middle schools is a strong partnership with families and the community. As the adage goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Young adolescence is a time when many students attempt to develop independence and assert a sense of authority over their own lives. Students need to be given the freedom and encouragement to form their own unique identity while in middle school. Schools walk a fine line between allowing independence and social development of students and alienation of parents. Parental involvement that includes an encouraging home environment with high expectations is the most accurate predictor of student success (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The involvement of parents in a child's education is more likely to determine achievement than socioeconomic status. It is therefore imperative that schools continue to provide opportunities for parents to be involved with the school and in the lives of their children.

Role of middle schools. Understanding the social emotional processes that students undergo during their middle school years does not provide the full picture of how students can experience a successful transition. It is crucial that we also understand theories of middle school education. *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010) and *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (2000) are two seminal

works that provide a comprehensive overview of the middle school model and how implementation of this model aides in successful development during middle school for pre- and young adolescents. These middle school models are based on theories of human development and account for the complex nature of adolescents.

Middle schools were introduced in the 1960s (AMLE, 2010) to address the specific developmental needs of early and middle adolescents (children ages 10-15) during a "period of vague, but real rights and obligations of its own" (Simmons & Blythe, 1987, p. xi). During this developmental stage, children are caught between dependency on critical adults in their lives and the need to establish independence and although "they are generally eager for more independence and autonomy...they may not be ready to navigate its more complex environment" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The establishment of independence for early adolescents comes with pressures from peers and requires complex navigation of relationships. Each of those relationships comes with an obligation to those involved and occasionally those obligations conflict with one another. During a time of such intense social emotional and personal changes, students are asked to remain focused solely on academics and appropriate school behaviors which can be a daunting task that leads to increased feelings of anxiety.

Middle schools should be more than buildings where students learn reading, writing, and algebra. They should be sacred centers that create lifelong learners using evidence-based curriculum and pedagogy that addresses the developmental readiness, needs and interests of youth. Promoting the intellectual and emotional growth of 10- to 15-year-olds means developing the love of learning; igniting a passion for curiosity and truth; and engaging questioning minds through critical thinking and problem solving (AMLE, 2010; Jackson &

Davis, 2000). Middle schools should cultivate growth in young adults by combining theories of human development and education theories to create programs aimed at student needs and interests. Educators must recognize that children are complex beings whose academic, psychological, intellectual, and social-emotional learning are interdependent on one another. Success or failure in one area can lead to the success or failure of the other areas.

The Association for Middle Level Education (2010) states that middle schools should be: developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable. All these attributes are possible to achieve when school administrators and teachers work together with the common goal of guiding children toward success. Characteristics of middle schools should include organization of common learning communities, partnering with communities and families, and setting high standards for equity and excellence. Middle schools should be primarily led by administrators and teachers who have a direct role in the education of students (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Although possible, creating a middle school with these four attributes is not without its own challenges. Today's middle schools must keep up with the changing world. Young adults face challenges that adults would not have considered even ten years ago. Creating schools that nurture learners, develop leadership schools, and teach students to maintain a positive outlook are key to student success. It is the responsibility of the adults in the school to create a culture where students can envision themselves as leaders and believe that success is possible. Continually asking ourselves, "What is our ultimate purpose?" and actively reflecting on that question is the first step to successfully moving students from childhood to adulthood.

Child Development

Human beings are innately complex. Biologists, physiologists, psychologists and other researchers have spent hundreds of years studying the complex nature of humans, yet we still do not fully understand how humans work. Although there is a basic understanding of the human body and mind and how they function, each individual is so uniquely different that no single theory or human development can accurately portray why and how humans function. Siblings from the same biological mother and father who have similar DNA and are raised in a similar environment can have completely different body mass, can be predisposed to different genetic disorders and can struggle with different mental health issues. One sibling may become a doctor while the other suffers from alcoholism. One may be a successful educator and the other a violent criminal.

In addition to biological and psychological factors, our environments also play a role in how we function as humans (Pajares, 1996). Environmental factors range from social and economic influences to household characteristics, nutrition, and the physical environment (Schell, Gallo & Ravenscroft, 2009). Scientific research indicates that children in households who do not experience physical touch develop at a slower rate than typical. Pregnant women with a low socioeconomic status have higher rates of pregnancy-related complications. Children in abusive families suffer severe neurological and psychological damage (Bellis, Keshavan, Clark, Casey, Giedd, Boring, Frustaci, & Ryan, 1999; Perry, 2001).

If social and emotional theories of human development are generalizable and true, why do some people with adverse child experiences lead successful adult lives while others from more privileged backgrounds do not? Researchers and scientists can theorize why this

might be, but the truth of the matter is that each individual is unique. Also unique to everyone is how they construct knowledge of the world based on those experiences.

Although social theories of adolescent development remained constant over the past 70 years, our rapidly changing world and the effects of those changes on young adolescents quickly renders the most current research on middle grades students obsolete. Research about students during this stage of life has continued relevance. Perhaps of even greater importance is the need to explore the unique perspectives of middle school students as they make these transitions during this critical stage of development. The importance of understanding the perspectives of middle school students as they transition from elementary to middle school is an integral part of creating a culture of students who are able to adapt, mature, and function successfully in school.

Middle school students. Scientific research indicates that students in the pre-adolescent stage of life face hormonal, physical, and identity changes (Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Feldman & Elliott, 1990). They develop new ways of seeing themselves and are also more self-aware and self-reflective. It is generally understood that young adolescents have developing brains. The exact science and understanding of the adolescent brain is a new area of science and a full understanding of what students are actually capable of must still be explored. MRI studies of the brain show that young adolescents should show improvement in executive functioning, or their capacity to control and coordinate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as processing speed, working memory, prospective memory, and decision making (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1993; Berthelsen, Hayes, White, Williams, 2017; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Pajares, 1996). Although brain scans of middle grade students show development in these areas, they still fall short in areas such as

multitasking. Very little research has been done in the area of adolescence on social cognitive development, which could explain the ineptness in areas like multitasking. (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

Keeping in mind that educators often place high expectations on middle school students, educators must also consider that research in pre-adolescent brain development and social cognition are relatively new fields of study. We use general knowledge of children during this stage in life to create our expectations of their capabilities. Those expectations are also created based on the type of young adults we believe those students can become. There are expectations that they can handle all social situations and maintain high grades while their bodies and brains are going through one of the most significant transitional periods experienced by humans. It is expected that their decisions are rational, well-thought out and logical. Sometimes we forget their pre-frontal cortex, which controls impulses and decision making, will not be fully developed for another ten or more years (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Johnson, Blum & Giedd, 2010). We expect higher-order, abstract thinking, but we fail to recognize that these skills take time and practice. Occasionally educators dismiss the fact that many students do not have the life experience or proper role models to aid in the development of these skills.

As a counselor, I tell my students that they will experience body, brain and friend changes. Students must therefore "train their brain." Similar to the way that students learn multiplication facts through practice and memorization, they must also practice social emotional learning skills and train their brains to think in ways that will benefit them emotionally. Practicing social emotional skills can be a difficult task for most adults whose brains are fully developed to accomplish. How much more difficult is it then for a middle

school student? Students who do not have adults in their homes that can model this behavior are left in turmoil as they attempt to reconcile their rapidly changing emotions, bodies, and friendships. Therefore, it is essential that schools have specially trained faculty and staff to serve as role models and advocates for youth (AMLE, 2010).

Finding Success: Combining Theory and Practice

It could be said that the main goal of any school is to create learners who can transfer knowledge and skills beyond the classroom (Kohn, 1999; Prawat, 1989). Schools are in the business of developing students emotional, social and cognitive abilities to create lifelong learners who are engaged in their own education. Shum and Crick (2012) believe when learners are strong in the areas of knowledge, skills and dispositions, they are most likely to be college and career ready. Bandura (1986) along with other major theorists posit that knowledge and skills are poor predictors of future outcomes because a students' belief about their abilities is a more powerful predictor of student success. Young adolescents are at the stage where they can begin using prior experiences to construct knowledge and new beliefs. Behavioral theories suggest that people filter knowledge based on beliefs about ability and this informs their behaviors in new situations (Pajares, 1996).

Schools have mastered the delivery of knowledge in a variety of forms. Teachers provide content knowledge in key areas and teach students how to apply that knowledge in new situations. Schools are also strong at delivering the skills students need to succeed in life. Beginning in pre-kindergarten, students are taught critical thinking, problem solving, how to work in groups, effective communication, study skills, and time management. What schools fail to teach are dispositions, or social emotional skills and behaviors that are associated with student beliefs about their ability to succeed (Ros-Voseles & Fowler-

Haughey, 2007). Learning dispositions are "habits of the mind" or patterns of behavior that students exhibit without coercion from an adult. They are intentional behaviors developed over time that are used in goal setting and achievement (Katz, 1993). There is an innumerable list of dispositions associated with social emotional learning that must be developed to foster positive self-beliefs about ability including self-efficacy, self-motivation, resilience, and self-advocacy. Table 1 illustrates two key areas currently addressed in schools (knowledge and skills) and a third (dispositions) which is not generally a primary focus of learning. A primary focus of this dissertation was on self-efficacy in regard to its importance during pre-adolescence and the transition into middle school.

Table 1.

Learning Dispositions Chart

	Knowledge	**Skills**	**Dispositions**
Definition	Facts, information, & knowledge gained through experience and education; the practical understanding of a subject.	The ability to do something well; expertise; strategies that allow students to engage in higher order thinking.	Qualities of mind or character; social emotional skills associated with success; habits of mind.
Delivery Method	Common Core Standards Content Knowledge Global Competence Career & Technical Educ	Critical Thinking Problem Solving Communication Collaboration Creativity Time Management	Self-Efficacy Motivation Self-Advocacy Resilience Initiative Adaptability

Note: Information in table collected from Measuring Skills and Dispositions prepared by the Educational Policy Improvement Center, retrieved from https://slideplayer.com/slide/3832616/

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, which is a key component of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, is an individual's judgements of their own capability based on prior life

experience. A person's self-efficacy beliefs influence social skills, academic achievement, behavior, effort, persistence and interest in learning. Studies also indicate that self-efficacy beliefs influence self-concept, anxiety and value (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Although self-efficacy does influence these areas, it is not necessarily a predictor of outcomes. A person's level of self-efficacy may, however, be a predictor of future accomplishments. Some people might have high self-efficacy in the area of academics, but their actual intellectual abilities vary from their beliefs. These people may not perform at the highest academic levels but may experience a sense of accomplishment in areas where they are intellectually weak based on their beliefs about their abilities. Self-efficacy is sometimes confused with self-concept. Self-efficacy is context specific and may be a requisite to self-concept. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but for the purposes of this paper they should not be considered interchangeable (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Graham, 1999; Schunk, 1991; Shoshani & Sloan; Zimmerman, 2000).

Bandura (1986) describes humans as having the unique ability to self-reflect and evaluate their performance and make behavioral decisions and adjustments based on those reflections. Individuals make determinations about their self-efficacy based on past performances and use that information to inform their own predictions of future success. Experiencing or perceiving success at many tasks has been shown to raise self-efficacy while repeated failures lowers a person's self-efficacy (Kohn, 1999).

High self-efficacy. Studies in math and science education show that people with high-self efficacy may be more persistent and display more effort on tasks and therefore they are able to overcome intellectual barriers to learning (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Green, et al., 2006; Kohn, 1999; Pajares, 2003; Schunk, 1991; Usher & Pajares, 2005; Zimmerman,

Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). A person with high-self efficacy who has experienced many successes is not likely to be affected or have lowered efficacy based on one failure (Bandura, 1986). Britner and Pajares (2006) determined that overcoming challenges to achieve success is not the only factor in raising levels of self-efficacy. It is the cognitive processing of these experiences, environmental factors, and previously held beliefs about self that lead to high levels of self-efficacy.

Students acquire personal self-efficacy knowledge both from personal experience and vicariously through the observation of peers. Students are more likely to develop high self-efficacy by experiencing personal success but observing peers' success allows students to understand that they are also capable of the same achievements (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Schunk, 1991). The combination of personal successes and observation of peer success provide students with a framework for developing high levels of self-efficacy.

Low self-efficacy. People with low self-efficacy often believe that tasks are more difficult than they are. This distorted view can lead to depression, anxiety, and limits a student's view on how to solve problems. Often students with low self-efficacy visualize their failures prior to attempting or experiencing a situation. They focus on the things that will go wrong and are likely to avoid tasks that appear challenging (Bandura, 1993; Green, et al, 2006; Kohn, 1999; Pajares, 1996; Shoshani & Sloan, 2013; Schunk, 1991). Schunk (1989) suggests students who have low self-efficacy believe they will have a difficult time comprehending new information.

Sources of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) identified four types of experiences that influence cognitive beliefs, specifically beliefs about self-efficacy. Schunk (1991); Britner & Pajares, (2006); Lane, Lane, & Kyprianou (2004); Bertram and Pascal (2001); and

Zimmerman (2000) echoed Bandura's 1986 research in these four areas to determine how people assess information to form self-efficacy beliefs. Of importance is how the information is processed and not simply the experience of the information. Those four types of experience are:

- *Enactive/mastery experience*s are the most influential of the experiences and are based on personal experiences. These are the most reliable sources of building beliefs about self-efficacy. Students participate in tasks and subsequently interpret and analyze the results to develop beliefs about their abilities. Confidence is raised when students interpret their tasks as successful.
- *Vicarious experiences* depend on self-comparison and can be difficult for pre-adolescents because of self-confidence issues as they navigate their developing bodies and brains. Students should find similar others to form the basis of their comparisons. They use information gathered about other student's successes to make determinations about their own abilities to be successful in similar tasks.
- *Social/Verbal persuasion* have a limited impact because they are based on the child's relationship to the persuader (usually a teacher or parent). Significant adults should participate in positive feedback strategies while determining if the envisioned success is attainable by that student. The role of the persuader is to encourage and empower.
- *Physiological reactions* can be confusing for young adolescents as they sometimes struggle to understand the relationship between the body's

physiological reactions and their psychological state. Perceived negative physiological states such as increased heart rate may lead a student to believe they are anxious and thereby not confident in their ability to complete a task. How students interpret their physiological state is key to determining their self-efficacy beliefs.

Self-efficacy in education. Self-efficacy studies have been conducted in the areas of math, science, and language arts. The overarching consensus among researchers is that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic achievement. Self-efficacy is tied to behavioral and psychological processes such as motivation to achieve academically. Students who place high value on academic outcomes and also believe they are capable of success are motivated to engage in tasks that may be challenging (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Marzano, 2003; Pajares, 1996; Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000). Their perceived abilities match the value they place on the outcomes. According to Pajares (1996), these perceptions give educators a more accurate picture of student motivation and potential achievement than competence. Educators can use this information about intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy to guide their practices. Many schools use extrinsic motivators in conjunction with a student's intrinsic motivators to cultivate a sense of self-efficacy with the aim of improving student achievement.

Research has shown that self-regulated learners who set challenging goals exhibit traits of high self-efficacy. One trait of students with high self-efficacy and self- regulation is the ability to set goals and subsequently evaluate their behaviors through self-reflection. Students who self-reflect on their experiences create beliefs about their abilities. They then use prior knowledge about skills and abilities to alter their behaviors and set

additional goals (Ames & Archer, 1988; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Matinez-Pons, 1992). When a student perceives that they can set a goal and achieving it, they are more motivated to work toward those goals. When combining data gathered from self-efficacy beliefs and goal setting with grades and measures of ability, researchers are able to make more comprehensive predictions about achievement (Zimmerman, 2000).

Students set goals based on their self-efficacy beliefs and outside influences. Parents and teachers have an influence on students and their personal goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). When significant adults set goals for students, it models expected behaviors and allows students to see what they can achieve. When adults set goals for students it teaches them how to set their own personal goals which leads to improved self-efficacy, academic achievement, and increased interest in academic subjects (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Matinez-Pons, 1992). Significant adults need to provide feedback on these goals to sustain progress towards a goal and maintain student motivation (Schunk, 1991). Since students are still developing their self-efficacy beliefs and academic skills, it is essential that adults oversee this process to guide students and encourage them during times of self-doubt.

Self-efficacy and middle school students. Understanding how self-efficacy affects student outcomes is of particular interest as students transition from elementary to middle school. Middle school environments can be large and impersonal, and educational attainment becomes more competitive among students. Combining several elementary schools into one middle school means an increased population with whom students compare themselves. Educators who are aware of how students develop high levels of self-efficacy can better prepare strategies and interventions to assist students in achieving success (Britner & Pajares, 2006).

It is imperative that middle school teachers and administrators understand that children are not simply anxious during the first weeks of school. They lack self-efficacy, or a belief that they can succeed at middle school, because it is a task that they have never faced. Their elementary school experience is so dissimilar in their minds that they do not believe they have prior experiences to draw on. Many students entering middle school have not practiced goal setting either. Coupling a lack of self-efficacy with limited knowledge about goal setting has the potential to leave students feeling that middle school is more difficult than it is. This overwhelming feeling of unpreparedness and uncertainty leads to sadness and depression for many students.

Middle school students experience changes in confidence levels as they are attempting to understand their changing physiological and psychological development. The rates at which students develop are not chronological according to age which can leave less developed students questioning themselves (AMLE, 2010). These changes can lead to a drop in confidence which could potentially affect a student's self-efficacy beliefs. Students who are dependent on vicarious experiences and compare themselves to more developed students are likely to develop feeling of anxiety or uncertainty about their abilities (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Choudhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). It is therefore important for middle schools to limit the focus on grades and competition, rather their focus should be on developing strategies for individual students to experience personal success. Scaffolding math, science, and language arts activities is one strategy teachers can use to meet the individual needs of students.

Students engage in tasks where they feel confident and avoid tasks where they are not confident. Middle school students frequently exhibit a lack of confidence in their abilities.

As a counselor, I tell students entering middle school that lacking confidence is normal because they have never experienced middle school before. They may find it difficult to engage in tasks because it is new for them. They are also at a disadvantage because they are not able to observe peers in their own classes who have successfully navigated middle school. My observations and conversations with incoming fifth grade students indicate that even those with older siblings often have misconstrued ideas of the expectations and realities of middle school. Understanding student needs and using strategies to meet those needs are essential to building beliefs of self-efficacy among middle school students.

Self-efficacy and transition strategies. Although little research has been done in the area of incorporating self-efficacy skills into transition plans for middle school students, the information gathered regarding the correlations between self-efficacy and academic achievement can be used to create strategic and effective activities that encourage the development of self-efficacy skills in young adolescents. Strategies that can be used include:

- Modeling
- Attributional Feedback
- Goal Setting
- Scaffolding
- Rewards Systems

Benefits of incorporating each of these strategies as a part of transition activities are twofold. These strategies aid in teaching self-efficacy skills to incoming students. Although these strategies need to be utilized frequently over time, the introduction of these ideas during transition programming allows students to have a general knowledge of expectations. It also allows them to begin forming their own beliefs about their self-efficacy in regard to middle school success. Second, teachers, counselors, and administrators can observe students' reactions to the activities in these areas. They could make general

determinations about a student's self-efficacy beliefs. Observational data could then be used to develop more specific program planning for students upon entry to the middle school.

Research limitations. Research about self-efficacy and its link to academic success is somewhat limited and conceptual in nature. It can be difficult to prove causality between self-efficacy and academic outcomes, but that does not mean this theoretical view should be excluded from a conceptual framework. Research does support social cognitive theory in the role of self-efficacy, but researchers question whether outcomes affect self-efficacy or self-efficacy affects outcomes (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Pajares, 1996).

Another limitation to the research indicates inconsistencies among findings. Some reports show correlations between vicarious experiences and self-efficacy while others show no relationship between the two. Other studies find the same inconsistencies between self-efficacy beliefs and psychological states, social persuasion, and mastery experiences. In some instances, researchers rank these associations hierarchically to make determinations. The inconsistencies in findings could be attributed to the variety of methodological choices made by researchers. Determining the independent contributions of sources of self-efficacy and the role they play in development of self-efficacy can also make it difficult to accurately predict correlations or causality (Britner & Pajares, 2006).

Future implications for self-efficacy research. Research about self-efficacy is abundant and empirical evidence has proven connections between self-efficacy and academic outcomes (Anderson, Christenson & Sinclair, Lehr, 2004). At this time, the research is still generalized, but Bandura (1986) made determinations that these generalizations can be transferred across domains. Use of generalized theories about self-efficacy to inform future research should be handled cautiously. Practical application in the field of education still

requires further research as the connection between theory and practice has been somewhat slow. Schools seek practical application and strategic interventions, not theories and concepts. The use of self-efficacy strategies and interventions could aid educators in building student competence and confidence (Pajares, 1996).

Identifying the Gaps

Research shows that transition periods, like those faced by young adolescents, are crucial times for students and outcomes of transitions affect "educational outcomes, motivation, functioning and attitudes toward school" (Theriot & Dupper., 2010, p. 206). It is well-known and commonly accepted that students are worried about schedules, lockers and combinations, bullies, school safety, navigating their way through the school, and increased workload. Unfortunately, the literature on students' social emotional needs during transitions is lacking (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004). There is even less current research that explores the students' perceptions about their social-emotional functioning and peer relationships, and how these affect their middle school experiences. The effects of social emotional functioning during the transition period on rates of academic success, attendance, and behavior also require further study.

Continued research in middle grades education is crucial to addressing the needs of children who are undergoing rapid and profound personal changes while attempting to meet the demands of schools, adults, and peers (AMLE, 2010). It is the responsibility of schools to aid children during this challenging period of human development by providing an education that prepares students, not only for college and careers, but to be productive and responsible citizens who are able to contribute to society to the best of their ability. At times schools may find it difficult to address all the needs of students because at this developmental

level, students of the same chronological age can experience very different levels of intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral growth (AMLE, 2010). The focus of schools is primarily academic and meeting each student's individual academic needs is often a challenge for understaffed and underfunded schools. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) indicate that social emotional learning (SEL) should be considered when creating transition plans, but do not provide concrete examples of activities that address these needs. Gilewski & Nunn (2016) echo the need for more social emotional learning during transitions and provide examples of activities and resources, but do not provide a deep insight to the effectiveness of these suggested activities. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) provides an array of resources to aid in the transition process for middle school practitioners; however, many of the resources located on the AMLE website serve the functionality of the school and are also becoming outdated with every new technological advance. These shortcomings in the research literature make it difficult for middle school practitioners who are already working to meet challenging curriculum standards to create effective, comprehensive plans.

Identifying Student Needs

The transition from elementary school to middle school often comes with feelings of anxiety as there is not only a change in the physical school location, but also in school size, peer relationships, academics, and scheduling. To complicate matters, students are also dealing with puberty; social and emotional changes; the need for autonomy; and the development of cognitive skills. These changes take place at varying rates among students and can make navigating peer relationships that much more difficult for students whose cognitive functioning is not fully developed (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield,

1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Rivera, 2005). Schools who are aware of these developmental milestones can take a proactive approach to developing comprehensive transition plans that are sensitive to students' social and emotional needs (Hill & Mobley, 2016). There is a level of cognitive dissonance that occurs for students due to the complex relationship between a young adolescents' developmental stage and the structure of the school. Careful consideration of this conflict allows schools to create transition plans that can effectively meet the needs of students and lead to positive academic outcomes. Recognizing that a student's focus is on their changing body, brain, and friendships as opposed to the policies and procedures of the school is one of the first steps in improving student outcomes.

Planning for the Plan

For students in public school systems, transitions occur at set intervals from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Schools create transition plans that benefit the system and culture of the schools. They even go so far as to address the academic needs of students, but often do not address their personal and social-emotional needs (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004; T. Espy, personal communication, October 17, 2018). Personal experience and observations led me to believe that creating plans to benefit the culture and system of schools is not the ultimate goal of transition plans and those who create them. Transition plans are often created with the intention of assisting students with the transition, but in reality the plans fail to adequately address their social emotional and mental well-being.

Research surrounding school transitions places a focus on the middle-to-high school transition and largely indicates that this is a crucial time for students. A successful transition can lead to future successes; however, students who fail to integrate themselves into the

system often see “an academic decline, an increase in the number of accumulated discipline referrals, and an increase in absences” (Bennett, 2012, p. iv). To counteract unsuccessful transitions, schools create “transition plans” to aid in a students’ acclimation to the school. These plans include orientations, open house events, meet-and-greet nights with teachers, tours of the school, and mentor programs (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McElroy, 2000; Niesen & Wise, 2004). Some schools aim to be creative in their presentation of important information by creating scavenger hunts or using technology and social media to aid in the process and catch students’ attention. Although these plans are well-intentioned and staff at schools spend hours meticulously planning transition events, they often only serve the needs of the school. The underlying goal is to create a successful transition so the systems within the school continue to function in an orderly manner according to policies and procedures (McElroy, 2000) with the hopes that students will achieve academically and behaviorally.

At times, educators are so focused on the transition plan that they fail to see the students behind the plan. The focus is on the well-timed tour; the engaging video; and the perfect answers to the not-so-perfect questions. The transition program should be an event that all other schools can envy. For students to be excited about attending middle school the day must go smoothly. Parents should feel welcome and believe that their students will be safe. After all, there are no fights or bullying in middle school. Nervous, yet happy eleven-year-olds will arrive at school on a warm August day. They will find their way to class without getting lost, successfully open their lockers, go through the lunch line and go home to their parents at the end of the day full of stories about the wonders of middle school. For many educators, if they can have an open house that others envy and a first day of school

where children are exuberant yet exhausted, then we have successfully transitioned students to middle school. Their work is done and now students are ready to be successful learners. If only this were the case. The reality of the situation is that for some students the social emotional transition to middle school lasts the entire first year (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). These particular students are able to adhere to school protocol, but struggle with self-efficacy, motivation, self-advocacy, and resilience.

Planning for the Student

Effective transition plans should be tailored to the needs of the school and include the logistics of daily operations. They should also consider and address the personal and social emotional needs of students as well as academics. If schools are truly student-centered as they claim to be then they recognize that students need more than a tour and a cookie prior to the first day of sixth grade. Students need continued support throughout the first year in a school that cultivates resilient learners with self-efficacy skills that allow them to meet the challenges of middle school and find daily success.

Waiting until the spring prior to a student's entrance into middle school to begin the transition process means waiting too late (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Transitions are processes that occur over periods of time as opposed to a single event. Students need to begin learning self-efficacy and resilience skills as elementary school students. If they can find success as young children, they will be more likely to engage in challenging situations in middle school. Facing their academic and social challenges will be a less daunting task because they know they can be successful. Schools must begin teaching these skills at a young age and spend the fifth grade year intensively engaged in work that leads to confident

young students who are able to overcome challenges and self-advocate when they do not know how to be successful.

MacIver (1990) explains that transition programs should be comprehensive in nature and include multiple, diverse activities. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) echo MacIver and state that effective transition programs with five or more diversified activities are proven to improve attendance, achievement and retention. Bottoms and Young (2008) concluded that effective transition plans include multiple components in four categories (providing information, supporting social success, addressing academic preparation, and collaboration among stakeholders). Examples of activities within these categories are counseling, school tours, summer programs, and parent nights (Akos, 2006; Akos, Lineberry, & Queen, 2013; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Each of these examples pertains to the transition from middle school to high school, but the information is relevant and applicable to the transition experiences from elementary to middle school. Wormeli (2011) suggests that schools consider five mindsets during the elementary-to-middle school transition. These mindsets are: (a) understanding students' concern about belonging, (b) empathizing with students, (c) understanding the characteristics of the age group, (d) focusing on the positive, and (e) building hope. Schools that take these mindsets into consideration when creating transition activities are better able to meet the social emotional needs of incoming students.

Considering student perspectives. Freeman (1983) explains that childhood is a social construct of the modern world. In the tenth century, children were considered small versions of adults. In the seventeenth century there was a cultural shift beginning with upper class families that were assigned a different style of attire to children and eventually led to the social construct of childhood. Children were viewed as innocent, dependent and in need

of formal discipline and structures (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Landsdown (1994) describes children as being undisciplined, immoral and lacking the life experience needed to purposefully and thoughtfully contribute to conversations. The term adolescent was assigned to people who were not viewed as children, but children who were trying to become adults (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Historically, the development of the Children's Rights Movement dates to 1924. At that time, the focus was on the rights of children outside of schools. The declaration, which was adopted by the United Nations, stated that as humans children were to be afforded special rights and protections under the law. The purpose of these rights was to allow them to grow, mature, and develop physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally (Declaration of the Rights of Child, 1959). Although the right to a free and compulsory education was included in the declaration, the rights of children to be active participants in the development of their education has not been considered until recently. The traditional view is that children are dependent on adults, unruly, and undisciplined. They are therefore not able to think or make decisions about their own needs and rights. This assumption has led to children being denied the basic human right of dignity and respect within the school setting (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

In 1972 the National Union of School Students (NUSS) developed a position statement that focused on the liberation of students regarding the organization of the school. Their demands called for freedom of expression through dress, a common room for relaxation, and the publication of school rules which would allow students to participate in the discipline systems of the school. They also requested the increased responsibilities within the school (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). In 1983 Lawrence Stenhouse published a

document outlining the rights of students in schools. His expectation of schools was similar to the NUSS document. He called for respectful treatment of students with the intent of producing students who could contribute to society. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, NUSS students and Stenhouse were more concerned with controlling the social aspects of school and their personal lives within the school than with having input about the curriculum. Students were eager to contribute to their learning processes through the creation of autonomy within the school.

Research that places students at the center of attention and regards their experiences as valid have recently increased (Erickson, et. al, 2008). Schultz and Cook-Sather (2001) came to the same conclusions as researchers in the 1970s. Students want to feel like whole humans with valued opinions while being engaged in school. They are more concerned with the social emotional aspect of school than the curriculum. Canadian researcher, Michael Fullan (1991) asks readers what would happen if educators valued student opinions about their education. In my experience, educators are still not asking students the essential questions needed to create a sense of autonomy in the school. They are not creating a space where students and their opinions are respected.

I would like to know what would happen if we asked the students. Would we see social reform, and would the outcomes be more beneficial to the students and the system as a whole if we considered what they students describe as their needs and desires? Rudduck and Flutter (2010) suggest that "pupils' accounts of their experiences of being a learner in school can lead to changes that enable pupils to feel a stronger sense of commitment to the school and to the task of learning; and commitment can lead to enhanced effort and enhanced levels of attainment" (p. 82). If students feel invested in their own education and educators

promote a sense of autonomy by allowing students to participate in transition program planning, then we may see higher levels of motivation, self-efficacy, self-advocacy and resilience. Although there are still deficits in the development of social cognitive skills among adolescents, social emotional theories indicate that children of this age should be able to show agency and appropriate abstract thinking that would aid in creative solutions to transition program problems.

My initial exploration of this idea while working with middle school students indicates that they are not able to independently plan programming but given tasks that are of interest to them the students are able to perform tasks as assigned. At this stage it is not necessary to outline and detail every specific task but given general instructions the students are able to think creatively and organize their respective responsibilities. For example, one eighth grade student is interested in becoming a fashion designer as a career. He was assigned the task of "dress code fashion show." As the sponsoring adult I gathered the students for the fashion show, but he organized all other aspects. He determined the number of outfits students should bring and what categories of clothing should be displayed. He also made decisions on what clothing items would pass a dress code inspection but were also fashionable and would aid students in feeling comfortable in social settings within the school. As an adult I would not be able to determine what is fashionable or would be socially acceptable among middle school students. This is one example of how student perspective is important when creating effective transition plans that serve the needs of the school and meet the needs of the students.

Areas of student concern. Studies indicates that there are three main areas of student concern during the school transitions (Williamston, 2010. Procedural concerns, or

day-to-day processes, appear to be the most widely covered aspect of transition programs. Program activities that address school procedures are abundant in the literature. Procedural activities are easily replicated and can be implemented by almost any member of a school's staff. These types of activities ensure that daily processes are understood and followed by students. Use of these activities as a part of transition plans primarily serve the function of the school, and often fail to address the social emotional or academic needs of the students. Academic concerns, or schoolwork and teacher expectations, are a second area that is addressed in many transition plans.

Upon entering middle school students see a marked difference in teacher expectations and requirements of schoolwork. Supporting student academic achievement can be a time-consuming part of the transition process, but it is an area in which administrators and teachers are familiar and trained. In many states, an emphasis is placed on student achievement based on test scores. Salary supplements can also be determined by student academic achievement. For these reasons, transition plans place a major emphasis on successful academic transitions. Academic support strategies are also readily available and practical for use in the classroom. Availability and generalizability are two reasons transition plans include the academic aspects.

Social concerns, or peer and teacher relationships, are often neglected even though they comprise the largest number of student concerns. Activities should address school safety, peer relationships, and teacher relationships. Although these are the most common concerns among students, they are the least addressed in transition activities. Creating activities that address the social emotional needs of students requires a collaborative effort. Many of the collaborators are unfamiliar or untrained in social emotional learning strategies.

Very often teachers rely on counselors to cover this information with students. A limitation of this strategy is the overwhelmingly large student-to-counselor ratio in the United States (Carey & Dimmit, 2012). Another limitation is the lack of school counselors or other trained professionals employed at the middle school level. A final limitation is the gap between theory and practice. Theories of child development are readily available, but practitioners want practical activities that are easily implemented in a classroom. These limitations are not challenges that cannot be overcome, and research does provide information about how to address social emotional concerns during the transition process.

Procedural processes. Current literature on transition plans and activities indicate that there are several areas of strength as well as weaknesses in plans being used in the United States (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015; Gilewski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016; Williamston, 2010; Wormelli, 2011). Overall researchers agree that school visits, meetings, summer programs, parental involvement, and collaboration are strong activities to include in plans. Areas of improvement and the lack of resources available to provide those improvements are also discussed in the literature. The effective collaboration between administrators, teachers, counselors, parents and students is essential to overcoming the barriers that prevent schools from full implementation of comprehensive programming. Table 2 provides a list of strengths identified in transition plans and areas for improvement. Limited resources often prevent schools from implementing the activities listed in the second column. Careful planning and involvement of key stakeholders is paramount to overcoming these barriers.

Table 2.

Strengths and Challenges of Transition Plans

Strengths of Transition Plans	Areas for Improvement
• Visits to the middle school • Administrators and counselors meet with students • Lessons on who works at the school and what services they provide • Effective programs include collaboration between administration, teachers, parents, and community members.	• Limited timelines • Few or homogeneous activities • Elementary students attend classes at the middle school • Summer meetings for incoming students • Include parents on the transition planning team

Creating transition plans that outline the policies and procedures of a school is one of the main strengths of transition plans. It is essential that students understand daily schedules, locker combinations, policies, procedures, room locations, and other various school expectations. Students must understand the functions of a school if they are to exist harmoniously within the school system. Administrators, teachers, and other staff need the students to understand these procedures to aid in the proper implementation of school safety plans. Aside from educating students, keeping children safe is a main goal of all schools. Knowing where students are located throughout the day helps schools accomplish that goal.

One reason schools excel in procedural transitions is ease of planning. Regardless of who the student is or what their academic and social emotional needs are, all students will have lockers, change classes according to the same schedule, attend classes in designated areas, and be required to meet behavioral expectations. Since these factors are universal for all students, it is easy to plan transition activities that address each of these areas. School tours, meeting staff members, and providing information sheets about schedules are three examples of activities that meet these needs. Each of these can be planned by almost any

member of the school faculty or staff. Although these activities do not cover all student need, understaffed schools often resort to these types of activities because of ease of planning for the assigned staff member.

The activities listed in the "areas for improvement" column are sometimes not addressed in transition plans because schools are understaffed or do not have employees who are adequately trained or equipped to develop associated activities. Summer meetings for incoming students would provide an opportunity for individualized or small group meetings. They would also allow students with increased levels of anxiety to become familiar with the school in a small group setting. Further, self-efficacy, motivation, resilience and self-advocacy could be addressed with students. Unfortunately, most schools do not have the funds to pay staff stipends over the summer to provide these services. School counselors are trained to provide these services, but in many systems counselors are not employed during the summer.

Jackson and Davis (2000) provide evidence on the importance of involving parents of middle school students. Although educators know that parental involvement contributes to student success, a disconnect between parents and teachers still exists. Relationships between parents and the school steadily decline as students age. Parents of middle school students remain concerned about their children's success, but many believe that distancing themselves from their children is the best way to teach maturity and responsibility. There is also a fear associated with the increasing difficulty of a child's schoolwork. Parents sometimes believe that the schoolwork will be too hard for them and they will not be able to adequately assist their child. Time constraints for parents from all backgrounds is also an issue when participating in school-based activities.

Schools must find a way to overcome the barriers that prevent the parental involvement of middle school students. Effective school-to-parent collaboration should begin with establishing a core team of teachers, administrators and parents. This team should work together to create multiple forms of outreach to parents of incoming students. It is important that parents feel comfortable in the environment where they are meeting school employees. Meeting with parents at locations in the community can provide a level of comfort for many parents that leads to more productive conversations about the needs of incoming students. A collaborative effort between the school and the parents leads to a mutual understanding of the expectations of both parties. When schools and parents work together students become independent learners.

Academic expectations. Regardless of the plans and strategies utilized, a common problem in schools across the country is the inability of students to meet academic growth and proficiency standards and the school's inability to support students in this endeavor. The mismatch between the developmental needs of middle school students and the systems of the school lead to decreased motivation and therefore decreased academic achievement. Understanding the unique developmental needs of young adolescents assist in creating plans that help students feel more connected to the school and their teachers.

When schools set clear, high expectations and provide academic challenges to students, they are likely to develop self-efficacy skills with each academic success. Schools that set high expectations, but then allow students to redo work as needed and encourage active reflection of the learning process often see student success (Kohn, 1999). Outlining these expectations during open houses, orientations and during the first week of school give students a clear understanding of what to expect in middle school. In addition to stating the

classroom expectations, all members of the school faculty and staff should engage in encouraging rhetoric with students about their potential to meet expectations. Students who feel supported are more motivated to work toward meeting goals.

Students entering middle school are tasked with organizing and managing their time. In elementary school, parents and teachers organize schedules and time for students. Middle school students have more opportunities for extracurricular activities and must learn new strategies for being successful in and out of school. Teachers expect that students manage their time in the classroom and complete any missed assignments on their own. Students with after-school activities may find the new level of assigned work and practice schedules difficult to manage. Summer programs, after school tutoring, and occasional free time in class to make up assignments are three strategies schools use to help students transition successfully. Successful schools model effective time management strategies and provide additional time for students to complete work.

Social relationships. As a school counselor, I am "trained in child and adolescent development, learning strategies, self-management and social skills" (ASCA, 2018). My role is to use that specialized training to meet the academic, personal, and social emotional needs of all students. While working as a counselor, I have observed that schools strive to put plans in place that meet the academic needs of all students. Schools utilize small groups, tutoring, exceptional children services and teachers, school psychologists, one-on-one assistants, classroom assistants, and school counselors to meet these needs. Schedules and activities are strategically planned around protecting valuable class time. Amidst this careful planning, are students who come from a variety of backgrounds with individual needs. Often, school administration is so overwhelmed with planning structures to uphold

the system and achieve academic growth and proficiency that they overlook the basic psychological and social emotional needs of students.

The nationally recognized position paper, *This We Believe,* discusses the importance of attending to students' social emotional needs and recognizing the unique developmental level of young adolescents (AMLE, 2010). Although middle level educators are often familiar with this position statement, their focus is on meeting the academic needs of students and achieving state standards of growth and proficiency. Beyond that, it is the assumed responsibility of counselors or other student service staff members to address the personal and social needs of all students within the school. With a national average of 482 students per school counselor and approximately 30% of schools in the United States having no counselor, effectively meeting the mental health and social-emotional needs of all students can prove to be a daunting task (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) .

During times of transition, when students feel particularly out-of-place and vulnerable, students need to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging. The mismatch between the school environment and a student's developmental needs can leave them feeling lonely and isolated. Students who lack resilience skills do not have the necessary coping skills to deal with feelings of isolation. Students who lack self-efficacy may feel overwhelmed and defeated by the challenge of meeting new people and developing new friendships. The lack of connectedness for many students leads to social emotional difficulties that ultimately affects academic achievement, participation in school, and personal outcomes (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). For these reasons, it is crucial that incoming students feel connected to the school and the staff. They must feel a sense of belonging as they enter a new school. Cultivating an inclusive environment through transition activities is

one way to overcome potential feelings of disconnect between students and their new school.

Research by Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) indicate that many students entering middle school fear that the impersonal setting leads to more fights and decreased student safety. My own observations based on conversations with students indicate the same fears. When speaking with a group of incoming fifth grade students, the majority of the questions asked referenced school safety, bullying and fights. Interestingly, the students indicated that they had no intentions of fighting upon entrance to the middle school. Their intention and history of not fighting did not dissuade them from believing that middle schools are imbued with bullying and fights. Consequently, the majority did admit to engaging in drama, but this was not something that concerned them.

The Whole Child. Adequately addressing the social emotional needs of students means transition programs should consider the "whole child." One strategy schools can use to ensure that social emotional needs are met is to align each activity with the five core competencies for social emotional learning (SEL) outlined by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Figure 4 (casel.org, 2019) shows the five SEL competencies. Together the five core competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) work to enhance a student's ability to effectively cope with daily challenges (casel.org, 2019).

Figure 4. The five core SEL competencies work together to promote Student achievement and success. Teaching these skills in schools as a part of transition programming has the potential to lead to higher levels of social emotional functioning in students.

A Collaborative Effort

Ideally, transition programs would include activities that were engaging, meaningful, and addressed each of these core competencies. Realistically, creation of such activities requires the thoughtful collaboration of a team of administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and not-least-of-all, students. Creative planning between all stakeholders is required to adequately address each SEL competency and its sub-competencies. Generally educational planning sessions only include adult stakeholders. Preadolescent children are able to think abstractly using logic and reasoning and therefore should be included in the planning process. Providing students with the opportunity to collaborate with adults regarding major school activities aligns with the standards discussed in *This We Believe* and *Turning Points 2000.* Students who engage in this process are developing leadership skills and fulfilling their need for autonomy within the school.

Limitations

Table 2 (page 57) lists strengths of current transitions programs. Careful review of these strengths indicates that activities that are viewed as standard practices for transition programs do not align with any of the CASEL core SEL competencies. This evaluation further proves that school transition programs are focused on the school and not on the development of the whole child. Activities that are focused on serving the system of the school are a major limitation of transition programs. Failing to recognize the importance of social emotional learning during the transition process can hinder a child's successful transition into middle school.

My experience as a counselor has taught me that many teachers and administrators do not have thorough knowledge of child development and social emotional learning. Teacher preparation programs across the United States have been slow to integrate social emotional learning into their curriculum (Blad, 2017). This lack of knowledge sometimes prevents teachers from understanding how to meet the social emotional needs of students. Middle school teachers are trained in specific area content knowledge. Lacking knowledge about the importance of social emotional skills and their impact on academic achievement can cause teachers who are charged with planning transition programs to leave out these important activities. Collaborative planning between teachers and counselors can also be difficult because they might differ on their beliefs about which activities have the highest importance and impact on student achievement.

When school employees lack knowledge about child development, that compounds the issue of application of theories in the classroom. Teachers seek practical activities that can be implemented as a part of the daily routine. The knowledge gap between theory and

application limits the ability of the school to implement effective social emotional learning as a part of the transition plan. Although a difficult challenge, it is not one that cannot be surmounted. Proper professional development by trained professionals that includes classroom strategies and techniques can aid in practical application of child development theories.

Future Research

Although much of this paper has focused on the potential negative effects of the transition into middle school, this milestone in a student's life is also an area for opportunity and growth. Using the information and data collected, I worked with seventh grade students to create a comprehensive transition plan which includes multiple diverse activities that meet the procedural needs of the school as well as the academic and social needs of students (Appendix B). A rubric to guide other schools as they create comprehensive, research-based transition plans was also created (Appendix C).

A transition plan based on six decades of prior research should allow schools to implement a program that promotes opportunities for students to grow and develop into resilient, self-efficacious students who are prepared to overcome the day-to-day mental, physical, emotional, and moral challenges of middle school. The transition plan should also create an opportunity for increased parental involvement in schools. Practical activities are provided for use in the classroom. Academic achievement and school discipline data could be compared to create an analysis on the effectiveness of the plan in the future.

CHAPTER 3: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. ...Research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world.
~Paolo Freire

Overview of Methodology

The design of a research project should be carefully considered and the most effective method for finding answers to research questions determined. The researcher should consider what they want to know about a particular phenomenon, determine what data needs to be collected and decide how that data should be analyzed in order to produce results that aid in drawing conclusions and creating theories that can be applied to research. As a researcher, it is also essential to ask yourself about the relevance of your question. It is not beneficial to select a research methodology and carefully plan a study if the information that was collected does not advance the field of study. Carefully planning the research design also aids the researcher in remaining focused on the goals of the research and not simply providing interesting anecdotal evidence that draws few conclusions and only minimally answers the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Harry Wolcott (1990) summarizes this idea when he says, "Make sure all parts are properly in place before tightening" (p. 47). Although he is referring to the assembly of a wheelbarrow, this same advice is true for researchers and writers. It is essential to have a plan in place for a proposal prior to proceeding with the research stage to determine relevance, research goals, and questions.

Considering all this information about how to determine an appropriate methodology, I decided to use youth participatory action research (YPAR) as the methodology. Clark and Richards (2017) explain that "participatory methods have been heralded as holding the promise of including children in the generation of knowledge about the social world more

effectively and collaboratively than previous methods, which have traditionally positioned the child as object rather than subject" (2017, p. 128). Keeping this statement in mind, it seemed only logical that I would use PAR as a methodology for creating an elementary-to-middle school transition plan.

Collaborating with students as research participants to create a transition plan filled a gap in research on school transitions by appealing to three central tenets of the rights of children proposed by Clark and Richards (YEAR). These are: 1) children should be included (participation); 2) children should be active in their social worlds (agency); and 3) children should be allowed to speak about their lives (voice) (2017, p. 129). As a researcher, I believe that by listening to what students have to say about their experiences, understanding what they think will make a difference in their learning, and using that information to make systemic changes will inevitably have a positive effect on their academic, personal, and social-emotional success in school (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Students who participate in such projects will ultimately feel a sense of autonomy as they work to construct knowledge based on their personal experiences and create hypotheses of their surrounding environment. Theoretically, the collaboration between adults and students will lead to the creation of an effective transition plan. Again, future research will determine if the plan created by students in this study had the desired effects.

Prior to deciding on the most appropriate methodology for this dissertation, I had to engage in critical self-reflection about my goals and purposes. Understanding my ontological perspective, or how I perceive myself in the world of education, is the first step in making an informed decision about methodological practices. *The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate* (Perry, 2015) states that "scholarly practitioners blend practical wisdom

with professional skills and knowledge to name, frame, and solve problems of practice" (p. 59). Based on this premise, I engaged the following questions to guide the reflection of my knowledge and practice and how those informed my project goals:

- What am I trying to accomplish?
- What pedagogy do I ascribe to when working with students?
- Will my project benefit students?
- Have I correctly identified a need among students?
- What would the students think about this project?
- How can I best collect honest data from students?
- How can I improve my practices as a school counselor?

Understanding myself as an educator and what practices I ascribe to led to a clearer understanding of my role as a researcher and the needs of the project. As a school counselor, I subscribe to an engaged, student-centered pedagogy. bell hooks' (1994) definition of student-centered pedagogy illuminates how I put into practice my personal practices as an educator:

> The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).

Acting on this belief is why I am a school counselor and why I pursue higher education. The quest to move beyond boundaries and push students and schools to their limits and beyond are what drive me to create a world for students where education equals

freedom. This philosophy aligns with key themes from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. A major function of that text is discussion of the human condition and the freedom that marginalized populations can obtain when they understand and work to change their conditions or situations. Freire believed that dialogue should not be a simple act of speaking works and giving knowledge to one another, but instead people engage in dialogue by actively speaking and critically reflecting on those words. Together people engaged in dialogue should be creating knowledge. The dialogue should not be a situation where one party dominates another as is often seen in schools. Instead, dialogue should serve as a means for constructing knowledge that leads to empowerment and therefore change. Those who seek to "deposit knowledge" in a marginalized population are simply acting as activists and not serving as an agent of change on behalf of those marginalized populations. When leaders in the school open dialogue and create a discourse between those in control and those being controlled (teachers and students), we create a trusting atmosphere of mutual respect where students have autonomy and the power relationship is equalized. Education then becomes an act of freedom. If educators were to pause for a moment and ask students, "What do you think?", "What do you need?" or "What does that mean to you?" then what would happen to our schools? What would happen if we were to ask students to impart knowledge on the adults in the school?

It is my belief that asking students to impart knowledge or to act as experts of their own lives and to communicate what they need is how school leaders propel schools forward. When educators remove some of our own power and place it in the hands of the students, are we ultimately giving them the power and freedom to learn and succeed? On the other hand, if the sole expectation is to follow rote procedures and rules, are we undermining the abilities

of the students? Are we teaching them to perform monotonous duties that require no critical thinking skills? If we give them back some of the freedom and power that we take from them through mandated policies and procedures, by allowing actual dialogue (not simple discussion) then we are setting students up to be inventors and scientists and engineers and creators of knowledge. *This is not to say that students and schools do not need policies and procedures. On the contrary, they are necessary when you have hundreds of children from a variety of backgrounds gathered in a building. It is only to say that students, particularly middle school students, can provide input about those policies and procedures. It is our job, as educators, to teach them how practice advocacy skills. Once those skills are taught and students embrace a sense of autonomy over their personal learning and lives, image what they can then become.*

So then if I am true to myself and my beliefs about the role of educators in schools then it stands to reason that I would engage students in the process of creating knowledge about their own community. Action research serves this very purpose. This methodology allows a researcher to take a theory and put it into practice. Action research serves as a powerful and liberating tool for using personal theories about the world to transform a practice into a living theory. These living theories generate new knowledge and serve the purpose of influencing the learning of others. It also allows practitioners the opportunity to continuously evaluate and reflect on their practice throughout the research process (Buss, 2018; McNiff, 2017; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Osterman, Furman & Sernak, 2014; Perry, 2015).

My personal experience engaging in various forms of action research with students has proven to be a profound personal experience for myself and the students. As we, adults

and students, work together to create change within our school, we are able to create theories about our community. Together we engage with those theories to make decisions about how to improve the lives of other students in the school community. It becomes a powerful experience for the participants when they see the results of their efforts each day. Reflection on past processes led to the creation of this dissertation using YPAR as a methodology and a deeper understanding of the forms of action research.

Educational practitioners engage in many forms of action research. Not all forms of action research are appropriate for every inquiry. Historically, participatory action research (PAR) was a term used to describe process of planning, evaluating and implementing projects in communities. Many projects focused on the health and well-being of community members, organization of communities, or environmental needs of communities. Originally, PAR was a research method used as a way for outsiders to discuss important issues with insiders and then advocate for change (Barton, Borrini-Feyerabend, Sherbinin & Warren 1997; Byrne, Canavan, & Millar, 2007). It was associated with ideals shared by Paulo Freire whereby marginalized populations would be given a voice within their community. Today it refers to action research that emphasizes equal participation and collaboration of researchers (McNiff, 2017).

The tenets of participatory action research encompass my student-centered pedagogical beliefs and social science theories of development through which this research is framed. This project is also influenced by the sixteen central tenets of participatory action research (PAR) developed by Robin McTaggart (1998) which are guidelines for conducting PAR projects (Appendix D). It was a living process whereby I worked to engage with students and discover our collective voice with the primary goal of recognizing key issues

among sixth grade students as they transition to middle school. At the outset of this research, I could not say where this project would go. Past experiences working with youth on action research projects tell me that I may not answer any of my initial research questions, but that is the beauty of participatory action research. The knowledge and social changes created comes from the processes of the project, not the final project itself. YPAR by nature does not fit neatly into a box which is why this methodology was appealing to me. Education should be an opportunity to explore "teachable moments" and YPAR allows for that freedom of exploration, no matter where the data takes the project.

Research Design

Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects are a qualitative methodology used in institutions and communities to understand perspectives of community members with the aim of creating positive changes. PAR projects are collaborative in nature and require cooperation among group members. Community partnerships are established to help stakeholders that create policies to better understand the environment and increase sociocultural awareness. It is a collective group experience whereby all group members have an agentic role in the creation of knowledge about their community. Groups that are normally marginalized or oppressed are part of a partnership between policymakers and community members. Through this partnership, disenfranchised members are able to solve problems that ultimately improve their communities, schools, and public policy. PAR is a form of social justice that looks beyond the individual level of explanations of problems and promotes meaning engagement, self-efficacy, and mattering of all participants (Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010; Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez & Morga, 2010; Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012).

Majority of PAR projects use adults as research participants, but there has been a recent shift to using adolescents in the PAR process. This methodology is referred to as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). The premise behind the reasoning is the same in PAR and in YPAR. Both are meant to engage those who do are not generally seen as change agents to create new knowledge about situations and create change (Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Ozer, Ritterman, Wanis, 2010; Smith, Brantini & Appio, 2012; Smith, Davis, & Bhowmik, 2012). The goal of YPAR is to "fully engage youth in the process of inquiry, action and reflection" (Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez & Morgan, 2010, p. 180) in an effort to help students develop their own knowledge and understanding of how their communities are structured and their role as change agents within those communities. YPAR research posits that this methodology may be effective to use with young adolescents and suggests school counselors integrate YPAR projects into their practice. At this time, there are still many limitations in the area of YPAR research in middle schools.

Although limited, there is emerging research that indicates YPAR has been used in schools to give students a voice about their school communities and help make necessary changes to policies that affect their ability to be successful students. YPAR "provides young people with opportunities to identify structural, interpersonal, and psychological factors affecting their lives; to gather and analyze data about these factors; and to determine actions that will address existing harms" (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018, p. 430). Students who engage in student-led YPAR projects become empowered and find new connections with their school and adult leaders while learning valuable problem-solving skills through the research process (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez & Morgan, 2010). YPAR appeals to

the constructivist paradigm and social-emotional learning theories which state that students are able to create knowledge based on experiences and subsequently become agents of change through the use of that knowledge.

In YPAR, young people are: (1) trained to identify community or school issues; (2) trained to conduct research to understand the nature of those issues; and (3) able to take leadership roles to influence policy changes (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Ozer, 2017). Benefits of using YPAR with school-aged children are improved attitudes and behaviors; heightened psychological empowerment; increased control, efficacy, motivation, and sense of purpose; enhanced understanding of the environment; elevated feelings of agency, pride and connectedness to their community/school; and a perceived sense of adult support which leads to positive attitudes toward education (Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Smith, Bratini & Appio, 2012).

Although YPAR appears to be a promising tool for use among school-aged children, there are many limitations to this work that need to be explored. The limited research in this area suggests that there is not much data on the effectiveness or YPAR in schools because implementation of such projects have not been widely studied. It is also generally used in small groups of hand-selected students, so it can be difficult to draw inferences or make generalized conclusions (Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Smith, Beck, Bernstein, 2010). Again, a key tenet of YPAR is to identify challenges and offer solutions. It stands to reason that use of this methodology with school-age children is appropriate because by nature YPAR is a cyclical process of identifying needs or challenges and creating solutions. By using YPAR as a research methodology in the school, the students and I improved the school community,

but also improved the YPAR process for future school counselors or educators who wish to engage in YPAR as a part of their pedagogy and practice.

Action Reflection Cycle

Participatory action research is cyclical in nature. Action research involves a cycle of planning, implementation, reflection and improving practices (Kennis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff & Whitehead; 2006; McNiff, 2017). This process is known as the action-reflection cycle (Figure 5) and is inspired by Kurt Lewin's (1935) social psychology theories. Lewin is considered the originator of action research and believed the action research cycle was one small part of a larger research process (Adelman, 1993). Here, the action-reflection cycle illustrates the steps researchers follow during an action research project. Researchers begin with observations of their community and reflect upon what they observe. During the reflection phase, action plans are created. Once action plans are complete, researchers evaluate their work and make necessary modifications. Communities, organizations, or institutions then move in new directions based on the modifications. The cycle then repeats to maintain consistent growth. The Lewinian action-reflection cycle is appropriate for communities and adult-led participatory action projects.

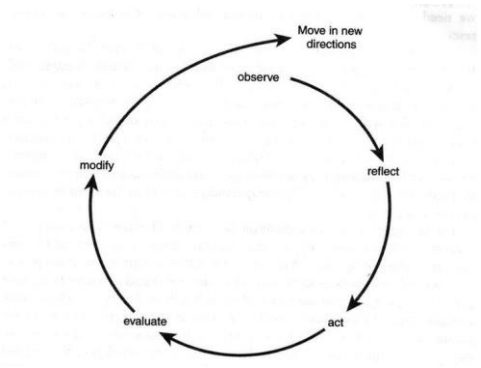


Figure 5. A modified version of the Lewinian participatory action research Action-Reflection cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Drawing on my background as a school counselor and my understanding of the varying developmental needs of students, I determined the action research process needed to be modified to meet the developmental level of students and address challenges of working in schools. The following section gives a description of a modified action-reflection cycle that was designed using current YPAR and transition programming research.

Action Research Cycle

Research on the typical phases of YPAR in school settings led to the development of Figure 6, the Action Research Cycle (see below). Future references to the Action Research Cycle in this paper will be in regard to Figure 6. The phases for the Action Research Cycle referenced throughout Chapter 3 and 4 are a culmination of phases developed by various researchers (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty & Aoun, 2010; Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010; Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen & Kirshner, 2015). The information gathered about phases of YPAR from these researchers were combined to create an action research cycle that could be used by schools working with young students. The Action Research Cycle begins with the training phase because many students have not received formalized research training and may be unfamiliar with research processes. Steps two and three allow adult researchers to work with students to collect data from a select group of participants and identify a problem within the school community. The purpose of including secondary data collection is to verify that the identified issue applies to the general school population and not only the initial sample of students. After gathering data from multiple sources (in steps one and three), adults should work with students to analyze the data for other themes related to the identified issue. Using all this information, the team works to create goals or a plan of action to improve the issue affecting the school community. In step seven, the students and

adults present the data and action plan to stakeholders to gain support for their proposed plan. Step eight allows the research team to reflect on their processes and make plans for future research.

Figure 6. The Action Research Cycle for use with YPAR projects conducted in school settings.

Action Research in School Counseling

School counselors are trained in child and adolescent human development are equipped to implement comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCP) that align with a school's mission and vision. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA), the guiding body for school counseling standards, provides clear guidelines for effective program implementation. ASCA recommends school counselors use data to analyze the needs of students/schools and use evidence-based best practices to create responsive programs that are tailored to increase Student Academic and personal achievement (ASCA, 2019; Sink & Stroh, 2003; Wilkerson, Perusse, & Hughes, 2013). As leaders in their schools, counselors

are charged with promoting a positive climate for students, staff, and community members through the CSCP.

ASCA (2019) standards recommend school counselors work with a caseload of no more than 250 students. According to data from the 2014-15 school year, the average student-to-counselor ratio in the United States was 482-to-1 (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; NACAC, 2018). In states like California, school counselors have average caseloads upwards of 900-to-1 (Gonser, 2018; Vercelletto, 2018). Large caseloads often leave counselors feeling overwhelmed and students feeling underserved. Schools with a high student-to-counselor ratio often see poor attendance, increased rates of discipline issues and dropout rates, and increased suspensions (Lapan, Whitcom, & Aleman, 2012). Students who know the counselor is overworked and overwhelmed are less likely to seek assistance because they know it may be days or weeks before the counselor is able to help them (L. H., Personal communication, September 2018).

The use of YPAR as a school counseling intervention has benefits that are numerous. Discussed below are several of the benefits of using YPAR in school counseling. These include: meeting ASCA national standards, reaching large populations, improved student outcomes, addressing social justice, improving student self-efficacy, and providing a platform for student voice (Smith, Beck, Bernstein & Dashtguard, 2014).

ASCA Standards. YPAR meets that national standards set forth by ASCA. YPAR projects provide an opportunity to work with students to collect data and engage students in decision making. Although the research is new and somewhat limited, initial outcomes indicate that students who participate in YPAR projects have increased self-efficacy and feel

more empowerment in their school community. These students instantly see widespread results of their efforts which encourages them to continue in the action research process.

Reach large populations. *C*ounselors who use YPAR to solve major issues faced by students in school can reach larger populations. Personal experience tells me that when important information needs to be disseminated quickly, it is best for adults in the school to tell a student who has personal connections to their peers. Today's students can communicate with hundreds of their schoolmates with the click of a button. The advent of social media and technology in the classroom means that information can be spread between students within seconds. Involving students in the decision-making process enables overwhelmed counselors to reach students through peer-to-peer connections.

Improved student outcomes. *S*tudents who participate in YPAR projects aid in increased attendance, increased academic success, and decreased discipline referrals for the entire school. Students who help improve the school atmosphere have increased feelings of empowerment and pride. The increased sense of pride in a student's school and autonomy over learning may also lead to increased feelings of connectedness to peers, teachers, and the school. Students who experience these outcomes may feel less isolated and be more likely to participate in school events.

Social justice. At the heart of both school counseling and youth participatory action research is social justice. Social justice is often viewed through a legal lens and defined as a fair and just society. Situating social justice in a counseling framework changes the definition. Viewed this way, social justice is "based on the idea that society gives individuals and groups fair treatment and an equal share of benefits, resources, and opportunities" (Chung & Bemak, 2012, pf. 26). Ratts & Pederson (2014) summarize social justice

counseling “based on the belief that toxic environmental conditions influence human development issues” and posit that counseling should have a focus on making changes to the society that oppresses individuals as opposed to counseling individuals to adapt their behaviors to fit an oppressive society (p. 28). Social justice in a school counseling setting encompasses the social issues that concern students, their families, the school community, and the larger community. The injustices experienced in schools are a result of the developmental mismatch between student emotional and academic development and school policies and procedures; language disparities between parents and teachers; power dynamics between students and teachers; and a lack of connection between the school and larger community.

Youth Participatory Action Research seeks to mitigate these factors by giving a voice to the students. YPAR seeks to understand the perspectives and needs of students and their families and to make changes to the larger system. Changes are aimed at creating a more level playing field for all students and families and providing equitable access to resources and opportunities. School counselors receive multicultural and diversity training that allows them to facilitate YPAR processes in a way that students are valued, and their perspectives are seen as valuable contributions. The role of the school counselor is to create equitable outcomes for oppressed and marginalized populations of students.

Sue and Sue (2008) developed seven principles of social justice (for counseling), five of which I considered when implementing a YPAR project in a middle school. The five principles were selected because they appeal to the oppressive nature of the school system and students. School counselors should keep these principles in mind when developing equitable transition plans that address the oppression and marginalization of students.

- A failure to develop a balanced perspective between person (students) and system focus (schools) can result in false attributions of the problem.
- A failure to develop a balanced perspective between person (students) and system focus (schools) can result in an ineffective and inaccurate treatment plan which is potentially harmful to the client (student).
- Organizations (schools) are microcosms of the wider society from which they originate. As a result, they are likely to be reflections of the monocultural values and practices of the larger culture.
- Organizations are powerful entities that inevitably resist change and possess many ways to force compliance among workers (students). To go against policies, practices, and procedures of the institution (school) can bring about major punitive actions.
- Although remediation will always be needed, prevention is better.

Sue and Sue (2008) discuss the need for a "balanced perspective" between person and system to have the best understanding of systemic issues and to create accurate and effective action plans that benefit the system and the student. When working to make policy changes in a school, the researchers must remember that schools reflect the wider society and culture. Suggesting changes to the school will have far-reaching effects and can sometimes receive pushback because the current policies are a result of larger societal injustices at play in the microcosm of the school. The counselor must be careful when serving as a research participant and facilitator of YPAR projects so as to not cause harm to the students or promote projects based on highly controversial topics that may result in punitive actions against the students and/or counselor.

YPAR as a tool for self-efficacy. YPAR researchers believe that teachers and students are co-creators of knowledge. Working together to achieve goals builds self-efficacy skills among students and leads to long-term academic success. YPAR is also a useful tool for teachers and counselors as they self-reflect on the power dynamics in their classrooms and determine the best ways to build a 21st century classroom. A benefit to using YPAR in middle schools is that it is interdisciplinary and can be used with students who achieve at all academic levels. At its core, PAR is meant to be used with marginalized groups. Students, particularly middle school students, often lack a voice in their own educational decisions even though this is a critical stage of development for students (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez & Morgan, 2010). Young adolescents should be developing social-emotional, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills. Building these skills during this rapid phase of social and academic development is key to building self-efficacy among students. Use of YPAR in middle schools is appropriate for developing such skills and fits with the core belief systems of middle schools.

Student voice. Self-efficacious students have learned to use their voice. They are not afraid of the scrutiny that often comes in a school setting whenever children speak. Students who know their abilities and their worth can speak up and out on behalf of themselves and others. They do not fear the judgement of other students and they know that their thoughts are of equal value with the adults in a school. They are not silenced by the hidden curriculum of the school system. Their responses are not guarded and spoken with fear of correction. They speak their minds and their truth. Speaking their mind is not to be confused with disrespectful or thoughtless blather. Self-efficacious students are calculated in their responses and speak based on the knowledge they have constructed from their

experiences. Authentic communities of learners are established in schools that encourage students to express their voices through speech, writing, art, music, and other mediums (Carnegie Council, 1989, 1995; Chamberlin, 2003; Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez & Morgan, 2010).

Challenges and Ethical Considerations of YPAR

YPAR projects offer enhanced learning experiences for youth, especially those in middle school. During a time of uncertainty because of rapid changes to bodies and brains, students need innovative ways to connect with their learning, teachers, and school community. As students develop morally, they begin to feel a sense of right and wrong and commitment to social injustices taking place in their schools. Although YPAR is a promising tool for use in middle schools, it does come with challenges.

Carballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, and Morrell (2017) acknowledge that research surrounding the ethical failures of YPAR is lacking. As research participants, students will analyze data collected through interviews, focus groups, small group discussions, and surveys. Some researchers struggle with allowing students access to the data gathered for privacy reasons (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). Not allowing students to conduct YPAR research because of fears about privacy or confidentiality severely limits an untapped resource for developing self-efficacy and leadership skills among young adolescents. It also prevents adults in schools from creating a true understanding of what students need or believe they need to be successful in schools. Ethical principles that were considered and addressed when making methodological decisions include: benefit to students and schools, non-malfeasance, informed consent and participant autonomy, and confidentiality/anonymity (Carter, 2018). The use of these principles is addressed below.

YPAR Methodology

Research in the field of YPAR in schools is relatively new, and there is little data to support its effectiveness among students. Students selected to participate in projects are usually hand-picked by adults based on their current leadership potential. Students who already show strong social-emotional, academic, and self-efficacy skills may not give the most accurate depiction of all student experiences and this limits the inferences that can be made from the data. When working with younger students (young adolescents), social maturity is uneven and can contribute to difficulties in group members understanding one another and working well together (Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010). Although YPAR research is highly dependent on student views, these students are not trained in YPAR methodology. To account for their lack of knowledge in this area, an adult must work with research participants and lead the process. Benefits to the YPAR process are promising and because the limitations do not pose harm or threat to the students, the benefits of conducting YPAR studies in schools outweigh the limitations. Benefits include new content generation; mutuality and power-sharing among students and adults; interpersonal impacts; blurring of social, political, identity, and cultural boundaries; enhanced sense of agency among youth; and increased efficacy (Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012; Smith, Davis, Bhowmik, 2010).

Confidentiality

Prior to classroom lessons and providing students with cameras, the students and I discussed the term confidentiality and its importance in research. Several students remembered discussing confidentiality when I first introduced myself as the counselor. They reflected their memory of this discussion and we created a new working definition of confidentiality. Application of the abstract definition presented challenges for some students.

Others understood the definition in a more concrete way and wrote “no faces” on their paper as a reminder of confidentiality. Although not all students understood the definition during the initial stages of photovoice, their lack of understanding did not present an ethical concern because the students were not sharing information with each other at this time.

The next ethical issue concerning confidentiality was presenting sixth grade student data to seventh and/or eighth grade students for analysis. Steps were planned and further steps implemented to ensure anonymity of data. During the photovoice procedures, I was careful to ask students to include their desk number (i.e. 1-20) instead of their name. Student papers and photos were first sorted by class period and then by student desk number. Many students included their name anyway. Because students wrote their names on papers, and maintaining confidentiality was a high priority for this study, I first reviewed all data gathered from the *scientific method* and *photovoice* class sessions. I typed the student responses prior to giving the information to the seventh-grade student research participants. No identifying information was included in the documents provided to the students. This action allowed students to work solely with the data and not focus on identity, handwriting, or other factors.

Working with Students

When selecting site participants, I also considered the need for “trustworthiness and proposed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” as Glesne discusses based on theories put forth by Lincoln and Guba (Glesne, 2016, p. 152). The ethics of working with students must be on the forefront of decision-making if this project was to have the qualities Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss. If the ethics of my decisions are brought into

question post-research, then I run the risk of producing a study that is not trustworthy, credible, transferable, or generalizable and potentially discredited (Maxwell, 2013).

To mitigate potential ethical threats when working with students, I selected a dissertation committee member who is a former school counselor to hold me ethically accountable for my methodological procedures and decision-making when working with students. Her background as a school counselor and now researcher was crucial to providing insight on the ethics of researching with students. My committee chair previously worked in middle school and provided valuable insight on conducting research with large groups of students in the classroom.

Psychological development of students indicates that young adolescents are capable of abstract thought processes and construction of knowledge. My work with middle school students supports this research. Based on past therapeutic groups and loosely based YPAR projects conducted through my work as a counselor, I perceived potential challenges to conducting productive meetings. Students in small groups tend to be actively engaged in their world. They are lively and enthusiastic. They appear excited to have autonomy and the opportunity to demonstrate leadership. They still lack key areas of brain development that makes small group work progress efficiently (Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010). Challenges are communication, self-awareness, and understanding others. These challenges can be detrimental to the cohesion of a group. A collaborative effort can derail very quickly without careful planning and structure. When conducting YPAR research, the facilitator must consider the strengths and challenges of working with middle school students. Researchers must find a balance between maintaining order and accomplishing group goals and allowing

students to control most aspects of the project. Crossing that line is counterintuitive to the goals of YPAR.

Although my past experiences indicated that working with students who have no interest in the project or do not work well together was a potential threat to the YPAR project, careful planning and selection of students allowed the project to move forward as planned. Two factors contributed to overcoming this potential limitation. Selecting two students and carefully explaining the details of the project and the proposed timeline allowed the initial phases of data analysis to run smoothly. Waiting until the first two students had a firm grasp on the project and then inviting other students to join the group as needed for additional feedback and action plan development aided in overcoming this previously perceived challenge.

Researcher-Participant Relationships. When selecting students, I considered the power relationship that exists between students and adults in the building. It was crucial that students felt that they were free to participate in this study (either as a student research participant or as a photovoice interview/focus group participant) and were able to contribute openly and honestly to the project. This information was explicitly stated and explained to the students, both verbally and in writing. Parents received written communication about the project and expectations. As the "gatekeepers of the study, the students will aid or interfere in the completion of this project" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90). It was of the utmost importance prior to beginning the study that trust was established and existed between myself and the students. If the project were to be a success and produce the data needed to have a positive effect on students, I would need a relationship of mutual respect and trust between me and the students. As Paulo Freire wrote, "Trust is contingent on the evidence which one party

provides the others of his true, concrete intentions. It cannot exist if that party's words do not coincide with their actions" (1993, p. 91). Freire's words served as a reminder that this project could not be carried out if trust was not maintained between myself and the students throughout the entirety of the research and dissertation process.

Dual Role

Another ethical concern that presents itself when conducting research in the workplace is that of the dual role between school counselor and students. Working in a school with students means that there is the risk of a student or parent feeling that they are not able to decline participation in the project. Students may also feel pressure to respond in a certain way due to the understood power relationships in schools between adults and students. To mitigate these concerns, it was clearly explained to students that their participation or choice to not participate in the project would in no way affect their relationship with me as the school counselor. The ELA teacher was present in the room during the conversation and had a thorough understanding of the project prior to beginning. Since students saw this teacher every day and had a closer relationship with her at the beginning of the school year than they did with me, they were encouraged to ask her any questions or voice concerns they had about the project if they were not comfortable speaking with me about it at the time.

Class Time

There are two concerns when considering class time for this project. The first is the amount of time that was taken from the ELA class. I met with students as a whole class for thirty to forty-five-minute sessions over a period of six weeks. Teacher class time is valuable, and to best serve the needs of students, teachers and researchers, North Carolina

State Standards for English Language Arts were considered and selected to justify the use of class time for this research project (see Appendix E for a full list of included state standards used in this project). These standards relate to the use of photovoice, interviews, journaling and related individual, small group, and whole class discussions. After the project began, I decided to integrate the North Carolina State Standards for Science into the project. Students were learning about the scientific method, and it was fitting to include this methodology in the discussion about data selection with the students (see Appendix F for lesson plans with included state standards). Inclusion of ELA and Science standards mutually served the needs of the students, teachers, and myself. The ELA teacher and principal were provided with those lesson plans to show that students were still following the required class format and learning skills from state standards. Students who did not participate were not penalized and used the time to study or meet with a peer mentor. Students who did participate did not miss any class work since the teacher built the time into her regular class schedule.

Time challenges and missing class did present a slight issue for the two seventh grade students for approximately two days. The students worked on the data analysis during their health and physical education class. One teacher understood the magnitude of the work that the student was doing and felt that this was a great opportunity for the student to engage in higher order thinking processes. This teacher excused the student from all work since she was still participating in an academic activity. The other teacher excused the second student from class but still required that any missed work be made up. The students also used some of their afternoon intervention and enrichment (IE) time to complete the project. No work was missed during this time, and the students volunteered to use their IE time to complete this work. Determining the best use of student time was another instance where my role as

the counselor had to supersede my role as the researcher. One of the students appeared a little stressed about missing class. She asked if she could miss class but seemed apprehensive. I took note of her tone of voice and body language and explained to her that I thought she should go to class, so she did not get behind. I let her know that it was okay, and we would find other time to work. I never wanted the students to feel pressure to continue to meet with me if they knew they were missing work in another class.

Voice

As a research participant who has more experience than other research participants and by default has a position of power (counselor vs. student), I perceived there to be a challenge when writing the final chapters of the dissertation. McNiff & Whitehead (2006) as the following questions about action research: Who tells the story? Whose voice is heard? Who speaks on behalf of whom? The first three chapters are written from my perspective. The goal was to write the final chapters from the perspective of all researchers, myself and the students, as equals. I also wanted to tie in as much student voice as possible into the first three chapters after completion of the research process. My concern is that the reflective, autoethnographic nature of the dissertation will allow my voice to overpower the voice of the students and work in opposition to the overall goal of understanding student perspectives. As the key author, my intent was to include narratives of student experiences, samples of writing and classwork, and student quotes to help student voice stand out as the prominent contributor of knowledge.

Subjectivity

My previous experiences when working with students on projects using YPAR as a loose framework for developing self-efficacy and accomplishing goals had been

unpredictable and sometimes even counterproductive. At the end of previous projects, students were able to accomplish some goals, and for the students who participated, I observed changes in their mannerisms and interactions with other students. They even began to create their own leadership positions within the school based on their successes with the project. That being said, I knew that YPAR was an appropriate tool to use for this project.

At the outset of the dissertation process, the greatest perceived challenge in undertaking this methodology to conduct research was myself, the researcher. I saw failure, poor communication skills, arguments, and jockeying for position within the group among past student participants. I also observed disorganization and conflict. At the end of projects, I did not ask what the students saw. When I reflected on those experiences, I should have seen a group of students who raised money for a cause by communicating in their own way and learning how to find their personal strengths and determine how to best use those strengths in a group. If I had stepped out of my role as an "adult" and worked in an equitable role, I would have seen students presenting information to school administrators and county board members about the rising occurrence of self-harm, depression, and suicide among youth. A willingness to trust the students means I would have recognized the importance of watching these them come together to create tangible products and a plan for creating a peer counseling program in their school. I should have seen a YPAR project that started from a simple idea based on a critical need identified by students come full circle and develop into an advocacy program that was shared with the larger community.

Before beginning this dissertation, I perceived my inability to be flexible and see past the "messiness" of working collaboratively with students who are at the beginning stages of becoming adults to be a possible detriment to the project. A central tenet of YPAR is

engaging in critical self-reflection. Taking the time to reflect on myself as a researcher and a practitioner who has experienced what sometimes seems to be the haphazard development and implementation of ideas before beginning the project was a crucial first step.

The process of creating knowledge in middle school can seem disjointed and sometimes feels like it is going nowhere. I need to continuously reflect on who I am to remain flexible and channel my inner middle school self. If I were to work in equal partnership with students, I needed to realize that their lives do not fit neatly in a box and neither would this project. The students and I would make attempts at using data to uncover critical needs in the school, but the fact of the matter is that this project could have gone in any direction and I needed to remain open to that possibility. After all, the project I previously described was a character education team that was meant to make monthly videos about character traits. Allowing the students to take the role of leaders and researchers led us to a project that I never could have fathomed. So even though the research tells me that there are endless limitations to working with young students, I would argue that as the adult researcher I, myself, posed the greatest challenge and the students hold the greatest possibilities.

Validity

It could be said that all researchers strive to create valid works. Researchers do not want to devote time and energy to a project that will be deemed invalid by peers or the larger educational community. Submitting invalid work can potentially be career-ending so it is of great importance that issues of validity are thoroughly addressed throughout the research process (McTaggert, 1998). Researchers also run the risk of having proposed ideas rejected because they do not give enough attention to validity threats; therefore, they must make

"validity an explicit component" of the research design (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121). There are several methods researchers can use to counter threats to validity. Researchers must keep in mind that simply using a multitude of techniques is not enough. They must also make a conscious decision about which techniques to use and question if those techniques truly address validity concerns. In short, it is not enough to simply triangulate the data collection process. The researcher must make deliberate decisions about the types of data collection and the reasons for selecting those collection methods. Again, the researcher should refer to Harry Wolcott (1990) and his wheelbarrow example from chapter one.

Researchers who conduct participatory action projects are no different; however, this type of research must be approached differently in terms of validity. Historically, research in all areas was considered valid if it met the criteria of being generalizable and showed causality. Because of its unique nature, McTaggert (1998) posits that participatory action researchers are in fact interested in "general understanding" and "causes of social phenomenon;" however, these two quests must be approached differently to have a "more complex view of the validity of research" (McTaggert, 1998, pp. 212-213).

Participatory action research (PAR) is not a widely used methodology in educational research at this time (McTaggert, 1998 & Zambo, 2011). There are some key concerns surrounding the validity of this form of research. McTaggert (1998) summarizes these concerns as:

I. there is still insufficient publication of quality participatory action research;
II. too much supposed `action research' is really the `implementation' of policy rather than the testing of policy as theory; and

III. there is still a tendency to think of action research as something that `practitioners' do, while professional, academic researchers do `real' research.

At times, PAR is used to implement policy as opposed to affecting change at a systemic level. A key factor of PAR is recognizing a need for social justice or change of systems, researching methods to bring about a change, creating theory, and then implementing those findings (Lac & Fine, 2018; Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez, & Morgan, 2010; Van Sluys, 2010). It is imperative that PAR is utilized as a "collaborative methodology" that "ensures that those who are affected by the research project have a voice in that project" (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010).

I selected YPAR as the methodology for this project because I believe that it provides a "cyclical, systematic approach to problem-solving" and allowed myself and the student research participants to focus on a "local problem, use theory and research to understand the problem, design a solution, take action, use data to understand its effectiveness and decide on next steps" (Zambo, 2011, p. 262). As a practitioner in the field of education, I must be able to "identify educational problems; blend practical wisdom with professional knowledge; conduct research that is rigorous, ethical and transparent; and make a positive difference in the lives of individuals" (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2010). I must also be flexible and responsive because I will be working in a social setting with real people which makes it difficult to predict every step and outcome (McTaggert, 1991). If I want to implement change that benefits the local school system, I believe that the most effective methodology for conducting research is PAR.

The final threat to validity addressed by McTaggert is somewhat more difficult to address because it deals with widespread, traditional perceptions and judgements about "real" research. Overcoming this challenge could be dependent on changing the understanding and thought process of current academic researchers; however, my goal in completing this research project was not to change the views of academic researchers about PAR, but to effect positive change in middle schools across North Carolina through the use of student voice. Providing new work in the field of PAR and aiding in the development of new understandings about PAR would be a secondary effect of the work.

Trustworthiness

In addition to validity, trustworthiness is another component of creating quality constructivist research (Morrow, 2005, pg. 252). According to Guba (1981), there are four constructs that should be evaluated when determining the trustworthiness of qualitative research. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following section provides brief descriptions of each of Guba's four criteria for evaluating qualitative research. Table 3 illustrates how the four criteria were used to evaluate the trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility asks the question, "How congruent are the findings with reality?" (Shenton, 2004). Researchers who write credible works should be familiar with the culture of the organization where data collection is taking place. A relationship of mutual respect and trust between the participants and the researcher allows the researcher to have a more thorough understanding of the site's culture. As the school counselor at the research site, I had a clear understanding of the culture of the school. I did not have to spend time

attempting to understand the culture or the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students because I was already familiar with the location, employees, and students.

Another form of credibility within qualitative research is the use of random sampling of participants. The use of random sampling may prevent the researcher from selecting only those participants who support the researcher's theory or perspective. When I initially began planning this research, I had specific students I wanted to work with. As I learned more about the challenges of YPAR research, I decided that random sampling would be the best way to select participants and students with whom to gather data. Often in YPAR, students are selected because they already show leadership skills or because they have high academic achievement. It was important that I gather information from students that represent a variety cultural, socioeconomic, social emotional, and academic backgrounds.

Triangulation, meaning the use of multiple data collection methods including observation, focus groups, and individual interviews further support the credibility of a research project. Verification of viewpoints and experiences should be checked against each other. Researchers are also encouraged to have colleagues, and peers offer feedback. Initial data was collected using student writing samples (questions about middle school and creation of hypotheses) and a photovoice project. This data was coded using an open coding process and card sort activity. Student interviews were conducted, and selective coding was used to verify the information and themes determined during the first round of data collection. The third round of data collection involved students writing thoughts and feelings about the main challenge identified during the first two rounds of data collection. Colleagues and peers offered their feedback and perspectives on the findings.

Presentation of research findings at conferences or to important stakeholders also provide credibility of the work. The findings from this dissertation were presented to stakeholders within the school and shared with county-level administration. The transition plan and rubric were slated to be shared at the North Carolina Middle Level Educators conference in March 2020, but the conference was cancelled. There are plans to submit the presentation proposal at future conferences.

Transferability refers to the inclusion of background data and information that provides a clear context of the study and site where the study takes place. Providing a detailed description of the research questions and data collection process allows clear comparisons to be made by other institutions who may be seeking answers to the same questions (Shenton, 2004). Mountain Middle School data is included in this dissertation to allow schools with similar populations to replicate the study. Schools with populations that differ from MMS can use this information to identify those differences and alter the delivery of the study to meet their specific needs.

Dependability provides clear and detailed processes of the study and enables others to repeat the work. Descriptions of project plans and execution, including details about data gathering, should be clearly stated (Shenton, 2004). Dependable works also indicate that findings of the research are consistent (Pandley & Patnaik, 2014). Chapters three and four provide a clear description of the methodology used and the exact processes carried out during the data collection phase. Chapter four includes researcher reflections to aid other practitioners in improving the research process.

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to admit predisposition. Bias is addressed through the use of triangulation. A researcher should be willing to admit any

shortcomings with the study and the possible effects of those shortcomings. Clear information in the form of an “audit trail” (Appendix G) also adds to the confirmability of a study (Punch, 1998; Shenton, 2004). Throughout the dissertation, there are sections that address researcher bias and the potential limitations of the study.

Table 3.

Guba's (1981) Four Criteria for Evaluating the Trustworthiness of a Study

Credible	• The dual role of counselor and researcher at the site allowed me to establish a relationship with the participants and have knowledge of the culture of the school where the research occurred. • Triangulation of data was performed through observations, written student questions, surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, photovoice, and writing samples. • I independently analyzed data for themes and meanings. Data was also analyzed for themes by seventh grade students. The students verified my conclusions and further added to the presence of student voice in the project. • Large samples of participants were used for collecting general data about the research topic. Small student samples used for individual interviews or small groups were selected at random to prevent bias since I am familiar with the students at the school. Individual interviews provided rich data because of the authentic, conversational nature of the interviews (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). • The research was reviewed by a dissertation committee, peers and colleagues for accuracy of ideas and correct use of methodology. • Research findings were presented at local and state conferences. • Participants were invited to review interview transcription and evaluate the analysis of written narratives. • Researcher reflection of methodological practices are included in Chapter IV.
Transferable	• Demographic and background data of the selected site are included in the methodology section.
Dependable	• Chapter IV provides clear details of the step-by-step processes of classroom lessons and data collection procedures. • Consistent findings between myself (the researcher) and student participants are detailed in Chapter V. • Chapter V provides connections between research literature and study findings.
Confirmable	• Challenges and limitations (including researcher bias) are clearly stated in Chapter III. • Shortcomings of the study are discussed in Chapter VII. • An "audit trail" allowing for easy replication of the study can be found in Appendix G.

Site and Sampling Strategies

Site Selection

There was no question this research would be conducted at a school. Middle schools are the best place to find large populations of sixth grade students. This site for research was in the Mountain County School District (pseudonym). Mountain City School District (MSCD) is in a rural county in the Appalachian region of North Carolina. Like many counties in western North Carolina, it once saw prosperity and was the location for many successful industries, factories, and businesses. The location, size, and geographical features of this county allow for a variety of large companies to develop and grow. The climate in this area is ideal for farmers, construction, and the lumber industry. In recent years, many of those businesses have chosen to relocate to larger, more industrial areas of the state. The focus of the economic development council for the county has turned to the development of current small business and attracting new businesses. The population and demographics of this county are typical for the region. Many of the residents were born and educated in the county and continue to live and work locally. The economy does offer enough opportunities to attract new residents to the area. The location of a major highway through the county allows for ease of access to several large cities.

The school selected for the research project was Mountain Middle School (pseudonym). Permission to conduct research at this site was given by the principal (Appendix H). Mountain Middle School (MMS) is centrally located in the county and is situated between the two main towns in the county. MMS has a population of approximately 700 students in grades 6, 7, and 8. The ethnic makeup of the school is 20% Hispanic/Latino, 10% black/African American, 65% Caucasian, and 5% other ethnic backgrounds

(PowerSchool, 2019). Students at MMS come from a variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that contribute to the overall diverse culture of the school. MMS is unique in that it is located in a rural county, but the location and demographic makeup of the school reflects a more urban population than other schools in the county.

One challenge faced by MMS is the transient nature of the student population. In the 2018-2019 school year, approximately 225 students either enrolled or withdrew from the school. At the time of the study during the 2019-2020 school year, approximately 170 students had enrolled or withdrawn from the school. The transient student population is generally due to large corporations relocating families, children entering or leaving the foster care facilities located in the district, or other typical reasons for moving. It is also not uncommon for students in the MCSD to move locally or transfer between the middle schools in the county.

Over the past five years, MMS has experimented with a variety of teacher team pairings (2, 3, and 4-person teams) and daily schedules. Teacher licensure has prohibited the administration from always pairing teachers in two-person teams as is suggested by research (AMLE, 2010; Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). It has been the goal of the administration in the past to ensure that sixth grade students are on two-person teams to aid in a successful transition process. For the 2019-2020 school year, circumstances dictated that the sixth-grade teachers would be arranged in four-person teams. Students rotate through ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies classes together. They attend exploratory or elective classes based on interests. These groupings and schedules have moved away from the traditional middle school model, and during the time of the research study, MMS operated more like a high

school. Gathering student perspectives and analyzing the data using a constructivist framework (by applying social-emotional theories of development) and past research on effective middle schools was crucial to understanding how the comprehensive school counseling program and future transition plans can effectively respond to student needs given the current structure of the school.

Researcher Background

I am the school counselor at this location, and because I work in the school, I am familiar with the school, administration, and student transition processes. I was able to easily gain permission from the administration to conduct research within the school. I am also familiar with the students and their parents and was able to get permission for students to serve as research participants. Relationships with the sixth-grade teachers allowed me to work with students during class time on data collection and analysis through the use of a photovoice project, written response, observations, and interviews. Familiarity with the school and its current transition processes were also considered when selecting this school as the site for research. Knowing the transition processes conducted over the past two years and being familiar with student and staff desires for future programming strengthened the direction of this project.

By working at a site where I am familiar with the students, I used long term working relationships with staff and students that were productive and enabled me to answer my research questions in a timely manner (Maxwell, 2013). Further, a key tenet of YPAR research is working collaboratively with students to determine challenges and solutions. Serving in a dual role as counselor and researcher allowed me to work with students with whom I already have an established relationship of mutual trust and respect.

Youth Researcher Participant Selection

This site allowed for a typical representation of students from rural Western North Carolina and conclusions should be applicable to schools with similar location and population. There were also enough students at the school to participate in data collection with a reasonable sample size that will contribute to validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the study. Student research participants were also able to be deliberately and randomly selected from a variety of ethnic, socioeconomic, academic, and social-emotional backgrounds.

Participants were selected through three phases to address the individual purposes and goals of each step in the Action Research Cycle. In phase one, four classes of sixth grade students were offered the opportunity to participate in data collection processes through submission of writing samples and a photovoice project. In phase two, seventh grade students were selected to participate in the data analysis and problem identification steps (using writing samples and photovoice data). At this stage of the project, twenty students were selected to be interviewed from the original group of sixth grade photovoice participants. In phase three, additional seventh and eighth grade students were selected to help create the transition program activities.

Phase 1. Two teachers were originally selected to participate in the project. Each teacher had four English Language Arts classes. These teachers were selected because their classes consist of students from diverse academic, ethnic, socioeconomic, and social-emotional backgrounds and abilities. The teachers and I have worked well together in the past and they are open to creative project-based learning in their classes. Ultimately, due to time constraints, only one teacher was selected for this project. Both teachers were willing to

participate, but limitations of conducting research at my job site and completing all required work duties only allowed me to work with one teacher and her four ELA classes. The demographic make-up of students in these classes still provided me with students from diverse backgrounds and varying academic abilities in all areas.

***Ms. G. Slides*.** Mrs. Slides (pseudonym) is a second-year sixth grade teacher. In the past, she taught English Language Arts (ELA) and Science. This year she is on a four-person team and only teachers ELA. Ms. Slides is enthusiastic about student progress and relates well with her students. She maintains professionalism but has a genuine rapport with her students. She creates rigorous classroom standards and expects that students meet those standards daily. Ms. Slides' classes were selected as participants because of her willingness to allow me to meet with students once a week for six weeks. She also ascribes to a pedagogy where learning should be flexible and allow students to make their own meaning of the world. Ms. Slides believes that children learn and grow as people through a variety of formats and methods.

During the first week of school, I introduced myself to the students in four ELA classes as the school counselor and discussed school procedures and my role in the school. Introducing myself during the first week of school is my standard practice at the beginning of the school year with all sixth-grade classes. The following week, I used a script approved by the Appalachian State Institutional Review Board (Appendix I) to introduce myself as a student researcher. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions about my dual role and the research project. All students were provided with a parental permission form (Appendix J) and upon return of parental permission were given a student assent form (Appendix K). The opportunity to participate was presented to 89 students, 76 of which

returned parental permission (see Appendix L for demographic information). Those students were again offered the opportunity to withdraw from the study and reminded that they could stop participating at any time they chose. I took a second opportunity to explain that there would be no repercussions for choosing not to participate and my role as their school counselor remained the same no matter what they chose. Additional information about the research process and lesson plans is in Chapter 4.

Phase 2. In keeping with qualitative research data collection methods, purposeful sampling was used to select seventh grade participants to serve as youth research participants (Creswell, 1998). The purpose in selecting seventh grade students to assist with research was to "discover, understand, and gain insight" about middle school transitions and student self-efficacy, and therefore the selected student research participants should provide information relevant to the purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Student research participants were chosen based on their ability "to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon" of interest to the researcher (myself) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 127). Participants were identified by on-site observations and previous informal conversations over a one-year period (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 127).

Several seventh and eighth grade students were considered to serve as youth research participants based on my observations and interactions with students at Mountain Middle School. After carefully researching the nature of YPAR, I selected a group of students to help gather and analyze data. The intent of the project was to meet the needs of sixth graders by creating a transition plan for students made by other students. The challenge in this was that I wanted this project to be fully based on student perspectives and not on my own. If I were to select a small group of five to seven students to assist with the project, then my bias

or the bias of teachers who might recommend students could potentially stand in the way of finding participants who have the best understanding of the student body and their perspectives.

Originally it was my intention to select two specific students from differing socioeconomic, ethnic and academic backgrounds who have shown leadership skills. The two students up for consideration were both in eighth grade and are known as responsible, dependable, and respectful students. They have taken on leadership roles in the past and have led other students in school advisory groups. Both students have personal characteristics that could have proven challenging for this project but given the developmental stage of adolescents it was to be expected that working with students would come with challenges. When working with students who face challenges working in groups, my role as school counselor superseded my role as researcher, and it would be my responsibility to help these students overcome these challenges and further develop their leadership potential.

In keeping with the organic nature of both YPAR and my counseling philosophy I did not ask the two eighth grade students to be a part of the project. Instead, I selected two seventh grade students after observing their unique leadership abilities and personal determination. The new students exhibited leadership qualities, dedication to their schoolwork, and a commitment to helping others. Although both students were female, their socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds varied enough to provide different perspectives on the project. Table 4 provides demographic information for each seventh-grade student.

Table 4.

Seventh Grade Student Research Participants

Student Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Grade Average	School Leadership	School Sports	Elective Classes
Lyla	Hispanic	F	A	Yes	Yes	Technology Art Mentor
Hana	White	F	A	Yes	Yes	Technology Art Mentor

Rationale for seventh grade student selection. The county where MMS is located offers grant money to student groups who identify challenges in their school and offer solutions to those problems. The two students (one student mentor and one member of the student LEADership team) selected for this project independently determined needs in the school and wrote grants requesting money to solve issues related to improving the mentor program and improving literacy skills of advanced students. Their student group advisors presented information about the grant to all students in the groups (mentors and LEADership team), and out of all students who were given the opportunity these two girls decided to identify challenges based on their own experiences and observations at the school. Then they responded to the grant questionnaire and then approached me, as their school counselor, to provide feedback on grammar and formatting. These two girls were unknowingly engaging in YPAR. At the time, they did not have an awareness of the impact they would potentially have on their school. The choice of students to approach about participating in this research study became clear. These two students had proven that they were already capable of thoughtfully considering the needs of others based on experiences and contributing to a YPAR project to improve their school community.

The next step was to approach them about participating in the research project. Prior to that experience, I would not have selected these two students. Although I was aware of their leadership roles within the school and their academic abilities, I had not observed them to be very outspoken, and even in personal conversations, they were unusually quiet and reserved. When I presented the idea of participating in the research project, they smiled and were hesitant to respond. I explained that there was no obligation to participate, and they could take a few days to talk it over with each other and their parents. The next day they returned their permission forms to my school mailbox without saying a word. They are a true personification of the phrase, "actions speak louder than words."

Sixth grade photovoice interviewees. Time constrains prohibited me from conducting photovoice interviews with all 75 participants. Twenty students were selected at random by picking their photo submissions and SHOWeD answers out of the stack. Students were interviewed independently or in groups of two to four students based on availability. Some students were called in groups, but if they were absent from school or engaged in a class activity they were called at another time.

Table 5 provides demographic information for these students. It includes student names (pseudonyms), race, gender, grade average and elective class enrollment. Student participation in school leadership programs and non-school affiliated sports are also indicated. This group provides a typical representation of the school population. Nine males (45%) and eleven females (55%) participated in the interview process. Nine students (45%) were white, four (20%) were black, and seven (35%) were Hispanic. Majority of the students (65%) were enrolled in Art or Music classes and 35% were enrolled in technology

courses. Four students (20%) participated in school leadership activities. Three students (15%) played sports that were not affiliated with the school.

Table 5.

Sixth Grade Photovoice Interview Participants.

Student	Race	Gender	Grade Average	School Leadership	Non-School Sports	Elective Classes
Thomas	W	M	A			TECH
Sarah	W	F	A			MUS
Melanie	B	F	B			MUS
Olivia	B	F	A	X		MUS
Garrison	W	M	A	X		TECH
Cole	B	M	A		X	MUS
Justin	W	M	A		X	ART
Walker	W	M	C	X	X	MUS
Leah	B	F	A	X		MUS
Shayla	W	F	C			MUS
Christian	H	M	D			TECH
Lexi	H	F	B			TECH
Taylor	H	F	C			MUS
Ryan	H	M	F			TECH
Sterling	H	M	B			TECH
Ariel	W	F	B			MUS
Nia	W	F	B			TECH
Naomi	B	F	A			MUS
Shea	H	M	B			ART
Jaelynn	H	F	B			MUS

Phase 3. After gathering data from the sixth-grade students, Lyla, Hana and I analyzed the data and drew conclusions about student needs (isolation). Then Lyla and Hana were asked to brainstorm transition plan activities that would meet the needs of incoming sixth grade students using evidence-based research and our data collection. Lyla and Hana decided when they needed additional support and insight of other students and selected peer youth research participants as needed. It was my belief that if I selected the entire group on

my own, I would overlook students who have great potential to serve as research participants or select students who would not work together cohesively as a group. Whenever additional support was needed (table 6), the research project was explained to the new participants and parental permission was granted. Students also signed an assent to participate (Appendix K).

Table 6**.**

Student Participants in Transition Activity Planning.

Student Pseudonym	Grade	Race	Gender	Grade Avg	School Leadership	School Sports	Elective Classes
Georgie	7	A	F	A	X	X	TECH
Adrian	7	W	F	A	X	X	TECH
Lois	7	W	F	C			TECH
Carmen	7	M	F	B			ART
Troy	8	W	M	C		X	TECH
Sadie	8	W	F	A		X	TECH
Jose	8	W	F	B		X	MUSIC
Henry	8	H	M	F			TECH
Tobias	8	W	M	A	X		MUSIC
Alec	8	H	M	C			TECH

Data Collection Methods

The qualitative nature of the study required that data was collected through a variety of sources and methods to serve as a tool for checking data sources against each other and aiding in identifying strengths and weaknesses of the data sources (Maxwell, 2013). Having "more than one type of respondent (triangulation) can contribute to eliciting more complex perspectives on an issue and to noticing more" (Glesne, 2016, p. 152). Including students from all grade levels and backgrounds provided a complex understanding of student needs.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth Participatory Action Research allows for multiple sources of data collection. The cyclical nature of action research project lends itself to responsive selection of sources of data. This research project began with my observations during the 2018-2019 school year, as the school counselor, of the need for improved transition programs for incoming sixth grade students. Prior to beginning the research project, I observed that the transition plan that was already in place at MMS seemed typical and had developmentally appropriate activities. I then observed that students were still struggling with academics, behaviors, attendance, and social-emotional skills.

Using information from these observations, I began to question why students seemed to be struggling given that MMS appeared to be doing all the "right" things for transitioning students. Further exploration of the problem through conversations with faculty and staff combined with knowledge from my current doctoral work led to this research project. I determined that YPAR would be an effective methodology for making decisions to improve the school. Photovoice is often used as a data collection method in YPAR and seemed appropriate given the nature of this project (Bayer & Alburququ, 2014; Lehtomaki, et al, 2013). After the initial introduction and instruction on photovoice, the subsequent steps of the project were to analyze initial data collected through the classroom lessons. Next, small group discussions or individual interviews were conducted using photos from the photovoice project. Beyond the initial stages of photovoice, further data collection methods were determined based on the results of student discussions and analysis of that information by seventh grade students. A *Student Sense of Belonging Survey* was administered to students who participated in the classroom lessons. Students were also asked to provide writing

samples about their experiences in school relating to connection and isolation. Figure 7 illustrates the research process concept that was created in May 2019. Figure 8 illustrates the actual progression of the research process conducted between August 2019 and February 2020.

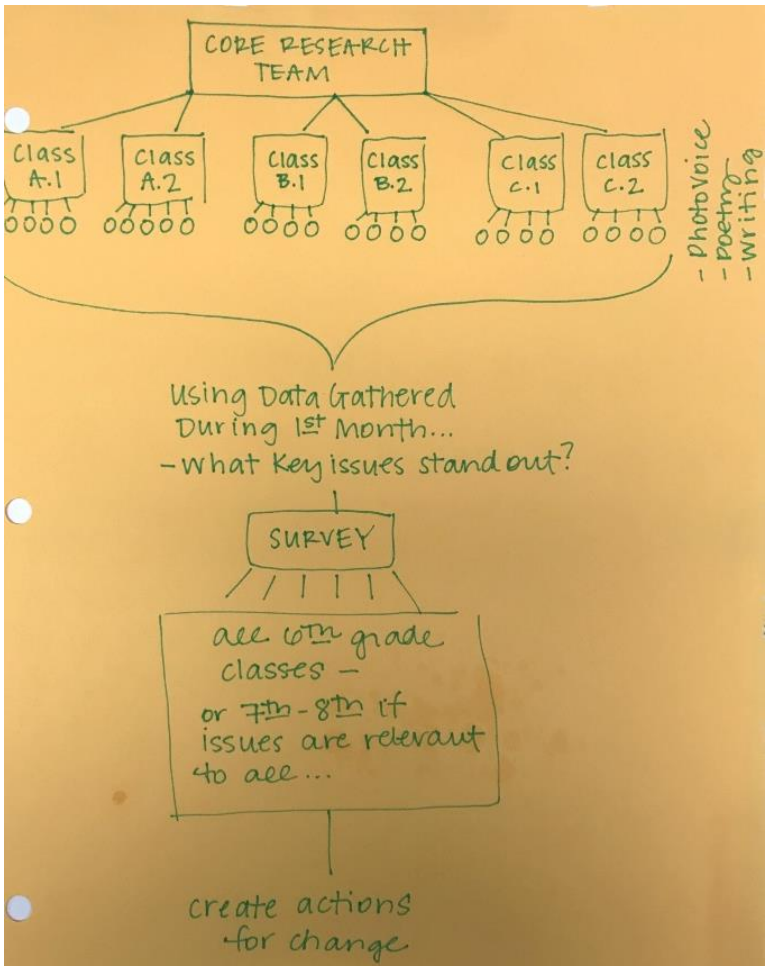


Figure 7. Initial research process phases.

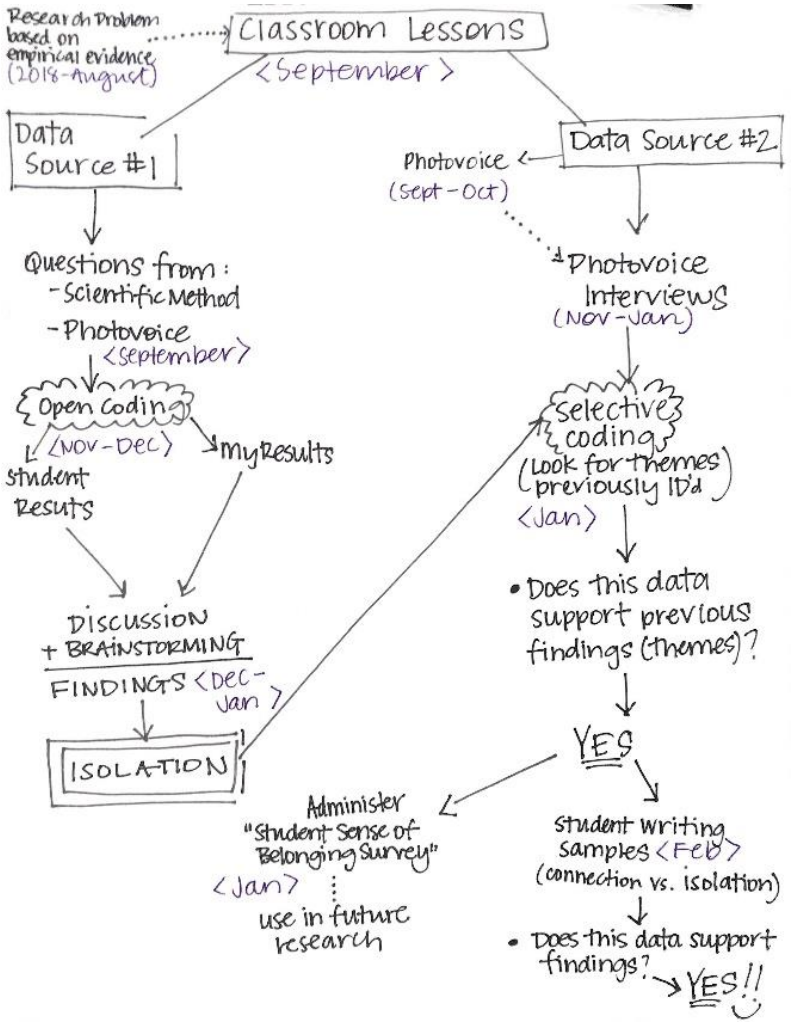


Figure 8. Research process flowchart.

Observations (August 2018 – August 2019)

Although a focus of this study was student perceptions about school transitions, observations were important for collecting data to describe the "settings, behavior, and events" that take place in the school (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102). Observations were conducted in the classrooms, during class changes, and in informal settings such as the school cafeteria or school dances. The student perceptions could be deemed irrelevant if there was no background information about the events taking place that are causing those

perceptions. Students do not simply perceive information without an event taking place prior to the perception. Drawing on psychosocial theories of behavior, an event must always precede a thought or perception and the subsequent behaviors (Cross and Cross, 2017). By observing students in their natural settings without giving them a structured activity, I was able to form a better understanding of how they interacted with each other and the school. Knowing how the students behave in a variety of settings helped me better understand their thoughts from writing samples and during the interview process.

Photovoice (September 2019 – October 2019)

Research in YPAR indicates photovoice is an appropriate methodology when working with young adolescents (Bandurraga & Gowen, 2013; Lewis, 2004; Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty & Aoun, 2010). The developmental needs of young adolescents lend themselves to this type of methodology. YPAR projects that use photovoice are based on the idea that people are experts in their own lives (Lehtomaki, et al, 2013; Levy, Cook & Emdin, 2019; Wang, 2006). I believe that students are the experts in their own lives and need an outlet to express their expertise. Youth sometimes struggle with verbalizing experiences or feelings. Using photovoice is a method that can generate discussion (written and oral) among students who may otherwise struggle to find their voice.

For this research project, students were introduced photovoice prior to beginning the actual project. Students were provided with articles and a video that described what photovoice is and the purpose of using photovoice in schools. In small groups of 2-3 students, they discussed photovoice and created their own definitions. As a class, students determined how photovoice played an important role in their lives and improving the culture of the school.

Interviews (November 2019 – January 2020)

The purpose of interviewing as a data collection method is to gain information about middle school transitions and student self-efficacy from a variety of perspectives. For this research study, unstructured or informal interviews were used. As a researcher, I "assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). I interviewed students and the students who participated in the photovoice project. It was important to be flexible with the questioning and allow the interview to have a conversational quality. This strategy alleviated some of the stress associated with being interviewed and voice recorded. The interviews were used as a basis to inform further study in the area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Data gathered through the interview process was used to create writing sample prompts to further triangulate the data and verify my findings.

Surveys (January 2020)

Student surveys distributed to all sixth-grade students with parental permission were used to gather large data sets about student perceptions of the transition process. Specifically, the *Student Sense of Belonging Survey* was given to the four ELA classes that participated in the writing samples and photovoice project. This information was collected in January 2020, but time constraints limited the use of this data during the research project.

The data collected will be used as the transition program is further analyzed over the summer break. Having a large data set to analyze will construct a more complex understanding of the data and can be used to make more effective decisions when implementing the transition plan in the fall. As the school counselor, I am still responsible for carrying out the transition programming and plan after the conclusion of this research. I

will use the large-scale survey data to make correlations between student sense of belonging perceptions, identified challenges for incoming students, and student achievement (Maxwell, 2013).

Writing Samples (February 2020)

After analyzing the data in phases 1, 2, and 3 I decided to further triangulate the data using writing prompts. Students were given the following questions and asked to respond:

1. Describe a time at school when you felt connected (joined or linked together to people in the school).
2. Describe a time in school when you felt isolated (alone or separate from people in the school).

I used this method to cross-check the major challenge identified through the initial data analysis. Overall students indicated that they felt isolated in the school. I believed that we had programs in place to help students feel connected. Since students still felt isolated, it was important for me to gather further information about what specific functions of the school were inhibiting feelings of connectedness and belonging.

CHAPTER 4: HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Our brains may not be developed, but we still have common sense.

~S.V., Seventh Grade Student

We are imperfect people in an imperfect situation - striving for perfect results. This philosophy is how I summarize middle school to my students. As educators, we take children during one of the most vulnerable life transitions and place them in a school with all new people, teachers, administrators, procedures and expectations (Jackson & Davis, 2000). We create "transition plans" that serve the needs of the school under the pretense of helping students successfully transition to middle school. Research on transition plans commonly list orientations, summer reading programs, mentor programs, school tours and scavenger hunts as developmentally appropriate activities to aid in a smooth transition. Yet somehow, even with the implementation of these programs, I have observed students still struggling academically, behaviorally, emotionally, and socially.

Gathering behavioral and academic data in a school to support research and planning is a relatively easy task. Schools document behaviors using classroom write-ups and office discipline referrals. Positive behavior can also be documented by schools that participate in programs such as Positive Behavioral and Interventions and Support (PBIS). Academic data is gathered through informal and formal classroom assessments, benchmark data, progress monitoring, and end-of-grade testing. School-wide outcomes become public record and are used by policymakers to determine the future school programs and funding to support the needs of the school.

Social-emotional data can be more difficult to document quantitatively, and this could be a reason that funding and programming for social-emotional learning (SEL) is often not a

top priority at the local, state, and national level (Dahir & Stone, 2009). School counselor data, which could include the number student and teacher referrals, observations, and case notes, could be used as indicators that social-emotional programming that meets the needs of students in middle school is still in need of improvement. Even when the data is present and shared with stakeholders, it is simply used to justify the job of the school counselor as a social-emotional support for students and not used to make decisions about school-wide programming to improve student outcomes (Harrington, Griffith, Gray & Greenspan, 2016).

If it is the intent of schools to help students successfully transition from elementary to middle school, then planning must be intentional. Qualitative and quantitative data gathered by school administration and school counselors should be used to analyze the actual needs of the students within that school district. Activities that go beyond checking the boxes of student tours, orientations, and meet-and-greet social time should be considered. Aaron Durant Allen's (2011) dissertation research on middle school transition programs in North Carolina concluded that "there is a shortage of formal, purposeful implementation of transitional best practice research within North Carolina middle schools and LEAs" (p. iv-v). His research interviewed 15 adults from three school systems across North Carolina. Three major themes emerged from the research. Of particular interest to this study is the theme of *connections*. Adults in schools believed that connections with students were important to creating successful transitions (pg. 38). His conclusion is also supported by current research on middle school transitions.

When considering busy daily schedules, the importance of standardized test scores, implementation of the standard course of study and academic programs, finding and creating connections with students can be easier said than done. Ideally, every student in the school

would have an adult advocate, class sizes would be minimal, grade levels would be divided into teams, and school counselors would have the ASCA (2010) recommended caseload of 250:1 (ASCA, 2010). Structuring a school with these formats increases the opportunity for students to connect with adults, other students, and the school culture (AMLE, 2010; ASCA, 2010). The reality for many middle schools is that students blend into the crowd, class sizes are large, grade level teams are determined by teacher licensure areas, and counselor caseloads are higher than recommended. Although there is research in support of small teams, no teams, K-8 education, and dedicated 6-8 middle schools, *personal connection* is the recurring theme that stands out in most middle school transition research.

Personal connection leads to resilience, self-efficacy, and motivation among students. This is all according to adults and years of research. The purpose of this study was to determine what students believe about their transition to middle school. Do similar findings emerge when middle school students reflect on their own experience entering middle school? Do students believe that connections with others are missing when they arrive at middle school? Do they believe that closer connections with other people would improve their overall transition experience and affect their success?

YPAR Methodology in Practice

This chapter provides a brief narrative of the steps taken in the Action Research Cycle used for this project. Each section provides a narrative description of the process used, procedures and data collection methods in that stage, as well as my reflections. This information is intended to create a step-by-step process for implementing YPAR programs in schools (specifically as part of a comprehensive school counseling program) and provide strategies to assist other schools in identifying student views on challenges and

solutions. Table 7 provides on overview of the YPAR methodology in practice. Full lesson plans to guide implementation (with North Carolina state standards for ELA) can be found in Appendix F. Chapter 5 further discusses the processes involved in the YPAR project and the results of the study.

Table 7.

Stages of Youth Participatory Action Research

YPAR Stage	**Structure**	**Participants**	**Activity Description**
1	Whole Class Lesson	6th graders	*Introduction of Self and Dissertation*
1	Whole Class Lesson	6th graders	*The Scientific Method*
1	Whole Class Lesson	6th graders	*Introduction to Photovoice*
2	Whole Class Lesson	6th graders	*Implementation of Photovoice (2 sessions)*
2	Whole Class Lesson	6th graders	*SHOWed Method*
3	Data Collection/Consolidation	Adult Researcher 7th Graders	*Card Sort Activity*
3	Small Group Discussion	7th graders (2 participants)	*Data Analysis & Problem Identification*
4	Individual Interviews	Adult researcher & 6th graders	*Photovoice*
5	Small Group Discussion	Adult Researcher 7th graders 8th graders	*Data Analysis & Problem Identification*
6	Small Group Discussion	Adult Researcher 7th graders	*Creating Goals and Plans*
7	Sharing Plans	Adult Researcher 7th graders	*Presenting at Conferences & Local Stakeholders*

Stage One: Training

Introduction of self and dissertation. This project was conducted with four English Language Arts (ELA) classes in sixth grade. The first step of conducting research with human subjects is an introduction. At this point, sixth grade students were already familiar with me as their assigned grade level counselor. During the first session with the class, I re-introduced myself as a doctoral student and researcher who is interested in the development of middle school students. I explained that I wanted to know what they thought about their transition to middle school and would like their help making middle school a better place for everyone. It was explicitly stated that although I appreciate their help, they were not obligated to assist in any way. Students would not be penalized if they chose not to participate and this activity would not be for a grade. I would also continue to help them as their school counselor whenever they have a problem or concern.

After the initial introduction of myself as a researcher, my personal goals as a doctoral student and my interest in middle school student transitions, all students who had parental consent (Appendix J) began the research process. Students who chose not to participate or did not have parental permission worked on a different project with their teacher and seventh grade mentors in a small group in another room.

Whole group meetings were held each Monday over the course of six weeks. Each lesson in phase one and two was conducted with four classes of students with approximately 15-20 students per class. Whole class lessons included a review of the scientific method, introduction to photovoice as a data collection tool, implementation of photovoice, and how to make meaning of photographs. Lessons were conducted in the ELA classroom and media center. Time constraints limited the lessons to thirty minutes.

Researcher reflection. I was afraid that separating the students out of the room may cause an issue or feelings of isolation. I had a discussion with the students in the classroom that it was okay for those who did not want to participate. Those students were not any different and they were choosing to use their time in a different way. We discussed that it was okay to talk about the project, but not to make other students feel like they were doing something wrong by not participating. In the end, it was not reported to me that students who worked in the small group felt negatively about the process or believed that they were being secluded in some way. The teacher spoke with the small group about their choice to use their time differently and assured them that they were not missing anything by choosing this group over the research project group.

Introduction of the scientific method. The first lesson took place during the first week of September. Students had been in school for two weeks at this time. At the time of the research, students were learning about the scientific method in Science class. I took the opportunity to connect their prior knowledge of the scientific method to the stages of research they would be assisting with. Students were asked to list the steps of the scientific method as a class. Once the students listed the steps, we reviewed the meaning of each step and students gave examples based on prior knowledge. I then told the students my research question (What do middle school students think about the transition to middle school?) and hypothesis (I think students would do better in school and have more friends if we had a better transition program). After the whole group instruction, each student wrote their own research question and hypothesis about middle school transitions. (Note: Although the use of a hypothesis is not typically found in qualitative research, students were still instructed to formulate a hypothesis to support the sixth-grade science curriculum). Students volunteered

to share their questions with the class. The content of the questions varied widely but offered initial insight into the students current thought processes and concerns. The initial questions aided in the development of the next whole class lesson. Questions from the students included:

- "Why can't 6th graders play sports for the school?"
- "Why do we have dress code?"
- "How come 6th graders don't get as many opportunities as 7th and 8th graders?"
- "Why don't we see other students in the school?"
- "Do friends actually change?"
- "Why do we lose some of our friends?"

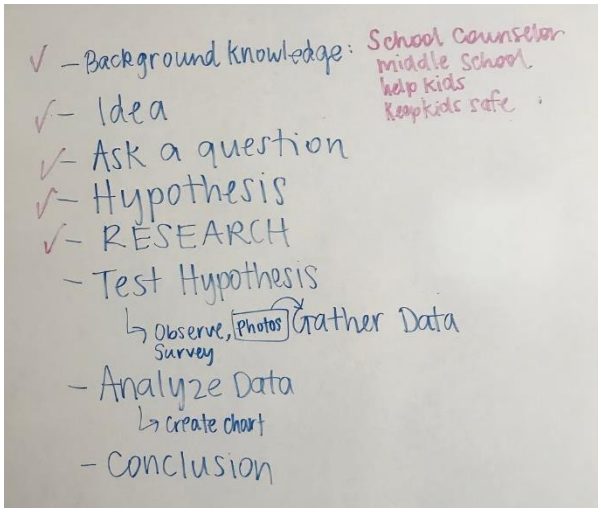


Figure 9. Example of the class discussion and understanding of the scientific method.

Researcher reflection. I wanted to begin the project as soon as possible so I could get very early reactions to the transition to middle school based on the transition activities in which the students had participated. At the time the YPAR project began (Fall 2019) the current transition plan had already been implemented (Spring 2019 - Fall 2019). An assistant principal and I visited the students for a question and answer session at the end of their fifth-

grade year. Students had been on a school tour the previous Spring that focused on understanding elective classes. The visit to the middle school also included a "dress code fashion show." Students also had the opportunity to visit the school for an orientation two weeks before school began and an open house one week before school began. Students also spent the first week of school learning the school policies, procedures, PBIS expectations, and being introduced to "Leader in Me" principles.

The inclusion of the scientific method was not an original intent in this project. During a classroom visit, I realized the students were learning about the scientific method and I decided to connect the class content to a real-life experience. It was my intent when conducting this research to relate the activities to class content as much as possible. Whenever I ask a teacher to allow me to use their class time, I believe it is important to create connections between my work as a school counselor and course content. This provides real-life connections for students and also creates a relationship of respect between myself and the teachers. When I respect their class time and show my interest in supporting the content, they are more receptive to my use of their class time for counseling instruction and activities.

Introduction to photovoice. Prior to providing students with cameras, they were presented with information about the purpose of photovoice as a data collection method. It was important that students understood the purpose of taking pictures so they would provide relevant data for the project. First students watched a brief video on YouTube. The video is nine minutes, but we began with the first two minutes of content. The video outlines the photovoice process from beginning to end. The first two minutes answered our essential question (What is photovoice?) for this lesson. During the video, I paused after important points and asked the students to reflect on what they had seen and heard. Students were then

directed to get into groups of two or three students. They were given two developmentally appropriate articles about photovoice (Bandurraga, Gowen & The Finding Our Way Team, 2013), a whiteboard and markers. Students read the articles and listed key words and phrases for ten minutes. Key words listed by students were: community, engaged, policy, promote, voice, environment, youth participatory, empower, positive, perspective, challenges, self-confidence, story-telling, strengths and challenges, youth, discussion, promote, and marginalized. Students volunteered to share their key words or phrases with the class. Then students used the information from the video and the key words and phrases to create their own definition of photovoice. They were invited to share their definitions with the class. Definitions created by students included:

- Photovoice is "a unique tool that gives kids the power to learn."
- Photovoice is "a process of how you collect information and how you share it."
- Photovoice is "a way to encourage people to help their community."
- Photovoice is "a way of inspiring and empowering youth to influence other youth and to learn more about their community."
- Photovoice is "a form that helps people with little rights to speak their mind."
- Photovoice is "a way for children to interact with each other."
- Photovoice is "where kids can explore their community and learn more about it by taking photos."

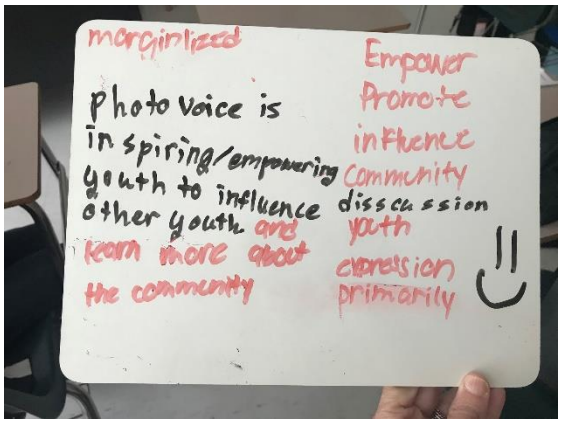


Figure 10. Student example of keywords used to create a definition of photovoice.

Researcher reflection. This is the session that was the most meaningful for me as a researcher. I did this same lesson with a group of sixth grade students the previous year in my role as a school counselor, but I did not use the video. I added it to this lesson because only a few of the students really grasped the concept of the articles the first time I taught photovoice. I used that experience to make improvements on the lesson.

I was impressed at the ability of this group of students to work together to create a definition about such an abstract topic. The students seemed to understand that photovoice was a way for students' voices to be heard by important policymakers. They understood that students do not generally have a voice in decision-making processes at the school and that this was a way to accomplish that goal. I worried that the students would not understand that photovoice is used to make community-level changes, but they grasped the concept of using this method to help contribute their ideas to something larger than themselves. This experience was significant to me as a researcher because the students were able to take information from two different formats and create their own meaning. This was the first step in the process of highlighting that students can make their own meaning of information, offer valuable perspectives and can use that information to affect change.

Stage Two: Data Collection

Adult researcher observations. I gathered and recorded observational data throughout the first five months of school. It is part of my job as a school counselor to observe student behavior daily and make determinations of student needs. As a researcher, I focused on viewing these observations through a more theoretical lens and asked myself questions about student behaviors based on the theories discussed in this dissertation.

Researcher reflection. This is an area where I had to be especially cognizant of my dual role. I observe all students every day as part of my school counselor role. I felt the need to be aware of which students I was observing and how I was applying theories of development to their actions or behaviors. Once I was in the practice of applying the conceptual framework from my research to use a theoretical lens to make determinations about student behaviors, I found it practically impossible to not analyze all student decisions, actions, behaviors, and social-emotional issues through this lens. As a practitioner I believe this is a great way to make more effective decisions on behalf of the students, but I wanted to also be aware that not all information observed as part of my job would necessarily be relevant to this research. I also wanted to be aware of ethical limitations associated with the inclusion of some information.

Implementation of photovoice: Session 1. Students were naturally most interested in the implementation stage of the photovoice project. Each week they begged to use the cameras but were patient and understanding of the process. Prior to receiving cameras, students were given a sheet of paper with brief instructions and a reminder of confidentiality (Appendix M). They were asked to write one question they had about middle school. Then they wrote a memory of the first day of school and a place in the school that represented that

memory. They also listed a place in the school that made them feel comfortable and a place that made them feel fear.

Students were given a digital camera (checked out from the school library) and five minutes to walk around the building and take pictures of the places and objects that represented their ideas/feelings. There were not enough cameras for each student to have one, so they were allowed to choose groups of two to three students to share cameras. Some students opted to work alone. Students were instructed to take a picture of their paper with their student desk number. This process was used to identify which photos belonged to which students once the photos were printed.

Researcher reflection. I began by asking student to only take two photos because I wanted to be certain that students understood how to use the cameras, how to walk around the school responsibly, and how to manage their time. Although developmentally I expect that middle school students are able to walk around independently, as an adult in the school who is responsible for their well-being and behavior, I still felt the need to test this theory using a shorter period of time. I wanted to teach the students the skills necessary to understand the process before giving them an extended amount of time to explore the school. All students were able to walk around the school and return to the classroom at the specified time. I stood in the hallway to monitor behaviors and assist students when needed. Some students had questions about how to operate the cameras. Other students asked permission to go outside and take pictures. Most students used the time responsibly and only went in areas where they would not disrupt others. One group of girls did enter a classroom where instruction was taking place because they wanted to look at a cute boy. I made a note to myself to remind students during the next lesson to only go in areas where no instruction was

taking place. If they needed a picture of a particular room that was occupied, they should take a picture of the door or the nameplate on the door.

I was most surprised by the places students listed as providing comfort or producing fear. In a few cases, my assumptions about where students felt comfort or fear in the building were directly challenged. For example, seventeen students listed the library as a place where they felt comfortable, safe, or helped them become a better learner. My previous observations and brief conversations with students led me to believe that many were afraid of the library. Students enter quickly and quietly, select a book and then leave. I assumed that if a student were comfortable with a location, they would stay longer or have more interactions. Similarly, I was surprised to see that the gym was a place of fear or could be made better. Regular observations of PE classes show students interacting, laughing, playing, and moving. These behaviors led me to believe that the students were having a good time, and this would be the area listed as being most comforting. Seeing this data and comparing it with my assumptions about students only further verified my thoughts that sometimes adults do not understand what students need. It is therefore imperative that we seek out meaningful conversations with students, and this YPAR project suggests that photovoice is a powerful method for eliciting and extending these conversations.

Implementation of photovoice: Session 2. The following week, students were given a paper that listed several prompts that they would use to take photos around the school (Appendix N). They were also asked to write a new question they had about middle school. Students spent approximately ten minutes in class individually brainstorming their questions and ideas of places in the school they would go to take photos (see table 8). The same procedures for taking photos were used during this session. Students were given

approximately fifteen minutes to take pictures and return to the room. They were reminded of *Leader in Me* (Covey, Covey, Summers & Hatch, 2008) principles and instructed that "proactive students would return to the room by the designated time." They were given confidentiality reminders and the opportunity to ask questions. Some students wrote "no faces" under the confidentiality reminder indicating that they had a concrete understanding of the term. At this time, the questions asked were mostly procedural. Students wanted to go outside to take pictures, so we discussed making plans for getting back in the locked building if they went outside. They were reminded to be respectful of instructional time and not enter classrooms where they would disrupt learning. I was also explicit in asking them to not enter rooms just to see their friends, but to remain focused on the task.

Table 8 shows examples of student questions and important places in the school.

Table 8**.**

Student Question Samples and Photovoice Image Locations.

Question	First Day	Enjoy	Safety/Comfort	Worry/Fear	Six Teachers/ Classes	Made Better	Better Learner	Friendships	Changes	Who You Are
Can 6th graders be Falcon Friends?	Lost	Food	Library (Calm/Quiet)	Gym (Getting Hurt)	Graduate (Happy)	Cafeteria (People playing in food)	Classroom			
How many classrooms are in the school?	Happyness	Playing Outside								
How many lockers are there?	homeroom	lunch	counselor		cafeteria	picnic tables	math	health		
Why are there so many rules?	Homeroom	Lockers	back table in homeroom	bus	homeroom	cafeteria	poster	desk	bathrooms/ body	
Why are we so lonely sometimes?	Talking to old friends	Talking to people in free time	Classroom	Bullying Poster			Classroom	Central Perk	Counselor	Posters
Why can't 6th grade have lunch first?	Fun, Sad, Boring	HPEX	Chorus	PE	Lockers	Lunch	Chorus	Reading	Lockers	6th grade hall
Why can't all grades be outside at the same time?	me standing in the breakfast line	math	classroom	ISS	homeroom	chorus	classroom	outside	health	PE
Why can't we do more stuff with other grades?	Central Perk	gym	Homeroom	bus	poster	bathroom	library	gym	front door	poster
Why can't we go to the coffee shop every day?	Falcon in front of library	Bus	Classroom	Principal	Homeroom	Bathroom stalls	Books in library	Where we sit in the morning	Leader boards	lockers

Researcher reflection. This session took place within the first month of the school year and this was one of their first tests of independently walking around the school without

adult supervision to complete a project. Overall, students did well and were able to handle the project responsibly. Most students walked around in groups of three to five students. There were one or two students in each group who preferred to work independently.

I was impressed with how well this session went and how responsible the students were. I had an expectation that students might try to take advantage of this freedom, but none of the students acted in a way that was inappropriate for their age or developmental stage. Some of the students went to the eighth-grade hall to take pictures and could be seen standing and talking with each other for brief moments. I interpreted this as an appropriate attempt of gaining independence. I did not say anything to the students since they were meeting the expectations of taking pictures, and they were not disrupting any classes or attempting to enter the eighth-grade classrooms. The students returned to the classroom at the expected time.

Further reflection on this moment, five months later, I believe that spending the first four sessions clearly explaining expectations and allowing students to practice the process with two pictures was the best method. Although the students were eager to begin the photo project immediately, outlining clear expectations has had a benefit for me as the school counselor over the past five months. I have noticed when I enter the room that the students become very quiet and diligent in their work. Many of them say “hi” or call me over to look at their work or share something with me, but they become quiet and focused. One of the teachers recently commented on the change in student behavior when I entered the classroom. This may have to do with other factors outside of the photovoice project, but at the beginning of each session I did remind the students that I would always give them the chance to talk and I would always be willing to listen. I told students during this project (and

still remind them) that "When it is my turn to talk, it is their turn to listen. When it is their turn to talk, it is my turn to listen." This seems to have carried over into our relationships throughout the rest of the year because when I go in a classroom, I simply say "eyeballs" and the students know I have something to say and they are expected to listen. I then always take the time to hear their responses and answer questions. Using the photovoice project was a great way to help students learn my expectations and to establish a relationship of mutual respect between myself and each of the students.

The SHOWeD method. After students were given two opportunities to take pictures, their brainstorming papers and photos were returned to them. They were asked to select the three photos that were most meaningful to them. Students returned to the classroom and we began the discussion of the SHOWeD Method (Bayer & Alburqueque, 2014). Students were given a paper with the SHOWeD Method questions:

- What do you **S**ee here?
- What is really **H**appening here?
- How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
- **W**hy does this condition **E**xist?
- What can we **D**o about it?

Using whole class instruction, students were provided with an example of how to answer these questions. The students were shown a plant (from the classroom). They were asked to describe what they saw. Students described the plant (yellow, green, flower) and the pot (teal, purple, butterfly). Students were then asked what the flower might actually represent. They responded with ideas such as growth, change, and life. When asked how this related to their own lives, most students struggled with making this connection. One

student was able to articulate that this flower could represent who they are as middle school students: they are changing a growing like the flower in the pot. They need lots of sunshine and care to grow properly. Students determined this particular condition would exist because it is a natural stage in life. They determined that they could ask for help when they need it as a response to the final question. After the classroom discussion of the plant example, students were given copies of the SHOWed Method questions. They were given time to write their answers to the questions about their individual photos. The SHOWed method is based on oral and collaborative discussion, and because the student images were personal and could be based on private emotions about experiences, I did not conduct a whole class discussion of the photos. The individual and small group interviews were used to discuss experiences, feelings, and suggestions for change using the SHOWed method.

Researcher reflection. The original intent was for students to take a picture of their paper with the student desk number prior to taking photos to help with organization. Using the student desk number instead of their name was the process selected to help students remain anonymous to anyone other than myself. Several students forgot to do this meaning that there was no way to know to whom the photos belonged. Several students took the same photo and some students took multiple photos to represent one idea. Seventy students participated and I had over 500 photos printed. I knew I was only going to ask them to pick their favorite three photographs, so I took all the photos to the media center and spread them out on the tables. Once students used their brainstorming sheet to determine their three most meaningful photos, they went to the library and selected those photos from the table. All students were able to locate their picture using this process. Although this is not ideal and

may not be how to conduct photovoice in its truest form, limitations of time, money and resources in a school often mean you must improvise to achieve an outcome.

This part of the project seemed to bring the most confusion for the students. They seemed unclear about taking a picture to represent an idea. I expected that there would be some confusion from the students about this part of the project because we were moving away from concrete ideas (like the scientific method and forming questions) to abstract ideas and physical representations of ideas and feelings. I know that not all students have entered the formal operational stage of cognitive development and therefore this task may be challenging for some. Using whole class discussion and presenting the classroom plant as an example of how to answer the questions clarified the process for most students. Two out of the four classes seemed to have a better understanding of how to proceed in answering the questions about their own photos.

Stage Three: Problem Identification

Data collection/consolidation. At the conclusion of the data collection sessions, I worked independently as the researcher to consolidate some of the data. The next step in the plan was to work with seventh and eighth grade students to make determinations about challenges and needs of sixth grade students. I had several stacks of papers and hundreds of photos. I wanted to make the process of interpreting the data easier for these students. I typed all of the questions submitted by students from the scientific method lesson in a spreadsheet. I created columns that categorized the questions based on major themes I identified. I sorted through the SHOWed Method papers and removed any paper that was blank and did not have photos attached. I again listed the questions in a spreadsheet and

categorized questions by major themes created from the scientific method questions. Twenty submissions were selected at random to conduct student interviews.

Researcher reflection. This data brings me back to the original problem that started this research project. Transition programs serve the functions of the school and not the students. So based on quantitative analysis of the data (which indicated several questions were about functions of the school), it stands to reason that educators create programs that address the daily functions of the school. It would be easy to stop there with a final conclusion, but in schools we work with people so it is necessary to perform a qualitative inquiry of the data collected. In both lessons, the question that is most frequently asked by students is, "Why can't sixth grade students play sports for the school?" The frequency of this question baffled me. Most students do not play sports. What does this have to do with transitions? Why is this question so prevalent? And although sports participation is a function of the school, why is it the most important function to the students? Sports are not even played during the school day. They do not receive a grade for sports. Sports have no place in the daily life of the average middle school student.

I consulted my co-counselor on this subject and without hesitation she said, "Sports connect people." Finally, it made sense. Sports connect people. A function of the school (not allowing sixth grade students to play sports) is inhibiting human connection. Students who play sports have connections with teammates and coaches. In my twelve years of experience as an educator, one of the fastest ways to improve student behavior or engagement is to call their coach. But what about students who do not play sports? They still have a role in athletics. They are spectators in the stands. Cheering on their peers and

serving as a supportive friend, if only for that moment. For a brief period of time, students of all backgrounds can become connected through a sporting event. They become a team working together toward a common goal. Given the opportunity, students can assist in athletics through volunteering to set up and clean up games. They help with ticket sales and concession stands. And of course, they are all brought together during school spirit weeks and pep rallies. As magical as that all is - what do schools do when the LEA does not allow sports in the sixth grade? How do schools foster those important connections? Research shows that small teams, adult advocates are keys to connecting students and schools. For schools where budgets and staff are limited, how do we pull this off? How do we create genuine connections between the school and the students?

Card sort activity. The next step in the process was to present the consolidated data (with all identifying information removed) to the seventh-grade students who had been selected to assist in the final stages of the project. I typed all the student questions from *the scientific method* and *introduction to photovoice* lessons. The two students were given the list of questions and asked to sort questions into major themes or categories. The students elected to use the white board to write the questions in similar groups. They used different color markers for each category they created. They were not given any information about themes previously determined by myself. I also did not provide any information about previous research on middle school transitions. I wanted to see what information the students would create on their own based only on questions asked by sixth grade students. It took the two seventh graders approximately one hour to sort the questions into four categories. The categories the students determined were: freedom and opportunities, feelings, "why" questions, and miscellaneous (which the students labeled as "other"). The

most similar category between the students and myself was freedom and opportunities. I labeled the categories as independence and connections, but many of the questions between the two overlapped. We also determined that freedom, opportunities, and independence had similar meanings and could be considered synonymous for our purposes.

Researcher reflection. I left the room and sat in the adjacent library. I did not want to be with the students during this process because I thought it was important that they made their own choices concerning themes of the questions. I did not want them to feel pressured or persuaded to respond in a certain way because of my presence. The girls were able to come ask me questions if needed but performed the activity independently. They did not finish during the thirty minutes they had to work, so they elected to come back during their afternoon free time to continue working. The girls ended up spending approximately two hours total working with the data.

Stage Four: Additional Data Collection

Individual & group interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with students about their photos using the SHOWeD method. In lesson six, students wrote their ideas about their photos on a paper with SHOWeD method questions. This process was used so students would have time to independently reflect on their pictures and gather ideas prior to the individual interviews. My experience in working with middle school students is that they sometimes become quiet or shy when answering questions or working in a small group. I am also asking students to take a concrete image and create an abstract meaning. This process may be easy for some while difficult for others depending on their current level of social-emotional and brain development. My intent was not to make students feel nervous or pressured to create results, so I included time for brainstorming and writing thoughts and

ideas prior to having conversations. The English Language Arts teacher kept the SHOWeD method papers in her room so students would have access during the following week to continue reflecting and brainstorming ideas during free time.

Once students had been provided time to write their ideas and create meaning from the photos, I collected all papers and photos. Due to time constraints, I knew I would not be able to interview all 75 students who participated in the project. Twenty student submissions were selected at random. Those students were then interviewed individually or in groups of two to four students. The process for determining if a student was interviewed in a group or individually was based on their class schedule and availability. To avoid removing students from core classes, the interviews were conducted during their elective classes. If a student was absent or participating in a required activity, they were interviewed at a later time. So, if my intention was to interview three students in a group, but only one student was present or available then I continued with that one student. Since student groups were selected randomly and not based on academic ability or personalities, then I was not concerned about the number of students who were in the final interviews. Details of the interview results can be found in Chapter V.

Researcher reflection. This was the most difficult part of the project for me as a researcher with the dual role of school counselor. The lessons were more time consuming than the interview portion, but it is easy to schedule a classroom lesson and let other teachers know that you will be unavailable during those time periods. There were several days where I intended to speak with students about their photos and gather their thoughts about the transition to middle school, but then a crisis would arise and that need would take priority over conducting interviews. An independent researcher would most likely not struggle with

this same limitation since their role would solely be to collect data from students. Another limitation was student availability. Even if I was available, students may have been absent or busy in class. Although I had other students to select from, this meant locating those students and calling them in to my office. This was not a major limitation but did take away approximately 15 minutes of my available time which limited the length of the interview.

I felt the most frustration when trying to conduct these interviews because the timeline did not go according to plan. I believe in the future when conducting YPAR or photovoice projects with students it will be less frustrating because I will not have the dual role responsibilities and time limitations for completing the project. Although the school year does present a time limit, the research will not need to be completed by a certain deadline for the purposes of writing a dissertation.

Informal conversations. Informal conversations were had with students who were part of the research study. As data was collected and analyzed by myself and the seventh grade students, we developed further questions about the student responses. I called the student participants in as needed and asked relevant questions to their responses to gather further data. There were also times where I would see the student in the hall, the classroom, or the library and take that opportunity to speak with them. Informal conversations pose a limitation when conducting research because documentation is not always as structured as it needs to be.

Researcher reflection. As a school counselor, I work with the students who were participating in the study every day. An outside researcher would not have this same opportunity. This dynamic presented itself as beneficial and challenging. I was able to access students at a variety of times on different days to gather data and have discussions

with students. As questions arose during the data analysis process, I could call a student in and gather additional information through informal conversations. This opportunity made ongoing data collection and analysis easy.

My practice as a school counselor is to be among the students throughout the day. I spend very limited amounts of time in my office. I always try to be present and available to the students and teachers to best meet everyone's needs. Because this is my practice, I spend most of my time in the classrooms or the media center where I can easily form relationships with all students. The challenge I faced was when working on data analysis was that it would be easier to ask whichever student was nearby what their thoughts were on a topic. It would be easy to bounce ideas off the students who were with me at the time. Since this was a research study, I needed to differentiate between gathering ideas from all students to assist in the planning of the transition program and gathering ideas from students with permission to participate in the research study. Another challenge was diligently recording all responses. Most days, I am juggling several student needs at one time. For the purposes of my job, I can make quick notations of tasks and information. For the purposes of research, I needed to make more in-depth case notes of conversations and responses. Time constraints and the constant interaction with students made it difficult to perform this process to fidelity. For future projects, I anticipate that this stage of the YPAR action research cycle will become easier because I will not need to limit which students can participate in data collection and analysis. I will also be able to make quick notations of ideas and discussions without keeping detailed research notes.

Stage Five: Group Data Analysis & Problem Identification

Small group discussion. The small group discussion phase refers to the discussion of major themes and data points between the seventh-grade student participants and myself. Working together as a group, we participated in the equal sharing of ideas about the data gathered. I presented my ideas, themes, and findings from the data to the seventh-grade students. They also presented their ideas, themes, and findings. This process took five separate meeting times. Each meeting lasted approximately 30 minutes. After five meetings, we were able to determine that a major challenge faced by sixth grade students is isolation. The insight provided by the students was integral to determining an overall challenge faced by students. For the purposes of this project, identifying themes from data would not have been sufficient to complete the action research cycle. A major challenge needed to be identified in order to continue with the final steps of the research process. The themes provide insight to the lives and concerns of sixth grade students but addressing each of those themes would not ultimately benefit students. Understanding the underlying issue (isolation) faced by students allowed the seventh-grade students and me to move forward in creating goals and an action plan.

Researcher reflection. After the first thirty-minute meeting and small group discussion, the girls look exhausted. It was evident that they were tired of thinking. They offered to stay in from lunch and continue working, but as their school counselor I thought it was important for them to go to lunch and have time to socialize with their peers. Working in a dual role as a researcher and a school counselor can present challenges, and this was one of those moments. As a researcher, I am on a deadline and need to get this work completed. As a school counselor, I need to look out for the best interest of my students. This was an

instance where my role as a school counselor superseded my role as a researcher. As a researcher and counselor, I want to hear what my students have to say. I want them to contribute their ideas. I want them to learn how to research and create ideas. I want them to advocate for the needs of other students. As a researcher, I want to work full speed ahead and meet my deadline. As a school counselor, I need to know when my students need a break. I need to remember that they are learning how to research, but they are also learning how to stop and allow their brains to process the information. I must also remember that they are thirteen years old and socialization is an important part of their development.

I was extremely pleased with the outcome of our discussions, and at the same time I felt frustrated by the outcome. I was pleased that the students were able to identify a challenge for our students. It excited me that their conclusion was backed up by research. On the other hand, I am asking myself if I just spent all this time researching and putting a YPAR project in place just to find the results that we have known all along? The answer to that question is yes and no. Although I was feeling ready to throw in the towel on this project, I proceeded forward with the students in creating solutions to the challenge.

Stage Six: Creation of Goals

Creating a plan. We, the seventh-grade students and I, began by creating a goal for incoming students and the school. Our school teaches the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) by Steven Covey using "*The Leader in Me" (2008)* programs. Our students are taught that they must always begin a project by creating a goal. Appendix O provides a table of the seven habits, attributes of each habit, and notes on how we have addressed those habits when creating a plan. We created the following goal:

> We will create a transition plan that includes intentional activities directed toward the personal, emotional, social and academic growth of all

> students. We will know we have achieved our goal when overall attendance rates improve, student behavior incidents decrease, students show growth on end-of-grade tests, and counselors report participating in more proactive school programming versus reactive response to incidents.

Once the goal was created, we reflected on past transition plans using the students' knowledge and memories. The seventh-grade students who assisted in the planning stage had experienced two transition programs at the time of planning. They were participants in the transition program as fifth grade students (2017) and assisted in guided school tours and other activities as sixth grade students (2018). They were able to access prior knowledge combined with current data on sixth grade perspectives to help guide decision-making when selecting activities.

During the small group interviews about the photovoice project, current sixth grade students also provided information about transition plan activities they thought would be beneficial in creating student connections. They reflected on their experience during the previous year's transition activities. Students were able to explain what activities they thought worked well and which were not beneficial. They also added new ideas for the upcoming program along with activities that could be carried out throughout the school year. Details of program plans, and sample activities are in Chapter 5.

Researcher reflection. This was my favorite part of the project. It was like magic watching it all come together. At this point, the seventh-grade students took the lead and recruited other students (both seventh and eighth grade) to assist in the process. This is where we moved from level six to level seven of Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (Head, 2010). The students took the project and began to make it their own. The recruited friends to help with the decision-making process and shared results with me. They came up with ideas and concepts that I would never have dreamed of using.

One girl thought we should have fifth grade students make slime. She explained that slime is made up of two ingredients that come together to create something fun. She thought that the fifth-grade students and the current middle school students were like the ingredients in the slime. Once we put them together in a bowl (the school), they come together to make something great. They would synergize to create results. This student was addressing the challenge our sixth-grade students face (isolation) by using a developmentally appropriate activity (making slime) and addressing one of the Seven Habits of Highly effective people. Mind blown. As an adult, I did not know that making slime was appealing to eighth grade students. I certainly never considered the synergy of the ingredients as a comparison to students working together to achieve goals. Here we have it - middle school students can use concrete ideas to create abstract meaning of the world around them. They can create ideas that will be effective contributions to the creation of an elementary-to-middle school transition plan.

The only limitation I experienced at this stage was, once again, the dual role of researcher and counselor. Many of the students who were working to create the plan are also mentors to the sixth-grade students. These students interact daily with sixth graders and have taken ownership of helping other students improve grades, behaviors, and address social-emotional concerns. Observing the mentor program having the desired effects of the research was inspiring and motivating. It was important to remember though that the focus of the research was not on the mentor program, but on the creation of a transition plan. The students did notice that their mentees were improving from one quarter to the next, so they decided to include the mentor program as a transition plan activity. They provided feedback

to improve the current program so it would be an effective piece of the upcoming transition plan that would address the identified challenge of student isolation.

Stage Seven: Presentation of Plan to Stakeholders

The final stage of the action research cycles is the presentation of ideas to stakeholders. A main tenet of YPAR is giving voice to marginalized populations. Tenet sixteen, as developed by McTaggart (1998), states that participants "can show how the evidence they have gathered and the critical reflection they have done have helped them to create a developed, tested and critically examined rationale for what they are doing." The students and I worked together to gather data and then engaged in conversations about the information gathered. We analyzed, discussed, reflected and had further discussions on all the information collected. I asked the seventh-grade students difficult questions about their ideas. They in turn asked me difficult questions about my ideas. They also provided information and insight that I did not possess as an adult who is sometimes far-removed from the life of middle school students. We used the ideas created through our conversations to develop a transition plan that would address the social-emotional, academic, and behavioral needs of students as well as the functions of the schools. Then we collaboratively used Google Slides to create a presentation to use when sharing our ideas with important stakeholders.

Researcher reflection. We are fortunate to have an administration that is open to ideas from students. Each month our principal hosts an activity called "Pizza with the Principal." One student from each homeroom is invited to come ask questions and present ideas. Since the school already promotes a culture of sharing ideas, presenting information to the administration was not a major source of anxiety for the students. That is not to say they

did not experience anxiety, but rather the students know that their ideas will be listened to and a response to their efforts is provided. They understand that not all ideas will be accepted, or changes made, but there is a willingness from adults in the building to validate their opinions.

CHAPTER 5: WHAT DID WE SEE?

I think Jean Piaget said it beautifully: When you teach a child something, you forever take away his chance of discovering it for himself.

~Magda Gerber

The voices of middle school students are glaringly absent from transition planning literature. Studies that consider student ideas have been conducted, but often are written through the lens of the adult studying the students. The purpose of this research study was to understand the perceptions of middle school students about their transition from elementary school through the lens of students. The data collected was used to identify challenges faced by middle school students. The plan was to work collaboratively with middle school students to create a transition plan that addressed the identified need. The study began during the first month of the students' sixth grade year and continued through the creation of a transition plan during the second semester.

The research served multiple purposes and met my needs, as well as the needs of individual students, and the school. Research conducted answered questions about the elementary-to-middle school transition period, served as a tool for helping students identify challenges within the school, and act as agents of change to create a more positive school climate. Goals of YPAR and the comprehensive school counseling program were also met through this research.

The research findings in this chapter come from data which included observations, informal conversations, images and unstructured interviews from a photovoice project, a school sense of belonging survey, and documented student questions about middle school. Data gathered from classroom lessons were independently reviewed by me and then

by seventh grade students. Initial data gathered through the classroom lessons answered the first research question:

- What assumptions do sixth grade students make about middle school based on their initial experiences?

After collecting and analyzing data as a team with Hana and Lyla (from the classroom lessons and photovoice project), a key challenge was identified. Seventh grade students determined the sixth graders felt isolated at school. Several questions were asked about participating in sports and not spending time with other students in the school. Students were concerned about what opportunities they would have to participate in school activities and leadership positions. There were many questions about why they would lose friends. The data indicated that students assumed they would not have any friends, would be alone, and not be involved in school activities.

Once a primary challenge was identified, I worked with several more seventh and eighth grade students to answer the remaining research questions.

- How do middle school students believe their transition into middle school could be improved?
- What types of initial experiences/activities do students believe they need to be successful throughout middle school?

Keeping in mind the identified key challenge sixth grade students face, we (the students and I) worked collaboratively to identify ways the school community was impacting students and creating an atmosphere of isolation. We developed an action plan to address the key concern. The action plan created was in the form of a transition plan for incoming fifth grade students.

This chapter provides details of researcher and student results, photovoice narratives, student writing samples, and connections between theory and results. The final section of the

chapter reports key findings and how they were addressed in the transition plan. Practical use of results are also discussed.

Results

Overview

Prior to giving any information from the classroom lessons and photovoice project to seventh grade students for analysis, I independently reviewed the questions gathered from sixth grade students during the *scientific method* and *photovoice* lessons. I began the data analysis in this way for two reasons. First, I was not certain what type of results to expect. At this time, I had very few preconceived notions about how students viewed their transition to middle school. My assumption at the time was that students might describe the transition as "scary" or as an event that made them nervous. Beyond that I did not know what conclusions would be drawn from the data. During the initial review of the classroom lesson data, I used open coding to identify items that were interesting, intriguing, or stood out amongst the rest as being directly related or unrelated to research literature (James & Slater, 2014). Second, raw data can be "messy," and I wanted to consider the inexperience of seventh grade students before giving them stacks of handwritten questions with incorrect spelling and poor grammar. To best get an idea of what students are actually saying in the questions, I wanted to remove any barriers (handwriting, spelling, grammar) and allow the seventh-grade students to focus on the content of the questions. I typed all questions from the classroom lessons data into a spreadsheet. All questions were typed as written with spelling errors removed and punctuation corrected.

Primary Data Results

My results. To begin the process of data analysis, I collected all the questions asked by students during the *scientific method* and *photovoice* lessons. Students submitted a combined total of 121 questions about middle school during the two lessons. Questions were entered into an Excel document with tabs indicating which lesson the questions were submitted. I first sorted the information into similar questions based on the topic. For example, questions about lunch (regardless of the question content) were grouped together. Then I reviewed the content of the questions from the *scientific method* lesson (64 questions). Themes were created based on content and my interpretation of the questions' meaning. I identified eight major themes: functions of school, friends, physical setting, understanding self and others, connections, changes, technology, and independence. I categorized the *photovoice* lesson questions (57 questions) using these same eight themes. Questions could fit into multiple themes. I reviewed questions that fell into more than one theme and narrowed down the number of themes to six. Friends, understanding self and others, and changes were combined into one theme called interpersonal relationships. These were combined because questions in these categories generally fell into all three. Functions, connections, and independence each had the most questions from both lessons and were identified as the major themes to be considered and explored during photovoice interviews.

Table 9 provides a pictorial representation of how I initially coded and sorted the data. At that time, I had not drawn any specific conclusions about the data or identified any major challenges students face while transitioning to middle school. My primary intention was to familiarize myself with the data so I would be prepared to discuss ideas with the

seventh-grade students or help guide their conversation if they had trouble identifying themes. As I sorted the data, themes began to emerge.

Table 9.

Responses and Themes from Classroom Data Lessons.

Scientific Method Lesson						
Number of Responses	Finished Responses	Unfinished Responses	Top Themes	No. of Questions	Overlapping Themes	No. of Questions
72	64	8	Functions	36	Function & Connections	13
			Connections	26	Function & Independence	20
			Independence	26		
Photovoice Lesson						
Number of Responses	Finished Responses	Unfinished Responses	Top Themes	No. of Questions	Overlapping Themes	No. of Questions
65	57	8	Function	48	Function & Connections	31
			Connections	31	Function & Physical Setting	7
			Physical Setting	7		

Once I identified three major themes, I looked at all questions that were labeled as being a function of the school since that theme had the most questions. I was intrigued by this result since it was my belief that focusing on the functions of the school during transition programs does not improve personal outcomes (social-emotional, behavior, academic) for students. My assumption prior to beginning the research was that students would have more questions about connections, friends, changes, or interpersonal relationships. To further familiarize myself with the data, I took a more in-depth look at the questions within the

"functions" theme. I created new thematic labels to determine any secondary themes of the questions asked about functions of the school. Identified secondary themes were locks/lockers, lunch, academics, dress code, technology, and opportunities (leadership or sports). From the 84 questions categorized as functions, two questions focused on locks, seven questions were about lunch procedures, nine questions were about dress code, thirty-one questions about leadership or sports opportunities available to sixth grade students, and nine questions about academics. All other questions that did not fit in a secondary theme were labeled as miscellaneous. Examples of questions asked, and the associated secondary theme are in Table 10. Questions were sorted into secondary themes to make determinations about the content or meaning of the questions. If I were to perform a quantitative analysis and solely focus on the number of questions asked in the functions theme, I may make the assumption that students were concerned about locks and lockers, schedules, walking in the halls, and other school procedures. Based on my experience with creating transition plans, these concerns (school functions) are a primary area of focus in current documented transition plans. I theorized that creating plans that meet the needs (functions) of the school was not beneficial to students, it is now imperative to perform a qualitative analysis of the data to draw accurate conclusions about student perceptions. Inaccurate assumptions such as those stated above may be a root cause of gaps in current literature about middle school transitions.

Table 10.

Secondary Themes and Sample Student Responses

Secondary Theme	No. of Questions	Examples of Questions
Opportunities	31	How come 6th graders don't get as many opportunities as 7th and 8th graders? Why can't 6th graders play sports for the school? Can 6th graders be student mentors?
Dress Code	9	Why do we have dress code? Why is the dress code so strict? Why is the dress code more intense for girls than boys?
Academics	9	Why do we have EOGs? Why do we have homework? Why do we have long classes?
Lunch	7	Why are we the last to go to lunch? Why isn't lunch longer? Why do they serve mostly chicken?
Interactions	6	Why can't we do more stuff with other grades? Why do 7th and 8th graders see each other more than 6th graders?
Technology	5	Why can't we have phones in our interest group? Why can't we listen to music on our laptops? Is there a day we can play with electronics?
Locks	2	Why can't students have key locks? Why don't we have more locker time?

My findings. After spending several hours reading through the data, I still had no conclusions about a major concern or key challenge faced by sixth grade students. What was this data telling me? Fortunately, a main tenet of YPAR research is the collaborative effort between an adult researcher and student researchers (Soleimanpour, Brindis, Geierstanger, Kandawalla & Kurlaender, 2008). I did not have to rely on my own understandings or assumptions of the data. The goal of the research was to understand what students believe

about middle school. YPAR offered the perfect methodological strategy to analyze the data through the equal sharing of ideas with students.

Student results. After I spent several hours cleaning up the data and typing student responses into the Excel sheet, I gave the information to Hana and Lyla, the two seventh grade students selected to work as student research participants. Hana and Lyla were given background information about the study but were not given any information about prior research findings on middle school transitions or middle school student development. I wanted to see what they would deduce using their own background knowledge and middle school experiences. I provided the girls with a list of questions and asked them to sort the questions into "like" categories or themes and then label those categories appropriately. The girls were told to look for key words or phrases, but to be sure and think creatively about what students might be saying or wanting to know. I did not give explicit instructions on coding and wanted the girls to engage in an inductive coding process (Christians & Carey, 1989). I wanted Hana and Lyla to sort the questions in a way that made sense to them, so I was brief in my instructions (Peterson, 1998). I selected this strategy (called *card sorting*) because it is a technique with which I am familiar and is often used in career counseling. The card sort activity is an approach used to engage people in creating narratives about their own lives. Card sorts are grounded in constructivist theory and assist people in creating constructs about their world using limited amounts of information. The cards are sorted as a symbolic representation of a person's values, goals, and interests (Brott, 2004; Osborn & Bethell, 2009).

Within two hours (over a few meetings), they categorized the data, labelled with major themes and had begun analyzing what the data meant. Appendix P shows an

illustration of how the students categorized the questions using a white board. The girls were given the information paper to sort but wanted to write on the white board using colored markers to indicate themes. Hana and Lyla created four overall themes. The themes were freedom and opportunities, feelings, "why" questions, and miscellaneous (which the students labeled as "other"). Once the girls sorted the questions into themes, I asked them to explain what the themes meant and why those themes were significant. Table 11 illustrates their explanations and examples of questions in each theme.

Table 11**.**

Student Identified Themes, Descriptions, and Sample Questions.

Themes	Descriptions & Samples
Freedom & Opportunities	**Questions in this category are mostly about why sixth grade students do things within the school differently than the seventh and eighth grade students.**
	Why is the dress code more intense for boys than girls?
	Why don't we get a lot of freedom?
	Why don't we see other students?
	Why can't we play sports?
Feelings	**Questions in this category are personal questions.**
	How does middle school change you mentally and physically?
	Why do we lose some of our friends?
	Why do we feel like we are ignored sometimes?
Why/Where are/is…?	**Questions in this category are "random things" that the students want to know.**
	How many classrooms are there?
	Where is the 8th grade hall?
	Why do some people have mentors?

Collaborative findings. Hana, Lyla, and I then engaged in a conversation about the questions they labeled as *freedom and opportunities*. I decided to start the conversation here

for two reasons. First, these themes were most like the questions I labeled as *connections and independence*. Second, these themes included the largest set of questions from the data. The conversation started slowly, and the girls were noticeably timid about sharing their ideas. Their reluctance was not surprising considering the usual power dynamic between adults and students in schools. The topic was also about identifying challenges within the school. In my experience students can be fearful of telling adults what is "wrong" with the operations of the school. It was important that Hana and Lyla understood that our discussion was not about "right" and "wrong" and I would not be offended by their feedback. I reminded the girls that this conversation was intended to be an equal sharing of ideas and that the purpose was to understand their perspectives to help create better programming for future sixth grade students.

To help move the conversation forward, I shared some of the research about adult perspectives on school transitions and activities that improve student outcomes (George, 2012). I explained to the girls that schools are often focused on improving grades, behaviors, and attendance. The girls then concluded that "influence" was an important word to concentrate on. They believed that students are influenced by home environment, by school, and by the students in the school. I then asked the girls what they thought influence might have to do with student success. They responded that seventh and eighth grade students do not interact much with sixth grade students because of the way the school schedule is set up and the layout of the building. Even when students from all grades do have the opportunity to interact (at school dances or sporting events), the seventh and eighth grade students choose not to because they view sixth graders as being inferior. The older students almost forget what it was like to be a sixth grader. Hana and Lyla also said that since the school does not

allow sixth grade students to have leadership roles until later in the school year and does not allow sixth graders to participate in sports that they are again excluded from the school in that way and are not finding positive influence. We did not discuss home influences at length since the focus of the research was on school transitions. Our conversation continued until eventually Hana concluded that although unintentional, the other students and the schools were working to isolate sixth grade students. Limited opportunities to engage in sports, clubs and leadership roles coupled with the layout of the building was causing sixth grade students to be isolated from others. They were not able to connect and that may be a reason the sixth-grade students struggle with the transition.

Further research. Once the students identified a key issue, the next step of the action research cycle (Figure 6) was to conduct additional research to triangulate the data findings. Triangulation of data was key to ensure we were drawing correct conclusions about students' needs and creating a transition plan that would be effective at Mountain Middle School. At this stage of the research process time was of the essence, so Hana and Lyla were tasked with further reading about transition plans while I began the photovoice interviews.

I shared a few pages of research from a dissertation on how high schools have implemented programs to aid in student success (George, 2012). I asked Hana and Lyla to use that information to create a list of ideas that they believed would best address our school's need to help students feel more included. Once the girls created a list of activities, I asked them to brainstorm all the positive attributes of those activities and all the challenges we would face in the middle school if we implemented those programs. Hana and Lyla created plus/delta charts to identify the strengths and weaknesses of activities in the research. They also included charts for year-long and classroom plans that could aid in the

success of students. They were not instructed to include year-long activities or classroom plans but believed these were important aspects of the transition plan. Figure 11 shows samples of the student plus/delta charts. Appendix Q provides a table of all activities suggested by students and the associated benefits and challenges.

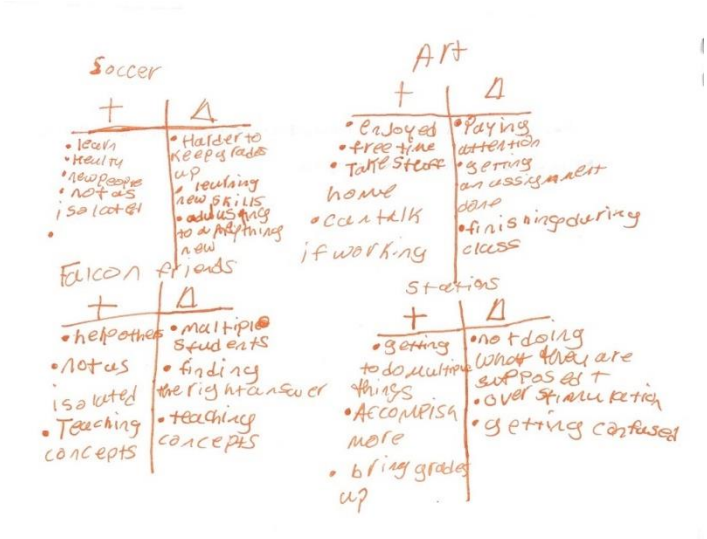


Figure 11. Student sample of PLUS/DELTA chart.

Secondary Data Results

Overview. Student photovoice interviews were conducted in December of the students' sixth-grade year. The timeline for interviewing students and analyzing other data did not go according to the original plan. By the time I was able to conduct student interviews, the seventh-grade student research participants had already provided me with their input from analyzing the questions asked during the *photovoice* and *scientific method* lessons. We had already begun discussing key challenges and made initial determinations about student needs. Hana and Lyla were analyzing transition plan activities from other sources and making decisions about which activities would best suit our school and student concerns. The deviation from the original timeline presented some challenges, but none that

were detrimental to the validity of the study. The change in process ultimately provided an opportunity for triangulation of data.

The challenge was to keep in mind the information Hana and Lyla shared with me about student concerns while conducting interviews that were not biased. My fear was that I would lead students to answer questions in a way that would fit with the findings from the earlier analysis of data. I wanted to be careful of this and not lead students to answers when discussing their photos.

During the interview process, I was careful to use the SHOWeD method to guide the discussion. I used an unstructured interview format to allow a natural flow of the conversation. I also relied heavily on my counseling knowledge of Socratic questioning to ask for clarification or to probe for more information. I wanted to remain unbiased and ask questions that reflected the answers provided by the students to gain as much insight as possible. For instance, when a student gave a response to a question, I might respond with "tell me more about that" or "explain to me what you mean by that." Using these prompts allowed the students to further develop their thoughts without me placing or forcing my interpretation on their ideas. I was also careful not to tell the students the results of previous data analysis. I did not want the students to feel like they needed to answer in a certain way to appease me or gain approval.

The interview process started with a reminder to the students that I wanted to know more about their views on the middle school transition process. I again explained that they did not have to continue to participate (all interviewees had signed parental consent and student assent), but I would be interested in their thoughts of the pictures they took. Each student gave also verbal permission to record the interviews. Since the students are minors

and I was their school counselor, I felt it was important to remind them of their rights and ask permission to continue working together at each step of the process.

Although I was careful not to lead the discussion in any way, I did use selective coding when analyzing the data gathered during student interviews. I independently examined the information to determine to what extent the interviews aligned or disagreed with the major themes and ideas from the submitted student questions (James & Slater, 2014). Hana and Lyla were provided with an explanation of selective coding and instructed to find key words or phrases that verified our previous analysis. They were also asked to find any new supporting or contradictory information. Hana and Lyla also independently reviewed the transcripts. It was important for me to give the girls ample time to work independently because I did not want them to feel pressure to produce certain outcomes. I wanted them to have freedom and independence in making decisions and not rely on me for input. An important part of YPAR projects is helping students learn self-efficacy and allowing Hana and Lyla to work independently from me gave them the chance to attempt a challenging task that is different from what they often do in school.

Student narratives. For the study to remain true to its intent, the student voice must prevail over any desire to connect student narratives to previous findings (Carter, 2018). A balance between the interpretation of raw data with the intent of emphasizing student voice and analyzing data using selective coding had to be used to provide the most in-depth analysis of student narratives. The narratives from individual and group interviews with seven students are included. These were selected because they were the most conversational in nature and provided the most data-rich information for the study. They provided the most

details about the challenge of student isolation and provided feedback on how to improve school policies and procedures to address the challenge.

It is documented in research that middle school students develop mentally and emotionally at different rates, which was evident during the interview process. While some students contributed well-thought out and meaningful responses that provided clarity and insight into the lives of sixth grade students during this time of change, others were more superficial and tangential in their responses. Some students were only able to describe the photo or events that might take place in the location of the photo. They were unable to explain what the photo meant for them or how that meaning affected their life or the lives of other students. Their responses were concrete and therefore did not yield information that was beneficial to this project.

Table 12 includes student names (pseudonyms) and demographic information for each participant included in the narratives. Four of the seven students in the narratives were male. Three of the seven students were black and the remaining four were white. Four of the students have an average grade of A on their report cards for the 2019-2020 school year. The remaining students have averages of B and C. Three students participate in school leadership activities and three play sports on teams not associated with the school. Two students were enrolled in technology electives and the rest were in music or art.

Table 12**.**

Student Demographics for Narratives.

Name (Pseudonym)	Race	F/M	Grade Avg	Leadership	Non-School Sports	Elective
Sarah	W	F	A			MUS
Melanie	B	F	B			MUS
Olivia	B	F	A	X		MUS
Garrison	W	M	A			TECH
Cole	B	M	C			TECH
Justin	W	M	A	X	X	ART
Walker	W	M	C	X	X	MUS

Melanie and Olivia. Melanie and Olivia were the first two students to be interviewed in December. As their school counselor I was familiar with who the girls were but had not interacted with them in a counseling session. At the time of the interview, I had interacted the most with Melanie. During one of the photovoice classroom lessons, I was attempting to pass out papers while also collecting papers. It was the end of the class period and the students were about to transition to the next class. The atmosphere was becoming chaotic. Melanie walked up to me and very calmly said, "Let me take those from you." She then proceeded to collect papers from the students. Melanie had the ability to read my emotions and respond accordingly. Although seemingly insignificant, this interaction stuck with me. I was less familiar with Olivia but had spoken to her one time about a misunderstanding with a classmate. During that interaction Olivia was willing to admit her mistakes and her part in the miscommunication. She was quick to understand the feelings of her classmate and offered an apology to her peer. Both girls possessed the ability to understand others and respond accordingly. At the time I selected the girls to be interviewed, I did not remember

this interaction with Olivia. It was not until reflecting on their interview in February that I recalled these interactions and realized the similarities in their personalities.

I called Melanie and Olivia to my office during their elective class and asked them to discuss their photos. Both students were willing to participate and said they were comfortable working with each other. These girls are in different classes and attended different elementary schools but were familiar with each other.

Melanie and Olivia provided particularly intriguing and insightful information during their interview. I asked the girls to look at the three photos they had submitted as part of the project. They were asked to select one photo that was the most meaningful to them. Melanie volunteered to discuss her photo first. Her image was of the eighth-grade hallway (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Eighth grade hallway.

She selected this picture because the eighth-grade hallway represented the overall idea that middle school is a big step in the life of an adolescent. It is a time in life where students are given more responsibilities, things in life get a little harder, and you must start

caring for yourself. This picture related to her own life because she felt shocked when she first came to middle school. Melanie wondered what would happen once she arrived. She was afraid of getting lost, not knowing anyone in the school, and being alone or not having any friends. During Melanie's discussion of her photo, Olivia interjected, "I agree" when talking about fearing loneliness and not being liked by others.

The girls continued the conversation together with a few verbal probes from me, such as "say more about that," during the interview process. The conversation very quickly turned from an interview, using the SHOWeD method, into a very comfortable conversation between the two girls sharing their thoughts and opinions on the transition process. I became a spectator of the conversation and allowed the girls to talk freely about whatever came to mind. They were very focused and remained on topic without much guidance from me.

They determined that the three main fears they had about middle school were: getting lost, not having friends or being alone, and their lockers. I asked them to elaborate on the idea that they would not have friends or be alone. This comment was surprising to me and I wanted clarification because the girls appear very well-adjusted and I see them interacting with friends and classmates throughout the school day. My assumption of Melanie and Olivia was that they were well-liked and would not struggle with these issues.

They talked about how middle school is a time where people often choose friends with whom they can get in trouble or make bad choices. Melanie thought that if a student was able to sit back and observe others' behaviors, they could potentially make better choices about with whom to make friends. Both girls thought that if you tried to understand others and found other people that understood you, those would be the best people with which to make a connection. Reflecting on my initial interactions with the girls at the beginning of the

school year, it should have been no surprise that they had these thoughts about how to make healthy friend choices.

At the time of the interview, the girls had been in school for four months and they felt like they now had a “home” at the school. They knew their way around and saw familiar faces everywhere they went. Olivia believed it only took approximately two weeks to start to feel more comfortable at the school. I asked if they thought this was the case for all students. Melanie said she knew that for some students the transition process may take longer, and they both were still able to identify students who they believed were bullied for being different and had not made good connections with others. At this point the conversation hit a lull so I turned to Olivia to interpret her photo using the SHOWeD method.

Olivia took a picture of a “character trait” poster (Figure 13). For her this poster represented how students should act in middle school. People with these character traits are “good friends and do not bully others based on their appearance or how they smell.”

Figure 13. Character trait poster.

Olivia and Melanie continued to discuss bullies but thought that the situation with others not exhibiting positive character traits improved throughout the year. Melanie determined that overall student behaviors improved since several students had been disciplined by administration for bad behaviors or mistreating others. I asked the girls why they thought some students bullied other student for because of differences.

Melanie stated, “Middle school is a big change that not all people are able to process. They don’t know how to treat others because everyone changes so much.” Olivia thought that “some students act this way because they are jealous of others or because they are trying to get into friend group. Sometimes those friends make bad decisions and get each other in trouble.” The girls then described a complex scenario that I labeled a “friend triangle.” In this scenario, a bully may lose friends because of their bad behaviors, but then realize that they need to change in order to regain friendships.

Regardless of the topic, the conversation with Melanie and Olivia always seemed to return to friendships. The girls said that "middle school students make a lot of choices based on friendships. If they show good character, act like a bully, or making bad choices, it all goes back to an attempt to make and keep friends. Middle school students will do almost whatever it takes to be included." In the introduction to the interview, we covered the SHOWeD method questions: What do you see here; What is really happening; and How does this relate to our lives?

The next question we discussed from the SHOWeD method was: Why does this problem or strength exist? I wanted to know why making friends was so important that students would make choices that they knew were wrong or could lead to trouble. For the girls, it went back to choices. Melanie said, "if everyone would make good choices then we would not have to deal with bullies or boy drama." Knowing that all the current programming we use in schools is not always effective at helping students make good choices, I asked them, "what can we do differently?"

The girls were very quiet, and Melanie whispered, "That's a hard question." I asked them how long they had been taught about making good decisions in school. They knew that they had been taught since pre-k to make good choices, and they did not know why students still made poor choices. Peer pressure, fear, the desire to be liked, and wanting to look cool on social media were all cited as reasons for poor choices. Melanie stated that she "wished we could know what was in people's minds so we could fix problems quicker and no one would get hurt." Although never explicitly stated, at this point in the conversation both girls seemed concerned for the safety of others at school. Even though we could not definitively answer the "why," we still moved on to the final question: What can we do about it?

The girls' creative juices began to flow at this question. Their demeanor changed, and they sat up a little taller. They had several ideas on how to make the transition to middle school a little easier for students. They believed that students needed more individual attention. I asked if they felt like students needed another, older student to talk with. The girls disagreed and believed that each student needed more individual time with an adult because adults were more "relatable." Olivia also thought that many of the students had parents who "did not care about them" and that is why they needed an adult at school they could go to for help. This answer was somewhat surprising to me. I had assumed that students would want more time with other students. Their conclusion supported the AMLE statement on middle schools that each student needs an adult advocate in the building (AMLE, 2010).

Melanie suggested that the school should spend more time explaining the rewards for good behaviors and the discipline for bad behaviors. The time spent during the first week of school explaining procedures was "not enough" and that should be done more frequently throughout the year. They thought that videos of students and teachers modeling bad behaviors and consequences as well as good behaviors and rewards would provide a clearer picture for students. This analysis of how the school is currently approaching its expectations speaks to an area of improvement needed by the school. Research suggests that when students have clear expectations and are given time to reflect on how they meet those expectations, the students are more likely to develop self-efficacy (Kohn, 1999).

Creating activities where students could move around the room and interact with a poster of "good versus bad" to help them understand school expectations was also suggested. Their conversation indicated that more classroom lessons from the counselor on expectations

would be good, but both wrinkled their nose when I used the words “classroom guidance.” That seemed like a very elementary idea to them, but they did think that there should be more visits to the classroom from the counselor in the first two weeks of school. Melanie also mentioned that small counseling groups would be beneficial for certain students, especially those getting bullied. She thought that they would find commonality with others and not feel so alone through the group counseling process. Melanie had not been a part of group counseling in elementary school but remembered seeing her elementary counselor meet with small groups.

From there the conversation bounced between how strict teachers are and how strict they should be. They talked about whole class punishments as being unfair to those students who follow the rules and were respectful. Both Melanie and Olivia indicated that trusted students should be able to pick partners for group work while students who get in trouble should be assigned partners.

Then they moved on to discussing ideas for summer transition programs, such as practicing how to have “outside time” as a middle school student and lockdown drills. They suggested that fifth grade students complete an interest inventory and then middle school administration place students in classes together who have similar interests. I explained to the girls that we usually group students based on grades, abilities, EOG scores, and teacher recommendations. They understood this process, but still thought that grouping by interests would have a greater impact on a student’s ability to feel connected in their first year. They also thought being grouped by similar interests would be a useful tool for creating orientation or open house groups. The conversation circled back around to feeling safe at school and the common term “snitches.” Olivia said that “true friends tell when they want the best for

them," and that when people tell teachers about problems they are just trying to help. The conversation again turned to the need for more small groups and students who are bullied. Melanie believed that by putting students who are bullied in a small group and having other kids talk with them, they will be able to build confidence and feel more connected with other students. In short, they would not feel so alone. Melanie again described a small counseling group focused on mindfulness that she knew about from her elementary school. Her recognition of this need is supported by research (Anfara & Schmid, 2017) which indicates students need to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging to experience social-emotional and academic success.

At this time the conversation concluded because the two students had been out of class for one hour. They were surprised at how long they had been talking, and both thought the conversation had been "fun." Melanie stayed behind and asked if she could talk with me more about the small counseling group for students who were being bullied. We set up a time to speak the next day about the group. A short time later, I received a Google doc with information and details she created about the small group. It included a list of student names who would be potential participants.

Receiving the email and Google Doc from Melanie indicated to me that the photovoice project was already producing the desired results. A student performed the simple act of taking a picture. Through an unstructured conversation she was able to explain the significance of that picture for her and what it meant for other sixth grade students and the school climate. Melanie was able to explain her ideas on what we could do to improve the situation for next year's students. Then she took it to the next level. She felt a sense of autonomy through the project and took it upon herself to create guidelines for a small

counseling group that would help students who feel bullied find connections with others. She identified a need in the school and created a plan for change. She had the confidence to share it with a stakeholder who could help implement the change (myself, the counselor).

Sarah. Sarah was also selected at random from the twenty submissions. She and I had met several times for a variety of reasons prior to the photovoice interview. Sarah struggled with decision-making skills and maintaining passing grades. Her academic abilities were not evident in her grade average during the first semester of sixth grade. She could make better grades than she was, but often allowed herself to focus on maintaining friendships or meeting peer expectations instead of her schoolwork. Sarah struggled with the social-emotional transition to middle school and it had an impact on her academic success. Sarah had been assigned in-school suspension once during the school year for an accumulation of minor incidents. She had also received out-of-school suspension for being involved in a physical altercation with a friend. During our meetings (as counselor and student) she would talk about interpersonal relationships and her desire to "stay out of drama," but then struggled to follow-through with her desires.

I was going to interview Sarah and Naomi at the same time. Sarah was interviewed independently because of Naomi's availability at the time of the interview. We met at the end of the school day and had approximately 45 minutes to complete the interview. If there had been more time, I would have selected another student to meet with us.

The conversation with Sarah took the full amount of time allotted for the end of the day and was tangential throughout. Generally, I allowed her to speak freely about whatever topic came to mind. Most of the conversation was about her interpersonal relationships with

friends at school, the hierarchy of girls in the sixth grade, and the "rules" for interacting with others. For instance, as a rule, "it is okay for a friend to be bossy to another friend. It is not okay for a girl to be bossy to another girl who is not her friend." Sarah talked about bullies and how to include people who are different or may be left out from the general population.

I asked Sarah to select the one photo that was most meaningful to her while I got a notebook to write important ideas. She selected an image of a mural on the hallway wall. The mural has six silhouettes of a person growing from a baby to adulthood (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Progression of life mural.

Initially when I asked Sarah why she took this picture and why it was significant to her, she gave a mixed description of what she saw in the photo and her interpretation of the meaning. She said, "I took the photo because it's like, it's a nice, like it's like a baby, then it's like a toddler. Whatever it's called. But then there's a middle school, high school and then college and graduation. And it's like showing how you grew up in different stages in life. So, it's the stages of life and growing up."

I rephrased the question as, “What does that mean to you? How does that relate to you at this stage of your life?” She seemed to understand that phrasing of the question better and responded that this image meant students should “not give up and keep growing up and don’t rush their lives. Don’t give up and don’t rush your life ‘cause you’ve got your own time.” Hana and Lyla marked this quote as significant to the study and determined that the new theme “growing up” was evident in this interview as well as others.

I asked Sarah to tell me more about the idea of growing up and rushing life. Sarah believed that she tries to act like she is grown and the boss of everyone, and this image serves as a reminder to stop rushing through life and trying to be a grown up. She stated that she needs to slow down because she has the rest of her life to be an adult. She knows that at school she acts like she is “all that,” but also knows that at school she cannot be an adult or the boss because the principals are the “bosses” at the school.

There were two times during the conversation where she switched between discussing who she is at school and who she is at home. She made several comparisons between her school personality and her home personality. Although I did view her information about her home personality as relevant to her development, I did redirect the conversation back to her relationships with students at school and in her class. After the third instance of switching the conversation back to home, it became apparent that she was trying to lengthen the conversation to avoid returning to class. As is my practice as a school counselor, I was upfront with her about her possible avoidance of going back to class by changing the subject from the SHOWeD method questions. She simply smiled.

The conversation continued about the girls in her class and the hierarchy of who is in charge. Some of this is based on student age (who is the oldest) and some is based on

personality. Her discussion of interpersonal relationships focused on the "rules" of being a girl and how people could interact dependent on the status or level of their relationship. Sarah explained the "rules" through an experience she had with friends in sixth grade.

> I felt like she (a friend) judged me when I was like being my goofy self and it's just, I didn't like it. Then like I even wanted to confront her about it but then I was like, maybe she won't be my friend. So, I like kept quiet about it. And then she moved, and it was like bricks had been pulled off my shoulders. I did know that with my other friends they act like their self. When I stared acting like myself, they actually got a little bit closer to me.

She believed that girls in sixth grade generally switch back and forth between being friends and then being judgmental and bossy. Even though this is how the girls behave with each other she stated, "If you're going to be someone, then be yourself. Like if your friends don't like you the way you are then they are not true friends." Sarah thought that girls in sixth grade were afraid to be a true version of themselves because they may be judged by others. The fear of judgement is usually a fear of being judged by one girl who may be viewed as dominant, as opposed to judgement from all students. For sixth grade girls they sometimes want to confront others about this concern, but they are afraid to because of that judgement. This statement of "being yourself" was contradictory to her behaviors that I have observed, but her explanation of how students fear judgment provided context and justification for why it is so difficult for students to "just be themselves." It is also not atypical for sixth grade students to think one way and act in another. Sarah's rationale for why students think one way and act another clarified the enigmatic behaviors of students. Hana and Lyla also indicated that this segment of the conversation was important as it related to the theme of "feelings" and how students interact to avoid isolation.

Sarah felt like she had to be "a certain way" while at school and perhaps her other friends also have to be "a certain way" to impress others or because they feel pressure from particular students who are seen as influential or popular. She restated that, "Being yourself lets you feel like you get closer to friends, but there are certain people that you felt a lot of judgement cause you like, you feel like you just couldn't be you." There is a lot of pressure to act a certain way about certain friends or classmates. This leads to mixed feelings and emotions, confusion for other friends who then do not know what the true version of a person is. Our conversation about pressure to perform or put on "a show" for others continued for the next four minutes.

Eventually Sarah began to talk about a student in class who gets picked on for her appearance. She described how it is difficult to be friends with students who are bullied because of appearance.

> Like I don't have much to do with her, but like I wasn't going to make fun of her or anything because I don't like to make fun of people. Like I tried to be nice but then I was like, other people would judge me if I was around her. Like I talked to her and I ask her if she can give me a piece of paper or I'll tell her I like the book she is reading.

According to Sarah, a rule among sixth grade girls is that even if you have something in common with a student who is disliked or judged, you still do not talk to that person. You can ask them for paper, or something related to class to make them feel more included, but it's not acceptable to speak to them in a social context. Again, Sarah's description of the rules for social engagement among sixth grade girls led back to the topic of isolation. Although Sarah never directly discussed isolation, she still indicated that she noticed when people were isolated and made attempts to mitigate the feelings of loneliness for others.

At the end of the conversation, Sarah brought the theme of isolation regarding students in special education classes. She thought that students in self-contained classrooms must feel isolated from the rest of the school and would struggle with confidence because they do not interact with other students in the general population on a regular basis.

> Some of them feel like they're lonely and like they had no friends because they're in that tiny little class and all they are with is those same people and some of them should be able to shift around classrooms and some other kids would help. Like some kids that maybe like the LEAD students could like help them move through their day. And like they go to PE when I have PE and they walk around the gym and I feel like maybe some students will help like boost their confidence if they talk to them.

Sarah indicated that students should be able to serve as an assistant in special education classrooms as a leadership role. This would help provide more leadership roles for sixth grade students and allow all students to be a part of the student body.

The conversation continued about friendships from fifth grade and how those have changed some now that the students are in sixth grade. Being in different classes or opposite ends of the hall means that new friendships form. Sarah considered herself to be a "nerd" in fifth grade, but she was still considered popular because of her more influential friends outside of her direct friend group. In sixth grade she had put on a different persona. Even though she is still a "nerd," she "keeps that part covered" so her friends will not know, and she will not be judged.

The conversation turned to third grade and what happened to friendships since then and how friends interacted in third grade. After another ten minutes of tangential topics, I directed the conversation back to sixth grade experiences. I reflected back the information she shared about friendships in sixth grade and then asked her if the information she shared with me about friendships was something that was a problem that we could work to solve or

if she believed it was just a part of sixth grade. Her response was a summary of the things we had already talked about. I rephrased the question if there was something the school could do better to improve the sixth-grade experience. She began discussing the after-school bible club and why that activity was important to her. She gave advice on how that program could be improved by meeting twice a week and not allowing cell phones. She thought this was a good place where students could go and be a true version of themselves. She wanted to bring more friends to the club because she thought that would be a way for friends to begin to understand more of who they are. She also wanted more friends to come because she has lost several privileges due to a bad decision made at school, but this is one privilege she has earned back. She viewed this as a time where she could see her friends and make better connections.

Other suggestions she gave were not allowing students to have cell phones on the car line because they are used for creating drama and keep the carline from moving efficiently. She also suggested:

- Free time with the teachers
- More time to ask for help or give ideas to the teachers
- Time to talk to the principals about their ideas
- More involved in things around the school - like community service projects
- Teachers should encourage students to participate more
- Rewards for good grades and attendance
- Assisting in the special education classrooms
- Counselors and administrators should be seen in classes more
- Spend more time pulling students out of class to check in
- Speaking to the whole class for a few minutes about a variety of topics
- More communication between students and adults
- More fundraisers and participation
- more fun things like pep rallies for students who participate in school
- Students who earn PBIS tickets should be able to buy time with teachers
- Be an assistant for the day

Sarah's interview, although tangential in nature, provided eye-opening insight to the world of sixth grade students. Reviewing the transcripts of her interview and using selective coding revealed that her anecdotes directly related to several of the themes determined by Hana, Lyla, and myself during the initial stages of data analysis. Her recommendations for activities to improve the school speak directly to the literature on middle school child development and cognitive processes. Her suggestions meet social-emotional and procedural concerns. They address the need for student-student and student-adult relationships, school expectations, and academic issues. Sarah's indication that students should have more time to present ideas to adults in the school speaks to all three learning dispositions of students (learning, skills, and dispositions). She also provided insight to activities that could help students develop self-efficacy while in middle school. Providing students with the opportunity to participate in project-based learning and service projects can improve a students' beliefs about their abilities to accomplish goals.

Garrison, Cole, Justin & Walker. When I interviewed Garrison, Cole, Justin, and Walker I was skeptical of the type of information I would gather from them. I had just finished an interview with Thomas (Table 5) where the discussion was brief and focused on surface level issues. Thomas had been able to explain what was in his picture (lockers) but was not able to make connections between his picture and his life or the lives of others. He could not explain the significance of the lockers in the lives of middle school students. I was afraid that the information this group of boys provided would also be concrete. This concern was not just because they were boys, but at the time of the interview I had formed relationships with each of them and our conversations did not generally focus on anything

beyond following rules and expectations or whatever random question the boys would ask in passing.

Justin is an A student who was enrolled in technology electives at the time of the interview. He attended the same elementary from kindergarten to fifth grade. Justin is kind-hearted and very easy going. He generally does not let other people's opinions bother him but did have one incident in the sixth grade where another student was rude to him and he responded by pushing the other student. This response was uncharacteristic of Justin because he typically ignores rude behaviors and was confident in his close circle of friends.

Cole, on the other hand, is a student that is constantly reminded to "keep self to self." He does not typically engage in physical altercations but has a very small "personal space bubble." He likes to hug or sit very close to all his friends. He had one incident in middle school where horseplay with a friend did lead to a fight and a consequence of an administrative conference with the principal. At the beginning of the year, Cole stole a candy bar from his teacher and was given an opportunity to repay the teacher for the candy bar. He was also involved in an incident with 12 other sixth grade students that involved having an inappropriate item at school. He was assigned three days of in-school suspension for his participation with the item. At the time of the interview, Cole was enrolled in a technology elective and maintained a C average in his classes. Cole was also the only student in the group who had experienced several school transfers during his student career. Cole attended a total of five elementary schools in the county and had transferred schools eight times by the time he enrolled in middle school.

Walker was enrolled in chorus as an elective at the time of the interview. He also participated in school leadership activities. His grade average was a C and he was identified

under the exceptional children program to receive academic support and modifications in school. He also attends tutoring after school. Walker was an unassuming young man and was close friends with Justin. They attended elementary school together and played sports outside of school on the same teams. Whenever I say "hello" to Walker, his eyes get wide and he becomes nervous. He usually musters out a, "hello" in response. Walker is energetic and participates in class but is generally unaware of what is happening around him. Classroom observations notes show that while other students are talking or passing notes between friends, Walker remains focused on his work and does not notice the activity of others. Oblivious and content would be the best words to describe Walker.

Garrison is the student with whom I have had the least interactions. I know one of his two older brothers well but have not had much reason to interact with him this school year. My best memory of Garrison was how proud he was of his photovoice project picture of chicken nuggets in the lunch line. After we concluded with the project, he asked me several times if he could keep his picture. Garrison is an A student and enrolled in technology electives. He attended the same elementary school as Justin and Walker, but they were not close friends. The boys all knew each other but did not have many of the same teachers in elementary school.

Our conversation began by getting permission from all the boys to audio record our conversation. All boys verbally agreed to be recorded. I reminded them of our purpose for the project and let them know they could choose not to participate at this point. All boys were interested in being interviewed. I began by returning their photos and SHOWeD method questionnaire to them. Cole had a questionnaire, but his photos were not attached. He remembered which photos were his and selected them from the pile of

unclaimed photographs. I then asked the boys to think about which of the three pictures meant the most to them. I told them that their thoughts about the pictures were more important than the pictures themselves and I wanted them to ask themselves, "Why did I take this picture? What was important about this?"

Once the boys each picked out one picture they wanted to discuss, I asked them to think about what was in the picture. I clarified that I did not want them to think about what the picture meant, but simply think of how to describe what they saw in the photo. I then showed them an example of a picture and described exactly what I saw in the picture. Cole raised his hand and volunteered to share his picture and speak first.

Figure 15. Lockers in the sixth-grade hallway.

Like many students I interviewed, he did not focus on what was in the picture but began by describing what the picture meant to him. Cole took a picture of the lockers in the sixth-grade hall (Figure 15). His first description of the picture was,

> Um basically, I was trying to like, um, like I was trying to do lockers because basically lockers is like somewhere you can keep your stuff and you can feel safe because nobody can really get inside there and get your stuff. And I guess it's just like a safe spot.

I used reflective listening during this part and repeated or rephrased what Cole described about his picture. We took a moment to go back and describe the lockers. Cole said they "were green and had a lock." At this point, I asked the boys to look at their SHOWeD papers to see that we had discussed the "S" part of the paper and addressed the question, "What is happening here?" I asked the other boys what they would say about lockers. Justin said, "It's where I keep my personal stuff." Walker responded, "it's where I keep something that's, like, most valuable for me so no one knows about it." Garrison did not respond to this question, so I reflected back the boy's answers and asked Garrison if he agreed. He nodded his head.

I asked the boys why lockers were so important for them at this time of their lives. The conversation focused mainly on the importance of personal space and privacy. They discussed the need for privacy at home and the need for privacy at school. They were also generally concerned about having a safe place to keep items so they would not be stolen.

Walker: It's kind of helpful because like whenever we want sometimes like whenever you're at home, like you kind of have like, it's kind of hard like where the put like something at, because you might forget it, but if you put something in the locker, you probably won't forget it.

Justin: And like I think, like you're always wanting me to have a safe place in your life. And I think one of the safe places in middle school throughout high school would probably be in the locker so you can keep your personal items and more.

Garrison: With Walker he like he said, if you forget something. What do you actually put in locker? And then you remember that you put it in your locker and then you know it's safe so people don't steal.

At this point, the boys were not making much sense to me, so I reflected back what they were saying to ensure that I was understanding their meaning. The purpose of this study was to not only gather information, but to actually hear what students were saying. I said to the boys,

> What I'm hearing you guys say is that the locker is important to you as middle school, middle school students, middle school boys...It's a personal space. It's a safe place to keep things. Do you think it represents, like, having a level of privacy?

To this question, I received a resounding "YES!" from all four boys. They then talked for the next four minutes about keeping phones and money in their lockers because those were important items for all of them. I was interested in hearing more about privacy from the boys because their eyes became wide and they answered almost in unison when I used the word "privacy." I directed the conversation back to that topic. It was interesting for me to hear that the boys were so interested in privacy. I assumed that this would be a topic of conversation I would have with girls and not necessarily with the boys. I asked them why privacy was so important for them.

Walker: Probably because like something happened in your family and like you want to keep it to yourself. Like your friends don't know about it and you want to keep it.

Justin: Yeah, like Walker said. So, like with my own privacy, I don't like, I just like don't want people to figure out the things I want to keep to myself. Like I just like to keep things to myself and think of myself as like a private person.

Me: Is privacy more important for you guys now than it was in middle school?

Cole: Yeah, it was for sure.

Me: Y'all say more about that for me.

The next two minutes of the conversation were very interesting because it quickly turned from lockers and privacy to rumors. The boys began to speak more freely and more quickly at this time. Prior to this point, they would raise their hand or wait to speak, but now they were talking over each other and interjecting thoughts. The boys were becoming more energetic and engaged in the conversation.

Cole: So, like in elementary school there wasn't even like a lot of kids and you could say something about me. Like you could say something about you saw me. But like here you can keep your stuff locked up, but like if you have something that's gone, you really can't get it back after that.

Justin: There's like rumors and stuff that goes around.

Walker: Yeah like in elementary school it was different because like no one thought about those ideas and like someone could have stole…

Justin: So, like right now we are getting more mature and we like talk about more than like in elementary. So that's what I think.

Me: Talk to me some about, this is interesting to me how you guys are telling me about rumors. So, is it like, are you guys thinking that it's more important to have private thoughts now as well?

All:

I was interested that the boys mentioned rumors and so quickly turned the conversation from lockers and privacy to private thoughts. I was taken aback by this change in the conversation, but also fascinated that the boys were thinking this way. I expected the girls to talk about rumors but did not expect this to be a topic from the boys. The content of the conversation and their knowledge and analysis of the subject proved to me that as an adult, I have no idea what is in the mind of a middle school student.

Cole: Like if someone were to say that I said something about Walker and like I called him a name and then people would spread rumors and then that would hurt me and Walker's friendship after all this time.

Walker: Yeah. Like the same thing as Cole. It can break up people's relationships.

Me: So, it's important in middle school to be able to keep some of your thoughts private because once some of the thoughts that are in there get out, it starts to affect some of those relationships and breaks up friendships. Is that more of a problem in elementary school than it was in middle school?

All: Yes ma'am.

Me: Okay. Tell me about that. Why do you think it is different?

Justin: In elementary school, you just didn't think about it. Now in middle school everybody just talks about it and thinks about it and talks about it.

Me: Tell me what is the "it" in that statement.

Justin: Like if you're making fun of somebody, told somebody something personal and its going to get on their mind more than it would in elementary because our brains are developing more and more and more as we get older.

Garrison: Cause like when we were in elementary school, we didn't know a lot of what people were talking about.

Walker: Yeah…

Garrison: Now that we are growing, and our brains are becoming more mature we think a lot more about a lot of this stuff.

Again, I was surprised to hear the boys talking about brain development and how that related to spreading rumors. At this point the boys turned the conversation back to lockers and discussed decorating the outside of their lockers. In elementary school students decorated their lockers, but the boys thought it was good that this is against the rules in middle school. They thought that in middle school, lockers that were decorated would be another show of social status and students. They also thought that if students had white boards on their lockers, others would write mean messages like "you stink." They did not

see this as a problem in elementary school but thought it would become one in middle school because of brain development. Walker thought that students in elementary school would know that those types of messages were jokes whereas in middle school, writing derogatory remarks on a white board would not be interpreted as a joke. Cole redirected the conversation back to rumors, how students interpret information in middle school, and bullying.

Cole: Like Walker said, we really didn't think about it in elementary school. Like it really wasn't a big deal. We wouldn't let it get to us, but now we are developing, and worry gets to people. And that's when, that's when bullying and stuff…

Garrison: …starts.

Me: So to that idea, you guys are really onto something here because there is, when you get to middle school age, you're right, your brain hits this, this developmental stage where it starts internalizing and thinking about all the rumors and what are people saying about me. Um, and, and the status of having items on your locker becomes more important and can cause more drama. Um, so, and we end up with this bullying. Did you guys see, do you think bullying is different in middle school than it is in elementary school? Talk to me about it.

Justin: Because like a lot of people in elementary school, like never let it get to them. So not that many people bully them. So when I was in elementary school I barely ever saw anyone bullying. There was like one person that was a really big bully. Now in middle school people make more fun of people because they tell people things. Because in elementary school they would just let it roll right off their shoulders. And now they just think about it and then they make fun of you about it.

Walker: Well like in elementary school its different. Because in middle school there's all different people from different schools and then as soon as, as soon as you see them like cause your used to like seeing your friends but like mostly like whenever you see them, new people, it like takes a long time to get used to them like until the middle of the school year.

This topic of conversation directly related to the key finding of students feeling isolated. Like most other topics of interest to the boys, this part of the discussion was brief

and only lasted less than one minute. The boys very quickly jumped from idea to idea, but all their ideas related back to feelings of isolation and the need to belong. They felt that students had trouble getting along with one another because they were now in school with so many students from so many schools. Many of the students came from elementary schools that had less than fifty students in the fifth grade. The sixth grade at Mountain Middle School had approximately 250 students and many students were not in class with their same classmates from elementary school. For the boys, this was an issue with the transition process.

After another two minutes of conversation about bullies, fighting, and consequences Walker directed the conversation to how much teachers in middle school cared versus how much teachers in elementary school cared. The boys all agreed that teachers in middle school cared about them more than their elementary school teachers, but they also felt like they had more freedom to make choices. Even when those choices in middle school are bad, the boys believed that teachers and administrators were more willing to review surveillance video and investigate situations to get to the truth of each incident. The believed that teachers in elementary school were more aware of bullying because there were fewer students, so bullying was stopped before it started. In middle school the teachers allow students to have more freedom, so there is more bullying. I asked the boys directly if this was a problem that needed to be solved. The boys saw bullying as a problem but thought since it was handled by counselors and administrators after the fact then it was okay. In this instance, their need for freedom seemed to outweigh their need to be protected from bullies. Cole thought that the school should continue to allow students to have lots of freedom, but

the adults should also have connections with the students and know a lot about the students to stop major problems before they start.

Cole: I feel like we should get freedom but like at the same time you got to watch kids because sometimes you just don't know what they go through and sometimes it just like makes him snap. That's how fights and stuff happen.

Walker: Kinda have a bad day.

Cole: And most of the time bullies, they have an anger inside of them that just makes them want to hurt somebody and that is what causes them to bully because they are letting their anger out on someone else.

The boys continued comparing elementary to middle school for the next five minutes. The boys talked again about how the teachers in middle school care more about the students. They felt like the elementary schools were stricter with rules but did not care about whether the students followed the rules. At the middle school, the teachers are watching the students from a distance, but they still have freedom. The teachers are more concerned about the safety of the students and not so much about their personal conversations between friends. Once again, I had to make clarifying statements through reflection to ensure I understood what the boys were saying.

I reflected the three main ideas I heard from the boys at this point. They had discussed rumors, bullies, and freedom. I wanted to know if they thought there was a way for middle school students to maintain their freedom and stop bullying. From what they boys said during our discussion, allowing students to have freedom was a cause of bullying. Early in the conversation Cole stated that adults in the building should have close relationships with students and then they would know which ones have anger issues and may be likely to be a bully. I wanted to know if they had any other school-wide solutions. Cole, Garrison, and Walker suggested that students who are being bullied should have time to speak privately

with the bully. They thought that this solution would allow students to understand each other better. Garrison thought that is might help students develop new friendships. Cole felt like students should be more willing to advocate for each other to adults in the building. In the instances where a student told a teacher, they believed it was handled by the teacher in the classroom. There was also a fear associated with telling a teacher because people who tell on each other are considered "snitches." Their suggestion for this was to use the confidential online counselor referral form. This would allow an adult in the building to know about a bullying situation without any other students knowing who reported the bully.

The final solution the boys had was to expand the mentor program so that all students in the sixth grade had access to a mentor. Cole knew several of the older students who already participated in this program and thought they were all nice and trustworthy. Justin viewed the student mentors as people who were responsible and served as "mini counselors" to the sixth-grade students. He agreed that there should be more student mentors available for all sixth-grade students. Garrison spoke up and thought the sixth-grade students could get help with minor problems from the mentors and then mentors could report major problems to the counselors. I asked the boys if it was still considered "snitching" to report a problem to another student who in turn reported the problem to an adult. The boys became loud and altogether said, "No!" They thought this was helping other people.

The discussion on the first photo lasted approximately forty minutes and the boys needed to return to class. Two of the boys asked if they could return at another time to talk about their photos. They had fun and wanted to come back the same week. A follow-up interview was scheduled after the conclusion of the research project. Time limitations did not allow the interview to be conducted during the data collection phase, but the boys offered

valuable insight to programs that could improve the school and I was interested in hearing what other solutions they could offer.

Making Connections

The focus of this dissertation is on how middle school students interpreted their transition from elementary to middle school. It is about what they experienced and how the school helped or hindered them from having a successful transition. Through this dissertation, I argued that middle school students are experts of their own lives and can provide feedback that will help other students have successful transitions. Schools can identify students who have successfully transitioned by examining grades, attendance, behavior, and social interactions with peers. Current research fails to address the "why" of successful students. Educators can determine which students are successful but fall short when it comes to identifying patterns and trends that conclude why some students are successful while other students struggle.

The findings in this section are based on major themes determined through an analysis of all data sources. Data sources include *scientific method* lesson questions, *photovoice* lesson questions, analysis of data and determinations by seventh grade students, photovoice interviews, informal discussions with students and colleagues, and a writing prompt about connections and isolation. Major themes that occur across all data sources are: isolation, connections, the need to belong, and importance of adult relationships.

What does this data mean? I can sort and categorize information all day but may never draw conclusions about what students are really saying. It has been my experience that middle school students ask questions or make statements that have a more profound or complex meaning than the words they are using. Since this dissertation was focused on

understanding student voice, it was important to interpret what the words really meant. The next phase of the study was the key to truly understanding student voice. Several studies have been done where the researcher takes student feedback and creates an interpretation of the data through an adult lens. This study aimed to understand student voice through the lens of other students. A review of relevant literature was conducted. An analysis of the literature and findings of this study resulted in several connections between the two.

Connecting Theory to Research Findings

The benefit of using youth participatory action research in school setting is that it provides school counselors and other educators the opportunity to apply theory to their practice. There are several evidence-based lessons available to counselors, but at this point in my career I have not encountered a written plan of action to guide my practice in decision-making based on the documented needs of the students. School counselors are not provided with pacing guides or standards that are then evaluated at the end of the year with an assessment. Generally, school counselors address needs that are common amongst most students or are "hot button" topics now. We may use a pre-test/post-test evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the programming, but the limitation to this method is that common needs among students or "hot button" items in the media may not be the actual needs of the students in that school.

In North Carolina, school counselors have general standards that need to be met, but it is often difficult to determine if the practices put in place are effectively addressing the needs of the students and the schools. YPAR methods allow school counselors to work with students to collect data, determine high priority needs, implement appropriate action plans and programs, and make determinations about the effectiveness of those action plans and

programs. Counselors can still use the pre-test/post-test method to determine effectiveness, but it may also become easier to collect observational data of changes seen in students since a key issue has been identified through the use of YPAR. Academic, behavioral, and attendance issues can also be tracked as a way to determine the effectiveness of implemented programs.

Maslow. Maslow, as cited in Chapter 2, points out that schools and community partnerships provide physiological needs. Community partners do an excellent job of providing food and clothes for those in need. We have Thanksgiving and Christmas sponsorships so that no student spends the holidays hungry or in need. We strive to create safe environments where students can thrive. Schools have safety plans in place and run drills each month to ensure students know what to do in case of fire, tornado, hurricane, or other emergency. We hang anti-bullying posters and provide "bully boxes" for anonymous reports about bullying. We teach students how to walk quietly on the right side of the hallway to maintain order. We put all these policies in place and then we skip the third step of Maslow's triangle (love and belonging) and go straight to teaching self-esteem in classroom guidance lessons, health class, and character education programs. We dispense information about love and belonging to students using the required lessons and then hope something sticks and students achieve self-actualization. Once self-actualization is achieved, students should have improved behaviors, attendance, and academic outcomes.

Educators are so focused on solving attendance, behavior and academic problems through programming that addresses stages one (physiological) and two (safety) that we stop before we get to stage three (love and belonging). We assume that if schools and programs meet stages one and two, then three, four, and five will fall into place. Reflecting on the

findings of this research, middle school transition programming should be about addressing stage number three. Transition programs should seek to mitigate barriers that create isolation and instead develop a sense of connectedness, love, and belonging for students.

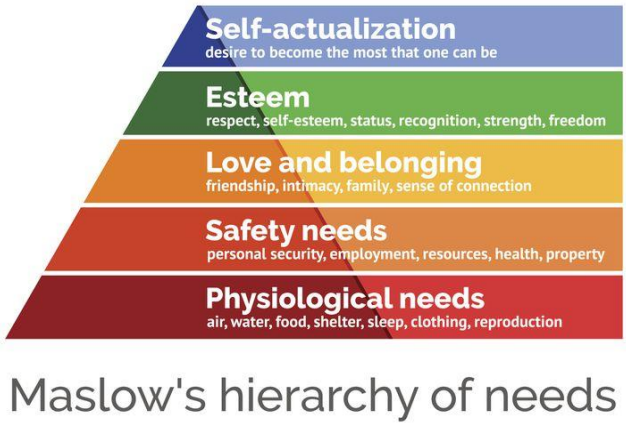


Figure 16. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (www.simplypsychology.org).

YPAR. A main tenet of youth participatory action research is helping students create connections to one another and their surrounding environment. As a school counselor, I use a modified version of youth participatory action as much as possible. In my experience, I have closer relationships with students when I allow them to identify problems within our school and then give them the freedom to solve the problem. These students have grown and developed into leaders in the middle school and even at the high school level. Unfortunately, I was viewing YPAR through my adult lens. I saw it as an opportunity for a small, select number of students to make connections and have improved outcomes. Only after fully implementing YPAR as a methodology for this research, and having students help identify a problem based on data collected from approximately 75 sixth grade students was I able to see how this process can have far-reaching effects and benefit the entire culture of the school. The problem identified by the seventh-grade students has been used to develop a

transition plan that will hopefully aid students for years to come in finding connections within the school community.

Photovoice. In its simplest form, photovoice is a tool used by marginalized populations to reflect their truth. Using photography as a form of voice, participants can identify issues in their community, create action plans for change, and use the power of images to present ideas to important stakeholders. Although the power dynamics of those marginalized people and those who oppress them are still at play (the marginalized are dependent on the oppressors to enforce change based on their ideas), the use of photography provides a more level playing field for two groups who may not "speak the same language." The power found in photography can provide images that tell a more powerful story than words.

Through the photovoice project, one particular student found her voice in the image of a hallway. This student was quiet, polite and often overlooked. Her image of the eighth-grade hall stood out from other photos and prompted a conversation. She not only provided clear insight to the lives of sixth grade students, but also provided suggestions for a transition program that would help all students feel more connected to the school and each other. Further, she spoke up on behalf of a group that she believed was marginalized by the sixth-grade students and created a plan of action to assist these specific students in finding connections.

For me, this was a powerful experience. Of course, I knew that students in school experience bullying, and I may be able to pick out some of the students who experience these things. I have used the techniques and lessons that are considered best-practices to try and help stop bullying in school, but it does not always work and often bullies go unnoticed. The

image the student took was not about bullying, but the conversation that ensued based on the photo provided the outlet needed to speak up and address the issue. Her unique perspective was not to stop the bullies, but to help others find connections in order to overcome feelings of isolation created through the actions of others.

Self-efficacy. I did not think I learned anything about self-efficacy skills after analyzing the data. The data from this research indicated that students need connections. Reflecting back on previous writings about "planning for the student," I now see that if we are truly student-centered, then creating a plan based on the expressed needs of the students can lead to less isolated feelings and in turn to increased self-efficacy. I learned several personal lessons about self-efficacy, and therefore feel more equipped to lead students in their own journey to improved self-efficacy.

Researcher Conclusions

Overview

Analysis of the data from two classroom lessons, photovoice interviews, and discussions with Hana and Lyla led to one major finding. Students at Mountain Middle School (MMS) felt isolated. The overall finding of the study was complex in nature and provided opportunity for many areas of improvement at MMS. Data indicated that there were several reasons students felt isolated: functions of the school including physical layout, opportunities for participation, and unclear expectations; positive student-to-student interactions; lack of student-to-adult interactions; and changing interpersonal relationships. This finding and the associated suggestions for improvement speak directly to this study's research questions.

Functions of the school. The first element that led to feelings of isolation for middle school students pertained to the functions of the school. Many of the questions that fell into the category of functions of the school did not have anything to do with class procedures, how to walk in the hall or change classes, or school rules. In fact, there was only one question about locks and lockers (which is a topic that seems to worry many adults during the transition period). The questions all focused on playing sports in school or participating in school activities. Even after coming to this conclusion about the data, I was still stumped. Why were so many students asking about the functions of the school? Why were so many students interested in playing sports and leadership opportunities?

I was surprised that so many students were asking about the functions of the school. It was my belief that students would not be as concerned about the functions of the school. I have not observed students having trouble with walking on the correct side of the hallway, having significant trouble opening lockers, or feeling confused about their daily schedule. I have had many conversations with students about not following minor procedures such as not chewing gum, wearing a hood in the building, or rolling their eyes at the teacher which is interpreted as disrespect. In these conversations, students generally indicated that they knew and understood the school policy.

One issue for students under the umbrella of *functions of the school* was the physical separation students felt because of the layout of the school building. Students knew that there was nothing they could do to address this issue but thought schedule changes and providing more opportunities for students in all grade levels to interact would improve the situation.

They also felt left out of school activities. The fact that seventh and eighth grade students were allowed to participate in sports and leadership roles further exacerbated their feelings of isolation. Some students did not understand why they were not allowed to participate since they had good grades, attendance, and behavior and exhibited leadership traits in the classroom. MMS also did not offer many clubs or advisory groups during the school day. Students believed that they were not offered an opportunity to make social connections with other students, especially students from other grade levels. Students knew that they were generally group in classes with other students who had similar academic capabilities, but this did not provide an outlet for social-emotional development.

Finally, students were unclear about school expectations and reward/consequence systems. They indicated that implementation of reward/consequence systems seemed inconsistent or nonexistent. Several suggestions were given to improve the functions of the school. Those included: more advisory groups/clubs; grouping homeroom classes by student interest instead of academic ability; more involvement in school activities and leadership roles; and more events where students can interact with other grade levels (fundraisers, pep rallies, dances, outside free time).

Adult advocates. A second cause for feelings of isolation was a lack of connection with adults in the school. Generally, students could identify an adult in the school with whom they could speak if they had a concern or issue. For students, this did not equate to a genuine connection with an adult advocate. Students wanted to feel like they had an adult who truly cared about them and could provide guidance for navigating middle school. Student suggestions to improve this area of concern were: allow students to be classroom assistants for teachers in other grades or special education classrooms; allow students time to

check in with a teacher frequently; counselors and administrators should visit classrooms more frequently; counselors should speak to classes about areas of concern on a regular basis; allow students to eat lunch with teachers; counselors should perform more individual student check-ins; and provide a platform for more communication between students and adults.

Interpersonal relationships. Students felt a lack of connection with friends and believed that bullying became more prevalent in middle school. Many students at MMS attended elementary school with no more than 50 students in a grade level. Some students attended elementary school with the same small class of 15 to 20 students from kindergarten through fifth grade. The sixth grade at MMS maintained an enrollment of approximately 250 students throughout the school year. In elementary school, small class sizes meant students formed close relationships and understood each other's differences. At MMS, many students were in class with only one or two of their elementary school classmates. Changes in physical development combined with all new classmates meant that students saw an increase in bullying behaviors. Uncertain of who their friends were and not fully confident in their own skin, some students turned to bullying behaviors to cope with the changes experienced in middle school. Other students joined in with bullies to make new friends, keep old friends, or in an attempt to maintain the status quo. It was easier for some students to passively engage with the bully than to become a target themselves. Students had several suggestions for improving connections between classmates. Those included: small counseling groups; picking partners for classwork; grouping students at orientations and open house by interests; teachers encouraging more participation from students; community service projects; and implementation of clubs and advisory groups.

Cycle of unsuccessful students. The findings of this research and the supporting literature indicate that students who do not experience success in middle school may in fact be caught in a cycle which I refer to as the "cycle of unsuccessful students" (Figure 17). Students who feel isolated may feel a lack of motivation, have trouble experiencing self-efficacy when facing challenging tasks, and therefore show declines in grades, attendance, behavior and social-emotional functioning (Ames & Archer, 1988). This leads to the age-old question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? Future research in this area is needed to determine if there is a starting point to this cycle or if students can become entrenched in this cycle at any of the stages or for any of the reasons. At this time, research also fails to address the effectiveness of transition plans in helping students overcome these barriers to success. This raises the question: do intentionally planned, comprehensive transition programs that consider needs expressed by students and address the components of the transition plan rubric (Appendix C) have a positive effect on student success? This is also another avenue of research to be explored in the future.

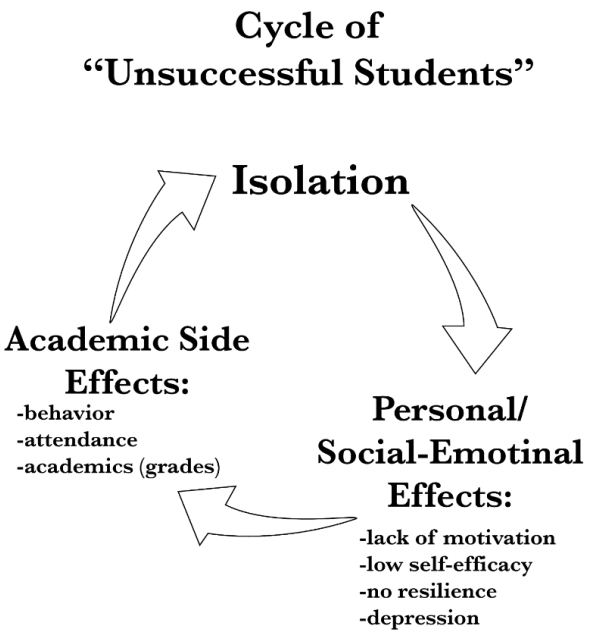


Figure 17. The Cycle of Unsuccessful Students.

The school creates transition programs with good intentions of making the transition easier, but the reality was we were addressing the functional needs of the school. We attend to the functions that we think will make the transition easier. We attend to the areas that we think will make attendance, academics, and behaviors better. Perhaps by focusing so much on the functions of the school, we are actually creating policies and procedures that inadvertently isolate students. By isolating students, we are contributing to social-emotional, academic, attendance, and behavior concerns. We may in fact be working against ourselves. We are trying to solve the symptoms of a problem (behavior, attendance, academics, social-emotional issues) instead of focusing on the actual problem (isolation). If we look back at the theories from Chapter two, we can see that throughout each of those theories is the need for human connection in order to develop resilience, self-efficacy, motivation and all of the things students need to be successful. Figure 18 provides a mind map illustration of the

process for determining the problem(s), identifying underlying causes, and possible transition plan solutions.

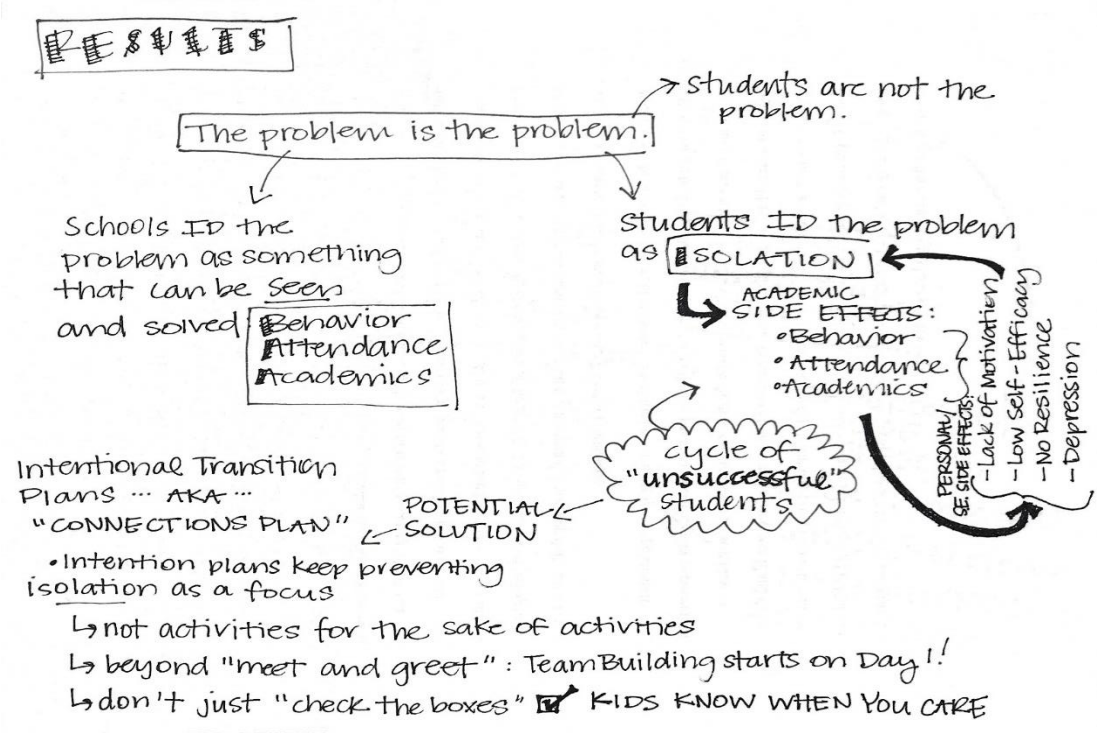


Figure 18. Flowchart sketch of findings based on researcher and student results comparing-student identified problems versus school-identified problems. Included is a rendition of the "Cycle of Unsuccessful Students" graphic.

Practical Use and Recommendations

Written transition plans can be difficult to find. In North Carolina, there are a limited number of school systems that have a written transition plan (Allan, 2010). A Google search for suggestion transition activities for North Carolina middle schools produces results mostly geared at the Individualized Education Plans for students enrolled in special education programs. The state of North Carolina does provide a *Transition Plan for 21st Century Schools* (2007) that outlines four goals and general strategies to meet those goals for

elementary-to-middle school transitions. Although the goals and suggested strategies provide a framework for transition planning, there are still no evidence-based activities provided.

One purpose of this dissertation was to provide a research-based, written transition plan to assist other schools with similar demographics create programming that addresses student needs. A goal of this plan and the accompanying rubric was to provide resources to help mitigate student feelings of isolation that lead to poor attendance, grades, behaviors and increased social-emotional issues. Improving student outcomes in each of these areas leads to improved self-efficacy and achievement for middle school students.

Recommendations for School Counselors

Using multiple data collection sources and YPAR methodology, I worked collaboratively with students to look beyond the words spoken by students and determine underlying issues to be addressed. This study found that students entering middle school feel isolated and the functions of the school may be a root cause of isolation among students.

Schools that wish to identify issues among their students and subsequently create goals and action plans should collect data using collection methods that appeal to the developmental stage of students. Photovoice provided an avenue for students to express themselves through photography, written word, and conversations. The photovoice project also allowed me, the school counselor, to interact with large groups of students through an engaging format. I was able to form connections with the students and learn more about them while discussing their photos. The use of photovoice as a part of a comprehensive school counseling program not only provides students an opportunity to connect with their

school and their school counselor but provides a platform for better understanding themselves and others in the context of their school environment.

Recommendations for Transition Planning

Using these results, a group of ten seventh and eighth grade students (students were recruited by the original two seventh grade students) created ideas for the transition program for incoming fifth grade students. Recommended program activities should begin in winter (February) of the fifth-grade year and extend through the first semester of the sixth-grade year. Other school procedures and activities would continue through the end of the sixth-grade year.

The team determined that incoming fifth grade students should ideally participate in a transition activity at least once per month prior to the spring when transition activities typically begin. Some suggested activities are aimed at meeting the functional needs of the school. Although activities in this category have not been proven to lead to positive academic outcomes, the students still believed there would be a negative impact on incoming students if they were not familiar with a basic idea about school functions. Ideas such as school policies and procedures, LEADership habits, locks and lockers, and exploratory classes should be introduced to fifth grade students prior to their arrival at middle school. Seventh and eighth grade students who were part of the transition planning team decided that it was best to explain these school procedures at the elementary schools to small groups of students using a "center" format with which elementary students would be familiar. As a follow-up to the activity, the transition planning team determined that the team should return to the elementary schools the following month (March) and provide a question and answer session using an interactive game format such as Kahoot! Table 13 gives the rationale for selected

activities, areas of concern addressed, and details of the transition plan activities determined by the students. These activities are divided by spring and fall activities. The first part of the table outlines activities that should be completed in the spring of a student's fifth grade year. The second part of the table shows examples and rationale for activities that should be completed in the fall of a student's sixth grade year.

Table 13.

Transition Plan Activities and Rationale

Prior to Middle School (Spring)	
Activity:	LEADership Visit to Elementary School
Areas of Concern Addressed:	Connections, Functions of School, Developmentally Appropriate, Academic Preparation, Communication, Collaboration
Description of Activity:	Student leaders from the middle school will attend sessions at the elementary schools. Sessions should address topics that are relevant to gaining a better understanding of middle school policies, procedures, and expectations. This session provides a basic understanding of the middle school culture. Activities include: Introduction to locks/lockers, LEADership Habits, School Procedures/Expectations/Schedules, and Choosing Elective Classes. All stations should include a hands-on activity. Elementary students should be divided into four groups and rotate through stations every 10 minutes. There should be access to SMART Board or AQUOS TV for videos and projection of important information.
Activity:	Reader Leader
Areas of Concern Addressed:	Connections, Academic Preparation/Expectations, Developmentally Appropriate
Description of Activity:	Sixth-grade students who achieve reading goals each quarter return to their own elementary school and meet with fifth grade students. MS students read a book to fifth graders, provide information about the MS Reading Program and associated class/grade expectations. This is also an opportunity for students to explain leadership opportunities available to sixth grade students. The Reader Leader program allows fifth grade students to create connections with current MS students.
Sixth Grade Year (Fall)	
Activity:	Open House/Orientation
Areas of Concern Addressed:	Connections, Functions of School, Developmentally Appropriate

Description of Activity:	Students will attend a two-hour orientation to the school. Students will meet their homeroom teams and together as a group will begin team building activities. The focus of the orientation should be to create a welcoming atmosphere and a sense of school belonging for all students. Minute-to-win-it (or similar) activities will be conducted in the classroom with students working in teams with new classmates. Completion of challenging activities will aid in developing self-efficacy among students. Homeroom teachers should establish rapport with students during this time and begin to build hope for the upcoming school year.

Transition Plan Rubric. Creation of a transition plan can be simple. Creation of a research-based transition plan with the goal of meeting a specific need of students can be more difficult and time consuming. Using theories discussed in Chapter 3 and gaps in the literature, I created a rubric for evaluating transition plan activities to ensure that each activity addresses the key challenge of student isolation (Appendix C). The rubric considers the overall needs of middle school students and schools. Individual activities are evaluated using Bottoms and Young's (2008) four components of effective transition plans and Wormeli's (2011) five mindsets.

CHAPTER 6: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.
~Helen Keller

Effective practitioners are reflective of their practice (Bandura, 1986; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Yost, 2006). The same could be said for researchers. Reflection is when researchers make meaning of what they have discovered and make conscious conclusions about what to do next (James & Slater, 2014). To maintain integrity and high ethical standards, I engaged in self-reflection after completion of data collection, analysis, and determining themes in findings. Participatory action research also requires reflection as one of the sixteen central tenets (McTaggert, 1998). Participatory action research "*allows and requires participants to give a reasoned justification of their social (educational) work to others"* (McTaggert, 1998) through the practice of reflection. Reflecting on the research process and findings gives the researcher the opportunity to find shortcomings in their processes and identify gaps that should be addressed in future research. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a reflection of the research process, discuss limitations and implications for future research and draw final conclusions about the project.

As I reflected on the process of research, data collection, and reporting findings, I asked myself the following questions:

- Did I address the research questions?
- Did we accomplish our purpose and goals?
- Through the research did we address the constructivist framework; knowledge, skills, and learning dispositions; student self-efficacy; transition strategies?
- Is it evident that student voice is highly regarded as being a central focus of this dissertation?

If I could not answer those questions, then I need to revisit the study and determine what steps can be taken next to best answer each of those (step 8 of the Action Research Cycle). I determined that I did address each of the research questions. Although the questions were addressed, there is still room for further research to determine more comprehensive answers. We, the students and I, did accomplish the goals of the research. We determined a major challenge faced by sixth grade students, created a research-based plan to address that need, and shared our findings with important stakeholders in the school. We also presented our findings to other educators at a conference.

The constructivist framework was used when creating the transition plan. The transition activities encourage students to interact with school environment (Piaget, 1936) through scavenger hunts and school tours. In all activities, the need for social interactions between students are fostered in small groups that are led by two to three current middle school students (Erikson, 1950). The students also receive knowledge about the school through observation of elective classes, chorus and band performances, and class transitions (Bandura, 1973). As part of the transition program students are also invited to participate in competitions between classes, small group counseling sessions, and meet and greet activities with teachers (Vygotsky, 1962).

Knowledge, skills, and learning dispositions (Table 1) were considered when selecting activities. Specific skills addressed in the transition plan are critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, time management. Students who participate in the transition plan are also introduced to activities that promote self-efficacy, motivation, self-advocacy and resilience. Of importance is the idea that the sixth-grade

students are not the only people who learn these skills and dispositions by participating in transition plan activities. Seventh and eighth-grade students also further develop these skills by assisting in the planning of activities and leading the sixth-grade students during the activities. The transition plan benefits students in all grade levels.

At first, student voice was not as evident as it should have been. As the primary researcher and writer of the dissertation, I had to be aware that my voice could easily overshadow the students. After several edits, revisions, and feedback from colleagues, student voice was brought to the forefront using images, charts, narratives, quotes and student writing samples. A key premise of youth participatory action research is that students work collaboratively as equals to present ideas, identify community challenges, and suggest improvements. Personal reflection was of importance during this stage of the writing because student voices need to be heard.

Personal Reflection and Discussion

I once heard someone say, "The student is not the problem. The problem is the problem." I am sure that a lot of people would be willing to accept credit for that statement. To that statement, I would respond that what adults perceive as the problem is not the problem. There is an underlying problem within many of our schools. Educators must stop and consider what schools view as the problem and then account for what students view as the problem. Do the views of both groups coincide or are they contradictory? Educators in school often see attendance, behavior and grades as the problem that keep our students from transitioning successfully. I agree that majority of schools nationwide need to make

improvements in these areas. To solve these problems, school officials keep throwing evidence-based solutions at the perceived problems and hope that one might stick.

What if those things (attendance, behavior, grades) are not the problem? They are symptoms of the problem. What if the actual problem is isolation and lack of human connection? This research study set out to determine what students thought about the "problems" when coming to middle school. Sixth grade students provided multiple sources of data to be analyzed. Independently analyzing the data did not lead me to any conclusions that were not already present in the current research. I did not know what the students were trying to convey. YPAR was an important component of this research because without the interpretation and analysis of ideas from the seventh and eighth grade students, I would simply have another study performed by an adult using students as subjects.

I conversed with the seventh and eighth students about the data. We bounced ideas back and forth. We brainstormed about issues and concerns. Suddenly everything made sense. The past research and the theoretical background of this study came full circle. Sixth grade students felt isolated. They were asking about sports and opportunities because they wanted to belong. They asked about using cell phones because they are looking for the connections that cell phones bring. They asked about dress code because they are trying to form their identities and find connections with other students who have the same personal identity as them.

Some students feel isolated in school. The idea was so simple yet so complex. Students are with other students all day long. They are always with adults in the building. We give students computers and technology and connect them to the world and all the

information they could desire. Somehow, many students still felt isolated. Students and adults are present with each other all day, but they are not connected to the person sitting right beside them or the teacher at the front of the room. They are isolated. They are alone. They internalize these feelings and begin to withdraw. They lose autonomy over their learning and begin to lose motivation. Once they lose motivation, they feel a sense of failure and begin to lose faith in their ability to complete anything. Then they lose self-efficacy. Schools, parents, and communities have not taught children how to be resilient, how to overcome the odds. Little by little the odds work against the students and they stop coming to school. It is easier to be isolated at home than to struggle through isolation in front of their peers. Poor attendance and low self-efficacy lead to a decline in performance and grades. Then their attendance is so poor, and their grades are so bad that hopelessness, anxiety and depression set into their minds. Finding their way out of the cycle (Figure 17) seems like a daunting task for middle school students whose bodies, brains, and best friends are all changing while they are attempting to hang on. Of course, this is not an absolute and only a possibility of what might happen when students feel isolated at school. After conducting this research, I am even more certain that it is the responsibilities of schools and educators to create comprehensive transition programs that address the social emotional needs of students. It is imperative that we do not silence students, but listen to their words, understand their needs, and create systems that move them toward a successful middle school experience.

I am not sure how implementing this transition plan will work. It may be effective, and it may not have any impact on student achievement or social-emotional development. The purpose of this study was not to determine the effectiveness of the plan; it was to create a research-based plan using the perspectives of students. I asked myself, is there a purpose in

carrying it out? Will it contribute to future research and gaps in the literature? My answer is yes. Yes, because I have empirical evidence through my years in education that indicates human connections aids in student success. I have witnessed the changes that students make when they feel connected to others. The changes are not only academic, but social-emotional growth occurs. Students develop self-efficacy and other learning dispositions when they feel a connection within the school environment.

If I am being transparent in my reporting of the research process, I did not fully understand my goals when this project started. I had written personal and professional goals, but they were not fully realized until I began this project and the careful task of self-reflection throughout. I did not know it at the time, but through this project I have contributed to overcoming a major challenge faced by sixth grade students. I have made connections with students that may have never developed without the YPAR project. There are several sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students I know because of this project that I would not have known otherwise. I usually start the year with classroom meetings, and then I call students in to my office based on self-referral, teacher referral, minor or major incident write-ups, or attendance. That limits the number of students I see and promotes a mindset or culture of connections based on negativity. At times, student visits with me can seem punitive and that is the opposite intention of my job. I want positive interactions and positive connections. Including YPAR and photovoice projects as part of the comprehensive school counseling program allows those positive connections to be established.

The photovoice project means that I know the names of students I may not otherwise know. I can greet them by name in the hall. They have a connection because they can ask,

"Are you a doctor yet?" when they might not know what else to say to me. I can thank them for helping me reach a goal (goal setting is a major part of our school culture). I can talk to them about their pictures and get to know them as a student and a person. I am not certain the students fully grasped what we were doing or trying to achieve when the project first began. I am also not fully convinced that they understood the SHOWeD method for analyzing photos. Perhaps they just viewed the activity as an opportunity to get out of doing work. None of that really matters. What matters is that kids need connections, and YPAR is a way to facilitate that process. I would like to say that I will never again attempt to produce a project of this scale in a middle school. I will continue to use photovoice to create connections with students. I will use it to determine challenges as seen by our students and create solutions to those challenges.

The final outcomes of this project and future photovoice projects are yet to be determined. Future outcomes and proposed solutions may never be taken seriously or implemented by stakeholders. Maybe this research does not change the world, but maybe it does change our school. MMS may see a change in the culture of the school or may not see any improvements. Regardless of future outcomes, the connections that are created with the sixth-grade students are what matters. The research, public speaking, self-efficacy and student advocacy skills that are learned by all students are what matters. I may not see huge changes to the system as whole, but I have already seen changes in the lives of our students who participated in the project.

I may not be able to write structured, formal answers to each of the research questions, but I answered them in an unconventional way. That is what I have learned from the students. I ask a question and expect a certain answer, but every time they offer new

insight that I never would have considered. I am not great at answering questions, but I am great at asking them. I do not believe I came up with definitive conclusions to all questions posed through this research. The students are meant to come to the conclusions. After all, this is all about giving the students a voice in their lives and the lives of others and the learning of others and the culture of our school.

I go back to where I started. What if we asked the students? What if we, educators at MMS, practiced what we teach? We teach leadership. We teach goal setting. We focus on student leaders, but then we just give them simple tasks to do to help around the school. We see them as helpers to the adults. What if we really let the students be leaders? Take charge. Make some decisions. We give them the opportunity to ask questions and then we come back at them with the answers. And usually the answer is "no." What good is that doing? What are we really teaching them? We are teaching them to ask a question and then accept whatever answer they get. And when they challenge that answer, they are punished. What kind of school is this that we are creating? What kind of wonderful things come when we put students in a room on their own and ask them to come up with ideas and create projects and create changes. They come up with much better ideas and answers than I can ever come up with. Although I will not ever undertake a project of this size again, I will continue to allow students to gather and interpret their own data and make their own decisions about what they need in their lives and their school. Does it matter if the ideas are not great? If no one is getting hurt and all students are safe, then why not let them explore their world and make some decisions. Woah. Ideas like this are what get people in trouble. Or are they?

Limitations of Research

Researcher Bias

Self. Conducting participatory action research at my job site presented some personal bias limitations. First, I wanted to be sure and conduct research with students from all backgrounds, social-emotional stages of functioning, and academic abilities. Selecting a large sample size of sixth-grade students was not difficult. This was more of a concern when selecting seventh grade students to work as research participants. Working with students who are leaders in the school or have high academic achievement has been a limitation of prior YPAR research studies. The two students who were selected from the seventh grade revealed themselves organically through the observation process. The two students had very similar leadership roles in the school, participated in sports, and were successful in the classroom. They did have different ethnic and cultural backgrounds which did provide some diversity of views. The similarities between the girls was limiting to the interpretation of data.

Second, there were times when I found it difficult to separate myself as the school counselor from my role as a researcher. I was not able to conduct the research independently of my job. I am still required to carry out my duties as the school counselor and that includes conducting transition activities for current sixth grade students. At the end of the project, the transition planning for current fifth grade students had already begun. Reporting only the results that were relevant to this project proved to be difficult at times because it was being conducted simultaneously while implementing the end stages of the plan with current sixth grade students and beginning parts of the plan with current fifth grade students.

Students. The seventh-grade student research participants, Hana and Lyla, selected other students to assist in developing transition plan activities. This could pose potential limits to the study if they girls chose to select students who were like them. There were some similarities between Hana, Lyla and the additional students. Hana and Lyla knew most of the selected students through sports and leadership roles. Two of the students selected by Hana and Lyla asked to have other friends help. The process of students selecting other students diversified the group. This process could potentially limit the variety or types of activities suggested for the plan.

Self-efficacy. Research about self-efficacy and its link to academic success is somewhat limited and conceptual in nature. It can be difficult to prove causality between self-efficacy and academic outcomes. Research does support social cognitive theory in the role of self-efficacy, but researchers question whether outcomes effect self-efficacy or self-efficacy effects outcomes (Pajares, 1996). Determining the independent contributions of sources of self-efficacy and the role they play in development of self-efficacy can also make it difficult to accurately predict correlations or causality (Britner & Pajares, 2006).

Implications for Future Research

Two areas of future research will be considered based on the findings of this project. First, the effectiveness of the transition plan which has been created using theoretical frameworks from chapter two needs to be tested. Activities and programs should be implemented and evaluated at multiple sites. Effectiveness can be measured through academic, attendance, and behavior data. Student social emotional learning would need to be evaluated qualitatively to determine the effectiveness of the programs.

Second, the challenge of student isolation should further be addressed through research in the area of student sense of belonging. Students' sense of belonging in schools is a relatively new area of research, with limited information about students in middle schools. Using the findings of this study as a springboard, gaps in the student sense of belonging research can be explored further and possible concrete solutions to the issue of student isolation identified. It is my intention to continue this research by using the student sense of belonging survey with students as a tool for measuring the successes and shortcomings of this transition plan.

Final Conclusions

Middle school research has several challenges and opportunities for future research. Effective middle school practitioners should be reflective in their practices to best move forward the area of the middle school research. Adults should be willing to listen to the words and hear the needs of their students.

The truth is that a transition plan must be more than a few activities. It must be a schoolwide culture of inclusion. The activities are great, but the intention is more important. If the culture of the school is not inclusive of all students and does not have an overall goal of making students feel included, then the activities are irrelevant. Written plans and rubrics become meaningless if the people and students implementing them are not interested in creating connections with the incoming students. It may be difficult to determine exactly which activities are the most appropriate for the incoming students. Not knowing the personalities or the needs of new students creates a challenge. These are human beings who are growing into young adults. Their moods, interests, bodies, brains, and besties change from day to day and sometimes it seems moment to moment. It is be difficult to conduct

research that could give an absolute answer to how to write a transition plan that would meet the needs of every student. Educators should not be asking themselves what they doing to successfully transition students to the school, but what are they doing to foster connections and relationships to the students?

The findings from this research project which used youth participatory action research as its methodology support the findings of previous research. This work fills a gap in the literature though because it provides a more in-depth understanding of how students communicate their needs. The sixth-grade students did not directly state that they felt isolated or needed better connections. They did not use the term *adult advocate* or *transition programming*. They did not use any of the key words that are found in the literature. They did not discuss self-efficacy, motivation, or social emotional learning. They did not discuss academics, behavior, or attendance. The students did talk about participating in school activities and friendships. It is important to understand that as adults we use a different language than the students we work with. I usually begin my parent and student orientations by telling them that they are not going to understand their parents for the next few years and their parents are not going to understand them. I tell them that they will speak a different language throughout middle school (and maybe beyond) and that is okay. It is my job as the school counselor to help interpret the language between parents. It is my responsibility to hear the silent voices of the oppressed.

This study supported the idea that middle school students are often silenced, but they do have important insights to their own lives and education. Through the data collection process, the students asked about playing sports because they wanted to feel connected. They ask about leadership positions because they are looking for a positive way to connect with

people who make good decisions. They describe situations where students make bad choices together because they are just looking for friends and want to be included. The students wrote ideas about friends that made them feel connected and school policies that made them feel isolated. It is my belief after analyzing the data that the school operates in opposition to the needs of the students. Obviously, creating policies that isolate students is not intentional but nonetheless it is happening. According to feedback from students, these isolating policies are having detrimental effects on middle school students.

Schools that create transition plans for students must be more intentional in their planning. A formal written plan that can be reviewed by students is a good place to start. Asking the students what they think about middle school and what challenges they see within the student body and policies is a good place to start the process of making changes. Talking with the students about what their major challenges are is the best place to start. Once those conversations are had, a more intentional and effective plan can be created and implemented.

Use of research-based practices to guide the transition plan formation is also essential to ensuring that student needs are met. Teacher and administrator buy-in is crucial in creating the connections that students need. The person or people in charge of creating the connections plan cannot be the only ones working toward the goal of successful transitions. Creating a transition plan should be a collaborative effort between school leaders, students, parents, and the community. The plans need to be aimed at meeting the social-emotional and academic needs of students as well as the functional needs of the school.

A rapidly changing world. Today's world is changing as rapidly as the bodies, brains, and best friends of middle school students. Currently, we see a global pandemic, COVID-19, affecting people across all cultures, races, genders, and socioeconomic status.

K-12 education is facing a new challenge of reaching students through digital learning platforms. With schools closing for two months or more, educators must continue to come up with creative solutions to address academics and social-emotional learning.

The question has been raised as to how we will help students transition to the middle school during these very uncertain times that do not allow students to enter the school building. It would be simple to jump into action and create virtual tours and online scavenger hunts. The truth is that we do not know if those would be effective means for reaching the students. Not all students have internet access or computers in their homes. Some students are not able to create meaningful connections through the use of technology.

When the world changes we must change with it. I still believe that the key to knowing how to respond is by asking the students. They live in a digital age with which many adults are unfamiliar. It would be irresponsible of us to think we could make determinations about how to best reach students using platforms with which we are unfamiliar. This is a time where it is imperative to reach out to students, get their feedback, and make the most informed decisions on how to help prepare them to enter middle school when they have not had the opportunity to complete elementary school in their own building.

There are many questions that will be left unanswered. How much learning loss will occur? Will students come to school in need of additional instruction in the area of school policies and procedures? Will the time home allow them to self-reflect? Will it be a time where they can reset their brains and begin middle school with a fresh perspective? I do not know the answers to these questions, but this poses an area of research that is completely untapped and information that is yet to be discovered.

I hope this dissertation serves as a challenge to educators everywhere. I want to challenge them to step back and engage in careful reflection of school policies and programs, as well as their own practice. Educators should be willing to understand their own practices and engage in discourse with their students to discover new information and ideas about our local and global communities. I challenge educators to always be willing to ask the students "What would you suggest?"

References

Adelman, C. (1993). Kurt Lewin and the origins of action research. *Educational Action Research, 1*(1), 7-24. doi: 10.1080/965079930010102

Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2002). School counselors and school reform: New directions. *Professional School Counseling*, 5(4), 235. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/213357102?accountid=8337

Adom, D., Yeboah, A., Ankrah, A. K. (2016). Constructivism philosophical paradigm: Implication for research, teaching, and learning. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, 4(10),* 1-9. Retrieved from http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Constructivism-Philosophical-Paradigm-Implication-for-Research-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf

Akos, P. (2006). Extracurricular participation and the transition to middle school. *Research in Middle Level Education Online,* 29(9), 1–9. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2006.11462032

Akos, P., Lineberry, C., & Queen, J. A. (2013). Promoting a Successful Transition to Middle School. Routledge.

Akpan, J. P., & Beard, L. A. (2016). Using Constructivist Teaching Strategies to Enhance Academic Outcomes of Students with Special Needs. *Universal Journal of Educational Research,* 4(2), 392–398.

American School Counselor Association. (2017). The essential role of middle school counselors. Retrieved from https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Careers-Roles/WhyMiddle.pdf

American School Counselor Association. (2018). Who are school counselors? Retrieved from https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Careers-Roles/SCInfographic.pdf

Ames, C. & Archer, J. (1988). Achievement goals in the classroom: Students' learning strategies and motivation processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 80(3), 260-267.

Anderson, A. R., Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., & Lehr, C. A. (2004). Check & Connect: The importance of relationships for promoting engagement with school. *Journal of School Psychology*, 42(2), 95-113. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2004.01.002

Anderson, M. Social-Emotional Learning and Academics: Better Together. 2015. Available online:http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct15/vol73/num02/Social-Emotional. Learning_and_Academics@_Better_Together.aspx (accessed on 20 April 2018).

Andrews, C., & Bishop, P. (2012). Middle grades transition programs around the globe: Effective school transition programs take a comprehensive approach to ensuring student success in middle grades. *Middle School Journal,* 44(1), 8-14. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2012.11461834

Anfara, V. A. & Schmid, J. B. (2007). School transitions: Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune? *Middle School Journal,* 39(1), 60-67. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2007.11461616

Armstrong, T., & Elkind, D. (2006). *The best schools: how human development research should inform educational practice*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Retrieved from https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy006.nclive.org/lib/appstate/reader.action?docID=289655

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist,* 28(2), 1174-148.

Bandurraga, A., Gowen, L. K., & The Finding Our Way Team. (2013). "I bloomed here": A guide for conducting photovoice with youth receiving culturally- and community-based services. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.

Bailey, G., Giles, R. M., & Rogers, S. E. (2015). An investigation of the concerns of fifth graders transitioning to middle school. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education,* 38(5), 1-12. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2015.11462118

Barton, T., Borrini-Feyerabend, G., de Sherbinin, A., Warren, P. (1997). *Our people, our resources: Supporting rural communities in participatory action research on population dynamics and the local environment.* World Conservation Union: IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK.

Bayer, A. M. & Alburqueque, M. (2014). Our world through our eyes: Adolescents use photovoice to speak their mind on adolescent health, well-being and sexuality in Lima, Peru. *Health Promotion Practice, 15*(5), 723-731. doi: 10.1177/1524839914530400

Bennett, C.L. (2012). The freshman academy impact: A comparison of ninth grade structures through analyses of student perceptions and performance data. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Bennett,%20Christopher_2012_Dissertation.pdf

Benner, G. & Kutash, K. & Nelson, R. & Fisher, M. (2013). Closing the achievement gap of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders through multi-tiered systems of support. *Education and Treatment of Children, 36*(3), 15-29. doi: 10.1353/etc.2013.0018

Bellis, M.D., Keshavan, M.S., Clark, D.B., Casey, B.J., Giedd, J.N., Boring, A.M., Frustaci, K., & Ryan, N.D. (1999). Developmental traumatology part II: brain development. *Biological Psychiatry*, 45, 1271-1284.

Berger, C., PhD. (2013). Bring out the brilliance: A counseling intervention for underachieving students. *Professional School Counseling,* 17(1), 86-96. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1558312662?accountid=8337

Berthelsen, D., Hayes, N., White, S. L., & Williams, K. E. (2017). Executive function in adolescence: Associations with child and family risk factors and self-regulation in early childhood. *Frontiers in Psychology.* Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00903

Bertram, T. & Pascal, C. (2001). What counts in early learning? In B. Spodek & O. Saracho (Eds.), *Contemporary influences in early childhood curriculum* (169-181). Greenwich, Conn: Information Age Publishing

Blad, E. (2017). Teacher prep slow to embrace social-emotional learning. *Education Week*, 36 (27), 10. Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/04/05/teacher-prep-slow-to-embrace-social-emotional-learning.html?print=1

Blakemore, S. & Choudhury, S. (2006). Development of the adolescent brain: implications for executive function and social cognition. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(3/4), 296-312. doi: 10.111/j.1469-7610.2006.01611.x

Bobu, R. (2014). The school counselor: competencies in a constructivist model of counseling for career development. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 142, 255-259. Retrieved from https://ac.els-cdn.com/S1877042814050034/1-s2.0-S1877042814050034-main.pdf?_tid=95bf2f62-1e75-48e1-85a0-6a5178bc0607&acdnat=1544652471_e56f1a3b930d5823bed6aaf37e3ddbf8

Bradley, R., Danielson, L. & Dolittle, J. (2007). Responsiveness to intervention: 1997-2007. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 39*(5), 8-12.

Bransford, J., Brown, A. L., Cocking, R. R., & National Research Council (U.S.). (1999). How People Learn : Brain, Mind, Experience, and School. *National Academies Press.*

Britner, S. L. & Pajares, F. (2006). Sources of self-efficacy beliefs of middle school students. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching,* 43 (5), 485-499. doi: 10.1002/tea.20131

Brott, P. E. (2004). Constructivist assessment in career counseling. *Journal of Career Development. 30, 3.* Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/089484530403000302

Brinegar, Kathleen (2015) A Content Analysis of Four Peer-Reviewed Middle Grades Publications: Are We Really Paying Attention to Every Young Adolescent? *Middle Grades Review*, 1(1) Article 4. Available at: http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol1/iss1/4

Byrne, A., Canavan, J. and Millar, M. (2009). Participatory research and the voice-centered relational method of data analysis: Is it worth it? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 12(1), 67-77. doi: 10.1080/13645570701606044

Cahill, C. (2007). Doing research with young people: Participatory research and the rituals of collective work. *Children's Geographies,* 5(3), 297-312. doi: 10.1080/14733280701445895

Callaway, R. (1973). Principals' perceptions of the junior high school and the middle school: 'A rose by any other name'. *Middle School Journal*, 4(2), 13–16. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/ stable/23022725

Caraballo, L., Lozenski, B. D., Lyiscott, J. J., & Morrell, E. (2017). YPAR and Critical Epistemologies: Rethinking Education Research. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 311–336. doi: 10.3102/0091732X16686948

Carey, J., & Dimmitt, C. (2012). School counseling and student outcomes: Summary of six statewide studies. *Professional School Counseling*, 16, 146–153. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/profschocoun.16.2.146

Carter, C. (2018). Successful dissertations: The complete guide for education, childhood, and early childhood studies students (2nd ed.). London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Castro, I. E., Swauger, M., & Harger, B. (2017). *Researching children and youth: Methodological issues, strategies, and innovations* (Vol. First edition). Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1423704&site=eds-live&scope=site

Cauley, K., & Jovanovich, D. (2006). Developing an effective transition program for students entering middle school or high school. *Clearing House*, 80(1), 15-25. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/30194999

Christians, C. G., & Carey, J. W. (1989). The logic and aims of qualitative research. *Research Methods in Mass Communication*, 354–374.

Choudhury, S., Blakemore, S., & Charman, T. (2006). Social cognitive development during adolescence. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 1(3), 165-174. doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsl024

Chung, R. C. & Bemak, F. P. (2012). Social justice as the fifth force: theories and concepts. *In Social justice counseling: The next steps beyond multiculturalism* (pp. 25-52). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781452240503.n3

Coleman, J. C. & Hendry, L. B. (1990). *The nature of adolescence*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2010-25007-000&site=eds-live&scope=site

Creswell, J. (1998*). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Traditions.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Cross, T. L., & Cross, J. R. (2017). Maximizing potential: A school-based conception of psychosocial development. *High Ability Studies*, 28(1), 43–58. doi: 10.1080/13598139.2017.1292896

Dahir, C. A. & Stone, C. B. (2009). School counselor accountability: The path to social justice and systemic change. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87, 12-20.

Da Ros-Voseles, D.A., & Fowler-Haughey, S. (2007). *Why Children's Dispositions Should Matter to All Teachers.* Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/why-childrens-dispositions-should-matter-all-teachers

Durlak, J.A.; Weissberg, R.P.; Dymnicki, A.B.; Taylor, R.D.; Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405–432. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Eagle, J. W., Dowd-Eagle, S. E., Snyder, A., & Holtzman, E. G. (2015). Implementing a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS): Collaboration between school psychologists and administrators to promote systems-level change. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation,* 25(2/3), 160–177. doi: 10.1080/10474412.2014.929960

Eccles, J. & Wigfield, A. (1997). Young adolescent development. In Irvin, J. L. (Ed.), *What Current Research Says to the Middle Level Practitioner* (15-30). USA: NMSA.

Eisenman, G., Edwards, S., & Cushman, C. A. (2015). Bringing reality to classroom management in teacher education. *Professional Educator*, 39(1), 1–12. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1062280.pdf

Elliott, E.S., & Dweck, C. S. (1988). Goals: An approach to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1, 5.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about teaching and doing autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Erickson, F., Bagrodia, R., Cook-Sather, A., Espinoza, M., Jurow, S., Shultz, J. J., ... Noguera, P. (2008). Students' experience of school curriculum: The everyday circumstances of granting and withholding assent to learn. *The SAGE Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction* (pp. 198-218). SAGE Publications Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412976572.n10

Feldman, S. S. & Elliott, G. R. (1990). *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Freeman, M. D. A. (1983) *The Rights and Wrongs of Children*. London: Frances Pinter.

Friere, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (2nd ed.) New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc.

Flower, A., McKenna, J. W., & Haring, C. D. (2017). Behavior and classroom management: Are teacher preparation programs really preparing our teachers? *Preventing School Failure*, 61(2), 163. doi: 10.1080/1045988X.2016.1231109

Foster-Fishman, P. G., Law, K. M., Lichty, L. F., & Aoun, C. (2010). Youth reACT for social change: A method for youth participatory action research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46, 67-83. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9316-y

Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L. (2006). Introduction to response to intervention: What, why, and how valid is it? *Reading Research Quarterly, 41*(1), 93-99. doi: 10.1598/RRQ.41.1.4

Gatewood, T. (1970–1972). Research report: Middle school versus the junior high school. *Middle School Journal*, 1/2/3, 12–14. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23022746

Gilewski, C. D. & Nunn, M. L. (2016). Research summary: Transitioning young adolescents from elementary to middle school. Retrieved June 2019 from http://www.amle.org/ServicesEvents/ResearchSummary/ TabId/622/ArtMID/2112/ArticleID/750/ Transitioning-Young-Adolescents-from-Elementary-to-Middle-School.aspx

Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson

Green, J., Liem, G. A., Martin, A. J., Colmar, S. H., Marsh, H. W. (R8137), & McInerney, D. M. (2012). Academic motivation, self-concept, engagement, and performance in high school: key processes from a longitudinal perspective. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.02.016

Gobin, B. A., Teeroovengadum, V., & Becceea, N. B. (2012). Investigating into the relationship between the present level of tertiary students' needs relative to Maslow's hierarchy: A case study at the University of Mauritius. *International Journal of Learning,* 18(11), 203–219. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=83813238&site=eds-live&scope=site

Guba, E. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal,* 29 (2), 75–91. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/30219811.

Gunter, H. & Thomson, P. (2007). Learning about student voice. *Support for Learning, 22*(4), 181-188.

Hertzog, C., & Morgan, P. L. (1999). *Transition: A Process Not an Event.* Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Hein, G. E. (1991). Constructivist learning theory. *CECA Conference.* Retrieved from http://beta.edtechpolicy.org/AAASGW/Session2/const_inquiry_paper.pdf

Hill, L. M. & Mobley, J. A. (2016). Making the change from elementary to middle school. *Ideas and Research You Can Use: VISTAS,* 22, 2-11.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hua Liu, C. & Matthews, R. (2005). Vygotsky's philosophy: Constructivism and its criticisms examined. *International Education Journal, 6* (3), 386-399.

Jackson, A. W. & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Johnson, S. B., Blum, R. W., & Giedd, J. N. (2009). Adolescent maturity and the brain: the promise and pitfalls of neuroscience research in adolescent health policy. *The Journal of Adolescent Health:* official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine, 45(3), 216–221. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.05.016

Juvonen, J., Le, V., Kaganoff, T., Augustine, C., & Constant, L. (2004). Core Practices of the Middle School Concept. In Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School (pp. 20-27). Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved February 27, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg139edu.12

Katz, L.G. 1993. Dispositions as educational goals. ERIC EDO-PS-93-10. Online: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED363454.pdf

Kohn, A. (1999). *The schools our children deserve: Moving beyond traditional classrooms and "tougher standards"*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Kornbluh, M., Ozer, E. J., Allen, C. D., & Kirshner, B. (2015). Youth participatory action research as an approach to sociopolitical development and the new academic standards: Considerations for educators. *Urban Review*, 47(5), 868-892. doi: 10.1007/s11256-015-0337-6

Lac, V. T. & Fine, M. (2018). The good, the bad, and the ugly: An autoethnographic journey on doing participatory action research as a graduate student. *Urban Education,* 53(4), 562-583. doi: 10.177/00420859I8762491

Lane, J., Lane, A. M., & Kyprianou, A. (2004). Self-efficacy, self-esteem, and their impact on academic performance. *Social Behavior and Personality*. 32(3), 247-256.

Lehtomaki, E., et al., (2013). Research to engage voices on the ground in educational development. *International Journal of Educational Development,* doi: 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2013.01.003

Levy, I. P., Cook, A. L., & Emdin, C. (2019). Remixing the school counselor's tool kit: Hip-hop spoken work therapy and YPAR. *Professional School Counseling,* 22(1), 1-11. doi: 10.1177/2156759X18800285

Lewis, M. E. (2004). A teacher's schoolyard tale: Illuminating the vagaries of practicing participatory action research (PAR) pedagogy. *Environmental Education Research,* 10(1), 89-114. doi: 10.1080/1350462032000173724

Lincoln, YS. & Guba, EG. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (1990). *A theory of goal setting and task performance*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

MacIver, D. J. (1990). Meeting the needs of young adolescents: Advisory groups, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and school transition programs. *Phi Delta Kappan, 71*(6), 458-464.

Mahoney, M. (2020). Implementing evidence-based practices within multi-tiered system of support to promote inclusive secondary classroom settings. *The Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship, 9*(1), 1-10. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/josea/vol9/iss1/2

Main, K. K. M. (2018). Walking the Talk: Enhancing Future Teachers' Capacity to Embed Social-Emotional Learning in Middle Years Classrooms. *Education Sciences*, 8(3), 143. doi: 10.3390/educsci8030143

Marrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 250–260.

Martin, M. & Rami. (2002). I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman. On *Britney* [CD]. Stockholm: Jive Records.

Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action.* Alexandria, Va: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach.* [Kindle Edition] Retrieved from Amazon.com

McElroy, C. (2000). Middle school programs that work. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 82(4), 277-292. Retrieved from http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=22286bfe-3528-4d28-b67d-4c2cff0e83d6%40sessionmgr4008.

McGuigan, L., & Hoy, W. K. (2006). Principal leadership: Creating a culture of academic optimism to improve achievement for all students. *Leadership & Policy in Schools*, 5(3), 203–229. doi: 10.1080/15700760600805816

McNiff, J. (2013). *Action research: Principles and practice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

McTaggart, R. (1998). Principles for participatory action research. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 4(2), 168-187. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=4000650&site=eds-live&scope=site

McTaggart, R. (1991). Is validity really an issue for participatory action research? *Studies in Cultures, Organizations & Societies*, 41(3), 211. doi: 10.1177/0001848191041003003

Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* [Kindle Edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Meyer, D. L, (2009). The poverty of constructivism. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 41*(3), 332-341. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00457.x

National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2019). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/archive.aspx#whats-new

National Middle School Association. (1996). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents.* Westerville, OH.

National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents.* Westerville, OH.

Niesen, V. & Wise, P. S. (2004). Transition from elementary to middle school: Strategies for educators. *National Association of School Psychologists*. Retrieved from https://www.nppsd.org/vimages/shared/vnews/stories/525d81ba96ee9/Tr%20-%20Transition%20from%20Eleemntary%20to%20Middle%20School.pdf

Oliver, R. M & Reschly, D. J. (2010). Special education teacher preparation in classroom management: Implications for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, 35(3), 188–199. doi: 10.1177/019874291003500301

Osborn, D. S., & Bethell, D. S. (2010). Using card sorts in career assessment. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, 25(4), 101-114. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/756956631?accountid=8337

Osterman, K. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research,* 70(3), 323-367. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org.proxy006.nclive.org/stable/1170786

Osterman, K., Furman, G., & Sernak, K. (2014). Action research in EdD programs in educational leadership. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 9*(1), 85-105. doi: 10.1177/1942775113498378

Ozer, E. J. (2017). Youth-led participatory action research: Overview and potential for enhancing adolescent development. *Child Development Perspectives,* 11 (3), 173-177. doi: 10.1111/cdep.12228

Ozer, E. J. & Douglas, L. (2012). The impact of participatory research on urban teens: An experimental evaluation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51, 66-75. doi: 10.1007/s10464-012-9546-2

Ozer, E. J., Ritterman, M. L., & Wanis, M. G. (2010). Participatory action research (PAR) in middle school: Opportunities, constraints, and key processes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46, 152-166. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9335-8

Paisley, P. O., & McMahon, G. (2001). School counseling for the 21st century: Challenges and opportunities. *Professional School Counseling*, 5(2), 106. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/213438281?accountid=8337

Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings. *Review of educational research*, 66(4), 543-578.

Pajares, F. & Graham, L. (1999). Self-efficacy, motivation constructs, and mathematics performance of entering middle school students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 24, 124-139.

Pandey, Satyendra & Patnaik, Srilata. (2014). Establishing reliability and validity in qualitative inquiry: A critical examination. *Jharkhand Journal of Development and Management Studies*, 12, 5743-5753. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/Home/Downloads/ERVQI%20(1).pdf

Pass, S. (2004). *Parallel Paths to Constructivism: Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky*. Greenwich, Conn: Information Age Publishing. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=470116&site=eds-live&scope=site

Perlstein, L. (2003). *Not much, just chillin': The hidden lives of middle schoolers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Perry, B. D. (2001). The neuroarcheology of child maltreatment: The neurodevelopmental costs of adverse childhood events. In K. Franey, R. Geffner, & R. Falconer (Eds.), *The Cost of Maltreatment: Who Pays?* (15-37). San Diego: Family Violence and Sexual Assault Institute.

Perry, J. A. (2015) The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 47(3), 56-61, doi: 10.1080/00091383.2015.1040712

Peterson, G. W. (1998). Using a vocational card sort as an assessment of occupational knowledge. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 6, 49-67.

Phillips, E. N., Berg, M. J., Rodriguez, C., & Morgan, D. (2010). A case study of participatory action research in a public New England middle school: Empowerment, constraints, and challenges. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46, 179-194. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9336-7

Pintrich, P. R. (1999). The Role of Motivation in Promoting and Sustaining Self-Regulated Learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 31(6), 459–470.

Pintrich, P. R., & de Groot, E. V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology,* 82(1), 33–40. doi: 10.1037/0022-0663.82.1.33

Powell, S. D. (2005). *Introduction to middle school*. NJ: Pearson.

Prawat, R. S. (1989). Promoting access to knowledge, strategy, and disposition in students: A research synthesis. *Review of Educational Research,* 59(1), 1-41. doi: 10.3102/00346543059001001

Ratts, M. J. & Pederson, P. B. (2014). *Counseling for Multiculturalism and Social Justice: Integration, Theory, and Application.* (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2000). Pupil participation and pupil perspective: 'Carving a new order of experience'. *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 30(1), 75-89. doi: 10.1080/03057640050005780

Schaefer, M. B., Malu, K. F. & Yoon, B. (2016) An Historical Overview of the Middle School Movement, 1963–2015, *RMLE Online*, 39:5, 1-27, doi: 10.1080/19404476.2016.1165036

Schunk, D. H. (1991). Self-efficacy and academic motivation. *Educational Psychologist*, 26, 207-231.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22, 63-75.

Shum, S. B. & Crick, R. D. (2012). Learning dispositions and transferable competencies: pedagogy, modelling, and learning analytics. *LAK 2012: Second International Conference on Learning Analytics and Knowledge*, 92-1010. doi: 10.1145/2330601.2330629

Simmons R. G. and Blyth, D. A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Singer, A. (2017). The results are in: Common core fails tests and kids. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/results-are-in-common-co_b_9819736

Sink, C. A. & Stroh, H. R. (2003). Raising achievement test scores of early elementary school students through comprehensive school counseling programs. *Professional School Counseling, 6*(5), 350-364.

Slee, R., Weiner, G., & Tomlinson, S. (1998). *School effectiveness for whom?* London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=88312&site=eds-live&scope=site

Smith, L., Beck, K., Bernstein, E. & Dashtguard, P. (2014). Youth participatory action research and school counseling practice: A school-wide framework for student well-being. *Journal of School Counseling,* 12 (21), 2-23.

Smith, L., Bratini, L., & Appio, L. M. (2012). Everybody's teaching and everybody's learning: Photovoice and youth counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Development,* 90, 3-11. doi: 10.111/j.1556-6676.2012.00001.x

Smith, L., Davis, K., & Bhowmik, M. (2010). Youth Participatory Action Research Groups as School Counseling Interventions. *Professional School Counseling*, 14(2), 174–182.

Soleimanpour.S., Brindis, C., Geierstanger, S., Kandawalla, S. and Kurlaender, T. (2008). Incorporating Youth-Led Community Participatory Research into School Health Center Programs and Policies. *Public Health Reports*, 123, 709-716.

Swafford, J., & Bryan, J. K. (2000). Instructional Strategies for Promoting Conceptual Change: Supporting Middle School Students. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 16(2), 139-161. doi: 10.1080/105735600278006

Swafford, J., & Durrington, V. A. (2010). *Middle school students' perceptions: What teachers can do to support reading self-efficacy*. In S. Szabo, T. Morrison, L. Martin, M. Boggs, & L. Raine (Eds.), Building literacy communities. (Vol. 32, pp. 221–241). Association of Literacy Educators & Researchers.

Theriot, M. T., & Dupper, D. R. (2010). Student discipline problems and the transition from elementary to middle school. *Education and Urban Society*, 42(2), 205-222. doi: 10.1177/003124509349583

Trumbull, E., Pacheco, M., & Brown Univ., P. R. E. A. for E. in the N. S. (2005). *The Teacher's Guide to Diversity: Building a Knowledge Base.* Volume I: Human Development, Culture, and Cognition. Education Alliance at Brown University.

U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center (2008). *Making the transition to middle school: How mentoring can help.* MRC: Mentoring Resource Center Fact Sheet, No. 24. Retrieved from https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/transition-to-middleschool.pdf

Usher, E. L., & Pajares, F. (2006). Sources of academic and self-regulatory efficacy beliefs of entering middle school students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 2, 125.

Van Sluys, K. (2010). Trying on and trying out: Participatory action research as a tool for literacy and identity work in middle grades classrooms. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46, 139-151. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010931908

Wadsworth, B. J. (1984). *Piaget's theory of cognitive and affective development*. (3rd ed.) New York: Longman.

Wexler, N. (2018). Why American students haven't gotten better at reading in 20 years. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/-american-students-reading/557915/

Williamston, R. (2010). Transition from middle school to high school: Research brief [PDF File]. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538706.pdf

Wolcott, H. F. (1990). *Writing up qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Zambo, D. (2011). Action research as a signature pedagogy in an education doctorate program: The reality and hope. *Innovations in Higher Education*, 36, 261-271, doi: 10.1007/s10755-010-9171-7

Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Self-efficacy: An essential motive to learn. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 82-91. doi: 10.1006/ceps.1999.1016

Zimmerman, B. J., Bandura, A., Martinez-Pons, M. (1992). Self-motivation for academic attainment: The role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(3), 663-676.

Appendix A
ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

From https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Careers-Roles/RoleStatement.pdf

Appendix B
TRANSITION PLAN FOR MOUNTAIN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Date	Activity	Format	Details
February	Intro to Middle School	Stations	Transition team students will visit elementary schools and present LEADership habits, locks & lockers, school schedules and procedures, and elective class options
	Reader Leader	Small Groups	Sixth grade students visit elementary schools and read to classes
March	Q&A	Whole Group/ Classrooms	Transition team will visit elementary schools for a 1-hour Q&A session. Elementary school counselors will provide lists of 5th grade student questions. Transition team will create a Kahoot! game to address questions/answers.
April	Middle School Visits	Whole Group	Intro to school administration and counselors, band, chorus, & electives; Dress code fashion show
	Middle School Visits	Small Group Rotations	Feedback indicates that small groups for tours (less than 10) was most effective; School tour; Trivia questions on tour; Introduction to important areas in school (media center, coffee shop, sixth grade hall) and sixth grade teachers
	Letter/Phone Call to Parents		Letter to parents introduces school and provides information about elective classes and upcoming registration processes; Provides information about school counselors and who to contact (Appendix O)
May	Reader Leader	Small Groups	Sixth grade students visit elementary schools and read to classes
	School Dance		

		Whole Group	Fifth grade students are invited to a dance at the middle school with sixth grade students
	Letter/Phone Call to Parents		Letter to parents inviting students to the Summer Connections Academy
June	Connections Academy	Small Group	Students are invited to attend a LEADership training; participate in book study activities with the media coordinator; establish relationships through small group activities; tour the school and learn school procedures through interactive methods
July	Connections Academy	Small Group	Students are invited to attend a LEADership training; participate in book study activities with the media coordinator; establish relationships through small group activities; tour the school and learn school procedures through interactive methods
August	Open House	Whole Group	Students receive teacher teams; Meet in classrooms
	Classroom Welcome	Small Group Stations	Activities in classrooms focused on getting to know people and teachers (Minute-to-win it games; Creation of class mission and vision statement; Goal-setting activities; Who Can Help Me? activity)
	School Functions	Whole Group	Students are introduced to: procedures; LEADership habits; lockers; functions of the school
	Getting to Know You	Two-person teams	Students interact with others on their two-person teacher teams to form relationships with others on team (Find Someone Who, Meet the mentors, SEL small groups with counselor)

			Students are introduced to a mentor during the 2nd week of school
	Student Mentors	Small Group	Students are given individual pathways and station work geared toward academic and developmental levels is encouraged in classes
	Class Work/ Curriculum	Whole Group/ Small Group Stations	Two-person teams with team names; competition among classes on the hall is encouraged
	Teaming	Classrooms	Sponsored by sixth grade
	School Dance	Whole Group	PTSO-sponsored Back-to-School Block Party for students, parents, community members, and faculty/staff; Held after school
	Block Party	Whole School/ Community	
September	Kickball Tournament	Teams	Two-person teams participate in kickball tournament between all of sixth grade; Students select to: play kickball, sell concessions, cheer, or be a spectator; PE teachers serve as referees
	Mentors		Students continue work with assigned mentors (complete Academic Checks using Data Tracker)

	Zen Kids	One-on-One/Small Group Small Group	SEL small groups with counselor focused on mindfulness, self-esteem, resilience
October	Mentors PBIS Quarterly Reward Zen Kids	One-on-One/Small Group Grade Level Small Group	Students continue work with assigned mentors (complete Academic Checks using Data Tracker) Activity To Be Determined (usually off-campus field trip) SEL small groups with counselor focused on mindfulness, self-esteem, resilience
November	Mentors Zen Kids	One-on-One/Small Group Small Group	Students continue work with assigned mentors (complete Academic Checks using Data Tracker) SEL small groups with counselor focused on mindfulness, self-esteem, resilience
December	Mentors Hallway Holiday Party	One-on-One/Small Group Stations	Students continue work with assigned mentors (complete Academic Checks using Data Tracker) Each classroom sets up a theme from a holiday book or story read during ELA class; Students are put into small groups and rotate through the stations completing academic activities and enjoying holiday snacks
January - May	Mentors SEL Groups	One-on-One/Small Group Small Group	Students continue work with assigned mentors (complete Academic Checks using Data Tracker) SEL small groups with counselor focused on mindfulness, self-esteem, resilience

Appendix C
TRANSITION PLANNING GUIDE AND RUBRIC

OVERVIEW	**YES**	**NO**
Was data collected to determine current needs/challenges of students (both student and teacher data)?		
Does the plan include five or more diverse activities?		
Is the plan student-centered?		
Is the plan developmentally appropriate?		
Does the plan address the functional needs of the school?		
Does the plan address the academic needs of students?		
Does the plan address the social-emotional learning of students?		
Was the plan created with an end goal in mind?		
Did we clearly communicate the plan with stakeholders, faculty, and staff?		
Are there opportunities for parental involvement?		

Month:	**Activity:**
Does/Is this activity: □ address the need for a sense of belonging □ empathize with student needs □ developmentally appropriate/responsive □ focus on the positive □ build hope	Does this activity: □ provide necessary information □ support social success □ address academic preparation Were activities created using feedback from: □ Teachers □ Students □ Administrators □ Parents □ Other community members
Notes:	

Appendix D
SIXTEEN TENETS OF ACTION RESEARCH

from http://www.caledonia.org.uk/par.htm

1. Participatory action research *is an approach to improving social practice by changing it* and learning from the consequences of change.

2. Participatory action research *is contingent on authentic participation* which involves a continuing spiral of *planning, acting* (implementing plans), *observing* (systematically), *reflecting* and then re-planning and so round the spiral again. The process can be initiated in different ways:

   Collect initial data in an area of general interest (a reconnaissance), reflect on it, and then make a plan for changed action;

   Make an exploratory change, collect data on what happens, reflect, and then build more refined plans of action.

In both cases, if the Lewinian action/reflection spiral is thoughtfully and systematically followed, preferably in a group context, then issues and understandings on the one hand, and the practices themselves, on the other, will develop and evolve.

3. Participatory action research *is collaborative*: those responsible for action are involved in improving it. The collaborating group is widened from those most directly involved to directly involve as many as possible of those affected by the practices concerned.

4. Participatory action research *establishes self-critical communities* of people participating and collaborating in the research processes of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. it aims to build communities of people committed to *enlightening* themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence, and to *emancipating* themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live by their legitimate, and freely chosen social values.

5. Participatory action research *is a systematic learning process* in which people act deliberately through remaining open to surprise and responsive to opportunities. It is a process of using *critical intelligence* to inform action, and developing it so that social action becomes *praxis*(critically informed, committed action).

6. Participatory action research *involves people in theorising about their practices*. This involves them in being *inquisitive* about and coming to *understand* the relationship between circumstances, action and consequences in their own lives. The theories that participatory action research develops may be expressed initially in the form of *rationales* for practice. These initial rationales are then subjected to critical scrutiny through the participatory action research process.

7. Participatory action research *requires that people put their practices, ideas and assumptions about institutions to the test* by gathering compelling evidence for substantiation.

8. Participatory action research involves not only *keeping records* which describe what is happening as accurately as possible but also *collecting and analysing the groups judgements, reactions and impressions* about what is going on.

9. Participatory action research involves participants in *objectifying their own experiences*. This can be done by keeping a *personal journal* in which participants record their progress and their reflections about two parallel sets of learnings: (a) about the practices themselves (how the individual and collective practices are developing) and (b) about the process of studying the practices (how the action research project is going).

10. Participatory action research *is a political process* because it involves people in making changes that will affect others. For this reason it sometimes creates resistance to change, both in the participants themselves and in others.

11. Participatory action research *involves making critical analyses* of the institutionally structured situations (projects, programmes, systems) in which people work. The resistance to change felt by a researcher is due to conflicts between the proposed new practices and the accepted practices (eg concerning communication, decision-making and educational work) of the institution. This critical analysis will help the participatory action researcher to act politically by (a) involving others collaboratively in the research process and inviting them to explore their practices, and (b) by working in the wider institutional context towards more rational understandings, more just processes of decision-making, and more fulfilling forms of work for all involved.

12. Participatory action research *starts small* by working on minor changes which individuals can manage and control, and working towards more extensive patterns of change. These might include critiques of ideas of institutions which might lead to ideas for the general reforms of projects, programmes or system-wide policies and practices. Participants should be able to present evidence on how they *articulated the thematic concern* which holds their group together, and on how they *established authentically shared agreements* in the group.

13. Participatory action research *starts with small cycles* of planning, acting, observing and reflecting which can help to define issues, ideas and assumptions more clearly so that those involved can define more *powerful questions* for themselves as their work progresses.

14. Participatory action research *starts with small groups* of collaborators but widens the community of participating action researchers so that it gradually includes more and more of those involved and affected by the practices in question.

15. Participatory action research *allows and requires participants to build records* of their improvements:

Participants must be able to demonstrate evidence of a group climate where people expect and give evidence to support each other's claims. They must show respect for the value of rigorously gathered and analysed evidence – and be able *to show and defend evidence* to convince others.

records of their changing *activities and practices*,

records of the changes in the *language and discourse* in which they describe, explain and justify their practices,

records of the change in the *social relationships and forms of organisation* which characterise and constrain their practice and

records of the development of their expertise in the conduct of *action research*.

16. Participatory action research *allows and requires participants to give a reasoned justification of their social (educational) work to others* because they can show how the evidence they have gathered and the critical reflection they have done have helped them to create a developed, tested and critically examined rationale for what they are doing. Having developed such a rationale, they may legitimately ask others to justify their own practices in terms of their own theories and the evidence of their own critical self-reflection.

Appendix E
STATE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- CCR Anchor Standard R.2 – Determine central ideas (RI) or themes (RL) of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- CCR Anchor Standard R.4 – Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- CCR Anchor Standard R.6 – Assess how point of view, perspective, or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- CCR Anchor Standard R.7 – Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- CCR Anchor Standard W.1 – Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- CCR Anchor Standard W.2 – Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- CCR Anchor Standard W.3 – Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- CCR Anchor Standard W.4 – Use digital tools and resources to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
- CCR Anchor Standard W.5 – Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating an understanding of the subject under investigation.
- CCR Anchor Standard SL.1 – Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively
- CCR Anchor Standard SL.2 – Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- CCR Anchor Standard SL.3 – Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
- CCR Anchor Standard SL.4 – Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- CCR Anchor Standard SL.5 – Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

Appendix F
LESSON PLANS FOR WRITING SAMPLES & PHOTOVOICE

Timeline: What are we doing and When?

1. Scientific Method
2. What is Photovoice?
3. Ethics and Confidentiality & Taking Photos
4. Taking Photos
5. Small Group Discussions

Lesson 1: The Scientific Method

1. Group Discussion: What is the Scientific Method?
2. My Idea & My Scientific Questions
3. What is your idea? What are your scientific questions?
4. My Hypothesis and How I came to it…finding background information
5. What is your hypothesis?
6. What do we do next?

Learning Target: I can use my knowledge of the Scientific Method to ask questions and create a hypothesis about sixth grade.

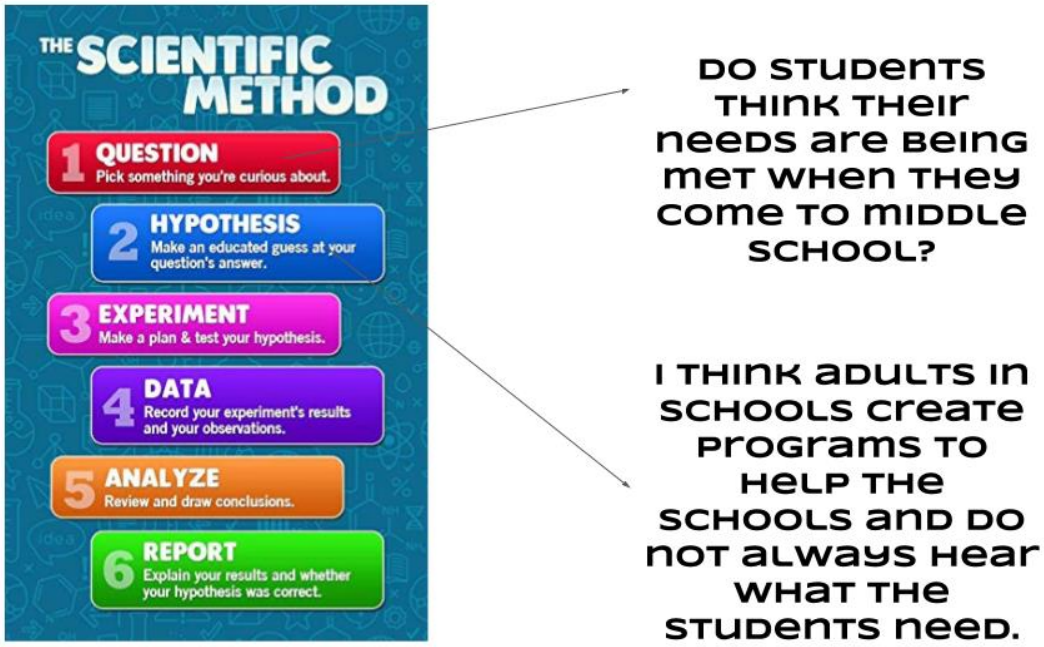
Method: Whole Group Instruction; Think-Pair-Share

Materials: Power Point; Paper & Pencil

Assessment: Students write question and hypothesis; Thumbs Up/Down

Standards:
W.6.5 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the investigation when appropriate.
W.6.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
SL.6.4 Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.

Vocabulary: Scientific Method; Question; Hypothesis



Lesson 2: What is PhotoVoice?

1. Students will view a video on PhotoVoice to get an understanding of the process

   https://youtu.be/xyxnnolvqom

2. Students will read articles on PhotoVoice in groups of 2 or 3..

3. Students will find key terms about photo voice and add those to the wordle.

4. Students will use the terms to create a definition of photo voice.

Photo Voice

Learning Target: I can use my knowledge of finding information to create a definition of PhotoVoice.

Method: Whole Group Instruction; Think-Pair-Share

Materials: Power Point; Paper & Pencil; Internet

Assessment: Students write and verbally explain the definition of photovoice; Thumbs Up/Down

Standards:
W.6.5 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the investigation when appropriate.
W.6.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
SL.6.4 Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.

Vocabulary: Constructivism; PhotoVoice; Community; Action Research

Lesson 3: Ethics and Confidentiality

1. Think-Pair-Share: What is confidentiality?
2. Groups: Discuss the definitions of confidentiality; create two examples of when we use confidentiality in school
3. Whole Group: Why do we need to practice confidentiality during this process?
4. What does confidentiality have to do with the research process?

Learning Target: I can use my prior knowledge to respect others ideas by maintaining confidentiality and acting ethically when in a group.

Method: Whole Group Instruction; Think-Pair-Share

Materials: Power Point; Paper & Pencil

Assessment: Students verbally discuss confidentiality; Thumbs Up/Down

Standards:
W.6.5 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the investigation when appropriate.
W.6.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
SL.6.4 Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.

Vocabulary: Confidentiality, Research, Ethics, Privacy

Appendix G
ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE (AUDIT TRAIL)

Stage	Activity	
1	Whole Class Lesson	*Introduction of Self and Dissertation*
1	Whole Class Lesson	*The Scientific Method*
1	Whole Class Lesson	*Introduction to Photovoice*
2	Whole Class Lesson	*Implementation of Photovoice (2 sessions)*
2	Whole Class Lesson	*SHOWed Method*
3	Data Collection/Consolidation	*Performed by Primary Researcher*
3	Small Group Discussion	*Data Analysis & Problem Identification*
4	Individual Interviews	*Photovoice*
5	Small Group Discussion	*Data Analysis & Problem Identification*
6	Small Group Discussion	*Creating Goals and Plans*
7	Sharing Plans	*Presenting at Conferences*

Appendix H
LETTER REQUESTING SCHOOL PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Appalachian State University
287 Rivers St., Boone, NC 28608

[redacted]

Dear [redacted]

I am hoping to undertake a youth participatory action research project at [redacted] School as a requirement for my dissertation for the Doctorate in Education Leadership at Appalachian State University. My goal is to gain an understanding of student perspectives about the transition from elementary-to-middle school. Using the data gathered, I will create a transition plan that will benefit social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of our students. This information may also be shared with other middle schools in the county and/or presented at the NC School Counselor conference at a future date.

A key component of youth participatory action research is using students as research participants. Together, with a small group of four to five students, we will gather information from the incoming sixth grade students using photovoice, journaling/writing samples, small group discussion, and surveys. Student research participants will be trained in the research process and ethics/confidentiality. This will serve as a leadership opportunity that will aid student research participants in developing problem-solving, decision-making, and self-efficacy skills. Interested students, who volunteer to participate as research participants, will be given a consent form to be signed by their parent or guardian and returned to me at the beginning of the research process.

Interested students, who volunteer to participate in data collection activities, will be given a consent form to be signed by their parent or guardian and returned to me at the beginning of the research process. Students/parents are free to withdraw from the research at any time. No costs will be incurred by either your school/center or the individual participants.

Based on student permissions, I will work with ELA teachers to determine the best times to work with students. Out of respect for the teachers and valuable class time, all activities will be tailored around the NC Standards for ELA. The attached sheet outlines the standards that will be addressed.

Student and school confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Pseudonyms for the school and students will be used when reporting data in the dissertation. Additional permissions will be obtained to include samples of student work in the final dissertation. The final dissertation will be publicly available upon completion.

I would be grateful if you would grant permission for me to proceed with my research. Please contact me with any questions you may have about the project.

If you agree, please sign and return a copy of this letter granting permission for me to conduct research at Central Wilkes Middle School.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Coleman, EdS, LPC, NCC
Doctoral Student
Appalachian State University

____ I grant permission for Elizabeth Coleman to conduct research related to her doctoral dissertation at [redacted].

_____

[redacted]

Principal

[redacted]

Appendix I
IRB APPROVED SCRIPT FOR USE WITH STUDENTS

Hey everybody! How are you all today?

Most of you know that I am Ms. Coleman, your school counselor. What you may not know is that I am also trying to become Dr. Coleman! On top of my job as your school counselor, I am also a student just like you. I go to school at Appalachian State. I am learning how to become an even better school counselor so I can help you guys have a great time while you are in middle school.

I know that sometimes adults around here think they know everything about you guys and what you are going through. How many of you sometimes think that adults just don't understand what it is like to be a middle school student? (Wait for responses.) Yeah, that's right. It's okay to raise your hand. Sometimes as adults, we think we know what is going on in your life, but really we have no idea.

So this is where you can volunteer to help solve this problem. I need students to use my old fashioned cameras (show disposable cameras) to take some pictures of different activities you will do in class. After you take those pictures, we will write some journal entries and if you want we can even talk about the pictures you took in groups.

After you take the pictures and we talk about it in groups, we are going to decide on the issues that are most important to you guys and make some decisions about what the school can do to make your middle school experience a really great one. I am going to get some seventh and eighth grade students to help us make some decisions as well.

Some of you may need some help learning how to use the cameras and I will show you how. I will also give you a checklist that tells you when to take pictures. We will also talk about how to take photos ethically and to be confidential with our information. Do you guys know what I mean when I say ethically and confidential? (Wait for responses and have discussion.)

So, if you are interested, you can take home this letter to your parent and bring it back signed. You can give it back to your teacher and she will give it to me.

I see some uncertain faces out there. The important thing to know is that you don't have to participate in this. This is for people who want to volunteer. It's not for a grade and I will still help each of you just the same if you are not able to volunteer. Talk to your parents about it and ask them to email me if they have any questions.

Do you guys have any questions?

Appendix J
CONSENT FROM PARENT OR GUARDIAN

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
Your child is invited to participate in a research study designed to understand student perceptions of the elementary-to-middle school transition and using the data collected, create a plan that addresses academic, personal, and social needs of the students and school programs.

ELIGIBILITY
All seventh and eighth grade students are invited to volunteer to participate in the research project.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPATION
You agree to allow your child to participate in this project. Your consent allows us to collect data from your student using photovoice (student photography of school experiences that does not include images of students), written samples, and small group discussions. Your child will also be invited to participate in presenting information to school administrators, teachers, and/or board members.

We will also ask your child to complete at least one of these tasks a part of this project. These will be completed during **HPEX and Advisory Time** and will take approximately **45 minutes during each session.** We will meet approximately 4-5 times from January 7 - January 15.

Reasons your child may not want to participate in this study include: anxiety related to speaking in small groups, presenting information or providing writing samples for the researcher.

VOLUNTEER STATEMENT
Your child is a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you and your child. If your child decides to be in this study, you or your child may end participation at any time without penalty. Neither you nor your child will be treated any differently if you or your child decides not to participate in this study. Your child's grade will not be affected in any way.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have any questions or concerns about this research project, please contact **Elizabeth Coleman (336-903-4188)** or **Dr. Chris Cook (828-262-6062).**
□ I give permission for my child to participate in this study
□ I do not give permission for my child to participate in this study

_____ _____
Signature **[optional]** Date

Appalachian State University's Institutional Review Board has approved this study.
IRB **19-0398**

Appendix K
STUDENT ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Bodies, Brains, & Besties: Understanding Student Perspectives
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Coleman Contact Information: colemanec@appstate.edu
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Chris Cook (cookcm5@appstate.edu)

Joining a Research Study

What is research? Research is a way to test new ideas. Research helps us learn new things. Research helps us make decisions about how to make ideas better.

Being part of a research study is your choice. We are asking you to join a research study. You can say Yes or No. Whatever you decide is OK.

Why are we doing this research? In our research study we want to see what issues that are most important to you guys and make some decisions about what the school can do to make your middle school experience a great one.

What will happen in the research? I am asking your permission to teach you how to take pictures of the things you experience in school and then write or talk about those experiences in order to make decisions about what the school can do to improve. You will take pictures of places or objects in the school that represent your experiences. I will ask you to not take pictures of other student's faces.

What are the good things that can happen from this research? What we learn in this research may or may not help you now. When we finish the research, we hope we know more about sixth grade students and the things they need to help with all those body, brain, and best friend changes. This information can potentially help make coming to sixth grade a better experience for other students.

What are the bad things that can happen from this research? You may feel nervous about participating in research or talking in a group. That's okay. You can always say you do not want to participate. You may see or hear something that makes you feel nervous or uncertain. If that happens, you can always talk to me or your teacher about your experience.

What else should you know about the research? Joining a research study is your choice. You can say Yes or No. Either way is OK. If you say Yes now and change your mind later that is OK. You can stop being in the research at any time. If you want to stop, please tell me, your teacher, or have your parent email me.

Take the time you need to make your choice. Ask us any questions you have. You can ask questions any time.

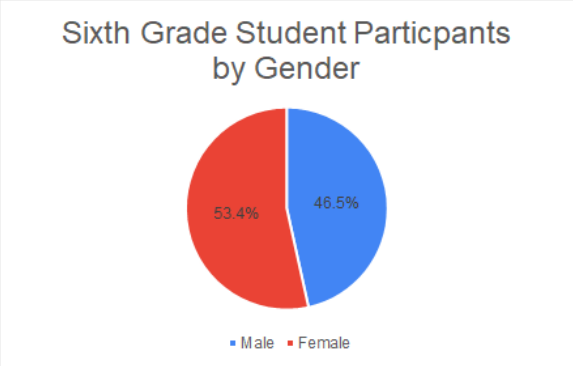
If you would like to be in the research, please read this statement and sign your name below:

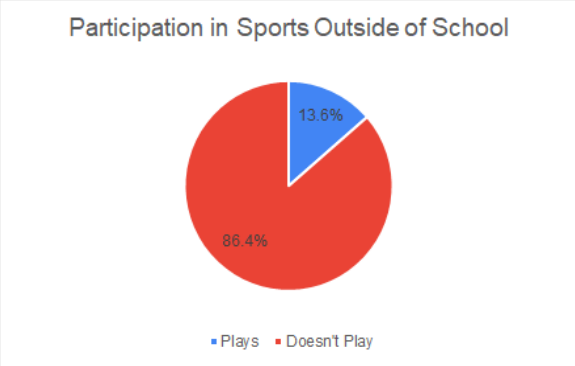
The researcher has told me about the research study. I had a chance to ask questions. I know I can ask questions or stop at any time. I want to be in the research study.

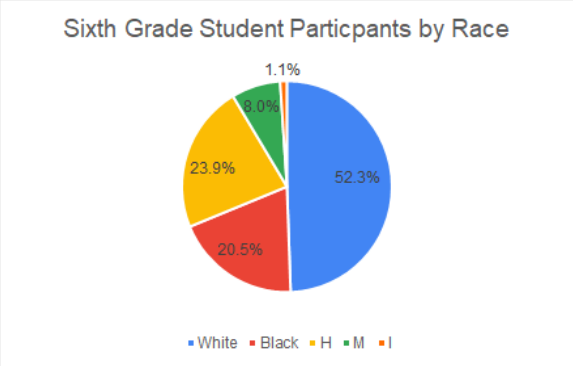
Print your name _____

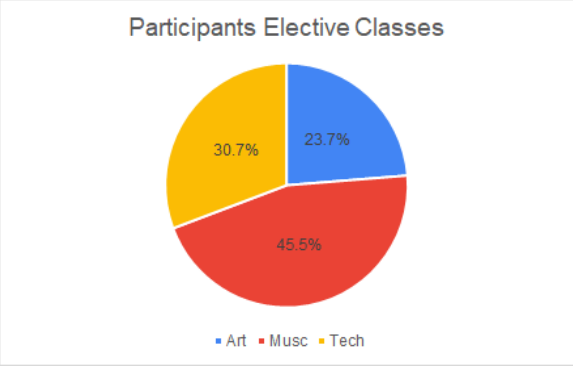
Sign your name _____ Today's Date _____

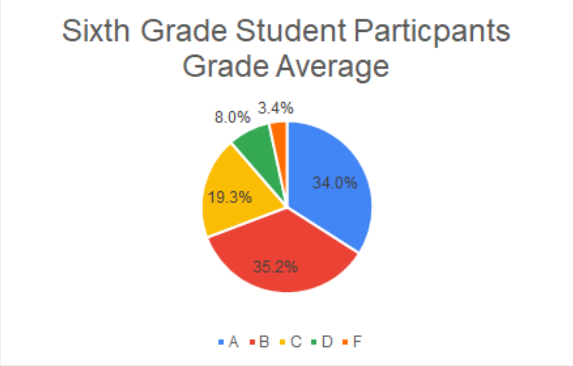
Appendix L
SIXTH GRADE ELA CLASS PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

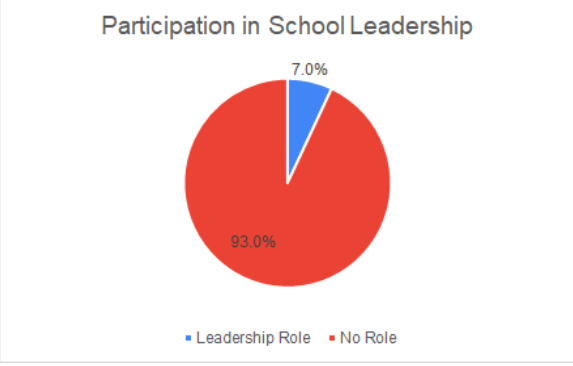












Appendix M
STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS: PHOTOVOICE SESSION 1

Photovoice: October 2019

Student Desk Number _____

Remember: Pictures are of places, ideas, and objects. There should be no pictures of faces. Pictures are private and are not posted in public or online.

Write down one question you have about middle school. Take a picture that represents this question or the answer to this question.

Think about the first day of school. Take a picture that represents a memory of the first day of school.

Think about something in school you enjoy. Take a picture of something/a place that represents this idea.

Appendix N
STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS: PHOTOVOICE SESSION 2

Student Desk Number _____

Today we will work together to take some photographs of different items in the school. You will have approximately 5 minutes to think about the following items and decide on a place or object for 3 of the following items. You may brainstorm and write down your ideas on this paper. Then we will spend 10 minutes finding those objects or places and taking photographs. (Remember, these should be places or objects, but not people). After we finish taking photographs, you will write down a few thoughts you had about the photograph that you took. Are there any questions?

Remember: Pictures are of places, ideas, and objects. There should be no pictures of faces. Pictures are private and are not posted in public or online.

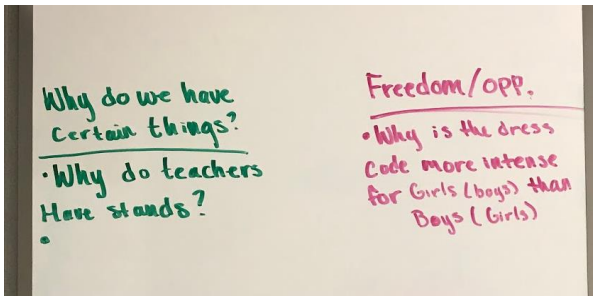
- A classroom door (this can be a door that makes you feel excited, nervous, happy, or any other kind of feeling).
- An object in the school that represents a worry or a fear.
- An object in the school that represents joy, excitement, or happiness.
- A place in the school where you feel safe or comfortable.
- A place or object in the school that reminds you of your first day.
- A place or object in the school that you think could be made better.
- A place or object in the school that you have a question about.
- A place or object in the school that helps you become a better learner.
- A place or object in the school that represents your feelings about having many classes.
- A place or object in the school that represents your feelings about friendships.
- A place or object in the school that represents who you are as a middle school student.
- A place or object in the school that represents change (both positive or negative changes).

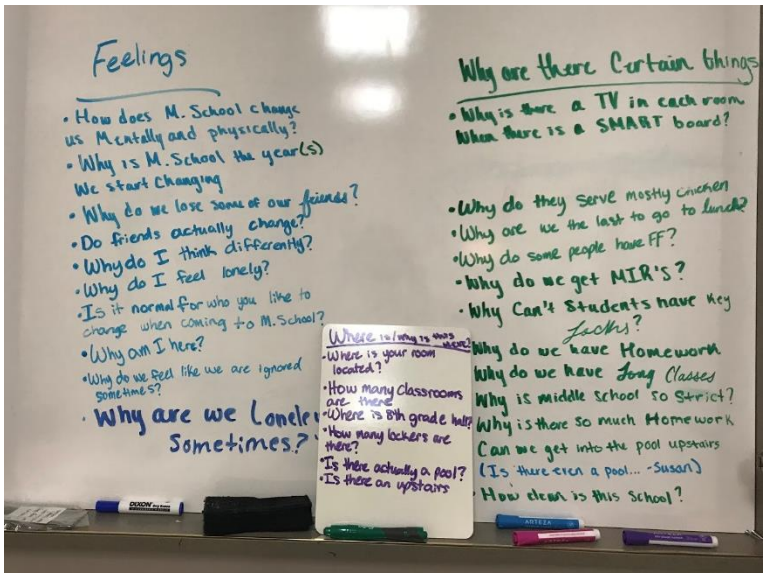
Appendix O
GOAL SETTING for TRANSITION PLANNING (7 HABITS)

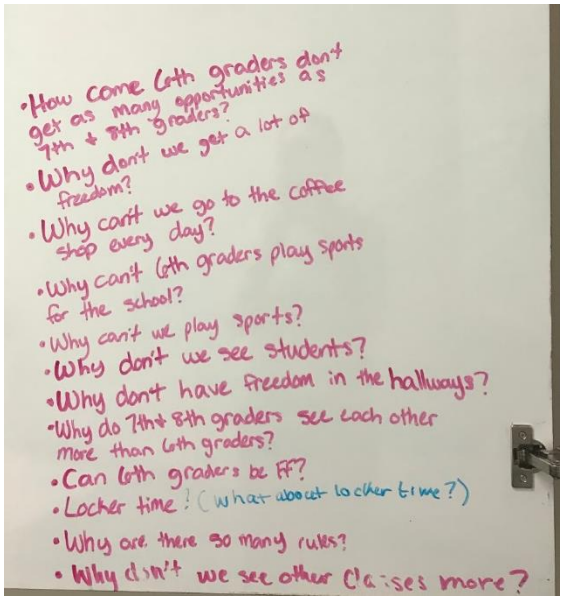
HABIT	Attributes of Habit	Notes
BE PROACTIVE	Achieve extraordinary results by consistently executing their R & I (resourcefulness and initiative) to break through barriers.	"Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our circumstances." Students and adults are being proactive by addressing the challenge of student transitions. Research has been done, data has been collected and analyzed, and key challenges have been identified prior to creating a plan.
BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND	Develop an outcome-oriented mindset in every activity they engage in—projects, meetings, presentations, contributions, etc.	Where do we want to be at the end of the 2020-2021 school year? We want to see each individual student grow as a person and academically. We want to see overall growth for the school. We want to see an improved climate where all students feel a connection to the school, adults, and peers.
PUT 1ST THINGS 1ST	Eliminate energy and time-wasting tendencies by focusing and executing on the team's wildly important goals with a weekly planning cadence.	What is our transition plan WIG? We want to create a transition plan that includes intentional activities directed toward the personal, emotional, social and academic growth of all students.
THINK WIN-WIN	Lead teams that are motivated to perform superbly through a shared expectation and accountability process.	How will we do this? Clearly communicate our intentions (and research) with the staff, administration and other stakeholders. Creating a transition plan that benefits students will ultimately benefit the school.
SEEK TO UNDERSTAND, THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD	Create an atmosphere of helpful give-and-take by taking the time to fully understand issues, and	To best understand the needs of sixth grade students, data was gathered through a variety of methods and shared with seventh grade students. Seventh

	give candid and accurate feedback.	grade students analyzed that data to help draw conclusions about the needs of the sixth-grade students. Students worked with adults in the school to make decisions and create a transition plan.
SYNERGIZE	Demonstrate innovative problem-solving skills by seeking out differences and new and better alternatives.	Students and adults in the school work together to find solutions to the challenges determined (from the data). Students helped adults understand key issues and create a plan with new strategies to aid incoming students during the transition process.
SHARPEN THE SAW	Tap into the highest and best contribution of everyone on a team by unlocking the total strength, passion, capability, and spirit of each individual.	Our intention through this transition plan is to help all sixth-grade students realize their potential as middle school students and help them recognize their strengths and how they contribute to the school. The long-term goal is that students who learn these principles in sixth grade will carry them through to eight grade and over the course of three years, we will see an improved school climate.

Appendix P
CARD SORT ACTIVITY (RESULTS)







Appendix Q
STUDENT PLUS/DELTA CHARTS OF TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

Plus/Delta Chart Summary

CLUBS/ADVISORY GROUPS		SPORTS	
Plus	Delta	Plus	Delta
Offer incentives to improve grades	Time constraints	Offer incentives to improve grades	Transportation
Time to socialize	Don't always get first choice	Learn new skills	Time management
Participate in topics of interest	Not all interests offered	Improve Health	
Connect with new students		Not as isolated	
Multiple grade levels			

MENTOR PROGRAM		ELECTIVE CLASSES	
Plus	Delta	Plus	Delta
Help other people	Lots of students to keep up with	Enjoy free time	Lots of distractions
Connect with people	Finding the right answer to help	Take classwork items home	Time management/finishing assignments
Teach students new concepts	Teaching new concepts	Social time while working	Not enough class time to finish work
Learn leadership skills			
Learn time management			
Learn communication skills			

CLASSROOM STATIONS		TWO PERSON TEAMS	
Plus	Delta	Plus	Delta
Doing many things at once	Off-task students	Connections with students	Stay in one place a long time
Accomplish more	Classroom behavior problems	Get to know your teacher better	When you don't like your teacher
Teamwork	Overstimulation	Less places to go	
Bring grades up	Confusion	Less things to keep up with	
Socialization while working		When you do like your teacher	

Vita

Elizabeth Coleman has 12 years of experience working in education. Her K-12 experience in education includes working as an elementary school teacher assistant, technology facilitator, and high school English teacher. After five years of teaching, Dr. Coleman earned a Master of Arts degree in Professional School Counseling from Appalachian State University. She then worked as a school counselor at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She also worked in the community college system as a counselor and advisor. Dr. Coleman earned her Education Specialist degree in higher education from Appalachian State University in 2017, and then continued her coursework toward the Doctorate in Education Leadership degree. She holds North Carolina School Counseling and Career Development Coordinator licenses. In addition to those, she is also a National Board Certified Teacher in School Counseling, a Board Certified Counselor, and a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor.