ABSTRACT

RICH, KATRENNAYVETTESIMPSON. A Case Study of Teacher Experiences and Perceptions of a Freshman Academy. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli.)

According to Feller (2005), only 68 percent of ninth graders will complete high school within four years. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) was 73.2 percent in 2007–2008 (NCES, 2010). Of all school districts in the United States reporting to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005 and 2010), 67 percent of the students were administered an out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary action, 52 percent received in-school suspensions, and 45 percent received corporal punishment. Two-thirds of the nation's students leave high school unprepared to apply to a four-year college, let alone get an undergraduate degree (NCES, 2005).

Freshman Academy is defined as an organizational structure within a high school where a concentrated focus is on freshman students. Ultimately, the goal is to ease the transition of students from middle school to high school. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine whether a Freshman Academy would impact student discipline, attendance, social development, and achievement as determined by teacher perceptions and experiences. An overarching goal was to analyze through interviews, artifact review, and observations whether the Freshman Academy concept could reduce dropout rates that currently plague public high schools. One-on-one interviews were conducted, using a guided questionnaire, with five core teachers (who previously taught freshmen before the implementation of the Freshman Academy), three upper class teachers (primarily sophomore
teachers), two administrators, and a counselor. Other data points came from a review of
documents, observations and artifacts throughout the school and the Freshman Academy
wing.

This case study revealed that a Freshman Academy has a positive impact on student
achievement, discipline and attendance. Additionally, teachers are swayed by the structure in
the way that they think and act with each other and the instructional process of powerful
teaching and learning. Ninth grade students attending the research site achieve better grades,
attend school more often, and display fewer discipline issues that disrupt the learning
process. The Freshman Academy has established strong positive relationships in a family-
like atmosphere. The primary themes that emerged as a result of the compilation of all data
points were: personalization, collaborative effort, location/proximity, common discipline
approach, instructional expectations, and supporting high school success and administrative
support. A major point to this research is that the concepts are applicable to other models of
school reform such as charter schools, or Early College or Leadership Academies.
A Case Study of Teacher Experiences and Perceptions of a Freshman Academy

by
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DEDICATION

Thank you Lance Fusarelli for your dedication and encouragement throughout this process. I would not have been able to complete this goal had it not been for your leadership and guidance. You never gave up on me although it was a long time.
BIOGRAPHY

Katrenna S. Rich is a wife of 31 years and mother of two (Germaine, 31, and Kandis, 28). She is a lifelong learner.

My educational philosophy is somewhat eclectic because it is a strong mixture of two educational philosophies, with evidence of other philosophical tenets that I have adopted. A majority of my educational philosophy tends to lend itself toward the Progressivism school of thought. The origins of this philosophy are rooted in the philosophy of Pragmatism, developed by John Dewey. As was Dewey’s, my personal philosophy is child-centered; however, because of my discipline beliefs and spirituality, inclinations of essentialism’s idealistic and realistic tenets are also pervasive in my philosophy.

The purpose of education is to produce prepared students to become practical in their personal and working lives by positively connecting to our society as well as pursuing personal growth development as they mature. In doing so, students learn to think rationally so that they may become intelligent, contributing members of society.

I love children and believe strongly in my calling to help change tomorrow by helping the generation of today! Furthermore, I believe strongly in the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to educate a child." Students, parents, teachers, counselors, custodians, administrators, and everyone must strive to create a sense of purpose for the "common good."

Who am I? What causes me to be the way I am? What causes me to think or believe the things I do? All of these questions are rooted in my research paradigm. My research paradigm, however, is not so black and white that it fits smoothly in one or the other, as with my personal philosophy. It vacillates, depending on the situations or the questions being
asked. I realize that the questions I ask and methodologies I pursue in research are laden with bias according to my subjectivity. The foundation of my beliefs always considers possibilities. I am always fighting for the underdogs. I am an administrator who values development, restitution, and reciprocity.

While there were a lot of bad things I remember happening in my life, school was always a good thing and a happy place. The teachers, who did not judge me nor assume that I was going to "be bad," loom larger than life in my memories whenever I think of my school days. The people who inspired and encouraged me to be different still cause my heart to swell whenever I think of them. It was teachers like Mrs. Worsley, Mrs. Steele, Mrs. Clark, Mrs. Whiteside, Mrs. Stickley, Coach Butler, and Coach Gieller that convinced me that I was somebody and could achieve whatever I believed in life! I loved my teachers.

My teaching experience was just as wonderful as my own schooling experience. I loved my students, regardless of who they were or from where they came. I accepted them and was driven by heartbeats to treat them with respect and dignity. When mistakes were made, I helped them to understand that mistakes are not to become permanent and that they were not a precursor for the next situation they would face. I stressed to them, as I do to students even now, that it is more important to learn from the mistakes we make and to view those mistakes not with condemnation, but as unfulfilled opportunities.

As an administrator, it seems that I am always trying to help teachers and other administrators to consider the individual student. "Optimistic" is the word generally used to describe me, as well as my approach to dealing with people. I think it is always important to try to see things through the other person’s eyes and to put myself in their shoes. Trying to
think, from the perspective of another, is not an instinctive action. It requires intentional and purposeful thought. From an early age, my spiritual beliefs had a tremendous impact on how I treated people, as they do today. I was always reared to believe that respect was the moral responsibility of all.

I believe that all people should be treated with equal respect, dignity, and fairness. I do believe, however, that when people are not treated in this manner, it is as a result of discrimination against their age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. When I recognize this injustice, I feel compelled to point it out to individuals in an effort to inspire positive change.

Finally, I believe that the three most important things to remember in education and in educating our children are:

1. Teaching and learning occurs, regardless of one’s awareness of it.
2. Teaching requires just as much heart as it does knowledge (students don't care what you know until they know that you care).
3. All children can learn, given the right circumstances and the right material at the appropriate levels.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I could not have done this had it not been for God who is Lord of my life. Scripture clearly states in Proverbs 3:5-6, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths”. My strength comes from the Lord. During my drought seasons, it was He who inspired me to pick up the pieces and begin again. In the trying times of trying to balance family, church, work, and this dissertation, it was He who helped to adapt to the current situations and find time to work. When my body was at a low point, it was He who put me on the right path. Without God, I would not have arrived at a point of completion.

My husband, who has always been a pillar of strength and motivation for me, has been by my side throughout this entire process. I want to thank you sweetheart for not allowing me to stop pursuing my dream despite the trials and tribulations. You were supportive as I spent weekends away from you working. When I planned a research work weekend, you were always so understanding and patient when there was no dinner to eat. Your longsuffering did not go unnoticed. I appreciate the fact that you allowed our home to be one of the workstations as my partner and I worked together. You selflessly retreated to the bedroom to watch TV in the middle of the day or at the close of an evening when you usually love watching your favorite sports on the flatscreen.

Furthermore, thank you Germaine and Kandis (my son and daughter) for understanding the events that I had to miss as a result of working. When I began this journey
of writing my dissertation, you were both still in high school. My greatest desire is to live a life that serves as an example for you. If you will strive for great things, great things will come to you.

Edye, my working partner, words cannot begin to express how thankful I am that you and I somehow found a connection while attending our earlier classes at NC State University. Our friendship has been based on a strong sense of commitment, loyalty, and accountability from the beginning. Can you believe the amount of time we spent on this project? I cannot think of anyone better to have shared my time and experience with. Thank you for not only being a research work buddy, but for being my friend. The late night conversations and early morning breakfasts will forever be in my memory.

Finally, what would I have done without Dr. Lance Fusarelli, my chair? Thank you for adopting me into your already busy fold. I will never forget that evening in January when I showed up at your office desperate for help and guidance. In the midst of my tears, you were able to show me a clear route that would lead to success. Thank you for helping me. Thank you for editing my work and offering suggestions to improve my work. Thank you for dealing with sudden bursts of energy when I would promise the world and deliver nothing. Still, somehow, you continued to have faith in me and encourage me yet again to thrust forward.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Problem

According to Feller (2005), only 68 percent of ninth graders will complete high school within four years. More recent data indicated that the average freshman graduation rate of those who entered ninth grade in 2006 – 2007 and graduated in four years was 73.9 percent for public schools (NCES, 2010). This is higher than the rate observed in 2005; however, it is only an increase of 5.9 percentage points in five years. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) was 73.2 percent in 2007–2008 (NCES, 2010). Of all school districts in the United States reporting to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005 and 2010), 67 percent of the students were administered an out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary action, 52 percent received in-school suspensions, and 45 percent received corporal punishment. Two-thirds of the nation's students leave high school unprepared to apply to a four-year college, let alone get an undergraduate degree (NCES, 2005). Feller (2005) declares there is also evidence that the achievement gap between racial groups and by gender, which starts at a young age, continues into high school and ultimately results in high dropout rates, particularly for minority groups and males.

Low parental involvement may contribute to the problem. Parents of elementary students are more likely to have high rates of parental involvement than those of high school students (Hickman, 1995). School culture and climate may also contribute to the problem.
Unfortunately, some of today’s high school students might describe their school like this one in Baltimore, Maryland:

The disciplinary climate in the school was often chaotic and unsafe. Large numbers of students, who should have been in class, freely roamed the halls and stairways. Periodic "lock downs" and "hall sweeps" to catch offending students and herd them back to class were largely unsuccessful as the class cutters simply shifted to another part of the building or resumed their misbehaviors on the following days. Cafeteria periods were frequently occasions for unruly student behaviors and fights, with some students attending more than one lunch period each day in defiance of school rules. It was impossible to make the building look attractive because students would quickly tear down wall posters or decorations and regularly deface display cases and smash windows and ceiling tiles. (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998, p. 338)

Many freshmen are not able to handle the freedom and the many choices associated with being in high school. For example, in middle school, some students are instructed to use their lockers at specific time intervals; in high school, they may sometimes be able to use them whenever they want. In some middle schools, teachers walk students to lunch; in high school, they go alone. If middle school students do not ride buses, parents are responsible for transportation; in high school, some students drive and others ride with friends when they don’t ride buses. Unfortunately, this freedom can result in students making bad decisions. These decisions often push them toward negative outcomes (drop-out, attendance issues,
academic failure, and discipline issues). The inability to quickly master the new high school environment results in freshmen feeling academically and socially unsuccessful. These students wonder if their teachers care about them. Educators must build strong foundational bridges to support students through this process and to guide them from one stage of life to the next.

Reents (2002) found that for some ninth graders, the pure act of entering high school could be one of the most emotionally difficult as well as the most academically challenging times in their lives. With self-esteem issues, students often experience developmental changes and environmental shakeups. Faced with young adolescents, school districts and administrators risk having their ninth graders fall through the cracks without proper transitional programs in place. In fact, researchers such as Reents (2002) have identified ninth grade as the most critical point to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation, resulting in their failure and exit from school.

As a parent of children in elementary schools and as a practicing administrator, the researcher has observed that teachers celebrate all types of successes for students. Younger students see their names on the board when they are behaving well or when they have learned their multiplication tables. They earn stickers and treats. Reading, in particular, is celebrated in elementary schools. Entire assemblies are planned to recognize students who have read a set number of books. They earn certificates and their parents are invited to the celebration. In middle schools, teachers work together in teams. These teams may consist of two to five members. They have team honor roll celebrations, birthday celebrations, and motivational celebrations. In high school, there is a shift in focus, and teachers rarely celebrate student
success collectively. High school teachers work individually, only answering to the department chairperson and principal regarding their particular curriculum. They become specialists of subject matter rather than specialists of students.

Comprehensive high schools are conventionally defined as grades 9–12 where attending students are not subject to special admission criteria, as in magnet or in academically selective schools. Roderick (1994) examined statistical evidence on nationwide dropout rates in such schools, and found that 60 percent of males compared to only 20 percent of females in a Chicago pilot study dropped out. Emerging findings in urban high schools also indicate that African American and Latino males in urban school districts are failing at a significantly higher rate, which further widens the racial achievement gap (Pugh, 2003). Data from Philadelphia, the gold standard of poor schools, affirms this finding (Nichols-Solomon, 2003). The current model for comprehensive high schools is not serving all students. African American and Latino males are disappearing at alarming rates and are not graduating from high schools. These students need more individual attention. Could Freshman Academies be the answer to this problem? “It is assumed that educational leaders use research in making decisions about school improvement and that they don’t reinvent the wheel every time they make a decision about curricula or programs” (Fusarelli, 2008, p. 365). This assumption drives this researcher to explore freshman academies so as to inform the field.

In Baltimore, data about comprehensive high school attrition rates emerged as a result of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Fund supporting the development of small schools; this study found, “While the system as a whole loses about 45 percent of its students between
9th and 12th grades, there is a 71 percent attrition rate in the neighborhood, i.e., comprehensive, schools” (Russo, 2001, p. 5). Similarly, Philadelphia’s comprehensive high schools follow the trend of large urban districts throughout America. Dismal findings on school climate-related variables such as urban high school students’ suspensions, attendance, arrests, and postsecondary preparation based on the percentage of students passing college prep courses (Mathematics and English) are consistent across urban districts within a national context. According to The Education Trust (2001), “The United States high school completion rates have remained the same for nearly 30 years and rank 17th in a world where we once led” (p. 3). Until recently, much of the reform has focused on the elementary levels and little attention has been given to high schools. The belief was that if we prepare students better to enter high school, then they would be able to perform better academically. But still today, “dropout rates are higher – and increasing; achievement levels are lower – and, in some cases, declining” (Education Trust, 2001, p. 3).

The often dismal performance of many comprehensive high schools raises several questions. Why are so many ninth graders failing? Why are so many ninth grade students being suspended from school? Why are so many ninth graders dropping out of school? What can be done about high school attendance? What impact do relationships have on student achievement? Will interdisciplinary teams in high school improve student retention rates? This search of inquiry inspires principals and administrators to look beyond “what is” to “what should be” (Weiss, 1998, p. 15). These questions need to be explored in greater depth.
Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of teachers involved in the implementation of a Freshman Academy Program in a medium-sized school district in a southern state. For the purpose of this study, a Freshman Academy is defined as an organizational structure within a high school where a concentrated focus is on freshman students. The ultimate goal is to ease the transition of students from middle school to high school. For this study, the academy has a designated administrator as the instructional leader and counselor. The teachers of the academy are located in close proximity to each other and are preferably organized into teams or collaborative groups. Teams are not necessary for the study as long as freshman teachers collaborate.

Research Context

This study will examine a Freshman Academy Program and the effect it has on teacher perceptions and experiences. While researching teacher perceptions in the Freshman Academy Program, the researcher hopes that effective/ineffective components of the Freshman Academy will emerge. The researcher believes that teachers will want to accredit some specific component(s) of the success of the Freshman Academy, as well as identify some challenges or problems of the program.

School reform has been ongoing in American high schools for the last decade. In light of poor student academic performance, students, parents, communities, and business leaders all desire change. American students should be able to compete with students from any country. Successful learning environments, according to Fulton (2003), help each child prepare for successful employment and productive citizenship in the 21st century. All
teachers must have in-depth knowledge of their subject areas, understand how children
develop and learn, use modern learning technologies effectively, and work closely with their
colleagues to create rich learning environments that produce high-quality learning
experiences for every child. Some Freshman Academy models reviewed in this study focus
on teacher collaboration and understanding adolescent development as a means to help
students succeed in schools (Boodey, 2002; Russo, 2001).

Too many ninth grade students are falling through the cracks of large high schools.
Falling between the cracks is when students seem to disappear from the surface (here today,
gone tomorrow) without a trace. Imagine an entire student body at the starting line in the race
of high school. The experience is like a desert and the cracks are all the paths that lead to
student dropouts. The cracks have already formed throughout several generations. The
students all begin walking in the desert where the ground seems smooth. Suddenly, the
cracks emerge. At the start of the journey, there are 2000 students proportionally divided by
grade level. There is no monitoring along the way. Students are just given directions to start
at level nine and end at level twelve. Every student must survive and make it to the end
without help. Some students struggle and discover that no one will notice if they decide to
slip down in the cracks. They begin to disappear, one by one. When the journey concludes,
fewer twelfth grade students are present than in any other grade level. They had nowhere to
go except through the cracks. Somehow, they got lost on the journey and no one was
watching, thus falling between the cracks. In our high schools, there are institutional cracks
that have already developed. In some schools, students can literally be absent for days
without anyone seemingly aware. This is a crack. Some students are not performing well and
are on the verge of giving up. This is a crack. Other students misbehave, seeking attention. This is a crack.

According to the NCES, there are two kinds of dropout rates reported: (1) the “event” dropout rate and (2) the “status” dropout rate. The event dropout rate represents the proportion of students who leave school during a single year. In the past 3 years, nationally, the rate has been 4.5 percent for students in grades 10–12. This 4.5 percent may not seem significant until it is understood that it represents about 429,000 students per year. We cannot allow this to continue. The status dropout rate represents the proportion of individuals who are not enrolled in school and have not completed high school. In October 1989, 12.6 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds were listed as dropouts, representing about 4 million individuals. Ten years later, 1999, this percentage had minimally dropped to 11.2 percent. In the latest year reported, 2008, the status dropout rate was 8.0 percent. This is a difference of only 4.6 percent. We cannot dismiss our youth to an unproductive life style that may result in governmental dependency (welfare, jail, homelessness, or even death). This is a gross waste of talent. They are the future; they are future teachers, doctors, and lawyers. If they drop out of high school, the future they could have had will never be realized. The dropout rate has changed very little since 1987. In 2000, about three-fourths (75.8 percent) of the current-year dropouts were ages 15 through 18; moreover, about two-fifths (42.0 percent) of dropouts were ages 15 through 17. Over the last decade, between 347,000 and 544,000 10th- through 12th-grade students left school each year without successfully completing a high school program of study. Many of these dropouts were not able to successfully make the transition from middle schools, where typically a collaborative team of at least two teachers monitored
them, to high school, where teaching is extremely departmentalized, making collaboration for student development difficult.

A considerable body of research has connected small schools with improvements in areas such as student achievement, attendance, school climate, and safety (Cotton, 2001; Fine & Somerville, 1998). Some of this research has focused on the creation of smaller learning communities (SLCs) within large high schools. Moles (2003) emphasized that evidence suggests that SLCs are beneficial in improving student attendance, decreasing dropout rates, improving school climate, increasing student achievement, and fostering stronger interpersonal relationships among faculty, staff, parents, and students. Furthermore, his study indicated that academies are an example of a way that SLCs are structured in high school by focusing on several models. SLCs have different structural designs that schools and school districts should examine before deciding how they will restructure their school. Some of the structural designs include: academies, houses, schools-within-a-school (SWAS/SWS), magnet schools, and alternative scheduling.

The table below briefly displays four models that high schools are investigating and implementing in comprehensive school reform models. Administrators of comprehensive high schools may consider these models because “decision making and program adoption in education are shaped and often determined by ease of use, good marketing, and lack of threat to current practice” (Fusarelli, 2008, p. 366). As shown in Table 1 below, the models have some similarities as well as some differences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Model</th>
<th>Developer</th>
<th>Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talent Development (TD) model</td>
<td>Johns Hopkins University by Jim McPartland &amp; Doug MacIver</td>
<td>Career-oriented academies for grades 10–12 and a “success academy” for 9th grade. Focus on climate building, core curriculum, and “double doses.” Ultimate goal is to restructure the school with wall-to-wall academies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Things First (FTF) model</td>
<td>By Jim Connell under subcontract with the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation</td>
<td>Concentration on caring adults across middle and high school years. Focus on thematic instruction with emphasis on an academic and behavioral standard and a low student-teacher ratio for core curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America’s Choice model</td>
<td>National Center on Education and the Economy</td>
<td>Physical structure of high school is in houses where each SLC has its own faculty and administration. A strong emphasis is on having a “class teacher” who serves as an advisor and direct contact between the school and home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina New Schools Project</td>
<td>Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation</td>
<td>Schools are developed as Early Colleges, Restructured Schools, or Redesigned Schools, all of which share the goal to meet student needs through individualized personalization. In order to maximize student success, these schools are guided by six design principles: college readiness, personalization, purposeful design, redefined professionalism, leadership, and powerful teaching and learning. The non-negotiables are autonomy, student support, sustainability, rigor, and relationships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, none of these models focus solely on the transition of freshmen from middle school to high school. The concept of smaller learning communities concentrating on freshmen is fairly new. School leaders, as risk-takers, across the country believe in the concept so strongly that many have modified their schools to provide this focus on ninth graders (Reents, 2002). George and McEwin (1999) note that:

> In time, many successful middle level educators took on new responsibilities at the high school level. In fact, many of the most innovative high schools in the United States are now led by administrators and teachers who enjoyed their prior experiences at the middle level. (p. 3)

It is possible this is where the Freshman Academy concept originated. Before the middle school initiative was fully implemented, ninth grade was a part of the junior high school rather than the high school.

A series of reports summarizing and synthesizing what has been done in three of the four models and preliminary evidence demonstrates promising results for students involved in these reform models (Quint, 2006).

**Freshman Academies**

In an effort to improve high schools, this study will focus on the Freshman Academy concept that is sweeping the nation as a model small learning community that promises to make a difference for ninth grade students. The development of Freshman Academies is one way schools seek to address certain pressing questions: Why are so many ninth graders
failing? Why are so many ninth grade students being suspended from school? Why are so many ninth graders dropping out of school? What can be done about high school attendance? What impact do relationships have on student achievement? Will interdisciplinary teams in high school improve student retention rates? This line of inquiry inspires principals and administrators to look beyond “what is” to “what should be” (Weiss, 1998, p. 15). These questions need to be explored in greater depth. "According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 128 9th-grade-only schools were operating during the 1999–2000 school year" (Reents, 2002, p. 14). “In the 2005–06 school year, that number had jumped to 185” (White, 2008, p. 1).

Freshman Academies were created for various reasons. Some formed because they wanted to provide a stronger foundation for ninth grade students and others because of an issue of overcrowding. As stated by Nadine Kujawa, superintendent of the Aldine Independent School District in Houston, "Our research found that we have more 9th graders who drop out of school because they get lost in a large high school setting and have less attention paid to them as individuals” (Reents, 2002, p. 1). Superintendent James Smith of the 44,000 student Alief Independent School District, also in Houston, says, "Research shows 9th graders have the largest failure rate and are at risk of dropping out when academic success is not experienced and that through the use of the concept of individualization and the implementation of learning teams, the failure and dropout rates are reduced" (Reents, 2002, p. 1). Other school districts report that Freshman Academies show more students performing better academically and fewer students are dropping out of school (Ambrosio, 2004; Anderson, 1997; Cowling, 2003; Fulk, 2003; McPartland, et al., 1998; Reents, 2002).
Principals, directors, teachers, parents, and students of active Freshman Academies have testified that these programs have made a difference. Reports, journal articles, and newspaper articles attest that students participating in the academies are improving their academic performance, experiencing positive social transitions (with teachers and peers), and grasping the concept of the school as a learning community (Anderson, 1997; Boodey, 2002; Cowling, 2003; DaGiau, 1997; Fulk, 2003; Reents, 2002). Furthermore, principals, directors, teachers, and parents announce that students attending the Freshman Academies are developing study skills that help them beyond ninth grade.

The Freshman Academy described by Bowsher and Libbey (2003) provides additional testimony about the impact their Freshman Academy has on ninth grade students. They found that students believed they were valued and that their teachers cared about them. Student academic performance improved and average daily attendance for ninth grade students was higher than any of the other grade levels (Bowsher & Libbey, 2003). Many of the students commented that they felt a sense of love among the teachers who taught them. For the first time, many of the students had reason to be happy; they were proud of their good grades, their social transition, and their self-worth. In this Freshman Academy, the students have four teachers in common who consistently help to encourage them to complete their freshman year successfully.

Even though anecdotal evidence is strong, large portions of America’s ninth graders do not have the benefit of a Freshman Academy. The new American high school should unabashedly increase its focus and efforts on the poorest and most at-risk forty percent of high school students (A Guide for Parents and Families about What Your 9th Grader Should
Be Learning in School This Year, 2001; Cowling, 2003; George & McEwin, 1999). Students entering high schools across America need to be guided so that they gradually display the positive practices that are characteristics of successful students. Stephen Covey (1990) has a habit that states, “Begin with the end in mind,” as one has a yearning attempt to change or improve. If America wants to ensure that every student entering the ninth grade graduates on time, then educators must lay out a plan for success. Piaget’s research on developmental theory peaks at the operational stage, which ranges from adolescences to adults. His theory indicates that during this stage, adolescents “can think logically about abstract propositions and test hypotheses systematically as well as become concerned with the hypothetical, the future, and ideological problems” (http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/piaget.htm).

It should not be mistaken that all students are the same. People are fundamentally different; therefore, students from different backgrounds and ethnic groups think and behave differently. As with all individuals, their sense of reasoning is governed by their worldview and the culture in which they live. This perspective informs how they process circumstances they may encounter. Freshman Academies can help with this transition because one of the components strongly suggests that teachers know their students.

If teachers develop relationships with their students, regardless of what background they bring to the educational arena, they will be able to guide and direct them as they make choices that may have an impact on their academic development. Additionally, teachers know general pathways to success for all students entering high school. Teachers who are trained in developmental theory will be equipped to help adolescents think strategically about their future and devise a plan geared toward helping them remain on the path to success.
Teachers in Freshman Academies will be able to help students address their background, culture, and way of life in order to analyze what is required and allow them to consider their actions. Educators must present the standards that are expected of students as their high school career begins so that they will know exactly what is required to graduate on time. The time to share these requirements is not students’ senior year. Students should be provided with an explanation of expectations prior to entering high school. As students wrap up their middle school experience, educators would be wise to share the graduation requirements with students and parents. High school educators should reiterate the expectations when students enter their freshman year.

Furthermore, it would be wise, in this researcher’s opinion, to revisit the expectations annually with students. Students should be guided through an experience that will allow them to set goals for each year and evaluate the previous year’s work. When students understand the expectations, they will rise to the challenge and failure will not be an option for them. According to Lumsden (1997), “Although students may appear to accept or even relish lax teachers with low standards, they ultimately come away with more respect for teachers who believe in them enough to demand more, both academically and behaviorally” (p. 4).

Adolescence is a tumultuous stage in human development. As teenagers enter high school, they face the emotional changes that come with the challenges and pressures of approaching adulthood (DaGiau, 1997). Typically, the freshman class represents the largest number of dropouts, the largest number of failing students, and the largest number of discipline referrals. Attendance is also an issue for most freshman class populations.
Something must be done in order to give more attention and focus to freshmen. There are noticeable differences between a freshman class beginning high school and that same class when they are seniors ready to graduate. Consider the statistics shared in Figure 1 by Joanna Fox of Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development High Schools model, depicting the numerical differences of a typical high school population. Notice in Figure 1 that the freshman class is more than twice as large as the senior class four years later. Each year the number of students in each grade level is smaller, which creates a pyramid effect. Where are the students going? They are not just disappearing. They are falling through the cracks. The
numbers are too drastic to assume that the differences are due to students moving to different schools. It is improbable that all of the transfer students are from one class or grade level.

According to Snyder and Dillow’s data noted in the Digest of Education Statistics (2010), in some of the largest counties in North Carolina, the dropout rate for ninth grade students is larger than the total dropout rate for all high school students. Students are at-risk of school failure. This is the trend throughout many states. Table 2 is a small indication that there is a need to focus on the ninth graders in high school.

Table 2
Dropout Rate of Select Counties in North Carolina
Comparing Ninth Grade to Totals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Ninth Grade Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilford</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecklenburg</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hanover</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wake</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These at-risk students are failing in schools and not entering the job market. In 1985, 49% of dropouts were unemployed and in 2006, 44% were unemployed (NCES, 2010).

Too many freshmen in the U.S. do not graduate with their class. Some school leaders think that forming Freshman Academies is the solution to this problem. Klonsky and
Klonsky (2008) state that, “small schools offered a way of connecting the core curriculum with the passions and interest of students, especially those from inner-city schools who, almost daily, had to confront issues of inequality, war, and violence, and who sought ways of reshaping the world in which they would grow to maturity” (p. 16). Freshman Academies are programs designed to provide support and encouragement needed to help ninth graders adjust to high school during this critical transition year. These support programs strive to improve academic performance, decrease the failure rate, and reduce discipline problems among ninth grade students. According to Liliana Castillo (2010), a Freshman Academy at Clovis High School has already seen a decrease in the number of referrals to the office for disruptive behavior and insubordination. There were 1,111 discipline referrals in the 2008–2009 school year but only 522 in the 2009–2010 school year.

The names or titles of the academies are different, but at the root, they share the same idea of helping ninth grade students make a smooth transition from middle school to high school. The aim, in most cases, is to help the students to be more productive and experience a greater level of success in high school. According to Richard Riley (2000) in his annual back-to-school address, the transition to high school is extremely challenging because students leave small, personal middle schools and enter large and often impersonal high schools where they are 18 percent more apt to experience a drop in their academic scores. Further evidence supporting a difficult transition is the fact that discipline issues or referrals are higher among ninth graders and the daily attendance rate is lower.

Ninth Grade Success Academies, developed by John Hopkins University Talent Development High Schools, are addressing this issue. Major responsibility for finding
solutions to individual student attendance, discipline, and learning problems rests with teacher teams, each of which has a team leader and uses regular data to set goals and monitor trends in student behavior. Good student attendance becomes a priority to set the foundation for serious student work to earn on time promotion to the next grade (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998). The freshman year of high school is the year when most high school students commit suicide. Sadly, this is the time when teenagers most need guidance and support. According to Gutierrez (2004), “Adolescence is a time of great change and often a time of confusion, but recent studies have shown that there exists an abundance of far more serious problems than these in today’s high school-aged individuals; one such problem is suicide-related behavior” (p. 421). Suicide is the third leading cause of death for this age group (Gutierrez, 2004).

Overview of Study Design

In an effort to reduce the dropout rate, this study will focus on the Freshman Academy concept that is becoming increasingly popular as a model small learning community that promises to make a difference for ninth grade students. This study will utilize a case study design because it will best allow the researcher to explore the topic and the research questions in depth. Case studies are embedded with interviews from individuals in the research setting. Individuals are able to describe the context of the study from personal perceptions.

A qualitative methodology offers an advantage over other methodologies in that the words of the interviewees can express ideas more vividly. A qualitative study allows
participants to openly communicate with the researcher and allows the researcher to analyze themes as they emerge throughout the study.

**Research Questions**

The central overarching research question proposed in this qualitative study of a specific Freshman Academy is: In what way does a Freshman Academy Program affect teachers’ perceptions and experiences of student performance and social development? The proposed study also investigates the following research questions:

1) How do teachers who previously taught ninth graders in comprehensive high schools compare their overall experiences with teaching ninth graders in a Freshman Academy?

2) What are teachers’ expectations of their students in Freshmen Academies and how do these translate into the reality of their experiences?

3) To what degree has team teaching or collaborative teaching influenced or altered teaching practices in Freshman Academies?

The questions for this study were developed as a result of the researcher’s professional experiences, a review of the literature, and the researcher’s personal interest in the educational practices of a Freshman Academy. Teachers, because of their direct work with students, are ultimately responsible for applying the concepts of the Freshman Academy in daily practices. Without implementation, the Freshman Academy exists in name only. The researcher wonders which components of the Freshman Academy teachers will perceive to impact student performance and social development. Additionally, the researcher hopes to
inquire if teachers who teach in Freshman Academies experience other professional outcomes in terms of expectations and teaching practices.

As a practicing administrator, the researcher participated in the planning process for implementing a Freshman Academy at a traditional comprehensive high school in the southern region of North Carolina. This experience informed the researcher about various components of a Freshman Academy. Paramount to the discussion surrounding the planning grant proposal was the design that involved teacher input and buy-in for the specific program. The technical assistance team, provided through the North Carolina Comprehensive School Reform Grant, suggested that programs that did not involve teachers had a tendency to fail. The testimony of teachers shared at the general meeting indicated that teachers were not involved in the process, were not given a choice, and felt unprepared and untrained to work in the program.

The review of literature leads the researcher to develop the research questions that will explore teacher expectations and practices. The literature indicated that teachers collaborate more in Freshman Academies and develop common core beliefs, which guide expectations and practices. The researcher wishes to investigate whether there is a translation of experiences into the reality of the Freshman Academy.

Finally, the researcher has a personal interest in the differences of teacher experiences in a Freshman Academy as compared to working in the traditional comprehensive high school setting, and whether this reform practice is perceived to be beneficial or not according to the teachers working in a Freshman Academy.
Significance of the Study

This study is significant and timely because many schools and school districts are adopting a Freshman Academy Program. The concept sounds promising, but the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of Freshman Academies needs to be demonstrated. More specifically, different styles and forms need to be studied to determine which, if any, components are truly identified as contributing to the success of freshman students and to ease the transition from middle school to high school. Furthermore, this study is significant because the freshman year is a crucial year academically. Students are unable, for the most part, to redeem themselves academically by their senior year if they don’t have a productive beginning or strategic interventions as they approach graduation. Often, their grade point average (GPA) is damaged during their freshman year. It is extremely difficult for a student’s GPA to be recovered.

There are few empirical studies of Freshman Academies and to date, the views of teachers in Freshman Academies have been largely unexamined. Ultimately, this research will be shared with educational leaders who are considering implementing a Freshman Academy Program in their schools. Since the success or effectiveness of Freshman Academies is largely dependent upon teachers, their views and opinions are critical, missing components of this reform.

Chapter Summary

In short, high schools are faced with the challenge of helping students remain in school. Because grade nine is considered one of the most critical points of intervention and prevention, educators are seeking to use this as the starting point to find ways to keep
students from losing motivation, failing, and ultimately dropping out of school. High school reform is a timely topic since high school completion rates have remained the same for nearly 30 years. Some have chosen to implement a Freshman Academy to offer focused attention on students entering high school at the ninth grade level. Some districts report that Freshman Academies have been deterrents for student dropouts and that students participating in these programs are performing better in school. Additionally, they describe attendance rates as increasing higher because Freshman Academy students attend school more regularly. This study will examine a Freshman Academy Program and the effect it has on teacher perceptions and experiences.

**Organization of the Study**

The next chapter will present a literature review of what research exists concerning the historical overview of high school reform and the middle school concept. Furthermore, attendance issues, adolescent social development, parental involvement, and teacher/student relationships will be examined. Finally, drawbacks of Freshman Academies will be reviewed and discussed.

In Chapter Three, the research design is explained. Instruments used to collect data are described and explanations for use are offered with the intent to support the validity and reliability of the study. All interview groups are described and the model of interviewing is made explicit.

In Chapter Four, the findings of the study are presented. Themes are explored to give meaning based on the findings. A discussion of the findings of the study and implications for research and practice is presented in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The literature review will provide an exploration of research including an historical overview of high school reform and the middle school concept. Furthermore, attendance, adolescent social development, parental involvement, and teacher/student relationships will be examined. Strengths and weaknesses of Freshman Academies will be the final focus of this review.

School reform has been ongoing in American high schools for the last decade. “All are alarmed by stubbornly high dropout rates, by the low academic achievement of many high school students, and by the large number of high school graduates who are required to take remedial classes in college” (Quint, 2006, p. ES-1). After considering the outcome of student academic performance, students, parents, communities, and business leaders, all desire change. Hayes (2004) lifts the level of concern by stating:

_A Nation at Risk_ was a landmark of education reform literature. Countless previous reports by prestigious national commissions had been ignored by the national press and the general public. _A Nation at Risk_ was different. Written in stirring language that the general public could understand, the report warned that schools had not kept pace with the changes in society and the economy and that the nation would suffer if education were not dramatically improved for all children. It also asserted that lax academic standards were correlated with lax behavior standards and that neither should be ignored. _A Nation at Risk_ was a call to action. (p. 1)
High School Failure

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or does it explode?

The lines above, from the poem “Harlem” written by Langston Hughes, help to describe the tragedy of what is happening in high schools. Educators can no longer postpone the dream to transform high schools for students. The current model of high schools needs to be more rigorous and more connected to help students aspire to their dreams. The condition of education in high schools in the United States has long been an issue of concern and is now recognized as a national crisis. Researchers report that it is necessary to improve the academic learning of students in secondary schools. As students advance through their studies, the approach to teaching and learning must change (Cano, 2005). Learners need more stimulation, motivation, and prompting. When students are young, they are eager to learn anything new. As students get older, they require relevance. They assess whether the information is worth learning. Adults must seek ways to make learning meaningful for older students. Students begin to question whether they should exert the energy to learn the required material.

The launch of Sputnik by Russians in 1957 caused a national frenzy. Criticism of our schools as the cause of the U.S. to not be the first country in space centered on the question, “Why can’t our children excel on this level?” Americans felt we were behind the Russians. Federal funds provided by the National Defense Education Act of 1958 required that more
emphasis be on cognitive skills and academic achievement. The focus was to promote improvement in science, mathematics, and foreign languages at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1993). The Title I reading programs emerged at this time.

Researchers have cited several causes to explain the current high school failure. Among the reasons listed, some of the most commonly mentioned are dropping out, lack of personalization, attendance, motivation, and lack of support both at home and in school. A 1995 report on high school dropouts by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), *Dreams Deferred: High School Dropouts in the United States*, states that according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) hundreds of thousands of young people drop out of school each year (Vollstadt, 2000). In North Carolina, 23,550 high school students (5.24 percent) dropped out of school in the 2006–07 school year. Although this is alarming, the national dropout rate during the 2005–06 school year was 9.4 percent (3,458,000 students). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) was 73.2 percent in 2007–2008 (NCES, 2010). These students become low-income working class adults. Furthermore, these dropouts comprise half of all heads of households on welfare and more than half of all people in jail.

Teens are dropping out of school for numerous reasons. Some are personal, such as pregnancy, or the fact that they need to find jobs to help support their families. The majority drop out because of school-related reasons. Many students who were performing poorly in school said they left school because their teachers didn’t care. Others drop out because of the NCLB legislation and its impact on testing (Vollstadt, 2000). For example, the state of North
Carolina required students to take ten End-of-Course exams, of which five were directly connected to graduation. Students had to demonstrate mastery by scoring level three or four on the five exit exams as a criterion for graduation. Some students decide to drop out because they are unsuccessful with testing. The researchers who studied the largest districts in Texas over seven years reported that “about 60 percent of African-American students, 75 percent of Latino children, and 80 percent of English-language-learners did not graduate within five years” (Vollstadt, 2000, p. 10). One teenager in Oakland, California, felt that no one in school cared about him:

> I was an invisible man. I knew it. I sat in those schools for two years. I sat in the back of the room and I did nothing. I didn’t speak to anyone and no one spoke to me. Nobody said, “do your work” or nothing. Then one day I said it, “Man I’m invisible here.” I got up and walked out the door and I never went back. (Vollstadt, 2000, p. 12)

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), signed into law by President George Bush on January 8, 2002, expanded the federal role in education, setting requirements that affect every public school in America. President Bush implemented the No Child Left Behind initiative in an effort to do something about the number of students who are failing and unsuccessful in the public school system. NCLB is designed to change the culture of America’s schools by closing the racial and gender achievement gap, offering more flexibility for instruction, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on scientifically based research. The push or aim is for a comprehensive school reform approach that will yield significant school improvement. Some of today’s high schools are
implementing a Freshman Academy model because they believe it to be an effective means of reducing dropouts and improving student performance.

Our nation is still at risk. According to former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, there are flaws in the NCLB Act. Terminology is causing problems as legislators seek to find a common language that is understood by all. Some of our schools are considered dangerous (Hoff, 2008). Breaden (2008) reports that the assessments required under NCLB have caused low-achieving students to drop out in higher numbers than before. High-stakes testing has had a direct negative impact on graduation rates. “Between 1997 and 2002, as Texas schools began abiding by their state's accountability system, which rates schools with test scores and targets principals for rewards and penalties, and which was the model for the NCLB Act—‘massive numbers of students’ left the school system” (Oleck, 2008). In North Carolina, according to State Board of Education policy HSP-N-004 (16 NCAC 6D.0503), first time ninth graders who entered high school in 2006–07 and beyond following the Career Preparation, College Technical Preparation, or College University Preparation courses of study will be required to perform at Achievement Level III (with one standard error of measurement) or above on five end-of-course (EOC) assessments. Students must also successfully complete a graduation project consisting of a research paper, presentation, and demonstration. The five required EOC assessments are Algebra I, Biology, English I, Civics & Economics, and U.S. History. The graduation project is a performance-based component that can include service-based learning or work-based learning experiences. The graduation project is developed, monitored, and scored locally using state-
adopted rubrics. Will these standards impact North Carolina in a manner similar to Texas? This is a topic of further study.

According to Joanna Fox of Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development High School Schools, the freshmen class usually represents the largest class in a 9th–12th grade comprehensive high school. Freshmen often cannot handle the independence of high school without help (Feller, 2005). Researchers and educators have realized that these transitions are difficult and that students need help (Boodey, 2002; Cowling, 2003; DaGiau, 1997; Fulk, 2003). On the agenda of every high school principal should be the focus of helping ninth graders to make a smooth transition from middle school to high school (Clark, 1995; Riley, 2000). With high schools changing so rapidly, administrators may come together to include the Freshman Academy concept for comprehensive school reform. Before exploring Freshman Academies, we must first trace the development of middle schools and how this method of institutional organization impacts school children.

**Historical Overview of the Middle School Concept**

Educational reform is about attempting to meet the needs of students. The first middle schools were designed with the intent to have school aligned with adolescent development. The definition of middle school as stated by the National Middle School Association (NMSA, 1995) depicts a school usually consisting of grades 6–8, but may also be comprised of grades 5–7, 6–7, 5–8, and 7–8. Middle schools are based on the developmental needs (social and academic) of young adolescents and provide:

- Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory;
- Varied teaching and learning approaches;
• Assessment and evaluation that promote learning;
• Flexible organizational structures;
• Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and
• Comprehensive guidance and support services.

The intent of middle schools was to meet the need of early adolescents cognitively, socially, emotionally, and morally. Most junior high school configurations are grades 7–9. Most proponents of junior high schools would say the reason why ninth grade freshmen have a difficult time with the transition to high school is because developmentally they are not ready for high school.

In the early 1900s, G. Stanley Hall initiated the term adolescent and “suggested that the adolescent years were characterized by turmoil” (Chamberlain, 2003, p. 21). This was also the timeframe when the United States was struggling with social and economic forces which prompted the organization of schools for young adolescents, namely junior high schools. Historically, the average high school graduate attended two schools (primary and secondary). By 1918, junior high schools and preparatory high schools were growing and more and more high school graduates had attended elementary school, junior high school, and high school. In 1920, one out of five high school graduates attended two schools, but by 1960, four out of five high school graduates attended three schools. Junior high school was the third school. “By 1973, a middle school movement was building momentum due to dissatisfaction with the junior high school configuration and philosophy” (Stowell, Rios, McDaniel, & Christopher, 1996, p. 15). Today, there are more middle schools than there are junior high schools. However, the reality is that many of them were organized purely for
economic reasons; the baby boom generation had a strong impact on school enrollment, classrooms were crowded, and school districts retained the senior high school model (Chamberlain, 2003).

Collaborative work in education is not a new idea. The middle school concept grew out of a plan to change from a departmental organization, where teachers are grouped according to the subjects taught, to an interdisciplinary organization, where teachers work collaboratively to teach the same group of students. From its origin, the Big 4 components of the middle school were in place (block schedule, teaming, advisor/advisee, and exploratory programs). However, middle schools adopt different components depending on school needs and school improvement goals. Some of the characteristics include: interdisciplinary team teachers, advisory programs, varied instruction, exploratory programs, transition programs (elementary to middle school), educators committed to young adolescents, flexible/block scheduling, extracurricular activities and clubs, intramural sports, parental involvement, community connections, and building organization.

Figure 2 contains a useful comparison of the similarities and differences between junior high schools and middle schools. Teachers in junior high schools may have a homeroom group of students, but solely for the purpose of attendance and dissemination of literature that is grade-specific. In middle schools, however, teachers serve as advisors to students under the advisor/advisee component. Teachers have team meetings to collaboratively work to generate ideas that will help students become more successful. Team teachers usually facilitate a curriculum that is based on social and academic development. This team meeting is designed to provide an opportunity for teachers to meet with students
(individually or with parents) who may need additional attention in order to create a plan with success in mind. They use team planning to create thematic units that integrate all the disciplines. In this way, they are able to help students find a connection between the new complex learning opportunities they encounter in the individual classes.

In junior high schools, typically one would see evidence of tracking which helps to teach students at similar levels of achievement as well as similar career goals and paths. Middle schools are designed to have heterogeneous groups so students will learn from the strengths and weaknesses of others. Similar to high schools, original junior high schools had periods where the subjects were taught. Teachers rarely collaborated for the benefit of the students. In fact, teachers were more departmentalized. By contrast, because of the team approach, middle school teachers have two planning periods, one devoted to integrated lesson designs with students in mind and the other to team planning in order to address issues across the team and the curriculum. These teaching teams are interdisciplinary rather than departmental.

Today, middle schools are still evolving as is the entire educational department. All levels are working to improve upon their efforts to move students to the next level. Many of the original components are prevalent in practice as they were originally designed. According to Coleman (2003), there are three major trends that may be observed in today’s middle schools.

• Growing emphasis on curriculum: This is a vital adjustment as the nation has charged all educational institution to invite rigor as a part of business in everyday school life. NCLB requires that teachers be highly qualified. This means that they have
demonstrated mastery of their subject matter and must maintain credentials to be a certified licensed teacher. This emphasis has added to the middle school interdisciplinary teams by also asking that departments meet to discuss instructional strategies, approaches, and new curriculum design. Coleman said, “The collegial support offered by a strong team combined with the group and individual planning times address two of the most often cited reasons that teachers leave the field: a feeling of isolation and a lack of time for planning” (p. 20).

- Redesign of the “chat” time or the advisor-advisee period: “This time was built in to many school schedules in order to allow small groups of students to ‘bond’ with an adult. Many schools found that without a clear set of expectations, curriculum, and guidelines, these sessions began to mirror the old homeroom, but in a much less-efficient way” (Coleman p. 21). Currently this timeframe is being used more constructively in a structured manner to allow students to polish skills and complete activities. This time is also being used to organize service projects such that middle-schoolers are able to contribute to the community.

- Helping students with transitions: Students cross two “bridges” in middle school. They cross a bridge to transition from elementary school to middle school and they cross another bridge to transition from middle school to high school. Today’s middle schools have learned over time and through experience that transitional attention must not be on academics only. Students need assistance and support as they transition socially, emotionally, and mentally. Some schools have actually created personalized transition plans for each student. Coleman said, “This requires us to respond with
greater flexibility, more differentiation, and a wider variety of support systems” (p. 22).
Comparison of Junior High Schools and Middle Schools

- Teachers have random contact with students
- Students grouped homogeneously and by subject
- Separated Curriculum
- Departmental Organization
- Periods, Exploratory, & Electives
- Competitive by ability
- Tracked – pre-determined courses

- Teacher-advisor
- Students grouped heterogeneously and multi-age
- Integrated Curriculum
- Team, Village, or House Organization
- Block/Flexible Scheduling
- Inclusive, Noncompetitive
- Exploratory – student selected courses

Figure 2
Developmental Theory

Middle schools are based on the developmental needs (social and academic) of young adolescents. Freshman students are adolescents; it would be beneficial for educators in a Freshman Academy to have a strong and deep understanding of the developmental stage of the students they teach during ninth grade year. Educators who have a high level of knowledge and comprehension of developmental theory will be better equipped to meet the needs of adolescents cognitively, socially, emotionally, and morally. These needs may be different for students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) expounded on the thought that African Americans and Latinos have needs significantly different from their white counterparts on all measures of achievement. These students may benefit the most from the concepts of a Freshman Academy. Culture plays a huge role in educating students, and literature with this focus in the 21st century has its roots in educational writing in the 1960s and 1970s on teaching the “culturally deprived and disadvantaged” (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ballenger (1999) explains that “teaching children from a culture not your own is ultimately different from teaching children you believe you understand more easily” (p. 9).

Some key areas of difference that make teaching students of poverty different and challenging include: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships, and knowledge of hidden rules (Payne, 1996). Knowledge of these differences will help teachers to apply conceptual and deliberate thought to the decisions and actions they take with the best intentions of students in mind. Most proponents of junior high schools
would say the reason why ninth grade freshmen have a difficult time with the transition to high school is because developmentally they are not ready for high school.

Many theorists, such as Piaget, Garbarino, and Maslow, elaborate on the conclusion that adolescents can think logically about abstract propositions and test hypotheses to make decisions. Maslow’s research indicates that motivation can be developed as the “hierarchy of needs” is fulfilled, and Garbarino’s research connects the theories by designating that a strong support system is necessary to help students develop initiative. Their theories can help educators begin to understand why students do what they do. Further, it helps them to realize the significance of building a strong connection between peers, school, home, and community. Teachers need to be aware of how outside expectations, pressures, demands, and experiences affect the decision-making process for students.

Reed Larson (2005) states, “A central question of youth development is how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170). He continues his research based on Maslow’s conclusion that motivation can be developed by studying the development of initiative. Educators must tap into topics that are of interest to students as a means to spark excitement. His claim is that these topics may be found in the ordinary lives of teens and are easily recognized by the curious educator (Larson, 2005). Adolescents have few experiences of preparing, planning, executing, and assessing endeavors and everyday dilemmas as a resource to be successful. Educators must serve as advisors to offer guidance to help adolescents realize their own potential and navigate a successful path. Initiative is born from three elements: intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement in the environment, and a
temporal arc (Larson, 2005). The temporal arc must be directed toward a goal, realizing that there will be times of setbacks, re-evaluations, and adjustment of strategies. Larson (2005) emphasizes that “initiative is not just starting things, but sticking with them” (p. 172).

Educators, with knowledge of developmental theory, will be able to note these challenges and help students move through them by encouraging them to aspire to greater things. Larson also encourages educators to structure activities that will promote initiative by utilizing student interests to catapult students to the next level.

When considering the development of adolescents, educators must also realize that critical to this understanding is knowledge of the impact of cultural needs in this field of study. Joan G. Miller (2005) stressed that it is essential to understand the role of culture as it forms the basic constructs and theories of developmental psychology. “The case is made that work in cultural psychology not only yields insights into the processes underlying developmental change but also contributes to a culturally broadened understanding of endpoints and course of development” (Miller, 2005, p. 35). Students enter school with different cultural experiences and, therefore, different views of how their decisions and choices impact their success in an educational environment. Her work demonstrated that students gave different explanation for everyday behaviors based on their own cultural experiences. Knowledge of this frame of reasoning could be of assistance in helping educators arrive at the “why students do what they do.” Students make choices based on personality traits or contextual considerations at different points in their development (Miller, 2005). Miller suggested that “developmental change results in part from processes of
enculturation and cannot be fully explained in terms of cognitive and experiential factors” (Miller, 2005, p. 35).

Researchers Bukowski and Sippola executed research on friendships and its connection to development. “An abundance of research has clearly demonstrated that (1) friendships are characterized by qualities that distinguish them from other types of relationships (that is, they are voluntary in nature); (2) some children are more likely to have a “friend” than others; and (3) under certain conditions friendship relations can create important, if not vital, opportunities for healthy social and emotional development” (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005, p. 91). This knowledge could help to save a student on a destructive path because they feel isolated or alone.

Borrowing from the ideas presented by Larson on initiative, negative friendships could influence adolescents to make bad decisions, because pleasing friends may be their primary focus. If friends are providing the basic needs studied by Maslow, the impact of friends could also be powerful. “Inherent in the notion of provision is the idea that friendship offers the stuff required to satisfy human needs” (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005, p. 92). Educators cannot underestimate the power of friendships in a Freshman Academy. They can use this knowledge to help with positive youth development as a means to help ease the transition from middle school to high school. Interesting in the findings of Bukowski and Sippola (2005) was the fact that adolescents from low socioeconomic (SES) families were more apt to rate those they considered friends with high levels of trust and had the expectation that friends protected each other. What if teachers of Freshman Academies could
use this knowledge to gain acceptance into the insight of these students such that the students trusted them to protect them? The implications could be unlimited.

Teachers of Freshman Academies could use theories of adolescent development to gain a better understanding of what students in this age bracket think and feel. It would also help them to make sense of the things students do and why. Finally, teachers could use this information to inform what happens in the classroom and the school so that powerful teaching and learning can take place to help students succeed in all areas of life.

**Adolescent Development and Freshman Academy Teacher Awareness**

Knowledge and understanding of adolescent development has tremendous implications for teachers in Freshman Academies. Knowing and understanding how developmental theories work gives teachers the power to know themselves and students better so as to make a difference in the educational environment. This awareness, and the ability to implement theory into action, may help teachers move students through the different levels effectively, with purpose and meaning. A solid awareness for teachers is essential for them to understand students’ developmental progress in order to strategically plan specific procedures to move them forward. Moreover, the intent is not for practices to remain at the lowest levels of developmental theory. Prior to establishing Freshman Academies, it is necessary to include information from various developmental theorists and their research. “To make research-based, data-driven decision making a reality in education, school leaders must spend time educating not only themselves and their staffs, but the school board and even the community” (Fusarelli, 2008, p. 368). For the purpose of this study, the following developmental theorists and their work have been summarized and illustrated as a
foundation to support teacher awareness: Benjamin Bloom, Abraham Maslow, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Howard Gardner, Erik Erikson, Charity James, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan.

Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning

Bloom’s 1956 Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, commonly referred to as the Taxonomy of Learning, references thinking from lower levels to higher levels. Figure 3 illustrates the six levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The levels move upward. The pyramid begins with knowledge at the lowest level of thinking (facts) and moves upward to evaluation. In order to prepare and teach effective lessons, Bloom’s Taxonomy notes that objectives must focus on three areas: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills (Vrchota, 2004). The intent is to help students gradually move up by applying the facts to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate within the learning context. Ultimately, the goal is to help students be reflective thinkers (another way of stating Piaget’s theory of concrete to abstract thinking). It is important that teachers understand Bloom in the context of Piaget. If students are on the concrete level of thinking, teachers must start with the facts in order to build a knowledge base of understanding before asking students to apply, evaluate, or analyze the details. In order to help students develop the 21st century skills needed to perform in the global arena, skills such as collaboration, creative thinking, reflecting, understanding and problem solving must be taught. All of these skills are achieved in the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Teachers must not linger at the level of facts just to pass a test; they must integrate a correct level of learning incrementally
to help students transfer learning to the higher levels.

![Bloom's Taxonomy](image)

**Figure 3 Bloom’s Taxonomy**

*Abraham Maslow’s Theory of the Hierarchy of Needs*

Abraham Maslow, father of modern management psychology, has informed the educational arena with insights useful for teaching adolescents. Maslow constructed a pyramid design (Figure 4) that focuses on human needs. According to Abraham Maslow (1968), children and adults develop as a result of satisfying numerous needs that are common to all people. He states (2000), "We are motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions upon which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain more intellectual desires" (p. 3). When students enter the Freshman Academy, educators must make sure that the students have food, water, and shelter. These physiological needs are at the very lowest of Maslow’s levels. Some students may struggle to have these needs met on a daily basis. How can anyone worry about how far a student can get on Bloom’s Taxonomy (facts,
understanding, application, etc.) if Maslow’s basic survival needs are not met; if they are worried about what they are going to eat, or if they are homeless? According to Daniels (1992), homeless children often to look to school as a safe haven from the frustrations associated with not having a secure home. The second level of Maslow’s hierarchy is safety. If safety is an issue, i.e., there is gang violence in their neighborhood or they are experiencing pressure on school grounds, then this is a huge barrier that teachers need to be aware of in order to move students to the academic levels they desire. Maslow emphasized the basic survival needs to help educators understand that these developmental concerns must be met before any learning can take place. The concrete, physical and personal needs must be met, so water, food, and shelter are the first level, and then comes safety.

For middle school students and certainly for freshmen in high school, love, acceptance, and belonging among peers, depicted in Maslow’s social and safety stages, are of critical importance. Students perceive the world as a result of their life experiences, however limited they may be. As a high school principal, this researcher has personally witnessed situations where this need has superseded academic achievement as a major concern for students. Most students will proclaim that they obtain satisfaction from school simply to meet the social needs in their lives. “School is all about social status” (Dr. Candy Beal, personal communication, November 18, 2011). It is crucial to have an understanding of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to ensure that needs are met prior to attempting to help students move up to self-actualization. One researcher summarized Maslow’s theory, "Students are driven inwardly to perfect themselves outwardly. They possess an inner desire to become the best person they are capable of becoming, to ‘self-actualize’” (Tauber, 1999, p. 30). To achieve
this, however, educators must be aware of all levels that precede self-actualization and be prepared to help students work through these stages because “people are not likely to be motivated to pursue intellectual challenges or develop a sense of positive self-esteem until the more basic or lower level needs in his or her hierarchy have been regularly satisfied” (Daniels, 1992, p. 105).

![Figure 4 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](image)

*John Dewey’s Theory of Education*

John Dewey is remembered as the father of modern education. According to Dewey, students bring many resources with them:

I believe that knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization, is necessary in order properly to interpret the child's powers. The child has his own instincts and tendencies, but we do not know what these mean until we can translate them into their social equivalents. We must be able to carry them back into a social past and see them as the inheritance of
previous race activities. We must also be able to project them into the future to see what their outcome and end will be. (Dewey, 1897, p. 77)

Students bring their background, their diversity, and their coping skills to school. Teachers should understand this so that they can fit the curriculum to the student and not the student to the curriculum. Dewey’s theory states that educators must know the students. In order for learning to resonate with students, they must believe that their teachers care and know them and can make a connection to them and their lives. A famous quote by John Maxwell expresses the thought in this way: “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Although comical, the picture below communicates Dewey’s philosophy.

![Cartoon](http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/j/john_dewey.asp)

**Figure 5** [http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/j/john_dewey.asp](http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/j/john_dewey.asp)

Figure 5 above helps to illustrate the impact Dewey had on education. He believed that it was important for teachers to know their students in order to teach them anything. “The child lives in a somewhat narrow world of personal contacts. Things hardly come within his
experience unless they touch, intimately and obviously, his own well-being, or that of his family and friends. His world is a world of persons with their personal interests, rather than a realm of facts and laws” (Dewey, 2010, location 28 – 30). Teachers who know their students are better able to meet the needs of individual students. What students bring to the learning equation determines how a teacher teaches to meet students’ needs.

*Jean Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development*

Piaget’s theory explains concrete and abstract cognitive learning. Although high school begins with ninth grade, there will still be some concrete learners among the students. Some will not have reached the abstract level. Teachers will have to teach concrete learners basic information. They must keep Piaget in mind and know the level of their students before moving them forward to abstract learning. Pacing guides are beneficial, but if students are three grade levels behind, adjustments must be made in instructional delivery. According to Table 3 below, high school students should be at a point where they are able to think abstractly and reason theoretically (formal operational stage); however, some students may still consider issues strictly from their point of view (concrete operational stage). They are not able to think through scenarios in order to consider multiple outcomes.

The information in Table 3 broadens an understanding of many middle and high school activities that allow students to learn by analyzing options. Lessons are designed such that students are forced to consider the point of view of others. Cooperative learning, collaborative groups, Socratic seminars, project designs, philosophical chairs, and other activities teach students to work together and consider the thoughts of their classmates. As a practicing administrator, when dealing with discipline for students in high school, this
researcher seeks to help students understand why they are trouble, what they could have done differently, and how to avoid similar infractions in the future. In doing so, it is imperative to help students consider the others involved and how their actions impact those around them. Piaget’s theory suggests that, “the relationship between organism and environment is that of a fight between forces of preservation of the organism (assimilating the environment) and those of changing under the influence of the environment (imitation)” (Valsiner, 2005, p. 59). New information is assimilated into prior knowledge. For this reason, teachers must make a connection to what students know (associating Dewey’s theory) in order to establish future pathways for learning. The most powerful teaching and learning occurs when there is a meaningful, relevant connection for students.

Table 3 Piaget’s stages of cognitive development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensorimotor</td>
<td>0–2</td>
<td>Reflex base and coordinate reflexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoperational</td>
<td>2–6 or 7</td>
<td>Self-oriented and egocentric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Operational</td>
<td>6 or 7–11 or 12</td>
<td>More than one point of view, no abstract problems, considers some outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Operational</td>
<td>11 or 12 &amp; up</td>
<td>Think abstractly, reasons theoretically; not all people reach this stage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner is known for his theory of multiple intelligences. This theory states that everyone has at least seven distinct intelligences and that the ones in which there are feelings of comfort and superiority are used the most. It would be helpful for teachers to understand and know this theory in order to adopt lessons and projects that would fit different learning styles for students. Howard Gardner initially formulated a list of seven intelligences: linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, spatial intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence. His listing continues to expand. The first two have been “typically valued in schools”; the next three are usually associated with the arts; and the final two are what Howard Gardner called “personal intelligences” (Gardner, 1999, pp. 41–42). As Gardner continued his studies and research, he later added an eighth intelligence, naturalist intelligence. Finally, as illustrated in Figure 6, existential intelligence was added. Gardner defined “an intelligence as the ability to solve problems or to create products that are valued within one or more cultural settings” (Gardner, 1999, p. 33). Teachers must know their students and figure out what is the best way to teach them and use various strategies to reach them. Most teachers, historically, only teach through verbal-linguistic and mathematical-logical approaches (Gardner, 1999). These two approaches do not fit everyone. It is important for teachers to assess the multiple intelligences of students and use this knowledge to inform the way they teach their lessons.
Erik Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development

Erikson is the father of social/emotional development stage theory. Freshman students, as indicated by Maslow, have a need for acceptance and belonging, which points to socialization. Erikson's theory proposes that individuals go through a series of stages as they develop a personal identity. How students identify with different groups will also determine the behaviors they display while functioning within those groups. There are eight stages of social/emotional development in Erikson’s theory, but for the purposes of this study, attention is given to the first five stages. A social toolbox is a bank of characteristics, learned from previous experiences, at the disposal of the individual. From birth through the fifth stage, individuals are constantly picking up tools for their social toolbox that determine responses to different scenarios.
As noted in Table 4, the first stage of Erikson’s theory is trust vs. mistrust. When infant needs are met adequately and consistently, trust is learned. The hopeful byproducts are faith, hope, and optimism. On the contrary, when parents do not consistently attend to the needs of an infant, the infant learns mistrust. So, the tool of trust may not be a part of his personality in the relationships he eventually develops. Some students in the Freshman Academy may not trust easily as an outcome of earlier experiences. The challenge is to help adolescents understand that there are times when they should trust as well as mistrust. It is not always safe to trust in every situation. They should, for example, not trust a friend who is attempting to convince them to do drugs, skip class, or commit an illegal act, simply because they consider the individual to be their friend. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development indicates that adolescents should be able to consider options. Teachers aware of both theories are able to guide students through choices by considering the possible outcomes of the decisions once made, and what impact they will have on the world of the student.

In stage two, the focus shifts to autonomy or shame/doubt. Students will either learn independence and confidence or dependence and a lack of confidence. The major challenge in this stage is that individuals question themselves, wondering, “Can I do things myself or am I reliant on the help of others?” The favorable outcomes for the social toolbox are self-control and will. As a practicing high school administrator, this researcher labels students who lack autonomy as “people-pleasers.” A lack of confidence causes students to be dependent on the opinions of others. These students are afraid to pursue their desires. Teachers in a Freshman Academy must help cultivate a sense of autonomy for students in a manner that will increase the likelihood of positive confidence. Additionally, students at this
stage are concerned with gaining a sense of control over the world. It is important to adolescents that they gain control over clothing selections, friends, food choices, leisure time, etc. Through encouragement and consistent displays of belief in students and their ability to make positive, informed decisions, teachers are able to support autonomy in students. Adolescents who successfully complete this stage feel secure and confident, while those who do not are left with a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Initiative vs. guilt is the third stage of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development.

It is important that adolescents are free to explore and discover in a trusting learning environment. The environment must be free of ridicule and promote creativity. Students at this stage will be apprehensive about making choices that will be judged as either good or bad. This concept of identity development, for adolescents, is two-fold. On one hand, adolescents seek the approval of peers. On the other hand, they seek the approval of teachers and other adults in their lives. Teachers in a Freshman Academy must not be discouraging or dismissive, as it may cause feelings of shame and guilt for adolescents attempting to assert initiative. This reaction may cause adolescents to feel ashamed and to become overly dependent upon the help of others. A sense of initiative is necessary for students to set and achieve personal goals.

The fourth stage in Erikson’s theory is industry vs. inferiority. During this stage, students strive to gain a sense of mastery over their environment by developing various social, academic, personal, and physical competencies (Daniels, 1992). Through social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities. Students who are industrious have a sense of purpose, which is generated by
exposure to new and complex learning opportunities. As often as success is experienced, the
more competent adolescents feel. Schools have a responsibility to expose students to learning
opportunities. Teachers in a Freshman Academy must diligently work to help students
demonstrate mastery and increased confidence in their skills. During times in which
adolescents feel inferior, teachers have a responsibility to support and encourage them by
helping them to realize their areas of strength. If not, these adolescents will doubt their ability
to be successful

The fifth stage of Erikson’s theory is identity vs. confusion. Adolescents need to
develop a sense of personal identity, which is essential during the transition to adulthood.
Students in Freshman Academies may feel confused about their identity and their role in
society. Teachers aware of this theory are able to help students as they seek to establish a
sense of self. Adolescents at this stage may experiment with different roles, activities and
behaviors. Most students in a Freshman Academy will be in this stage, struggling with the
psychosocial crisis of identity vs. confusion. These students want the acceptance of their
peers who influence their daily lives. Based on the observations of this researcher, teen
friendship can be supported over time by loyalty. These friends commit to each other and
faithfully support each other through different situations and dilemmas. Students need
guidance and direction as they choose different pathways in their lives. Proper
encouragement and reinforcement will help adolescents emerge with a strong sense of self
and independence, resulting in an individual’s ability to exercise fidelity to self. On the
contrary, those who do not receive this support may continue to struggle with confusion, lack
of purpose, and feelings of incompetence.
Erikson’s theory, however, does not propose a solely forward progression through its stages. Individuals may reverse, go back to any of the previous stages, and relearn the experience. It is important to note that emphasis here has been placed on positive experiences. This theory is not about one characteristic or the other; rather, it is about helping students find the appropriate balance. There are times when it is necessary for adolescents to have a level of mistrust, sense of shame, doubt, guilt, inferiority, or even confusion. The role of teachers in Freshman Academies is to help students as they attempt to make sense of different circumstances and make decisions. This occurs when teachers are able to provide a positive learning environment by which students may thrive and develop.

If Freshman Academy teachers know their students and understand this theory, then they can return to previous stages and help students navigate life choices that impact their development and understanding of the world. Teachers have the opportunity, through educational experiences, to support students. Some students may suffer from low self-esteem and may experience feelings of inadequacy, which may cause them to withdraw and not fully participate at school. Students who may initially be observed as not being “risk-takers” may reveal that during earlier stages of life, they were put down if they were wrong and scolded for taking chances. If teachers understand this developmental theory, they will be able to provide guidance as decisions are made.
Table 4  Erikson’s Model of Socialization, recreated from http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/elliott/pics/set-2.htm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE (years)</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Psychosocial Crisis</th>
<th>Psychosocial Strength</th>
<th>Environmental Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>Trust vs. mistrust</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Maternal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>Autonomy vs. shame/doubt</td>
<td>Willpower</td>
<td>Both parents or adult substitutes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – 5</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Initiative vs. guilt</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Parents, family, and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 11</td>
<td>Middle childhood</td>
<td>Industry vs. inferiority</td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 18</td>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Identity vs. confusion</td>
<td>Fidelity</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Charity James’s Polarieties Theory*

Charity James is a British developmental theorist who studied American education and found teachers did not try to understand the students they were teaching. James’s theory states that students develop on six different continuaums, each with polarities. One of her polarities states that individuals have a need to need. There is a need to need others to help them achieve personal goals. On the other end of the continuum is the need to be needed. Ninth grade is the time period in an adolescent’s life where the need to be needed is more obvious (James, 1974). Individuals need to feel a sense of value, self-worth, and that they can contribute. Her theory indicates that individuals consistently shift from one end of these polarities to the other. As illustrated in Figure 7, the polarities constantly work together as adolescents seek to find a balance between the opposite ends of the continuum. Teachers need to understand where students are on each polarity. James said, “I believe that if
American teachers study child development, examine their own culture, become sensitive to their own students, become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, plan carefully, take the risk of action, and then learn from their mistakes, they will do much better” (Gadell, Gadell, & James, 1972, p. 130).

There are specific times where each of the needs is necessary in individual lives. Not only will students seek to find a balance, teachers must seek it as well, and help students adjust as they make choices. This knowledge will help teachers to nudge students to the middle and not stay on one side of a polarity toward which there may be inclinations. There needs to be moderation so that teachers may create an educational atmosphere conducive to learning.

The need to need and the need to be needed are both appropriate needs. However, there are times when students must learn to depend on themselves and the resources available. Some projects will be individual, and others will require them to work collaboratively with a group, where all members must contribute for the success of the project. Students will need each other and work through individual strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes there are opportunities and experiences where students will be able to complete tasks without the assistance of others; however, there will be other times when they will need the help of others.

Students have a need to believe in myths or legends. Hope has its place. Students should be allowed to creatively use their imagination to dream of possibilities. There is still a need for facts and how to help students accept and deal with the facts of their experiences. Likewise, there is a time for stillness, a time to settle down and reflect on opportunities and
experiences in order to make an informed decision about next steps. Students cannot, however, remain still; there is a need for physical activity, a time to operationalize the dream and put action to work in order to fulfill dreams.

It is important for students to understand that there is a time and need for separateness. There is a time to pull away from the group as a practice to analyze individual needs, goals, and desires to determine if membership in the group is getting the results students aspire to gain. People are fundamentally different, and teachers can help students to evaluate the groups of which they are members and determine if it is a group they wish to continue to be associated with or separate from. There is also a time to belong. John Donne writes in Meditation XVII, “No man is an island, no man stands alone”. This quote helps to encapsulate the concept that there is a need to belong. Students, especially those who tend to separate themselves from a group, need teachers to help them understand the need to belong. Not only will students be able to contribute to the lives or others, but they will also gain from others’ experiences.

Individuals need to feel and believe that they can make a difference and affect the outer world. In schools, teachers can organize and create lessons that allow students to have opportunities to work collaboratively and cooperate with others on projects that may impact the school, state, and nation as a whole. Students can explore problems and issues and devise solutions that make a difference. As students experience small successes, they will feel empowered and capable to impact the world on a larger scale. Likewise, there are times to move inward and concentrate on practices that will allow for self-improvement. Self-reflection and analysis takes place internally.
Teachers must provide opportunities for students to practice these skills in order to help them set and accomplish individual goals and objectives. In this manner, students will examine their routines to determine their needs to guide them through life. Teachers must establish routines because students have a need for routine and stability. Furthermore, students have an expectation to understand what is needed and why, and if they know and understand the established routine, they are better able to align themselves to the expectations of their teachers. Because routines may also become boring and create a sense of complacency in the lives of teachers and students, there is a need for intensity, something that raises the level of concern and challenges the routine. Students must be challenged with variety that intensifies their thinking and causes them explore new and complex situations of learning.

In understanding James’s theory, teachers are better equipped to help students find the balance they seek to achieve as they seesaw back and forth between the polarities. This will help students choose opportunities and experiences so they may develop a greater appreciation for different choices and behaviors in the world. Furthermore, teachers who explain these needs to students will prepare them for a world where tolerance and acceptance of others is required. As students begin to understand themselves and their needs, they will recognize the needs of others.
Lawrence Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development (male-specific)

Kohlberg’s theory focuses on law and order as it relates to decisions made by individuals. His theory was based on white male behavior. His theory of morality has to do with why individuals obey rules and what factors influence thinking and decision-making. Kohlberg’s theory of morality is organized in six stages, grouped into three moral levels. According to his theory, there are general aspects of morality that students bring into their thinking: their concept of rights, their orientation toward punitive justice, and their intentions in relation to the consequences of their actions (Kohlberg, 2008). This suggests that students are willing to react to situations depending on a gain which may be received. In relation to Erikson’s theory, most adolescents are in the stage where their peers are the largest...
environmental influencers of their decisions and choices. Students seek acceptance (noted by James and Erikson).

In the preconventional morality stage of Kohlberg’s model (2008), children are particularly concerned with “choosing in terms of the physical consequences involved” (p. 9). Primarily, children seek to gain rewards and avoid punishment. In high schools, students may avoid reporting inappropriate behavior because they fear the punishment of peers more than the possible consequences that schools may administer. Likewise, students contemplate whether the reward of their peers is greater than the reward school offers. At the heart of the other stage in level one is personal gain. Students will question, “What’s in it for me?” as they make decisions about emotional, social, and academic goals. This is important for teachers to recognize as the decision of students may not be predictable. There may be other factors students process internally that may drive decisions that teachers may not be privy to. As students get older, their thoughts transfer from “What’s in it for me?” to “How can I fit into this world and make a difference for myself and others?” as a result of their experiences.

Kohlberg’s third stage is in level two, conventional morality. In this stage, students are concerned with how they are perceived (good or bad), which governs whether they obey rules. Understanding this stage may help teachers comprehend or rationalize the choices made by students as a means to develop their relationships. In stage four, students consider maintenance of the social order in determining whether they will obey rules. Although freshman students are concerned with having the approval of their teachers and may want to comply with existing rules, this sometimes conflicts with gaining the acceptance of their peers. They seek to avoid punishment and disapproval, and attempt to find a balance that will
result in rewards and approval. This conflict impacts the decisions and choices that Freshman Academy students will make. The aim of teachers is to guide students to the fourth level so they may understand the power and sway exercised by their peers. For example, being prepared for class and consistently completing assignments will certainly gain the approval of teachers, and students will be rewarded with good grades; however, some students may decide to do just the opposite in an effort to be accepted into a popular group.

There is a need to be strategic in schools that wish to model appropriate acts of morality. Students will learn and develop a system of morality with or without teacher assistance. Therefore, teachers in Freshman Academies aware of these theories will be better equipped to plan instructional presentations, lessons, conversations, strategies, and activities to guide students as they transition through Kohlberg’s stages.

If one drives out explicit moral education in the schools, it comes back in as the hidden curriculum, the unspoken values transmitted through the authority of teachers and administrators necessarily expressing values through acts of modeling, praising, blaming, and exhorting. In a society in which families have often lost much of their moral authority the values represented by the school often become critical. (Kohlberg, 1980, p. 19)

This researcher believes that students are innately good, striving for acceptance and approval; however, their thinking is skewed and in need of guidance. Socialization is critical for students in a Freshman Academy. Their idea of social order may not align with the goals and objectives of schools. Therefore, teachers must know their students and help them to navigate
the choices faced daily in order to direct and support them as they become productive members of society.

Students try to negotiate these levels. The fourth stage is usually the highest level of these stages on the moral compass that most adolescents are capable of achieving. Teachers of Freshman Academies, keeping Kohlberg in mind, should create and design lessons that will allow students to consider multiple perspectives through the eyes of various cultures. Administrators must guide students through the process of problem solving to analyze dilemmas and possible consequences as a means to help their moral development. Kohlberg (2008) states, “Mutual respect is believed to be associated with the cognitive capacity to differentiate one’s own value perspective from that of others” (p. 12). Teachers aware of this theory, driven and supported by Dewey’s theory of knowing one’s students, will be equipped to make a difference and guide students through higher levels of reasoning and moral development. Table 5 below indicates the levels and stages of Kohlberg’s theory.

**Table 5 Kohlberg’s levels of morality, recreated from http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/elliott/pics/set-2.htm**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1 PRECONVENTIONAL MORALITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 1 Punishment orientation – Rules are obeyed to avoid punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 2 Instrumental orientation or personal gain – Rules are obeyed for personal gain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 2 CONVENTIONAL MORALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 3 “Good boy” or “good girl” orientation – Rules are obeyed for approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 4 Maintenance of the social order – Rules are obeyed to maintain the social order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 3 POSTCONVENTIONAL MORALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 5 Morality of contract or individual rights – Rules are obeyed if they are impartial; democratic rules are challenged if they infringe on the rights of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 6 Morality of conscience – The individual establishes his or her own rules in accordance with a personal set of ethical principles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Carol Gilligan’s Theory of Moral Development

Carol Gilligan, an American feminist, developed a theory that aids teachers’ understanding of girls’ moral development. Gilligan criticized Kohlberg’s work as biased against women because he only used males in his studies. In her theory of moral development, Gilligan describes women as being more concerned about relationships and need for care than law, order, and equality. More emphasis is placed on the individual and what is best for them rather than the rules.

Knowledge and understanding of adolescent development has tremendous implications for teachers in Freshman Academies. This awareness, and the ability to implement theory into action, will help teachers move students through the different levels effectively, with purpose and meaning. Awareness of Gilligan’s theory is useful because it helps teachers and administrators become conscious of signals provided by girls. “A basic understanding of the fundamentals of males’ and females’ acquisition of knowledge and decision-making processes will enable educators to be aware of the perils adolescent girls experience and verbalize through changes in voice (Wren, 1997, p. 464). Table 6 indicates that girls transition from selfishness to responsibility as their attachment increases for others, and that this has a impact on the decisions and choices made. Furthermore, the model below identifies that girls are willing to make self-sacrifices if they consider it to be necessary for the individuals they care about in their lives.
Finally, Freshman Academies have the desire to make a difference for ninth grade students. In order to do this, schools and teachers must have an awareness of the various developmental theories and how they impact the educational environment. Teachers must use this knowledge to help them know their students and inform their instructional practices in the classroom. One of the primary components indicated in the literature review is a high level of personalization needed for success. Educators in a Freshman Academy will benefit from the knowledge of developmental theory as they get to know their students and apply it to their work.

**Attendence, Adolescents, and Freshmen**

Poor attendance is another problem that negatively affects student achievement. Often, a school’s physical building is structured so that teachers may go through their normal day and never see some of their colleagues. Some high schools are so large that there are teachers who have absolutely no relationship or contact with each other. When teachers do not communicate, it becomes easier for students to skip class undetected. If Teacher B communicated with Teacher A, the students’ absence would be recognized. It is probable that ninth graders quickly learn how to skip class. Some of them never get caught and continue
this practice. Their attendance rate becomes unacceptable and makes academic success
difficult. On days when students actually attend class, rather than are absent or skip, they
may fail to understand the objective being taught and discover that they have fallen even
further behind. They may feel helpless to change what they see as a hopeless situation. In the
end, some students will eventually fail their classes due to excessive absences.

High schools attest to the fact that ninth graders quickly account for the largest
number of students who demonstrate poor attendance, are tardy to class, cause disturbances
and disruptions, are suspended and expelled, and fail to accumulate enough credits to move
on to the tenth grade (Flora, 1987; Fulk, 2003). As a result, they drop out in large numbers as
soon as they come of age.

Some high schools separate their freshman class by isolating them in one location of
the building for their core academic classes. The intent is to create a home-away-from-home
learning environment because it is believed that this environment will improve attendance
(Cowling, 2003). Teachers believe this physical separation results in less distractions, fewer
behavioral problems, and higher academic achievement (McAndrews & Anderson, 2002).

Attendance is one of the first things that Freshman Academies should strive to
eliminate as an issue. If students are not at school, how can schools begin to make a
difference? An article in the *Journal of Social Issues* described class cutting this way:

Students cut when they utilize breaks in the school day to selectively skip
class. They do so to avoid classes they dislike, see as too hard or too easy,
or for which they are unprepared; to avoid particular peers or teachers with
whom they are engaged in conflict; to attend to personal matters; as well as
for a variety of other reasons. While missing one class can be inconsequential, with even a few cuts, students lose a sense of continuity, class work becomes difficult to follow, homework becomes difficult to complete, and tests become difficult to pass. To cope, students cut test days. As grades suffer and students fail class, their academic progress slows. Students then become discouraged and drop out. (Fallis, 2003, p. 104)

This researcher ascertains from personal experience that if teachers are in close proximity, students are less likely to skip class, and when teachers are on interdisciplinary teams sharing the same students, the likelihood of skipping is even less. It would be difficult for students to attend one teacher’s class and not the other without being noticed when teachers communicate. Therefore, attendance rates could increase in Freshman Academies. According to Anderson (1997), the principal at Kenwood Academy in Chicago hired two parent coordinators to notify students’ families of poor attendance, behavior, and homework. If a student cuts a class, misbehaves, or misses an assignment, the teacher fills out a brief report and then drops it off at the school’s central office. Coordinators follow up with a phone call home and parents generally respond by speaking to their child and getting them to school and class.

Adolescent Social Development

Students have a need to belong and it is this issue of school belonging, identification, and engagement which critically influences academic performance and successful completion of high school (Walton, 2007). In the existing literature, school belonging has
been connected with teacher support, peer relations, motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Booker, 2006). Freshman Academy components have been designed to meet the needs of support, motivation, engagement, and academic performance. Teacher support strengthens relationships through collaboration and teamwork. Advisor plans are meant to foster peer relations while motivating students to be engaged and accountable for their own academic performance. “Walk into a large, urban, comprehensive high school and you often sense feelings of isolation. Students and staff members scurry to and fro, rushing to class, each in his or her own world” (Schnitzer & Caprio, 1999, p. 46). One school, Granby High School in Norfolk, Virginia, believed that students lose a sense of identity in large schools and that small schools could better serve at-risk students; administrators structured the large comprehensive high school into four small academies as a means to eliminate isolation of students and teachers and foster an atmosphere of collaboration and teamwork (Schnitzer & Caprio, 1999, p. 46).

Walton (2007) further explains that to form their identity, adolescents must release the safe hold on childhood (dependency) and get a firm hold on adulthood (independency). The formation of identity can move in a positive direction when a stable sense of self is developed that provides adolescents with a sense that they know who and what they are and where they are going. As a high school administrator, this researcher strives to convince the adults in the life of adolescents that they must guide students in the right direction. Is it an easy job? Of course not, because adolescents already think they have all the right answers. Positive adult advocacy in Freshman Academies, given in the right dose, could be useful in directing students to realize that there is life beyond high school. DaGiau (1997) stressed that
considerable discussion has centered on the notion that adolescence is a period of crisis for most teens. Freshman Academics with well-trained educators could engage students in constructive teamwork projects that may help to fulfill the need of belonging as well as help to develop identity and self-worth.

The current lifestyle of many adolescents comes equipped with more and more problems and difficulty finding acceptance in their daily lives. Chamberlain (2003) claimed that adolescents were misunderstood and rebellious individuals wrapped in a package that needed care. The transition from middle school to high school falls uncomfortably amidst the teen’s excitement to be accepted by their peers. They are anxious about their feelings concerning school procedures and the presence of older students (Cowling, 2003).

The high school is larger than both elementary and middle schools. With this increased school size, there is also decreased contact between individual students and teachers. In elementary schools, students typically spend the majority of the day with one teacher and the same group of students. In middle schools, they share a team of teachers and a team of students affiliated with that team. In high schools, the teachers may not know each other; they may see one student in one period and not see him or her for the remainder of the day.

The design of high schools fosters disconnect rather than prompt connections for students within the school context. This system of organization places a heavy demand on parents to be involved so students do not fall through the cracks. According to the North Carolina New Schools Project (2009), “Research shows that 9th grade is a critical point in a student’s progress toward graduation. It is the point at which most students decide to drop out
and at which those who succeed end up earning diplomas. More than two-thirds of innovative high schools in North Carolina had no 9th grade dropouts.” Although North Carolina New Schools Project’s innovative high schools are not all Freshman Academies, many of them have a Freshman Academy component. The focus they place on their freshman students is similar to that of a Freshman Academy in larger comprehensive high schools. Essentially, care and attention to freshman students drives decision-making.

**Parental Involvement in High Schools**

What is parental involvement and what impact might it have on Freshman Academies? What impact might it have on high school dropout rates? Parental involvement has many definitions. Anguiano (2004) states that parental involvement is “an umbrella term for different types of activities that depict the involvement of parents in nonacademic and academic activities that may contribute to their children’s educational success” (p. 62). Although he offered this working definition, he stated that parents from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds interpret the meaning in different ways.

When the researcher attends professional development conferences, session topics generally include parental involvement. Unprecedented efforts across the country have been initiated to increase the role and involvement of parents in schools. Teachers’ and parents’ groups as well as the U.S. Department of Education and education associations work collaboratively to promote new efforts and ideas they view as key to raising student achievement. The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), whose motto is “Every child, one voice,” supports parental involvement by promoting The Family Engagement in Education Act (http://www.pta.org/); The National Education Association (NEA), whose
motto is “Great public schools for every student,” encourages parents to visit school and develop relationships with educators (http://www.nea.org/home/index.html); and the United States Department of Education promotes parental involvement through policy (http://www.ed.gov/). Everyone does not support these efforts. In fact, some teachers and administrators argue that parents do not know their boundaries and challenge teacher and administrator professionalism.

Students need a strong support system. James Garbarino, an applied theorist, has works and publications that help educators understand adolescents and possible rationale for why they do what they do. His work helps individuals understand the imperative connection of peers, school, home, and community essential for adolescents in their developmental growth. The combination of all working together is the support system needed to help students succeed. The African proverb states that it takes a village to raise a child. At the Closing the Achievement Gap Conference, the pervasive statement was that we must change the way we do business in the village. Students need adults to become adaptive to help meet the many facets of their needs. According to the North Carolina State University Adolescent Development website (http://www.ced.ncsu.edu/2/ci/applied.html#garbarino), Garbarino’s work has direct implications on teaching and learning, as he believes that schools are Microsystems which “[enrich] an individual when there is a good balance of power and reciprocity.” His work also contends that “teachers need to be aware of how outside expectations, pressures, demands and experiences affect their students.”

As educators work with students, they must realize that their students’ support systems must also include peer, community, and family. Parental involvement, defined in a
smaller context, is the very basic level of participation that a parent has in the home-to-school relationship of children. Based on personal experience, the researcher has observed that in practice, it includes supporting students’ learning at home, maintaining communication with the school, assisting in school activities, volunteering, and advocacy. It could also include parents being proactive in setting an educational environment at home that is conducive to learning. Parents could organize a specific location in the house where children complete homework assignments, read, and do research.

Eliminating stressors from the lives of students could also be viewed as parental involvement from the perspective of the researcher. If children do not have to worry about what they are going to eat, whether they will have a roof over their heads, or what to wear to school, then parents are contributing by providing an atmosphere that promotes a comfortable and less stressful learning environment. Students then are able to focus on doing well in school and realize their own dreams. This researcher has discovered that administrators and teachers believe that if they reach out to contact parents about their child’s learning, then the parent should speak to the child about doing better. This partnership is vital so that students receive the support they need both at school and at home.

However, there are limits as to how much and what kind of parental involvement school professionals desire from parents. To go beyond this boundary is sometimes considered obtrusive to teachers. For example, “Many of the administrators and teachers stated that curriculum development should be reserved for the experts” (Ramirez, 2001, p. 1). This sometimes creates an atmosphere where parents are met with opposition. Ramirez (2001) states “my colleagues and administrators felt parents were agents of negativity,
wanting more for their own children than others, people to deal with rather than work with, part of the radical right, and uncaring” (p. 1). Administrators and teachers must acknowledge that parents are a resource and may help them to help students work towards their best potential. This description of what parents can do to help students at home is supported by the theory developed by Abraham Maslow. Parents are responsible for providing basic and safety needs. Ultimately, they contribute to psychological needs by supporting students as they build positive self-esteem.

The genesis of the parental involvement movement has a deep and rich historical tradition. Organizations for parental involvement date back to the early days of the United States. Parents were the original educators of their children. Parent organizations developed to help bridge the gap for their children to become comfortable in the formal settings of school (Anguiano, 2004). Moving forward, parents began organizing themselves to have a more meaningful role in the development of our educational system. One administrator, according to Ramirez (2001), stated that there are three different types of parents:

1. Those parents who are involved from day one;
2. Parents who are involved sometimes; and
3. Parents who feel that the school and the teacher are at fault.

In today’s society, a combination of number one and number three are probably most descriptive of the type of parents in schools. Will Rogers said, “There are three kinds of men, ones that learn by reading, a few who learn by observation, and the rest of them have to pee on the electric fence and find out for themselves” (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2008, p. 45). Parental involvement organizations have been intellectually informed;
they have watched on the sidelines as changes happened; and finally, they have launched into the deep to learn for themselves. According to Clark (1995), information dates back to 1897 indicating the extensive history of parental involvement organizations:

- **1897**: The formation of the National Congress of Mothers in Washington, D.C., setting the stage for the soon to be developed National PTA.

- Parents were protesting the federal government as early as 1925 in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled favorably with the parents that all children don’t have to attend government-supported schools.

- The PTA began to flourish in the 1940s and 1950s. The organization played major roles in the influence of policies that ranged from a push for the United States to catch up with the Soviet Union after the launching of Sputnik in 1958 to the promotion of hot lunches after it merged with the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers in 1970.

- Legislators began to include requirements for parental involvement in programs such as the Great Society federal education programs in the 1960s.

- In 1965, Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required parental involvement.

- **1970s**: Court rulings and legislation favors parents. For example, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* (Dec. 4, 2006) the U.S. Supreme Court favored parental involvement in the decision-making procedures for busing to eliminate segregation.
- Congress enacted the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act in 1974 to assure parental access to student records.
- The National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education is founded in 1979.
- The 1980s marked the rise of the school reform movement. During this time, the Reagan Administration prompted Congress to change some of the requirements of parents of children participating in federal programs.
- 1983: *A Nation at Risk* shakes the nation concerning the quality of education in America.
- 1985: The National PTA organizes the Big City campaign to boost parental involvement in urban cities.
- 1989: President George Bush invites state governors to create a plan for our educational system that would include parents. The objective was to create national educational goals.
- 1990s: The federal government more aggressively seeks ways to include parents. Specific legislation denotes goals for parents and their role in the educational development of their children. The National PTA, again, begins to play a more active role in the development of policies.
- 1995: Education Secretary Richard Riley stated that Goals 2000 was improving education in Kentucky by helping Harrison County strengthen
parental involvement in education by training teachers to recruit parents as volunteer instructional aides and by reaching out to parents through cable television programs and homework hotlines.

- Today, through the No Child Left Behind legislation, parents are offered options to help ensure that their children are in the best possible learning environment available. They have been given the privilege of choice through magnet and charter schools.

Unfortunately, despite these efforts, parental involvement in high schools is rarely visible (Hickman et al., 1995). In elementary schools, parents attend functions in large numbers. They understand the impact that their appearance has on their children’s self-esteem and on the teacher. No student wants to be remembered as the child whose parent never showed up for activities. Parental involvement diminishes in middle schools, but parents are still available to help their children (Hickman et al., 1995). Some parents may not come to all parent/teacher conferences, but in general, there is a big showing of parents during open house events. A big showing is defined as 80 percent of parents attending the function. Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) meetings usually have a great showing of parents. Middle school level administrators believe that as long as they keep students involved by participating at these meetings, parents will come. For this reason, the school orchestra, chorus, band, or dance group performs as the main event of the evening (George & McEwin, 1999).

When students reach high school, some parents become absent from events such as parent/teacher conferences, PTA meetings, celebrations, etc. (George & McEwin, 1999).
Some students may feel helpless to change their circumstances and give up. Rarely do parents need to drive their students to functions for participation because students either drive themselves or they ride with friends. Riley, Sixth United States Secretary of Education (2000) articulated with great emphasis that we must get the message out to parents that now is not the time to back out of their teenager’s life. Ninth graders need their parents or significant adult role model more than ever (George & McEwin, 1999). On the one hand, students want to be independent and responsible. On the other, students are confused and afraid. They need their parents or significant adult role model. Parental involvement is important in high schools just as much as it is in elementary and middle schools. Throughout the past couple of decades, the issue of parental involvement in schools has become increasingly popular. It has been a key factor in several legislative policies, but most of the parental involvement strategies occur in elementary school settings (Ramirez, 2001). Some parents report that they do not feel welcome in their child’s high school (Clark, 1995; George & McEwin, 1999; Ramirez, 2001). Some high school teachers don’t regularly make telephone calls to parents or ever invite them to school.

Below is a chart of selected data distributed by the National Center of Education Statistics. It clearly shows a discernable difference between elementary and secondary parental involvement in public schools. Parental involvement has basically increased in all charted areas; however, secondary parental involvement is significantly lower in all categories other than the general meeting (open house). The data show a trend from 1999–2007. For each recorded year, the percentage is higher for the general meeting event for both elementary and secondary school. The range in percentage points has decreased from 15.9 in
1999 to 9.7 in 2007. The difference in the range from elementary to secondary has decreased from 1999 to 2007 but the range is still significant. In 1999, the range of difference was 30.8 percentage points. In 2003, the difference in the range was 30.3 percentage points. Although the range is smaller in 2007, there is still a difference of 25.2 percentage points.

In the researcher’s personal experience as a high school administrator for a number of years and based on conversations with colleagues, parents claim that they are not more involved in school because they are either not invited to events or not informed of the events they can and should attend. The percentage of parents who attend parent teacher conferences is extremely alarming. Parents need to recognize that their presence is needed in high school just as much as it is in elementary schools. High school administrators and teachers should plan, organize, and implement activities that will require parents to be involved with school. Can teachers of Freshman Academies make a difference by making special attempts to involve parents in the progress of their children?
Table 7
Parental Involvement in Elementary and Secondary Schools 1999–2007

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ELEMENTARY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SECONDARY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Meeting</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Teacher Conferences</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>59.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Event</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to an article written by Liliana Castillo (2010), the Freshman Academy of Clovis High School has witnessed successful participation by parents of the students attending the academy. There were 400 parents who attended two parent nights, over 1,000 hits on Skyward grades (website to monitor student grades), 100 percent contact on parent conference day, 50 who parents attended a school pep rally, and 20 school visits by parents a month. Brian Pickard, one history teacher from a Freshman Academy team, boasted that they had built an atmosphere in which it is conducive to learn and that with teaming, they had more students engaged, going to class, and being where they were suppose be (Castillo, 2010).

According to research conducted by Holland and Mazzoli (2001), Freshman Academies appear to increase parental involvement. Parents are kept informed of their child’s progress by design. It is not an accident that parents receive progress reports,
telephone calls, and even home visits from teachers and administrators. “Students and their parents had to sign a contract agreeing to specific expectations of behavior, attendance, and outcomes” (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001, p. 302). Administrators, teachers, and staff realize that positive parental involvement is a critical component to the reform instituted in Freshman Academies.

The responsibility to foster, model, and encourage parental involvement rests on all stakeholders involved in the education of our youth. Everyone benefits as a result of this responsibility being embraced and nurtured. As a nation, we must all learn to operate within the boundaries of our authority. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Division sums up the dilemma by stating that it is about changing the way we do business in the “village” through parent/family empowerment. This change will involve a collaborative effort because students, parents, educators, and the community are responsible. Again, Garbarino’s research emphasizes the importance of all involved (peer, school, home, and community) to form a connection for the common good of the student. The point is that parents and teachers not only have the right but the responsibility to know what is going on, that schools should not blame all the school’s problems on parents, and parents should not blame all the problems on schools (Clark, 1995).

As Anguiano (2004) pointed out, “most parents seem to agree that it is their obligation to provide students with a home and school environment that supports learning; however, they disagree about what constitutes such an environment” (p. 63).

The blaming game must stop. “Parents and teachers agreed that more opportunities for parents to be involved would provide more positive communication between the school and
home. However, both the teachers and parents felt the other group was responsible for creating such dialogue” (Ramirez, 2001, p. 8). This barrier prevents our society from moving forward. Clark (1995) showed in his research that children’s academic performance is higher at schools that have high parental involvement, and that although the primary value of parental involvement is greater academic achievement, it also allows parents to have the opportunity to contribute to school reform.

According to the North Carolina New Schools Project (http://newschoolsproject.org/), when students are not adequately prepared for their high school experience, they are in a state of jeopardy. They could possibly fall behind or fail to graduate. Parental involvement plays a major role in helping to keep students connected to school. Our society benefits from this effort. Anguiano (2004) found that different types of parental involvement were important to students’ high school completion rate depending on ethnicity. He went on to state that regardless of what ethnic background was used to describe students, “whether parental involvement is enacted for proactive or reactive reasons, the literature is consistent in stressing its importance to a student’s educational success” (p. 61). Young (1997) also found cases where even if the mother was homeless, her ability to stay involved with her child’s educational success was significant.

Several factors can impact students’ completing high school: family structure, parents’ education, family income, and both the direct and indirect relationship parents have with schools (Anguiana, 2004; Young, 1995; Young, 1998). Researchers have shown that “parental involvement in students’ academic and social lives is one variable that would seem likely to have important potential for promoting student academic achievement” (Fehrmann,
Keith, & Reimers, 1987, p. 330). Can Freshman Academies move beyond these barriers and find a way to communicate with parents in order to help students stay in school and achieve?

Parents of students who participated in the Freshman Academy at Bowsher and Libby (2003) point out that their children not only made the transition to high school smoothly, but also gained social skills, organizational skills, study skills, life skills, and learned to work in a group. This evidence delineates a clear connection between Freshman Academies and developmental theory as they are both designed to work on behalf of students. Freshman Academies aim to promote student success by incorporating modules of developmental theory. Gains in social skills, organizational skills, study skills, life skills, and interpersonal skills should be the aim for all high schools. If schools can help students make a successful transition, gain these additional skills, and make parents happy, then students’ academic performance and engagement will improve. In both Anguiano’s (2004) and Young’s (1995) study, they found that parent participation made a difference whether an adolescent completes high school, regardless of the ethnic or cultural background of the parents. Freshmen must be the focus of any reform if American high schools intend to reduce the dropout rate. Ninth graders typically have the highest percentage of low grades, low attendance, and the highest rate of suspensions and discipline problems (Kerr, 2002).

Building Relationships in the Freshman Academy

In 1996, the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, in collaboration with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, issued a report envisioning the high school of the 21st century (National Association for Secondary School Principals, 1996). They believed that to accomplish the objective of increased personalization, the high
school must break into units of no more than 600 students so teachers and students can get to know each other (National Association for Secondary School Principals, 1996). When students know that their teachers care about them, they are more likely to come to school regularly and perform at grade level on most assignments (National Association for Secondary School Principals, 1996). “Teachers are most brilliant when they know how to relate to students as human beings” (Checkley & Kelly, 1999, p. 60). According to Sutton and Wheatley (2003), “Motivation research on achievement goals did not begin to focus directly on teacher disposition until the late 1990s. Researchers have not delved into this type of qualitative research because there is suspicion in the Western culture that there is something wrong with emotions” (p. 331). Caring is an emotion. A recognizable cliché in the education arena puts it this way, “Children don’t care what you know until they know that you care.”

One report by Public Agenda in New York interviewed students concerning their feelings about school. Students who were performing well below grade level asserted that teachers do not care about them. They went on to say that their high school is a big place and students can easily hide or go unnoticed indefinitely as long as they are not bad or misbehaving (Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools, 1997).

After observation and being connected in the secondary educational arena for twenty-plus years, the researcher believes high school educators have overlooked the need to balance curriculum concerns with a school organization. There should exist a sense of community that ties learners and teachers together in an interpersonal fabric of care and concern for one
another. The presence of caring should be transparent. Parents have been left out of the equation because high school teachers no longer feel the need to call home and inform parents when their children are not achieving at an acceptable rate. In some cases, teachers are afraid to confront parents. No matter what the reason, it is essential to establish a positive relationship at the start of each new school year.

The team teachers at both Lincoln Park High in Chicago and Dover High School in New Hampshire (Boodey, 2002) are good examples of teams working together in their schools with the same group of students. Each team has developed rules and consequences that are the same and are posted in the same location in each classroom. Teams meet daily to plan lessons and discuss student progress. If a student is having a problem, team teachers meet together with the student to formulate a plan. Both schools have created peer advisor associations. Sometimes, teachers invite the student who is having a problem to meet with the peer association rather than with the teachers. This is crucial to their plan because they insist that freshmen are more likely to bond with each other and, more importantly, with teachers with this type of combined effort (Anderson, 1997; Boodey, 2002). It is like growing up in a small town where everyone knows everyone else. Teachers in these academies say that students not only help each other with conflict resolution, but that the students help each other with study skills as well.

When students are not adequately prepared for their high school experience, they are in danger of falling behind, having a delayed graduation date, or at worst, dropping out of school (Cowling, 2003). Attention and focus on parental involvement is necessary in high schools. Freshman Academies give attention to the beginners in high school, the freshmen,
who are most at risk. The job of teachers and administrators is to stand close by as students attempt to navigate their new environment, providing a helping hand in the event they stumble or fall.

**Various Models of Freshman Academies**

Throughout high school, students’ success or failure may be linked to the transition into high school (Cowling, 2003). The influences of the Freshman Academy serve as a foundation for the entire high school experience. Students need a purposeful design that intentionally sets goals devised to promote success and encourage students to complete high school. If students remain on the pathway established through the academy, they will know how to develop positive relationships with their teachers and peers; they will know how to study or how to seek assistance, when needed, within the learning community; and they will continue to strive to make good grades (Cowling, 2003).

There are various models of the Freshman Academy currently operating. Some are designed where a specific section of the building is set aside to populate all freshmen. Freshman students and teachers have their own location, whether it is a hall or a wing. Depending on the design of the school, sometimes it is possible to populate a separate building for the Freshman Academy. There are also some models where school districts have acquired a totally separate building not located on the campus of the traditional high school. In order to fully explore the components of Freshman Academies, it is necessary to review a range of styles and models. Anderson (1997) reveals that freshmen who participated in the Kenwood Academy in Chicago were better students throughout high school. She pointed out that the students were accustomed to thinking ahead and planning for success. This process is
initiated during the freshman year. Teachers guide students through a process in which the
students examine a blank transcript and predict what will appear there when they are seniors
and when they graduate from high school (Anderson, 1997). Anderson (1997) continues to
reiterate that when adults structure student thinking, it helps students to become aware of the
consequences of their choices. The researcher concludes that awareness will help students to
plan what they want to do rather than allow outcomes to be accidents. Furthermore, some
students do not fully realize the impact or outcome of their choices and how these choices
connect with their future. Educators, as in the case of Anderson’s (1997) study, who structure
a process of thinking about the future annually, help students connect one year to the next. In
the end, by focusing on the future, students will be better equipped to prepare and make
intentional choices that will help them emerge from high school successfully.

**Tribute to Freshman Academies**

Students who feel connected and are excited about school tend to perform
successfully. A student from Kenwood Academy stated, “I am a student at the best high
school on the Southside, Kenwood. This school is one big happy family. Unlike most high
schools, the teachers take time out to help kids in need and they communicate a strong sense
of concern for what happens in the lives of their students. The principal knows mostly all the
students and if she don’t she will get to know you. I love my school” ("Kenwood Academy
Reviews," n.d., para. 1). Kenwood Academy is located in Chicago, Illinois. As part of the
school improvement plan, Kenwood provides academic support, teacher collaboration, and
parent communication.
At Manley High School, eleven freshman teachers meet weekly to discuss student progress and plan lesson strategies. Their teamwork has fostered a more coordinated effort to assist freshmen in making their choice of career tracks in their sophomore year (Anderson, 1997). Students are progressing well as they continue their high school experience. In all the “real” high schools studied in this review (Lincoln Park High, Kenwood Academy, Manley High, Bogan Computer Tech High, and Hyde Park Career Academy High), “real” refer to the full comprehensive high schools. Boodey (2002), in *The Voice of the Community*, explains it this way:

The academy or a “school within a school” concept has been one of the most talked about educational movements in the United States since the tragedy at Columbine High School. The academy concept decreases the chances of students falling through the cracks by promoting more student-teacher-parent communication, quicker identification of those students with academic or personal problems, and teaching those skills necessary to allow students to make choices that enhance their education. (p. 1)

Dover High School, located in Dover, New Hampshire, chose to use the Freshman Academy concept to address the needs of their ninth graders. One of the major differences in their academy is that the class size was 20 students or less. Additionally, this Freshman Academy was in a different location from the high school. It was on a separate campus from the comprehensive high school. Students attend Dover High School’s Freshman Academy until they increase their basic skills and then proceed to the regular high school. The purpose was not remedial. It was a design to strengthen students’ basic skills in reading and math.
This focus helped students score at or above grade level on state standardized tests. In this respect, it is not a school within a school, but a separate school altogether. Students who attended this academy had increased student achievement as a benefit in addition to the support it provided to help ease the transition into high school.

Recently, in North Carolina, through the New Schools Project, high schools throughout the state are redesigning large high schools in order to make a difference in student achievement and reduce dropout rates. Large comprehensive high schools are redesigning their structure into smaller high schools in order to supervise no more than 400 students at a time. Each school is assigned its own principal, counselor, and teachers to work with the group of students. These innovative high schools first opened in 2005 with the first graduating class being 2009, but there are already promising signs of early success. On August 18, 2010, New Schools Project (School Data, 2010) reported that the biggest collective class of students yet from North Carolina's innovative high schools graduated last spring in great numbers, indicating the schools are succeeding with their critical goal: helping more students earn their diplomas.

North Carolina's small, innovative high schools are proving that a high degree of personalization, combined with high expectations and strong support, are effective incentives for students to behave responsibly. While discipline issues can be a major distraction in many high schools, the focus of innovative high schools can be squarely on teaching and learning. Three quarters of the 90 innovative schools in 2008–09 for which data is available had short-term suspension rates below those of their districts, according to data from the NC Department of Public Instruction. And most of those
achieved rates that were a fraction of their districts or those of the larger, traditional high school from which many were derived. (Suspended Student, 2009, 3)

According to the New Schools Project (2009), “the annual dropout rate in innovative high schools was 2.8 percent—roughly half the statewide rate of 5.24 percent. If North Carolina's dropout rate had mirrored that of the innovative high schools, the state would have had 11,000 fewer dropouts. More than four out of 10 innovative high schools reported no dropouts.” They also boast that more than three-quarters of innovative high schools required to make "Adequate Yearly Progress," or AYP, under the federal No Child Left Behind law, met that benchmark.

Administrators establishing a Freshman Academy are like architects who design buildings to withstand the strongest forces of nature. The intention is that it will be able to stand; failure is not an option for the designer. During the design process decisions are made concerning what materials to use. Architects lay out the foundation of the physical building in order to handle all the pressure that will eventually be placed on the foundation. They consider and analyze options that can be explored as the building is built. Some items will be necessary or essential for the building to stand strong while other items will be added for beautification. In the end, the building will be able to pass the test of time and weather many storms. It should be the same for the Freshman Academy. Careful planning and implementation are vital for the success of the students. Administrators must evaluate the program in stages to determine if it is accomplishing what it was intended to accomplish: to help freshman students transition smoothly and successfully from middle school to high school.
There are journal and newspaper articles providing testimonies about the effectiveness of the Freshman Academy and its benefits for students. According to a Smaller Learning Communities report (2004), the development of academies is recommended in order to realize the full benefit of effective downsizing. Some schools are using Freshman Academies while others are using career academies or pathway academies. Included in this SLC report (2004), several strategies are directly related to freshmen:

• **Strategy I: Freshman Transition Activities**, designed to help ease the transition of students from middle school to high school. Some schools place all first-year students in their own academy or house setting, sometimes in a separate wing or even a separate building, with extra supports from adults. In other cases, freshman transition includes mentoring from older students, or special career exploration classes designed to set the context for high school as a pathway to college and careers.

• **Strategy II: Multi-year groups**, in which several teachers stay with a group of students over a period of two or more years, to foster trust and intimacy between students and teachers. This strategy is also known as looping, a strategy used in elementary or middle schools when groups of students stay together with a teacher for more than one year.

• **Strategy III: Alternative scheduling**, which allows teachers to develop lessons that are more compatible with learning objectives. Alternative scheduling is also conducive for work-based learning opportunities and integrating business and community volunteers into the curriculum. The length of the class period, the school day, and the school year can be changed to support academic achievement.
• Strategy IV: Adult advocate systems, to ensure that at least one adult knows each student well. One quarter of students report being concerned that their friends lack an adult who talks with them about problems and decisions. Teachers, counselors, community volunteers, and other school staff members meet with 15–20 students, individually or in small groups and on a regular basis over several years, to provide rapport, academic and personal guidance, and information about critical elements for success.

• Strategy V: Teacher advisory systems, which are similar to adult advocate systems; they organize adults to personalize the high school experience and support academic achievement, working with small groups of students. These groups meet either daily or weekly for activities such as developing personal learning plans, exploring career pathways, course selection assistance, and planning for the future.

• Strategy VI: Academic teaming, designed to organize teachers in an interdisciplinary manner rather than in a departmental manner. One of the major factors contributing to the success of teaming is common planning. Although strategies I and VI reflect specific designs that schools have selected to use with their Freshman Academies, the other strategies are components that are also embedded in the structure. These strategies are at the foundation of high school reform. They do not happen by accident, but are specific and by design. Each of these strategies suggests a common theme of personalization. According to Holland and Mazzoli (2001), “schools that nurture positive relationships among students and among students and teachers are more likely to realize the payoff of more engaged students achieving at higher levels” (p. 297).
Drawbacks of Freshman Academies

More research is needed to illuminate the practices and processes associated with Freshman Academies. The simple solution of smallness is not enough. Moles (2003) pointed out that one problem connected to any small learning community is the tendency to track students in groups according to academic ability. When students are placed in particular academies in order to take specifically designed courses, educational leaders may not be able to avoid a subtle method of tracking. McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, and Legters (1998) emphasized that educational leaders must pay particular attention not to dilute academic demands for struggling students. They contend that by fostering relationships, teachers will be able to assess the needs of struggling students early and offer assistance without providing a curriculum that has low expectations. Early intervention is the key to addressing the needs of students. Students who do not get this attention and early intervention will begin to sink and slip through the cracks. It is imperative that the adults working within a Freshman Academy keep their attention on the students and not on the concept or structure of the school only.

The following analysis is based on the researcher’s personal experience as an administrator and teacher in both middle school and high school. Additionally, the researcher has synthesized the readings and developed a conceptual framework for understanding the conditions that may be considered when establishing a Freshman Academy. Overall challenges associated with program development and implementations are also a potential weakness in creating Freshman Academies. Some people are resistant to change and do not adapt to it well. Creating academies that focus on the freshman transition may have a
tremendous impact on high school structures. It may change the way business operates in high schools, so that the ninth grade year resembles or shares some of the components of middle school. Adults planning and working within the Freshman Academy must be careful not to make decisions out of convenience. This could be a drawback that causes the students to suffer in the end. For example, teacher selection should be strategic and preferably on a volunteer basis. In this way, the administrators will have teachers working with freshman students by choice. Their level of commitment and buy-in to the goal should be genuine. Administrators who organize and plan to place the Freshman Academy in a specific location in the building should do so with intent, considering the needs of freshman students. Since they will be new to the building, they should consider the location that would provide comfort and ease of transition. Professional development for teachers in a Freshman Academy is vital. Teachers must be prepared to deal with the change. Furthermore, it is essential that these teachers understand the academic, emotional, and social needs of teenagers.

Challenges arise from districts, schools, teachers, parents, and students. With students and parents, challenges can surface because of fear or lack of knowledge associated with communication barriers that prevent information from reaching the community. In schools, challenges arise because of scheduling, resources, and physical space.

This review of the literature indicates that the historical overview of high school reform and the middle school concept are interrelated. Reform of schools from K–12 came to the forefront after A Nation At Risk was released, following the launching of Sputnik in 1957. Secondary schools were failing the nation. Among the reasons listed, some of the most
prevalently mentioned were dropouts, lack of personalization, attendance, motivation, and lack of support both at home and in school. The high suspension rate worries advocates for children because suspended students are three times as likely to drop out (Anguiano, 2004). Various models of Freshman Academies have been examined and indicators for success were noted in this review.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter Two provided an overview of past and present literature which sought to explain conceived failures of high school today. School reform has been ongoing in American high schools for the last decade. Researchers have cited several causes for high school failure; some of the most commonly mentioned include dropout rates, lack of personalization, poor attendance, lack of motivation, and little support, both at home and in school. An in-depth look at the middle school concept and a historical overview of the expectations helped to explore meaningful connections between middle school and the high school transition. Several small learning communities were examined. The possible need to increase the growth of Freshman Academies nationally was investigated by looking at several factors: attendance, adolescent development, and parental involvement. According to research, Freshman Academies have a greater opportunity of building strong relationships. The teachers are teamed and work specifically with a small numbers of students. They are able to monitor for student success, and struggling students are targeted earlier. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce the dropout rate. Various models of Freshman Academies were observed, with emphasis on the components they believe are making a difference. Finally,
the drawbacks of establishing a Freshman Academy were explored, as a caution to high
school administrators considering this model for their school.

In Chapter Three, the research design is described by elaborating on the strategy that
will be used to collect the data. The research questions are again restated as the guiding focus
for the study. The details of site selection and participants’ selection are explained in more
detail. The means of collecting data through observations and interviews, as well as the
method of collecting data, will be expressed so that they may be replicated for future studies.
Data management, analysis, and the limitations of the study are clarified in the remaining
sections. Finally, a subjectivity statement is provided so that readers may understand the
perspective by which the researcher’s worldview is framed.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative research was developed as a case study. Yin (2009) proposes six steps that should be used in a case study: determine and define the research questions, select the cases and determine data gathering and analysis techniques, prepare to collect the data, collect data in the field, evaluate and analyze the data, and prepare the report.

Various schools and districts have adopted Freshman Academies as a solution to strengthen the transition from middle school to high school. The central research question guiding this study was: In what way does a Freshman Academy Program affect teachers’ perceptions and experiences of student performance and social development? Additionally, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1) How do teachers who previously taught ninth graders in comprehensive high schools compare their overall experiences with teaching ninth graders in a Freshman Academy?

2) What are teachers’ expectations of their students in Freshman Academies and how did these translate into the reality of their experiences?

3) To what degree has team teaching or collaborative teaching influenced or altered teaching practices in Freshman Academies?

The purpose of this section is to describe the participants, methodological framework, evaluation instruments, data collection methods, data management techniques, and the process of data analysis. Using a case study design, the researcher collected qualitative data from school and classroom observations, individual teacher interviews, administrative
interviews, and a review of documents. A case study, as defined by Creswell (1998), is “an exploration of a bounded system or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). “The case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 8). In other words, a case study always occurs in a specified social and physical setting. Thick descriptions were generated by the development of participants and context portrait memos. Case studies should be rich in descriptions (Creswell, 1998). Comparative analysis was used to compare data from teachers who worked in the sample school before the academy concepts were implemented, and those who currently worked in the academy. The case for this study was a single school after it had implemented a Freshman Academy for at least one year.

A qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher to tell a story. This approach allows the voices of participants to be heard. Hatch (2002) declares that most qualitative researchers would agree that research questions, methods, and other elements of design are altered as studies unfold. This was particularly important for this study because the researcher remained open-minded to emerging themes throughout the study.

**Site Selection**

The researcher selected an eastern North Carolina high school that had a fully functioning Freshman Academy in place. The site separated the freshmen from other students during their core classes by using a separate wing. The academy had an administrator, a dean of students, and a counselor who worked exclusively with the freshman class. In selecting the
school site for the study, the purposive sampling strategy, rather than random strategy, was used in consideration of the researcher’s time, distance, and available funds.

Obtaining access to schools can be challenging. “Despite the obvious links between district politics and change within schools, most researchers who studied the politics of education at the local level tended to stay outside of schools” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 337). Districts sometime prohibit researchers from coming in because they fear the results. This will sometimes cause the district leader to deny a request to study a particular school.

The researcher believed that choosing and securing a site was the first important decision to implement the plan for conducting research in a case study. After discussing possible sites for the case study with two outside leadership coaches, this researcher sent invitations to four neighboring school districts with fully implemented Freshman Academy in at least one high school. Recommendations were provided by Dr. Gus Martin and Dr. Jane Burke. Dr. Gus Martin, CEO of The Leadership Group for the Carolinas, provides leadership coaching to the principals of turnaround schools as well as newly created schools under the North Carolina New Schools Project. With his business partner Bob McRae, Martin trains and oversees the coaches who assist principals in improving their schools and making innovative change. Dr. Jane Burke, retired North Carolina Superintendent, is currently consulting through North Carolina New Schools Project. She also provides leadership coaching to principals of turnaround schools and Early Colleges.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher sent invitations to Jordan High School and Hillside High School (located in Durham, NC), Cape Fear High School (located in
Fayetteville, NC), West Bladen High School (located in Bladenboro, NC), and Anson High
School (located in Wadesboro, NC).

Anson High School is a low performing school and has struggled with student
achievement. According to the North Carolina School Report Card, although their scores are
well below the state average, when compared against previous years, they are performing
better and making small gains. This researcher wondered if the Freshman Academy had
contributed to that growth. On the website
(http://www.anson.k12.nc.us/FreshAcademy/FA.htm), it was stated, “At Anson, we have
developed a ‘Freshman Academy’ (CATS) that helps ease students into the full high school
experience. The CATS Academy provides a supportive, nurturing environment for ninth
graders as they transition to the high school environment with its rigorous academic course
work.”

West Bladen High School was one of the possible selection sites because they are one
of only two high schools in Bladen County. They have grown from priority school status to a
school of progress in the course of five years. During this time, the Freshman Academy was
formed. The Freshman Academy is also located in a separate wing at West Bladen High
School. The researcher wondered if their Freshman Academy has contributed to this growth.
Bladen’s commitment is affirmed on their website
(http://westbladen.nc.bch.schoolinsites.com/?PageName=LatestNews&Section=Highlights&
ItemID=58125&ISrc=School&Itype=Highlights&SchoolID=3299):

With consistency, support, and enthusiasm, our Freshman Academy partnership has
been handed the unique opportunity to lay the foundation for the future of West
Bladen High School. Our students will earn the right to enter their upper classman experience through their freshman foundation year. We will not set them up for failure, nor will we allow ourselves to fail. There is too much talent within the walls of this building for failure to be an option. The catch, however, is simple: we all need to buy into it, or it cannot work. The reality is clear: it has to work.

Cape Fear High School was a possible selection for this study as it is conveniently located in Fayetteville, NC. Cape Fear has maintained a Freshman Academy for three years. They have a designated area of the building for all core classes, and teachers are organized into teams. The vision of Cape Fear’s Freshman Academy is “With cooperation from family and community, the freshman academy will create a supportive academic environment where students will develop the skills and confidence necessary to achieve success now and into the future.”

Jordan High School is located in Durham, NC. According to their Freshman Academy website (http://www.jhsfreshmanacademy.com/), the process started during the 2003–2004 school year by a staff dissatisfied with the retention rate at a school who had a well-deserved reputation for academic excellence in the Durham community. They decided to spend the year conducting research to discover the needs of the students at the school, as well as transition programs available for them to consider. During the 2004–2005 school year, they orchestrated a pilot including 40% of the freshman class hand-selected for the program. They decided that the middle school concept of teaming had merit, and chose to implement this teaching model to help change outcomes with freshmen at Jordan High
School. They started the full-scale plan for their Freshman Academy during the 2005–2006 school year. Currently, they have four teams: Brightwell, Brosnan, Irving, and Rubenstein.

Finally, Hillside High School in Durham, NC was a possible site for the researcher’s case study. Hillside suffered from extremely low scoring rates in all tested academic areas. Additionally, the dropout rate was well below the district and the state averages. The turnover rate of teachers is also higher than the district and state averages. As a recipient of a comprehensive school reform grant, Hillside decided to implement a Freshman Academy. According to the NC School Report Card, the school is performing at a higher rate although they are still below the proficient scores.

**Participants**

Data was collected from a representative group of teachers from the Freshman Academy, as well as upper class teachers, a counselor, and administrators of an eastern North Carolina high school. The number of participants selected depended upon which interview plan was actually implemented (see section on interviews). The researcher hoped to involve all teachers of the Freshman Academy; however, it was recognized that the feasibility of conducting focus group interviews during the school day may be problematic. Since the researcher was not able to obtain access to all Freshman Academy teachers, the case study involved eight teachers (five teachers of ninth grade students and three teachers of students in grades 10–12), the counselor, and at least one administrator. Interviews were conducted in either a small conference room or a classroom. The researcher preferred the Freshman Academy building for the interview site. Originally, a focus group was to be used for clarification of observations; however, it was not necessary.
Teachers were chosen as study participants because they are the ones who work directly with students, and are ultimately responsible for applying the concepts of the Freshman Academy in daily practices. Without implementation, the Freshman Academy exists in name only. The researcher wondered which components of the Freshman Academy teachers would perceive to be responsible for impacting student performance and social development. Additionally, the researcher hoped to inquire if teachers who taught in Freshman Academies experience other professional outcomes in terms of expectations and teaching practices.

The counselor participated because her formal schooling prepared her academically to handle school issues associated with the emotional, moral, and mental issues for students. The researcher made certain assumptions that students typically share their feelings with counselors. The expectation was that the counselor would not divulge confidential information. Questions in the guided interview questionnaire (Appendix E) were intended to gather information in terms of generalizations. Another assumption was that the counselor would be able to add a different perspective because she was not connected to students academically or disciplinarily.

Finally, the administrators were expected to participate because he could add insight as to why the Freshman Academy was initiated at the school. The administrator was able to provide clarification of the vision and mission of the Freshman Academy, as well as specific goals, challenges, successes, teacher selection and teacher training procedures, and future plans.
Rather than random sampling, different types of purposive sampling were utilized in this study, depending upon the type of data collected. Case studies are usually bound to some degree by circumstances (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The case was bound to an eastern North Carolina high school that had already implemented a fully functioning Freshman Academy for at least one year. The focus was not necessarily on other components of the school, only those components that had a direct impact on the participants in the Freshman Academy.

All participants were asked to volunteer and agreed to participate by signing a consent form. Pseudonyms were used to protect each participant’s identity. Participants were informed that individual interviews would be recorded on a digital recording device. The focus group sessions were schedule to be recorded with a video camera, because it would allow the researcher to fully participate in the discussion without the need to take notes or ask a participant to repeat a response. By using a video camera, the conversation would have occurred freely; however, there was not a need for a focus group.

**Interviews**

Originally, there were two methods to gather the information needed from the interviews. As a practicing high school administrator, the researcher recognized that it would be difficult to conduct focus group interviews during the school day, as substitutes or class coverage could be necessary if the teachers do not have common planning. Each plan is identified as Plan A or Plan B. Plan A, the preferred plan, assumed that the researcher would have access to Freshman Academy team teachers at one time during the school day, while
Plan B, the contingency plan, assumed that the selected school was unable to accommodate the request; in this case, interviews would be conducted during planning periods.

**Plan A**

Under this plan, the researcher would not utilize a sampling process, since all Freshman Academy teachers would participate in the study. Freshman Academy team teachers would participate in a focus group with all team members present. In this way, at least two teams of teachers will be interviewed, composed of 4–8 teachers. The team would be comprised of the core subjects, including at a minimum math, science, English, and social studies. If elective teachers were assigned to a team, they would participate in the focus group with their cooperating team.

The focus group interviews would be videotaped. The researcher would use a journal to capture observations of the focus group and observations. Building observations would be conducted prior to the focus group interviews. Teachers would have been informed that they may ask that the tape be stopped at any time during the interviews. The central research question would be used as a guide when conducting participant interviews and when deciding which activities to observe (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

**Plan B**

This is the plan that was ultimately used. Eight teachers were interviewed individually (five Freshman Academy teachers and three teachers who taught students in grade 10–12). All interviews were conducted voluntarily, as outlined in the IRB human subject protocol. Demographic characteristics of teachers were considered when selecting participants. The diverse group of participants was created and asked to willingly participate
in interviews during their planning time. Teachers were interviewed individually for their convenience and informed that they may ask that the tape be stopped at any time during the interviews. The central research question was used as a guide when conducting participant interviews and what activities to be observed (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

An interview guide was used to orchestrate the open-ended interviews for teachers, counselors, and the principal. The participants signed the consent form after a full explanation of the study and the proposed amount of time for the interview. The researcher recorded and took written notes during the interviews. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. All notes and transcripts were shared with participants of the individual interviews. The researcher asked all interviewees for permission to return for any clarification of ideas at a later date during a focus group interview for the teachers and all agreed. However, a follow-up focus group interview was not conducted, as the participants did not believe that clarifications were necessary. Each had received a typed transcription of the interview and believed it was clear and exactly what they meant to communicate.

All interview questions found in the appendix sections were derived from the researcher’s personal interest in the subject, professional experiences, and literature review. The researcher used the interview questions found in Appendices B and C for the individual interviews. Appendices A, E, and D were used for the principal, counselor, and focus groups respectively. They were open-ended, by design, to provide an opportunity for the individual to share his/her understanding and knowledge. The interview questions for the focus group were derived in the same manner as the individual interview questions. These questions were designed to ascertain, through a collaborative effort, the general perceptions of all the
participants. The discussions were designed such that teachers were allowed to elaborate on their thoughts.

The researcher utilized a criterion sampling strategy to select a diverse group of teachers to participate in the study. The researcher sought to include teachers who taught at the school prior to implementing the Freshman Academy when seeking volunteers to serve as participants. This factor was essential in that it would allow teachers to elaborate on the students in Freshman Academies, as compared to students in comprehensive high schools. These teachers were able to make informed comparisons regarding the similarities and differences between the two groups of students. Further, the researcher hypothesizes that the Freshman Academy may have influenced their teaching in some manner through various instructional strategies.

Teachers were asked to examine their teaching experience in Freshman Academies and reflect on the similarities and differences between teaching in a Freshman Academy and their experiences prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy. They were asked about their expectations of ninth grade students prior to the Freshman Academy and during the Freshman Academy. Ultimately, the teachers were asked how they felt about themselves as teachers in the Freshman Academy and what difference, if any, the Freshman Academy has made on their teaching and student success, academically and socially. Each individual interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Teachers were asked what impact (if any) they perceived the Freshman Academy to have made on freshman students as well as on their teaching practices.
In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with the main high school principal, the assistant principal in charge of the Freshman Academy, and the counselor, in addition to the teachers. The interviews explored the principals’ experiences with the planning and implementation of the Academy as well as their overall experiences with the Freshman Academy. Predictions were explored concerning the social and academic outcomes of ninth grade students as a result of the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Additional questions addressed the decision-making process that led to the implementation of a Freshman Academy. The researcher attempted to gain an understanding of the vision and mission of the Freshman Academy, and how they guided practices and implementation. Furthermore, a query of the administrators’ expectations and perceived notions was explored as it related to the Freshman Academy, with particular attention given to student academic performance and social development. In addition, the administrators could explain what components or elements they perceived to have an impact on teachers’ experiences and perceptions while participating in the Freshman Academy.

**Observations**

A series of observations were conducted. All observations took place prior to any interviews being conducted. The entire Freshman Academy wing, the classrooms, and the common areas where students congregate were observed. Distinct attention was given to the physical structure of the Freshman Academy. The researcher considered where freshman students were positioned and what visual signs were evident to produce a positive emotional climate. The researcher observed students as they freely moved throughout the academy. Particular attention was focused on whether student action was parallel to teacher
perceptions. Teachers were observed within their own individual classrooms, as they interacted in the hallway, and during team meetings. Guidelines and procedures were agreed upon by the researcher and Freshman Academy faculty prior to observations. With the administrator’s assistance, the researcher conducted an overview with all teachers of the Freshman Academy to explain the study and to explain what could be expected of the observations. The observations ranged between a half-day to a full school day. One full day was devoted to observations in the common areas, hallways, throughout the building, and during times of peak student interaction such as lunch, physical education, before or after school, etc. All classrooms were visited during observations for various periods of time; all teachers participating in interviews were visited for an entire class period. A post conference was conducted with teachers who were participating in the interview to clarify any concerns, and to ensure that particular events were appropriately interpreted by the researcher.

Each classroom observation was conducted for at least thirty minutes; some lasted half a class period, or an entire class period. The researcher arrived in the observed class prior to the period beginning or in the middle of the class, and stayed until the last student exited the room. The initial focus was to observe how students entered the classroom, how they interacted and treated each other, how they reacted to the presence of the teacher, and how they settled down for instruction. Conversations prior to class could be an indicator of student feelings and attitudes. The researcher listened to side conversations and noted participants’ nonverbal cues.

During instruction, the researcher observed whether meaningful connections were created for student understanding. Particular attention was given to the relationship between
students and teachers as well as student-to-student interactions. These responses are essential for building and maintaining positive relationships. Notes were captured for probing, questioning, and mutual respect. Expectations and beliefs within the Freshman Academy community surfaced as a result of these observations and appeared to be aligned with the mission.

The Freshman Academy community was observed throughout the day and at random timeframes during observation visits. The researcher visited common areas, cafeteria, locker area, faculty lounge, and hallways to observe the relationships between students, students and teachers, and teachers with their colleagues. Careful attention was given to artifacts throughout the environment. The guiding question was, “What message is the Freshman Academy is sending to students?” The researcher attempted to notice all posters, bulletin boards, signs, flyers, brochures, letters, etc. If announcements were made during the observation visit, the researcher took notes on the type of announcements made. Students were made aware of upcoming events and provided information about a college tour. Additionally, students were reminded of the tutoring schedule and open computer lab hours.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection circle suggested by Creswell (1998) was utilized as the procedural process to collect data: “Locating site/individual, gaining access and making rapport, purposefully sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and storing data” (p. 110). Careful attention was given to the specific research question: In what way does a Freshman Academy Program affect teachers’ perceptions of student performance and social development? The researcher gained access through the “gatekeeper” (Creswell,
in this case the superintendent, by sharing the information in the literature review on Freshman Academies. Information was shared with the school administrator and Freshman Academy Director prior to the start of the study. Both descriptive and reflective notes were drawn upon to gain clarity from data and experiences during observations. Creswell (1998) stated, “A case study involves the widest array of data collection as the researcher attempts to build an in-depth picture of the case” (p. 123).

Extensive notes were taken as interviews were conducted. Additionally, individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with participating teachers. During site visits for the interviews, observations were conducted with participants who volunteered and signed the consent form. Students were observed during unstructured interactions (changing class, eating lunch, attending class or assemblies) as well as in academic settings. The researcher was an observer, speaking to random teachers in the hallway or cafeteria and speaking informally, to teachers on hall duty. The researcher recorded experiences during this time as they were happening. When questions or concerns arose during these visits, the researcher framed questions that were discussed in the individual interviews.

**Data Management**

“How a qualitative study is managed from Day 1 strongly influences the kinds of analyses that can be done, and how easily” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 43). The researcher typed all notes and transcriptions from raw data to the computer for neatness and clarity. All original field notes were maintained from the different data collection forms. All notes were given a heading, dated, and organized in topic folders. Each document’s date automatically updated with each revision, while retaining the original drafting date. In this way, the
researcher was able to preserve the original date of the actual observation or interview. During evaluation, the researcher used a color coding system to identify themes as they emerged in all participant and context portraits, as well as interview transcripts, to help expedite data analysis.

Miles and Huberman (1994) cited Tesch (1989), stating that “computer-aided analysis can reduce analysis time, cut out much drudgery, make procedures more systematic and explicit, ensure completeness and refinement, and permit flexibility and revision in analysis procedures” (p. 44). Some of the available software helps to decipher themes and patterns once the data has been entered into the program. This was not useful when working with this case study because of the expense; however, since theme coding is one of the main analyzing processes it would have been helpful. Considerable time may have been saved. Critical friends were summoned to explore alternatives themes and edit work in an ongoing process. Data was not destroyed unless participants asked that something be removed.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data was analyzed using a content analytic procedure to explicate participants’ experiences and interpretations of the new Freshman Academy program. This method was valuable for describing differences among the participants and the specific components of the program (Patton, 2001), and was used for the individual teacher interviews, counselor interview, director interview and administrator interviews.

Analysis was an ongoing process. The researcher consistently compared the analysis against the original case to prevent biases from taking over. This constant referral to the original data helped the researcher remain honest while analyzing the data. Additionally, by
returning to the data, new revelations were gained. New and surprising themes emerged and initial assumptions were either confirmed or rejected by the data.

Field notes were converted into typed notes, in most cases, within a week. This prevented notes from becoming difficult to decipher. Furthermore, this added to accuracy, thereby increasing the possibility to exercise different techniques and strategies for analyzing data. Words are extremely important in a qualitative study. They are the essence of what separates quantitative research from qualitative research. Therefore, the notes were a high priority when decisions were made about processes and procedures. If hand-written notes were unclear, the researcher sought clarification from the participants when providing the transcripts of the interviews.

Computer-generated contact and document summary forms were designed to capture the essence of the field experience prior to any initial contact with the research site or participants. The document summary form was a single sheet designed to help the researcher focus and summarize the event (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using the contact form helped to re-create a written picture of the experience. It was written to help the researcher to become situated in the event in its full context. Each computer-generated contact or document summary form had a reflective section for personal notes.

Summary forms completed as the process unfolded saved time during final analysis. It helped by focusing on fewer sheets rather than pages and pages of raw data or typed data at the end of the process. Although the summary forms were available, occasional references to the original data were sometimes necessary. For this reason, again, the original data was maintained.
Manual color-coding was utilized to explore patterns and themes. This allowed descriptive codes (not numbers) to be created which were easy to remember as surfacing data was analyzed. All codes were printed on a single sheet and displayed near all work areas for quick reference. No themes were pre-established to avoid hindering the emergence of unique themes. All themes emerged from the study beginning with the initial data collection events, and continued to be revised and edited throughout the data gathering process. The researcher “continue[d] to reevaluate interviewed participants on each consecutive visit” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 344).

Validity and Reliability

Figure 8 illustrates the process of triangulation. Triangulation is the process of using different sources to find common themes or pieces of information that are present in other areas. The key was to find the overlap (the darkest section) using the different sources. Triangulation was chosen because of the multiple data sources the researcher used in this study to promote cross-data validity (Patton, 2001). Rather than relying on one single form of
evidence or perspective as the basis for findings, multiple forms of diverse and redundant
types of evidence were used to check the validity and reliability of the findings through the
triangulation method. According to Flick (2002), triangulation is a key tenant of the
anthropological approach to data gathering (and therefore is appropriate for educational
research). The process is not intended to validate results and procedures; rather it is an
alternative to validation “which increases scope, depth and consistency in methodological
proceedings” (Flick, 2002, p. 226). Researchers should gather a wide variety of evidence for
the purposes of triangulation, in order to enrich and gain a more complete understanding of
the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 8 below summarizes of the types of data collected in this case study of teacher
experiences and perceptions of a Freshman Academy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>What</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>5 core teachers (previously taught freshmen before implementation of Freshman Academy) 3 upper class teachers (primarily taught sophomore students) Administrator (principal and director) Freshman Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Areas</td>
<td>Entire school Common areas (gym, cafeteria, hallways, library, etc.) Freshman classrooms Classrooms of upper class participating teachers Team meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>Bulletin boards School newspaper Website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Limitations of the Study**

Time was a major limitation in this study. Qualitative research takes time to conduct. The interviewing process (from conducting to transcribing) was extremely laborious. The researcher was employed, full-time, as a high school principal. Time sacrifices were essential to adequately conduct this study. Case study development requires time because of data triangulation, coding themes, and transcribing interviews. There were two situations where
the participants were not able to meet with the researcher on the originally scheduled date. Flexibility and careful planning was necessary.

Personal attitudes, feelings, and beliefs influence a researcher’s subjectivity. The researcher became educated, sufficiently, concerning the actual program development of the Freshman Academy at the selected site in order to delineate fact from fiction in the data collection process. Preconceived notions and ideas can present an obstacle when conducting research. For this reason, the researcher maintained a journal for personal reflections about herself while conducting research. The researcher was able to recognize, through metacognition, personal biases as they emerged in order to separate them from the facts of the case study.

A third limitation for this case study was that it did not include a parent or student perspective. Parents are not usually available, daily, in schools, yet they are best able to help the researcher to understand changes observed in their children. Student perceptions could also contribute to this type of case study. Moreover, individual students could be included in the study to learn if teacher and student perceptions are aligned. Other measures are necessary to actually include students in a research study. These components will be areas of further exploration for this researcher’s agenda of inquiry.

Finally, small qualitative studies are not generalizable or valid in the traditional sense. “Qualitative studies are usually not designed to allow systematic generalizations to some wider population and defined as the extent to which one can extend the account of a particular situation or population to other persons, times, or settings than those directly studied” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 52). Since only one Freshman Academy was studied,
it does not mean that it is typical or representative of all Freshman Academies. The sample was small and only one school was studied. Furthermore, teachers’ perceptions and experiences in this Freshman Academy may not be representative of most or even some teachers’ experiences in a Freshman Academy. The researcher designed a study that can be replicated so that stronger ties to the Freshman Academy concept can be linked. Triangulation was used in order to promote cross-data validity. This allows for crosschecking of information and conclusions.

In conclusion, Meloy (2002) says it best, “Because qualitative research requires personal rather than detached engagement in context, it requires multiple, simultaneous actions and reactions from the human being who is the research instrument” (p. 145). Since in most cases, the researcher played the role of observer, this allowed greater space for ideas and concepts to emerge from the interviewees and observations rather than from the researcher’s personal bias. The documents reviewed were analyzed with careful scrutiny so that the evidence was supported in the final analysis. Realizing the time required to accomplish this task, and believing it was necessary in order to fully capture the perceptions and experiences of teachers in a Freshman Academy, the researcher scheduled site visits as close as possible.

Subjectivity Statement

The researcher for this study is a principal at a small New Schools Project (NSP) high school. The high school is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the local school system. The high school is designed to be small intentionally, with the student population never exceeding 400 students. Individualization and personalization guide the
rigor, relevance, and relationship aspects of the school. Before becoming a principal, the researcher was an assistant principal at a large urban comprehensive high school. This high school initiated a Freshman Academy because the principal was convinced that it would make a difference for the ninth graders. Prior to being in high school administration, the researcher was a middle school teacher, teaching on teams ranging from four to five teachers. The researcher can personally attest to the amount of influence a teacher can have on a student’s life and his ability to make positive decisions. A teacher has the ability to influence a student’s academic experience positively or negatively. Linda Lumsden (1997) says, “Students tend to internalize the beliefs teachers have about their ability” (p. 2).

The researcher believes that teachers have the ability to influence student attitudes. Working collaboratively as a team, teachers are able to monitor attendance, discipline, and academic success. Amazing revelations surface during team meetings when student work is being examined. When students are at the center of every decision, success is sure to follow. During parent/teacher conferences, team teachers are able to communicate caringly with parents. Teachers brainstorm together in order to determine what strategies yield the most success. Meeting daily (a middle school concept), teachers are able to discuss student matters, team concerns, and team recognition. This allows team teachers to plan for student success and more effectively meet student needs (Stowell, Rios, McDaniel, & Christopher, 1996).

In 2004, for a course on program evaluation, the researcher was required to study and evaluate a program. For the assignment the researcher focused on a Freshman Seminar Course designed to help freshman students make the transition from middle school to high
school by focusing on study skills, time management, test taking, goal setting, and peer relationships. In doing so, the researcher discovered that colleges and universities have also organized and implemented Freshman Seminar courses to orient students to college and hopefully create a seamless merging of high school to college. The researcher not only learned about these courses, but also the academy concept that many high schools were implementing to help ease the transition from middle school to high school. Schools implement this concept differently, so the researcher began to wonder if there was one model that was more successful. This led to an interest in examining individual components for a Freshman Academy to determine their impact on students’ perceptions of success, academically and socially. Teachers and their perceptions are powerful images to analyze. The names or titles of the academies are different, but in essence they share the same idea of helping ease ninth grade students’ transition from middle school to high school. The aim, in most cases, is to help the students to be more productive as they experience a greater level of success in high school.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Background

Data collection is the hub for gathering the information needed to inform the analysis of findings. In gathering data, it is imperative for the researcher to remain focused on the research questions guiding the study. Interviews provided a large portion of the data collected during this study. The voices of the teachers were the primary source guiding the researcher to frame an image of daily life at the Freshman Academy. These interviews were instrumental in serving as the foundation from which themes emerged. The other data collection points, reviews of artifacts, and observations helped to fill the gaps in understanding how the Freshman Academy functioned at this research site.

All interviews were completed using a guided interview questionnaire with individuals who volunteered to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in an informal setting (teacher’s classroom, principal’s office, conference room, or counselor’s office). For Freshman Academy teacher participants, the researcher established the following criteria: 1) teachers must currently be teaching in the Freshman Academy 2) teachers must have taught at the school or another comprehensive high school prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy at the research site. Five Freshman Academy teachers were selected from those who volunteered to participate. The intended Freshman Academy focus group to be interviewed included two math teachers, an English teacher, a science teacher, and a social studies teacher.
There was also a group of teachers interviewed who did not work directly in the Freshman Academy. These teachers taught in the traditional comprehensive high school (and are referred to after this point as traditional teachers). The original plan cited in Chapter Three of the study was to secure a teacher from each grade level to determine if expectations and experiences changed at each grade level. The goal would have been to identify consistencies that stayed with students as they transitioned from one grade level to the next. In this case, however, the Freshman Academy had only been implemented for one year. Therefore, teachers beyond the tenth grade had not yet taught students who had gone through the experience of the Freshman Academy. The researcher addressed the issue of not having teachers from all grade levels by interviewing three teachers who had classes primarily compromised of sophomore students. Two English and one math traditional teachers were interviewed.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the implementation of a Freshman Academy in a comprehensive high school. An overarching goal was to analyze through interviews, artifact review, and observations whether the Freshman Academy concept could reduce dropout rates that currently plague public high schools nationwide through an examination of teacher experiences and perceptions. Additionally, the researcher sought to explore whether the Freshman Academy had an impact on discipline and student achievement. Specifically, the researcher aimed to discovered teachers’ thoughts on the impact of a Freshman Academy on student academic performance and social development. This study tells a story of teachers’ experiences of the process used to implement a Freshman
Academy at their school, as well as their perceptions concerning the impact of their work with students.

The research questions that formed the foundation for this study are:

1) How do teachers who previously taught ninth graders in comprehensive high schools compare their overall experiences with teaching ninth graders in a Freshman Academy?

2) What are teachers’ expectations of their students in Freshman Academies and how do these translate into the reality of their experiences?

3) To what degree has team teaching or collaborative teaching influenced or altered teaching practices in Freshman Academies?

The questions for this study were developed as a result of the researcher’s professional experiences, a thorough literature review, previous practices with a Freshman Academy as an Assistant Principal at a comprehensive high school, and the researcher’s personal interest in the value and impact of a Freshman Academy. Teachers are the ones who work directly with students and are ultimately responsible for applying the concepts of the Freshman Academy in daily practices to help transition or prepare students so that they are equipped to be successful throughout high school. This is the primary reason why teachers are used to inform this study. Without implementation of a plan, the Freshman Academy only exists because of its name. The researcher wondered if and what components of the Freshman Academy would teachers perceive to impact student performance and social development. This study unfolds a powerful story of the pros, cons, and all experiences associated with one Freshman Academy.
A Glimpse of the School

Demographic Overview

At the initial meeting with the school principal, I learned that the school was a historically black high school and that it was the oldest remaining of over 300 that once operated in North Carolina before desegregation. The principal had this to say, “We owe it to history to succeed because our children are falling by the wayside.” The principal considered poor academic performance, student attendance, discipline, dropout rates, and teacher retention as critical factors that could cause students to “fall by the wayside.” In the review of literature in Chapter Two, this phenomenon was described as “falling through the cracks” in which students often fail at school and go unnoticed. The researchers used this description to explain why dropouts occurred. A review of the school’s profile data sheet indicated that the school’s student population currently consists of 87.7% African-American, 7% Hispanic, 2% White, 2% Multi-Racial, and 1% Asian students. The principal shared, “We provide a comprehensive instructional program to meet the demands of our very diverse population of students.” The school celebrates the success of the Art Department, which has performed nationally and internationally, as well as the fact that they have the only International Baccalaureate (IB) program in their district. The principal’s desire to implement a Freshman Academy originated from discovering that the majority of the dropouts at the school were freshmen who did not return for their sophomore year. As stated by the principal,

I was completely in shock when we actually analyzed the data and looked at the names and grades of the students who were dropping out of school.

The majority of our dropouts were literally freshman students who simply
did not return to school in August. In several cases, the students came the first week or so and then just stopped. One of my teachers stated that we must have failed them. They probably came to school hoping to see something different, but there was no change. It was then that I realized we must put a concentrated effort on this dilemma. There was no way that I could ignore the data and continue life as usual without making some type of change.

He had recently attended a conference for school administrators, during which he learned that there were schools implementing Freshman Academies with large gains. The principal shared, “One principal, at the conference, said that his Freshman Academy had completely changed the culture of the school, and that its impact had positively enhanced relationships with teachers, students, and parents.”

School Performance

The selected school has had one full year of implementation of a Freshman Academy and is currently in year two of a three-year School Improvement Grant. It has historically had a difficult time meeting expected academic progress as determined by the state, according to the North Carolina School Report Card. As indicated in Table 9 below, the available data from the North Carolina School Report Card of the selected school until 2012–2013, the school had a designation as either a low performing school or a priority school. After one year of implementation of the Freshman Academy at the school, it was designated as a School of Progress with high growth. Teacher E, one of the interviewed Freshman Academy
teachers, stated, “We were in the *Leandro* case because we were one of the schools that Judge Manning threatened to close because of our low composite scores for so many years.”

Table 9 indicates a change in leadership (pseudonyms used) approximately every three years. For all years considered, the teacher turnover rate is significantly higher than both the district and the state. The student attendance rate for all years considered had been consistent, averaging 92%, with pockets of success in the AYP Cohort Graduation Rate 2002–2005. There had been a steady increase since the change of principal in 2009. Although the school size has had some variation, it has consistently been larger than the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges at both the district and state levels.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>School Size</th>
<th>AYP Cohort Grad. Rate</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>1,368</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>Peppers</td>
<td>1,433</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>Peppers</td>
<td>1,402</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>Low Performing</td>
<td>Not Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>Peppers</td>
<td>1,376</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>Low Performing</td>
<td>Not Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>Peppers</td>
<td>1,344</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Not enough students tested to determine. Schools must test at least 95% of the student population.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>1,309</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>1,198</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Not Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>1,209</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Priority School</td>
<td>Not Expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>Little</td>
<td>1,296</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>School of Progress</td>
<td>High Growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**The Site Visit**

When I arrived on the campus, I observed a beautiful structure with a well-manicured landscape. After parking and walking to the entrance, I was greeted by an officer who asked how he could help. I was directed to the office. In the office, a polished and polite student helper asked me who I was there to visit and to sign in on their computer monitoring system. He told me that the principal had been notified that I was there as he pointed to the principal outside the office window. The principal was speaking with a student. A large sign hung over the main office counters entitled “Instructional Time Reminder”:

[School name] prioritizes instructional time. In order to protect the instructional time, we do not interrupt any classroom to deliver messages or retrieve and deliver items to students. The main office staff will accept items that support instruction such as books, assignments, notebooks, etc. Students may come to the main office between classes or after school to retrieve these items. Any interruptions must be approved by administration and will be considered on a case by case basis. Thank you for your continued support in the education of your child.

The atmosphere seemed friendly and relaxing, yet professional. The hallways were clear and it appeared that teachers and students were in the classroom.

**Review of Artifacts and Interviews**

Different types of artifacts were selected to be reviewed prior to visiting the school. Most items were accessible via the Internet. The documents reviewed included the school’s North Carolina School Report Card (2001–2012), Federal School Improvement Grant proposal, North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey results (2010 and 2012), and
website. Other artifacts were examined during the course of school observations. Some of the artifacts examined during the site visit included bulletin boards, the school newspaper, team meeting minutes, guidance information provided to students, and signs/posters around the campus. Throughout the analysis stage, these artifacts were considered useful on the basis of whether or not they supported information that had been referenced during the interview process and observations.

Artifact #1: Federal School Improvement Grant Proposal

The school improvement grant proposal was written as a collaborative effort by members of the selected school and central office representatives. The school staff members were the school improvement team, comprised of teachers, parents, administration, community members, and students. The grant was initially submitted to the state of North Carolina.

The entire grant award was for $4.7 million over a three-year period, and a large portion, $3.6 million, was designated to the development of a Freshman Academy. Based on the needs assessment, which indicated that the selected school had a higher dropout rate, as well as the lowest cohort graduation rate, of all schools in the Local Education Agency (LEA), the selected school was required to submit a grant proposal that included the development of a Freshman Academy. Approximately $2.4 million went towards personnel costs; $300,000 was allotted for professional development, $80,000 was budgeted to help sponsor field trips, and almost $900,000 was allocated for equipment and other resources. The remaining $1.1 million was designated to help the school make improvements in other areas. The selected school was provided the option to make adjustments in the submitted
budget as needed throughout the implementation of the grant. Additionally, the school was required to submit an annual budget proposal and action steps for each year of the grant.

Some of the personnel additions included the hiring of an additional counselor who would assist with the transition of students from middle school to high school. This counselor would work solely with the Freshman Academy but would also serve as a connection with other areas of the school. The counselor said,

I am thankful for my position as the Freshman Academy counselor. I get the opportunity to know my students really well. I serve all the freshman students and that is a massive case load. It is well over the 400:1 ratio that it should be; however, because of the help and support that the teachers offer in meeting student needs, I benefit greatly. I do not take for granted that our teachers are willing to go the extra mile to know our students and their families. This just does not happen in every high school. I also enjoy going to our feeder middle schools to do presentations about the Freshman Academy. I think that the more we build it up, the hype will have students excited about coming to high school. I think this position is having a huge impact on the results at our school, but I fear it terminating once the grant runs out. I am paid directly from the grant. It is unlikely that the district will continue to pay for this position when the grant subsides, but only time will tell.

A Freshman Academy Director who also serves as an Assistant Principal for the school was also hired with the grant funds. The Assistant Principal oversees administrative
matters with the Freshman Academy as well as serves the entire school at the discretion of the Principal. The director had this to say,

Serving the Freshman Academy is rewarding. My principal allows me to focus on running this area of our school. Other than that, I have athletic responsibilities [budgets, uniforms, discipline, etc.] as everyone else when I get a chance to engage with all students. I believe this is allowing me to prepare for a principalship. I must monitor our budget, oversee professional development, provide teacher support and observations, plan programs, discipline, and just about anything else that the principal does for the whole school. Prior to being hired as an Assistant Principal here, I worked in an Early College. This was an excellent preparation opportunity for this next level of my life. It was a small family-like environment where all attention was placed on student achievement. We had very little discipline and attendance problems. I believe this is because our students knew we cared and we had created a place where they wanted to be. That is exactly what I want to do here.

Other personnel additions for the Freshman Academy included a Dean of Students for the Freshman Academy and one for grades 10–12, a mentor coach for beginning teachers, and eight teacher positions for the Freshman Academy. There were also personnel additions that would benefit the entire staff. The grant provided three intervention specialists (one math/two reading) and PLC coaches (one STEM and one literacy).
One of the major jobs for the Dean of Students in the Freshman Academy was to focus on attendance, as 42% of students who had attendance concerns missed more than 10 days of school; 76% of these were freshmen. Secondly, the dean would focus on discipline, since the 31.9% suspension rate again primarily applied to freshman students. The purpose of the coaches was to help with the proficiency rate in tested areas. The director said,

We are directly involved with our targeted students who have demonstrated either attendance or discipline concerns. The dean and I meet with them individually as well as [in] monthly group meetings. It is amazing the change you see when they know they are being monitored and that they are not forgotten about. We literally give them appointment cards and put them on our calendar for their next follow-up meeting. At first, they would not come; I think they either hoped or thought we had forgotten. We would call them out of class and remind them that we are here to support them and that they must be responsible in keeping their appointments.

Now, they are at our office waiting for their appointment and excited to share their academic success with us.

Less than 50% of students demonstrated proficiency in math and reading in 10th grade in previous years. Additionally, the school has not been successful for the past eight years in meeting Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP). Finally, the coaches were hired to help with the teacher turnover rate (22–27%), which is significantly higher than any other school in the district and the state. Teacher C said, “I am so happy about the coaches. They have provided curriculum support to help and they help extend my efforts by working one-on-one with
students.” One of the traditional teachers interviewed stated, “I serve as a mentor to a teacher who teaches in the Freshman Academy. She is a science teacher and often comments about how beneficial the STEM coach has been to her.” This is a valuable observation as it impacts staffing and resources to support the Freshman Academy.

*Artifact #2: North Carolina School Report Card*

Data on the North Carolina School Report Card supports many of the comments made by participants in this study. The school has a history of low graduation rates and has performed poorly on North Carolina standardized exams over the past several years. Several teachers commented on the fact that attendance was a serious issue the school has struggled with in previous years. Teacher B said,

Some students would just get missing. There was nothing we could do.

Threatening to call parents did not help. Most of them were over 16 years of age. We felt helpless and ineffective with our motivation techniques to encourage them to come to school. In fact, some students came to school, but would not go to class. They ultimately got suspended and could not come to school.

Teacher C said, “If we could just get them in class that would help us to make a difference in the learning for the students.” Teacher E said, “The biggest challenges is to get the students in class consistently.” Teachers who participated in the study believed that the other teachers and administrative staff were doing the best they could, given their situation. It was noted by all the teachers interviewed (Freshman Academy and traditional) that poor attendance had
plagued the school for generations, and that many of the students with attendance problems had siblings who attended the school with similar attendance problems.

Teacher D stated that attendance in the Freshman Academy was much better than the overall school attendance now that the Freshman Academy was being implemented. When asked why, he said,

We make sure they [students] know they were missed. We do not just continue when they finally come back as if it is business as usual whether they are here or not. Additionally, we call parents and email students…over and over regardless to the number of days they are absent. We don’t slack up. Of course, for some, that is not enough, but it has helped in so many of our attendance situations. In the past, we [teachers] did not make calls to student homes because the counselor and the social worker were responsible for following up with attendance concerns. Our only responsibility was to report the issue to them. We [Freshman Academy Teachers] actually discussed the difference this has made during our team meetings and all agree that the payoff is worth the extra effort and time, but we wish we had more time to do it during the school day. This has also given us the opportunity to discuss other areas with parents as it relates to the student and their road to success. We believe this has helped us to build a strong positive relationship with parents and students.
A traditional teacher had this to add,

    The biggest problem is getting them here. I believe that academic
success is directly linked to attendance rate. It is virtually impossible
for students to keep up with the academic requirements and expectations
when they are never here. I would go on record and stay that my
students from the Freshman Academy [have] had better attendance than
my previous sophomore students overall. Consequently, this has been a
great academic year for me.

If students are not in the classroom, teachers feel their ability to make a difference,
aacademically, is significantly diminished. The teachers interviewed considered
student attendance to be the major challenge; however, they strongly believe that
they are getting better attendance from students as a result of the Freshman
Academy.

*Artifact #3: North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey Results*

The 2012 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey yielded 100%
participation by all certified staff. The results indicated that 66% of teachers either agreed or
strongly agreed that they had time available to collaborate with each other. This percentage
was lower than other high schools in the district and in the state. Freshman Academy teachers
specified that this ability to collaborate has made a major difference in how they “do
business.” Teacher B said,

    I look forward to our weekly meetings. It allows me to have time to touch
bases with my colleagues to learn what concepts they are covering and how
we might possibly integrate our lessons. Additionally, our conversations about our students and how to offer support to those who struggle has been particularly helpful. We often generate a plan to wrap our arms around a student based on the struggle in one class; yet we all support the student’s success. We have also discovered that some teachers have a better connection with some students than others. We use this advantage to benefit student success in other classes. This concept was unheard of before we started the Freshman Academy. I personally enjoy the comradely atmosphere and believe it makes a major difference for students. If you were to ask any of our students if we loved them, I believe you would hear a resounding yes.

Another traditional teacher said,

As a school, we do not meet weekly; however the Freshman Academy Teachers do. I have only heard positive comments about their gatherings. I believe that this helps to establish and continuously build positive professional and personal relationships. Because they collaborate about instructions, I think it helps them all to be better teachers. I have even benefitted from lessons they have made together. They have done most of the work for me already and I just modify it for me. I especially love the projects they share with me and the rubric makes it much easier to grade. I find that my students present better work having a rubric and knowing
exactly what I expect to find. I don’t know why I never used rubrics before.

The percentage of teachers that indicated that they had more than 3 hours of professional development, in an average week, during the school day was 100% on the survey. Freshman Academy teachers indicated that although they receive professional development from their technical assistance team, there are many cases where teacher leaders conduct sessions on various instructional strategies as well as differentiation during their weekly meetings. Teacher A said,

I’ve been doing this a long time. I usually do the same type of activities every year. I could have easily been considered reluctant when we started this process because I did not want to do anything different. I was sort of set in my ways. I actually felt that I could teach my class better without the use of technology and that technology would be better served in other subjects. Now, thanks to my colleagues, I embrace the use of technology and can’t imagine not exposing my students to all it has to offer. I honestly do not feel this change would have occurred had I not [been] required to [participate] in the Freshman Academy meetings. Basically, I just wanted to continue to do my own thing. Now I am open and learning to utilize the new activities.

Professional development and collaboration are two major themes at the selected school. This outcome led administrators to intentionally make them a part of the development of the Freshman Academy. Although these practices have not
extended throughout the school, the administrators believe the Freshman Academy was a great place to pilot strategies that will eventually become a part of the school culture.

Artifact #4: School’s Website

The website of the school is very informative. Key information that is visible on most school websites was available for parents, students, and the community. It was apparent that the Freshman Academy is an important part of the school. From the home page, visitors are able to quickly navigate directly to a page that is specific to the Freshman Academy. On the Freshman Academy page, it appears obvious that the school is working diligently towards the goals established for the Freshman Academy as it highlights elements that keep them visible.

Personalization is one of the first things that can be observed when the page opens. The current “student of the week” is featured with a movie flash of previous students who received the same honor. Direct teacher contact information is listed as well as times posted when students may gain additional academic support. The “counselor corner” link provides information to students and parents to help them plan for positive results in school and life beyond. The counselor’s comment about this addition was:

I have never been involved with the school website. Here I get a chance to share information about summer programs, internship possibilities, and scholarships. I also have a comment section where students and parents can submit question or ask for help. I am amazed at the type of questions they ask via email that I rarely get in person. This new task has added a lot of pressure to my already full workload, but I don’t mind because I know it
has made a difference. It is almost like checking my Facebook status each day.

It was particularly impressive that the Freshman Academy page had a list of willing mentors from various career paths that students could contact with questions about job preparation. The counselor also had resource contacts to help with other areas of life such as private counselors, therapists, and community agencies.

The Freshman Academy website is a useful source for parents and students. It is used to inform as well as to highlight what is going on in the Freshman Academy. The resources and links that go beyond the home page are valuable to promote student achievement and to get students thinking about life after high school.

Artifact #5: Bulletin Boards and Posters

The researcher made note of the many different bulletin boards and posters displayed throughout the school. The theme that seemed to repeatedly surface was what students should be considering for their next steps. The bulletin boards had information about colleges, scholarships, the military, and workforce development centers through a joblink program. There was also information about internships and summer camp programs in specific subject matters.

One of the posters that had a lot of activity indicated there was a large amount of student interest. The poster was for students to gain information on how to apply for GearUp and/or Upward Bound. These are programs that connect students to colleges or universities. The programs are yearlong and are operated by the colleges or universities. Students participate by attending additional academic support sessions throughout the academic year.
and attend a summer residency program on the campus during the summer. The counselor shared, “The programs have representatives who recruit, directly, from the Freshman Academy, although all students may apply.” The poster, which had tear-off strips at the bottom with contact information, had only two strips left out of twenty.

The bulletin boards and posters are meant to be engaging. They are visible everywhere in the Freshman Academy area and stimulate thinking. They were not just pretty colors on the walls, as the researcher observed students taking notice of the information that was posted.

Artifact #6: School Newspaper

There were two school newspapers at the case study school. One of the papers was about the entire school, and the other focused on the Freshman Academy. The school newspaper for the Freshman Academy was planned, organized, and written by freshman students in their English class. A section entitled “What’s happening in classrooms” highlighted teacher strategies and student quotes about what they were being asked to do in their assignments. This section also included pictures of students in action, who appeared to be working collaboratively on an assignment. The article described the project, teacher expectations, and quotes from students who were in the picture. One student quote in the paper indicated,

> It is always fun working with our groups on real life problems. Although we have different opinions about how the problem should be solved, Mrs. Jackson always remind us that most problems have many options and that it is up to us to agree, as a group, which path we will follow.
A section on birthdays was in the newspaper. This section listed the students and teachers who would celebrate birthdays for the month. They also allowed submissions for “shout outs.” Here, the paper included quotes from others who wished to send a message to someone celebrating a birthday.

Social Justice is the concept that Freshman Academy teachers decided to focus on this year. Each month, English and social studies teachers in the Freshman Academy give a group writing assignment. Each member of the group is required to contribute to the paper on various topics. The teachers provide a list of social issues that the group researches and writes a compelling argument to persuade others to get involved. The papers go through a peer editing process so that students will know what each paper is about. Finally, each class selects a paper to be featured in the newspaper. The Freshman Academy teachers decide which paper will actually be in the paper, but all student groups are recognized. Teacher D said,

The papers on social justice have done a lot for our students. I can see where they have matured and have tackled each topic with sincerity. This has never been done before at our school. They have taken tremendous ownership of the paper and display pride in the work they accomplish. I have been here for seventeen years and it is a great feeling to witness this type of transformation in school pride and student workmanship.

The Freshman Academy newspaper had information on how students could become active at school by highlighting various clubs and volunteering opportunities. Here students were encouraged to visit the Facebook page for the Freshman Academy to learn more. All of
the Freshman Academy clubs are student-led, but students must secure a teacher sponsor for their group. Teacher A said,

Many of our students are very persuasive. Initially, I did not want to sponsor the Action Club and their agenda because I felt I would take too much of my time. Our students are social animals. They know how to work together and get things done. There was very little that I actually have to do for my students to execute their projects. My group organized a sock drive to donate to the VA hospital in our city. They collected about 400 pairs of socks. When they delivered the socks, they wore Santa hats and sang Christmas carols as they walked the halls and went into each patient’s room. We have already been asked if we would continue to do this each year because it lifted the mood of the patients and the staff. Needless to say, I am so happy that I decided to sponsor the club for the students. Their commitment and dedication is almost overwhelming. They want to make a difference for others. This warms my heart because many of the students who joined the club have very little themselves.

Both students and teachers are proud of the Freshman Academy newspaper. Students not only have fun creating it, but are engaged in meaningful learning throughout the process of publishing the paper.

*Artifact #7: Team Meeting Minutes and Guidance Information for Students*

Team meetings in the Freshman Academy are usually productive and highly engaging. However, Teachers A and D both admitted that sometimes, the meeting ends up in
a gripe session because teachers feel exasperated. Sometimes the teachers felt there was so much to do and not enough time to do it. There is a lot of grumbling and complaining about how they are expected to make things happen. They shared that the demands to do more or something different can be overwhelming. At times, these discussions transferred to specific students and teachers shared a sense of helplessness.

In general, the meetings are centered on reviewing student performance and attendance data. Plans are developed to help students get on track. Teacher B stated,

At the beginning of each month, teachers write the names of students who they feel are struggling in their classroom on chart paper. Each teacher is asked to limit their list to five or less. We create a list of target students from the names that appear more than once and adopt these students for an intensive plan. Each teacher agrees to adopt one. If a student appears on an individual teacher list, that teacher will work with that individual student, but the rest of us share information that has caused that student to be successful in our classroom. The target students and their parents are invited to a team meeting and the counselor facilitates to help us develop a plan to help the student. I like this because we focus on academics and behavior.

Teacher E had this to add,

It is extremely time consuming to conduct these meetings because we do them after school hours, but they have been really productive. If I could change anything, I would find a way to give us time during the school day
to have collaborative planning so that we could conduct these meetings
during school hours.

Artifacts reviewed prior to visiting the school (North Carolina School Report
Cards, North Carolina Teacher Working Condition Survey Results, and the school
website) as well as those shared onsite (the Federal School Improvement Grant
Proposal, school newspapers, team meeting minutes and guidance for students, and
bulletin boards and posters) all provided insight for this case study. Data revealed
that there was a need to make improvements within the school and that the ninth
grade students should be an area of focus. Additional evidence supports a high level
of commitment by teachers and administrators for the Freshman Academy. Finally,
according to the original grant proposal, the school is well on the way of
accomplishing the goals and objectives outlined.

Observations

During the initial meeting with the school principal, the researcher was taken on an
informal tour of the school. The purpose of the tour was to allow the researcher to move
around at will during future visits as the study was being conducted. All common areas were
visited: the gym, cafeteria, auditorium, library, computer labs, teachers’ lounge, workroom,
conference room, and the professional library. As the tour was being conducted, the
classrooms which had been designated as Freshman Academy rooms were identified and the
researcher was able to record these for future visits of teachers who were study participants.
Each scheduled date for interviews also included observations to maximize time. The researcher visited some of the common areas as well as an instructional period for all teachers who volunteered to participate, whether they were interviewed or not. Classroom observations were at least thirty minutes. All classroom observations of teachers being interviewed were conducted prior to their scheduled interview. Observations were conducted in an unobtrusive manner. This was a purposeful decision, because the researcher wanted to have the opportunity to clarify any interpretations during the interview.

Observation notes were taken on a portrait observation form that was created prior to the observation. After the analysis of the portrait observation forms, four common themes emerged that were apparent throughout the campus. Table 10 below indicates the themes as well as where they were most visible. (“Visible,” in this instance, is used to describe any manner in which behaviors were noted that contributed to each theme.) Activities were noted as to what the researcher heard, saw, or felt. No specific data was provided for individuals that were observed throughout the experience. It was strictly a non-participatory experience where the researcher gathered data through observation. In some settings, the researcher sat down and observed for an extended period of time, so as to see a particular activity completely evolve.
### Table 10: Emerging Themes (Observations)

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**Personalization**

Students at the selected school, particularly students in the Freshman Academy, experience personalization on a high level in every aspect of student life on campus. Students are treated as individuals and provided the support and attention needed to help create an environment conducive to student success. The following is a conversation held by three students at their locker at the beginning of school one day:

**Student 1:** “Hey man, were you able to get that FAFSA filled out right online?”

**Student 2:** “Man that thing is confusing. I could not do it. I will try it again later.”

**Student 1:** “I could not figure it out either… that is why I went to see Mrs. C [counselor]. She made an appointment for me and my parents to sit down with her.”

**Student 3:** “Did that help? Man, I don’t know if my parents will want to show all their business.”

**Student 1:** “It helped and my stuff is submitted. It is not like she did it for them … she just helped them so your parents won’t have to show all their stuff.”
Students 2 and 3: “We need to go see her because time is running out.”

Not only did Student 1 feel he would be able to get assistance from his counselor in a one-on-one session, but he was also comfortable inspiring his friends to do the same in order to get the help they needed. When students believe they are cared about and trust that they will be given the correct information, they will ask for help and encourage others to do the same.

The researcher observed that students were greeted throughout campus (in most cases, by name). Integrated learning was used to personalize learning for students within the Freshman Academy. One teacher in the hallway shared with another teacher in between classes that “personalization increases student motivation by making learning relevant to their interest.” Teachers seem to have made a concentrated effort to know their students and tailor instruction such that it enhances the overall experience of learning for students.

During the interview session with the Director, students were comfortable stopping by to speak with him directly. They asked questions about a range of topics. Some of the topics included: Are you coming to my game Thursday? Why was tutoring cancelled today? Can I schedule a meeting to discuss an issue I am having in Ms. X’s classroom? Is it too late for me to go on the field trip? When the researcher asked the Director if the interruptions were bothering him or if he would like to pick up with the interview at another time, the director said,

Oh no. Absolutely not. I have tried to create an environment where the students know it is okay to ask me for help. It is my goal that they see me as approachable. In fact, I want the teachers and parents to see me as approachable as well. I have an open door policy and they know that if the
Students are important to the adults of the Freshman Academy. It seems clear that they care about them and share in the objective to making a difference.

*Instructional Accountability*

Of the teachers interviewed, they reported that individual teaching is no longer the norm in the Freshman Academy environment. “We generally discuss the concepts and topics being covering weekly during our team meetings,” said Teacher A. Teacher D also commented, “Our weekly goals and objectives are posted in our meeting rooms.” Teacher E added, “It is beneficial to share the results of our growth test with colleagues who are teaching the same material. Teachers who teach the same subjects also give the same unit tests, which are developed collaboratively.”

Teachers feel they are accountable to each other as well as to the students. When specific students are on academic contracts, their team of teachers work to bring the student to a passing status in all classes. “When we meet with the students and their parents, it helps to know that we are all working towards a common goal and want the same results for the students,” said Teacher B. Teacher A added,

At times, we have made a group home visit because the parent is not able to get to the school. I must admit, these are some of the most difficult meetings. We soon learn that the parent has so many other things in life to
content with just to have peace. Yet, I have never met a parent that was not willing to work with us to get their son or daughter on the road of success.

The monitoring does not stop when students leave the Freshman Academy. A traditional teacher reported,

Freshman teachers often check with me to see how students are doing at the next level. They want to know if their students are progressing at an acceptable rate. I have also witnessed several occasions when a former teacher will speak with my students and encourage them to seek assistance if they find themselves struggling. Just as they care about the students, I really believe that the students care about them as well. They seem to act like they are family.

During a professional learning committee session witnessed by the researcher, teachers were developing a project that integrated three subjects (English, social studies, and math). The social studies teachers were doing a unit on the caste system of classification during the medieval time period, and the English teacher was teaching myths and fables from the same period. With the assistance of the math teacher, they were developing a project to extend beyond the content that would be covered in class. Students would be expected to study and write a research paper on the impact of modern medicine on the diseases that surfaced during medieval times. They would also be required to display statistical representation in the form of charts and graphs. Finally, the teachers wanted students to predict how the outcome of deaths caused by the plagues may have been different if the outbreaks were during this century.
The teachers indicated that they enjoy the work they are accomplishing together and that it has been rewarding. They also shared that it is their belief that the students benefit from these connections between subjects. Teacher E claimed, “By doing integrated projects, I believe it helps students to remember content at a higher rate. Ultimately, this type of consistent integration has helped with their retention of information and it has increased their level of comprehension. The bottom line is it helps student achievement overall.” Teacher B stated, “Our district benchmark scores have been the highest this year than any other year in the past. Although we cannot assign grades for the benchmark exams, we offer incentive points (5) towards the next unit test for all subjects for those students who demonstrate they are at or above grade level.”

School Pride

School pride has been a constant in some areas for the research site. The pride is noticeable when discussing athletics and the Arts department, regardless of whom the conversation was with during any visit. The front office waiting area was surrounded by the team records, trophies, school attire, photos, and fundraiser items. It was not uncommon to hear discussion about a previous game or an upcoming game. All of the teams, with the exception of baseball, have enjoyed district and state championships. Even individual sports like tennis and wrestling have produced champions. Academics is a different story collectively for the school. Little or no discussion was heard that would cause any observer to believe that they were proud of the academic success of the school. The Freshman Academy was the exception. Over time, as more students come through the Freshman Academy, this
could change the culture of the school so that there will be more conversations about how well the school is doing in academic achievement.

During observations, the researcher heard several teachers reminding students that they are as good as anyone else. Teacher C said, “I’m so excited about the progress you all are making. You are going to shock everyone when the final results come out and you have the best scores in the county.” Teacher E shared that,

We want our students to believe in themselves and know that they can succeed. Many of them have not experienced academic success at any grade level. Some of our students have never made a level 3 or higher on any state exam. Sadly, they are comfortable with below average and have accepted it to be the case in every situation they face. We want to change that for our students. We are working hard and the students are working hard. We honestly believe this year, our students will do even better than last year.

Teacher B added,

It may seem funny, but we show our entire group of freshman students the movie *Lean On Me*. Our students can relate to this movie. The situations that students face in their personal lives are very similar to some of the situations our students face. The movie has served as a connection for us [the faculty] and them [students]. Our students are so inspired by the movie that they are working on our school song.
The teachers at the research site are using the web-based software of ClassScape to give unit tests according to each goal. The class averages are posted on a bulletin board. Students are allowed to retest until they are able to demonstrate mastery. When new scores are added, the board is updated. Each subject is listed by the goals. According to the boards, students are well on their way. Teacher B said, “It makes the students feel good to see the progress posted. It stays in their face and they challenge each other to beat their scores. We know this is building school pride.”

The Director of the Freshman Academy said,

We started an honor society just for the Freshman Academy. We have more freshman students with honor roll status than ever before. We recognize them each grading period rather than once at the end of the year when the entire school has awards night. Additionally, we have the ceremony during the school day instead of at night. This allows all of their classmates to know who is performing well. At the end of the ceremony, we ask ten students to personally challenge one of their friends to be on the stage with them next grading period. We have witnessed some of the best compelling pleads from these students. Most of them take ownership and tell their friend that they will help them. I love this.

Teacher D had a final remark on the matter. He said, “We are not where we want to be yet, but we are nowhere near where we were.” The feeling and the tone throughout the Freshman Academy is strong and powerful. They know that the atmosphere is different. The
family-like attitude they express towards each other is clearly apparent to an observer. Throughout all the visits, the positive tone and energy was consistent.

**Collaborative Instruction**

Collaborative instruction, team teaching or co-teaching is a concept that promotes cooperation among peers to develop instructional activities that maximize student achievement. The concept can be understood by meditating on a quote from Helen Keller, a deaf and blind author, who said, “Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.”

In some cases, teachers plan, deliver, and evaluate the instruction of students together. This teaching model has the potential to get the best out of everyone involved, because each teacher brings a different level of expertise and a different worldview. Instruction has the opportunity to be enhanced as a result of each teacher pushing the other to go beyond the surface of instruction, so that meaningful connections can be formed to shape learning for students.

The principal and the director both agreed that collaborative teaching has been the largest academic challenge of the Freshman Academy. The director said, “We have made some teachers really mad at us for asking them to work in this manner.” Collaborative instruction also has the potential to create strain and anxiety for educators, because it requires flexibility and open-mindedness towards others. The principal said, “I have had several teachers to come to my office complaining that they are expected to plan together. They vent to me because they hope I will talk to the director and try to influence him to do things differently.” It forces teachers to expose talents and share their point of view about various topics of discussion in a manner that may be difficult for some. As the director explained,
“Teachers are no longer able to teach in isolation and within their own four walls. In a way this expands teaching and offers continuity within the building.”

Collaborative instruction was not received with welcome arms. It seemed to be a major surprise for the teachers in the Freshman Academy at the selected research site. Nearly all of the teachers interviewed indicated they were not fond of the idea of being required to develop integrated projects “together.” Initially, it was understood that projects would need to include, at a minimum, two different subject areas. The Freshman Academy teachers thought they would be individually creating projects that crossed other subject areas. After learning that they would be required to create the projects together as well as develop scoring rubrics, the teachers thought that the logistics would present a problem and that it would be difficult to reach consensus about project expectations. Teacher E stated,

I was fine with creating an integrated project. In fact, most all projects I assign cross at least one discipline. We are required to do one integrated project-based or problem-based project each semester. During our first discussion about the upcoming expectations, we were allowed to brainstorm potential project ideas and select our own teacher partner. This helped to ease the discomfort because many of my colleagues were afraid of being teamed with someone they had little or no relationship. I was pleasantly surprised with the effortlessness and comfort of working with my partner to develop our project. It was less stressful than I could have ever imagined and we each complimented the project with our area of strength. I am proud of the work we’ve done and it has established a
pathway to other mini-projects that we have worked on throughout the semester. I believe I am a better teacher as a result.

Teacher A expressed a similar feeling in her thoughts about the opportunity to participate in collaborative instruction. “My first reaction was not positive at all; however, I found that working with another teacher to build our project was rewarding. I grew professionally as a result of this experience and would advise others to team with colleagues.”

Personalization, instructional accountability, school pride, and collaborative instruction were themes that emerged as a result of the visits at the research site. These themes were interwoven in the design of the Freshman Academy. Adults working in the Freshman Academy were intentional with their actions. Decisions appeared to be made based on what was best for the students they served.

**Additional Interviews**

On the same day as the initial visit to the school, the principal introduced the researcher to the Assistant Principal that served as the Director of the Freshman Academy. A Freshman Academy faculty meeting was scheduled after school. It was not possible for all teachers in the Freshman Academy to participate, and the team concept was not implemented at the selected school; however, the researcher was able to address all Freshman Academy teachers (33) to share the background, purpose, risks, benefits, and time expectations of the case study. Additionally, the process to volunteer to participate in the study, including expectations in terms of participant criteria (a diverse group that represented all core subjects, as well as years of experience teaching), were communicated. Interview questionnaires
(Appendices A–E) were provided for all in attendance at the meeting. Finally, the details of
the informed consent form were provided and questions were answered. The faculty meeting
was followed up with an email to all Freshman Academy teachers, reviewing the information
shared at the meeting and including an attachment of the informed consent form, so teachers
could consider participating in the study.

In the original plan for the study, the researcher hoped to interview one upperclass
teacher from each grade level (10th, 11th, and 12th). However, since the Freshman Academy
had only been implemented for one full year, only teachers of sophomore students had
students who had participated in the Freshman Academy and would be able to share whether
they noticed any influence on student behavior and academic preparedness as a result of their
participation in the program. Therefore, a similar email was sent to a list of tenth grade
teachers provided by the counselor, indicating that the researcher was seeking the help of
three upperclass teachers to interview.

Fourteen out of thirty-three Freshman Academy teachers replied to the email to
indicate an interest and willingness to volunteer for the study, while nine teachers from the
group of tenth grade teachers offered to participate. Of the Freshman Academy teachers, five
were selected, teaching a variety of core subjects (one social studies, one science, one
English, and two math teachers) because they taught at the selected school prior to the
implementation of the Freshman Academy. No elective teachers were invited, because the
Director clarified they are not included in the Freshman Academy. Four out of nine of the
upperclass teachers fit the selection criteria of having taught at the school prior to the
implementation of the Freshman Academy; three of these teachers were invited to participate (one math and two English teachers).

The researcher scheduled a date to meet with each teacher during planning periods. There was only one counselor designated to work with the Freshman Academy; she agreed to participate. The Assistant Principal, who served as director, also agreed to participate. Again, interview dates and times were scheduled. The questions on the guide for interviews (Appendices A–E) were used during each interview based on the person being interviewed. The questionnaire served as a guide, but the interviewing researcher asked additional questions depending on the responses, the observations, and the flow of the interview. All interviews were recorded on a digital recording device and journal notes, transcribed verbatim from the recording, and shared with each individual interviewee via email.

Focus Group

Originally, the researcher planned to conduct a focus group with the participants in order to clarify points and ideas; however, none of the participants believed it was necessary. The transcribed interview was provided to each interviewee within a week. They were satisfied with the researcher’s capture of their thoughts and original interpretations; therefore, no focus group was conducted. Points were further elaborated via email communication with the interviewees.

Revealing the Story

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and emailed to individual interviewees so that they could elaborate on points, ask that any remarks be removed, and indicate if a
clarifying focus group was necessary to provide additional information. Observation notes were also typed and shared with all participants in the study. The researcher reread all observation notes immediately to ensure that all memories were captured and that nothing had been left out. The interview notes were not reread until after the interviewees exercised their opportunity to review what had been transcribed.

After finalizing the transcribed interview notes with each interviewee, the researcher allowed two weeks for the notes to become cold (a process to help the researcher disconnect from the study) before the analysis process would begin. This was done so that biases would not be inserted in the notes and interpretations. All notes were read the first time and initial key points that seemed to emerge were underlined. During the second reading, themes that had emerged in other interviews were highlighted (color coded) and identified in the margins.

Although the guided interview instrument was different for academy teachers, upperclass teachers, and the administrator and counselor, there were some overlapping questions that asked about the strengths, challenges, preparation, successes, and evaluation of current outcomes in each of the interview instruments. Interviews were conducted with the foundation of the research questions supporting the conversation, and some common threads emerged from the individual conversations. Table 11 below indicates the questions from the interview instrument that yielded common responses from each interviewee. The complete guided interview questions are located in the appendices.
Table 11: Instrument and questions that yielded common responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questionnaire Instrument</th>
<th>Agreement %</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Associated Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Academy Teachers (Appendix B)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>What are your beliefs concerning your ability to impact student attendance, discipline, and student achievement?</td>
<td>Personalization, Collaborative Effort, Common Discipline Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Academy Teachers (Appendix B) Counselor (Appendix E)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>What do you consider the strength of your Freshman Academy?</td>
<td>Personalization, Collaborative Effort, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Academy Teachers (Appendix B)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>What impact do you believe the Freshman Academy has had on student attendance, discipline, and student achievement?</td>
<td>Personalization, Collaborative Effort, Common Discipline Approach, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Academy Teachers (Appendix B) Principal (Appendix A) Counselor (Appendix E)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>What are the challenges you have faced?</td>
<td>Location/Proximity, Administrative Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Academy Teachers (Appendix B) Principal (Appendix A) Counselor (Appendix E)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>What are the perceived future concerns?</td>
<td>Location/Proximity, Administrative Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman Academy Teachers (Appendix B) Principal (Appendix A) Comprehensive Teachers (Appendix C)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Are you getting the desired results that the Freshman Academy was designed to produce? Why or why not?</td>
<td>Personalization, Collaborative Effort, Common Discipline Approach, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal (Appendix A)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Are there a perceived difference in the behavior of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?</td>
<td>Personalization, Collaborative Effort, Common Discipline Approach, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success, Administrative Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Teachers (Appendix C)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Is there a perceived difference in the academic attitude of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?</td>
<td>Personalization, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Teachers (Appendix C)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is there a perceived difference in the attendance of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?</td>
<td>Personalization, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Teachers (Appendix C)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Is there a perceived difference in the attendance of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?</td>
<td>Personalization, Instructional Expectations &amp; Supporting High School Success</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Every Freshman Academy teacher (100%) responded positively when asked about their impact on students in terms of attendance, achievement, and discipline. They were hopeful that the work they execute each day is worthwhile and will produce positive results for the students. Similarly, 100% of Freshman Academy teachers, as well as the principal and counselor, were concerned about the future of the Freshman Academy. Primarily, their concerns are on their ability to sustain the program when grant funds are no longer available.

Teacher D commented,

I am thoroughly enjoying the small class sizes. Since we were able to hire additional teachers, it has reduced the number of students in our classrooms. I have never had classes this small. To be quite honest, I never really believed it mattered and have made wise comments about elementary teachers getting so upset when they have thirty instead of twenty students. To me, it would not make much difference because the same material would need to be taught to the students regardless to the number in the classroom. I now believe differently because I am much better able to serve my students when there are fewer of them in the classroom. Discipline concerns are also minimized with fewer students.

All data points were read and analyzed in search of emerging themes. The themes and specific comments were highlighted in each document so as to make connections based on similarities. Table 12 indicates the themes that emerged from the compilation of all the data points. The indicated themes are not in any particular order of importance, but are categorized below.
It was interesting that these themes emerged from all conversations, considering that the interview instruments were different for each category of interviewees: Freshman Academy Teachers, Principal, Counselor, Comprehensive Teachers, and the Focus Group (Appendices A–E). At some point throughout the interview, each interviewee found a way to speak about the same topics. Fears, concerns, and challenges also surfaced throughout the interviews; however, these will be discussed in another section. This section will specifically focus on the themes that emerged and how they were revealed throughout all data points.

**Personalization**

Personalization is a term used at this site to describe the relationships that were built throughout the community: between students, students and teachers, teachers and their colleagues, teachers and administrators, and finally between the school and students’ homes. The overall feeling was that they were like “one big family,” as described by Freshman Academy teachers. The traditional teachers interviewed also shared this description of the Freshman Academy. In a review of artifacts, the idea of being a family was noted in several printed items as well. Teacher A commented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personalization</th>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative Effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location/Proximity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Expectations/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative Support</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I love my kids. They are just like my children. When they hurt, I hurt. Children are not able to focus and learn when they have other things on their minds. If one of my students is having a bad day, I can tell in an instant. In fact, we [teachers] make sure that each other know so that we can wrap our arms around that student throughout the day until things are better. Some of us have better rapport with certain students than others do. In cases like these, our students even know that they may ask to go see that teacher. We like to call it wrap-around counseling service. We have one counselor who is designated to serve the Freshman Academy. She is just one person. We must share the load to move our students from one point to another. The wonderful thing about this type of atmosphere is that both students and parents see and recognize the genuine love and concern. They open up and allow us in their world.

During observations, it was obvious that there was a sense of family in the academy. The researcher overheard students talking to each other just as brothers and sisters would talk to each other. There were personal conversations as well as academic conversations. One student checked with her classmates to make sure that they were aware that they only had four more days for their project to be due. She wanted to know who was working on it and where they were in the process. She also volunteered information that a group of students were staying after school the next day to work in Mrs. Smith’s (fictitious name) classroom because she had lots of specialty paper. She was giving it to any student who wanted it to help beautify their project.
The use of personal computers and classroom technology also facilitated personalization. For example, several classes were using Study Island, an online learning software, to implement personalized learning. Teacher C shared,

Having computers for each student is awesome. It helps me to set individual preferences from the teacher page for each student in order to personalize instruction. I can also ask all students to take the pre-assessment at the start of the lesson. The program will analyze the student’s strengths and weakness, then assign a prescribed learning path based on the scoring results. I like that all of this data is available in a report that can be sent home and shared with parents. Each of my students have a folder that stores their records for each unit. They are also allowed to move at their own pace. The application is available from any device with Internet capability. This allows students to work at home or anywhere. The enrichment opportunities are available for extra credit. Students may do these if they choose and submit to teacher online. In this way, no student is limited. There are also fun learning games on the website. We [teachers] originally thought the students might not be interested in playing the games, but it is amazing that they love them. There is no extra credit for the games, but students spend a lot of time playing. We are happy that they are also learning.

Teachers recently attended a training on differentiation. Teacher E thought it was a great training, but believes that implementation will be overwhelming. Teacher E said,
“Because differentiation is like making a tailor-made suit for each student, it will require a lot of work. Students work on the same objective, but will be learning in a manner that works best for them.” The teacher believed in the concept and is certain that it will make a difference for each student and their learning path, but “I don’t think I can pull it off in the middle of the year, maybe I can work on things this summer. I enjoy the benefit that Study Island offers through the computer. It’s like it does the work for me,” said Teacher E.

“The major way we connect around here is through conversation. Sometimes I know more about my students than I want to know. There are times when we conduct conferences that we end up helping the student and the parent. We are all in this together,” said Teacher B. Teacher D added, “Our students are comfortable talking to us. They feel at ease asking questions. We tell them that we are all in this together and expect them to be helpers, one to another.”

Although the emerging themes are not placed in any particular order, personalization would be ranked at the top of what makes the Freshman Academy experience different. The differences are felt by all involved. This is the connecting piece that made the rest of the design fit together and helped to build strong, positive relationships. The challenge was great in that teachers were asked to do much more with their time and in their work together. From telephone calls home to specialized instruction, personalization made the students have a sense of belonging and belief that they mattered.

**Collaborative Effort**

Many of the projects assigned in the Freshman Academy are created collaboratively. Teachers work together to enhance each other’s projects by adding concepts to integrate the
assignments. They also work to develop projects that they will implement together. Rubrics are designed and each teacher contributes to grading. Teacher E reported, “The benefit of the doing projects together is that it helps students to connect information from various disciplines. This makes learning more meaningful. The students like that they earn a grade [from] each teacher doing one project.” Teacher B said, “Learning is not isolated and individual subjects can no longer be taught in a vacuum. If we [teachers] work together to help students realize that history and English are connect[ed], it will make many of the concepts come alive for them.” When working in groups, Teacher A expects them to tap the knowledge of other groups as well: “They must ask three and then me. Usually, by the time they have reached out to other groups, they either get the information they needed or it sparks their own idea about what they want to do.”

Not only do teachers work together, but they expect students to do the same. It was common practice to see students working in collaborative groups within the classrooms, and apparent that this was an established routine. Students worked with a high level of engagement and enthusiasm and were responsive and respectful to one another. All student ideas were valued and appreciated. This change has impacted the atmosphere and increased student leadership and cooperation.

Location/Proximity

During the first year of implementation of the Freshman Academy, all of the classrooms were located on the same wing of the school. This year, the principal made some changes, specifically for the science classrooms. The school is located in an older building, with a design focused on putting departments together, and the rooms designed to be science
classrooms are in another wing of the school. The science teachers of the Freshman Academy were frustrated by the lack of access to their materials and equipment. They asked for a change, but now doubt if it was in the best interest of the Freshman Academy. Teacher C said, “I like having my equipment, but I miss the ongoing connection in the Freshman Academy wing. I don’t see my colleagues until the end of the day.”

The Freshman Academy is located, primarily, in one wing of the campus. The bulletin boards are decorated and contain information about student progress (attendance, class averages, student of the week, upcoming information, etc.). Student work is on the walls and display cases in the hallways. Upon entry into the Freshman Academy, there is an immediate recognition that this is a special area. The mission and vision of the Freshman Academy are displayed in large print.

During a team meeting, science teachers expressed the disconnect they were experiencing being away from the “family.” One teacher expressed, “I know this is what we asked for, but I miss being able to communicate with other colleagues between the bells. This biggest impact is on the day-to-day activities that happen throughout the day.” Another teacher said, “Sometimes we don’t learn about something important until the end of the day or during our meetings. I’ve tried to make it a habit to check my email constantly, but interruptions prevent me from doing that.” The director facilitated a brainstorm session for teachers to suggest solutions to this dilemma.

Another change that happened this year is the location of the counselor’s office. Last year, the counselor was on the Freshman Academy wing, but this year, the office is in the counselor’s center. The counselor commented,
It was really convenient being down the hall from the students and teachers last year, but I was constantly going downstairs to get things from the counselor’s center. All of the records are even located in one place. I wish I could be in two places at once. I am not sure what the better location is. I plan to ask if the freshman cumulative records can be moved upstairs with me to that office and if maybe I can have my own storage for the files.

Some of the teachers commented on the difference it has made to not have counselor and science teachers on their wing. Teacher D said, “I really miss our counselor not being here with us. Last year, during advisory, she used to come into the classroom more and conduct seminars and assessments. Now, I think maybe she gets caught up down in the counselor center and does not make it into the classrooms as much.” Teacher A said, “The learning style survey that our counselor gave the students was helpful. Since she has been downstairs, she has not had time to do things like that this year.” “Mrs. Graham (fictitious name) [science teacher] and I created a co-project together last year. It has been difficult, logistically, to manage the project this year since they moved the science teachers.”

It appeared that the difference in the location of science teachers and counselor is felt in the Freshman Academy. The convenience of having colleagues in close proximity seems to impact the way business is conducted.

*Common Discipline Approach*

Teacher discipline plans can be just as diverse as the teachers themselves. A plan is usually built upon fundamental beliefs about behavior, rewards, and consequences. Teachers also possess varied tolerance levels as to what is and is not acceptable behavior. The
experience of this researcher reveals that it is difficult to get a group of teachers to come to some consensus about a discipline plan upon which they will agree. It is even more difficult to see the plan actualized and all teachers enforce what is agreed upon.

At this research site, the teachers of the Freshman Academy created a discipline plan. The plan is posted throughout the halls of the Freshman Academy as well as in the classrooms. The director had a professionally made sign mounted at the entrance of the area. Under the sign, each teacher has offered a signature pledging to be faithful to the agreed upon plan.

Infraction in the Freshman Academy is lower that it was when the program started. When interviewing the director, his excitement about this fact was expressed this way,

Wow, the change in discipline has been major. I am not dealing with one situation after the other like I used to before we started the Freshman Academy. I used to have students lined up at my office door before the tardy bell even rang. Teachers would stop them for one thing or the other. Students would get in trouble in the hallway because of their conduct. We also had a lot of arguments and confrontations that could have been expected to end up in a fight. Now, I can actually spend more time visiting classrooms and doing my formal observations. I use to run out of time regularly and rush into classrooms to get them done before the deadline.

With the decline in discipline, I am also able to be a better instructional leader. I have the time to actually plan meaningful and effective professional development for my staff. Our team meeting time is more
relevant because I am able to plan meetings around the goals and objectives we have set for our Freshman Academy. I must admit, in the past, sometimes, I did not get the agenda for the meeting together until an hour or so before the actual meeting.

The teachers also commented that student behavior is better than in previous years.

Teacher A said,

I like that we [teachers of the Freshman Academy] agreed to work on our discipline concerns collectively before writing a student up and sending them to the office. Personally, I have never written a lot of referrals, but many of our teachers did. In fact, they used to keep a stack of referrals in their classrooms in close reach. Now, you would be hard pressed to actually find a referral in any of our classrooms.

Adding to this, Teacher E said,

As a man, I do not have that many discipline problems in my classroom; however, I had more here [the research site] than I have ever had at other schools I worked. I think we are extremely effective when we conduct our discipline meetings whether they are with the student or if we need to invite parents to attend. We are all on the same sheet of music and the students know the same behavior is expected regardless to which classroom they are in. I also think our common discipline plan has been beneficial for teachers who struggle with discipline. It has helped them to become stronger.
“Mutual respect is the norm in our Freshman Academy. Our students are polite to their teachers and to each other,” the counselor added.

This researcher would have to agree that the students are well behaved. During the study, no major discipline problems were observed in the hallways, common areas, or in classrooms. One of the bulletin boards had a flyer that displayed a graph showing the number of referrals submitted each month. All months were significantly low, below ten, with the exception of December, where fourteen referrals were recorded. Students appeared to be happy in school and glad to be learning in their classrooms.

*Instructional Expectations & Supporting High School Success*

Students at the Freshman Academy seem to know and understand that their teachers want their best behavior and best work. There is an unspoken rule that anything less than your best is not acceptable. A regular occurrence witnessed by the observer is that teachers would return submitted work to students because more was expected. If the first submission was not up to par, teachers returned work without any feedback. When asked, Teacher E commented, “We want them to learn self-analyze and find the mistakes or what is missing for themselves. So often, students become dependent on the feedback from teachers only and never learn to analyze and evaluate their own work. We believe this also helps students to submit good work from the start in hopes that they will not have to revisit the work and do more to it. Furthermore, they are developing better writing habits. Ultimately, our hope is that our students will begin to have high expectations of themselves.” Students were observed seeking feedback from classmates. Often, students would read a sentence to their
partners and asked what they thought. They also communicated what they wanted to say and sought advice from others on how they could say it best.

While the researcher visited an English class, students were working on a practice college essay. Teacher A provided direction and went over the rubric so that students would completely understand what was expected from the assignment. She elaborated by saying, “As you prepare for your future, you must realize that everything you do today has a direct impact on your success for tomorrow. I expect all of you, 100% of you, to submit this assignment on time and that it represents your best work. If this is a reasonable expectation, give me a thumbs up to indicate that you are committed to meeting that goal.” All of the students lifted their arms and signified their agreement with a thumbs up. The atmosphere was positive and the energy was riveting. Students began the assignment differently. Some started typing on their computers right away, some had pencil and paper, some created a thinking map to brainstorm their thoughts, and others started out by reading some of the resources that the teacher had available on the table.

There were many instructional support structures in place to ensure that students had every opportunity to be successful in high school. Already, the Freshman Academy had exceeded their own expectations in terms of success rates. Currently, 96% of the students in the Freshman Academy were passing at least three out of the four academic courses scheduled. In addition to their academic courses, all students in the Freshman Academy were scheduled a forty-five block for advisory. This course was called freshman seminar. Freshman seminar was the result of creative planning around scheduling. The director stated,
I am so pleased at the progress of our students. We decided to start a freshman honor society in hopes that it would encourage our students to work harder. Students cannot normally become a part of the honor society here until at least their sixth semester. That is so far away. So many students are doing well that we are considering a change to the criteria next year. We have put programs in place to support our students and their quest for high student achievement. We have flex hours for late computer lab and library days, peer tutoring, all of our teachers are required to have one day set aside each week for after school assistance, online resources available 24 hours a day, and advisory time can be used for those who cannot stay after school.

During freshman seminar, students can get permission to go to another teacher’s classroom for help. Teacher E said,

I like that we have an opportunity during the school day for students to get help. There are many students who are unable to stay afterschool because they depend on bus transportation. Since we have this support in place, it eliminates the excuses. The truth is, sometimes the student that needs help will not come, but we take control of that by letting their advisor know during our team meetings that they need to send the student to our classroom. We have done this so much that students are beginning to come more and more on their own.
Teacher B wants to see the advisory time structured differently. “Sometimes I have too many students who want to come to my class during advisory. This is a problem, especially if none of my students need to go anywhere. I wish we would provide the extra help by class period.”

The adults in the Freshman Academy believe that student achievement has increased because of the instructional supports they have in place.

Administrative Support

Administrative support can be viewed differently, depending on who is sharing their perspective. For some, it means that the administrator (principal) is directly involved with what is going on at the school. They view a personal appearance, physically, as being supportive. For others, it means that the administrators (principal and assistant principals) are personally involved, but it also means that particular activities or events are a direct result of administrative approval. Perspectives of administrative support emerged in three areas: discipline, instructional support, and sustainability.

Discipline

The Freshman Academy has a discipline plan that was created and is supported by all teachers in the Freshman Academy. Generally, they handle discipline as a team of teachers and with parental involvement. There are also times when they refer students to visit the counselor and when an administrative discipline referral is necessary. In order to have an atmosphere conducive to learning, it is vital that discipline in the classroom is minimized. When students are actively engaged and focused on the work, teachers are able to put all of their attention on teaching. When there are discipline problems in the classroom, teachers are
Teacher D said,

Behavior problems in the classroom can have a huge negative impact on student learning. When we are not able to get parents to come in to speak with us or when they do not want to accept that their child is creating problems, it becomes difficult for teachers to resolve the issues. If there is not support from our administrators when we feel a need to refer students to a higher level, it also has a negative impact on teacher morale. Luckily for us, our director is supportive and acknowledges our referrals as genuine concern for the learning environment. He trusts that we have done everything within our power to produce a change in behavior before writing a referral. We are not necessarily looking for suspensions, we just want to see a change in the behavior. Our director has established a wonderful relationship with students and parents. He is usually able to help get the student back on the right track.

Teacher B had a similar opinion, stating,

In the past, discipline problems were pervasive at our school. There were a lot of fights that involved ninth grade students. Disruption was so common that the school resource officer (SRO) stayed in this area and often had to intervene. Unruly behavior interrupt[ed] learning in the classroom and instruction is fragmented so much so that little learning occurs. The atmosphere was so out of control that teachers contemplated quitting the
profession or at least leaving the school. The feeling around the campus
was the administrators allow students to get away with anything. We have
a much calmer atmosphere in the Freshman Academy now. It has taken a
lot of work and I am sure that there is a lot more we will have to do in
order to maintain. Our administrator is rarely seen in our area unless he is
escorting someone or giving a tour of the campus. He is not involved and
probably do[es] not know our students. On the other hand, our director is
right there on the grind with us. He is in our classrooms and in the halls. He
takes the time to get to know the students and he talks to teachers when
frustration is on the rise. He is a great motivator.

Teacher A said,

Disrespect was a major problem at our school. Our director scheduled a
classroom management professional development at the beginning of the
year and we have refreshers periodically. In addition to the information that
the presenter shared, several teachers, well known for having excellent
classroom management skills, shared their secrets. Our director is very
much a people person and he emphasizes creating an atmosphere of mutual
respect. He always tells us, if you respect the students and treat them as if
they matter, they will respect you. This has definitely had a significant
impact on our entire environment. It is funny to me that even in times when
he has had to suspend a student, the student and parent [are] not angry. He
The counselor summed up her thoughts by stating,

Our administrators realized that there needed to be a change at our school so they sought out a grant that would provide the means to make things happen. They are there in the trenches to support the program, the teachers, the parents, and the students. We do not have a zero tolerance policy, but it is almost like we do. Discipline issues are not a daily occurrence as they once were.

Teachers believe that discipline and order in the classroom is necessary to create a positive atmosphere for learning. In general, they believe the involvement of their director, who is an administrator at the school, contributes to the changed environment. Teachers also believe there is a positive difference in the Freshman Academy in terms of current discipline issues when compared to the time prior to its implementation.

**Instructional Support**

The research site has instructional support programs such as: remedial education, special education support sessions, EOC cram sessions, attendance Saturdays, afterschool teacher assistance, instructional coaches, and peer tutoring. Most teachers agree that these programs have been initiated because the administrators have a vision, and have thus secured the financial funds necessary, to help motivate students’ academic achievement. Teacher E stated,
One of the biggest differences, in my opinion, is the integration of EOC cram sessions in our daily schedule. Our director got approval from the principal to change our schedule three weeks prior to EOC testing so that we could offer a double dose of academic support to our students. During this time, we did not have seminar. Instead attendance was recorded by one of the core teachers and passed to the seminar instructor. All students got a double dose of one of their core subjects each day based on the schedule. For example, Monday might be double dose for first period. That meant that the teachers had the students for the regular first period and an extra forty-five minutes for the review. We were instructed not to teach new material during the cram sessions, but to reteach objectives previously taught in different ways. We played games using practice EOC items. I loved this because we were able to reach every student because they were already at school. They did not need to stay after school to get this extra help. We [teachers] never feel we have enough time in the period to cover all the information we want. I hope this is a practice we will continue to do.

Teacher A said,

Everyone in the Freshman Academy building is working together with a common philosophy for powerful teaching and learning. We have set and agreed that certain learning expectations are a minimum for every student. The instructional coaches hired with grant funds are invaluable. The information and projects they have supported us with helps us to reach
students in multiple ways. Our science instructional coach is big on multiple intelligences and she always offers varied approaches to engage and assess student learning. Large classrooms contribute to discipline problems. The combination of reduced classroom sizes, minimum discipline problems, and these interactive activities increases the probability that more learning is common practice in our classrooms. Our coaches also conduct research for us and provide information for best practices. This helps to keep our classroom lively. Thank goodness someone had the foresight to write the additional personnel into the grant.

Teacher C thinks that the attendance Saturdays are more meaningful. She said,

The attendance Saturdays used to be a big waste of time. It was difficult for administrators to get teachers who were willing to come out on Saturday mornings to babysit without monetary incentives. It might seem like easy money to come and sit with the students while they made up time, but it’s hard work when the only purpose was to make up time. Discipline problems generally ensued and no one wants to deal with that on Saturday when they could be home. The principal allows the Freshman Academy to conduct its own attendance Saturday. Our director changed the format so that there was an academic connection in the form of work packets provided by Freshman Academy Teachers. We were also paid to supervise the attendance Saturday session. For the students, they could earn extra points for the class they chose to complete the work packet. This was
beneficial for them and they were not just sitting there to make up time. Since we have our own attendance Saturday with our own students, we do not have any discipline problems. Students are required to work on the work packets individually, but if a parent or someone else stays with the student, that person could help them with the work packet. Additional make-up time is also awarded to the student when they have someone to stay and support them. It’s a win-win for everyone.

Evidence of how administrators support the instructional programs at the research site is bringing positive outcomes in the school environment. As noted in the North Carolina Schools Report Card last year, the school finally moved from a categorization of low performing or priority to a school of progress. Additionally, more students are earning honor roll status at the school level than ever.

**Sustainability**

The staff at the research site has concerns regarding the school’s ability to sustain its Freshman Academy once the grant funds are no longer available. They worry that things will revert back to business as usual if something is not done to keep these practices as a part of the school culture. The director said,

Monies from the grant [have] allowed us to hire additional teachers, a grade level counselor, a dean of students, and coaches. All of these people contribute to the successful implementation of our Freshman Academy. Frankly, it worries me what will happen when the grant funds are depleted. The school certainly [does] not have that kind of money to maintain these
positions. I tell my staff, if we continue to work hard and have good results, maybe the district will see the difference and will pick up the tab for these positions. I try to keep the Board of Education informed about what is going on in the Freshman Academy. I send our newsletters to them. I also go to meetings and take a few students and parents to speak about what this experience has meant to them. I think student voices are a powerful tool.

The counselor shared,

Honestly, I worry about the stability of my position. I was told at hiring that my position is funded as a grant position and that my salary would be paid directly from grant funds. I hope that I will not be looking for another job. Our principal said that he would find a way to keep this good thing going and that he has his eyes and is looking out for other grant opportunities. I don’t know what the outcome will be, but every day, I come in here and give it my all.

Teacher D said,

I believe that we are all forever changed. We cannot go back to the way things once were. The small classroom size has made a tremendous difference. I certainly don’t want to ever see thirty-four students on a single classroom roster again. I also have enjoyed and benefitted greatly from the collaborative teaching approach we have developed here and do not want to see that practice disappear. I pray that our administrators have a plan of
sustainability and that this will not be a fly-by-night experiment. Someone has to see all the good that this has meant for our students and for our school. We are even better teachers because of the implementation of our Freshman Academy.

There is a strong desire to keep the Freshman Academy at the research site once the grant funds are no longer available. No one seems to know what the solution will be, so each day, the teachers and staff commit to doing their best in hopes that the powers that be will recognize the impact the Freshman Academy is having and find a way to continue to support the transition program.

Conclusion

By all accounts gathered from artifacts, observations, and interviews, the overall perception of teachers is that they are accomplishing their intended goal, and making a difference for the students who come through the Freshman Academy. The atmosphere at the school is exciting, and full of energetic and engaging teaching and learning. Student attendance has increased, student administrative discipline referrals are reduced, and students are achieving a greater academic success.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine whether a Freshman Academy would impact student discipline, attendance, and student achievement as determined by teacher perspectives. Ninth graders typically have the highest percentage of low grades, low attendance, and the highest rate of suspensions and discipline problems (Kerr, 2002). Research reveals that the average ninth grade graduation cohort rate was 73.2 and that 67 percent of students were administered an out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary action (NCES, 2010). Furthermore, two-thirds of students leaving high school are unprepared, academically, for a four-year college experience due to low achievement and poor attendance (NCES, 2005). An overarching goal was to analyze through artifact review, interviews, and observations whether teachers of a Freshman Academy perceived that the program implemented at their school had an impact on student discipline, attendance, and student achievement. This chapter responds to the research questions that formed the foundation for this study:

1) How do teachers who previously taught ninth graders in comprehensive high schools compare their overall experiences with teaching ninth graders in a Freshman Academy?

2) What are teachers’ expectations of their students in Freshman Academies and how do these translate into the reality of their experiences?
3) To what degree has team teaching or collaborative teaching influenced or altered teaching practices in Freshman Academies?

This chapter is a discussion of the findings from artifact review, observations, and interviews. Also included in this chapter are implications for future research study concerning the Freshman Academy concept and implications for practicing school leaders. It is my hope that high school leaders will learn from this research, provoking change in the way teaching and learning occurs in a manner that will foster positive growth for students. This study tells the story of one high school, to add to the body of research of schools that are implementing a Freshman Academy, or some form of small learning community, focused on applying concepts to help ninth grade students’ transition from middle school for a successful high school experience.

The research questions that formed the foundation for this study were explored and addressed through reviews of multiple sources of data in an effort to depict a total picture of why the academy was created, what it looks like, and what teachers perceived to be the reality of the work they do each day.

*Where did the idea come from?*

The research site had consistently been designated as a school of priority or a low performing school, based on the North Carolina School Report Card, for at least a decade. The Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) cohort graduation rate averaged 73.4% during this same time period. The overall attendance rate percentage ranged in the lower nineties, but within the freshman class, attendance rates averaged between 80–90%. The teacher turnover rate averaged 28.3%, which was the lowest in the district and lower than the state average.
Like other high schools in the nation, the research site was suffering from years of low student performance, high discipline rates, and low attendance rates. A review of the literature cites several reasons for high school failure: dropout rates, lack of personalization, poor attendance, low motivation, and a lack of support. High schools attest to the fact that ninth graders quickly account for the largest number of students who demonstrate poor attendance, are tardy to class, cause disturbances and disruptions, are suspended and expelled, and fail to accumulate enough credits to move on to the tenth grade (Flora, 1987; Fulk, 2003). As the administrator of a high school reflecting many of the research findings in the literature review, the new principal at the research site wanted to reform the school. School reform has been ongoing in American high schools for the last decade. “All are alarmed by stubbornly high dropout rates, by the low academic achievement of many high school students, and by the large number of high school graduates who are required to take remedial classes in college” (Quint, 2006, p. ES-1).

After taking a closer look at the data, the principal knew that something had to be done to change the culture of the school, and believed that a focus on ninth grade students could help bring about the desired change. His feelings were ignited by a discovery in the dropout data that showed a direct link to the ninth grade cohort. According to the North Carolina New Schools Project (2009), “Research shows that 9th grade is a critical point in a student’s progress toward graduation.” The principal stated, “After learning about the Freshman Academy concept at a conference, I believed that it could be the key to jumpstart the difference I wanted to make at my school.” With that thought in mind, a collaborative
team of administrators, students, parents, teachers, community members, and district leaders organized to design the Freshman Academy components at the research site.

As the team gathered to plan, it was clear that they needed an atmosphere in which students believed they were a part of the movement and a part of the change. The key issues of school belonging, identification, and engagement critically influence academic performance and successful completion of high school (Walton, 2007). In the existing literature, school belonging has been connected with teacher support, peer relations, motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Booker, 2006). It was the belief of the team that if students were happy in school, they would do better, academically, in school.

Another driving factor that guided the decision making of the team was the importance of a support structure for the transition from middle school to high school. Throughout high school, students’ success or failure was linked to the transition into high school (Cowling, 2003). Libby (2003) points out that the parents of students who participated in the Freshman Academy at Bowsher High School had a smooth transition to high school, and gained social skills, organizational skills, study skills, life skills, and learned to work in groups as a result of the changes made to focus on freshmen.

The influences of the Freshman Academy served as a foundation for the entire high school experience for other schools that selected an academy as a reform model. Students need a purposeful design that intentionally sets goals devised to promote success and encourage students to complete high school. If students remain on the pathway established through the Freshman Academy, they will know how to develop positive relationships with their teachers and peers; they will know how to study or how to seek assistance, when
needed, within the learning community; and they will continue to strive to make good grades (Cowling, 2003).

**What does this Freshman Academy look like?**

Many components of the Freshman Academy resemble the middle school concept. A reemerging idea of teaming (also known as team teaching, co-teaching, and team planning) surfaced in many of the conversations as well as during meetings. For the purpose of this case study and specifically for this research site, teaming is an organizational structure where a group of educators come together to achieve a common goal (student success). The Freshman Academy as a whole represented the collective team dedicated to impacting the outcome of freshman achievement, attendance, social development, and discipline. Under this umbrella were several smaller teams (i.e., subject teams and interdisciplinary teams). These teams worked together to coordinate instruction to build retention and integration of learning for students. All of the teachers worked as a team to focus on the freshman students, exposing them to varied teaching and learning approaches. The students were all assigned to one school counselor who offered guidance and support services. The teams of teachers were an extension of the counselor, with wrap-around guidance services for all students that focus on the Big 4 components of middle school (block scheduling, teaming, advisor/advisee modeling, and exploration programs). All teachers served as advisors for a small group of students (15–20). Brian Pickard, a history teacher from a Freshman Academy team, boasted that they had built an atmosphere that was conducive to learning and that with teaming, they had more students going to class, engaged, and being where they were suppose be (Castillo, 2010). Integrated curriculum development, as an outcome of redefined professionalism, has
created an environment where teachers consider each other as experts and has become the cornerstone of their instructional model.

Team meeting times vary. Some met monthly while others met weekly. The team teachers at both Lincoln Park High in Chicago and Dover High School in New Hampshire met daily to plan lessons and discuss student progress. They are good examples of teams working together in their schools to deal with the same group of students (Boodey, 2002). At Manley High School, eleven freshman teachers meet weekly to discuss student progress and plan lesson strategies. Their teamwork has fostered a more coordinated effort to assist freshmen in making their choice of career tracks in their sophomore year (Anderson, 1997). Teachers at the research site conducted weekly team meetings to collaborate on instructional practices, lesson and project design, student concerns, and parental meetings. They monitored student success by checking the “pulse” of students demonstrating difficulty in more than one class.

Data was collected to monitor three areas of concern: attendance, discipline, and student achievement. The weekly meeting was also utilized to plan social activities, field trips, and student recognitions. Finally, team time was used for professional development. Professional development was provided by internal and external sources and was based on teacher needs. Observation revealed this time to be sacred. Teachers were able to accomplish items of concern in this working meeting. An atmosphere of trust and mutual respect was clearly observable. By meeting as a group, there was potential for teachers to get off task and stray from agenda items; however, there appeared to be a shared sense of responsibility and teachers kept each other on track. Similar to the academy studied by Boodey (2002), the
research site developed rules and consequences that are the same and are posted in the same location in each classroom. This component helps teachers to know student strengths and weaknesses, thereby allowing for a more individualized and personalized instructional and social plan for student development.

The review of literature revealed that Freshman Academies’ location and proximity of classrooms were often in close range of each other in a wing of a school building. In some cases, the Freshman Academy was located in its own, separate, building located on the campus, with their own dedicated counselor and principal. Closeness of location increases accessibility. Teachers were able to check in with each other or solicit quick assistance with student concerns. This proximity is also convenient for team teaching and activities involving multiple classes. Finally, close location provided a secure section of the school that is considered home for the Freshman Academy.

Physically, the Freshman Academy of the research site was originally all in one wing. Due to the need of having science equipment readily available, during the second year, all science teachers were relocated to the science department in a different area of the school. Additionally, the school counselor was relocated to the guidance center with the other school counselors. All other core teachers, the dean of students, and the director were all located in the Freshman Academy wing.

*What is the perceived teacher reality of the Freshman Academy?*

The review of artifacts such as the Federal School Improvement Grant Proposal, the North Carolina School Report Card, and the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey documents why teachers felt the school was not meeting the needs of the students
before the establishment of the Freshman Academy. Teachers were not happy with progress, and overall teacher morale was at an all-time low. The historical background answered the question of why the school needed a reform that focused on freshman. This resolution was identified and supported by teachers interviewed for the case study.

As the researcher, I am persuaded that knowledge of the background and input in the planning of the Freshman Academy components were instrumental in the development of teacher confidence and commitment to the program design. In general, all involved spoke positively about the impact the Freshman Academy had on students. Teachers believed students were performing as expected and that the outcomes on discipline, attendance, and student achievement were in sync with what they saw in the classroom every day. Motivating students to learn is a key element for getting results. Reed Larson (2005) states, “A central question of youth development is how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170). Teachers of this Freshman Academy believed they were influential and were making a difference in the lives of their students. They believed that they had the capacity to change the academic story of the school and that their students were on fire with learning.

Artifacts such as the school website, bulletin boards, posters, newspaper, and team meeting minutes documented that the adults working in the Freshman Academy cared about students and were making significant strides in moving the school to the next level. Teacher E said, “We are working hard and our students are working hard. No one can come in our environment, observe learning in action or review data, and determine otherwise. The proof is in the pudding.” Indeed, attendance rates are up, discipline issues are down, and more
freshman students were passing core classes and earning honor status than ever at the research site. Similar results were reported by other schools implementing a Freshman Academy. This type of data collection is necessary to tell the story of Freshman Academy success in other schools. It is my recommendation that other schools maintain detailed records of their data so that comparisons can be made on the impact of Freshman Academy implementation and the effectiveness of its individual components.

How do teachers who previously taught ninth graders in comprehensive high schools compare their overall experiences with teaching ninth graders in a Freshman Academy?

Teachers of the Freshman Academy believed that the school environment was more fulfilling as compared to teaching in the comprehensive setting. There was a strong sense of support and connection for the common good of all. As described in an article written by Liliana Castillo (2010), the Freshman Academy of Clovis High School witnessed successful participation by parents of the students attending the academy. The research site has begun to see similar involvement. Teacher A shared,

When we were structured like a traditional high school, I had a hard time getting parents to come for a meeting to discuss their child’s progress. I’m still amazed that most parents are more willing to come when they are talking with a team of us [teachers].

One of the major themes that emerged from the research findings was the strong presence of personalization. One traditional teacher stated, “They [teachers in the Freshman Academy] know each other and their students so well. Their interactions resemble activities that are observed from family members. It is obvious that there is genuine concern and love
for students and their success.” All of the adults made mention of the fact that they knew their students and parents. This is similar to what one student at Kenwood Freshman Academy stated,

“This school is one big happy family. Unlike most high schools, the teachers take time out to help kids in need and they communicate a strong sense of concern for what happens in the lives of their students. The principal knows mostly all the students and if she don’t she will get to know you. I love my school” ("Kenwood Academy Reviews," n.d., para. 1).

Students at the research site seem friendly and cooperative towards one another. Freshmen often cannot handle the independence of high school without help (Feller, 2005). The Freshman Academy has been successful at helping students build friendships and to form bonds that strengthen their sense of belonging. The knowledge of students translated into an awareness of both the academic and social aspects of the students’ character. It created an atmosphere for parental involvement on a higher level, which is often missing or significantly lower in high schools. Parental involvement in high schools is rarely visible (Hickman et al., 1995).

The building of strong positive relationships was a by-product of Freshman Academy implementation, as noted from the schools in the review of literature, as well as the school in this case study. According to Holland and Mazzoli (2001), “schools that nurture positive relationships among students and among students and teachers are more likely to realize the payoff of more engaged students achieving at higher levels” (p. 297). The relationship of
student-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, student-to teacher, and parent-to-school interactions were enhanced at the research site through daily activities, parent-teacher-student conferences, collaborative group work, and project design planning. Through the establishment of an atmosphere that promoted and fostered collaboration, stronger relationships were developed at the research site. Teacher E indicated that, “I feel so close to my colleagues. Closer than I have ever felt before working in the Freshman Academy. My teaching experience has been enriched.”

What are teachers’ expectations of their students in Freshman Academies and how do these translate into the reality of their experiences?

Teachers at the Freshman Academy noted that expectations for students were higher, in general, than in their previous teaching experiences. These expectations were built on a foundational belief system created collectively by the Academy teachers. Teacher E stated, “They [students] have to do more because we [teachers] are all on one accord. We hold them accountable, collectively. Now, I not only expect their best in my class, but in all their classes.”

Students who were enrolled in the Freshman Academy take life-changing behavior with them to the next level. They were more confident, as students, having successfully completed their freshman year. One traditional teacher stated,

I see a difference between these students and the students from previous years. First of all, they are so respectful; not only to me, but to each other as well. They work well together and seem to care about their future and success in school. They are doing well in my class and I am proud of their
progress. Conducting group work is smooth and with ease because the students are comfortable with the process and with each other. There is a strong spirit of cooperation in the classroom and they [students] are usually able to resolve group conflicts without my assistance.

When students realized that all teachers were working together and that they communicated with each other, this raised the stakes when they were asked for their best effort. When teachers hold students accountable and expect them to do their best all day and not simply in an individual classroom, students rise to the challenge. The reality is that students respond to high expectations when teachers collaborate and demonstrate a collective interest in student success.

To what degree has team teaching or collaborative teaching influenced or altered teaching practices in Freshman Academies?

Team teaching altered teaching practices in the Freshman Academy. The establishment of a culture of commitment and collaboration was a major contributing factor in teacher and student achievement at the research site. Once, there was an environment of individualism and isolation; now teachers plan, create projects, and share rubrics and ideas on a regular basis. This echoes findings in schools studied by Boodey (2002), which included Lincoln Park High, Kenwood Academy, Manley High, Bogan Computer Tech High, and Hyde Park Career Academy High, all of which identified team teaching as a factor that changed their teaching practices and allowed them to do more. The sharing of ideas collectively enhances teacher experiences individually.
Teachers attested that it was more rewarding to target students as a group of teachers and conduct parent teacher conferences to address the whole student. Teacher D stated,

As a member of the planning committee, I have seen the dream become a reality. Our students are happy to be here. Our teachers are working well together. Every primary goal is being focused on and held up as a target. The early results are promising and already indicating that we will exceed our expectations as a school. The way I do business has changed as I have benefitted from the expertise of my colleague. Projects are more relevant due to collaborative contributions from my colleagues and help students to discover the connection between subject matter. Each year, I do a project when we study medieval times. Now students are able to connect that time period to English and the impact of medical science through statistical analysis of amputations due to the bubonic plague.

Team teaching and collaborative teaching strengthen instructional presentations. It also generates connections, academically, that can be applied throughout an educational experience for students. It promoted a combination of skills that increased thinking and helped students become critical learners. Anderson (1997) reveals that freshmen who participated in the Kenwood Academy in Chicago were better students throughout high school. She pointed out that the students were accustomed to thinking ahead and planning for success. These are lifelong skills that students and teachers can add to their teaching and learning toolbox.
Before and After

The research site has both visual and statistical differences as a result of implementing the Freshman Academy, which indicates that the school is well on its way to achieving the desired goals. Table 13 below shows the impact of the Freshman Academy by comparing some areas of what the school looked like before and after implementation.
### Table 13 Comparison: Before/After Freshman Academy Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before Implementation of Freshman Academy</th>
<th>After Implementation of Freshman Academy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average class size = 32</td>
<td>Average class size = 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade suspension rate = 83.57%</td>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade suspension rate = 26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade average daily attendance = 66.9%</td>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade average daily attendance = 91.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade students achieving honor roll status = 36.42%</td>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade students achieving honor roll status = 71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching in isolation</td>
<td>Team teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual planning and lesson development</td>
<td>Team planning and team lesson/project designs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No collaborative field trips or enrichment activities designed</td>
<td>Teachers collaborative plan 5 – 6 field trips, college tours, assemblies, and student recognition ceremonies exclusively for freshmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade students retained = 94</td>
<td>$9^{\text{th}}$ grade students retained after one year of implementation = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most teachers did not believe that they could impact attendance, discipline, and student achievement</td>
<td>100% of the teachers participating in this case study believe that they were capable of impacting attendance, discipline, and student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited instructional resources were available for students beyond the school day</td>
<td>Flexible hours were created for the computer lab, library, peer tutoring, teacher tutoring, and online resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers indicated that there were a lot of physical fights and verbal altercations (almost daily)</td>
<td>Teachers indicated that the climate and culture of the Freshman Academy is like a family atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School was identified on the NC School Report Card as either low performing or a priority school</td>
<td>School was identified on the NC School Report Card as a school of progress for the first time since the initiation of the NC School Report Card</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13 indicates some of the differences for the research site after implementing a Freshman Academy; however, the concepts implemented are applicable beyond Freshman Academies. A focus on personalization, collaborative planning and teaming, building strong
positive relationships, instructional accountability, school pride, and a common discipline plan are components that will be beneficial for other types of academies, Early Colleges, and charter schools. Any organizational structure designed to focus on student achievement, social development, attendance, and discipline has the capacity to build strong positive relationships that promote student success.

**Implications for Research**

This research study documents that a Freshman Academy can positively influence attendance, discipline, and student achievement. Additionally, this model can serve to strengthen teacher relationships and professional development. Interviews, observations, and artifact review all serve to provide well-documented evidence that the Freshman Academy program at the research site is achieving a level of success consistent with the sites discussed in the literature review, and accomplishing its established goals. Success was celebrated at the research site; yet, there are other aspects of a Freshman Academy that warrant attention and are viable topics for future research.

- How does a Freshman Academy help with the transition from middle school to high school in preparing students for graduation from high school? This study would examine a freshman cohort through high school to graduation to pinpoint specific components that assist with the transition and prepare students for graduation.
- How will four full years of high school demonstrate the influence of attending a Freshman Academy? Will students be prepared in a way that demonstrates increased
performance in academic areas? This study would explore student preparation and preparedness for four-year colleges.

- What are the professional development needs of teachers in a Freshman Academy? This study would examine various types of professional development and their potential for classroom applications. Which forms of professional development are more likely to become common practice? How does professional development impact learning in the Freshman Academy?

- What skills are developed and demonstrated over time by students who attended the Freshman Academy? This would be an exploration that would follow a cohort from ninth grade to graduation to measure new and complex skills introduced in the Freshman Academy that are still applicable and/or practiced in students’ lives.

- What leadership skills are necessary for school leaders implementing a Freshman Academy? This would be a study that focuses on administrators. What decisions were made and why? How was the program planned? What did the school leader(s) do to obtain buy-in and support?

- What are the perceptions of students and parents of a Freshman Academy and its impact on attendance, discipline, and student achievement? This would be a study that is informed by parents and students. Do parents and students have the same beliefs about the impact of a Freshman Academy? Do parents and students feel they were able to make a smooth transition from middle school to high school? Do parents and students believe that their teachers care about them academically and socially?
Do parents and students accept responsibility for learning and are they willing to work as a team with teachers?

As the researcher, it is my conclusion that a plan for sustainability be secured and communicated to all involved adults. The sustainability plan needs to be a part of the initial planning stage prior to any implementation. This is crucial in order to maintain the buy-in and dedication that teachers and counselors have in the program. Many of the staff at the research site feared whether they had secure employment, as they were hired with grant funds. More research should be conducted to help school leaders realize reform actions that may be incorporated in the regular setting without grant funding. In this way, schools will be able to incorporate concepts of a Freshman Academy using available resources.

**Implications for Practice**

School leaders are able to learn from this study because it provides a clear description of the key components of a Freshman Academy, and their impact, as perceived by the academy’s teachers. This is critical information which ultimately benefits the growth of the students in a nurturing environment. These practices can be easily duplicated at any school. Documentation of the case study provides insight into what teachers think, feel, and fear about the implementation of a Freshman Academy. School leaders who plan to implement a Freshman Academy are able to use this data to realize that fear of sustainability is troublesome for teachers. Knowing this from the onset of planning could help in the development of academy concepts that are sustainable with a regular school budget, as opposed to total reliance on grant funds. Planning for the future is one way to encourage sustainability. The Freshman Academy should not be a plan that only exists on paper; it
should be revisited and evaluated periodically in order to determine if adjustments are necessary for the plan to continue.

Another finding of significance for school leaders/administrators is to recognize that teachers expect their support (mentally and physically) and value it as necessary if the academy is to succeed and sustain itself over time. School leaders should periodically attend team meetings, field trips, and recognition ceremonies. It would also enhance the relationship of school leaders and teachers if school leaders attended parent-teacher-student conferences periodically.

The impact of building strong positive relationships cannot be taken for granted. This impact encourages students to behave well and do their best work. Teachers believe that students make every effort to rise to teacher expectations when there is a genuine, caring atmosphere. Students will not want to disappoint their teachers. School leaders who plan to initiate a Freshman Academy should carefully seek professional development that will equip teachers with the tools necessary to foster and promote an atmosphere of caring. Furthermore, this topic is so valuable to the experience that it must be a constant focus in order for it to become a regular part of the school culture.

It is understandable that science teachers had a desire to be both near their equipment and near their colleagues at this research site. Consideration was not given to this situation during the planning phase of the Freshman Academy. With careful planning, school leaders will be able to avoid this dilemma so that such a choice for teachers is unnecessary. The earlier these discussions occur, the better it will be for the planning process. According to those interviewed, there was no location discussion held. Teachers were simply informed
where the academy would be located in the building by the administrator. The planning process that involves all stakeholders will produce a better plan and have more buy-in from all constituents.

The importance of data collection could serve a variety of functions for school administrations who currently have a Freshman Academy, as well as those who plan to implement one in the future. Data can help to secure financial support from business partners as well as the school district. Program implementation has the potential to be a financial burden; however, great results will encourage others to support the cause. Business partners and district leaders want to be a part of progress. School administrators should use the data to tell the story from beginning to end. To that end, school administrators should secure time on board agendas, periodically, to tell the story of the academy and the progress that is being made. Above all else, data collection will help the school leader to adjust to the school's changing needs.

Monitoring and controlling for change is an ongoing process. School leaders must be directly involved with the operations of the Freshman Academy to help determine what adjustments are necessary. Well-kept data records also provide a constant target that helps to keep the goals in sight. This will also allow school leaders to take advantage of measurement outcomes so that they can be recurring agenda items for teacher meetings, parent meetings, and district meetings.

At the research site, there was no established plan for seamlessness for the freshmen leaving the academy and continuing on throughout their high school experience. Certainly, the traditional teachers interviewed provided a glimpse of hope that documents that students
are taking some of the skills learned to the next level. What if there was a specific plan
designed to ensure this transition occurred? If a plan is not established, it may create a delay
in the transition and students’ issues typically observed in the ninth grade could shift to the
tenth grade. School leaders, in their plan for sustainability, should develop protocols
targeting procedures and strategies that they want students to take to the next level.

In school, collaborative planning time was not available at the research site. Teachers
perceived this time to be meaningful. Furthermore, they agreed that they were able to
accomplish more together and wish they were not required to do it on their own time. School
leaders should consider flexible planning to allow collaborative planning during the school
day. One option to consider is to have an elective period for all freshmen. If all freshmen are
in an elective class at the same time, it would allow core teachers to have planning at the
same time. Another option is to form small sub-teams with collaborative planning during the
day to work on integrated lesson plans and projects. Although it would still be necessary to
have an overall meeting later so that all teachers are present, it would at least help provide
some planning time.

Planning cannot be understated when undertaking a venture such as a Freshman
Academy. School leaders should not rush into the transition without careful planning and
input from all constituents. If school leaders are able to coach a smooth transition from
middle school to high school several years in a row, the culture of an entire school can
dramatically change with significant improvements. The impact of teaching and learning for
students and teachers who attend and work with a Freshman Academy has the potential to
change a generation of learners.
Recommendations

Whether a school administrator is considering the implementation of a Freshman Academy, or some other structural change to impact powerful teaching and learning, student attendance, discipline, or social development, the practices outlined below will help to develop a school culture that embraces changes and cultivates civic awareness. Although some of the practices have the potential to be costly, many of them can be applied by reorganizing already existing resources. A principal of a low-performing school, seeking to implement a reform initiative, should consider the following practices:

1. School leaders should begin the process with a clear understanding of the goals and objectives they wish to accomplish. Sustainability should be a priority consideration. A solid plan would include revenue streams that are sustainable over time, with or without grant funds.

2. School leaders should plan to play an active and supportive role. Teachers expect sound leadership as well as physical participation; therefore, principals should periodically attend team meetings, field trips, and recognition ceremonies.

3. The impact of strong positive relationship cannot be overstated. School leaders who plan to initiate a Freshman Academy should carefully seek professional development that will equip teachers with the tools necessary to foster and promote an atmosphere of caring. Leaders should include some type of team approach so teachers are able to support each other for the good of the cause. Relationship building with all stakeholders must be intentional and visibly noticeable as a cornerstone of the culture in the school.
4. Teachers associated with the academy should be located within close proximity of each other. This allows for easier communication and information sharing. Along these lines, establish expectations for collaborative planning and set aside time, within the school day if possible, for teachers to work together to meet the needs of the students (academically and socially).

5. School leaders should assess needs and determine what data to collect as evidence to assist with the monitoring process. Data collection helps to maintain focus on and to meet goals and objectives. Furthermore, it helps to tell the story of the school and the progress being made towards achieving success.

**Conclusion**

This study was prompted by previous research suggesting that Freshman Academies appeared to have been influential in reducing the dropout rate, as well as helping students to find a sense of connection in the school environment. The conclusions drawn by this researcher are based on the research findings obtained in this case study. Research in the review of literature supported that Freshman Academies helped with the transition from middle school to high school. Based on responses provided by five teachers in the Freshman Academy, three upper class teachers, the counselor, and the director, it is proposed that the Freshman Academy is making a difference for the students at the research site. Respondents communicated that students were attending school regularly with fewer discipline problems. Ultimately, they believed the final outcome is that student achievement is on the rise. While
the overall success of the Freshman Academy is celebrated, there is fear that the program will not be sustained once the funds from the grant are depleted.

Since this was a single site qualitative case study, the conclusions drawn are not intended to be generalized. However, studies such as this one can help develop a deeper understanding of teaching and learning for freshman students. More high schools should commit to implementing a Freshman Academy or small learning community that focuses on helping freshmen transition from middle school and prepares them for success in high school. Dropout rates, discipline, and low student achievement are not just problems at the research site, but in local school districts, states, and the nation.

Themes that emerged from observation included personalization, instructional accountability, school pride, and collaborative instruction. The Freshman Academy has created an environment where everyone is known and no student is able to disappear or go unnoticed. Teachers hold each other and students accountable for teaching and learning. Students working together in collaborative groups own the responsibility to contribute to projects. Overall, the Freshman Academy teachers are helping students to become more confident in their academic potential and take pride in changing the history of the school.

The compilation of all data points (review of artifacts, observations, and interviews) revealed the emergence of the following themes: personalization, collaborative effort, location/proximity, common discipline approach, instructional expectations and supporting high school success, and administrative support. These themes helped to tell the story of one Freshman Academy from the perspective of teachers, a director, a counselor, and an administrator.
Consistent with research findings in the literature review, this Freshman Academy is making a significant difference in the lives of students. The concepts of teaching and wrap-around guidance promote strong relationships. Curriculum design is more integrated and collaborative. Teachers at this Freshman Academy believe that their practices are forever changed, and would find it difficult to return to a traditional high school setting, which they felt was more isolated and fragmented. It is concluded that more high schools should consider the implementation of a Freshman Academy as a small learning community to enhance learning for students, build collaborative professional relationships, and change the way teaching impacts the future of tomorrow’s generation of students.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Principal

The purpose of this questionnaire is to initiate the conversation. It will be used as a guided instrument rather the total data collection tool. New questions may arise as a result of the conversation. All questions may be used; however, the intention is to allow the conversation to evolve naturally.

1. Describe why your school elected to implement a Freshman Academy.
2. Describe how the decision was made and the process that was used to gain the support of the teachers involved.
3. Describe the process that was used to select teachers to teach in the Freshman Academy.
4. What role did teachers’ understanding of the needs of adolescents play in the selection?
5. What is the vision and mission of the Freshman Academy?
6. What goals have been established for the Freshman Academy?
7. Describe specific initiatives that operate within your Freshman Academy.
8. What components of your Freshman Academy do you believe are designed to have an impact of attendance, discipline, and student achievement?
9. Are there drawbacks that stand in the way of your school implementing the Freshman Academy as planned?
10. Share your thoughts concerning the positive outcomes as a result of your school implementing the Freshman Academy.
11. What are the challenges you have faced?
12. What are the perceived future concerns?
13. Are you getting the desired results that the Freshman Academy was designed to produce? Why or why not?
Appendix B

Interview Questions for Freshman Academy Teachers

The purpose of this questionnaire is to initiate the conversation. It will be used as a guided instrument rather than the total data collection tool. New questions may arise as a result of the conversation. All questions may be used; however, the intention is to allow the conversation to evolve naturally.

1. Describe your feelings toward working in a Freshman Academy.

2. What are your beliefs concerning your ability to impact student attendance, discipline, and student achievement?

3. What do you consider the strength of your Freshman Academy?

4. Describe your experiences and training in the Freshman Academy in terms of working on a team. How were you selected?

5. Share your favorite success story while working in the Freshman Academy.

6. What, if anything, would you do differently to meet the goals of your Freshman Academy?

7. What impact do you believe the Freshman Academy has had on student achievement, attendance, discipline, and attendance? Why?

8. What are the challenges you have faced?

9. What are the perceived future concerns?

10. Are you getting the desired results that the Freshman Academy was designed to produce? Why or why not?
11. Describe your experiences working in the Freshman Academy compared to your experiences working in a regular comprehensive school.

12. Explain your knowledge of the developmental needs of 9th graders – social, cognitive, emotional, and moral.
Appendix C

Interview Questions for Comprehensive Teachers

The purpose of this questionnaire is to initiate the conversation. It will be used as a guided instrument rather than the total data collection tool. New questions may arise as a result of the conversation. All questions may be used; however, the intention is to allow the conversation to evolve naturally.

1. What do you believe is the purpose of the Freshman Academy at your school?

2. In your opinion, is your school getting out of the Freshman Academy what it is designed to do?

3. Describe any positive outcomes you believe have benefited students who attended the Freshman Academy.

4. Describe any negative outcomes you believe have hindered students who attended the Freshman Academy.

5. Is there a perceived difference in the preparation and organization of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?

6. Is there a perceived difference in the behavior of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?

7. Is there a perceived difference in the academic attitude of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?

8. Is there a perceived difference in the attendance of students who attended the Freshman Academy as opposed to those who did not?

9. Describe the climatic impact that the Freshman Academy has had on the atmosphere of the entire school.
10. Please describe changes you would implement
Appendix D

Interview Questions for Focus Group

The purpose of this questionnaire is to initiate the conversation. It will be used as a guided instrument rather the total data collection tool. New questions may arise as a result of the conversation. All questions may be used; however, the intention is to allow the conversation to evolve naturally.

1. Describe any positive outcomes you believe have benefited students who attended the Freshman Academy.
2. Describe any negative outcomes you believe have hindered students who attended the Freshman Academy.
3. What are the perceived differences between the students who were in the Freshman Academy and those who were not?
4. What do you believe is the purpose of the Freshman Academy at your school?
5. In your opinion, is your school getting out of the Freshman Academy what it is designed to do?
6. What impact do you believe the Freshman Academy has had on student achievement, attendance, discipline, and attendance? Why?
7. What do you consider the strength of your Freshman Academy?
8. Describe any special training you received in preparation of the Freshman Academy?
9. What, if anything, would you do differently to meet the goals of your Freshman Academy?
10. Are there drawbacks that stand in the way of your school implementing the Freshman Academy as planned?
11. Explain your knowledge of the developmental needs of 9th graders – social, cognitive, emotional, and moral.
Appendix E

Interview Questions for Counselor

The purpose of this questionnaire is to initiate the conversation. It will be used as a guided instrument rather than the total data collection tool. New questions may arise as a result of the conversation. All questions may be used; however, the intention is to allow the conversation to evolve naturally.

1. Please share your professional background.

2. How long have you been a counselor? At this school?

3. Were you a counselor prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy?

4. Were you involved with the decision to establish a Freshman Academy?

5. What are the strengths of your Freshman Academy?

6. What are the challenges of your Freshman Academy?

7. What training/preparation has been offered to the teachers?

8. What are the ongoing professional development discussions for teachers participating in the Freshman Academy?

9. What components/concepts of the Freshman Academy, if any, are being expanded to the larger school?

10. How do students benefit from being in the Freshman Academy?
Appendix F

North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

A Case Study of Teacher Experiences and Perceptions of a Freshman Academy

Katrenna Simpson Rich

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research explore the experiences and perceptions of teachers involved in the implementation of a Freshman Academy (FA) Program, explore the components of the Freshman Academy, and ultimately be able to inform this body of knowledge to help ease the transition from middle school to high school and reduce dropout rates. Additionally, the goal is to provide feedback to Jordan High School about its Freshman Academy as a means to make decisions about next steps based on research.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an overview of the study during a faculty meeting, participate in an individual interview (60 – 90 minutes), a focus group session with other faculty members (60 – 90 minutes), and a celebration banquet.

Risks
If teacher responses could be considered negative or contrary to the school’s goals and objectives, they could have a social impact on the teacher’s working conditions in the environment. For this reason, no response will be linked directly to any specific teachers; rather, response will be presented in the final research in terms of generalizations connected to the evidence uncovered. Finally, pseudonyms will be used for all participants. Therefore, if a participants authorizes the researcher to use a direct quote, then the pseudonym will be used.

Benefits
Individuals participating in the study will receive handwriting appreciation cards, refreshments, and celebration banquet directly. Indirectly, findings from the feedback will inform the practices of the school staff as a means to gain knowledge of the experiences and perceptions contained in the Freshman Academy of their school. The
researcher hopes that vital information will emerge that will support or guide school improvement efforts within the school. Additionally, the research will inform the education arena from teacher experiences and perceptions so that enlightened decisions may be made by other administrators or central office educators. Ultimately, knowledge may be gained from this study that would benefit the school being studied and other school implementing a Freshman Academy. This case study documents teacher experiences and perception in an effort to highlight lessons learned and components that may or may not be more beneficial than others. It is through this analysis the school can determine what next steps are needed in the development of the Academy.

**Confidentiality**
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a computer hard drive. After the project, the recordings will be deleted. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

**Compensation**
For participating in this study you will receive a handwritten appreciation card, refreshments, and celebration banquet. Additionally, a final copy of the entire dissertation will be provided to the school. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will still be invited to the celebration to hear the final findings.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Katrenna Simpson Rich, at 3200 Lillian Place, Fayetteville, NC 28306, or (910) 229-5285.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

**Consent To Participate**
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature_________________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature_______________________________________ Date _______________