ABSTRACT

GODFREY, PAULA KATHLEEN. Listening to Students’ and Teachers’ Voices: An Ecological Case Study Investigating the Transition from Elementary to Middle School. (Under the direction of Dr. Candy Beal and Dr. Carol Pope)

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the transition from elementary to middle school by listening to the voices of the students as they make the transition and the voices of the teachers on either side of the transition. A qualitative case study was conducted which included student interviews before, during, and after the transition. Teachers in fifth and sixth grade were also interviewed. The participants in the study were seven students and seven teachers. The study was conducted in an urban city in the southeastern United States. Data for the study were collected from May 2002 through October 2002. A triangulation of student interviews, teacher interviews, observations, and field notes provided validity.

The study reviews adolescent development and middle school philosophy. Five themes were found to be present throughout the data. (1) Students have mixed emotions throughout the transition. (2) The discovery of independence is welcome, but with it comes responsibility. (3) The importance of friendships for students was apparent in this study. (4) The new middle school learning environment provided several challenges for students: difficulty and amount of work, time management, lockers and locks, the size of the building and the increased number of people, organization of materials, and communication with many new people. (5) According to student and teacher voices, an absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition was evident.
The findings conclude that the transition from elementary to middle school needs to be addressed for both students and fifth and sixth grade teachers. Some specific recommendations are made to provide this information.
LISTENING TO STUDENTS’ AND TEACHERS’ VOICES: AN ECOLOGICAL CASE STUDY INVESTIGATING THE TRANSITION FROM ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

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Dedicated to the two

most important and significant friends

in my life, my parents, George and Jeanette Godfrey.

Without your unconditional love and support,

this accomplishment would not have been achieved.

Thanks for helping me live my dream!

You are “the wind beneath my wings.”
BIOGRAPHY

Paula Kathleen Godfrey was born on April 18, 1946 in Washington, D.C. After living for four years in Washington, she and her family moved to Reynoldsburg, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. She attended public schools in Reynoldsburg and graduated from high school in 1968. Her love of music pervaded her life and she demonstrated this love by accompanying the all county chorus for three years in a row and playing the piano in the high school dance band. The Ohio Congress of Parents and Teachers awarded her a partial college scholarship to study education. She received her B. S. in elementary education with a minor in music education from Bowling Green State University, where she was a member of Kappa Delta sorority and Kappa Delta Pi honorary education society. Returning to her hometown, she taught fifth grade for seventeen years in Reynoldsburg, Ohio.

Godfrey moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, and taught academically gifted elementary students, was director of a federal grant, and began and coordinated the academically gifted program at a gifted and talented magnet middle school in Raleigh, North Carolina. In 1995, North Carolina State University awarded her an M.S. degree in Educational Administration and Supervision. In 1996, she became the assistant principal of a magnet elementary school, where she is currently employed.

Godfrey is a Baldridge trainer for the school system where she works. She was awarded a fellowship to attend the Capital Area Writing Project. She has also presented at the North Carolina Teachers of English and for PAGE, a parent organization for parents of academically gifted students. She was a finalist in the county PTA Teacher of
the Year competition and is a member of The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development. She is also a member of the North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals Organization.
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Many, many people have contributed to the completion of this work. My committee members have been invaluable. Dr. Candy Beal, my committee co-chair, has encouraged and guided me along the “road not taken.” She has become my mentor and friend. Dr. Carol Pope, my committee co-chair, has been a positive and calming influence on my journey toward completion of this study. Dr. Peter Hessling provided valuable guidance regarding case study research and “doing a good literature review.” Dr. Ellen Vasu taught me the difference between qualitative and quantitative research as well as the knowledge and wisdom to know which was the most useful for my study.

Family and friends were also instrumental to my finishing this work. My daughter, Amy Grissom, is always my cheerleader. My friend, Carolyn Padgette, was invaluable in both the good times and the stressful ones. The staff at my school helped me in so many ways, it is impossible to mention them all. Without their help in covering duties, proofreading, copying, and encouraging me to keep going, I am not sure I could have continued both my job as school administrator and my passion for completing my research. The students who participated in my study will always have a special place in my heart. They enabled me to “experience” the transition through their impassioned descriptions and stories. The teachers, who participated and shared honestly their lack of knowledge regarding the transition, provided invaluable information.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Reflect for a moment, if you will, on the feelings created the first time you attempt something new, make a long distance move, or begin a new job. Anxiety, trepidation, fear, and challenge—these are some of the feelings you may experience. Do you engage in self-talk? Do you receive encouragement and support from another person? For me, one moment stands out in my mind—trying to cross a swinging suspension bridge. Perhaps you remember crossing a swinging suspension bridge or maybe crossing a funhouse tunnel that was rolling while you tried to go through it. What strategies did you use to successfully move from one side to the other? Did you look at someone who successfully crossed into new territory? Did you wonder how to successfully move from one side of the bridge to the other, all while the bridge was moving underneath you? Were there guideposts along the way? Was someone there giving advice? Did you analyze how to get across/through without falling?

The way you feel when crossing a bridge or going through a rotating tunnel are similar to the feelings research shows are aligned with change or transition—anxiety, trepidation, fear, challenge. Students who must move from the small, safe, comfortable environment of an elementary school to the large, unknown, complex environment of a middle school may experience these same feelings. Combined with these tenuous feelings is the period of time known as adolescence and undependable physical, emotional, and cognitive growth spurts associated with this simultaneous major life transition or change. These students are literally crossing the bridge (Kiepenheuer, 1990).
Transition is a complex phenomenon. Transitions, whether expected or unanticipated, positive or negative, require adjustments. Early adolescents, ages ten to fourteen, simultaneously undergo transition in the physical realm, the cognitive realm, the psychosocial realm, as well as the educational realm, (Carnegie, 1995). Some young people manage to negotiate these transitions with relative ease, while others stumble on the obstacles in their path (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001).

In the educational realm, one change happens every year for most students—the move to a higher grade. Students encounter different teachers and fellow students, as well as new content material to learn. In addition to these yearly changes, two major transitions take place within the public school educational continuum: the change from elementary to middle school and the change from middle school to high school. These major changes present new and larger surroundings to navigate, more teachers and students with whom to become acquainted, more extra-curricular activities, and new knowledge to construct.

The change in the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional realms happen during that period of time called adolescence. Adolescence is a time of profound change and sometimes troubling uncertainty (Maehr & Anderman, 1993). Early adolescence is a time when enduring and sometimes irrevocable patterns of motivation, achievement, and social relations emerge and become established (Carnegie, 1995). The Carnegie Foundation Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents states, “Young adolescents face significant turning points. For youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For others, it represents their last and best chance to avoid a diminished future.” (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 8)
Combining the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive changes from childhood to early adolescence with the transition from an elementary school setting to a middle school setting can make this a confusing and bewildering time of life. Just as early adolescents are undergoing the physical, cognitive, and emotional changes of puberty, educators ask them to adjust to a different format in their schooling. Transition can create anxiety and at the same time be stimulating (Brammer, 1991). Transition is difficult at any age but with other stressors present, this change is even more complicated. Listening to early adolescents who are traversing this transition, as well as listening to the teachers, who teach them, will enable educators to understand and help make this transition more successful.

**Background of the Problem**

This complex phenomenon known as elementary to middle school transition contains two distinct yet intertwined parts: 1) the transition within the structure of the American education setting from elementary to middle school, and 2) the transition from childhood to early adolescence. While these factors can be explored independently, they are intertwined within the concept of elementary to middle school transition and happen simultaneously. An understanding of each part as well as an understanding of how they are integrated is important to acquiring the knowledge necessary to explore this complex problem.

**Transition and School Structure**

School provides one important context for the experiences and processes that distinguish early adolescence from other periods in life. School is the most important microsystem, after the family, for an early adolescent (Garbino, 1985). In today’s society,
attending middle school occurs during the period of early adolescence and is considered a
time of great challenge, complexity, and change. More than 88% of public school students
enter a new school when they begin the middle grades (Arowosafe & Irwin, 1992). Thus, the
transition or change from elementary to middle school is of great importance.

Early in the American colonies, schooling was a replication of European ideals. After
the American Revolution, the focus of education became that of preparing future citizens for
political responsibilities and forming an American cultural identity. Traditionally, secondary
schools had focused on preparing youth for entry into colleges and universities. During the
1920s, the American High School began a multi-pronged focus: (1) college preparatory, (2)
business preparatory, and (3) vocational preparatory (Gutek, 1991). At about the same time,
the standard school structure of grammar schools, grades 1-8, and high schools, grades 9-12
was reorganized to include the junior high school. The junior high school, grades 7, 8, and 9,
had several main purposes. They included:

- Retaining students in school and easing the transition from elementary to high school;
- Providing for individual differences in ability, interests, development, etc.;
- Providing career guidance;
- Recognizing the nature and impact of adolescence on education;
- Beginning subject departmentalization earlier; and
- Increasing students’ physical, social, recreational, athletic, and educational activities
  (Koos, 1920).

While the beginnings of the middle school movement were in the 1960s, the National
Middle School Association was founded in the 1970s. This group, along with the Center for
Early Adolescence in North Carolina, the National Middle School Resource Center in
Indiana, and several state and regional middle school associations, fostered a middle school “reform movement” (Beane, 1993). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, a task force on education of young adolescents, focused the spotlight on the middle level of education with their publication, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989). This report presented important information and made recommendations to transforming middle level education. Thus began the “middle school” – a transition level of schooling between elementary and high school. According to the Carnegie report, the middle school should be a place for learning that complements the developmental level of adolescent students. It, also, should be designed as a place that provides sensitivity to the characteristics of early adolescents. Some other features suggested by the Carnegie Council’s report were as follows: a structural change centered on teams, a safe and secure environment complete with relationships with teachers, teaching methods that promote constructed learning, and curriculum built around integrative themes and adapted to appeal to early adolescent interests.

The current education system is built on a continuum from elementary to high school, with middle school exactly where it says it is—in the middle, spanning two different levels of education. The concept of the transition to middle school is like the concept of a bridge. In general, a bridge is built to span two different situations usually providing connection or transition. A particular kind of bridge, the swinging bridge, is built across a short, hard-to-cross area. It is anchored on both ends, but the bridge itself moves, especially when it is being crossed. Crossing a swinging bridge can create feelings of uncertainty, apprehension, and sometimes fear. After all, the bridge is moving at the same time it is being crossed creating an uncertainty that the crossing will be successful. The transition from elementary
school to middle school is indeed like crossing a swinging bridge–possibly creating equivalent feelings. This transition from elementary to middle school needs as sturdy a bridge as possible in order to ensure success for each student in middle school. Anchoring one side of the bridge is the smaller elementary school setting, usually with one classroom teacher and a nurturing, environment that stresses concrete activities. Ideally there is a lot of parental involvement at the elementary level. Anchoring the other side of the bridge is the larger middle school setting, with several teachers, cognitive tasks that build from concrete to abstract problem solving. Early adolescents may reject parental involvement. There are two different anchors, each doing the same difficult job of holding up their end of the bridge. This transition from a smaller environment that stresses activity and concrete experience to a larger one that introduces abstract thinking could create marked consequences for students (Wall, 1977).

Transition From Childhood to Early Adolescence

The adolescent experience not only varies from culture to culture but also varies throughout the history of a culture. There is documentation of the concepts of childhood, youth, and adulthood throughout cultures and history, but the concept of adolescence as it is defined for this study emerged in America in the late nineteenth century (Modell & Goodman, 1990). The industrial revolution and the expansion of educational opportunities greatly enhanced the engagement of youth. Larger numbers of adolescents lived at home, worked, or attended school, instead of working to help support their immediate family or asserting their own independence.
Many theories of adolescent development have a level or stage related to the early adolescent time period, ages 10-13. These include:

- **Piaget** - formal operation stage. In this stage early adolescents begin thinking of possible logical relationships among objects and people. Students also begin thinking about their experiences and environment more systematically, and they solve problems more deliberately;

- **Erikson** - Stage 5 - Identity versus Identity (role) confusion. This stage is the time that the adolescent searches for a sense of identity. An attempt is made to answer the question, “Who am I?”;

- **Kohlberg** - Good Boy – Good Girl. This stage is the time that an adolescent conforms to rules in order to avoid the disapproval of significant others;

- **Vygotsky** - verbal self-recognition and personality development. Verbal self-recognition is connected to the personality traits of conscience and willpower that begin to develop with abstract reasoning (Crain, 2000).

Since the 1950’s greater attention has been given to adolescence within the psychological, and educational realms. With the increase in school enrollment after WWI and the widespread acceptance of the junior high school concept, the emergence of the study of adolescence was established. However, not until the 1970s and the founding of the middle school movement was a focus on early adolescence proposed to be used as the guideline for structuring the educational environment (Carnegie, 1995).

While the beginnings of early adolescence cannot be exactly predicted for each individual child, the process (both physical and cognitive) begins sometime between the ages of 10 and 14 (Caissey, 1994). With early adolescence beginning at the same time as the
elementary to middle school transition is occurring, the students involved are experiencing transition in many ways.

**Statement of the Problem**

My practical experience (17 years of it gained from teaching fifth grade and another four years teaching in the middle school) suggests that students, who are making the elementary to middle school transition, as well as undergoing the changes inherent in early adolescence, have many challenges before them. Having spent thirty-one years as an educator, both in elementary and middle schools, I have witnessed first-hand students who are experiencing this transition. I have been both the teacher who was sending (fifth grade) and the teacher receiving (sixth grade) these early adolescent students.

Early adolescence is the age in which individuals adopt behavior patterns in education and health that can have lifelong significance (Carnegie, 1995). *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* (The Carnegie Council, 1995) promotes an approach to early adolescence that will enable the adolescents to meet developmental and transition challenges successfully. There are five basic concepts about adolescence that constitute this approach:

- Early adolescence is a critical turning point in life’s trajectory. This period, therefore, represents an optimal time for interventions to prevent destructive behavior and promote enduring practices.

- Education and health are inextricably related.

- Common underlying factors contribute to problem behaviors in adolescents. One is academic difficulty; another is the absence of strong and sustained guidance from caring adults.
• Preventive interventions are more likely to be successful if they address the underlying factors that contribute to problem behaviors.

• Given the complexity of influences on adolescents, the essential requirements for healthy, positive development must be met through the joint efforts of a set of pivotal institutions that powerfully affect adolescents’ experiences. These institutions begin with the family and include schools, community and neighborhood organizations.

Early adolescents should meet fundamental requirements if they are to be successful. Given the complex nature of adolescence coupled with the concurrent change in school level and structure, listening to the voices of the students while they are undergoing these transitions is imperative to gain knowledge of what is happening during the transition.

There is much research on the transition from middle school or junior high school to high school and the transition from high school to work. This research spans almost seventy years. However, there is less research focusing on the elementary to middle school transition. One of the reasons for this lack of information is the relatively recent emergence of the middle school. Also, most of the research on the elementary to middle school transition is of a quantitative nature; i.e., self-reporting surveys, tests of statistical significance on various topics such as academic achievement. If this transition is an important one for students, determining what happens during the transition is vital. Gathering test scores, grades, and opinion surveys provides data but does not give descriptive information about what is actually happening.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to investigate the different aspects of the transition students make from elementary to middle school from both an emic and an etic perspective. Gaining descriptive information about what happened during the transition from students’ and teachers’ perspectives provided the emic perspective. The primary source of information was the students’ voices with secondary information gathered from teacher interviews. School observations and my reflective writings (field notes) also provided information. Observation and field notes allow me to share my experience of “being there” (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997) and help the reader understand and interpret my study. My perspective, the etic one, is woven throughout.

My study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, using interviews, observations and comments in my reflective journal as data. The early adolescent participants were seven students who were first interviewed during their fifth grade school year prior to transitioning to middle school. Observations were made in their natural elementary school surroundings. These students were also interviewed and observed in their new sixth grade middle school surroundings. Fifth grade teachers were interviewed in the spring as their students were preparing to make the transition, and sixth grade teachers were interviewed in the fall as students had just made the transition.

My study contributes to the research on the elementary school to middle school transition by focusing on the students’ voices with the addition of some teachers’ voices. My research also lends authenticity to the importance of studying this particular transition.
Using qualitative case study research provides detailed information concerning the elementary to middle school transition directly from students who were experiencing the transition, as well as from the teachers who sent and received those students.

Pilot Study

In preparation for this study, a pilot study was conducted in the fall of 2000. A magnet elementary school in a large southeastern city was chosen in order to provide diversity in the selection of participants. Magnet schools in this city have a base area that surrounds the inner-city school. The students who live in this area are assigned to the school. Approximately 48% of the students lived in the base area. The other 52% were considered magnet students. The magnet students lived in the northern and eastern areas of the county and attended the school by choice.

Four students and four parents – four family pairs participated in this study. The students and parents represented diversity in race, socio-economic status, and students’ academic achievement. Thus, I attempted to use maximum variation sampling. The following family pairs included: Vicki (mother) and Lindsay (daughter), Euro-American, average socio-economic-class and average achievement; Barbara (mother) and Savon (son), African-American, lower socio-economic class and below grade level achievement; Laura (mother) and Chris (son), Euro-American, average socio-economic-class and above average academic achievement; Johnnie (father) and Jonathon (son), African-American, average socio-economic-class and average achievement. Two of the students were the oldest child in the family, and two of them had an older sibling who had already attended a middle school.
Two fifth grade teachers also participated in this study: Lynne, a Euro-American, probationary teacher with two years experience and Jean, a Euro-American veteran teacher with twenty-one year’s experience.

Data were collected using one-on-one interviews with the students, the parent of each student, and the fifth grade teachers. The interview questions for the students and parents focused on what perceptions they already had regarding middle school (Appendix A). The interviews for the teachers had a slightly different focus: what did they know about middle school and what did they do, if anything, to help prepare students for middle school (Appendix B). Two observations within the school setting were also conducted.

Transcriptions of the taped interviews were read for themes and patterns. Three consistent topics emerged from all of the interviews as well as the observations—organization, responsibility or independence, and communication. Organization was observable within the school environment from the lobby of the school to the classroom. Both teachers also discussed organization, noting they planned together and wrote assignments on the board for students. Students were observed writing assignments in a notebook specifically for this purpose. Two parents also mentioned the assignment notebook as a helpful tool.

The words responsibility and independence were used interchangeably within the interviews and observations, as they were a focus for all participants. One student, Lindsay, said “I know it will take me longer to finish homework and I will have less time of my own.” Lindsay’s mother, Laura, described how the sixth grade teachers had helped her older daughter transition to middle school. The teachers had students put their assignment books on their desk each day during class. The teacher then initialed it during class. The
assignment book was then taken home to share with parents and have them sign. After the first grading period, this practice was abandoned hoping that it had created responsibility and independence as a habit. One of the students, Savon, gave short, apathetic answers, stating “I will wing it when I don’t have my work.” Interestingly, his mother also gave brief, often hurried, answers to questions.

Communication was the third common topic discovered from the interviews and observations. The teachers, students, and parents mentioned communication - all in different contexts. Three of the parents mentioned the assignment book as a way of communicating. One parent described a voice message system that allows the principal to record a message (regarding important upcoming events; i.e., school pictures, report cards, a school dance) and have it called to all homes. Both parents and teachers mentioned conferences and newsletters as an important tool for communication. Three parents also mentioned PTA as a way to be involved and communicate. The students did not directly use the term communication. They were more concerned with the aspect of sharing information, especially with each other, regarding assignments, teacher expectations, and information regarding friends. Because all of the participants in this pilot study discussed the same topics, I considered this noteworthy.

Based on the findings of this earlier pilot study, I decided to pursue the investigation of the elementary to middle school transition. Listening to what the students have to say regarding their own schooling is imperative to understanding what is happening and how to support the students. Listening to the teachers on each side of the transition provides more descriptive information. This earlier pilot study also helped clarify and develop the research questions used for the current study.
Research Questions

On the basis of personal experience, the pilot study, and an interdisciplinary review of the literature, the following questions were formed:

According to students’ and teachers’ voices,

1. What major factors play a role during the transition students make from elementary to middle school?

2. What student and teacher perceptions are connected with the transition from elementary school (fifth grade) to middle school (sixth grade)?

3. How do school practices (both contrived and environmental) fit into the students’ and teachers’ personal perceptions?

4. How are student anxieties, concerns, and predictions voiced in fifth grade brought to fruition in sixth grade?

5. What do the student and teacher voices say to educators and other support members about how they can help?

Significance of the Study

This research is not directly based on any previous study. Two main occurrences have driven me to pursue this study. First, I discovered several years ago while doing another study that the largest number of students who drop out of school, do so in the ninth grade. The two main factors for dropout in ninth grade were age eligibility and the fact that most students had repeated at least one grade. That statistic alarmed me and caused me to wonder about when students begin the downward spiral that leads to dropping out of high school. Second, the focus of this study was selected after seventeen years of teaching fifth
grade. I selected teaching at the fifth grade level after observing my brother make a difficult transition from elementary to junior high school. I have worked in both elementary and middle schools, and observed first-hand the stress students experience during the time of transition from elementary to middle school.

Given the literature, this study provides a forum for student and teacher voices to be heard regarding this transition. Student and teacher voices provide the day-to-day details of exactly what is happening during the transition. By sharing students’ personal anxieties, triumphs, and actual experiences, as well as describing teachers’ perspectives, this study is useful in 1) contributing to the existing literature, 2) validating student and teacher voices, 3) helping educators and other support groups understand student views, and 4) helping schools plan and carry out programs that support students’ transition.

Middle schools must meet the basic needs of adolescents so that they will reach their full potential. These needs of security, acceptance by both peers and adults, and a sense of future are the base from which the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development promoted the “fundamental transformation” of middle school and its curriculum (Carnegie, 1989). The recommendations, Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, were in response to calls for reform of the junior high school. These recommendations were continued ten years later in Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents for the 21st Century.

Much of the literature on school transition has focused on the move from middle/junior high school to high school. The objective of middle/junior high school to high school transition literature is on ensuring high school success and lowering the dropout rate. Since the middle school concept is relatively new, when considering the history of American
education, a focus on the transition from elementary school to middle school is important and timely. Also, the lower age indicating the onset of adolescence now coincides with the transition to middle school not from middle school. The most dramatic “normative age-graded” change that American school children face is the transition from an elementary school to a middle school (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1977). This transition is a normative change because most children in a community experience it at a particular age or point in their development. The fact that students are experiencing an important transition (made up of physical, cognitive, and contextual changes) simultaneously with experiencing the transition in levels of schooling makes listening to student voices, in order to understand their needs, even more imperative.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Adolescence* is defined as that period of life between childhood and adulthood (Garbarino, 1985). Adolescence, from the Latin adolescere, literally means to grow up or to grow into maturity (Muuss, 1996). Adolescence is measured using biological age and social age in the literature. The beginning of adolescence varies greatly by age. The physical changes occur somewhere between the ages of nine and fifteen (Tanner, 1972) and are greatly influenced in Western cultures by the advancements in nutrition. Schools mark the beginning of adolescence with a change in level of schooling.

*Cognition* refers to changes in the way individuals acquire and use knowledge. During early adolescence, this is a time of tremendous change moving from concrete thinking to abstract thinking (Garbarino, 1985).
**Constant membership** refers to grouping students in homeroom and their four core classes with the same student members. There is no remixing of students for different classes (Mitchell, 1994).

**Educational achievement** is measured by the grades students receive from teachers and by scores on diverse types of achievement tests designed by authorities beyond the school.

**Educational attainment** is the number of years of education completed and the formal degrees achieved.

**Efficacy** is the belief in your power to be effective. In particular, teachers have a sense of efficacy that is either positive, they believe they can have a substantial affect on a student’s learning, or negative, they feel powerless to affect a student’s learning.

**Epigenesis** is a gradual unfolding, progressing toward complexity and organization in development. Erikson’s eight stage of development are an example of this (Garbarino, 1985).

**GPA** refers to the grade point average calculated by assigning points to each letter grade, multiplying the points by the number of grades and dividing by the number of hours of credit a student has taken.

**Interdisciplinary** refers to the joining or integrating of several academic disciplines within the educational setting. When information is presented to students using an interdisciplinary approach, more than one learning style is addressed, more than one academic area is presented, and connection rather than isolation is modeled for students.

** Macrosystem** is a broad ideological and institutional pattern within a particular culture or subculture (Garbarino, 1985).
Microsystem is a simple, immediate setting in which an adolescent develops and in doing so experiences and creates reality within a macrosystem (Garbarino, 1985).

Middle School is the grouping of grades 6-8 into an integrative environment, facilitated by teams of teachers, infused with interdisciplinary curriculum, focused on the developmental needs of adolescents (Beane, 1993). Middle school replaced the junior high mentioned early in the introduction to this study.

Puberty is the period when a person becomes physically and sexually mature and is able to reproduce.

Pyramid transition refers to different and multiple elementary schools that feed into one middle school. The opposite would be a linear transition of one elementary feeding into one middle school.

Statistical significance refers to a test done to determine the probability that the means of two given groups are equal.

Team teaching refers to a small group of teachers (2-4) who share a common group of students, a common planning time, and a focus on interdisciplinary teaching (Mac Iver, 1990; Walley & Gerrick, 1999; Manning & Bucher, 2001).

Transition is a journey accomplished with short, sharp changes through a period of time to something unknown (Brammer, 1991). This journey requires courage to take risks and to cope with fear. Transition is also a time of change from one phase of life to another. In particular, in adolescence, the immaturity of childhood is being left behind, while the challenges and potentials of adulthood have not yet been adopted (Kimmer, 1995). Transition is an interactive process among a person’s characteristics and her coping resources, the environment, and the nature of the transition itself (Schlossberg, 1984). For
this study, a synthesis definition of transition is that it is an interactive process requiring risk-taking, consisting of fairly predictable stages, and includes the environment, the support systems, and the person directly involved.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

This study examines the nature of the transition from elementary to middle school primarily through the voices of students experiencing this transition. Secondary information is included from the teachers of the students as well as the researcher’s reflections. While much of the information is presented in traditional format, the beginnings of each chapter deviate from the traditional. Personal reflections and/or student quotations or reflections drawn from actual transcripts or writings set the stage for the reader and the research. This is done to emphasize and expand the participants’ or reader’s perspectives or to illustrate a connection with the literature.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the study and sets the stage for further reading. A perspective of transition is provided along with succinct statements of the problem, the background, the purpose, the significance, key definitions, a pilot study, the research questions, and an overview of the study.

Chapter 2 reflects the complexity of studying a school transition that occurs at the same time as a life transition, early adolescence. The literature review is presented in an interdisciplinary context since several fields of study are represented: sociology, psychology, and education. The focus is narrowed in order to highlight key issues as they relate to the research questions presented. Basic information regarding the phenomenon called transition is first presented followed by characteristics of early adolescents, theories of adolescent
development, and middle school philosophy. Research focusing on relevant early adolescent concerns and the transition to middle school include: academic performance, motivation, perception of self, support systems, and the school environment. Transition programs already in use are also presented. A summary concludes the chapter.

Chapter 3 details the research design and procedures that were used in collecting and analyzing data. The chapter presents key information useful in understanding the research process and the decisions/conclusions/recommendations that are made during my study. Detailed descriptions of the participants and the setting conclude the chapter.

Chapter 4 presents the findings and discussion of my analyses of the qualitative data. Data explored include interviews, observations and my reflective writings.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion and summary of the findings as they relate to adolescent development theory and to the reviewed literature.

Chapter 6 presents implications and recommendations for further study based on the research findings. Also presented are recommendations for schools to implement in order for the transition from elementary school to middle school to be a successful one for all children.

Summary

This chapter describes the transition process within both the context of school and early adolescence. Since these two phenomenon occur simultaneously, an argument is presented for the need for further study of the transition from elementary to middle school, especially hearing student voices. The chapter shares the problem, a description of the organizational transition from elementary school to middle school as well a brief description regarding the transition from childhood to early adolescence. The purpose and significance of
my study along with the research questions are presented. Key definitions and the research questions are shared, and an overview of the dissertation concludes the chapter.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Reflect again, if you will, on the process you use to learn something new. Do you read, or talk with someone else about the subject? Do you observe and ask questions? Do you use trial and error and actually experiment to find the knowledge that you seek? Do you reflect on prior knowledge about the subject? Once you have the new knowledge what do you do with it? More precisely, how do you synthesize new knowledge into useable knowledge? Learning is not done in isolation. For a person to progress in their learning, connections must be made with prior knowledge. In order for learning to “stick,” it must be applied and periodically evaluated to see if still more viable knowledge is needed. “I’m not very good at it so I have to practice more and really think about what I already know,” shared Anthony. Knowledge is something that is constructed, reflected upon and tied to prior learning (Cohen & Barnes, 1993). Past experiences, guidance, and signposts along the way are all helpful when encountering something new. Crossing the swinging bridge from elementary school to middle school successfully will take building upon what is known along with help from those who have gone before.

Elementary to middle school transition has been a topic of interest for me for many years. Reviewing the studies of others helped focus the purpose for my study. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and the National Middle School Association have both presented educators with important information regarding adolescents and their schooling.
Early adolescence is associated with physical, behavioral, moral, and social transformations that roughly correspond with the move from elementary school to middle school (Carnegie, 1995). School systems in America have historically organized levels of education so that students make a transition from a smaller, child-centered, task-oriented, relatively protected elementary school to a progressively larger, more diverse, more subject-oriented, competitive secondary school (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983). Currently, a student moves between levels of schooling twice – elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. At the same time the first school level transition is occurring, most students are entering adolescence.

The complexity of studying the elementary to middle school transition demands a clear understanding of several topics. Considering the research questions, the first topic reviewed is that of transition or change. A clear understanding of the transition phenomenon is necessary in order to analyze the study’s data. Inherent in my study is an understanding of the characteristics of early adolescents. Thus, the next part of this chapter shares the needs and traits of these young people. Theories of adolescent development and a description of middle school philosophy are also presented. Other topics that inform this study are:

- The relationship among academic performance, motivation, and transition,
- Student perceptions of self and transition,
- Support systems for students during transition,
- The school environment and its relationship to transition,
- And documented programs already established to help students during the transition.

The literature review in this chapter is integrative in nature. Few of the topics presented were researched, studied, or reported in isolation. The information presented
reflects studies that are largely quantitative in nature. The quantitative results are noteworthy in that these studies point to the need for qualitative description and explanation. In the quantitative studies reviewed, there is little description as to why the results were found. Thus, there are gaps in the information currently available regarding middle school transition. These quantitative studies present affirming evidence that qualitative descriptive research on the transition from elementary to middle school is sparse.

The Concept of Transition

In order to study transition, an understanding of the concept is necessary. Any transition in life contains several major factors. These factors are natural, contrived, and environmental (Brammer, 1991). Naturally occurring factors that are part of the normal life span of a human being are physical, emotional, and cognitive. One natural transition is that period of growth known as adolescence. Perhaps nowhere in a person’s life span, except in infancy, is the collection and interplay of transition so pronounced as during early adolescence, ages 10-14 (Carnegie, 1995).

Contrived factors are those imposed upon a person by forces outside herself (Brammer, 1991). The contrived factors experienced by early adolescent students in the transition from elementary to middle school are as follows: change of building, change of school, teams of teachers, a larger building, a larger student body, the daily schedule, extracurricular activities, and more content-oriented curriculum. These contrived factors are within the control of educators and can be altered, if deemed necessary.

Environmental factors, the third part of transition, include anything in the larger macrosystem affecting people but not imposed upon them (Brammer, 1991). For early
adolescents the environmental factors include the media, the knowledge base explosion and Internet access, family structure, support systems (or lack thereof), peer pressure, and stress. These factors are not contrived or planned; nonetheless they play an integral part in everyday life for early adolescents as they make transitions in their lives.

Transition is characterized by the alteration of a particular state between two sequential points in time (Douglas, 1997). Sequential events in the early adolescent’s life create definite alterations. Transitions during sequential life events are usually short-term; however, the time during the transition is experienced as slow moving, almost dragging. Transitions during human development are also sequential, yet often unsettling (Brammer, 1991). These transitions usually occur over a longer period of time coinciding with spurts of growth, whether physical, emotional, or cognitive. Transition is also characterized by an abrupt discontinuity with previous life events and the emergence of coping responses that were heretofore, perhaps, unrealized (Hopson and Adams, 1977). Early adolescents may be undergoing this transition in human development at the same time they are experiencing a school level transition, but what factors (natural, contrived, or environmental) play a major role during these transitions? My research study proposes to answer that question.

**Characteristics of Early Adolescents**

Who are the students that my study is investigating? The early adolescent period (from 10 to 14 years of age) corresponds to the middle school years (Jaffe, 1998). Early adolescents experience different facets of change during this life period including:

- Biological or physical changes,
- Cognitive and moral changes,
• Psychosocial changes,

• And life role transition changes.

The biological or physical changes in early adolescence refer to the onset of puberty and the naturally occurring bodily changes which can begin anywhere from age 7 to age 14 (Gilbert, 1997). The physical component of development, puberty, is typically characterized by hormonal changes and by a sharp growth spurt, most noticeable in height, but affecting the entire skeletal and muscular systems. Boys and girls typically grow between 2 to 5 inches between ages 9-15, with girls starting the growth spurt first and boys catching up and eventually becoming about 8 percent taller than girls (Sprinthall & Collins, 1995). Along with growth in height, there is the appearance of sexual characteristics in both boys and girls that accompanies the change in hormone production. A noticeable difference in size between adolescents and adults today compared to 100 years ago is referred to as a secular trend (Chumlea, 1982). The secular trend shows that in industrialized nations there is an increase in size and an earlier achievement of sexual maturity. This secular trend appears to have stabilized with a fourteen year-old boy of today being approximately 5 inches taller than a fourteen year-old boy of 1880 (Schneck, 1976).

Exactly when puberty begins depends on a variety of factors – genetic influences, environmental influences, and geographic and ethnic differences (Conger & Galambos, 1997). The adolescent growth spurt, the accelerated rate of increase in height and weight that accompanies the hormonal changes, varies widely in intensity, timing, and duration from one child to another. The timing of the growth spurt is so variable that some adolescents complete the spurt before others have begun. Clearly, normal includes large differences in timing. During a period of life when feeling “normal” is so important, the determination of
what is normal is vague among adolescents (Garbarino, 1985). This need for normality combines with social, moral, cognitive, physical, and emotional changes to create a complex condition and uncertain time for early adolescents.

Cognitive changes occur throughout life, but it is during adolescence that there is a metamorphosis in thinking and reasoning (Jaffe, 1998). Piaget’s model of cognitive development suggests that early adolescents are entering the formal operations stage. The most basic of those formal operations capabilities is a shift of emphasis from the real to the possible, from what is to what might be (Conger & Galambos, 1997). Early adolescents can begin to think in more abstract ways. Such evidence of abstract thinking includes their being able to think more flexibly, reflect on their own thinking, and distinguish between what is possible and impossible.

Moral reasoning is also undergoing stages of change for early adolescents. Kohlberg’s three levels (six stages) of moral reasoning positions early adolescents at the beginning of the conventional level of moral reasoning, stage 3, the good girl-good boy stage (Dacey, Kenny, 1997). This stage focuses on a child’s need to have approval from others and moves into stage 4, which has an emphasis on societal needs and values rather than individual interests. Moral reasoning skills are beginning to play a role in early adolescent thought and actions (Kohlberg, 1971).

Social and emotional changes, also called psychosocial, in early adolescence are interwoven with the biological and cognitive changes. The key psychosocial challenge facing adolescents is creating an identity (Erikson, 1968). Beginning this process of
establishing self-concept means early adolescents are constantly comparing themselves to their peers to determine if they conform to the group standards. Peers become extremely important at this phase in development. Learning how others perceive them suddenly assumes great importance as a pathway to self-definition. By affiliating with a peer group, early adolescents are typically less challenged by the task of dependently achieving their identity, since many of the details of appearance, behavior, interests, and ideals are dictated by group standards (Garbarino, 1985).

Role changes that begin during this period may further complicate this life period for early adolescents. Some examples include the understanding among family members and educators regarding the role of child versus adult for the early adolescent. Another role change for early adolescents is becoming a part of a wider social world and forming close relationships with peers. A third role change involves becoming more self-sufficient and the dichotomy - dependence versus independence (Cobb, 1995). Experimenting with all of these role changes is part of early adolescence. Failure to relinquish the peer group and achieve an independent identity results in role confusion (Garbarino, 1985; Erikson, 1968).

Early adolescence is that transition from childhood to adulthood that begins with the onset of puberty and/or the entrance into the middle school years (Jaffe, 1998). The operative word for early adolescents is beginning. Combining biological, cognitive, moral, psychosocial, and role changes into one significant time period is compounded by the change in levels of schooling from elementary to middle school. So the answer to the question, “Who are the students that my study is investigating?” becomes as complex as the students themselves.
Adolescent Development

The study of adolescence is a rapidly growing field. New theories and research appear in many books and journals such as psychology, sociology, education, and law (Moshman, 1999). Theories of development are based on a set of fundamental principles and assumptions for the purpose of making predictions and interpreting events expressed as cause/effect statements (Garbarino, 1985).

The differential changes that take place during this transition period from late childhood into early adolescence are encompassed in the history of adolescent development theories. When studying the various theorists, it is important to note the similarities and overlap, for all theorists are studying the same transition (Kimmer & Weiner, 1995). Synthesizing the varied theories of adolescent development provides a more diversified understanding of early adolescence. For middle level educators, an understanding of adolescent development both past and present, is essential.

Adolescent psychology and development as a distinct academic discipline originated in the twentieth century. Of course, scholars made distinctions among, children, youth, and adults before the modern era. The early Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato offered advice on the socialization of children from their earliest years through adolescence and young adulthood (Conger and Galambos, 1997). Both stated that an adolescent’s early developmental years are subject to many changes. They also emphasized voluntary and deliberate choice as one of the foremost characteristics of adolescence. This ability to choose was said to be necessary for the attainment of maturity and adulthood.

Even though the Greeks used the word adolescence, little observation or writing concerning adolescence is found from early Greek times until the early nineteenth century.
Christian theology and the Middle Ages obscured much of the observation concerning this period of life (Conger and Galambos, 1997). In colonial America and Western Europe, girls and boys between the ages of 12 and 15 were “fostered out” as part of their training for an economic role in the society (Modell & Goodman, 1990). This “fostering” out was viewed as a rite of passage that marked the transition of the adolescent from childhood to adulthood. Youth were often the topic of sermons by religious leaders during this period (Modell & Goodman, 1990). In the late 1800s, the precursor of contemporary concerns with adolescence as a significant and complex period in a young person’s life had already begun. The Industrial Revolution and the influx of immigrants forced young people out of the labor market and into school. This was one of the main factors for the emergence of adolescence as a specific time of development. The rapid increase in numbers of schools, academies, and colleges, also fueled the importance of adolescence. This “new” concept created an awareness that led school-leaving ages laws being enacted (Conger and Galambos, 1997).

The theories of adolescence that have had a major influence during the past century can be divided into six somewhat distinctive types (Berzonsky, 1989). These include the following: 1) biological views (Hall), 2) psychoanalytic views, (Freud), 3) cultural views (Mead), 4) psychosocial views (James and Erikson), 5) cognitive views (Piaget and Vygotsky), and 6) moral views (Kohlberg). The scientific study of adolescence with a biological focus began with the publishing of Adolescence by G. Stanley Hall in 1904 in America. Hall republished his second edition in 1909 at a lower cost so that parents, teachers, schools, colleges, and “reading circles” could afford to purchase and use it (Berzonsky, 1989). The topics in Hall’s book included: pre-adolescence, muscles and motor powers, industrial education, manual training, gymnastics, faults, lies, crimes, intellectual
education, the education of girls, and moral and religious training. Hall’s main focus was on the idea of recapitulation. Recapitulation proposed that an individual organism goes through stages, much like Darwin’s theory of evolution: from primitivism, to periods of savagery (adolescence) to more civilized ways (adulthood). Hall used the scientific method to study developmental processes, a milestone in the study of human development. Hall, a contemporary and friend of Sigmund Freud, formulated the theory that adolescence is a period of extreme “storm and stress”.

Sigmund Freud presented a psychoanalytic focus regarding human development in 1915. Freud, a medical doctor, doubted the reliability of people’s testimony about themselves. For him, the unconscious mind was the key to understanding the human being (Dacey & Kenny, 1997). Freud’s psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the role that childhood experiences play in adult personality; however, few significant changes in personality were thought to occur during adolescence (Berzonsky, 1989).

In the late 1920s, Margaret Mead presented adolescent research with a cultural focus. Adolescent girls in Samoa moved through adolescence without the storm and stress that was the focus of Hall’s adolescence studies in America (Mead, 1928). Her interviews and observations in Samoa reported that the adolescent girls had clear and uniform roles to follow. She attributed their ease of transition to the lack of conflict and competition. Her research started the nature-nurture debate in psychology focusing on which was more important—biologically based influences or environmentally based influences (Berzonsky, 1989). While many cultures/societies have rituals to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood (more closely related to puberty), our society has no similar distinct ritual to mark the transition to puberty (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1994). As adolescents move toward
adulthood, we do mark that transition with such things as obtaining a driver’s license,
military service, and a legalized age to consume alcohol.

Erikson’s theory of epigenesis (Erikson, 1968) proposes a theory that integrates and
synthesizes past and present experiences. This psychosocial view, combining mental growth
with the surrounding social environment, is composed of eight stages. Of the eight stages,
stage 5, identity and role confusion, occurs during adolescence. This pivotal stage occurs
when adolescents actively attempt to integrate past experiences into their present situations in
an effort to construct a stable sense of identity (Berzonsky, 1989). To an adolescent, how
others perceive them assumes great importance as a pathway to self-definition. Adolescents
may vacillate back and forth through this stage as they pull away from peer groups, fail, and
try again. Role confusions beget self-doubt, obsession with the opinion of others, or
withdrawal from social interaction. Although this process is psychosocial in nature, the
focus is a lifelong series of challenges that enable reality testing and the acquisition of self-
knowledge. Positive resolutions throughout epigenesis facilitate the process of identity
formation whereas failures may result in identity diffusion (Erikson, 1968).

Another psychosocial theory presents adolescents’ personal needs in a need-polarities
configuration (James, 1974). These need-polarities are particularly applicable to the
educational setting where James observed these needs were not always being met for
adolescents. James presents the needs of adolescents in a polarities style that supports the
complexity of early adolescence. These needs include:

• a need to be needed a need to need
• a need for intensity a need for routine
• a need for myth and legend a need for fact
• a need for physical activity  a need for stillness
• a need for separateness,  a need for belonging
• a need to move inward  a need to affect the outer world.

These identified adolescent needs were a result of James’ work with schools and a focus on the “stage” of self-discovery and self-actualization that is at the heart of early adolescence. While the adolescent needs may appear to be oppositional, James presents them in tandem with each other, as we all have different needs at different times in our lives. Early adolescents want to understand human behavior, especially their own, in order to better manage their own relationships.

The cognitive view of adolescence is represented by the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky. Cognitive functioning, according to Piaget, involves an ongoing interchange between assimilation (fitting problems and information into existing cognitive structures) and accommodation (modifying and revising cognitive structures that are ineffective or unsuccessful) (Wadsworth, 1989). Piaget described four periods of development beginning with sensory-motor and ending with formal operations. Early adolescents are at the end of concrete operations – logical and systematic thought about concrete, physical objects and activities- and at the beginning of formal operations – the ability to think about thinking and other abstract and hypothetical ideas. The concrete operational level of cognitive development is powerful, allowing an early adolescent to use logical ways of thinking and to look for facts to prove or disprove opinions. This level of thinking is characteristic of young adolescents (Kimmer & Weiner, 1995). Moving from concrete operations to formal operations requires thinking to be flexible when dealing with abstract ideas. This begins in early adolescence. Piaget’s theory of formal operational thought prepares early adolescents
for experimentation with abstract concepts (McCarthy, 2000). Some adolescents reach formal operation while others do not. Even as Piaget (1972) suggested that reaching formal operational thinking might be a question of interest and ability, Gray (1990) states that formal operations require a great deal of effort, energy, and knowledge.

At about the same time that America was embracing and arguing the nature-nurture controversy in the 1930s, a Russian teacher of literature and art history, Lev S. Vygotsky, was documenting his research. Vygotsky’s theory stresses relationships between the individual and society. To understand a child’s cognitive development, there must be an understanding of the culture in which the child is reared (Meece, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). An individual’s thinking patterns are the products of cultural institutions and social activities, not innate traits. These thinking patterns are undergirded by language, especially speech development. Perhaps Vygotsky’s most important contribution to theories of adolescent development is his theory of the zone of proximal development (Tryphon and Voneche, 1996). The zone of proximal development (transition) includes those functions that are in the process of developing but are not yet fully developed. In practice, interactions with adults and peers while adolescents are in the zone of proximal development will help them move to a higher level of functioning. Belonging to social groups and learning to work in cooperative groups in an educational environment will promote higher functioning in the zone of proximal development. “Belonging with” includes belonging with grown-ups (James, 1974). Also, an important role of the teacher as mentor is to pass on to early adolescents the expectations of societal values.

Kohlberg extended Piaget’s theory of cognitive development into a theory of moral development that focuses on thinking about moral issues. This theory of moral development
is focused on thinking about moral issues not thinking about behavior that is right or wrong. Kohlberg’s model has six stages of moral judgment with stages three and four being where most adolescents operate. Stage 3, the stage of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and conformity, focuses on individual relationships, shared feelings, and expectations that are more important that individual interests. One places oneself in another’s shoes. Stage 4, the stage of social system and conscience maintenance, focuses on the viewpoint of the welfare of society or the group and considers individual relations in terms of the social system. Both stage 3 and stage 4 are an integral part of an early adolescent’s transition from elementary to middle school. According to Kohlberg’s view, formal reasoners are able to use high level moral reasoning (Brezonsky, 1989). In other words, adolescents begin to understand the relative nature of rules and laws and also realize the need to protect individual rights. Formal and moral thinking enables adolescents to begin thinking about their own thinking. This change in levels of thinking – from the concrete to the abstract - is a major transition that begins in early adolescence. Some adolescents that are insecure and operating only in the concrete stage of thinking may operate in stages one or two of moral judgment when transitioning to middle school. Stages one and two are very focused on oneself, with stage one trying to avoid punishment and stage two beginning to compromise to earn the goodwill of others. Understanding the stages of moral development and knowing where early adolescents are operating within those stages will help educators address the needs of students who are making the transition from elementary to middle school.

When considering all of the theories of adolescent development, there are several reasons why these theories relate to the transition from elementary to middle school. For
example, the change in levels of schooling is happening at the same time as the aforementioned changes in adolescent development. At best, an early adolescent who has just entered sixth grade in middle school, is beginning to think more abstractly, is attempting to create a sense of identity, is trying to conform to the expectations of the middle school, is testing out cooperative learning roles with both peers and teachers, and is vacillating back and forth between the various needs that are inherent in this age (11-14). At worst, an early adolescent who has just entered sixth grade is still using concrete thinking, is focused on learning to trust others rather than on creating her own identity, and is complying with the expectations of middle school in order to earn a personal reward. The majority of the students experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school are neither the best case nor worst case. The majority are somewhere in between. An understanding of the theories of adolescent development by fifth and sixth grade teachers and by the students becomes important to making a successful transition.

All of these theories of adolescent development have had an impact on current thought regarding adolescence. The nature-nurture debate concerning which is more important, genes or environment, continues today. However, looking at all the information on adolescent development allows an understanding of this complex time of life. Synthesizing this information is useful for preparing teachers to interact successfully with adolescents and designing middle school programs and curriculum.

**Middle School Philosophy**

Since the founding of the American colonies and the beginning of education in America, there has always been a continuum in the educational system. The system of
graded schools, with students moving year-by-year through classes with other children of roughly the same age and ability, was well established by 1900 (West, 1996). Increasingly, grade levels became the sole method of organizing schools in more populated areas. Students moved from one “level” to the next based on the curriculum standards set, what they had learned, and sometimes based on age.

The middle school movement has its roots in the development of junior high schools in the early 1900s. During this time, the government sponsored several studies to improve public education. The most influential was the 1918 Commission of the Reorganization of Secondary Education. The main recommendation of this commission was to structure public education to include six years of elementary schooling and to divide the latter six years into the junior and senior high school periods. The purpose of this structure was to give more time for college preparation in high school and to weed out earlier, those students who were not college bound. The junior high school movement spread. By 1960, four out of every five high school graduates had attended a 6-3-3 system (George & Alexander, 1993).

Some of the motivations for the creation of junior high schools included: (1) increased student enrollment following World War I, (2) a belief that earlier vocational training would reduce the drop-out rate, (3) a perceived need for accelerated college preparation, and (4), the increasing research regarding adolescents which indicated the special needs of this group (Alexander & George, 1981; Smith, 1990; Gutek, 1991).

The first textbook with a focus on adolescence, written by G. Stanley Hall, was published in 1904 (Muess, 1988). Hall’s work focused on the physiological forces as more important than socioeconomic forces in adolescent development. However, drawing
attention to the unique needs of adolescents was an important step in junior high school development.

Approximately fifty years later, school reformers revisited the developmental aims for early adolescents that were the focus of the junior high school but as yet unmet (Cuban, 1992). This school reform was called “the middle school.” William M. Alexander is often called “the father of the middle school movement” (McEwin, 1992). Alexander proposed a new name “middle school” with a unique program that many credit as a turning point of the movement. Alexander shared these sentiments in a speech at a junior high school conference at Cornell University in 1963:

However needed a transition between the elementary and the high school, there are grave doubts as to the functioning of the junior high school in this regard . . . The usually departmentalized program and organization of the junior high tends to defeat the transitional function . . . The general adoption by the junior highs of the activity program and the organization of the high school attests to the dominance of the idea that the bridge was fundamentally a vestibule added at the front door of the high school (Alexander, 1984, pg. 16).

A classic contribution that built upon and transcended junior high school goals was a revolutionary middle school proposal, Eichhorn’s, The Middle School (1987), first published in 1966. This book provided one of the first comprehensive applications of early adolescent characteristics and needs together with a detailed program. Eichhorn emphasized a developmental curriculum, described an appropriate school environment, and introduced emerging middle school components.
Teacher education programs were initiated in response to middle level certification requirements. In 1975, eight states reported such certification; more recently the state count for certification programs is 35 (Valentine & Mogar, 1992).

The goal of the middle school should be to provide for the academic, personal, social, and cultural growth during this transition (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1987). The middle school should also be focused on the needs, interests, and abilities of early adolescents (Schurr, 1996). There have been great strides in understanding the nature of early adolescence and in restructuring responsive schools through interdisciplinary team organizations, home-based guidance, block scheduling, and experimenting with responsive curriculum (Arnold, 1991).

A powerful voice in middle school reform, The Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, has issued three publications: Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (1989), Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century (1995), and Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents for the 21st Century (2000). These publications issue a challenge to people at all levels of society to implement the recommendations in the reports. The challenge was supported by grants to states and cities to change middle level schools by adopting policies complementary to the recommendations. These policies would guide middle schools in their work of developing responsive programs for early adolescents (Carnegie, 1989; Gallagher-Polite, DeToye, Fritsche, Grandone, Keefe, Kuffel, & Parker-Hughey, 1996). The latest recommendations in the Turning Points 2000 include:
1) Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best;

2) Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners,

3) Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities;

4) Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.

5) Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best;

6) Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring ethical citizens;

7) Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.

There are changes in the above recommendations from those in put forth in 1989 (Carnegie, 2001). The major change is the focus on ensuring success for every student. This is in line with recent federal legislation. The second focus is that teaching and learning should drive changes in organizational structure, teacher preparation, professional development, and connections to parents and the community. Next, the curriculum taught should be grounded in rigorous standards and in the concerns of young adolescents. Finally, reengaging families and connecting schools to communities is essential. This blueprint for a successful middle
school is clearly drawn and is supported by developmental theory. The caring relationships between students and teachers, the professional mentors, the exploration of identity and the cooperative work on curriculum grounded in adolescent concerns, together with the partnership of family and community, would create a middle school where all students could be successful.

**Correlation of Transition with Academic Performance**

Middle grades can be a pivotal time in academic achievement. Students either acquire the necessary knowledge and demonstrate achievement, or they may drop out of school when they reach high school (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). Student success in school is commonly reported as educational *achievement* (Newman, 1998). For purposes of my study, academic performance is considered synonymous with the term academic achievement.

**Transition and Decline in Academic Performance**

The interest in student achievement as it relates to transition and adjustment is documented in several research studies spanning a 50-year period (Bayley, 1949; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Finger and Silverman, 1966; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995, Alspaugh, 1998). In the 1960s, even before the middle school movement, some researchers attempted to document what educators believed was the phenomenon of decreased academic performance, specifically occurring during the transition to junior high school. Studying seventh grade students attending five junior high schools, researchers used standardized test results, grades, and a student-completed self-inventory to examine the transition from elementary to junior
high school. The researchers found a decline in achievement for a majority of students – the
decline appeared to be highly related to academic motivation (Finger and Silverman, 1966).

A more recent research study conducted almost thirty years later also indicates an
overall decline in academic performance after the transition to middle school (Alspaugh &
Harting, 1995). This study examined the transition effects of grade-level organization on
student achievement and included both elementary to middle school transition and
elementary to junior high transition. A comparison of academic achievement was made
using five randomly sampled groups from eight rural school districts in Missouri. The school
groups were equalized on district K-12 enrollment and proportion of students receiving free
and reduced lunch. The percent of minority students in the sample schools was usually less
that 5%. The study was limited to rural schools in order to form equivalent groups. The
study noted no statistically significant differences among the overall mean levels of
achievement of the five school groups for any of the subject areas. However, there were
consistent losses in achievement for the transition years no matter what the school level
configuration was. The study concluded that this could be expected as students convert from
self-contained classrooms to departmentalized classrooms (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995).

In a separate study, achievement losses on standardized tests associated with the
transition to middle school at sixth grade were consistent with the aforementioned study
(Alspaugh, 1998). A statistically significant achievement loss associated with the transition
from elementary school to middle school was found. This study states that students involved
in a pyramid transition of multiple elementary schools into a single middle school
experienced a greater achievement loss than did the students making a linear transition of a
single elementary school to a single middle school. The study also reports that high school
dropout rates were higher for districts with middle schools than for districts with K-8 elementary schools. The summary states that the adjustment required of students in school transition is negatively correlated with education outcomes (achievement), but no causes were ventured or descriptions given. My study may supply information as to why this is a problematic adjustment for students.

Young adolescent adjustment to school appears related to the timing and number of school transitions, i.e., elementary (K-5) to middle school (6-7) to junior high school (8-9) to high school (10-12) versus, elementary (K-5) to middle school (6-8) to high school (9-12) (Crocket, Petersen, Grager, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989). Adjustment was assessed in terms of course grades and self-image. Three groups of adolescent students (T=253) were randomly selected from two middle-to-upper-middle-class suburban school districts. Course grades in five subject areas (language arts, literature, mathematics, science, and social studies) were obtained from school records for each school year. All groups had significant losses in achievement as reported between fifth and sixth grades, however the study participants were not from diverse backgrounds. The student participants in my study were a more diverse sampling.

As stated earlier, the literature revealed several of the factors affecting the transition were interrelated. There is a significant link between the peer relationships of young adolescents and their academic achievement (Wentzel and Caldwell, 1997). While no causal explanations or descriptive information were reported, the conclusion was that peer relationships serve varied functions, both positive and negative, related to academic achievement.
Supporting this link between peer relationships and academic achievement was an interesting action research study done at one middle school (Mitchell, 1994). The objective of the school study was to ascertain the effects of a constant peer membership group on achievement and on self-esteem. The transition year within this school system is from sixth to seventh grade. In the initial phase, the academic performance of 85 seventh graders, who were placed in constant membership groups (staying together for homeroom and four classes/day), was compared to the other seventh graders who were in fluctuating membership groups (homeroom and one class/day). In the second phase, all seventh graders were placed into constant membership groups. Noteworthy gains in seventh grade achievement were recorded for the constant membership groups in language arts and math at the end of the follow-up pilot. Achievement appeared to be positively affected by the constant membership in both phases of the study. No reason for this positive effect was given in the research study nor was any descriptive information from students or teachers included. The faculty of the school who originated and carried out this program decided to continue constant group membership because having the same peer groups seemed to mitigate the discontinuity associated with the elementary to middle school transition. My study provides descriptive information from the student and teacher perspective.

Present and possible academic success for sixth grade middle school students can be predicted (Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999). Using their earlier research, combined with the theory of Erikson (1968) concerning the importance of identity for early adolescents, survey data were collected from students. Students indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale how much a statement described them. Then the data were analyzed for relationships between present and possible selves (the survey) and academic performance.
(GPA). Results indicated that both present and future academic selves could predict statistically significant positive changes in students’ end-of-year grade point averages. The implication for instructional practice, suggested by the researchers, is that there should be less emphasis on social comparison in middle schools during early adolescence. The researchers suggest, that after the transition, the emphasis should be on perceiving oneself as a “good student.” The authors also suggest further research should include interviews that may yield important information regarding present and possible selves and academic performance.

In the research studies already mentioned, it is not clear whether or not the schools in the studies employed team teaching. However, one study examined the effects of interdisciplinary team teaching on the transition to middle school. Three groups of ten schools were compared to determine if organizational format has an effect on achievement during the transition year from elementary to middle school. Organizational format (interdisciplinary team teaching versus departmentalized teaching) for instruction was the independent variable, and student achievement (measured by the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests) was the dependent variable. A consistent achievement loss was evident associated with departmentalized teaching when compared to interdisciplinary team teaching across the transition. Interestingly, the results indicate that team teaching may not be more effective than departmentalization after the transition year. The conclusion was that interdisciplinary team teaching may be an effective mediation strategy for reducing the achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school (Alspaugh & Harting, 1997).

Recent research provides new information on developmental trends (Hurrelmann & Hamilton, 1996). School achievement, as represented by grades assigned by teachers,
appears to decline beginning with the early adolescent years (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Alspaugh, 1998). The decline is generally reported to be connected to increasingly stringent grading practices from teachers who are content oriented and content trained. This reported achievement decline is in contrast to the expected increase in cognitive development and cognitive abilities in the adolescent years. In particular, there should be a significant increase in an adolescent’s ability to think abstractly (Martorano, 1977; Keating & Clark, 1980; Peterson, 1983).

Correlation of transition and motivation

Academic achievement depends on a student’s commitment and participation in learning (Newman, 1998). Motivation is usually considered from a cognitive standpoint (Ames & Ames, 1984). For some students, the early adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral marked by negative behaviors and loss of motivation. This downward spiral often leads to academic failure and school dropout (Carnegie, 1995). Although these declines are not extreme for most adolescents, there is a gradual decline in not only performance but also motivation (Simmons and Blyth, 1987). Along with the documented decline of motivation in the middle school years, there is a decrease in engagement of positive school-related behaviors. Negative attitudes and behavioral patterns, which interfere with academic performance, become more common in middle school (Anderman, Hicks, & Maehr, 1994; Anderman, 1999).

Several studies have focused on the transitional relationship between motivation in the elementary school and motivation in the middle school (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999). An investigation into the effects of the transition from elementary to middle school
on the motivation of students who attended two substantively different types of middle schools was conducted. One of the middle schools was characterized as utilizing task-focused instructional practices; i.e., student – teacher created activities designed to reinforce learning. The other middle school utilized more traditional practices; i.e., teacher directed activities designed to teach through repetition. These were both “neighborhood” schools attended by students within designated boundaries. The study took place over three years, and students completed surveys during the spring of fifth grade in elementary school and again during the spring of both sixth and seventh grades in middle school. After the transition to middle school, the students’ motivation changed, depending on which middle school they attended. Specifically, the students who attended the middle school that placed a greater emphasis on competition and ability differences reported decreased performance goals and motivation. The students who attended the school with student-teacher-created activities reported increased task and performance goals as well as increased motivation. The researchers attribute these results to the fact that the student-centered school was working closely with a university team to institute procedures and concepts from the middle school reform literature. This school made a conscious effort to make the transition from elementary to middle school easier for students by:

- De-emphasizing competitive grading,
- Working towards interdisciplinary and thematic instruction,
- And focusing on meaning making for all students.

Motivation is also linked to teachers’ and students’ perceptions (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Students come to understand early in their school careers that strong effort leading to good performance is valued by adults and that teachers are most likely to reward students
who work hard (Barker & Graham, 1987; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Furthermore, students realize that teachers and parents disapprove of poor performance, perceived laziness, and lack of effort, and that more approval is given to low-achieving students when they exert effort. The researchers concluded that affiliation and motivation are related and that to understand this phenomenon more research should be done that includes listening to students, not just analyzing achievement scores.

Motivation and academic achievement are closely intertwined. Frequently research studies report on one of these dimensions but also mention the other as a contributing factor. From all of the studies cited, it is clear that academic performance is affected by the transition students make from elementary school to middle school. In a quantitative sense, the correlation is evident, but the causality is elusive. While the above cited studies support diminished academic performance, they fail to find the reasons for this. My study gathered descriptive information directly from the students as they made this transition in order to gain some insight into why there is a negative correlation between the transition from elementary school to middle school and academic performance and bring to light any positive transition issues as well.

**Student Perceptions of Self and Transition**

A student’s perception of self and the transition between school levels is documented in the literature as another important consideration when investigating the transition from elementary to middle school. One study reports that student self-perception following the transition to middle school can be predicted (Anderman, Maehr, Midgley, 1999). This study examined changes in self-concept (present and possible selves) as students moved through
this transition. Information was gathered from a “pre” (end of fifth grade) and “post” (end of sixth grade) student self-reporting survey. When analyzed together with achievement scores, the results indicate that positive self-perceptions of both “good student selves” (those scoring above the 50th percentile) and “academically at-risk student selves” (those achieving below the 50th percentile) decline over the transition. Positive self-perception declined more for males than females.

Another study with a survey approach to look at both positive student affect and negative student affect following the transition to middle school provides corroborating information for the correlation between self-concept and achievement (Anderman, 1999). An emphasis by the school on relative ability produced a negative student affect. However, an emphasis on task and goal orientation in their classes, a sense of school belonging, and a strong focus on relationships produced a positive affect in the sixth grade. A sense of belonging and a desire to participate in the social life at the school is essential to the school context for a young adolescent. Finding ways in which the energy of early adolescents can be made welcome should be a fundamental focus of middle schools (James, 1974).

Relationships between perception of self and the transition from elementary to middle school are important (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). An ethnically diverse, financially poor group of students were participants in a study examining the effects of a school transition on young adolescents’ self-esteem. This research was part of the Adolescent Pathways Project, a longitudinal study of youth attending schools in Baltimore, Washington, DC, and New York City. Data were collected in group settings with research staff who read the questions aloud. Researchers also answered student questions. Existing
measurement instruments and measures developed by the researchers were used to gather the

data. Some of the specific data areas were:

- Affective domain,
- Cognitive (both academic and social efficacy) domain,
- Behavioral domain,
- Perceived class preparation,
- Perceived peer relationships,
- And, within school transactions.

The impact of the transition from elementary to middle/junior high school in large, resource-
poor urban schools is associated not only with a decline in extracurricular participation but
also with a decline in the perception of support from school personnel. The inverse of these
transactions within the school context is increased engagement with peer groups and
decreased engagement with school staff. While different relationships were examined, the
most meaningful to this researcher’s proposed study are the negative effects on self-esteem,
class preparation, and grade point average across gender and ethnicity.

Transition from elementary to middle school often brings heightened stress, in both
school and family contexts. There are relationships between school stress and support from
family and teachers (Wenz-Gross, Siperstein & Parker, 1997). Poor adjustment in sixth
grade was related to higher levels of school stress and less social support from family and
teachers. Support from family was reported to buffer the negative effects of school stress on
self-concept. Parents should relinquish some of their power over early adolescents, support
them, and recognize their adolescent’s struggle to become a distinct individual (Garbarino,
1985). Also, social support from teachers was reported to buffer the negative effects of
school stress on liking school. Caring relationships with teachers are one of the main needs of adolescents (James, 1974). In addition, levels of stress in fifth grade predicted students’ experience of school stress during the transition. In turn, school stress during the transition predicted students’ level of school stress in sixth grade (Wenz-Gross, Siperstein & Parker, 1997). Discovering relationships are important, but further description of the roles parents and teachers may play need to be gleaned from students.

There are specific patterns of individual adjustment during the middle school transition with regard to gender. Early adolescents show significant changes in their adjustment following the transition to middle school (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998). These changes include increased psychological distress and decreased academic achievement. Students showing high levels of distress prior to transition represent early adolescents at greater risk for a stressful school transition than their peers. If these students could be identified in fifth grade, perhaps interventions could be done to help the transition. The best way to identify these students may be through observation and/or discussion.

The factors that contribute to motivation, achievement, and emotional functioning are interconnected. There are reciprocal relationships between school motivation and positive emotional function. As noted previously in the literature review, these external factors are intertwined. While relationships are evident between motivation and several different factors, the reasons for these changes in motivation needs to be explored further.

**Support Systems**

Support can either be physical or emotional. In either manifestation, support provides aid or assistance and/or adds strength to that which cannot stand on its own. Within the
context of this research, support systems describes the assistance a student gets from her family, peer group, or educational institution. These support systems aid or assist the student in traversing the adolescent time period and in developing academic prowess (Weldy, 1995). Families, peers, and teachers can have an influence on student’s academic achievement.

Because young children’s lives are centered initially within their families, the family environment becomes the first and foremost support system. Families today are more likely to conform to a medley of configurations. Some of the configurations could include a dual-earner family, one-parent households, blended or reconstituted families (Kimmer & Weiner, 1995). Regardless of the make-up, a family is defined as a primary group whose members assume certain obligations for each other and generally, though, not always, share a common residence (Barker, 1991). There is a positive relationship between family support and students’ school success (Cauce, Hannan, & Sargeant, 1992).

During the pilot study for my research, one of the themes that emerged was that of communication. The importance of this theme is documented in the literature. In order for family support to be effective, communication between the family and school is essential. A superintendent of schools in a large city in the Northeast conducted a study regarding communication and support within his district (Johnson & Williamson, 1998). Most of the phone calls to the superintendent’s office were from middle school parents and/or the “public.” To identify the specific concerns of parents and the public, surveys, general interviews, and exit interviews when students were leaving middle school to attend a private alternative school were conducted. An analysis of the surveys revealed seven major themes or categories of reasons why middle schools need to clearly communicate with families:

- Fear of anonymity brought about by larger school size,
• Confusions about curriculum,
• Lack of rigor and challenge tied to unclear curriculum,
• Lack of safety, sociability, and civility (lack of adult supervision in common areas such as hallways),
• Lack of responsiveness by teachers and administrators to parent contacts (most common concern),
• Instruction that was dull and boring,
• Poor parent and public relations (no clear point of contact and mixed messages).

The superintendent’s conclusion was that middle schools do not necessarily need to explain everything, but they must listen - quietly and sincerely - in order to benefit the adolescents and keep the focus on the students.

Another important support system, especially for adolescents, is the peer support group. Peer relationships play a significant role in adolescents’ cognitive development and in intellectual advances (Vygotsky, 1978). Peer relations serve varied functions in the academic lives of young adolescents. Interacting cooperatively with peers encourages learning in a mentoring or guiding atmosphere. Problem solving and the development of higher level cognitive functioning happen naturally in cooperative groups (Vygotsky, 1978). More recent research has established a significant link between elementary aged children’s academic achievement and peer relationships. Children between the ages of 6-11 who are not well accepted by their classmates tend to do less well than children who are more popular with classmates (Austin & Draper, 1984; Li, 1985; Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller & Skinner, 1991). Elementary aged children who do not have attachments to positive peer groups are
more at risk for dropping out of high school (Coi, Dodge & Kupersmidt, 1990). This is because cohesive social groups appear to be particularly influential in promoting and enforcing sets of norms and values that can either undermine or facilitate academic achievement (Furman, 1989). As students enter middle school, the potential of peer support groups for influencing the adoption of these norms or values may be especially strong. Identification with peers as well as pressures to conform to peer norms increase in early adolescence (Berndt, 1979; Brown, 1989). Social peer groups are important sources of support for the early adolescent in times of stress. Social support is the information available to a student from others that leads one to believe that she or he is cared for, valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations. Belonging with not belonging to is of major importance to early adolescents (James, 1974). Support from others has been shown to provide protection for a student facing a variety of transitions (Cobb, 1976). The effect of the elementary to middle school transition is particularly negative for girls and especially for early maturers who have begun to date (Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979). Girls who have experienced school level transition as well as the early physiological transformations of puberty have a greater risk for negative self-esteem. According to this study, one reason for the differential reaction of girls and boys to these environmental changes may be that, in early adolescence, girls’ values are shifting more fundamentally than are those of boys. Adolescents turn more to their peers for support than to parents or other adults in times of stress (Burke & Weir, 1978). Even more specifically, female adolescents exhibit a greater dependency on family and peers for emotional support than do males (Siddique & D’Arcy, 1984).
Young adolescents spend most of their time with family members and peers (Larson & Richards, 1991). Young adolescents’ adjustment to the school context is influenced by factors from both the family context and the peer context (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995). In particular, urban and culturally diverse adolescents’ self-reported relationships with family, peer, school and neighborhood groups are positively related to an adolescents’ perceived stress and daily hassles, and participation or involvement in extracurricular school activities (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, Feinman, Yoshikawa, Comtois, Gotz, Miller, Ortiz-Torres, & Roper, 1995). On a student self-reported survey, there was a decline in the magnitude of perceived stress when active support groups were in place for the adolescent. Also, there was a positive correlation between active participation in extracurricular activities and active support groups. This unique research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health and the Carnegie Corporation and reported the data both before and after a major school transition, both from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. The researchers noted that generalizing from the results should be cautious since the students were ethnically diverse, but not economically diverse.

The need to be needed, especially by peers, is strong in early adolescents (James, 1974). Peer relationships, as well as psychosocial characteristics, in early adolescence are directly linked in complex ways to academic achievement (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). As already mentioned in the section on academic achievement, peer relationship variables were significant predictors of students’ grades, both concurrently and over time. Group membership was the most consistent predictor of sixth-grade GPAs according to this research. Reciprocated friendships and peer acceptance were related less consistently to GPA when social and emotional characteristics of students were considered. This research
reported that belonging to a particular group is directly related to academic performance thus supporting developmental theories that early adolescents need to be needed (James, 1974).

Teachers can be an important support system within the school setting for young adolescent students. Improved interactions between students and teachers during middle school helps young adolescents fashion the means to deal and cope with their stresses (Roberson, 1994). Caring teachers foster emotional and intellectual growth of students (Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994). Opportunities for positive student-teacher relationship should be encouraged (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991).

Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy as well as a caring attitude are important (Midgley, 1991). After studying sixth and seventh grade teachers of math (with sixth grade being elementary and seventh grade being middle school), the sixth grade teachers, in general, had a stronger sense of efficacy than the seventh grade teachers. The sixth grade teachers anchored the sending side of the transition, and the seventh grade teachers anchored the receiving side of the transition. Because both sets of teachers felt positively about their potential for affecting student achievement and motivation, the students making the transition felt more certain of their academic abilities and were less likely to lose interest in academics.

Having positive relationships with mentoring adults is important for early adolescents (James, 1974). Teacher efficacy is also an important factor when regarding students’ expectations for themselves (Midgley, 1991). According to the literature, a study using a self-reporting survey reports that when teachers feel they can be effective facilitators in the classroom, students feel they can be successful.

The implications of the importance of support systems for adolescents are summarized well around this theme: There is a link between the study of adolescents’
behavior, motivation, and experience and the study of the teachers’ behavior, motivation, and experiences (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). To enhance the success of both adolescents and teachers, six considerations are proposed to strengthen the support link between them:

- Consider implicit and explicit school practices, including feedback and recognition practices,
- Include students’ voices in the learning process and give them some control over their own learning,
- Teach lessons that focus on meaningful life events, experiences, and ask questions that are meaningful to adolescents in their everyday life,
- Create schools that are smaller, or at best, schools-within-schools,
- Commit to care about all students; look critically into overt or covert practices of discrimination,
- Coordinate health and mental health services at the school site for at-risk students.

The literature on support systems provides information regarding relationships. If a deeper understanding of the role support systems play for early adolescents is desired, case study research would seem to be a likely method for acquiring that kind of information. An adolescent’s perception of self, of support systems, of stress would be useful for schools in designing programs for both teachers and students to address these issues. Each school, using results from their own action research and/or case study research, should design involvement practices that utilize the different support systems (Brough & Irvin, 2001). Listening to students as they transition is the logical method for gathering such descriptive data.
The School Environment

Different school environments play an important role in the transition from elementary to middle school. Developmentally responsive schools may be the key to alleviating some of the problems early adolescents experience during the elementary to middle school transition (Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Classroom and school environments that provide students the opportunity to develop their own thinking and to construct their own meanings are vital. Adolescents are at the stage of development where both specific knowledge (reading, writing, and math skills) and constructed knowledge are important. Teachers should recognize that different styles of teaching are essential and that knowledge can be culture-bound (Dimmock, 2000).

There are consistent development themes across the early and middle adolescent years literature – identity formation, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development, stress, academic achievement, motivation, peer and familial support. The simultaneous and sudden onslaught of these complex factors is the challenge for early adolescents (Forehand & Wierson, 1993). Concurrent transitions, new developmental tasks, and an intense peer orientation are likely to render middle school students more sensitive than older students to larger, impersonal environments. In terms of knowledge, using Piaget’s theory of cognitive and affective development when developing curriculum for middle school students is important (Wadsworth, 1989). Moving from concrete operations to formal operations should be of highest importance when designing lessons for middle school students as well as designing teacher education programs for middle school teachers. Motivation is related to environment, not puberty (Anderman, 1999).
Higher school enrollments and larger school size are associated with several important factors:

- Higher dropout rates (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987),
- Lower attendance rates and school behavior problems (Fowler & Walber, 1991; Haller, 1992),
- Less participation in student activities (Lindsay, 1982; Garbarino, 1985),
- And lower achievement (Caldas, 1993).

In all of these studies the main connecting factor was the decreasing number of relationship opportunities that students experience. Larger schools may have increased options for participation and relationships, but they have lower participation rates. As school enrollment increases, students become less positive about the social climate at the school (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987; Lindsay, 1982). A positive environment at school affirms normal adolescent development and fosters a sense of connection and common purpose among students and adult staff members (Meir, 1996). Collaborative learning between teachers and students promotes honest personal interactions (James, 1974). The effect of school size is directly related to three aspects of the environment at the middle school level: 1) school satisfaction, 2) teacher support, and 3) school safety (Bowen, Bowen & Richman, 2000). Schools with enrollments of 800 or more may be too large to ensure a satisfactory educational environment for middle school students, particularly for white students and for girls. Establishing a social environment that is supportive of adolescent development becomes more problematic in a larger school setting.

Adolescent perceptions of academic competence, valuing of school, and emotional health are important predictors of grades, conduct in school, and the quality of peer
relationships (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000). At the individual level, adolescents make meaning of their middle school in terms of how good a “fit” there is between the opportunities they desire and need and their experiences in the classroom as well as in the school as a whole. The need polarities that stress the need to fit in or belong with what is going on within the school, as well as the need to affect the outer world, are mutually supportive (James, 1974).

A decline in motivation can be linked to specific characteristics (teacher efficacy and teacher-students relationships) of the educational environments to which early adolescents are exposed. The adolescent’s education environmental context is the most important factor in sustaining motivation (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). If the middle school demonstrates the following characteristics – an increase in teacher (authoritarian) control along with a lessening in teacher efficacy and a decrease in teacher-student relationships-- then a negative impact on student motivation will be evident. A mismatch between adolescent students’ needs and the focus of the middle school curriculum and structure lead to fewer opportunities for students to be an integral part of their own learning. Serious efforts should be made to improve and expand opportunities for student-teacher relationships and provide an environment that will increase the teachers’ sense of efficacy. While these recommendations may be more helpful than correlations, there is no attempt to explain why motivation and environment are related (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). Developmental theorists might suggest this correlation exists because positive student-teacher relationships promote higher-level cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978), and a sense of belonging (James, 1974). Also teachers with a high sense of efficacy may be more likely to provide mentoring role models for students.
Elementary schools should consider making demands for independent work on their fifth grade students that might mirror the demands in middle school (Fenzel, 1989). Using questionnaires given to two middle schools and their three elementary feeder schools, data were gathered regarding role strains (stress), perceptions of competence, self-worth, social support and significant life events. Findings suggest that upper elementary school preparation with more emphasis on independent content learning can significantly affect the quality of middle school transition. Middle school teachers, especially in sixth grade, should ease students into the independent competitive world of content learning. Stress can be created by the dramatic change in focus of school environments (Anderman, Hicks, & Maehr, 1994). The research findings, significant to this topic of environment, indicate that the biggest adjustment students make following the transition to middle school focuses on the competitiveness of a content oriented curriculum. For the most part, middle school teachers are content trained and thus may emphasize outcomes and competition to their students. This is a far different atmosphere than students experience in elementary school where the focus of a student’s learning is more on individual learning and progression. The issue of testing and test results that drive the curriculum further supports this focus on outcomes. Another important contextual factor is the number of students a teacher may have contact with per day – 25-29 in elementary as opposed to 150 in middle school.

The school learning environment and its stress on either task or ability goals is related to student motivation and learning. A school environment that stresses learning (task goals) is more conducive to cognitive engagement than an environment that emphasizes the demonstration of ability (ability goals) (Maehr & Anderman, 1993). Students perceive the school environment as emphasizing either task or ability goals. The goals the students adopt
are important factors in their adaptive development (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). Not only does goal orientation correlate with emotional well being, but more importantly, task goals are more likely to facilitate learning and school achievement than ability goals. There is a direct, positive correlation between task goals (both personal and school) and positive learning as well as positive feelings about oneself. Establishing an identity by combining past experiences with present information depends on social interactions (Erikson, 1968). This is a particularly important issue in the life of a young adolescent who is characteristically conscious of self, and often worried about peer comparison. A middle school environment that promotes task goals should then promote positive well-being for young adolescents.

Motivational and social aspects of the classroom/school contextual features may be related to students’ affective experiences in school (Anderman, 1999). In fact, Anderman, in a separate study, uses the strong adjective vulnerable to describe the young adolescents’ state during the transition into a new school environment. The quality of the school environment is also important in developing adolescent resilience and coping (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Call & Mortimer, 2001).

Another important topic, which transcends all of the literature on school environment, is that of relationships. A student’s relationships inside the school environment play an important role in that student’s adjustment to and success within the school setting. Middle-school children feel less secure with their teachers than elementary-school children (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Adolescents are more likely to depend on support from their peers. The inverse is that older children are less likely than younger children to report that the perceived quality of their relationship with their mothers and teachers was secure. Why do the patterns
of the relationships change? Perhaps the interview information gathered from this research study will provide clues.

The research described in this section chronicles the importance of the school environment, including all of its contextual features and relationships. The challenge for my research was to obtain quality, descriptive information regarding the school environment. This information came directly from students, and the educators, as well as observations.

**Current Transition Programs**

Several programs are documented that attempt to help early adolescent students with the transition from elementary school to middle school. The first one is described as a “shadow” transition program. The “shadow” program allows fifth grade students to attend a middle school for one day and “shadow” a sixth grade student. To compare the social adjustment of students who participated in the program with students who did not participate, a survey was used. The data collected suggest two things: the “shadow” program is beneficial for students making the transition, and that elementary schools where students change teachers in the fifth grade have higher positive adjustment scores than those where fifth grade students were in the same room all day (Ferguson & Bulach, 1996).

Another transitional program is the School Transitional Environment Program (STEP) (Felner & Adan, 1988). This program was designed to alter key social characteristics common during this transition. The STEP program clusters students in groups that are assigned as a team. The team shares homerooms, and is in close proximity to the rooms where academic subjects are taught. This facilitates the students’ sense of comfort with the school environment and is especially helpful in a large school building with
multiple feeder schools. Another component of the STEP Program involves the homeroom
teachers serving as the primary link between the school and the student’s family. There
were significantly lower school absentee rates and higher grades for STEP program students
at the end of the first year.

A third idea for helping students is an elementary to middle school transition program
implemented in Missouri (Allen, 2001). The transition for students has three components:
In January, parents of fifth grade students attend an orientation night at the middle school.
Middle School Administrators, middle school guidance counselors then select six to eight
sixth grade students to visit the elementary school. In the spring, the fifth grade students
visit the middle school and meet in small groups with sixth graders to ask questions. In the
summer, the middle school conducts two-hour classes that meet at the middle school four
mornings a week. The goal of this last component is to give incoming students a better feel
for the school building layout, expose them to sample language arts lessons, and provide
instruction in the computer lab and in library research skills. Survey data collected reports
that this is a successful program. In addition, detailed descriptive data regarding this
program were collected through short answer questions. This information was very useful
when structuring the questions that guided this research study.

Young adolescents have both anxieties and keen anticipation regarding their
impending move from elementary to middle school (Odegaard, 1992). Because some of the
exploratory behaviors in which adolescents engage (e.g., substance use, delinquency, sexual
activity, academic involvement) can have an important impact on their future lives,
description information is imperative. Early adolescence is a key developmental transition –
a time in which pathways begin to take shape (Crockett & Crouter, 1995). Plans should be
made (Pohl, 1995), programs should be tried, revised, and retried to help students in early adolescence make a successful transition from elementary to middle school (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). A sound transition program can directly influence an adolescent’s formation of an identity as an active participant in the learning process and as a successful student (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Several focused transition programs have been reviewed. Using these program descriptions and the data gathered in my case study, recommendations are made that will support the aforementioned programs or underpin a newly developed transition program.

Summary of Literature Review

Good relationships, hard work, and high expectations are absolutely necessary when making the transition from elementary school to middle school (Cooke, 1995). Involved in the transition from elementary to middle school are several topics and influences—achievement, motivation, perception of self, support systems, and environment. The research literature suggests correlations and shows relationships between the topics and the transition students make. However, few provide explanations for their findings. This fact emphasizes the need to investigate the transition to determine how these factors interact and are perceived by both students and teachers.

Description and understanding are the best ways to gain this kind of qualitative research. Existing studies show what is known about a general area of inquiry and what is missing (Glesne, 1999). The literature review has supplied information regarding what some important factors are during the transition from elementary to middle school. A case study focusing on listening to the students’ voices as they transition is essential in order to add to
the literature regarding how and why the factors are important. Including the voices of the teachers on both sides of the transition add explanation to the findings of previous studies. My study, an in-depth investigation of the transition from students’ and teachers’ perspectives, is essential in order to provide rich description from students and teachers as the transition unfolds.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Standing on one side of the swinging bridge and looking across, feelings of confusion and ambiguity are swirling in your head. Crossing the bridge is the goal but what ticket do you need to be allowed to cross successfully? Did you see any signposts? Figuring out what method works best when crossing a bridge that is also moving while you are crossing is a big challenge. Should you watch others who are crossing? Perhaps talking with others who are about to cross would give you ideas. Can you find someone who has successfully crossed and ask her to share her method? “I do not want them to think I am afraid,” said Anthony in a shaky voice.

Methodology And Research Procedure

The focus of my case study research involves investigating the transition from elementary school to middle school from both an etic and an emic perspective. The etic perspective of this transition is presented using the metaphor of a swinging bridge. The delicacy and function of this bridge has been explained and the explanation interwoven by the researcher into the first two chapters of my study. The emic perspective was obtained by listening to the voices of students while they were making this transition as well as the voices of fifth and sixth grade teachers on both sides of the transition.
The rationale for using qualitative research, in particular, case study research, and a description of the research design and procedure continue in this chapter. Also included in this chapter are descriptions of the process used to select both participants (students and teachers) and settings. The data collection process, the data analysis process, and a detailed introduction to the participants and the settings (including the use of pseudonyms) follow. Concluding this chapter is a discussion of the validity, ethics, and the limitations of my study.

Research Design

Qualitative Research – the Case Study

My study examines the transition students make from elementary school to middle school. Qualitative research is the logical and appropriate choice for this investigation for several reasons. First, qualitative research is inquiry into the meanings people make of their experiences (Patton, 2002). The main characteristics of qualitative research are the naturalistic or actual settings, descriptive data, focus on the inductive process, and the meaning gathered (Bogdan & Bicklin, 1998). In addition, qualitative research uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic and is fundamentally interpretive (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). My study compliments these criteria by focusing on these characteristics:

- a particular setting (levels of schooling),
- descriptive data (interviews and observations),
- a focus on the process (transition),
- the inductive process (constructing meaning from interviews and observations by finding common, inherent themes and patterns),
• multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic (gathering the descriptive data), and

• meaning gathered or the interpretation (fueled also by my field notes).

Second, after analyzing the research questions, qualitative case study research was determined to be the best method for gathering the desired data. The case study, one type of qualitative research, is generally confined to an individual, program or, as in this study, a process. The strength of the case study lies in its inclusive nature, depth, and ability to enable readers to grasp relationships as they connect within the setting (Apple, 1978). Qualitative methods, such as case study research, provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This was the explicit intention of my research. While there are studies in the literature that describe the outcomes from the elementary to middle school transition, there is a lack of information concerning what happens during the transition. My purpose was to go beyond looking at surveys, test scores, and attendance rates and focus on students as they experienced the transition.

Third, qualitative case study research is the logical choice for acquiring descriptive information within a complicated environment. The varied contextual conditions inherent within a school setting cannot be easily separated from each other. My study was concerned with one phenomenon – the transition between school settings. The school setting contains different facets-- the pre-adolescent through adolescent stages of development, the support systems available or unavailable to the student, any unique personal characteristics of each student and teacher, as well as societal, media, and peer influences—all of these are integrated and relevant to each student. This myriad of connections can best be explored, analyzed, and understood through descriptive case study research. Case study research copes
with a situation in which there will be variables of interest and relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). In addition, case study research is a good choice when the interest is in understanding a unique situation (Stake, 1995).

When gathering information from the informants, personal presumptions were set aside so that I could listen to the voices telling their stories. The focus of my study is not primarily to explain the transition for prediction purposes, but rather to understand the process better. The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the participant’s point of view and to unfold the meaning of the participant’s experiences (Kvale, 1996). Using the students’ points of view combined with the teacher’s perceptions, a case study of the transition is the best method of collecting this type of data.

Finally, case study research is the logical answer to listening to student and teacher voices regarding the transition from elementary to middle school. Since the students “own” the different pieces of the elementary to middle school transition, listening to and including the voices of students can best be done through interviews and observation. Teacher interviews and my field notes will add to the description. A researcher should put her own reactions, as much as possible, into her field notes, (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). Case study research evolves from an inductive approach where the details that emerge from the study are considered in their context (Hamel, 1993). The points of view of informants are considered and valued.

A qualitative researcher sets out to collect data in a real situation that is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing (Glesne, 1999). Data in case study research are, at best, mediated by the self-reflection of the participants. For this reason, researchers need participants who are familiar with the setting, open, and knowledgeable. Thus choosing
students who were experiencing the transition from elementary school to middle school gives optimum opportunity to collect descriptive information. Choosing teachers who teach on each side of the transition also added important details. Qualitative case study research provides the depth of information that this complex phenomenon, the transition from elementary to middle school, requires.

Selection/Sampling

Student Participants

A type of purposeful sampling, maximum variation sampling, was done to select the student participants for this case study. Purposeful sampling is a sample from which the qualitative researcher can learn the most (Merriam, 1988). The logic and focus of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). In this case study, the purpose is to understand the transition process students go through when moving from elementary school to middle school. In order to obtain rich, descriptive information for my study, the student participants were chosen using maximum variation sampling. Variation of the sample avoids one-sidedness of the topic (Patton, 2002). Thus, this type of sampling includes as wide a range of variation in the students as possible. The wide-ranging criteria that were used to select student participants included the following (Table 3.1):

- Gender – equitable representation of males and females, if possible,
- Ethnicity – equitable representation of Caucasian-American, African-American, and any other minorities represented in the pool,
- Academic Achievement – equitable and representative of levels of academic achievement, i.e., low, average, above,
• Socio-economic status – equitable representation of different levels of economic living, i.e., low (free/reduced lunch status), average, and above average

• Chronological age (early adolescents mature at different rates; the ages range from just becoming ten to just becoming twelve),

• Rank in family, i.e., first child, second child, only child, etc.

• Exceptional children status; i.e., learning disabled, academically gifted, other health impaired, behaviorally disabled,

• Student assignment status – i.e., magnet or base, and

• Number of elementary schools attended.
Table 3.1  Maximum Variation Sampling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>GPA (self-reported)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Family Rank (self-reported)</th>
<th>EC</th>
<th>Assignment Status</th>
<th># Of Elementary Schools Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>*Anthony</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Betty</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ag.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittainy</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Only</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Only</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Edward</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Only</td>
<td>AG</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>W</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>AG</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
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<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Only</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Only</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>*Karen</td>
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<td>Youngest</td>
<td>AG</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Joshua</td>
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<td>Only</td>
<td>AG</td>
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<td>AG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
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<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>*Sandra</td>
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<td>Avg</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Only</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanti</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>AG</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Sharon</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Thomas</td>
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<td>Avg</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* students chosen for study

N=22

All of the selected schools, the elementary school and the three middle schools, are magnet schools. Each school has students who are assigned to them – base- and students who attend by choice – magnet. The elementary school is Frost Elementary, and the middle
schools are Crockett, Crosby, and Murray Middle Schools. All school names are pseudonyms.

The county’s magnet application process takes place in the months of February, March, and the beginning of April. That is when parents complete applications for the magnet program they choose for their children. In order to determine which students from Frost Elementary might be attending Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools, a letter was sent in early April to all parents of fifth grade students at Frost Elementary School (Appendix C). The letter explained to parents that I am a graduate student doing research on the transition students make from elementary to middle school. The letter asked the parents to indicate if they were applying to Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools or if their child is assigned to one of the three middle schools. A small incentive was given to the students who returned the letter regardless of which of the thirteen middle schools in the district they were attending. The incentive encouraged a high level of participation in the initial sampling strategy. Sixty-nine of the original 76 letters was returned (90.8%). From the letters returned that indicated an application was made to or an assignment was made to Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle School, a pool of preliminary participants was established at Frost Elementary School (28 students).

When the magnet selection process was completed, the student assignment office in the county sent out letters of acceptance in April. Frost Elementary students who were accepted were placed in a participant pool along with the students who were assigned to the three middle schools. The participant pool was limited to 22 students. Some who applied were not accepted.
A criteria grid was established for the 22 students and the aforementioned criteria were examined for each student (Table 3.1). Eight students were identified to form the final participant pool. An explanation of this research study and permission for the students to take part in the study was mailed to those identified students and their parents (Appendix D). One student declined, so another equitable student was offered a participant slot. Once permissions were obtained, observations of the students in their elementary surroundings and initial interviews were begun in May. Students were given remunerations at the beginning of each interview – the book, *Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul*, a computer disk carrier with three blank disks, a pencil pouch complete with pencils, pens, highlighters, post-its, a small notebook, and a bookmark, and a binder with dividers and notebook paper. Student participants were told they could leave the study at any time.

**Teacher Participants**

The teacher participants, both fifth and sixth grade, were selected by self-nomination. All possible fifth and sixth grade teachers were given the research descriptive information and then were selected as volunteers. Teachers were also given remuneration, the book, *The Power of Their Ideas*, for sharing their time and knowledge.

**Data Collection and Management**

The research took place from late April 2002 through October 2002. Student participant and teacher participant interviews as well as environmental observations supplied the primary data for the case study. Reflective journal writings (field notes) from the researcher were a secondary source of data. The specific data collected included taped
interview recordings, typed transcriptions of the interviews, notes and typed observations, and (journaling) field notes. These were organized chronologically by participant and kept in color-coded file folders in a plastic crate. All materials were dated and assigned titles for easy access. The audiotapes were destroyed after the transcriptions were complete. Several back-up computer disk files were created to avoid losing any data. All materials were kept in a locked closet at the researcher’s home when not in use.

Using the idea of Seidman’s (1998) three-interview process, student participant interviews supplied the bulk of the data. This process suggests the first interview should put the participant’s experiences in context, the second interview should give details of the actual experience, and the third interview should allow for reflection. While the structure of this process was used in interviewing students, the process was not strictly followed. The first half of the first interview in fifth grade investigated the student’s experiences in school as well as personal information. The second half of the first interview, as well as the second, third, and fourth interviews searched for details of the transition. The fourth interview and the focus group allowed for reflection (Appendix E).

This same three-step process was used in the teacher participant interviews. However, the process was initially condensed to be included in one interview (Appendix F). Teachers were asked to give information regarding their background, and then asked to share what they knew regarding the opposite level of schooling. Finally, teachers were asked to reflect upon what they did in their classrooms that might affect the transition. After analyzing the data gathered from the teachers’ interviews, I determined more information was needed. A phone interview was conducted with each teacher to gather more information regarding not only what he or she knew about the transition, but also why the teachers did not
do anything specifically related to the transition (Appendix F). Another focus of the phone interview was the perception teachers felt regarding teaching their particular grade level – fifth or sixth. The students had already shared the stresses they encountered, so gathering information regarding teacher perceptions of stress was deemed important to my research study.

Interviewing is not a simple process because it is not grounded in theory but in everyday actions (Dilley, 2000). Interviews are imperative to case study research because they help understand why situations are the way they are. The interviews in my study were exploratory, investigative, and descriptive in nature in order to provide background information as well as an understanding of the transition process from the selected participants’ point of view. Observations were not done as frequently as interviews, but were done in different settings to ensure a varied look at the students, the teachers, and their environment. The observations took place in different locations within the school setting and at different times of the school day - homeroom, core subject classes (math, language arts, science, and social studies), electives, lunch, and recess.

Four total individual interviews were conducted with students. The initial student interviews were done at the beginning of May, before state-mandated End of Grade Testing began. These interviews were conducted before and/or after school hours to create no distractions or interference with the instructional setting. Students were given small incentives for sharing their time, insight, and opinions regarding the transition. There was one interview in the summer in between elementary and middle school. This took place in a neutral place, the university library. I picked up each student, interviewed him or her, treated him or her to lunch or dinner, and returned the student home or to a summer camp program.
Student observations at Crockett Middle School and interviews, after participants had begun sixth grade, took place within the first two weeks of class in late July. Teacher interviews took place in August and an informational interview with the principal to gather information regarding Crockett Middle School took place in September.

Crosby Middle School and Murray Middle School observations and student interviews first took place around the middle of August. Teacher interviews and informational interviews with Crosby and Murray Middle School principals took place in September. A final student interview took place after students had received their first report cards in September or October. This interview focused on any changes students may be thinking of making in their role as a middle school student. Observations of the students in their elementary school as well their new middle school surroundings provided rich, descriptive information regarding the context within which the transition takes place. The interviews with the students before, during (the summer break), and after provided information regarding the feelings, strategies used, and happenings during the transition. At the students’ request, a focus group interview took place in late October. Students wanted to see each other and talk about their experiences. This was also done at the university library and then the group went out for dinner.

Teacher interviews were conducted once in person and one by telephone. This information was gathered from an educator perspective. Fifth grade teachers were interviewed once in June of 2002, and sixth grade teachers were interviewed once, either in August or September of 2002. The phone interviews were conducted in February 2003.
I relied heavily on the perceptions of the student and teacher participants. The importance of telling the participants’ stories using both the interactions with the researcher and the participants’ perceptions is the focus of case study research (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). The primary participants, the students, provided data while they were making the transition. The secondary participants, the teachers, provided data focused on either side of the transition or bridge.

To be sure, other perceptions were present within the interviews and observations and may have influenced the data gathered. The fact that the students already knew me as an administrator at the elementary school was a definite factor. However, being an inside researcher can present the following advantages (Arksey & Knight, 1999):

- Easier access,
- An informed knowledge of the culture, and issues of the setting,
- Shared experiences, interests and language, which can stimulate rapport and interviewer-interviewee interaction,
- Richer data: interviewees are more likely to be candid and open because they feel confident that the interviewer believes them,
- Easier to discern the authenticity of the account.

I found these advantages to be true. Being an insider, also presented a disadvantage – role confusion. The researcher remained aware of any concern expressed by the students and teachers in separating my roles –researcher first, administrator second. A journal of my perceptions also helped me stay focused and provided collaborating or disconfirming data.
Data Analysis

Wolcott (1994) describes data analysis as the identification of key factors in the study and the relationships among them. Interview and observation data were transcribed and then coded. These data were analyzed looking for themes, categories, and patterns that could be used to describe and explain the transition from elementary to middle school. I struggled with what to call my groupings: themes, categories or patterns. After looking carefully at the definitions of each word and analyzing what I was finding, I decided that the best term to use was theme, a recurring, unifying idea (Webster, 1996). There were also categories, divisions within a theme, which were easily identifiable. The task before me was not just the assignment of data to themes or categories. The task was a mutual fitting of data, themes, and categories (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996).

Once the themes and categories were identified, the informants’ files were marked indicating the themes and categories, along with the link made to each research question. A matrix using the categories as well as the themes and patterns was developed to help with the analysis and synthesis of the information gathered and the discovery of possible relationships among data as well as providing details for the rich description desired. See Tables 4.1 and 4.2.

The transition data were analyzed in several ways. One analysis was done across each participant’s interviews looking for themes for each individual student. Another analysis was done across the set of interviews; i.e., the first set during fifth grade, second set during the summer break, etc. The data gathered from teachers were analyzed and compared within the grade level groups, across the grade levels, and with the student data. These sets of analyzed data were then also compared to look for themes that were similar.
Setting/Environment

Frost Elementary School

The first half of my study occurred in an urban elementary school, Frost Elementary, situated in the southeastern part of the United States. This school was chosen mainly for its diverse student population. Other factors considered were the constructivist philosophy espoused by staff, the organizational structure that allows students to change classes for certain subjects, and its small number of students. Approximately 500 students attend the school from 9:00 am until 3:30 pm. It is designated a gifted and talented magnet elementary school. The designation of magnet school means Frost Elementary draws students from the western and southern parts of the county to complement the students who are assigned from a base area around the inner-city school. Magnet students travel up to one hour each way on a school bus or by car to get to the school.

The term “gifted and talented” denotes a diverse selection of electives offered to all students two periods of the school day, Monday through Thursday. The philosophy behind the electives is that all students have gifts and talents, and the elective program will nurture those talents. The electives are offered in the four content areas – math, language arts, social studies, and science – as well as art, dance, drama, physical education, foreign language, computers, band, and orchestra.

The original red brick one story school building was built in 1960 and was the last school building built before racial integration and the merger of city and county schools school system. An addition was added in 1990 to accommodate the extra teachers in the
magnet program. Frost Elementary was renovated two years ago: new roof, lights, doors and windows, carpeting, stage curtains (dark blue velvet), blue vinyl gym floor, and paint (beige, yellow and blue – the school colors). Frost Elementary’s hallways form a square around a courtyard in the middle. The inside rooms have windows and doors that overlook the courtyard. In the courtyard are raised beds for planting (the electives, Green Thumb and Grow It use the raised beds as do classroom teachers), a recycling water fountain, designed by the art teacher and covered with tiles made by students, a greenhouse and a storage shed as well as bushes, two large oak trees and four picnic tables. Students were observed eating lunch outside with teachers and friends on two different occasions. The outside rooms have doors leading to the outside area around the school. There is a long hallway off one corner of the square that houses the fourth and fifth grade classrooms as well as two multi-aged (grades 3, 4, and 5) self-contained special program classrooms. These self-contained special programs’ rooms are included in this hallway for mainstreaming purposes.

Approximately half of the student population at Frost Elementary is designated magnet and half is designated base. The student body is made of up of approximately 45% Caucasian and 55% minority. The minority groups are African-American (45%), Asian-American (8%), and a few diverse students make up the rest (Arabic, Russian, Hispanic, Brazilian.) About fifty students walk to school; about three hundred fifty ride the school bus, and about one hundred are carpoolers.

There are three fifth grade classrooms, and the three teachers supplied data regarding their knowledge of middle school and the transition students make. The fifth grade classes have heterogeneous homerooms, but some students change classes for math/science, and language arts. Frost Elementary’s service delivery model for the academically gifted
program is to group all the gifted students together for reading and for math, so some of the students must change classes. The number of students that do change is kept to a minimum when the administrators form the classes. The homeroom teacher teaches one of the three core subjects mentioned plus social studies. There are eight periods or blocks during the school day (approximately 45 minutes long), including two electives, one special class (art, computers, dance, drama, music, physical education, Spanish or French) and lunch/recess. The electives for the fifth grade are the last two periods of the day while the special is during the morning and breaks up the content subject periods. Teachers have a common planning time and meet weekly with administrators and the Instructional Resource Teacher (curriculum specialist). Bell tones signal the start of the day, the change of classes for electives, and dismissal. The hallways are narrow and extremely crowded when students are changing classes and toting all of their belongings.

Crockett Middle School

The second half of my study took place at three different magnet middle schools located in the same school district: Crockett Middle School, Crosby Middle School, and Murray Middle School. These magnet middle schools were chosen because of the diversity of their student populations, also. A brand new middle school, Crockett Magnet Middle School, opened in August 2000 for the 2000-2001 school year. The red brick, two-story building is surrounded by open land near a state university. This middle school has some of the same characteristics as the elementary school: diverse student population, constructivist focus, and relatively small size. It is designated as a magnet school because of its modified school calendar. Crockett Magnet Middle School has an assigned base population and also
has magnet students that come from the entire county. Crockett Middle School is also located in an urban setting in the southeast, is smaller in size (600) than other middle schools in the county, and is in close proximity (approximately three miles) to Frost Elementary School.

Crockett Middle School operates on a modified calendar with a ten-day to three-week break following each nine-week grading period. The school hours are 7:45 am until 2:30 pm. At Crockett Middle School, the principal believes in constructivist theory and hires teachers with matching belief systems. The middle school has two teacher teams, and the core team teachers have a common planning period. There are specialist teachers (art, music, physical education, computers, foreign language) who teach “exploratory” classes – one per day per grade level. Sixth grade students attend their core classes on two-teacher teams, and have one exploratory class.

Several physical differences are apparent at Crockett Middle School as compared to the other middle schools and the elementary school. One is the width of the hallways. The hallways appear much wider than Frost Elementary, Crosby Middle School or Murray Middle School; indeed, three students were observed walking side by side and talking between classes with plenty of room for two more students to pass on the opposite side. The overall open architecture creates a spacious, less crowded feeling. The many windows, skylights, and lighting enhance this roomy feeling along with the absence of lockers in the hallways. The pale paint scheme, complimented by the cleanliness of the building, especially the floors and walls, added to the calm atmosphere. Also noted was the lack of bells to dismiss students for classes. At all of the schools involved in the study, even Frost Elementary school, loud droning tones ring to signal the change of class, as well as the
beginning and the end of the day. The only bells at Crockett Middle School are at the
beginning and the end of the day, and the sound is a “soft dinging three times” not a loud
harsh tone. There were several teachers in the hallways, some walking with or in the
opposite direction of most students, and some teachers were talking with students.

The building is set up in “quadrants or houses – sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth
grade.” The houses are separate squares with the classrooms around the outside and a large
seating area in the middle for “group activities.” The lockers separate the seating area and
the classrooms. There are lockers, restrooms and water fountains within each house. The
sixth grade is on the first floor along with the cafeteria, the gymnasium, and exploratory
elective classrooms. Sixth grade students take only one elective per day. The seventh and
eighth grade houses are on the second floor with the media center. The classrooms are set up
in twos (two teacher teams) with a connecting door in between.

**Crosby Middle School and Murray Middle School**

Crosby Middle School and Murray Middle School are designated as gifted and
talented magnet schools, the same as Frost Elementary School. They are both located in the
same urban setting as Crockett Middle School, have the same hours (7:45 am until 2:30 pm),
and have some students who are assigned to the schools and some who choose to attend.
Both Crosby Middle School and Murray Middle School consist of several red brick one- and
two-story buildings. (In the southeast it seems that red brick schools are as commonplace as
the red clay.) Both schools have been recently renovated. There is obvious visual distinction
between the “unrenovated part and the renovated part.” The additions have been made to
accommodate more students. The type of wall surfaces changes from cement block to wallboard as you move among the newer and older parts of the building. The ceilings in both schools are much lower than at Crockett Middle School and the hallways are much narrower, indicating their age. Together with the lack of windows and dim lighting in the hallways, the atmosphere is darker and gloomier. Three students abreast at Crosby and Murray take up the whole hallway. When the bell rings its loud, droning tone, students spill into the hallways carrying or pulling bookbags, along with other assorted belongings – instruments, projects, etc. The din makes it hard to talk, especially if students are trying to get into lockers. Lockers line most of the hallways and are stacked one on top of the other. The hallways are loud and congested at class change, and dismissal is even more chaotic. There were few teachers noted in the hallways during class changes or at dismissal. A few teachers were in doorways during arrival but several were observed arriving after the bell rang.

The teams at Crosby and Murray Middle School consist of four teachers – math, science, language arts, and social studies. Three of the classrooms are in close proximity to each other, but the science room is not always close by. Since the science lab is a specialized room and since both the schools have grown in student populations, sometimes the science lab is “upstairs or downstairs from my other classes.”

The three middle schools are different in several other demographic ways. Among these are the following differences:

- **Total student population** - Crockett (600); Crosby and Murray (1200 each);
- **Number of electives each day** – Crockett (1); Crosby and Murray (3);
- **Size of teacher teams** – Crockett (50); Crosby and Murray (100).
• **Age of building** – Crockett (2 years old), Crosby (45 years old with partial renovations within the last two years), and Murray (20 years old with partial renovations within the last two years).

**Participants**

The participants in my study were seven fifth grade students who attended Frost Elementary School. Although the study started with eight participants, one female participant moved out of the county during the summer. The seven student participants attend three different middle schools - Crockett Middle School, Crosby Middle School, and Mayberry Middle School. Three fifth grade teachers and four sixth grade teachers, representing each of the three middle schools, also provided information through interviews. All participants were provided the informed consent form and agreed to participate. Pseudonyms were assigned to the students and teachers to provide anonymity. After the students and teachers had read the consent form, I answered any questions they had to ensure understanding. The student participants will be referred to as Anthony, Edward, Joshua, Karen, Sandra, Sharon, and Thomas. The fifth grade teachers are referred to as Ms. Black, Ms. Smith, and Mr. Harrod. The sixth grade teachers are designated as Ms. Davidson, Ms. Zellner, Ms. Adams, and Ms. Myers.

**STUDENTS**

**Anthony**

Anthony is a ten-year-old Caucasian American male who was born in Moscow, Russia. He and his mother immigrated to the United States when Anthony was four.
Anthony’s mother is an engineer, and they have lived in three southeastern states where he went to kindergarten and first grade in one state, second and third in a second state, and fourth and fifth in yet a third state. While he attended fourth and fifth grades in the same school district, Anthony attended two different schools. Anthony has attended a total of four different schools during his elementary school years always maintaining above average grades. He does not have an exceptional children identification as gifted, but prides himself on hard work and “high marks.” Anthony plays the violin in the school orchestra in fifth grade and hopes to continue his music studies. He has attended Frost Elementary School just one year – fifth grade. The new house his mother bought is in the area assigned to Frost Elementary, so he is a base student. His older sister has recently completed “university” in Russia, has come to live with him and his mother, and hopes to find a job in the United States. They are also expecting his grandmother to come and live with them.

Anthony attends Crockett Middle School as a magnet student. He and his mother had visited several magnet middle schools and decided to apply to Crockett because of the small size, close location to their home, and the philosophy of the school. He and his mother attended an open house in February, which helped them make the decision to apply to Crockett. He was accepted as a magnet student.

Anthony is an outgoing, cheerful, positive young man who at the same time is serious about his schoolwork- “the best thing about fifth grade is I passed the End of Grade test.” He has two pets--a calico cat, Chris, and a tan hamster named Hammy. The hamster was a present when he completed fifth grade. During the second interview, he shared that he had to move the hamster out of his room because it kept running in its wheel all night and kept him awake. Playing outside with friends, riding bikes, playing basketball, and playing games as
Anthony enjoys watching Japanese cartoons, and at this time would like to be a cartoonist for a career.

**Edward**

Edward is a ten-year-old Caucasian-American, who has always lived in the same house in the same neighborhood with his mother and father. Edward, an only child, attended Frost Elementary School as a magnet student. He works hard to maintain above average grades and is identified as a moderate academically gifted student in both reading and math, which means he is learning approximately one year above grade level. His mother and father work for the state government.

Edward attends Crockett Middle School as a magnet student. He and his mother chose to apply for Crockett Middle School after visiting several middle schools during the magnet application process. Also, a friend, who lives in his neighborhood, attends Crockett Middle School and told him good things about it. Edward was accepted to Crockett Middle School because he believes “you have a better chance of going to the schools you want if you are a magnet student.” He is a carpooler in the morning, dropped off by mom or dad at approximately 7:30 am, and rides the bus home in the afternoon.

Edward is a serious but fun-loving young man with a ready smile. Well-traveled is another adjective to describe Edward – he has visited many different places including Washington, DC, Atlanta, GA, Myrtle Beach, SC, Grand Canyon, AZ, and Snowshoe, VA.
He skis as well as plays ice hockey on weekends and enjoys fishing with his cousins and his dad. Edward loves to play outside with his friends riding bikes. A pet dog named Freckles, a Brittany Spaniel, is his “best friend.”

**Joshua**

Joshua is a ten-year-old African American male who has always lived in the same house with his mother, grandmother, and younger cousin. He is an only child, and his mother teaches ceramics at the local parks and recreation center. His father, who does not live with the family, is a mechanic. Joshua’s home is in the immediate neighborhood surrounding Frost Elementary School, and he was assigned there as a base student. He attended Frost Elementary School from kindergarten through fifth grade. He plays mostly by himself, stating “Sometimes I throw a frisbee for myself, and sometimes I ride my bike around my house, but only go one block. Mostly I rest and play on my computer.” Joshua is identified as an academically gifted student with moderate needs for differentiation, meaning he is achieving one year above his grade level. He qualifies for reduced breakfast and lunch under federal guidelines.

Joshua was assigned to Murray Middle School based on his home address, but his mother requested a transfer so that he could attend Crosby Middle School. The transfer was granted because Crosby Middle School is about six miles closer to his home, and his mother wanted Joshua to be part of the after school program where she works. Also, Joshua was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at the end of fifth grade, and his mother wanted him to be close by if she was needed. Joshua has gone to training to learn to manage the diabetes and is being considered for an insulin pump at the end of his sixth grade year. He takes insulin
readings several times a day in the nurses’ office at school, and he is extremely aware of what and when he eats. Joshua is a carpooler both morning and afternoon, as mom drops him off and picks him up.

Joshua is a serious young man with a dry sense of humor. Doing well in school is important to him. He works hard on his schoolwork and spends long hours to be sure it is his best. He loves to draw and design car bodies and would like to be an automobile designer as a career. Joshua also loves to “be on the internet and send and receive email.” His mother bought him a digital camera as a present for completing elementary school, and he is learning to use it. He does not play outside much because “mom is concerned about the neighborhood.”

Karen

Karen, a ten-year old Caucasian American female, is the youngest member of her family. The other members include her mother, her father, and an older brother and sister. Her older brother and sister are in college. Her family raises and shows Sheltie dogs. She has attended Frost Elementary for four years – second through fifth grade. Her mother is a veterinarian, and her father is an engineer. The family has a second home at the beach and a boat as well as two vans. Karen was a magnet student at Frost Elementary School, and her parents chose to request magnet status for her between first and second grades because of the electives offered at Frost Elementary. Karen is designated as an academically gifted student, with strong differentiation needs in reading (achieving two years ahead of her grade level) and moderate differentiation needs in math (achieving one year ahead of her grade level).
Karen has always obtained well above average grades and scored at the highest level on her end of grade tests in reading and math.

Karen attends Crosby Middle School as a magnet student. Her older brother and sister also attended Crosby Middle School. She rides the bus both to and from school, getting on the bus at 6:40 am and getting home at 3:30 pm.

Karen is a responsible, serious young lady. She readily joins in school activities. At the third interview, she was dressed for “Remember When” day during school spirit week in a poodle skirt, high heels, and a black sweater with her hair in a pony tail. She lives out “in the country” with no other kids her age around so she spends most of her time with the show dogs. Karen spends approximately three to four hours a night on middle school homework trying to be the best student she can be. Language arts is the hardest subject for her. Karen and her family visit their beach house every summer for two or three weeks and go fishing from their boat. She hopes to be a veterinarian and states she “must do her best to get a scholarship to college.” She also might be a singer. “Everyone who hears me sing says I could be in the music business.”

**Sandra**

Sandra, an only child, is an eleven-year-old Caucasian American female, who lives with her mother and father. She has always attended Frost Elementary School and has always lived in the same home. Both of Sandra’s parents work, and she spends time after school with a neighbor until her parents come home. She is an average student who works hard to get above average grades.
Sandra is attending Crosby Middle School as a magnet student. Her family chose to apply to Crosby because it has a similar program to Frost Elementary. She arrives at school around 7:30 am when her father drops her off. She rides the bus home, arriving around 3:20 pm. She is involved in school activities: i.e., singing in the chorus and being elected to student government.

Sandra is a fun-loving young lady with a logical outlook on life. She is confident and popular and she is not afraid to speak her mind. “I think going to middle school will mean parties and fun, but then I think, ’wait a minute. This is school and this is a place to learn.’ I think balancing the fun and learning will be a big challenge.” She got contacts to replace her glasses at beginning of sixth grade and is still adjusting to them. She loves to visit relatives in California and Florida. She also visits every summer with grandparents in Michigan. Animals are a favorite for Sandra including her dog, Nikki. Sandra loves to ride horses and wants to be a barrel racer. She also loves to read “real stories, not fiction, hang out at the mall with her friends, and write poetry at night while looking out my bedroom window.”

**Sharon**

Sharon is an eleven-year-old African American female who has always lived in the same city in the southeastern United States. Sharon lives with her younger brother, her mother, and her mother’s boyfriend. She has attended four different elementary schools due to moving among public housing complexes. In addition, public housing complexes are often reassigned when the school system redistricts where students attend school. She has attended Frost Elementary School for two years – fourth and fifth grade. Sharon struggles with her academic work and is identified as learning disabled in reading and math. She
receives extra help from an exceptional children’s resource teacher and has modifications to take her end of grade test on the computer. She passed both reading and math tests. Sharon qualifies for free lunch and breakfast under federal guidelines and was assigned to Frost Elementary School because her family is renting a home within the base area. Sharon repeated the first grade, and her younger brother is now only one grade behind her. Sharon was selected for the track team at Frost Elementary and hoped to be on a track team in middle school.

Sharon is assigned as a base student to Murray Middle School. She rides the bus to and from school every day. Sharon’s mother’s boyfriend uses the one older family car to go to work; Sharon’s mother rides the bus to work as a housekeeper for a local hotel. Sharon had not visited Murray Middle School. When I found out that she had not seen her “new” school, I took her to visit her middle school after the conclusion of the second interview in July. Sharon was excited to be able to tell her friends in the neighborhood that she had seen her “new” middle school, as few of them had visited it either.

Sharon is a very spirited young lady who thinks school is “important, but mainly a place to be with friends.” Sharon likes to “hang out” with her friends in the neighborhood as well, talk on the telephone (when it is turned on), and watch television. She has never visited anywhere outside of her immediate area; she replied that she rides the bus to visit her grandma who lives about two miles away.

**Thomas**

Thomas, a ten-year-old African American male, has always lived in the same house in the same neighborhood and has always attended Frost Elementary School as a magnet
student. He lives with his mother, father, and older brother, who completed Crosby Middle School this year. Thomas has always obtained above average grades through hard work, persistence, and his parents’ help. While Thomas did not qualify for exceptional student status as a gifted student in math, he has taken electives designated for gifted students. Thomas played the trumpet in the band at Frost Elementary School (“I was first chair”) and hope to be in the band at middle school, too. His mother and his father are both insurance agents.

Thomas is attending Crosby Middle School as a magnet student. His family applied to Crosby Middle School because of his brother’s good experience there. His mother drops Thomas off each morning at 7:30 am. He rides the bus home each afternoon and gets home around 3:20 pm. He is in the intermediate band as a sixth grader (only three sixth graders are in the intermediate band) and he is very concerned about making friends. He cried during the third interview when he talked about the fact that all of the friends he knew were on the “gifted” team. When asked during the fourth interview if he had found new friends, he stated, “Yes, a few. There is Matthew and Peter who are in two of my classes.”

Thomas is a very serious yet funny young man, who worries a lot, especially about friends and schoolwork. He enjoys the electives more than the core subjects at school. He enjoys recess because he likes listening to gossip about others. He states, “I hear but I don’t pass it on.” He has visited several theme parks with his family; i.e., Disney World, King’s Dominion, and Carowinds, as well as spending time at the beach. He attends church three times a week and his parents push him to be involved in sports such as basketball and football, but “I really don’t like playing on teams.”
# Table 3.2

Transition from Frost Elementary to Crosby, Crockett, and Murray Middle Schools

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<th>FROST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</th>
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FIFTH GRADE TEACHERS

Ms. Black

Ms. Black, a twenty-six year veteran teacher, has taught at all levels from kindergarten to high school. She has also taught in five different states as her husband’s job transferred the family. Her specialty is reading and language arts, but she has also been a test coordinator, a reading specialist, and a summer school coordinator. She has three grown children. She taught fourth grade language arts at Frost Elementary school the previous year and was teaching fifth grade language arts when my study took place. She has had no formal education focusing on teaching adolescents.

Ms. Black stated that she became a teacher because “my uncle, a psychologist, gave me a test when I was in grade school, and it said I should be a teacher.” She enjoys teaching upper elementary students because “they understand the underlying meaning of what you are saying. You can relate things to world events more than in lower elementary.” Ms. Black believes that “students want to be challenged.” She prides herself on using higher-level questions; i.e., “What do you think? Explain what you mean.”

Ms. Smith

Ms. Smith, a twenty-year veteran teacher, has taught in two large cities in the southeastern part of the United States. She has taught both sixth and fifth grades, although both settings were in an elementary school. For the last seven years, she has taught fifth grade math and science at Frost Elementary. She has two grown children of her own and two grown stepchildren. When her children were young, she stayed at home for ten years.
During this past year, she has successfully been treated for cancer. While she has had no “formal training” to teach early adolescents, she stated, “You need to develop a working relationship with them and have open communication while at the same time maintaining control.” She prides herself on her relationships with her students. She describes herself as “strict,” and she enjoys teaching math and science more than language arts or social studies.

**Mr. Harrod**

Mr. Harrod, a fifteen-year veteran teacher, has taught fifth grade at Frost Elementary School for eight years. He previously taught seventh grade in a middle school setting for seven years in a small southeastern city. He chose to become a teacher because pre-med was “too difficult and I would become too involved with my patients.” Art and drama were also an interest for him, and he “could tie those subjects into teaching.” He also reminisced about two high school biology teachers he had had that he considered very inspiring. “They team taught and made you feel comfortable learning; they were the biggest role models I had during my time in high school.” While teaching at the middle school level, he wrote curriculum for a basic life skills elective. He moved from seventh grade to fifth grade for a change of pace, but “didn’t want to go too far down, certainly not to kindergarten.”

Mr. Harrod stated that if students enjoy learning, the comfort level would be there, and they would want to be part of the learning process. Students will feel it is “OK to mess up and try it again with my help.” He prides himself on working with difficult students.
SIXTH GRADE TEACHERS

Ms. Davidson

Ms. Davidson has taught math in sixth grade at Crosby Middle School for three years. She is the only teacher interviewed who has a degree in middle grades education, specializing in math. She also has a master’s degree in special education. Middle school students are her first choice for teaching because “I don’t like little kids crying, and I don’t like big kids telling me where to go. I think middle school is a moldable age group. I feel more influential here.” Attending a teaching college because it was next door to her boyfriend’s college got her started in education. She is originally from the Northeast and moved to the southeast when her husband’s job transferred them.

Ms. Davidson enjoys working with her four-teacher team; she is the math teacher, and she also teaches two electives. The two main factors, according to Ms. Davidson, in successfully working with middle school students are “patience and consistency. Period. End of story.” These factors were stated emphatically with a flourish of her hand, which ended up palm down on the table.

Ms. Zellner

Ms. Zellner, a veteran teacher of seven years, teaches sixth grade science at Crosby Middle School. She is from the Midwest and moved to the Southwest seven years ago. She became a teacher because “I love working with kids.” Music education is her first degree, but in the 1980’s jobs for specialists were cut. Substituting took Ms. Zellner into the science arena by accident. This was in a parochial school in the Midwest. She worked there three years, but “people picking up food stamps were making more money than I was.” A position
at a car factory (where all of her family worked and where her family expected her to work) introduced her to her husband and showed her that she really missed teaching. She went back to college and earned a master’s in math and science education because for her “it is all about the kids.” Her husband was transferred to the southeast, and she accepted a job at Crosby Middle School. “I wasn’t asked if I wanted the position. I was told when to report. I fell into sixth grade science by accident. I really wanted eighth grade math. I stayed in sixth grade because the children come in and they’re still so happy to see you. They want to be hugged. The hormones haven’t hit hard yet.”

Ms. Zellner recently completed a Master’s Degree in Media and would like to transfer to a media specialist position. She feels she could have a greater impact on more students as a media specialist at the middle school level. “Helping students locate information and seeing the challenge of real learning is what I ultimately want to do.”

Ms. Adams

Ms. Adams is a veteran teacher of nine years who teaches sixth grade language arts and social studies at Crockett Middle School. She taught fifth grade for eight years before moving to Crockett Middle School this year. Having always lived in the Southeast, she became a teacher because “it was the only thing I could think of that I could make a career out of when I went to college.” Her mother had been an educator. Ms. Adams was a successful student, so it seemed logical to her to become a teacher. A teaching scholarship ensured she would teach at least four years. “A sense of humor is the biggest asset to working with this age group,” Ms. Adams declared. “I use humor to try to defuse situations and to explain with analogies or ‘life lessons.’”
Ms. Adams has been involved in several areas of education; i.e., peer coaching, mentoring, because “I want to give something back.” She is a self-proclaimed political activist for education. She is working on an administration degree and hopes to be a middle school administrator in the near future.

**Ms. Myers**

Ms. Myers is a second year teacher at Murray Middle School. She teaches language arts and is a native of the Southeast. She became a teacher instead of a doctor because “I become too emotional and that’s a problem. It can be a problem in teaching, too. However, it is not so life and death.” (Her father is a doctor.) Ms. Myers attended private school her whole school career. She chose to teach at the sixth grade level because “sixth grade was my worst year in school. I hated all the gossip and cattiness.” I really love teaching sixth grade, however, because they are old enough to have a lot of personality, but young enough that you can still teach them. They are excited most of the time.”

Ms. Myers stated that her number one goal is for her students to feel safe at school. She used to think only teaching the content was important but now believes “you have to set up the environment for them so that they feel comfortable, I mean emotionally safe, and then everything else falls into place.” She says she is a little “overwhelmed” by all of the requirements for teachers that go far beyond teaching.

**Reliability**

In qualitative research the focus is on description and explanation of the context as seen by those participants who are experiencing it. Thus, repeating the exact case study
would not necessarily “measure” or obtain the same descriptions or explanations. Every person sees the world around him differently and uniquely. Replication of a case study could be difficult because human behavior is always changing (Merriam, 1988). Three important aspects of reliability in case study research are a clear description of the participants, the basis for selecting them, and a detailed description of the context within which the study takes place. These three important aspects have been extensively described in my study.

Reliability in qualitative research can be established through careful documentation and analysis: i.e., personal accounts, interviews, written observations (Merriam, 1988). Merriam (1988) uses the word dependability, which is more consistent with the focus of case study research. Dependability helps ensure that the reader will concur with the results given the presented data. Replication is not necessary but having results that are dependable, consistent with data gathered, and logical are the foundation of case study research. Some case study research has been poorly documented and even if a researcher did want to or could replicate the study, it would be next to impossible because of poorly kept documentation (Yin, 1994). Keeping and organizing the data collected, as well as being focused on telling the students’ stories with the support of the teachers’ reflections, will help ensure accuracy in this case study.

Validity

Validity of an instrument can discussed or defended, but discussing or defending the validity of a case study is more difficult. Since case study research is grounded in the natural context, nothing is certain, everything is perspective. Therefore, discussing the processes and procedures used are one way to feel confident about case study research. In my case study of
students making the transition from elementary to middle school, collecting data includes interviews before, during, and after the transition as well as observations before, during, and after in several different contextual surroundings; i.e., classrooms, playground, cafeteria, hallways. Interviews that build rapport, trust, and openness and which give participants a forum to express the way they see things enhance validity (Arskey & Knight, 1999). Collecting, transcribing, dating, and color-coding these from the five participants provided the bulk of the data I gathered. Keeping up with the information, staying organized, and explaining the organizational scheme in my research was imperative to substantiate my interpretation of the students’ perspectives regarding the transition.

One method of establishing understanding and ensuring plausible explanations in case study research is triangulation. Triangulation involves using multiple sources (interviews, observations, reflective writings) and cross-referencing their perspectives for common themes, patterns, phrases, etc. This is the main method I used for examining the students’ and teachers’ perspectives, as well as my own.

There could be several threats to validity. The researcher’s presence and administrative role may have changed the behavior of the participants. However, the researcher had no evaluative or judgmental power over the students or teachers, so this effect was lessened. It was agreed ahead of time that the other administrator at the elementary school would handle any interaction with the selected participants and/or their families at the school level. The participants and families also understood this before the start of the research. I came to know the participants, not just as students or teachers but also as people. Becoming more familiar with the students through interviews and observations facilitated my ability to see the world of “school” through their eyes and the transition they underwent from
their perspectives. I have continued a relationship with those students who have expressed interest in doing so. We email each other, and I have met two of them for lunch.

Researcher bias was always a possibility, but being cognizant of the possibility helped clear the lens I used to see and made the clarity of listening a priority. Threats to validity should be minimized through the use of participant interviews at various times (not during the instructional day) during the school year AND random observations of participants within the context of the school day.

The focus of case study research is to investigate and describe a situation within its natural context. In fact, Stake (1995) calls case study a poor basis for major generalization, but the reader can draw his/her own generalizations. However, generalizations can be drawn from the particular case being studied if, in fact, certain responses come up again and again. The case study’s focus is particularization (Stake, 1995). From a particular case studied in depth, unique knowledge is gained. It could be problematic to assume any generalization from a case study. It may be generalized if the case is typical of the phenomenon, but the consumer (reader) should make the final generalization of the finding rather than the researcher. My desire was to understand this transition from the students’ point of view with support from teachers’ reflections. Contributing to the overall literature concerning transition is another major reason for this research.

**Limitations of the Study**

Subjectivity is the very nature of qualitative research. It is a given that qualitative research, particularly case study research, does not produce specific, definitive answers to questions or allow generalizations that will alter major educational programs. Case study
research, while time consuming, does give in-depth information that cannot be found within objective, quantitative research. It is the researcher’s responsibility to acknowledge her own subjectivity toward the research topic and “keep notes” (Glesne, 1999). The researcher must be aware of subjectivity when gathering or analyzing data, as well as when interpreting it. If the researcher is keenly aware of her own perspectives, it can help to observe with new “glasses” on. Subjectivity needs to be monitored not controlled (Glesne, 1999), for in monitoring more is learned about beliefs, values, interests, and needs.

For my study this was particularly important, as I was in familiar surroundings during the first half of my data collection. The students were also familiar with me and I with them. Keeping a journal of my personal feelings and reactions helped me with the monitoring process.

While only a small sample, seven students, were involved in this study, an in-depth description is the focus. Understanding through perception, not generalizability, is the objective of case study research. Perhaps, further, expanded research possibilities or different directions will be pointed out at the conclusion of analysis.

**Ethics/Confidentiality**

Ethical dilemmas are always possible during the collection of data, especially collecting interview and observational data. There are several issues involved with case study research and ethics, particularly the case study I am conducting. The first issue was confidentiality. This research was conducted with profound respect for students’ and teachers’ voices. Students and teachers were assured confidentiality throughout the process. I assured them that school personnel would not be able to identify who said what in this
study. The goal of the research was stated at the beginning of every interview, and
participants were given the chance to ask questions at the end of every interview.

Permission to conduct research was obtained from the school system, as well as the
university. After a review by the Institutional Review Board, permission to interview and
observe the students was obtained from their parents and from the students themselves. The
students are young and naïve and could be easily led with questions or with wanting to please
the interviewer. I assured the participants and their parents that confidentiality was of
extreme importance. Also I obtained an agreement with the other administrator at my school
that if for any reason, administration is needed to intervene (between teacher and student or
student and students) she was the one to do that. Therefore, the relationship the student
participants and I had was one of researcher and participant. Remaining alert to any changes
in our relationship was essential. I did not become involved with any issues, situations, or
events with the students other than observations and interviews. Also, the names of the
students in my research were changed, as were the names of the schools.

Remaining uninvolved with the situations observed might be perceived to be a
problem for the researcher. However, being an educator for over thirty-one years, I believe I
have a good sense of preadolescents. Guiding the interview questions carefully was always
at the forefront of my agenda with participants.

Transcriptions, audiotapes, field notes, computer disks and other information were
kept in my home in a locked closet when not in use. At no time could anyone else have
access to the research information.
Summary

A case study using interviews, observations, and field notes was completed at four sites in succession- one elementary school (fifth grade students in the spring of 2002) and three middle schools (sixth grade students in late summer, early fall of 2002). The focus of the case study was the perceptions of the students as they negotiated this transition from elementary school, fifth grade, to middle school, sixth grade. Supporting this focus were the reflections of teachers who teach on either side of the transition. The time period for my case study was critical – it had to occur during the time that students were actually experiencing and negotiating the transition – the last months of fifth grade, the summer in between, and the first few months of sixth grade. Student perceptions (feelings, concerns, accomplishments, support systems, peer interactions) while actually experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school and teacher perceptions (both fifth and sixth grade teachers) were gathered and analyzed, looking for themes.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: Themes

Now that you have made it across the swinging bridge, reflect on what transpired as you were crossing. Did you follow the plan you had set out before crossing? Did the advice you were given help? Did you see any signposts along the way? Did you adjust your tactics while you were crossing? Were there any unusual events with which you had to cope? Did the people behind you or in front of you provide any clues or support as you crossed? Thinking about the crossing, what were the major elements involved? When going through the challenge of a transition, like crossing a bridge, and viewing the transition adversely, it is difficult to recognize the benefits (Brammer, 1991).

This chapter presents an assessment of the data collected during my study. The critical analysis of the data was done with the research questions in mind.

According to students’ and teachers’ voices,

1. What major factors play a role during the transition students make from elementary to middle school?

2. What student and teacher perceptions are connected with the transition from elementary school (fifth grade) to middle school (sixth grade)?

3. How do school practices (both contrived and environmental) fit into the students’ and teachers’ personal perceptions?

4. How are student anxieties, concerns, and predictions voiced in fifth grade brought to fruition in sixth grade?
5. What do the student and teacher voices say to educators and other support members about how they can help?

The data take the form of observations that were documented in field notes in my journal and transcribed interviews with students and teachers who participated in my study. The student interviews were done in succession, following the students through their transition – before, during, and after their transition from elementary to middle school. The first student interview occurred in May during the students’ fifth grade year. The next interview happened during the summer break, after completing elementary school and before beginning middle school. The third interview took place the second week after students began middle school. Finally, the last individual interview was after students had received their first report card. At the students’ request, a final focus group with all but one of the students was concluded in October, again at the university library. This focus group was also transcribed and analyzed.

The teacher interviews were of fifth and sixth grade teachers on each side of the transition. The fifth grade teachers were interviewed in May, and the sixth grade teachers were interviewed in September and October.

All interviews and field notes were analyzed for themes. The student interviews were analyzed two ways: across the series of interviews for each individual student and across the interviews by timing, i.e., all of the first (fifth grade) interviews, all the second (summer break) interviews, all the third (beginning of sixth grade) interviews, and finally, all the sixth grade interviews concluded after students received their first report card. The teacher interviews were analyzed by grade level; i.e., fifth grade together and sixth grade together.
Some themes that appeared in the teacher interviews were noted as having also appeared in the student interviews.

The data gathered are related to the elementary and middle school environments where the participants work and study as well as to the participants themselves. This chapter presents the themes identified within the data. The themes are intertwined and were sometimes difficult to separate. The analysis and descriptions are presented by themes, but it will be apparent that none of the themes are isolated. A review of each theme is presented at the end of each section with a summary at the end of the chapter (Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

The aim of social research is to discover patterns; some of the patterns are descriptive, and some are explanatory (Babbie, 1986). The themes that were identified in my study are as follows:

- Transition or change creates ever-present mixed feelings for students as they move from elementary to middle school.
- Independence and freedom are welcome but with them come responsibility.
- Peers (friends) are very important during this transition, both keeping current relationships and making new ones.
- Learning in a new setting requires coping with many new issues all at the same time.
- There was an absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition.
Theme One

Transition creates ever-present mixed feelings and stress for students as they move from elementary to middle school.

Adolescence has been characterized as a time of polarities (James, 1974). Students may exhibit intellectual industry and intellectual laziness, critical analysis and critical lapses, and penetrating insights and dopey platitudes (Mitchell, 1998). Jean Piaget observed that even though adolescents are capable of formal reasoning, they often fail to use it because they lack familiarity with the tasks they are required to reason about.

Transition is characterized by sharp discontinuity with previous life events and the emergence of coping responses as a person enters the unknown (Brammer, 1991). Since middle school is an unknown experience to elementary students, mixed emotions are a logical outcome. Each of the students interviewed during my study expressed conflicting emotions several times throughout the duration of the interviews as well as during the same interview – some even while responding to one question. While students were in fifth grade, before the transition, they expressed mixed emotions about leaving elementary school and entering middle school. These expressions of conflicting emotion continued throughout the duration of my study – across the transition for each individual student and across all of the interviews that took place within the same time period. I have categorized the ever-present mixed emotions expressed into two categories: 1) fear of the unknown, apprehension, and nervousness (including challenges to previously held beliefs) and 2) excitement and anticipation.
Fear of the Unknown, Apprehension, and Nervousness

All students expressed concerns about several issues. Students used the words *scared* and *afraid* to describe their apprehension. The concerns that students shared were wide-ranging, but certain topics of concern came up over and over again in response to the general questions, “What do you already know about middle school? What do you think will be your biggest challenge?” Students expressed concerns about academics, friends, personal comfort in a new environment, and parent and teacher expectations.

Sandra shared that she had talked with friends in elementary school, “What if I accidentally push somebody down. What will happen to me? I am afraid there will be a fight.” When asked if she had been in a fight or if this was just something she was envisioning, she replied, “No, I have never been in a fight, but I have heard from others who are in middle school that there are fights.” The wrinkling of her forehead when she spoke about this possibility and the change in the intensity of her voice indicated the importance of this concern for her.

In the first interview at the end of fifth grade, Karen shared that she was scared, “I will not see my best friend, and I do not know how new kids will accept me.” Sharon stated in her first interview: “I feel scared about going to middle school because you have to start all over. You don’t know many friends; you have to change classes all the time with a new teacher in each one; you don’t get any free time like recess time in elementary school; you have to use a lock and a locker; you have to take showers in gym.” As with Karen, the words came quickly from her mouth, and she did not breathe until she was done. It was like water spilling over a dam – it just keeps coming until it reaches a level point. Sharon went on, after
Edward concurred with the idea of starting over being stressful: “In elementary, all the students look up to you, but when you get to middle school there are seventh and eighth graders who know their way around and are much bigger than you. Instead of being the top person you go down to being the bottom again.” Edward also spoke quickly and intensely when he described his concern with starting over. “You don’t know where to go; you don’t know what teachers will want; you don’t even know about the restrooms or cafeteria.” When pressed further about why this is stressful, Edward shot back quickly, “If you don’t even know about the bathrooms, where they are and if they are safe, and about eating, how can it not be stressful!”

Taking showers for gym was a distinct unknown for three of the students – Sharon, Anthony, and Thomas. A friend had told Anthony that students have to take showers after gym, but he was quick to share that when he went to the open house at his middle school, he specifically looked and saw shower curtains. I asked him if he asked anyone at the middle school about the showers, and he stated, “No, I don’t want them to think I am afraid.”

Thomas shared that he spent about one hour on homework in elementary school, but his brother “often stays up all night doing his middle school homework. I don’t like to do that; in fact, I am not sure I can do that.”

Some of the students expressed concerns after the transition about ideas they had believed were true, but now they were not so sure. Karen shared that she always thought that grades reflected what she had learned in a subject and the grade would show “which subject you are really better at.” She had always made decisions about what to work hardest in based

a few seconds pause, to add, “The work will be harder, and there will be a lot of stress to always be prepared and be on time for classes.”
on her grades, so that they would be as good as they could. After the transition to sixth grade, she expressed confusion about the relationship between hard work and grades: “But now, that is not true. I worked hard in math and I loved math, but I got a C in math because I didn’t understand what the teacher wanted. It is important to figure out what the teacher wants as early in the course as you can, so you can get the grade you want.” Despite her confusion about grades, Karen has attained some wisdom about the importance of determining the teacher’s expectations. In a later interview Karen shared that “I brought my math grade up but another grade went down. I was working harder in the other subject. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

Joshua made a big sigh when I asked how he was feeling about moving to middle school. He went on to say he was nervous and excited. “I am nervous because I don’t know how the people in middle school will be. Will they be mean; will they be nice? Most of my friends from elementary are going to another school. I feel excited about getting used to something different.” Karen went further in expressing her concerns by explaining her confused emotions, “Another thing is that I am expecting something, and it probably is not going to happen. I don’t know any more.”

Transition is a constant and characteristic feature of our society and takes place at an even faster pace every day (Noack, Hofer, & Youniss, 1995). Anthony, who had already successfully attended three different elementary schools after immigrating from Russia, summed up the transition stress along with mixed emotions very well, “I feel kind of comfortable and kind of scared. My sister told me it was hard but fun. I am afraid of the classes. They may be really hard, and I won’t pass. I don’t know anything. I am worried that the kids won’t like me. I am concerned about the work, especially math class. But I
think meeting new friends may be fun.” When I reminded him that he had already made several successful transitions to new school settings, he acknowledged that was true. However, “I am older now, and so are the other kids. They are bigger, too. There will be more teachers, each one wanting something different. Everything seems to happen so fast and be so complicated. I don’t know if I will be able to do it. I think a lot at night and worry that I won’t make it.” When Anthony was talking about these concerns, the words spewed from his mouth at a rapid rate, which also indicated the intensity he felt. He talked rapidly and then abruptly stopped, took a breath, and scooted back on his chair.

**Excitement and Anticipation**

On the opposite end of the spectrum from nervousness and apprehension are excitement and anticipation. Four of the seven students in my study also expressed excitement (during the same interview) about going to a new middle school because they had always gone to the same elementary school. Of those who said they were excited, they had all visited the middle school with their parents before they actually attended. Anthony had taken a tour of his new middle school. He shared, “The new teachers at my middle school told us a lot about it. They told us that we will have a lot of new stuff like lockers and that we get to use binders. They told us a lot about the classes and gave us a schedule.” While Anthony did not state that he was excited, his facial expressions were animated when he was talking. Three students had not visited their middle school and when pressed for how they felt about attending did not say they were excited. One of the three stated indifferently, “It is just another school.”
The girls in my study expressed more anticipation and excitement than the boys. Karen shared, “I am excited about getting older. Also I am looking forward to not having to be around some of the people I don’t like from elementary school. I like the feeling of knowing I am a good student. I hope I can try to be as good of a student in middle school as I have been in elementary.” Sandra was also excited about all the different kids and about maturing. Sharon stated she was “looking forward to it.” However, only one of the boys, Joshua, mentioned anticipation or excitement about moving to middle school. “I am excited about getting used to something different.” The other three boys, who had visited their middle school beforehand, described with animation what they saw and heard but did not use the word excitement. Anthony, after attending his middle school (Crockett Middle School) for two weeks, said, “I am very comfortable here, and I am very excited. It is really fun, and I really like it.”

While the teachers interviewed did not speak directly of students’ mixed emotions, several of them did mention the emotional aspect of being a middle school student. Ms. Black, a fifth grade teacher, shared, “Emotionally, these students are not ready when they are leaving elementary. They are expected to know what they feel. And they do not. Some of our students are very immature, and they are not emotionally ready.” Ms. Adams, a sixth grade teacher, agreed, “This is a tough age. You have to remember what you went through and how awkward you felt. But you got through it.”

In this theme of ambivalent emotions accompanying the transition students make from elementary to middle school, the passion with which the students expressed their views was evident during the interviews. Their facial expressions, wrinkling of foreheads or wide-open eyes accentuated their feelings as they spoke. Their voices became louder, and the
speech was more distinct, often they said words more forcefully, or with definite syllabication within words, i.e., “MAKING FRIENDS!” Sitting on the edge of their chairs and moving in closer proximity to me also indicated the powerful emotions that were tied to their concerns.

**Review of data regarding mixed feelings**

The students who were experiencing the transition expressed the same mixed feelings throughout the interviews – apprehension and fear, anticipation and excitement. The students readily shared their feelings and gave examples for each feeling. Interestingly, none of the teachers interviewed, either fifth grade or sixth grade, mentioned in the interviews that they noticed any of these strong feelings exhibited by students. The teachers also did not initiate that they participated in discussions with students about their feelings regarding the transition from elementary to middle school. I specifically asked each teacher if students approached them individually or in groups to ask questions about middle school, and they responded, “No.” Two of the teachers, one fifth (Ms. Smith) and one sixth (Ms. Davidson), said they had not even considered talking about it, but since our interview, they would consider it in the future.

**Theme Two**

**Independence and Freedom are welcome but come with responsibility.**

The ability to find an arena of comfort during a major life transition may have symbolic importance, signifying to adolescents, as well as to parents and teachers, that a young person is successfully moving toward independence (Call & Mortimer, 2001). Several students mentioned or described the freedom or independence that they experienced in
middle school. Anthony commented on individual freedom, “the teachers treat us more like we are grown up. Like whenever we want to go to the bathroom, we just take a pass and go without asking. We can also have medicine with us, like for a headache. We have to be responsible for it so no one else will get it. Also we can bring a cell phone but not have it turned on. I would use it only for an emergency. We get to bring water bottles and put them on our table and drink whenever we want. The gym is more grown-up, too. It has a wooden floor and bleachers that pull out. The gym has lockers, too. We don’t have to shower, thank goodness!” The last sentence was punctuated with a huge sigh, as showering was one of Anthony’s big fears.

Several students mentioned their independence and freedom in middle school. Sandra stated that, “changing classes is better than elementary school. There are no line leaders. Here you are on your own. You do whatever you need to - run down the hall. However, it can be a time stressor.”

Karen told an interesting story that related to her feeling of independence: “At lunch I sit with my friends, not assigned seats. On the first week of school, there were two seats at a table of boys and we went to sit down.” The boys said, ‘You can’t sit there, that is somebody’s seat.” We said, ‘Why not?’ They said, ‘You are girls. You have cooties.’ We said, ‘Grow up a little bit. You will like us some day.’ They said, ‘We can beat you up.’ We said, ‘Bring it on!’ These were the tiniest boys in sixth grade, but we aren’t scared of them. You have to stick up for yourself!” Karen was smiling and appeared happy as she related this tale of independence.
The cafeteria also allowed independence with more food choices. Anthony stated, “We have slushies. They said we can’t bring sodas but they sell sodas, chips, yogurt, and donuts. Every Wednesday is mini pizzas. I buy my lunch a lot. The choices are good and so is the food.”

The students indicated that they enjoyed the newly found freedom and independence. Karen said, “I like more freedom. We are the people to have our homework in on time.” Thomas agreed, “I like the freedom. You are responsible for everything that you do. This is sort of a good thing and a bad thing. We have more homework but now we have to organize it and bring it in ourselves. I think I am learning a lot more.” Karen concluded, “At first, I didn’t like all of the independence. I wanted to go back to elementary school. But now I am glad I can make my own decisions, and I am beginning to think I make pretty good ones.” Anthony said, “We get to bring CD players to listen to when we run the mile in P.E. That is cool.” After ten weeks of sixth grade, Joshua stated, “Middle school is better than elementary school. It is much better than I thought. You have more freedom and more responsibility. More things to do, more activities.”

Making the choice of which middle school to attend seemed easy to Anthony at first. He liked Crocket Middle School and was accepted as a magnet student. However, he discovered that his middle school did not have orchestra, and he had started playing the violin in elementary school. He was in the Frost Elementary orchestra. During the first interview after he started attending Crockett Middle School, he expressed sadness at the lack of orchestra as an elective. However, during the second interview after starting middle
school, he stated that he would take private lessons to continue his violin, and perhaps he could be in an orchestra somewhere else. “I really enjoy my violin, and I think it is important. I will have to be responsible to keep up my playing!” Anthony stated emphatically. He also shared that he and his mother decided that he had made a good choice for a middle school because all of the teachers were friendly and helped him.

Developing independence is an important element of adolescence. The early adolescent is combining new information with past experiences to form his identity (Erikson, 1968). In the school environment, students are trying out their decision-making skills regarding independence, hopefully with guidance from teachers. “Fifth grade teachers should have been harder on us,” commented Sharon. “We had too many chances. In middle school you only get one chance, and you had better make the right decision or you will be in trouble.”

The fifth grade teachers interviewed mentioned that toward the end of the school year they started releasing “the reigns of control” (Mr. Harrod). Mr. Harrod went on to say, “Children at this age need to learn to be a little more independent and a little more responsible.” The fifth grade teachers also stated that they tried making students more accountable for their own learning. There were fewer reminders; some students missed field trips for lack of permission; some students had lowered grades for lack of homework; some students even went without lunch for lack of lunch money. Ms. Smith stated, “Once I have established the relationship, the students can tell it is not a personal thing with me. They are all treated the same, and I want them to be responsible for themselves.” Ms. Black went further, “I tell them there is not going to be anyone to say, ‘This is a draft; go back and redo it.’ I think middle school takes a lot emotionally, physically, and socially.” Mr. Harrod
said, “I explain to my students that I have taught in a middle school. It is not as bad as you might have heard from rumors. You just take it in stride. And you grow with it.”

All of the sixth grade teachers stated they attempted to be more lenient with responsibility the first two weeks of sixth grade, “I give them more reminders, more pointers on how to remember things, more suggestions about how to parcel out a long-term project,” shared Ms. Adams. One teacher admitted knowing a teacher who did not. “One of my teammates, an intelligent, content-trained teacher, states emphatically that she only gives students one chance from the get go,” stated Ms. Zellner. Karen must have had that teacher because in both of her sixth grade interviews, she mentioned a teacher that she would never go to if she had a problem. In fact, Karen stated, “I just try to get through the class without having to talk to her.”

**Review of data regarding independence**

Students and teachers acknowledged that students have more independence and freedom in middle school than in elementary school. Some of the biggest areas of freedom from the students’ point of view were in walking in the hallways (not in a line), having a variety of food choices in the cafeteria, completing and turning in homework, and sitting with friends. The fifth grade teachers stated they “released the reigns” a little and tried to help students understand they needed to take responsibility for themselves. The sixth grade teachers regarded students’ independence as a phenomenon they helped students develop by their own repetition, consistency, and patience when working with students. However, the students did not acknowledge any of the qualities the fifth or sixth grade teachers stated they did.
Theme Three

Relationships with peers and friends are important during this transition, both keeping current relationships and making new ones.

In the adolescent community to be without friends is to be nobody . . . (Mitchell, 1998). Expressions of the word friends were uttered frequently during the student interviews. Some of the comments were about seeing current friends at the new middle school or about keeping in touch with current friends. More often, though, students’ comments were about new people and the process of making new friends. With a worried, frowning expression, Karen declared while still in fifth grade, “Trying to fit in with the right groups and find friends is very important. I think the friends I want to hang around with may not want me.” Edward was more emphatic when he stated, “the biggest challenge will be MEETING NEW PEOPLE!!” When I asked for an explanation, Edward stated, “It is a good thing and a bad thing. New people can be good but all of them will be new, both kids and teachers! New means unknown and that is scary.” During the summer interview, Edward informed me, “I am excited that Anthony is going to my middle school. That means I will have at least one friend when I get there.”

Joshua, an only child, appeared sad as he sincerely shared before going to middle school, “I am really worried about making friends because I don’t want to be alone. Most of my friends are going to another school. I don’t know how easy it will be to make friends. I don’t know how the people are and if they will like me.”
Learning to meet new people and deciding with whom to be friends is a huge step toward maturity. Sandra likes her new middle school “because it is more of an experience. There is so [sic] much more kids at this school, and you can have all sorts of friends. Danielle is my new friend, and we stand in line together and sit together when we can. Her last name comes right after mine; so no matter what, we get to be together.” Joshua provided this insight, “The first few days of sixth grade, it was hard to make friends. But after that it got easier making friends. I know now that there are so many different kids.”

These young people are also just starting to figure out how to keep friends when they do not see them often. This experience is new for many since they had attended Frost Elementary for much of their elementary school career. “I have talked with a friend in middle school and asked him about ways to keep in touch with friends at other middle schools. He says email, and they compare their schools and share what is going on,” Sandra said. Anthony went further and wistfully stated, “I wish we had recess everyday instead of just Fridays. It is the only time we have to really talk to friends. In elementary school we had it everyday, and I liked that much better. You could spend time talking with friends and finding out what they were doing.” Thomas agreed that recess time was necessary and went on to state that if he had a problem, “. . . a little thing, I would talk with a friend here at middle school. But if it were a big problem, I would call my friends from elementary school. After all, they were the first ones I had.”

Figuring out when to visit with friends and when to accept their opinions is another milestone for adolescents. Sharon, who admittedly has gotten into “trouble” for playing around with friends, says, “I like my friends, but I have to learn not to talk so much with them.” Fitting in is important for adolescents. Karen confirms this when she shares, “I have
been trying to be part of everything like dressing up for spirit week. I think people (kids and teachers) will like me more that way. I wore my hat on hat day, and everybody said it was cute. On tacky day, everybody said I was tacky, and today is Remember When Day.” (She was wearing a poodle skirt, high heels, and a black top. Her hair was in a pony tail tied with a scarf.) Anthony said that he likes sitting wherever he wants in class and at lunch, “but teachers will change our seats and stuff because we like the kids we are sitting with and we are talking a lot.” Sandra, a logical early adolescent, stated, “There are so many different kids. At Frost there were about 400 kids, but here there are 400 kids in the sixth grade! I know there are some kids who won’t be my friends. I have seen some fights and bad stuff go on, but I know that is just part of life.”

Ms. Black, a fifth grade teacher, confirmed the importance of friends when she shared, “One of the most challenging aspects of teaching this age is that they are not emotionally always there. They let their friends influence them to do what is cool or not cool. There is a lot of peer pressure not to learn and that is really sad.” Ms. Smith stated her idea about the importance of friendships, “Friendships are the relationships they have with each to her. I think that a lot of the challenge for them is trying to figure out how to relate to each other, and then they pull me into it.” Ms. Adams, a sixth grade teacher concurs. “Their peer group has the biggest influence on them. That makes it difficult for them because if they are not in the “in” crowd or popular group then that is what you are dealing with. Getting them to understand that not everybody is going to like you. That is a tough idea for adolescents. I think that –getting their social life under control is hard.”

Interestingly, the importance of family or teachers came up little during the student interviews. I observed students talking with teachers, but most of the time the students were
talking and laughing with each other. One student stated that perhaps she would talk with her mother if she had a “big” problem. To the direct question, “If you had a problem at this school, whom within the school would you talk to?” Four students stated they did not know (even after ten weeks attending the school). Two students stated they would talk with the guidance counselor and one stated a teacher.

**Review of data regarding friendships**

Students expressed the importance of friends, or the lack of friends, in every interview. Friendships were mentioned as sources of stress and as valued treasures. Both fifth and sixth grade teachers also mentioned the importance of peer groups for students. The sixth grade teachers strongly felt that struggling with making new friends and keeping old friends was a major focus for sixth graders.

**Theme Four**

**Learning in a new setting requires coping with many new issues all at the same time.**

Students’ perceptions of the quality of school life may decline as they progress from elementary to secondary school, with the largest decline occurring during the transition to a middle level school (Schumacher, 1998). Student comments and behaviors give insight into their concerns about a new school environment and all of its challenges.
Difficulty and Amount of Schoolwork and Homework

The second most often mentioned topic in the student interviews was schoolwork and homework. The students used the word stress many times when talking about the topic of schoolwork and homework. During the fifth grade interviews, students predicted that the work would be hard and take longer. Karen envisioned, “It will be harder to get an A or B. I think my A’s will be B’s.” Anthony agreed, “I am concerned about the work. The classes will be harder, especially math. I am afraid I won’t pass the End of Grade test. I am afraid that I don’t know anything.” Edward expressed a concern about reading, “. . . because I am not very good at it. When you have to finish a book within a certain time, it is hard. I am a slow reader and I fall behind. I read the book slowly and I understand more than the people who read it fast. But it takes me longer.” In the third interview right after starting middle school, Edward stated, “Taking notes is a big challenge. We have notes in all subjects and I try to keep up but it is hard.”

Sandra made a forecast that encompassed many of this theme’s topics, “I am nervous about the classes; you have only five minutes to get to the next class, and I may not find my way through the hallways. I may not be able to get my locker open. A friend who is in middle school says the locker is a real challenge.”

The interviews that took place after students began middle school concurred with their predictions. Sharon, a student with a learning disability, said, “the work is harder and there is a lot of stress. I worry about turning in my homework. I try to get help from the resource teacher when I can.” Sandra, an average student, emphatically agreed, “There is definitely more homework - pages and pages per night. I spend about two to three hours on
homework per night. Generally, though, it is stuff I can do.” Joshua agreed with Sharon, “I have more homework than in elementary. It takes me longer, and it is harder than what I thought.” Anthony, an above average student, also agreed but added, “It is definitely harder, but I like it now. I am in the routine.”

Karen sums up the feelings of the students interviewed regarding their new environment and coping with the academic work: “Homework, well we have so much homework. It is like ten times more. I am used to taking a break between subjects and getting something to eat or drink. But, with middle school, there are four core class and electives that give homework. I probably spend three hours, even though in guided study I didn’t say how long I spend. I know that if you do anything wrong or different, the teacher and kids will make fun of you.”

The teachers interviewed did not often mention their work expectations for students. In a partial answer to one question, Ms. Black, a fifth grade language arts teacher, explained, “I make an effort to get them to write. That is one thing that I have done is show them how much writing will be expected of them.”

Ms. Adams, a sixth grade language arts and social studies teacher, talked about a connection between academics and friendships. “Friends affect the academic part. If I can help them with friendships and make them feel good about themselves, they will do better academically.”

Ms. Zellner gave a lengthy description of her philosophy for helping early adolescents with their academics. “I start out doing a lot of concrete type of things. In the beginning of the year, most of the answers are black and white, and then I move them to the abstract where they have to take all the pieces that I give them and come up with something
that they would not have thought of. It is hard. I have to allow them to move two steps forward and one step back because they are in transition. Letting them know it is OK. The hard part is getting the to see it is OK to go back because they do not want to. They are a little unwilling to try; they do not want to take that risk. The hardest part is getting them to see they have to work hard to learn. They ask, ‘Why don’t I understand? I must be a stupid person.’ Cognitively they might not be ready for some things.”

**Time Management**

Time management presented itself in two venues: getting from class to class and an earlier start in the morning. Sandra said, “It is hard to get around and get to class on time. You have four minutes to unlock your lock, get your things, get a drink of water, go to the bathroom, and walk in the door. I try to pace myself and be aware of time.” Thomas added, “It isn’t enough time when you have to go to the other side of the building.” Karen explained, “This school has two floors. The bottom floor is bigger than Frost Elementary. You have to have better timing to get to class.” Joshua concurred by stating, “Five minutes is not enough time. I heard at one of the middle schools, they have four minutes.”

On the subject of an earlier start time than elementary school, Sandra summed it up for all of the students, except Sharon and Karen: “I don’t ride the bus because I get up at 5:30 as it is. The bus comes at 6:15 and is on the other side of the neighborhood. My mom or dad bring me, and I ride the bus home.” Sharon and Karen have to ride the bus in the morning, and both declared it is very “tough to function at that time of morning.” Karen went further in her explanation, “I am actually more awake at night than I am in the morning. An earlier start time is hard because I have to ride the bus. My parents won’t take me.”
Anthony stated, “I rode the bus once and didn’t like it. It is too early so my mom takes me. I also get my bookbag ready the night before. I like coming earlier and getting home earlier.”

Sandra also explained her ideas of time management. “I have to pace myself and be aware of time. I handle it by, well, it is like having nine subjects. All of the subjects have homework and practice; it is a big challenge.”

Ms. Adams, a sixth grade teacher, mentioned time management. “I try to keep them organized and work on time management so they will learn to be independent. I think all of these things are challenges and I tell students, “You are in middle school now. No one is going to hold your hand. These are life skills you will need. If you are not organized and can not manage, then learning is for naught.”

**Lockers and Locks**

Another frequent topic, actually what appeared to be the number one worry, was that of locks and lockers. Six of the seven students interviewed mentioned the concern about locks in the fifth grade interview. Joshua provided a good summary of the locker concern, “I thought you could go before every class. How will you know what you need and can I get it open, get my stuff, and get to class in time?” Interestingly, none of the teachers interviewed mentioned locks as something they work with students on at the beginning of sixth grade. After having been at middle school a few weeks, locks and lockers were still something to be reckoned with. Sandra stated, “I need to work on stopping at my locker because I worry that I will forget something.” She went on to share, “I had a bottom locker, but I kept getting stepped on. I switched to a top one and now it is like all these little ants
running around.” Karen explained her unique experience, “Sometimes my lock just
‘freezes.’ I am always afraid I am not going to be able to open my lock. Today I did it
perfect and it didn’t open. So I am saying to it, ‘Come on!’ Then it just opened.” There was
a real sense of urgency and intensity in her voice. She added, “I wish we could get locks in
fifth grade and practice. That was my number one fear for the first few weeks.”

Thomas was definite when he stated, “I do not like the locks. Twisting and turning
and trying to get to the right lines while everyone else is doing the same thing. I wish we had
had a lock to practice with. I may get a locker by myself because of my band instrument.
That would be good because then nobody could get into my stuff.” The importance and
difficulty with locks and lockers was also an observable phenomenon. At Crosby and
Murray Middle Schools, students could be seen anxiously trying to open their lockers while
other students were jostling them. Rarely were teachers observed in the hallways during class
change. The area around the lockers appeared congested and was loud as students attempted
to access lockers. Students were reaching over each other, leaning into the lockers and each
other, and I observed two students get stepped on while others were accessing their lockers.
Also within the narrow hallways, other students were hurrying past talking and laughing.
Two students were observed leaving their locker without access after several tries at opening
the lock. One teacher was observed helping a student during the second week of school, but,
in general, students were on their own in the hallways. At Crockett Middle School, the area
around the lockers did not seem so chaotic. The lockers are located within the students’
“house” and not in the main hallways. Students appeared more relaxed, several teachers
were seen supervising, and one student was observed helping another student with a lock.
Anthony (a Crockett Middle School student) did not share the other students’ dislike of lockers. He liked his locker, even though, at times, he had trouble with the lock. “I like lockers, but not the lock. I have never had a locker.” The locker gave him a sense of freedom and individuality. He even wanted me to see his locker; he wanted to show off his decorations - a mirror, a comb, a calendar, and some pictures of popular singers. Afterwards, he took me on a short tour of the school.

Ms. Zellner actually talked about locks and lockers. “Opening that lock! The first day in homeroom we hand out the locks and students had to open the lock five times in a row without stopping. We practiced. We spent 60 minutes but this way when it was put on the locker, students felt OK, cause they had the feel of it.” She was the only teacher who made a reference to the importance of locks for students.

**Size of Building and Number of People**

Students had many opinions regarding the size of the building and the number of people within their middle schools. It was clear that their perceptions affected their day-to-day functioning. Joshua stated in the fifth grade interview, “It will be harder to get around because it is bigger, and there are not straight halls like here in elementary. The halls go all over the place. I went there for Open House, and the halls looked very complicated. I am afraid of getting lost and the students may not help me.” Karen agreed with the Joshua, “I am concerned about getting lost.”

In response to a question about the size of the middle school as compared to the elementary school, Joshua stated, “I know my way around, but it is huge!” Joshua, a diabetic, goes to the nurse’s office at least twice a day to check his insulin. He further stated
that, “I am an expert on this building. Just ask me how to get from point A to point B and I can tell you. But I can not guarantee you will get there on time, “ He chuckled at saying this.

Sandra expressed a safety concern. “Sixth graders get run over trying to go to lunch. The seventh and eighth graders are changing classes, but we are trying to get to eat! Sixth graders get pushed around and get smushed.” She added in another interview, “I have studied the floor map and the fire escapes, but it is a big challenge in this large two story building.” Karen shared this thought in a hesitant voice, “I don’t want to be tardy and get detention. Moving around this big school makes me scared.” Thomas must have experienced the same emotions: “The location of the gym is hard. See, it is in another building and on the other side of this building. I have to go all the way over there, get changed, and then get changed back and make it all the way to the other side for the bus at dismissal. I think I am going to be out of time and miss the bus. It is very stressful.”

I experienced first-hand what Thomas was describing during my first visit to Crosby Middle School. I arrived, I thought, fifteen minutes before dismissal, but I was wrong. As I entered the parking lot, I saw several yellow school buses lined up along with a double line of cabs. I parked my car and walked toward the building only to be met by a steady stream of students coming out of the building. The entire doorway and hallway was filled, and I was going the “wrong way.” Students were talking and laughing, jostling each other and were totally unaware of me. Many of the students with bookbags on their backs were larger than I am. The steady stream of students was like an avalanche plummeting down a mountainside, and I was the skier trying valiantly to avoid it. I moved from pillar to pillar as I dared. (There were pillars in the hallway about every ten feet.) Finally, I reached the main foyer and the main office!
After two weeks of attending Crosby Middle School, Joshua said forcefully, “This school is so much bigger. It looks so different. The halls are wider but more crowded because there are more people and it is to get through. There are different ways of getting around and I am learning them, but it is always crowded.”

Edward, however, did not share the concerns above at his middle school (the smaller one). “In this school (Crockett Middle School) it is kind of hard to get lost because all of your classes are together except your exploratory, and they have signs when you go to exploratory. The rooms seem larger, and the hallways are definitely larger. The teachers just kind of dismiss you – no bells. Also, the rooms are larger. We have two teachers and the classrooms have a set of double doors where if the teacher needs to tell everybody something, she can by just opening the doors.” Anthony, who also attends Crockett Middle School, agreed with Edward. “I like the two floor building and there are three ways to go to get to the gym. I like going up and down the stair and the elevator.”

None of the teachers mentioned the size of the building in the interviews. However, one sixth grade teacher at Crockett Middle School, Ms. Adams, shared that she like being in a new, clean building. When asked about where she had taught before, she replied, “I taught fifth grade in a forty-year-old building that was demolished this year to make way for a new building. It was dirty, drafty, and just plain old. This is so much better.”

Organization of Materials

All of the students referred to a planner or agenda in the sixth grade interviews. The agenda is a type of notebook where the students write down assignments and other important announcements and have their parents sign that they have seen it. Some of the students
relayed they were asked to keep a “table of contents” for each of their subject, a list of papers within that subject. Other students had a grade sheet to keep track of their grades. Both of these ideas seemed beneficial in the students’ opinions. Organization is Sandra’s biggest challenge, “trying to have everything together and trying to be sure you have it is where it needs to be. I do my homework and have my parents sign my agenda book at night, because in the morning it gets kind of too busy. I leave my agenda book out so if I remember something I can go back.” Edward did a similar thing, “We have an agenda, and we write down our assignments everyday. Our parents have to sign that they have seen them. We also have a spot for writing down our grade. So we can keep up with our grades ourselves. The teachers want us to know our grades as we go.” Joshua shared, “Our planner is our hall pass, so we have to keep up with it.”

Anthony shared, “We have a little schedule thing that is in my locker. It shows our classes. We write homework in our agendas. We have to keep our stuff in binders. This binder is for electives and I have a big binder for core subjects. We have a table of contents for each subject. You check them. The teachers said this would keep us organized.” When I asked whose ideas the schedule and binders were, Anthony stated firmly, that the teachers insist you do it this way to stay organized. He also shared that he had gotten shelves for his bedroom to help him stay organized.

Thomas uses his planner for writing down assignments and, “…things I need to remember, like things to bring in to school. I look at it the night before and I say I will do it in the morning. But I am rushed, so I have to get better about doing it right then.”

Some of the teachers interviewed shared their organization ideas. Ms. Black, a fifth grade teacher, shared that she had students keep a table of contents in language arts to help
them organize their papers within a given unit of study. Ms. Black also stated that some fifth
grade students, “who have siblings in the upper grades say that organization is a big thing. It
is important.” Ms. Smith, a sixth grade teacher, works on organization, “because they
always want to go back to their homeroom to get something.” An interesting observation
was given by Sandra regarding organization and how curriculum is presented: “In
elementary school, the subjects were kind of blurred in together, but in middle school they
are separate and you have separate grades. It is hard but it can be good because if you pass
everything but one thing, you know you have to work on that one thing.” Ms. Davidson,
another sixth grade teacher agreed, “I do a lot of repetitive things. Trying to keep them in a
routine and keep them organized. Whether it is a math skill or a locker concern, I always tell
them why.”

I observed students with the daily planners or agendas. Anthony and Edward showed
theirs to me during the third interview. Students seemed to like to have a routine place to
write down reminders and the planners had the school name on the front with other pertinent
school information inside.

**Communication**

When students were asked whom they would talk with if they had a problem at
middle school, they unanimously stated, “A friend!” This validates the importance of peers
for these young people. There were other people mentioned in the communication arena that
were important to these early adolescents – most of them were educators. Sandra also stated
she might talk with the principal. “As a matter of fact, I am thinking of doing just that. I
have seen stuff that is not right and is against school policy.” Karen, who is comfortable in
the educational setting, shared, “I had a big relief when I found out Ms. Black was teaching what kind of things we would do in middle school. Talking with her makes me feel better.” Karen went on to say, “I didn’t like my math teacher the first day (sixth grade), but I told my mom I would give her another chance. She is very funny in my guided study class. There are fewer kids, and it is more relaxed. However, she only tells you something once so you had better listen. She can be very funny.” Thomas also likes his teachers but, “In middle school, I miss visiting my other teachers at the end of the day. I used to go and visit before my bus was called. I like talking with them, and I still email with one of them.”

Only one student really mentioned the guidance counselor with any explanation. Anthony said, “He is funny like my teacher Mr. Cook. He has these pictures of beavers and they show what kind of person you are. He teaches lessons to help us understand ourselves.”

Joshua said he talks with the P.E. teacher or the school nurse. He has gotten to know them because of his diabetes. “I mostly get teased in P.E. because I am so small. But I would tell Ms. South and she would get on them. And they stopped. I talk with the nurse about my snacks and my insulin.” He continued, “I also talk with friends about school things.” Before going to middle school, Joshua, talked with his mother. “I have talking to my mom about how I feel. Will I be able to make friends? How much harder will it be?:

Whenever students mentioned talking with someone about school, ninety percent of the time it was talking with friends. Two students mentioned talking with parents.

The teachers had some interesting comments that compliment the communication category. Ms. Smith (a previous fifth grade teacher now in sixth grade) prides herself on communicating with her students, especially at-risk students. She worries that “there is not
much time to pull kids over and communicate with them on a personal level at the middle school. I see teachers not individualizing as much as we do in elementary school.” Ms. Black commented on communication “that this age of student responds better. They understand jokes and the underlying meaning behind them. You can relate assignments more to world events. Students need to make connections with their life and what they are doing.”

In answer to another question, Ms. Black stated, “In middle school, I am not quite sure if they felt that there is someone there; that they can go see their counselor. I think that otherwise they will get lost in the shuffle with their emotional state.”

Ms. Smith also stated that, “Communication is the key to a good working relationship with students. There is a need for understanding and why they are beginning to act the way they do. There is a big change from fourth to fifth grade. It used to be a change from fifth to sixth grade but now that we have moved the sixth grade to the middle school, I think our fifth graders are picking up some of the same struggles, and developmental and physical changes that used to happen in sixth grade. I am finding out that fifth graders are going through the changes now that the sixth graders used to. I think communication is the big piece, finding out why did you make this decision, one on one, and then where can we go from here?”

Review of data related to the new school environment.

A new environment with new issues can be stressful yet challenging. Students have many complex matters to deal with as they make the transition from the known environment of elementary school to the unknown environment of middle school – academic requirements, lockers, time management, organization, communication, the bigger size of the
building and the larger number of people. Juggling all of these concerns at the same time is a huge undertaking for anyone, especially for early adolescents.

Theme five:

There was an absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition.

According to the students’ voices as well as the teachers’ voices, there was a void or absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and for a successful transition. Students voiced no relationships with teachers either in fifth grade at the end of the school year or in sixth grade, even after twelve weeks of school. Teachers at the fifth and sixth grade level did not mention any individual students or relationships with them. One fifth grade teacher alluded to trying to build relationships, but did not mention any particular students in the examples she gave during the interviews. There was no apparent plan, either at the elementary level or the middle school level, to help support the students making the transition from elementary to middle school. Students did not know what to expect, and teachers did not know what happened before or after they taught the students.

Transitions strain our adaptive capacities. At the same time, transitions can bring out hidden strengths in the form of coping resources if knowledge already known about the transition is accessed (Brammer, 1991). When I asked the students, after they had transitioned, what they would change if they could, Karen described how she would change
fifth grade. “We would have lockers so we could work with the locks, that was my #1 fear. Or at least have locks to practice with.” Edward agreed, “I didn’t understand about locks and combinations.” Joshua expanded on the locker idea, “I always thought we could go to our lockers between classes.”

Students also had ideas about changes they would make in sixth grade to make the transition easier. Karen sighed, “I wish on the first day of school we had a seventh grader who would come and show us around and show me where my classes were.” Thomas agreed, “It’s good to have somebody to ask questions. I have an older brother, but everyone does not.”

Before entering sixth grade, students expressed a lack of information about teacher expectations, academics, and grading. Karen said, “I am concerned that a lot of my A’s will be B’s. I like the feeling of being a good student with the teachers. I don’t know what the middle school teachers expect. A good student does not do what the teacher says not to, a good student turns in their work when the teacher says to, and a good student tries to go for the best grades they can make.” Joshua, a good student, echoed the same sentiment, “I don’t know how hard the 6th grade work will be.” Sandra also agreed, “The hardest part is not knowing what the teachers expect.” Edward said the same things almost word for word, “The hardest part will be knowing what the teachers want.”

There was also a lack of information about “getting around” for Edward or put another way “finding where things are” for Sandra. This was particularly significant, as both Edward and Sandra had visited their new middle schools. Sharon, who had not visited until I took her, said, “Don’t they send out a letter telling you what you will need and where things are?”
The fifth grade teachers also said they lacked information about middle school. Ms. Black stated, “We try to prepare them in elementary school. I think it would be better if they didn’t have so many choices for middle school but that many of them went together. That would help the friends’ aspect as well as the preparation by fifth grade teachers. I would like to know what the expectations of the middle school teachers are. Then if there is a big gap, we could try to fill it. If there were anything educationally or socially we would do to help get students ready, middle school teachers should let us know. Then we could be on the same page that way. Organization is an important thing, I think. If we could give one small example and say, ‘This happens in middle school.’ We get some information about the physical aspects of adolescence when we teach the fifth graders Human Growth and Development. We need some information about how their brain is growing too – how they learn best.”

The other two fifth grade teachers also had specific requests regarding information about the transition from elementary to middle school. Mr. Harrod stated, “I would like to be well informed about what middle schools expect from us. We hear rumors but if we knew it would make our job easier.” Ms. Smith queried, “I would like to know how the middle school teachers handle the large number of students. What do they do to get the students ready for high school? How do they handle discipline? Are they more likely to reward or consequence?”

Sixth grade teachers also expressed some information concerns. Ms. Davidson, a sixth grade teacher, said, “I would like to know what the teacher expectations are for the fifth grade kids, in terms of what they hold the kids responsible for. I found a lot of kids will ask to do things, and I will ask did your elementary teacher let you do that or do you do that at
home? They say, ‘Yes.’” I also would like to know how they helped them study for tests. It is tough on these kids, they have nine teachers and they don’t know who to go to.” Ms. Davidson is the only teacher who stated she had had some higher education courses on adolescent psychology and middle school philosophy.

Ms. Zellner, a sixth grade teacher, noted that, “I do not know a whole lot about elementary. I would like to know what goes on in elementary. It would probably help explain to me why the students do what they do. The really good middle school teacher knows if you do not have all of the other pieces in place, the content can go fly a kite.” When I asked what the other pieces were, Ms. Zellner stated, “Relationships, consistency, patience, communication, organization.”

Ms. Adams had interesting comments about what she perceives to be the strength of her team. She is elementary trained and her teammate is content trained. “Students pick up the vibrations that a teacher gives out. My teammate and I have different styles. But the kids are learning from both of us. I am not of the mentality sink or swim. Why fail a kid? That is not my job. If a child fails, they are going to redo it and get a higher grade. My job is to teach. I think the elementary mentality that it is all right to make a mistake is essential; it is okay to redo work as necessary. I am here to teach.”

During follow-up phone interviews with the teachers, it was very evident that all of them would welcome information regarding the transition students make from elementary to middle school as well as early adolescent development. Some were more enthusiastic than others. Ms. Smith, the veteran fifth grade teacher said, “I am always open to information, even though, most of the time when it is presented I feel as if I could be the presenter. However, I usually learn something new or perhaps something is just brought to my attention
that would help my students. After all, the world these students live in is very different from
the world I grew up in and the world I raised my own children in.” Ms. Zellner and Ms.
Adams, both veteran sixth grade teachers, concurred with Ms. Smith’s assessment of
welcoming information.

However, Ms. Davidson, the sixth grade teacher with middle school certification, and
Mr. Harrod, a veteran fifth grade teacher were not so sure. Ms. Davidson stated, “I have
been taught all that material in college. If teachers would just be consistent in their
expectations, students would achieve.” While this was a phone interview, the intensity in her
voice was obvious. Mr. Harrod was more apathetic, “I’ll do to whatever they want me to. It
is always something “new” we have to learn. Why are they always changing everything?”

Teachers’ responses to the other question about the advantages and disadvantages of
teaching fifth or sixth grade, respectively, were interesting. Ms. Black summed the
advantages for fifth grade up well, “The students are so much more independent in their work
habits. They also get the jokes you tell and enjoy a sense of humor. Students will help each
other out more and work cooperatively if you structure the setting right.”

Ms. Zellner, a sixth grade teacher, shared that she like the sixth grade, “because they
still like you. They still look up to you most of the time. They want your help.” Ms.
Davidson went even further when she shared, “There are relationships you can form with
sixth graders because they are new to the school and don’t know any of the teachers. This is
good for them and good for you.” When I asked why it is good for the teacher, Ms.
Davidson responded, “Because that is why we teach, isn’t it?”

All seven of the teachers were emphatic about the disadvantages of teaching fifth or
sixth grade – the state’s accountability. While they all said it in different ways, I could hear
the intensity in their voices. “Don’t they trust us to teach?” asked Mr. Harrod, a fifth grade teacher. “That is what they pay us for. We want to see these kids do well not just move on to the next grade.” Ms. Smith agreed, ”All the emphasis on test scores at the end of the year puts pressure on us as teachers and on the students, too. What if a kid has a bad day on test day? Does that mean they should repeat their grade?” Ms. Black, the other fifth grade teacher, disliked the testing accountability for another reason. “It is only one measure of what a student knows. Why shouldn’t a portfolio that shows growth over time be as important as a single test score on a single day?”

The sixth grade teachers were just as forceful in their dislike of the testing and accountability. “Paying teachers more if their students do well on testing is ludicrous,” responded Ms. Davidson. She went on to say, “You can’t control the ability of the groups of kids you have in your classroom. You also can’t control what they have learned in previous years. You just take them where they are, and do the best you can to teach them your curriculum. That is all you can do.” Ms. Myers shared, “the stress for the teachers to have students score well on the tests at the end of the year is enormous. As a second year teacher, my evaluation is tied to how my students perform. I am considering leaving teaching because of the pressure.”

Ms. Zellner, a sixth grade science teacher, stated, “I am not as stressed as my teammates. Science is not tested on the accountability tests. However, in high school it will be tested at the end of science courses, so I want my students to learn as much as they can. I would feel that way anyway even if there were no tests. Having tests or not having tests does not change the accountability for me. My accountability is for myself, but I know colleagues who teach reading and math who are very pressured.” Ms. Adams, the sixth grade teacher,
who had also taught fifth grade, made an interesting point. “You asked if we wanted more information regarding the transition students are making and regarding adolescent development. Are you asking us to teach one more thing? I don’t know where we will put it in the school day. The day is already crammed with so many things. It seems teachers are always being given more information to teach but nothing is every taken away. Where would we put one more thing? It is no wonder many teachers are leaving the profession.”

All teachers were asked about knowledge regarding specific theories of adolescent development, i.e., Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, James, and Vygotsky. Two of the seven teachers said they remember hearing “a couple of the names but I don’t remember much about them.” When teachers were asked if they were aware of the work of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, all were unanimous that they were not.

In summary, of the seven teachers interviewed, only one stated that she had any formal education regarding adolescent psychology or middle school philosophy. One of the fifth grade teachers had taught at the middle school level, but it was over eight years ago. One of the sixth grade teachers had taught at the elementary level. There is definitely a lack of information for both teachers and students regarding the cognitive, psychosocial, and moral levels of reasoning for early adolescents. What happens on either side of the transition from elementary to middle school always is a mystery to those on the other side. There is also a lot of emphasis on accountability for students to perform on grade level on math and reading tests at the end of the year.
Review of data related to the absence of some of the elements necessary to successful adolescent development and successful transition

This theme was the most powerful and the most surprising. Every year students make the transition from elementary to middle school, and every year educators decry the lower test scores of sixth graders. Students do not know what to expect in middle school and the teachers on either side of the transition do not know what happens on the other side. Teachers and students also demonstrated that there is a lack of information regarding adolescent development while there is much emphasis on test scores at the end of the school year.

SUMMARY OF THEMES

The themes that emerged from my case study of the transition from elementary to middle school have been presented in this chapter. Data from student and teacher interviews as well as my observations have been discussed under the five theme headings. Mixed feelings for students regarding the transition, a new found sense of independence, the importance of friendships, a problematic new learning environment, and the lack of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development are the main themes present in my study. I have tried to the best of my ability to transmit the emotions and feelings along with the words. Every time I reread the interviews, the emotions are crystal clear for me as though the participants were sitting right there. I hope the reader gets a sense of the emotional side of the findings as well as the practical side.
Table 4.1  Table of themes and categories - STUDENTS

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<tr>
<th>Theme/Category</th>
<th>Anthony</th>
<th>Edward</th>
<th>Joshua</th>
<th>Karen</th>
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X  Denotes Quotation
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CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AS THEY RELATE TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THE LITERATURE

Having crossed the swinging bridge, how does the experience compare to what you thought it would be? Did the analysis that you did of the bridge prove helpful? The responses to a transition such as crossing the swinging bridge are dependent on many factors. These factors include: the meaning of the transition, the extent to which you express your feelings about the transition, the use of previous experiences, and the extent and functioning of your support systems and other coping resources (Brammer, 1991).

My research study examines the transition made from elementary school to middle school to determine what important factors are involved, and what perceptions are regarding the transition from both students’ and teachers’ points of view. Another focus was to what extent educators could help with the transition. As reported in the previous chapter, five themes emerged from the data. These themes are also the main topics of much current middle school literature: Beane’s A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality, ASCD’s The Middle School – and Beyond, and the Carnegie Council’s Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century, Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century, etc.

The fact that the themes that emerged from my study complement the major topics of middle school literature is significant. Listening to the voices of students and teachers has confirmed what the literature says about successful middle schools. The student voices, in
particular, enable us to have a richer, more detailed description of what actually occurs during the transition from elementary to middle school. Other literature regarding the transition focuses on specific aspects or outcomes of the transition but not on what students and teachers have to say about it. While I was the interviewer and talked face-to-face with the participants in the study, I relived the intensity of their feelings and comments many times as I composed Chapters IV and V. It is almost as if they are here telling their stories and asking you to listen to them. It is impossible, perhaps, to convey that intensity of emotion, but I have tried to share their emotions as honestly as I can. The essential problem a qualitative researcher faces is to combine description that is engrossing and convincing with analyses that go to the heart of the research (Lancy, 2001).

The heart of my study was the students’ voices as they shared what they experienced as they negotiated the transition from elementary to middle school. Surrounding the students were the teachers’ voices and their experiences with the students on both sides of the swinging bridge of transition. On the periphery were my observations, helping to provide description and detail. The themes which have emerged from triangulating and synthesizing the three data sources of this study provide valuable information for educators regarding the transition from elementary to middle school.

The following discussion elaborates on the connections among the data and themes, the literature, and the research questions. The research questions provide the organizational structure for this discussion.

Research Question One: What major factors play a role during the transition students make from elementary to middle school?
Research Question Two: What student and teacher perceptions are connected with the transition from elementary school (fifth grade) to middle school (sixth grade)?

Research Question Three: How do school practices (both contrived and environmental) fit into the students’ and teachers’ personal perceptions?

Research Question Four: Are student anxieties, concerns, and predictions voiced in fifth grade brought to fruition in sixth grade?

Research Question Five: What do the student and teacher voices say to educators and other support members about how they can help?

1. What major factors play a role during the transition students make from elementary to middle school?

A factor is “an element or circumstance that makes a thing what it is,” (Webster, 1996, pg. 501). My study identified two key factors related to the transition from elementary to middle school: 1) the new environments in which students found themselves, and 2) the absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition. The factors related to the new environment included students’ new exposure to lockers, adjusting to a larger building than the elementary school, making and keeping friends, the demands of academic homework, and time management during the school day.
Factors within the new environment

Within the school environment, the most prevalent concern mentioned was the use of lockers. Locks and lockers were mentioned by all of the students in the study and by some of the sixth grade teachers. Students talked a lot about locks with intense frustration, while one sixth grade teacher stated briefly that she practiced with students the first day regarding their locks. Fifth grade teachers did not mention locks or lockers at all. The lockers themselves were also an ever-present topic of conversation for students. Lockers, time, and organization were closely tied together, as students struggled to use the locker as a tool to organize their belongings and yet comply with the time regulations of the middle schools. Sharing lockers also presented two students with the moral dilemma of someone else getting into their belongings. The respect for another’s property is an important part of early adolescent moral growth (Kohlberg, 1984). Stage three of Kohlberg’s moral development theory describes early adolescents acquiring a focus on societal needs and values that take precedence over individual interests. Reflecting increased cognitive development, the intentions behind behavior, not simply the behavior itself, take on greater importance: one seeks approval by “being good” (Conger & Galambos, 1997).

A second concern within the school environment that played a role in the elementary to middle school transition was the larger size of the middle school buildings as compared to the elementary school. Moving around the larger building (sometimes multiple buildings) prompted four of the seven students to voice concerns about getting lost and being tardy. Students were anxious about being on time for class and wanted to conform to school expectations. This desire to comply and maintain the order within the school environment is also in agreement with an early adolescent’s developing moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984).
The good boy, good girl (stage three) level of moral reasoning begins around age nine and focuses on the desire for approval of others and the wish to maintain good relations with others by conforming. Stage four, the law and order level, manifests as students seek approval of society in general. Fixed rules and rigid order are a student’s mentality in stage four of Kohlberg’s model of moral reasoning.

In addition to the larger building, a concern was expressed because the number of students in the middle schools was much larger than the elementary. The sheer number of people complicated movement around the buildings, communicating with others, participating in school activities, and managing friendships. Surprisingly, none of the teachers mentioned the difference in size of building and number of students in their interviews. It is significant that the teachers did not mention these two factors because the students expressed their importance quite explicitly. If teachers had established relationships with students (James, 1974), then knowledge about student concerns would be more evident.

Another key factor that was important to students regarding the transition from elementary to middle school is the differential amount of academic homework. All students stated that they spent much more time on homework in sixth grade than in fifth grade. Four students felt it was a disproportionate amount of time, with fifth grade being minimal and sixth grade being much greater. The need for intensity (flexibility) and the need for routine (James, 1974) are called to mind with the topic of homework. If teams of teachers are working with a prescribed set of students as middle school philosophy suggests in an integrative way (Beane, 1993), then the amount of homework should be regulated as the teachers plan and discuss among themselves what the team is doing. Helping students develop the skills of flexibility but also allowing them the comfort of routine will promote
positive development (James, 1974). Interestingly, the teachers interviewed did not mention the amount of time for homework when they discussed academics.

Friendships were an important and often mentioned element within the school environment. Friends are important in developmental theory, too. Examples in developmental theory include: needing to be needed (James, 1974), conforming to stereotypes of how others in the group behave (Kohlberg, 1984), combining past experiences with new ones to establish new friendships (Erikson, 1968), and learning with competent peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Friends can have a powerful influence on adolescents’ academic performance (Mitchell, 1994). Real friendship is different from affiliation and adolescents are just starting to realize this. All young people need friendship, and much of their energy is directed toward satisfying this need. However, even though adolescents want to experience meaningful friendships, they sometimes have difficulty establishing and keeping friendships, because of their lack of experience, their meager social skills, and their difficulty with perspective-taking (Mitchell, 1998). The young adolescent’s developing cognizance is allowing her to begin to be able to take a reflective state of mind and consider herself as both the observer and as the observed (Selman, 1980; Piaget, 1972).

Making new friends was an important topic mentioned by students. In contrast to elementary school friendships based on shared activities or neighborhoods, the most important features of adolescent friendship are intimacy, trust, self-disclosure, and mutual support (Parker, Rubin, Price & Roeser, 1995). Early adolescents tend to select friends who match and reinforce the kind of person they want to be. Reflecting upon past friendships and juxtaposing them with new friendships, the early adolescent is attempting to establish her own identity (Erikson, 1968). Without the experience of making new friends and other
different social interactions with peers, early adolescents may have a more difficult time learning acceptable ways of dealing with ordinary and extraordinary situations (Garbarino, 1995). Working together cooperatively in the educational setting will increase the likelihood of making new friends and keeping current ones (Vygotsky, 1978). Reinforcement, obtaining a reward for learning something new (making new friends), may not be a necessary condition for all learning, but it is particularly important for social learning (Conger & Galambos, 1997).

Depending on whether a student was going to a middle school where friends were known or unknown, the topic of friendships was a recurring one by students in my study. Keeping friendships viable during the transition from elementary to middle school means overcoming environmental obstacles over which early adolescents have no control (Sprinthall & Collins, 1995). Both fifth and sixth grade teachers mentioned the social aspects of students’ interactions, and described situations that they observed but no mention was made of interactions with students regarding friendships.

Becoming “independent” is part of the move from concrete thinking to abstract thinking (Piaget, 1972). Before adolescence, children think mostly about one problem at a time (Mitchell, 1998). Making decisions about meeting others’ expectations and showing respect for authority and the given social order is an important part of early adolescence (Kohlberg, 1984). Creating a personal identity and determining how others see us (sense of self) is one of the major characteristics of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Providing caring, mentoring student-teacher relationships (James, 1974; Vygotsky, 1978) is perhaps the “trickiest” part of fostering independence. Most of the individual factors mentioned by students – lockers, time, size of building, number of people, noise, homework- were related
to the school environment. Structuring the school environment so that freedom and independence are naturally occurring and yet safely occurring is a challenge in middle schools.

Life transitions are short, sharp journeys usually into the unknown (Brammer, 1991). To successfully maneuver through life’s transitions can require the courage and ability to take risks and to cope with anxiety. Early adolescents are just beginning to acquire these abilities, thus making the transition from elementary to middle school more tenable. In our society, children are expected to act like children throughout an extended adolescence, and then, quite abruptly, they are expected to act like adults (Dacey & Kenney, 1997). If elementary schools and middle schools provide an environment based on knowledge of developmental theories, the transition could become a positive, motivating, and natural experience for early adolescents. The behavior of an individual depends to a great extent on the environment in which he or she spends time (Mead, 1928). A gradual and natural transition from childhood to adulthood is less disruptive (Benedict, 1959). Adolescence can be pleasant and relatively free from stress if the environment is structured to be natural, developmentally appropriate, and nurturing.

Absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition

The second main factor in the transition from elementary to middle school, and perhaps the most important and astounding one, is the absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition. When this study was conceived and began unfolding, inductive reasoning was supposed to be used to
determine some of the answers to why previous study results were found. Surprisingly, there was little information to answer the *why* because there was a void in the information supplied by both teachers and students. Discussion of relationships (teacher-student or student-student) was null and void. There was none. Friends were mentioned numerous times by both the student and teacher participants, but the descriptions were always in the general context of a group. The student participants expressed little knowledge regarding middle school expectations other than the “rumors” they had been told by friends and siblings. Fifth grade teachers knew little about the middle school setting and the sixth grade teachers, with one exception, knew little about the elementary school setting. There was also little mentioned regarding support for students making the transition. Both sets of teachers were unaware of theories of adolescent development and were uninformed about the work of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.

The fact that students had little knowledge about the transition before they undertook the move from elementary to middle school did not surprise me. What did surprise me was the teachers’ lack of knowledge as well as the teachers’ apparent lack of interest in discovering information about the transition their students would make (fifth grade teachers) or made (sixth grade teachers). When I pursued the questions of why the teachers did not feel compelled to know where their students were going or where they came from, the resounding answer was “When is there time to visit or figure these things out? “ Ms. Black stated that she was totally occupied with “covering all the curriculum so my students will score well on the end of grade tests. Every other spare minute, when I am not in class, I am preparing lessons, grading papers, and attending meetings.” All the teachers echoed these sentiments. It wasn’t that they didn’t care or weren’t interested, but “accountability drives
everything I do,” summed up Ms. Davidson. Students at middle school age are experiencing many transitions and beginning to experiment with many different levels of thinking: early adolescents are beginning to think abstractly about the possibilities of what could be (Piaget, 1972), they are beginning to find their place within a group and conform to group standards (Kohlberg, 1984), and they are beginning to establish their own identity (Erikson, 1968). During this same period of time, they are experiencing both physical changes and school level changes. Relationships with caring, mentoring adults are essential for successful adolescent development and the many transitions they are experiencing (James, 1974; Vygotsky, 1978). How can early adolescents possibly accomplish all of this (establishing their own identity, finding their place in a group, conforming to group standards, and using abstract thinking) without support from the adults around them? More importantly, how can this be accomplished if the adults around them do not have the necessary knowledge to help and do not have a plan to support these early adolescents?

The two major factors that my study uncovered were the importance of the environment to the transition students make from elementary to middle school and the absence of some of the elements necessary for successful adolescent development and successful transition. Both of these factors are controllable by the teachers, administrators, and policy makers. Using what was found in my study to be important factors during the transition from elementary to middle school should enable educators to complement the studies already done and develop a plan regarding the transition from elementary to middle school.
2. What student and teacher perceptions are connected with the transition from elementary school (fifth grade) to middle school (sixth grade)?

Perceptions are those ideas we have based on “feelings that come from our senses,” (Webster, 1996, pg. 1055). Student perceptions were the primary ones used to consider the transition, with teacher and researcher perceptions being secondary. The main student perceptions, which emerged in interviews with students and observations in their schools, included their mixed feelings about the transition, their enjoyment of independence along with the realization of responsibility, the importance of friendships, and the stress and frustration they experienced regarding their new middle school environment. Teacher perceptions focused on the social aspects that students seemed to struggle with and the accountability they felt to “cover their curriculum.”

First, students expressed mixed feelings, nervousness and apprehension along with excitement and anticipation, about the transition throughout the interview process. Transition can create stress and at the same time be motivating (Brammer, 1991). Several students used the word stress when referring to the new environment of middle school. Students perceived the following situations to be stressful: being prepared for class and knowing what each teacher expected, being on time, starting over in a new school, not knowing where to go in your new school, the difficulty and amount of work, making and keeping friends, and of course, the ever-present lockers. While stress, like transition, is a naturally occurring part of ongoing life situations, too many stressors occurring at the same time as many developmental changes are occurring can be detrimental. Early adolescents who experience stressors as chronic or ongoing events are more likely to be depressed or
anxious, display conduct problems, exhibit a lower level of self-confidence, or have lowered academic achievement (Daniels & Moos, 1990).

Another student perception that frequently surfaced in conversation with the students was the welcomed independence and freedom. Students were also beginning to realize their responsibility in the learning process. This reported recognition parallels the personal need polarities which suggest that students need both a time for separateness and a time for belonging (James, 1974). Students recounted many examples of perceived independence: not having to walk in a line, taking a pass without asking, getting a drink of water, sharpening a pencil, observing assignment deadlines, choosing after school activities as well as involvement in activities during the school day, choosing where to sit at lunch as well as more choices about what to eat at lunch. The particular needs of intensity and routine, as well as separateness and belonging, were brought up many times by students. While these examples of independence may seem like small and simple things, finding satisfaction and making choices in the academic, achievement-oriented, sphere of school is perceived as a precursor to achieving future success in the adult world of work (Call & Mortimer, 2001).

The students’ perceptions of relationships were more difficult to ascertain from the interview process. As students transition to middle school, conformity to peers is an important feature of early adolescent life (Garbarino, 1985). The importance of friends, having and keeping current ones, as well as making new ones was a common thread in the interviews. Students’ had varied perceptions of what a friend was. Joshua stated, “It is someone who likes the same things I do.” Sandra went further and shared, “Someone I stand in line with or sit by at lunch.” Regardless of the definition, the importance of friends was apparent by the number of comments made. This need for belonging is supported by
developmental theorists: James (1974) who says that adolescents have the need to be needed and the need to need, and Kohlberg (1971) who explains that in Stage 3, early adolescents tend to conform to whatever others approve.

Social groups are influential in promoting and enforcing sets of value that can either undermine or facilitate academic achievement (Furman, 1989; James, 1974). Teachers interviewed also declared the importance of peers to an early adolescent. This importance was voiced in the interview with Ms. Black, a fifth grade teacher. She stated, “There is a lot of pressure on this age of student to act social. Emotionally, some of these students are not ready. They let other students tell them it is not cool to learn. They don’t need to learn in school.” Ms. Adams, a sixth grade teacher, concurred, “I think their peer group has the biggest influence on them.” Identification with peers and pressure to conform to the peer group increases in early adolescence (Kohlberg, 1971; Berndt, 1979; Brown, 1989).

Self-perception was also a factor in the transition as one student presented information regarding “spirit week.” For the fourth interview on a Thursday, Karen was dressed up for “Remember When” day in a poodle skirt, ponytail and high heels. She had dressed for a different theme each day of that week, she explained. While it was obvious that she was conforming to the group to “fit in” with the school spirit week theme, it was also evident that she was confident in herself and her choice of costumes. She was quite animated and detailed in her description of how she planned what she wore, the comments others made, and how she felt about her participation in this activity. This school activity was helping create a positive identity for her. Figuring out a personal identity is a complicated task for early adolescents. Personal identity development occurs within the larger societal context (Erikson, 1968). Social peer groups are important sources of support
for early adolescents in time of stress (Call & Mortimer, 2001). Peer support, both negative and positive, is a perception that leads a student to believe he/she is cared for, valued, and part of a network of communication and obligations.

Perceived support from peers has been shown to provide protection for students facing transitions (Cobb, 1976). Perhaps this is why Thomas was on the verge of tears as he described his first two weeks of sixth grade. All of his former friends were on another team in the school, and his only support was from “new” friends which he was having trouble making. When I asked him why it was difficult, he stated, “There is no time. Everything moves so fast; there is not time to talk.” Thomas is the student who expressed a desire for recess in middle school like elementary so you could talk with others. Adolescents turn more to their peers for support than to parents or other adults in times of stress, even though they may ultimately turn to their parents (Burke & Weir, 1978.) After ten weeks of sixth grade, Thomas was doing better, having found two friends who shared common interests.

While none of the students interviewed mentioned the perception of friends and learning as being connected, the literature suggests that peer relationships in early adolescence are directly linked to academic achievement. Group membership is the most consistent predictor of sixth-grade achievement, both current and over time (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). If this relationship has been established, should we not listen to the students who stated over and over that friends were so important? Perhaps achievement would be raised and not lowered during the transition if there were time for making friends as well as guidance as to what friendship is and how it comes about. The adolescent peer group owes its existence to psychological forces and social inclinations that have little to do with genuine friendship (Mitchell, 1998). Real friendship takes time and effort. Simply hanging
out and being together does not do it. It is a gradual achievement and if everything in middle school moves so fast, when will real friendships occur?

The final perception that emerged from the findings was the students’ perception of the school environment itself. Schools are the social setting in which adolescents spend a substantial portion of the waking hours during an academic year. How school size affects youths in the developmental stage of early adolescent is evident in the literature. A large school size (enrollment over 600) creates a social environment in which it is difficult to support adolescent development (Garbarino, 1995; Heath, 1994). A large school size can even exert a negative effect on performance outcomes through its effect on the social environment (Bowen, Bowen & Richman, 2000). Students attending small schools (enrollments less than 500) have higher achievement, better discipline and attendance, and higher graduation rates (Raywid, 1999).

A smaller, supportive school environment would promote positive development for adolescents. If caring, positive student-teacher relationships are an important part of early adolescent development (James, 1974, Vygotsky, 1978), smaller school environments would make these important relationships easier to maintain. If conforming to peer expectations, and beginning to understand the importance of social order are the focus of adolescent moral development, then a smaller school environment would be a safer and friendlier place for these developments. Already existing studies revealed student concerns gathered from surveys. These concerns centered around a new and larger building, getting lost and being late to class, older and possibly rougher students, and difficult homework assignments (Odegaard & Heath, 1992). The students interviewed for my study voiced all of these
concerns, thus reflecting congruence with former studies. In fact, all seven of them stated each of the above concerns at least once during the last two interviews.

Student perceptions regarding the transition to middle school confirmed existing literature regarding the existence of and the importance of the following topics: stress, growing independence, relationships, friends and social groups, a self identity, and the school environment. The students’ perceptions added rich description to the existing studies regarding adolescents and middle school transition. All we know for sure is that what we know keeps changing. Reality is the objective realm outside a person’s subjective perceptions (Babbie, 1986). Adolescents are just beginning to think beyond the present, and analytically reflect upon their own thinking. The adolescent’s thinking, at times, may still seem to be oversimplifications of reality but it is their perception (Muuss, 1996). Making decisions based on subjective perceptions, reality, and experience is at the heart of transition.

3. **How do school practices (both contrived and environmental) fit into the students’ personal perceptions?**

Several school practices were mixed in with students’ perceptions of their new environment. Being on time to class, responding to the bell system, having the agenda or daily planner, and knowing where classes were located were all school practices students alluded to in the interviews. They often aligned being on time to class with the locks and locker issues. If students are late to class, there are consequences such as detention at lunch or after school. The requirement of being on time put together with the stress of locks and lockers created the independence with responsibility theme for several of the students.
The bell system used at the three middle schools was different. As already mentioned, bells at Crockett Middle School only ring to begin the day and dismiss students at the end of the school day. The bell is three separate, dinging tones. It is pleasant to hear and is not loud. I observed one teacher at the end of the day that actually talked through it, and students could hear and understand her. There are no bells between classes. Teachers dismiss students, and students seemed to adhere to the time constraints of changing classes. At Crockett Middle School, there was an absence of the rushed, congested hallways observed at the other two middle schools. I also observed students and teachers moving through the hallways talking, but the loudness apparent at the other two schools was not evident. I could actually hear bits and pieces of conversation.

The bell system at Crosby and Murray Middle Schools consisted of one long, droning, loud tone. The tone was about 8-10 seconds long. It was definitely too loud to talk over. Before the tone ceased, students were spilling out of rooms, moving quickly, some even running down the hallways. The bells were heard at the change of every class. The bells were dismissing students and controlling the change of classes, rather than the educators and students being in control. The frequent sounding of the bells fueled the students’ descriptions of the hallways as noisy and crowded.

Another common school practice at all three middle schools was the use of a school planner or agenda. All of the students in my study were observed with their daily planner or agenda. One student even gave me a detailed look at his daily planner. All students mentioned the daily planner at some point in the interviews. This method of organization and communication (with parents, teachers, and classmates) seemed to revolve around having assignments and other pertinent details about school written down in the planner. It
was obvious that all of the students had accepted this as an expected school practice. In some classes, the planner was placed on their desk at the beginning of class. In other classes, students immediately began writing in their planners when they were seated in their new classroom. The agendas or planners did appear to provide a focus for both students and teachers. They were used as a communication tool with parents as well as an organizational tool for students. All participants spoke of the planners, and it was evident from observation that they were an integral part of sixth grade for all students. When students did not have their planner, they had a piece of paper and were writing down information in the class. All three middle schools used the planners, and both students and teachers abided by this practice.

Several participants in different interviews mentioned knowing where different classrooms were located. All three middle schools observed the practice of having the team teachers in rooms close by each other. The only rooms students had to locate were their elective or exploratory rooms. Once these locations were known, students were at ease. However, a change of electives and exploratory classes was approaching after the last interview, and five of the students mentioned again their concern of having to find their way around. The school practice of locating team classrooms together brought apparent relief from the stress of being on time and using a locker. Routine gives adolescents security and privacy (James, 1974).

A middle school that has common school practices for all students promotes a healthy learning environment for all. School-wide practices that are consistently and clearly articulated to all – parents, students, and staff - are important in establishing an orderly and safe climate for learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The daily planner and locating team
classrooms in close proximity were consistent and positives school practices for all of the students in my study. The bell system at two of the middle schools, with its loud droning tones, appeared to be a problematic school practice for students at those schools during observations. It was observed that the loud bell sounds combined with the frantic rushing through the hallways created almost a chaotic atmosphere of jostling, bumping, and loud talking. Sixth grade students who were using their lockers during this hectic time had strained looks on their faces as they tried to get the locks open, remember what they needed to retrieve, and what they needed to put away. When the second bell rang to indicate the start of the next class (and also indicated tardiness), students would run and push to get where they needed to go. At all three middle schools there were consequences for being late. However, at Crockett Middle School, the transitions (without the bells) were more orderly, calm, and purposeful. Since the term stress was used so many times by students in the interview, it would seem that having a day without the loud bells and frantic movement through the halls would lessen the stress for students.

4. Are student anxieties, concerns, and predictions voiced in fifth grade brought to fruition in sixth grade?

Students expressed concern in the first two interviews about getting lost, making friends, the difficulty and amount of work, and lockers. These concerns, expressed by the students in the first two interviews, were mentioned in the last two interviews, but most of them were abating as the students spent more time in the middle school setting. The concern
about getting lost was only brought up in the last interview again as students were getting ready to change electives at the end of the nine week grading period. Once they knew where to go, they were all right. In fact, one of them talked about finding new ways to move about the campus.

Making friends, another commonly discussed topic, was also moving in the mixed emotions theme from fear to excitement. Four of the students talked readily about new friends they had met. Some of the new friends were just friends at school, but one participant had invited a new friend to her house. Because peer friendship increases in importance during adolescence and adolescents may acquire stronger interpersonal skills, comfortable relationships with friends become highly prevalent in importance (Call & Mortimer, 2001).

The concern expressed in fifth grade regarding the amount and difficulty of schoolwork was valid. All seven participants responded that they were spending more time on homework. Two of them were spending three times as much time as they did in elementary school. All of the participants attempted to complete their work and expressed the desire to do their best, even though three admitted sometimes they forgot their homework or did not do it as well as they could have. Karen expressed several times that her goal was to figure out what the teacher wanted so she could do well. This intense need to take a risk but still know what is expected, demonstrates well the polarization of the need for routine and the need for intensity (James, 1974). This desire to do well in school also demonstrates that these early adolescents are beginning to conform to the expectations of the school, stage four of the conventional level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1964). While the literature does not talk specifically about these concerns, the emotional and cognitive changes early adolescents are undergoing play into the worry that they express.
Early adolescents show significant changes in their adjustment following the transition to middle school (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998). Coping with new issues in a new environment is stressful. Coping is the process of managing external or internal demands that a person views as difficult (Brammer, 1991). The process of coping is not immediately satisfying or beneficial. However, the successful negotiation of a stressful event or situation may better prepare an adolescent for future challenges and promote resiliency (Rutter, 1983). When asked, the students in my study were unaware of many things their teachers might have done to help them make the transition successfully. The degree to which students have to adjust on their own to the transition to middle school without guidance or “signposts” along the way may determine the level of success of their transition. Our challenge as educators is to help adolescents cope successfully with the transition to middle school, not just stand by and watch it happen.

5. What do the student and teacher voices say to educators and other support members about how they can help?

Identifying the major factors and how these factors impact students involved in the transition process should enable educators to intervene and make the transition from elementary to middle school more successful for more students. The major factor that students identified that has an impact on their transition adjustment is the new complex environment that students find themselves in. The data from my study also showed some of the elements essential to successful adolescent development and successful transition were missing. Teachers on both sides of the transition had no plan to help support the students
during the transition and little information regarding early adolescent development. Relationships between teachers and students appeared to be nonexistent, and relationships between students appeared strained due to lack of time to establish them.

Teachers can be one of the important factors in the transition to a new middle school environment. In one study already cited in the literature review, the most important consideration for students regarding caring teachers come from student writings: “responded to the individual” was the most frequent and most important characteristic of caring, followed closely by “helped with academic work,” and “encouraged success and positive feelings” (Hayes, Ryan & Zseller, 1994). The teachers in my study expressed concern about and interest in the students, i.e., “If you can help them with friendships, they will do better academically; You have to allow them to move two steps forward and one step back because they are in transition; I am here to teach; I don’t want any student to fail.” However, no examples were given of this help when I asked specifically how teachers could help. More interestingly, the students in my study did not recognize the teachers’ interest or concern. When I asked students in the third, fourth, and group interviews, whom they would talk with at their school if they had a problem, only one student mentioned a teacher. The caring student-teacher relationships that the literature stresses are so important (James, 1974) were not evident in my study.

In another cited study, students who moved from high efficacy to low efficacy teachers during the transition (the most common pattern) ended their first year in junior high school with lower expectancies in math than students who experience no change in teacher efficacy or who move from low to high efficacy teachers (Midgley 1991). Teachers’ beliefs in students’ abilities are powerful. Teachers and other adults must become aware of
students’ emotional needs and respond with empathy (Wood & Hillman, 1992). Teachers’ relationships with students are necessary and meaningful for both parties (James, 1974; Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers knowledgeable about adolescent development are essential to the transition. The ability to empower students and care about them can have a strong effect on an adolescent’s transition between elementary and middle school, but the students need to be aware that the teachers are seeking relationships with them.

According to the literature, a familial support system is central and essential in most children’s, in particular most adolescents’ lives. Early adolescents spend most of their non-school hours with family members (Larson & Richards, 1991). Adolescents’ adjustment to the school context is influenced by factors from both the family context and the peer context (Kurdek, Fine & Sinclair, 1995). Both family support and peer support is important to the adjustment to a new school context. Both family and peers supported the students in my study to varying degrees.

The students in my study mentioned their families several times during the interview process and alluded to the support the families provided during their adjustment to middle school. Four of the student participants interviewed mentioned Mom or Dad as the person who took them to school so they would not have to ride the bus so early in the morning. Four of the students and a parent had visited their new middle school during an Open House before actually attending the middle school. All of the students talked about the agendas or planners that they were required to use to keep track of assignments and other important events happening at school. Teachers shared that these organizational tools had to be signed by parents.
Two of the students interviewed mentioned family members in an important way. Karen said, “I would talk to my mom or dad if I had a problem at school and couldn’t solve it.” Joshua stated, “I talk a lot with my mom since I don’t go outside to play with other kids.” At the last focus group session, three mothers and one father came into the pizza restaurant to pick up their child early and sat and talked with all of us. The students introduced their parents to the rest of the group and seemed happy to have them there. An apparent lack of family support was also evident as Sharon had not seen her middle school before I took her, and she would not have been a part of the focus group if another parent had not brought her and taken her home. This apparent lack of support was due to lack of transportation, not parental interest, thus educators have to be careful when making judgments regarding parental support. The task of being a parent to an adolescent is different from that of being a parent to a child (Garbarino, 1985). Adolescents need guidance and support as they begin the transition into adulthood. If educators work to include parents in as many ways as possible, a partnership will be provided to support adolescents as they transition into middle school.

Perceptions of academic and social contexts of schools are especially important to young adolescents (Anderman, 1999). Lowered achievement rates have been documented by several research studies (Alspaugh, 1998, Alspaugh & Harting, 1995, Anderman, Maehr & Midgley, 1999). Student perceptions of the academic and social contexts of their middle schools were integrated throughout the findings. The often-mentioned topic of friends speaks to how important the social context is for adolescents. The students in this study expressed concern that there was little time to socialize (no recess) and that the few times they had were constrained by time limits – lunch, class change, and before school. The
teachers in this study were aware of the importance of the social context for adolescents but did not share any explicit ways that they addressed this need. One teacher shared that she understood the importance of the social aspect and its direct influence on the academic context of middle school but when asked what she did to address it, she said she did nothing specific because she did not know what to do.

The most important finding from the student and teacher voices have is that there is little being done specifically to help students make the transition from elementary to middle school. The students did not share anything specific in the interviews about what their teacher did regarding the transition. Even more significant, the teachers shared that they did little to address the transition the students made. Only one teacher had any middle school higher education courses, and she did not remember specific information regarding adolescent development. Two teachers said that I had raised their awareness of the transition’s importance, and now they would consider talking with their students about it. The literature supports the importance of this transition in relation to academic achievement, identity formation, peer interactions, and relationships with others. The student voices gave specific details of the concerns they have regarding the transition. Why are we educators doing so little to help them? My study has provided information to work with to address the concerns the students shared, but action is needed, not words.

Summary of findings as they relate to literature

The findings of my study correlate and extend the previous literature regarding the transition from elementary to middle school. The new, larger environment can be
problematic for early adolescents. New and current friendships, independence, mixed emotions, and the lack of essential elements for successful adolescent development and transition—all combine with the cognitive, psychosocial, and biological elements of being an early adolescent to create a complicated time of life.

There are several lenses through which to view transition (Brammer, 1991). Transition can be positively viewed as a friendly event, as a challenge, as an opportunity for creative growth, and/or as a normal everyday event. Transition can also be viewed as a negative event or a dilemma. How a person reacts to transition plays a vital role in how the transition is traversed. Whether a person reacts positively or negatively to a transition does not matter. Anxiety is present either way (Noack et. al., 1995). When actually experiencing a transition, it may be difficult to see the benefits such a transition may deliver. However, viewing transitions in life as a normal part of living is imperative in helping early adolescents successfully cope with the strain of the transitions.

To successfully maneuver life transitions requires the courage and ability to take risks and to cope with anxiety. Early adolescents are just beginning to acquire these abilities, thus making the transition from elementary to middle school more tenable. The literature tells us that this is an important transition and the data support that it is stressful, also. Chapter VI will suggest some things that can be done to support students in their transition.

Being a middle schooler is a lot like a favorite fairy tale. Like the ugly duckling, adolescents go through a time of change that for some is compacted into a few months and for others occurs over a few agonizing years (Walley & Gerrick, 1999). Providing a support system for early adolescent students (even if they verbalize that they don’t want it) should be one focus of a middle school, especially the sixth grade year (Midgley, 1991). Any person
entering a new situation and coping with new issues would benefit from a support system to help them adjust.
CHAPTER VI

Summary, Implications, and Recommendations

Summary

This case study set out to investigate five research questions regarding the transition from elementary to middle school. The research questions were:

According to students’ and teachers’ voices,

1. What major factors play a role during the transition students make from elementary to middle school?

2. What student and teacher perceptions are connected with the transition from elementary school (fifth grade) to middle school (sixth grade)?

3. How do school practices (both contrived and environmental) fit into the students’ and teachers’ personal perceptions?

4. Are student anxieties, concerns, and predictions voiced in fifth grade brought to fruition in sixth grade?

5. What do the student and teacher voices say to educators and other support members about how they can help?

To examine these questions, a qualitative method of research was chosen: the case study. Seven fifth grade students, chosen by purposeful maximum variation sampling, were selected for this study. The criteria used for their selection included: race, socio-economic status, grade-point average (self-reported), gender, age, family rank, exceptional children status, assignment indicator status, and the number of elementary schools attended. Three
boys – two African-American and two Caucasian American – as well as three girls – one African-American and two Caucasian-American – were the student participants. They were interviewed before the transition to middle school (in fifth grade), during the summer break, and after the transition (in sixth grade – once within the first two weeks, and lastly after their first report card). An elementary school with a diverse student population was chosen for observation. Also, three fifth grade teachers were interviewed regarding their beliefs, their knowledge of middle school, and what they did, if anything, to help students with the transition. The students attended three different middle schools, so those schools were also observed. Four teachers in sixth grade provided interview information regarding their beliefs, their knowledge of both middle and elementary schools, and what they did, if anything, to help with the transition. A follow-up phone interview was conducted with each teacher to gather more specific information regarding his or her role as a fifth or sixth grade teacher. The source and methods of data collection include: eight field observations conducted at the elementary school and three middle schools (two each) from May through October. Observations were made in the classrooms, in the hallways, in the cafeteria, and lasted for approximately one hour each. Timing of the observations was different on the two occasions; i.e., arrival/dismissal, class change, lunch, etc. Other data sources included interviews, one apiece for the teachers, and four apiece for the student participants. Also at the end of the research gathering, all students were gathered for a “focus group” and then treated to pizza at a local restaurant. This was done at the request of one of the participants who “wanted to see everyone after they had started at their new middle schools.” Multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of data.
At the end of the study all field notes and interview transcriptions were examined. Five themes/patterns were identified from the data:

- Transition or change creates ever-present mixed feelings for students as they move from elementary to middle school.
- Independence/freedom are welcome but with them come responsibility.
- Peers (friends) are very important during this transition, both keeping current ones and making new ones.
- Learning in a new setting requires coping with many new issues all at the same time:
- There was an absence of some of the elements essential for successful adolescent development and successful transition from elementary to middle school.

Findings enabled the research questions to be answered. The major factors inherent in the elementary to middle school transition are the new school environment and the absence of some of the elements essential for successful adolescent development and the transition from elementary to middle school.

Implications

This study identified several large issues related to the transition to middle school education for the study participants. These issues, while implied, were problematic especially for the transitioning students. The fifth and sixth grade teachers also implied that the issues were problematic for them. These issues included: a dehumanized school that has a focus on accountability rather than on students, the lack of time to form relationships, the
need to personalize learning for students, and the loss of some students who are overwhelmed by the complex environment.

This study documented the themes that are present during the transition from elementary to middle school:

- Mixed feelings before, during, and after the transition,
- Independence and freedom coupled with responsibility,
- The importance of friends,
- The complex environment at the middle school,
- The absence of some of the essential elements for successful adolescent development and for successful transition.

These themes, combined with the physical, cognitive, and emotional changes early adolescents are experiencing, can be overwhelming, as substantiated by both the students’ and the teachers’ voices.

This study provided several implications for educators? Taking the “mystery” out of the middle school setting for students who are transitioning seems to be one of the biggest propositions educators could undertake. Adolescence is a time of profound biological transformation and social transition characterized by exploratory behavior. To have a promising future, adolescents must be able to accomplish the following objectives (Dryfoos, 1998):

- Find a place in a constructive group,
- Learn how to form close, lasting human relationships,
- Earn a sense of self-worth,
• Achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices,
• Express constructive curiosity and exploratory behavior,
• Find ways of being useful to others,
• Believe in a promising future with real opportunities,
• Cultivate the inquiring and problem-solving habits of mind necessary for lifelong learning and adaptability,
• Learn to respect democratic values and the elements of responsible citizenship, and
• Build a healthy lifestyle.

Adolescents with the collaboration of several support systems can achieve these requirements. This collaboration should create programs designed to help adolescents reach their potential. Early adolescents begin taking steps toward achieving these goals around the fifth or sixth grade school year. So why not let the middle school be the place for these things to happen?

Middle grades education requires a core set of principles, changes in the environment, and a commitment for change on the part of the educators. Early adolescents are no different from any other person who is anxious about a new setting. Trying to cross that swinging bridge without knowing what is on the other side, without a handrail for support, and with no signposts along the way (both leading on and getting off) makes the crossing that much more difficult.

**Recommendations**

The knowledge concerning the transition from elementary school to middle school has been broadened by my case study. Research is about trying to make a claim of
knowledge, or wisdom, on the basis of systematic, creative and critical enquiry (Bassey, 1999). It is about trying to discover something that was not known before and communicating it to others. The essential feature of any research is that it makes a claim of particular knowledge (Bassey, 1999). A case study researcher is obligated to draw pointed conclusions, explicitly or implicitly and make recommendations that will affect policy and/or practice (Lancy, 2001). My research study concludes that the middle school environment is potentially problematic for students. The adjustment is exacerbated by the lack of a plan grounded in developmental theory and the lack of knowledge by both teachers and students regarding the transition from elementary to middle school.

Transition is an ongoing ever-present condition in everyday life, and education is no exception. The institution of education is not immune to transition. American education has undergone two fundamental educational transitions and is in the midst of a third transition (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2001). Each of these major shifts in educational policy has occurred at the dawn of a new century, and each was triggered by dramatic changes in the social, political, and economic conditions of the nation itself. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the common school emerged as the accepted model of education because it provided a universal educational experience for American children. The beginning of the twentieth century brought fundamental changes in the American economy and society. The graded school was devised to meet the needs of a more urban, corporate, and industrial focused America. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, educational reformers and the public at large are questioning the validity of the graded, leveled school, the traditional calendar, and the competencies of teachers.
Transition can be productive and positive if it is grounded in theory and periodically reevaluated. My research study allowed student and teacher voices to be heard regarding important aspects of the transition from elementary to middle school. Early adolescents making the transition from elementary to middle school have little input into the process of the transition. For the transition to occur with a minimum of disruption, students need knowledge of their new environment, and it is imperative for them to see the environment ahead of time (Wood & Hillman, 1992). By understanding the transition, teachers will be better prepared to meet challenges, guide students, and embrace new opportunities (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2001). Teachers also need an understanding of the early adolescents who are in the midst of the transition. While teachers may have more immediate impact on the transition, most of the directives regarding education come from policy makers who are distanced from the actual educational environment, and they, too, need an understanding of the students and the environments they are moving between.

Eleven recommendations are suggested that address the elementary to middle school transition:

1. *Consideration should be given to provide training regarding adolescent development theories for upper elementary and middle school teachers, along with the administrators.* The most powerful way to impact the transition would be for schools/school districts to set up workshops for teachers regarding the major adolescent development theories and how they apply to teaching early adolescents. These workshops could be done on workdays. Part of the workshop could be used for learning new information, and the second part of the day could be used for synthesizing
the new information and interactions with other teachers. Teaching can be an isolating profession with little time for dialogue with others who are experiencing the same situations. Teachers need knowledge about the students they are interacting with everyday. Without it, how can the interaction be successful? Also, set up communication among teachers so they can share ideas, situations, etc. with each other (perhaps an on-line chat room). Knowledge is power.

2. Communication across the fifth and sixth grade should be considered. Fifth grade elementary school teachers and sixth grade middle school teachers could “shadow” each other for at least one day to get a true experience of each other’s worlds. After shadowing each other, the fifth and sixth grade teachers could trade places for a day or two and teach on the other side of the transition. Nothing can take the place of actually being there. Direct communication, through email or phone, could be established so when questions arise they can be addressed quickly, be they questions from the teacher or the students.

3. Elementary schools could consider providing specific information for upcoming students to the “Mystery” of middle school. All fifth grade students could “shadow” a sixth grade student for a day. Even if the middle school is not the one the student attends, the experience will give the students a truer idea of what middle school is like. This could be done halfway through the fifth grade year so that perceptions students get from
the shadowing experience could create an ongoing dialog between students and teachers.

4. *Teachers should consider sharing the different issues of a new environment with their students, modeling appropriate behavior, and providing scenarios for practice:*

- **At the fifth grade level** there could be locks available to let fifth grade students become comfortable working with them. Have fifth grade students use an organizer, either one provided by the school or one all fifth grade teachers have agreed upon. Hopefully if recommendation #2 is put in place, the fifth grade teachers will get an idea when they visit the middle school. Help fifth grade students establish a sense of time. Four or five minutes is often longer or shorter than students think. Practice reading a map and finding alternate ways around their own school. Ensure opportunities for students to establish relationships with fifth grade teachers. This will provide a foundation for future mentoring and student-teacher relationships.

- **At the sixth grade level** the first week of school could be set aside for practice in all of the new aspects of the new environment, i.e., using locks and lockers, finding different locations in the school, using a map to locate different locations within the school as well as different routes to travel, establishing a sense of time, using an organization, and most importantly time to establish new friendships and mentoring relationships with new teachers.
5. *Schools could consider providing students who are making the transition with the knowledge of adolescent developmental theories to help them better understand themselves.* Provide students with mini-workshops on adolescent developmental theories. If students do not have correct knowledge, the decisions they make may be happenstance not based on fact. Students are often left out when considering how to improve education. If students have the knowledge, including developmental theories, they will be better able to start having control over their own lives.

6. *Teachers on both sides of the transition could consider coaching and providing role-playing opportunities regarding friendships and communication with different people.* This is an essential component of a successful transition. What constitutes a friendship? Teachers could use a sociogram, periodically, to assess the friendship patterns. Teachers could also address with students such questions as: How do you “make” friends? How do you talk to a teacher regarding a concern? How do you ask for help?

7. *An elementary administrator and a middle school administrator could consider visiting each fifth grade classroom prior to the transition and talk about the expanded opportunities available at middle school as well as answer questions from students.* Administrators could collect ahead of time a compilation of questions and concerns from students. The administrators could then address these questions, thus personalizing the information and
making it most relevant. Knowledge is power, and the more knowledge students have, the less apprehensive they will be.

8. *Middle schools could consider implementing two teacher teams at the sixth grade level with the two classrooms in close proximity to each other.* The closeness of the classrooms would facilitate communication among teachers and among students. Two teacher teams would also foster a comfort level for most students since each teacher would be responsible for fewer students.

9. *Middle schools could consider limiting the number of electives for the first semester of sixth grade.* This expanded time for core academics might also counteract the decline in achievement scores that is evident in the literature. More time with a smaller number of teachers also would promote student-teacher relationships and new friendships – both important aspects of early adolescent development. The concern of getting lost in the new building would be lessened if students stayed longer in core classes without electives the first semester.

10. *Middle schools could consider making an effort to keep sixth grade students from the same elementary schools together in classes.* With friendships being an integral part of early adolescence and the middle school, keeping students who know each other together during sixth grade will make the transition to be less stressful. Knowing other students, having others to talk with, ask questions of, sit with at lunch, and walk with
in the hallways would create a more comfortable school context for sixth grade students.

11. *Elementary and middle schools should consider conducting an evaluation focusing on the recommendations that are put in place.* Whether only one or all ten (or somewhere in between) of the recommendations are put in place, an evaluation tool should be used to measure the effectiveness of the changes. This evaluation should include the teachers and the students.

**Future Research Considerations**

There are other, future research studies that need to be considered in order verify, expand, and focus on the areas identified in this study. These future research studies could include:

- *Longitudinal research should consider investigating any connection between the factors in the elementary to middle school transition and factors in the middle school to high school transition.* If there are any commonalities, perhaps sharing information will help students be more successful across both transitions.

- *Another research consideration might include various studies of students in grades 6-8.* These studies could focus on areas identified as problematic in my study, e.g., organization of materials, time management, friendships, communication, lockers and locks, and amount of homework.

- *Longitudinal research with the study participants in this study could reveal more descriptive information as they progress through middle school.*
Following the study participants to further describe the outcomes that are manifested for them could provide more recommendations or validate some of those from this study.

The interesting thing about the recommendations regarding the transition from elementary to middle school is that none of them are cost prohibitive. They do not require large amounts of money in these frugal times. However, they do require planning and dedicated educators who can look beyond convenience. Educational professionals need to understand that if they do not lay a firm foundation for each side of the transition, the bridge across it may swing out of control. The students cannot be blamed for environmental effects and lack of knowledge that is out of their control. It is within the control of the educators to anchor the bridge and coach them across.

In the past decade, the world in which young people come to maturity has changed dramatically. In this new millennium, our schools must play an important role in helping these young adolescents reach their potential. High quality middle schools are the result of a creative balance between elementary and secondary perspectives, between specialization and generalization, between curriculum and community, between equity and excellence, and between touching the mind and touching the heart (George, et.al, 1992).

My case study was the result of a long-held passionate belief that the transition between levels of schooling is complex but can be impacted by caring educators. To that end, I have undertaken to describe that transition from the perspective of students who are undertaking it and the teachers who are on either side of it. My research has allowed me the forum to share with you the sense of transition that the students have. While I was in the “field” observing, I often thought of this quote:
“In a vague way, of course, we are all fieldworkers whenever we must make sense of strange surroundings and pass on our understandings to others.”

Maanen, 1987 pg. ix

To conclude my study, I want to share two more scenarios from the students. Throughout my data analysis, I looked for a metaphor from the students to complement my etic one of the swinging bridge. I believe I found it in Joshua’s description of how he tries to deal with frustration and being overwhelmed. He imagines himself as a bird flying high above the crowded hallways, looking down, and then deciding what to do. He referred to the song used at Frost Elementary for students, “I believe I can fly.” He said he had to continually remind himself that he could do this and then he would. To end every interview, I always asked students if they had anything else they wanted to share. At the conclusion of the last interview Sandra said, “Thank you for involving me. Like, you are publishing a book and anybody can read it. Those are MY thoughts.” While I had believed in my study all along, this comment made my hard work worthwhile. The students believe they can cross the swinging bridge as long as we are there on both sides to support them. They believe we know what to do to make the bridge sturdy and safe for them. They also believe they can even fly! It is up to us to help them. After all, education really is all about the kids.
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APPENDIX A
Appendix A

Student/Parent Protocol for pilot study:

“You (child/student/parent) will be leaving elementary school at the end of this year and are going to middle school. I am going to ask you some questions about going to middle school. Please share with me your thoughts and ideas.”

1. What are your ideas right now about middle school?
2. Where did your perceptions come from?
3. If I asked you to describe a typical day in middle school, what do you think it would be like?
4. Have you talked with anyone about middle school – parents, friends, teachers? If so, what has been said?
5. What do you think are the major differences between elementary school and middle school?
6. What are your major concerns about middle school?
7. What kinds of things do you think would help make you successful in middle school?
Appendix B

Teacher Protocol for Pilot Study

1. What do you know about fifth (sixth) grade?
2. Have you ever visited fifth or sixth grade?
3. Have you had any training in early adolescent development?
4. Do you do anything in your classroom that you think affects the transition students make from elementary to middle school?
APPENDIX C
Appendix C

April , 2002

Dear Parents,

I am currently a graduate student at NCSU working in the doctoral program of curriculum and instruction. As you are aware, I am also the assistant principal at Frost Elementary GT Magnet School. As part of my dissertation research, I am interested in studying the transition fifth grade students make from elementary school to middle school. I am particularly interested in Fuller’s fifth grade students who will be attending Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools. Since this is a magnet school, most Frost students attending Crockett would be magnet students. While magnet acceptance letters have not been mailed yet, I would like to establish a pool of diverse students with whom I could consider working who will be attending Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools. Please acknowledge receipt of this letter and indicate by checking yes or no, you have applied for Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools. Once acceptance letters have been mailed, I may contact you again to ask for permission to interview your child as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at school, 856-7625. Thanks for your help.

Sincerely,

Kathy Godfrey
Assistant Principal

_____ Yes, I applied to Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools.

_____ No, I did not apply to Crockett, Crosby, or Murray Middle Schools.

Student name __________________________________________________________

Parent signature ________________________________________________________

Phone number __________________________________________________________
APPENDIX D
Appendix D

May, 2002

Dear Parents,

As you are already aware from a previous letter, I am interested in studying the transition students make from elementary to middle school as part of my doctoral program at NCSU. By studying this transition from a student’s point of view, I hope to better understand the different aspects. I will also be including the teacher’s point of view from both fifth and sixth grades. This study will provide information that may enable future students to make a smoother transition.

I need your help to complete this study. I would like permission to interview your son/daughter, as well as observe them in their surroundings at the two schools. I will be interviewing selected students once or twice before fifth grade is over, once during the summer before middle school begins, and twice after the sixth grade year has started. These interviews will be arranged at your convenience and will not interfere with the instructional day. I will audio tape the interviews in order to transcribe them and fully gain the information that is shared.

The information shared is entirely confidential and the names of the students will be changed in the dissertation.

I have received permission to conduct this study from the following sources: Ms. Pamela Peters, Principal, Frost Elementary School; Mr. Kenneth Branch, Principal, Crockett Middle School; Ms. Anne Dornan, Principal, Murray Middle School; Mr. Leonard King, Principal, Crosby Middle School; Dr. Karen Banks, Associate Superintendent for Evaluation and Research, Wake County Public School System, and the NCSU Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research.

Attached is the NSCU informed consent form for research. Please read it through and make sure your child wishes to participate. Then sign the form if both you and your child agree to participate. Send a signed copy to school with your child and I will return a copy for you.

If you have any questions at all concerning this study, please contact me at 856-7625 (work) or 420-0877 (home). I look forward to working with your son/daughter to better understand the elementary to middle school transition from a student perspective.

Sincerely,

Kathy Godfrey
North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS

Listening to Students’ and Teachers’ Voices: An ecological case study of the transition from elementary to middle school

Paula Kathleen Godfrey

Faculty Sponsors: Dr. Candy Beal & Dr. Carol Pope

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the elementary to middle school transition from a student’s point of view.

INFORMATION

1. I will be interviewing selected students 3-4 times from the end of fifth grade to the beginning of sixth grade. Likewise, I will be observing the school surroundings of the students. I will also be interviewing selected fifth and sixth grade teachers. The interviews with students will focus on thoughts and feelings about leaving elementary school and attending middle school.

2. The interviews for students will take approximately 30-45 minutes each and for teachers approximately one hour.

RISKS

Because I am an administrator at the site where I will begin my research, I am especially sensitive to the need for confidentiality. I will not discuss the research with anyone else at the site without the written permission of the participants. If any situation arises with the students or teachers where an administrator needs to intervene, the principal has agreed to do so. Likewise, I will make it clear to participants at what time I am acting in the role of “researcher” and not acting in the role of Assistant Principal. Any participant is free to leave the study at any time. Interviews will be audiotaped, but tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

BENEFITS

I believe there will be several benefits to the study. First, students and teachers will have an opportunity to voice their understanding of the transition process. Second, students and teachers will have an opportunity to contribute to the existing knowledge base in the field of education. Also, students and teachers will have an opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes and ideas regarding themselves as they fit into the scheme of transition.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION

For participating in this study you will receive small educational-related tokens of appreciation at the end of each interview. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will receive only those tokens earned up to the point of withdrawal.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Paula Kathleen Godfrey at 806 Calloway Drive or (919) 856-7625. 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 Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects.
PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.”

Parent/Guardian’s signature ___________________________ Date __________
Investigator’s signature ______________________________ Date __________

CHILD ASSENT
“I have read the above information, and had it explained to me. I agree to participate in the study.”

Participant's signature ________________________________ Date __________
APPENDIX E

Interview protocol for fifth grade participant interviews

First, let me tell you how much I appreciate your taking time for this interview. There is no way I can fully repay you for all you are doing, but I hope you enjoy this small token of my appreciation.

Because we already know each other, it may seem like I’m asking you something that you feel I already know the answer to. However, I am sure I will learn a lot that I don’t know since we don’t get the chance to sit and talk like this. So, please, tell me anything that comes to mind and do not assume that I’ll know what you are talking about.

I will be audio taping this interview so that I may transcribe it and gain full knowledge of what you share. If you think of something later in the interview that is related to something mentioned earlier, please share it. Since I am audio taping this interview, when I type it up, I can place the ideas where they need to go.

First, I want to start with some general questions and just learn about your as a person and a student. That will give me some background information about you.

1. Tell me about your elementary school experience. For example, have you always attended Frost Elementary, or have you attended other schools? How do they compare?
2. *(for magnet students only) What are some advantages and disadvantages in not attending your neighborhood school?
3. Tell me about your background. For example, where have you lived, who is in your family, what places have you visited, etc.
4. Tell me about the kinds of things you like to do both in school and away from school.
5. Tell me about a typical day in fifth grade.
6. What have you found to be the most challenging and/or difficult part of being in fifth grade?
7. What have you found to be the most rewarding and/or fun part of being in fifth grade?

The next questions are more focused on the heart of my research study, which is the transition students make from elementary to middle school.

8. How do you feel about leaving Fuller (the elementary school)?
9. Tell me about anything you and/or your family are doing to celebrate completing elementary school.
10. What do you think the terms elementary school and middle school mean?
11. What do you think about going to a middle school instead of an elementary school?
12. Tell me about anything you have ever asked about or talked with someone about concerning middle school.
13. Who did you talk with or ask? Why did you specifically talk with the person?
14. What do you think you know about middle school?
15. Describe any things your teachers have had you do to prepare students for middle school? How do you know these are things teachers have had you do?
16. Right now, describe what you think will be the most challenging part about moving to middle school? What are you looking forward to? What are you concerned about?
17. Do you have any questions for me about my research?

I will be talking with you again in the summer. I will call your house and set up a time when we can get together. Thank you again for taking the time to let me talk with you. I appreciate your input into my research.
Student interview protocol – 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview (summer)

First, let me tell you how much I appreciate your sharing your time and thoughts with me. I hope you enjoy this small token of my appreciation and that it proves useful to you as you start middle school.

I will be audio taping this interview so that I may transcribe it and gain full knowledge of what you share. If you think of something later in the interview that is related to something mentioned earlier, please share it. Since I am audio taping this interview, when I type it up, I can place the ideas where they need to go.

Some of the questions I will ask are similar to what I asked during the first interview. You have had time to think and are closer to starting middle school so perhaps your ideas have changed.

1. Tell me about your summer since you left elementary school. What have you been doing?
2. Did you and your family do anything to celebrate your completion of elementary school?
3. What do you think will be the greatest challenge about going to middle school?
4. What do you think will be the most fun about going to middle school?
5. Have you talked with anyone about middle school?
6. Have you done anything to prepare for middle school: ie. Purchased anything, organized your room, etc.
7. What kinds of electives did you sign up for?
8. Which math are you taking? Are you reviewing or working on any school subjects like math, writing, etc.
9. Do you have any ideas about what you might want to do as a career?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share?
11. Do you have any questions for me?

I will talk with you again within two week of your sixth grade year starting.
Interview protocol for sixth grade student participants

This is the third of our interviews and I appreciate your taking time from your busy schedule. I hope you enjoy this disk carrier as my way of saying thank you for your help with my research.

Even though we already know each other, remember I am asking you questions that I want your thoughts about. Do not assume that I already know what you think since we haven’t talked for several weeks.

1. Even though it has only been a few weeks, tell me about your middle school experience so far.

2. How do you feel about attending this middle school?

3. Do you have former friends attending this middle school with you? Tell me about your friends that you knew before coming here and any new friends you have made since coming to this school.

4. What has been your biggest challenge at middle school and how have you handled it?

5. Describe any things your teachers have said to you concerning middle school being different from elementary school; the same as elementary school.

6. Describe any changes you have made in the way you organize your school materials since coming to this school, i.e., changes from the way you organized your things in elementary school.

7. Tell me about your different teachers and what they expect from you.

8. Tell me about the difference in size, if any, from your elementary school. What kind of advantages does the change in size have? What kind of disadvantages does it have?

9. Describe the homework and classwork you are expected to complete. How does it compare with the work in elementary school?

10. If you have problems at this middle school, have you decided whom you will talk with? Why have you chosen that person?

11. When I talked with you before, I asked you about things that you had heard from others, and concerns you might have about attending middle school. (I will remind them of what they said.) How do you feel about these things now?
12. What kinds of new things are you doing at middle school that you did not do in elementary school?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

I will be talking with you again after you receive your first report card. Thanks you again for taking the time to let me talk with you. I appreciate your input into my research.
Interview protocol for sixth grade student participants

This is the fourth and final individual interview. I appreciate your taking time from your busy schedule. I hope you enjoy this book as my way of saying thank you for your help with my research.

Even though we already know each other, remember I am asking you questions that I want your thoughts about. Do not assume that I already know what you think since we haven’t talked for several weeks.

1. Tell me about your middle school experience since we last talked.

2. How do you feel about attending this middle school?

3. Tell me about your friends that you knew before coming here and any new friends you have made since coming to this school.

4. What has been your biggest challenge at middle school and how have you handled it?

5. Describe any changes you have made in the way you organize your school materials since coming to this school, i.e., changes from the way you organized your things in elementary school.

6. Describe the homework and classwork you are expected to complete. How does it compare with the work in elementary school?

7. If you have problems at this middle school, have you decided whom you will talk with? Why have you chosen that person?

8. When I talked with you before, I asked you about things that you had heard from others, and concerns you might have about attending middle school. (I will remind them of what they said.) How do you feel about these things now?

9. What kinds of new things are you doing at middle school that you did not do in elementary school?

10. How were your grades? What are you going to change for the next grading period?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

I will be talking with you one more time with all of the other participants. Thanks you again for taking the time to let me talk with you. I appreciate your input into my research.
Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for coming today to this focus group. This will be the last time we will get together for my research. I would still like to keep in touch with all of you through email. If you would like to keep in touch with me, just email me a message and I will respond.

Today’s focus is the transition from elementary to middle school that you all have just completed. I have talked with you individually but today I want to have you talk as a group. Please listen to one another. You do not have to raise your hand to respond. Some ground rules for what we will be doing are as follows:

- Speak one at a time.
- All opinions are valuable and none will be laughed at.
- No sidebar conversations.

I will state a question or statement and you may respond as you wish. I will be audiotaping this session so I can transcribe it.

1. Describe the feelings you have had as you have transitioned from elementary to middle school.
2. What has been the most difficult thing to accomplish during the transition?
3. How do you handle getting up earlier?
4. What would you change about fifth grade to make the transition easier?
5. What would you change about sixth grade to make the transition easier?
6. What would you say to current fifth graders about becoming sixth graders next year?
Appendix F

May, 2002

Dear fifth grade teachers,

Attached is a NCSU informed consent form describing my research study. I would like to interview you before you leave for the summer. I can do it during the workdays or at any convenient time. I know this is a very busy time of year, but I value your input and insight for my research. The interview will probably take about 30 minutes. I will be audiotaping it and I will destroy the tapes when I finish conducting my research. NO names will be used. Please let me know if you will be willing to participate by signing the consent form, return it to me, and arrange a time for an interview. I appreciate your collaboration.

Sincerely,

Kathy Godfrey
August, 2002

Dear sixth grade teachers,

I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University. The focus of my dissertation research is the transition students make from elementary to middle school. I am following a group as they make the transition and using interviews, observations of surroundings and fieldnotes to gather data. I am also using interviews with fifth and sixth grade teachers to gather data.

This is an invitation to be part of my research. I would like to interview sixth grade teachers. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour depending on what you have to say. It will be scheduled at your convenience between now and October 15. If you are interested, there is an official university consent form attached. Please complete and contact me via email or phone. Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Kathy Godfrey
kgodfrey@wcpss.net
856-7628 (Frost Elementary)
420-0877 (home)
North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS

Listening to Students’ and Teachers’ Voices: An ecological case study of the transition from elementary to middle school

Paula Kathleen Godfrey                           Faculty Sponsors: Dr. Candy Beal & Dr. Carol Pope

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is understand and describe the elementary to middle school transition from a student’s point of view.

INFORMATION
1. I will be interviewing selected students 3-4 times from the end of fifth grade to the beginning of sixth grade. Likewise, I will be observing the school surroundings of the students. I will also be interviewing selected fifth and sixth grade teachers. Teacher interviews will focus on teachers’ knowledge of the transition for students.
2. The interview for students will take approximately 30-45 minutes each and for teachers approximately one hour.

RISKS
Because I am an administrator at the site where I will begin my research, I am especially sensitive to the need for confidentiality. I will not discuss the research with anyone else at the site without the written permission of the participants. If any situation arises with the students or teachers where an administrator needs to intervene, the principal has agreed to do so. Likewise, I will make it clear to participants at what time I am acting in the role of “researcher” and not acting in the role of “Assistant Principal.” Any participant is free to leave the study at any time. Interviews will be audiotaped, but tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

BENEFITS
I believe there will be several benefits to the study. First, students and teachers will have an opportunity to voice their understanding of the transition process. Second, students and teachers will have an opportunity to contribute to the existing knowledge base in the field of education. Also, students and teachers will have an opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes and ideas regarding themselves as they fit into the scheme of transition.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION
For participating in this study you will receive small educational-related tokens of appreciation at the end of each interview. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will receive only those tokens earned up to the point of withdrawal.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Paula Kathleen Godfrey at 806 Calloway Drive or (919) 856-7625. 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 Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)
PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT
I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature___________________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature_______________________________________ Date _________________
Appendix G
Interview protocol for fifth grade teacher interviews

First, let me tell you how much I appreciate your taking time for this interview. There is no way I can fully repay you for all you are doing, but please accept this small token of my appreciation.

Because we have known each other for several years, it may seem like I’m asking you something that you feel I already know the answer to. However, I am sure I will learn a lot that I don’t know since we don’t get the chance to sit and talk like this. So, please, tell me anything that comes to mind and do not assume that I’ll know what you are talking about.

I will be audio taping this interview so that I may transcribe it and gain full knowledge of what you share. First, I want to start with some general questions and just learn about your as a teacher. That will give me some background information about you.

1. Tell me about why you became a teacher.
2. Tell me about your background in education. What kinds of things have you done?
3. Why did you choose to teach at the elementary level, especially fifth grade?
4. Tell me about a typical day in fifth grade.
5. What is your philosophy for teaching students who are at the end of childhood and the beginnings of early adolescence?
6. What preparation have you had for working with early adolescents?
7. What have you found to be the most challenging and the most rewarding aspect of working with students of this age?

The next questions are more focused on the heart of my research study, which is the transition students make from elementary to middle school.

8. Tell me about anything students ever ask about or talk about concerning middle school.
9. Describe any things you do consciously to prepare students for middle school?
10. What do you know about middle level education?
11. What would you like to know about middle school and the transition fifth grade students make?
12. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for taking the time to let me talk with you. I appreciate your input into my research.
Interview protocol for sixth grade teacher interviews

First, let me tell you how much I appreciate your taking time for this interview. There is no way I can fully repay you for all you are doing, but please accept this small token of my appreciation.

Because we are both educators, it may seem like I’m asking you something that you feel I already know the answer to. However, I am sure I will learn a lot that I don’t know since I have not visited your school before and gotten the chance to sit and talk like this. So, please, tell me anything that comes to mind and do not assume that I’ll know what you are talking about.

I will be audio taping this interview so that I may transcribe it and gain full knowledge of what you share. First, I want to start with some general questions and just learn about your as a teacher. That will give me some background information about you.

1. Tell me about why you became a teacher.
2. Tell me about your background in education. What kinds of things have you done?
3. Why did you choose to teach at the middle school level, especially sixth grade?
4. Tell me about a typical day in sixth grade.
5. What is your philosophy for working with early adolescents?
6. What preparation have you had for working with early adolescents?
7. What have you found to be the most challenging and the most rewarding aspects of working with young adolescents?

The next questions are more focused on the heart of my research study, which is the transition students make from elementary to middle school.

8. Describe any things you do consciously to help students adjust to middle school?
9. What do you know about elementary level education?
10. What do you want to know about elementary education and the transition sixth grade students make?
11. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for taking the time to let me talk with you. I appreciate your input into my research.

Note: This protocol is not designed to be followed rigidly. I have simply considered two general areas for interview questions. I am sure as the interviews progress, the teachers will take some bends and turns that I have not thought of, but may provide information or jumping off places for further questions. This is simply a starting place.
Phone interview protocol for fifth and sixth grade teachers

Hello, this is Kathy Godfrey. My research on the transition to middle school is progressing well but I have discovered that I need more information from you. Is this a convenient time to do a ten to fifteen minute phone interview?

I asked the students some questions that I have now decided that I would like to ask you, also.

1. Tell me, if you will, about the advantages and disadvantages you feel as a teacher of fifth or sixth grade students.
2. You have already shared that you do not know very much about the transition students make from elementary to middle school, nor do you know much about adolescent development. How would you feel about that information being shared with you? Do you think it would be useful and could you integrate it into what you are teaching?