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Bridging The Transition Gap: Student Perceptions Of Middle To High School Transition Practices And School Connectedness

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BRIDGING THE TRANSITION GAP: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION PRACTICES AND SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was two-fold: first, to understand perceptions of high school students regarding their transition from middle school into high school. Grounded theory research methods were used to construct theory from data obtained from the study. Secondly, the researcher wished to advocate for North Dakota high schools for implementing school-wide transition programs to bridge the transition gap during a period of pivotal importance in the lives of our students. A review of North Dakota Century Code 15.1 revealed no statute has been developed requiring North Dakota schools to implement school-wide programs or activities focusing on students transitioning from middle to high school.

The researcher conducted a grounded theory mixed methods study by collecting online survey responses (both quantitative and qualitative) from 513 currently enrolled high school (10^{th}-12^{th} grade) students from three participating high schools within one public school district in North Dakota. Grounded theory is employed to understand a situation (student's perceptions of transitioning into high school) and to identify the cause of a problem (possible reasons/motivations behind students perceptions of school connectedness). The integration of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and School Connectedness frameworks were critical in understanding how student participants experienced their transition into high school as well as unearthing aspects of school life that may have contributed to the overall transition itself.

Findings of this study suggested that students within the participating school district had a need for connections with others, believed there are multiple benefits of joining extracurriculars, and had a need to learn more about the “unknowns” about high school prior to their arrival. The results of this study included recommendations for educators, state educational departments, students, and for implementation of a school-wide transition program for incoming high school students to bridge the transition gap between middle school and high school.

Keywords: high school students, school connectedness, transition

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Transitions in our lives bring about a flurry of emotions whether it be excitement, readiness, nervousness, or possibly fear and dread. Students across the world traverse through developmental milestones and transitions throughout their school age years (and beyond) experiencing many of these same emotions. Therefore, it is the duty of educators to assist students in the transition phases of their lives, including the transition from middle to high school.

According to Corsello, Sharma, and Jerabek (2015), ninth grade is a "pivotal" point in a student's educational journey and often "sets the stage" as to whether or not a student will successfully graduate from high school. The transition from middle school to high school is full of "developmental, academic, and structural challenges" (Corsello et al., 2015, p. 1). According to DeLamar and Graham Brown (2016), some of these challenges include "concerns about . . . getting lost, interacting with older students and bullies, understanding the school rules, making new friends, successfully opening lockers, and having too much homework" (p. 33). These challenges are amplified for students who may demonstrate "at risk" indicators such as attendance problems, behavioral issues, and course completion (academic) difficulties. Other relevant indicators or predictors (for dropout) include: "individual self-beliefs (e.g., Academic

Self-Efficacy, Motivation), students' connection to their school environment, and the support that students receive from school during important transitions (e.g., eighth grade into ninth grade)" (Vera et al., 2016, pp. 161-162). Therefore, schools must address this pivotal period for all ninth-grade students through not only attendance, behavioral, and course completion (academic) support, but also through social supports to increase academic achievement, school connectedness (Nitza & Dobias, 2015), and to address the incidents of dropout within our high schools.

According to the University of North Dakota Educational Leadership Cohort #8 (personal communication, March 3, 2021):

> Education in North Dakota is guided by the North Dakota Century Code (NDCC) 15.1 statutes [Elementary and Secondary Education Act, n.d.] with the North Dakota Legislative Interim Education Policy Committee evaluating their effectiveness. As inferred by Chairman David Monson in the minutes of the Education Policy Committee meeting on October 2, 2019, it is time "to recommend changes to any laws found to be irrelevant, duplicative, inconsistent, or unclear" (Assel, 2019, p. 4). Following this Interim Education Committee meeting, the need to review, revise, and make recommendations to NDCC statutes was brought to the University of North Dakota Educational Leadership Doctoral Cohort #8.

After doing a little research, the University of North Dakota Educational Leadership Cohort #8 (personal Communication, March 3, 2021) also stated:

> The purpose of the educational system in North Dakota, according to Article VIII of the Constitution of North Dakota, is to preserve democratic government and to

provide for the "prosperity and happiness" (N.D. Const. art. VIII § 1), of the people. The writers of the state constitution believed that this required students to have, "a high degree of intelligence, patriotism, integrity, and morality" (N.D. Const. art. VIII § 1). It is the responsibility of educators to uphold these values while recognizing that the educational system and its stakeholders continue to change. Preparing students to be prosperous and fulfilled citizens in a world that is ever-changing means that educational systems must also evolve to meet those changing needs.

Need for the Study

This study aimed to give attention to high school (Grades 10-12) students' perceptions regarding their transition from middle school to high school, and how schools bridged the transition. Through grounded theory mixed methods practices, data collected gave voice to students and informed school officials of the importance of understanding how a student's transition may impact their perceptions of school connectedness. The study also aimed to review and make recommendations for selected sections and topics of NDCC 15.1.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold: first, to understand perceptions of high school students regarding their transition from middle school into high school. Grounded theory research methods were used to construct theory from data obtained from the study. Secondly, the researcher wished to advocate that North Dakota high schools implement school-wide transition programs to bridge the transition gap during a period of pivotal importance in the lives of our students. A review of North Dakota Century Code 15.1

revealed no statute had been developed requiring North Dakota schools to implement school-wide programs or activities focusing on students transitioning from middle to high school.

Legislative support of resources and funding could contribute to North Dakota high schools implementing transitioning programming specifically addressing needs of ninth grade students who may display "at risk" indicators for dropping out. Two specific funding mechanisms could be used. First, within the North Dakota education funding formula at the time of this study, there is a line item for "at risk" students with a weighting factor of 0.025, based on Average Daily Membership, which is:

> Calculated at the conclusion of the school year by adding the total number of hours that each student in a given grade, school, or school district is in attendance during a school calendar and the total number of hours that each student in a given grade, school, or school district is absent during a school calendar, and then dividing the sum by: . . . One thousand fifty hours for middle and high school students. (N.D. Cent. Code, n.d., Section 15.1-27-35, para. 1)

This weighting factor could allow districts to use funds to implement a freshman transition program into their district high school(s) and focus efforts on decreasing dropout rates through early programming and intervention. Secondly, there is the option for districts to use federal Title I education funds for implementation of a freshman transition program, as well. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 calls for school districts to ensure successful transitions from middle school to high school, including mentorship opportunities; to implement dropout prevention or intervention strategies; and to re-engage out of school youth.

Statistics of high school dropouts have been dire. According to Tony Miller (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), 1.2 million students drop out of our nation's high schools annually, equating to around 7000 students per day. North Dakota's dropout rate as of the 2018-2019 school year was 2% (Insights.nd.gov, n.d.). It is important to note that within North Dakota alone, 2% equates to approximately 637 students dropping out of our schools (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2019b). Students who dropout are not simply statistics; they become citizens within our communities, and the effects of their decision to dropout have long term implications, not only for themselves, but for their communities as well.

The researcher sought to answer two overarching research questions that guided this study. The researcher crafted each research question through an "interactive design process" to determine what "specifically she wanted to understand by doing the study" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 73). This process included determining the study's purpose, methods of data collection, and checks on validity. Research questions were reviewed frequently and changed as the study developed in scope and breadth.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the research for this study:

1. What are the perceptions of 10^{th}, 11^{th}, and 12^{th} grade students towards transitioning into high school in one public North Dakota school district?
2. How can a student's experienced transition from middle to high school impact their feelings of school connectedness?

Research Design

The researcher of this study selected a grounded theory mixed methods research design due to her desire to understand a situation (students' perceptions of transitioning into high school) and to identify the cause of a problem (possible reasons/motivations behind students perceptions of school connectedness). Within this study, the researcher will analyze quantitative and qualitative sources to correlate data and establish an underlying theory regarding a real life problem through two research questions.

Research Question #1 focused on the "meaning of an event to the individuals involved (students experiencing the transition into high school)" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 83) and was addressed through an online survey. The rationale behind Research Question #1 included the importance of obtaining student voices (about their experiences), and information gathered from the study assisted the researcher in giving voice to students which otherwise may not have been heard.

Question #2 focused on the "processes by which these events and activities and their outcomes occurred" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 83). The rationale behind Question #2 included the importance of addressing systemic inequities within the participant school district regarding transition practices, programs, or policies for incoming high school students. Research Question #2 was answered through a variety of sources including a literature review, the researcher's experience within the education field, and review of data collected through the online survey.

Researcher's Background

The researcher has been a lifelong public school student. She earned a bachelor's degree in social studies secondary education in 2011 and a master's degree in special

education in 2012. She has worked in rural and urban secondary school settings in North Dakota and has held a variety of teaching and educational leadership positions since 2011 from Grand Forks to Stanley and then most recently to Fargo. She has been employed as a special education and U.S. history teacher as well as a special education area service coordinator. As of the 2020-2021 school year she entered into her first year as a middle school assistant principal.

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Theory emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals personally perceive transitions within their lives. Within the transition process from middle school to high school, there are many variables and factors that may influence our students, and as educators, we must be aware of how a transition can affect a student, not only academically, which is often the focus, but also psychologically and socially.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was envisioned by Nancy Schlossberg in the mid-1960s and focused on how individuals experienced transitions throughout their lives (Stankey, 2018). Within her framework, she identified three types of transitions including anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events (Stankey, 2018). Anticipated transitions are those in which an individual predicts, expects, or knows what is going to happen or occur (Stankey, 2018). Unanticipated transitions are those in which an individual does not predict, not expect, or not know what will happen or occur (Stankey, 2018). Finally, non-events are transitions that are expected to occur but do not occur (Stankey, 2018).

Also within her theory, Schlossberg identified the importance of understanding where an individual is currently "at" within a transition phase and according to Barclay (2017), it is critical to know whether they are "moving in, moving through or moving out" (p. 24) of a transition. Identifying which sub-phase an individual may currently be in helps determine possible solutions to assist with a transition (if the individual views it as a transition at all). "Moving in" is the sub-phase in which "an individual is making sense of the newness of a transition" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). This can be observed when students are first entering ninth grade worrying about becoming a high school student including: self-selecting courses, worrying about upperclassmen, worrying about unknown academic demands as well as meeting their teachers. "Moving through" is the sub-phase in which an individual is "achieving as much new learning about roles, relationships and routines as possible" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). This can be observed when ninth-grade students are learning how to balance the demands high school presents including friendships, extracurriculars, multiple courses, and maintaining passing grades. "Moving out" is the sub-phase in which an individual is "completing a smooth, solid transition to the next phase of life" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). This can be observed when students are graduating from high school and starting their next chapter in life whether it be post-secondary education, the military, or entering into the workforce.

Schlossberg's 4 S Framework

According to Schlossberg, in order to smoothly and successfully navigate through potential stressors of a transition, an individual should "take stock" and examine their current situation (or transition) and employ strategies or coping mechanisms if necessary (Barclay, 2017, p. 25). According to Schlossberg (2008), "taking stock" consists of four

major sets of factors including: a situation, supports, the self, and strategies, also called the 4 S Framework, that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition as well as accompanying questions to consider.

I. Situation
    - From the student's perspective, is the situation good or bad?
    - Did the student expect the experience or was it unexpected?
    - Has the situation come at the worst possible time or best?
    - Where is the student in the transition process – beginning, middle or end?

II. Support
    - Is the student getting what they need in terms of affection, affirmation and aid?
    - Does the student have a wide range of supports?
    - Does the student know how to locate and connect with other forms of support?
    - How has the student's "convoy of social supports" been interrupted by the transition?

III. Self
    - Is the student challenged or overwhelmed by transition events or nonevents?
    - What types of stress challenge the student? Overwhelm the student?
    - Does the student face transition with a "fighting spirit", as a stoic, as a denier, a helpless person or as a believer in magic?

- Does the student feel a sense of control or mastery when facing transition?
- Does the student face life as an optimist or a pessimist?

IV. Strategies

- Does the student in transition use a range of strategies?
- Is the student taking action to change the transition?
- Is the student attempting to change the meaning of the transition?
- How well does the student handle stress?
- How does the student decide that doing nothing is the best option?
- How does the student exercise flexibility in choosing various strategies depending on the challenge at hand?

(Schlossberg, 2008, pp. 25-28)

It is essential for educators to instill knowledge within our students on identifying different types of (life) transitions that may be experienced, whether expected or unexpected, as well as assisting them in employing coping strategies to ultimately lead to "progress related to self-concepts and perceptions" (Barclay, 2017, p. 29). Therefore, schools must address this pivotal transition period for students through not only academic, attendance, and behavioral support, but also through social supports to increase academic achievement, school connectedness (Nitza & Dobias, 2015), and to address incidents of dropout within our high schools.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed all respondents answered survey questions honestly. Also, it was assumed the historical record regarding NDCC 15.1 is accurate.

Definitions of Terms and Acronyms

The following terms and definitions are integral to this study and clarify meanings within the context of the study.

ABCs – Attendance, Behaviors, and Course Completion (Christie, Jarratt, Olson, & Taijiala, 2019).

Average Daily Membership – "Adding the total number of hours that each student in a given grade, school, or school district is in attendance during a school calendar and the total number of hours that each student in a given grade, school, or school district is absent during a school calendar, and then dividing the sum by . . . one thousand fifty hours for middle and high school students" (N.D. Cent. Code, n.d., Section 15.1-27-35, para. 1).

Dropping Out/Drop Out – When a student leaves school permanently before successfully obtaining a diploma or certificate (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

Early School Leavers (ESL) – High school students who report leaving school for the first time after reaching the legal minimum age without attaining a secondary school certificate (Polidano, Tabasso & Tseng, 2015).

Education Policy Committee – "An interim committee of the North Dakota Legislature tasked with reviewing educational policy at the state level" (University of North Dakota Educational Leadership Cohort #8, personal communication, March 3, 2021).

Every Student Succeeds Act (or ESSA) – "Federal legislation signed into law in 2015 that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965" (words of University of North Dakota Educational Leadership Cohort #8, personal

communication, March 3, 2021; information taken from U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Mentor Program – "Mentor or partnership programs connect people who have specific skills and knowledge (mentors) with individuals (protégés) who need or want the same skills and advantages" (University of Kansas, Center for Community Health and Development, n.d., para. 3). "Mentoring . . . guarantees young people that there is someone who cares about them, assures them they are not alone in dealing with day-to-day challenges, and makes them feel like they matter" (MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, n.d., "Why mentor?" section, para. 1).

North Dakota Century Code (NDCC) – North Dakota state statutes (North Dakota Legislative Branch, n.d.).

North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) – "Agency that oversees public instruction in North Dakota" (University of North Dakota Educational Leadership Cohort #8, personal communication, March 3, 2021).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory – Developed by Nancy Schlossberg; describes how transitions impact an individual's perceptions and outcomes (Stankey, 2018).

School Connectedness – The engagement and acceptance levels students feel within their school (McWhirter et al., 2019).

Transition – When a student advances from eighth grade to ninth grade or from middle school to the high school setting (Corsello et al., 2015).

Organization of the Study

This study has been organized into five chapters. Chapter I provided the background and history of the problem, need for the study, purpose of the study, research

questions, researcher's background, theoretical framework, assumptions, and definitions of terms and acronyms. Chapter II is a review of literature related to the topic. Chapter III outlines the methodology of the study, which includes research design, research methods, data analysis, and validation techniques. Chapter IV includes the study's findings which are broken down based upon research questions as well as a merged findings section which includes interpretation of both qualitative and quantiative data. Chapter V includes integration of theoretical frameworks, recommendations, implications for future research, generation of grounded theory, evaluation criteria of the grounded theory, and a summary.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There is a lack of in-depth and personal research on perceptions of high school students towards their transition into high school. There is also a lack of extant research featuring correlations between a student's sense of school connectedness and high school graduation rates. Results of this study provide voice to high school students from one urban school district in North Dakota and may inform educators of the importance of understanding how a student's transition may impact their perception of school connectedness and ultimately, their journey towards graduation.

Chapter II includes a literature review associated with the study that enhances the reader's understanding of the subject. This chapter includes literature on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, school connectedness, possible student indicators for dropping out of high school, and eighth to ninth grade transition programs.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

"One of the most demanding phases for children is that of school transition, especially the one from middle to high school" (Longobardi, Prino, Marengo, & Settanni, 2016, para. 2). The Southern Regional Education Board stated that the transition from middle school to high school is the "most difficult and cumbersome transition in K-12" (Ellerbrock, Denmon, Owens, & Lindstrom, 2015, p. 83). According to Pretsch and

Ehrhardt-Madapathi (2018), "school is an important factor of socialization and thus, it can be assumed that school influences an individual's attitudes" (p. 656). Perceptions among students entering high school, of this transition may differ, and educators must understand how transitions impact students.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory focuses on "transition as a process one goes through over time, and every transition begins with an ending" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). Transitions are considered "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles"' (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 215). Transitions are only transitions if the individual experiencing the transition perceives it to be one, and regardless of its perceived positive or negative connotation, a "transition creates a disruption within an individual's life" (Barclay, 2017, p. 23). "The transition itself is not of the most importance, but how the transition fits within an individual's life stage, situation, and style at the time of the transition is" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

Originally published in 1989, in *Overwhelmed: Coping with Life's Ups and Downs*, Schlossberg introduced readers to life transition research through a self-help book aimed at positively dealing with expected or unexpected transitions that follow change. Schlossberg republished her book in 2008. She said, "The pressures people experience required a new look" (p. xvi). In the second edition of her book, Schlossberg proposed a more structured approach to manage life transitions which are "things that can and do happen to everyone" (p. 3). First, individuals must "approach change" by identifying a transition exists including asking themselves: What is the transition? How has it changed my life? And, where am I currently located within that transition? Secondly, individuals must "take stock" and assess the resources one has to cope with a

transition including: situation, self, supports, and strategies. Thirdly, "taking charge" equates to selecting a coping strategy and developing an action plan to manage a transition. Schlossberg (2011) also prefaced that the "process of leaving one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions and establishing new ones takes time" (p. 160). It is imperative for educators to understand how transition theory can play a role in a student's sense of school connectedness.

School Connectedness

Definition

School connectedness, across much of the extant research, is not a readily agreed upon term and has evolved over the years. In 1993, Carol Goodenow defined school connectedness as "the extent to which students feel accepted, included, and close to others in the school social environment" (Joyce, 2015, p. 185). The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health findings in 1997 stated that school connectedness "generally reflects students' feelings of belonging to and closeness with others at their school" (Loukas, Duncan Cance, & Batanova, 2016, p. 559). At the 2003 Wingspan Conference, a definition of school connectedness was constructed by education and health sector professionals as "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 3).

At the time of this study, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) definition of school connectedness was "the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 3) and was widely used within the

education sector during this study. It is important to note the addition of the term "peers" into the 2009 definition due to further research noting the importance of peer influence. The term, school connectedness, has been used interchangeably with the following terms: "school belonging, school bonding, school climate, [school transformation] and school engagement" (Loukas et al., 2016, p. 559). Within this study, the researcher will only use the term "school connectedness" to refer to how closely a student identifies with their school. The concept school connectedness is unique because students themselves are. Therefore, it is critical for educators to understand and identify factors that may influence a student's sense of school connectedness including: (a) school climate, (b) relational climate, and (c) educational climate.

School Factors that Influence School Connectedness

School climate. There is no one agreed upon definition of school climate; however, extant research demonstrates that school climate is multidimensional. Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) defined school climate as the "quality and character of school life" (p. 180) that includes "norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe" (pp. 180-181). Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) claimed that "school climate is generally viewed as a multidimensional construct that encompasses a school's atmosphere, culture, values, resources, and social networks" (p. 427). Fatou and Kubiszewski believed there are multiple dimensions of school climate including relational climate, educational climate, climate of security, climate of justice, and affiliation climate. Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, and Adekanye (2015) added to Cohen et al.'s (2009) definition of school climate to include:

> Students feel emotionally and physically safe, part of the school community, that adults in the school respect them, care about them, and have high expectations for their well-being and success, and that they have opportunities to provide input in how things work at the school. (p. 253)

Biag (2016) claimed that educators, including administrators, "set the school's academic climate, ensure that the learning environment is orderly, and provide teachers with necessary supports to ensure high quality instruction" (p. 37). "A positive school climate can buffer negativity, including poor self-concept and self-esteem, and minimize negative outcomes, while a negative school climate is likely to exacerbate declines in self-concept and self-esteem commonly found during middle school transition" (Coelho, Bear, & Brás, 2020, p. 1794). It is also critical to hold students accountable to high academic standards as it strengthens their connections to school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Biag (2016) also found that "teachers who hold students to rigorous standards tend to perceive intelligence as malleable, and implement flexible and cooperative groupings that provide students with challenges as well as leadership opportunities" (p. 37). However, Hernandez, Oubrayrie-Roussel, & Prêteur (2016) found that the "influence of social support on academic achievement depends on the student's representation of school and on the goals each student has chosen to pursue" (p. 203).

Relational climate. Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) claimed relational climate referred to "students' perceptions of their relationships with peers and adults at school" (p. 430), and educational climate was described as "students' perceptions of learning transmission quality and the school's efforts to promote learning and other school tasks" (p. 430). Adults at a school should be "responsive to students' basic and developmental

needs, including their need for both care and fun in learning, [which in turn] may be critical in fostering an adolescent-centered community" (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014, p. 230). Sampasa-Kanyinga and Hamilton (2016) claimed that "bonds help with positive development and buffer the effects of negative experiences" (p. 11). Oldfield et al. (2018) claimed that these protective factors (i.e. bonds with adults and peers) could "buffer against negative outside influences such as negative peers or life experiences" (p. 15). Therefore, relational climate develops as a "result of a process that begins with the student's perception of opportunities for involvement in the social environment" (Loukas et al., 2016, p. 559), which includes interactions and associations with both adults and peers in a school setting.

Adult associations in a school setting. Connections between adults and students within a school building is foundational to build school connectedness; however, "engagement [in school] is not necessarily an individual task but one that depends to a large extent on collaboration with peers and teachers" (Hennig Manzuoli, Pineda-Báez, & Vargas Sánchez, 2019, p. 35). Previous research has found that as students transition from one grade to the next there can be declines in student engagement as well as academic and self-concept (Coelho, Marchante, & Jimerson, 2017). Dynarski et al. (2008) from the Institute of Education Sciences claimed:

> During the middle school years, students' interest in school and academic skills may begin to lag, so that by the time students transition to high school, students who are at risk of dropping out may need intensive individual support or other supports to re-engage them in the purpose of education. (p. 4)

According to Blum, McNeely, and Rinehart (2002), children's and adolescents' beliefs about themselves and their abilities are shaped by the extent to which they perceive adults in their lives care about them and are involved in their lives. According to Ellerbock and Kiefer (2014), educators, most specifically within the middle school setting, should be "responsive to students' basic and developmental needs, including their need for both care and fun in learning, [which in turn] may be critical in fostering an adolescent-centered community" (p. 230). In order to be responsive, educators need to get to know students well, "provide guidance and academic help, hold high expectations, encourage success and positive emotions, listen to students, and foster opportunities to experience enjoyment" (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014, p. 231).

When considering methods for dealing with school transitions, Lemkin, Kistin, Cabral, Aschengrau, and Bair-Merritt (2018) stated that fostering supportive relationships with adults at school (and positive peer groups) may be areas most amenable to intervention. "Teachers with effective behavior management strategies, engaging instructional techniques, high expectations of students, and expectations of parental involvement in school can act as a protective factor for students from low socio-economic backgrounds" (Quin, 2019, p. 9). It is critical to note that "students from stigmatized racial and ethnic groups may have especially salient concerns about belonging in school because their social identities make them vulnerable to negative stereotyping and social identity threat" (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015, p. 3). However, when a student has a bond with a parent or other adult this helps with positive development and buffers the effects of negative experiences (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016).

Peer associations in a school setting. "Students at school have goals not only for their academics, but also for their social relationships with their peers and their reasons for interacting with their peers are consequential for their well-being and adjustment at school" (Makara & Madjar, 2015, p. 478). Studies have also shown that "social status within a group and . . . popularity (or social acceptance) and rejection, prove to be strong predictors of an adolescent's adjustment at school" (Hernandez et al., 2016, p. 195). According to Nitza and Dobias (2015), "Evidence demonstrates the important role of peer connections and a sense of belonging among students in improving the overall performance of students and may be an overlooked and untapped resource for school improvement" (p. 91). Loukas et al. (2016) stated that "if the student interacts successfully in the school with teachers and peers, and if meaningful rewards are gained from the interaction, then a connection to the school develops" (p. 559).

> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009):
>
> Students who report feeling most connected to school also report having the most friends at school and having friends from several different social groups that are integrated by race and gender. Conversely, those students who report feeling less connected to school have more friends from outside school than inside or are socially isolated, reporting few friends either inside or outside of school. (p. 6)

"During adolescence individuals become more autonomous, they are not so dependent upon parents and are able to transfer certain dependencies onto their friends" (Oldfield et al., 2018, p. 14). Nitza and Dobias (2015) claimed that students have a natural desire to be more connected but are often not given either the means or the opportunity to do so in a positive and beneficial manner. Within their study, Lemkin et al.

(2018) declared that along with positive peer associations, participation in school activities likely supports positive relationships with adults and peers at school and may be related to having a close relationship with a school club advisor, as school club participation was positively associated with having a supportive relationship with an adult at school.

It is important to note that a student's "sense of belonging is socially constructed, informed by a student's experiences in a particular educational context" (Murphy & Zirkel, 2016, p. 2) and therefore is unique to them and their educational journey. According to Hernandez et al.'s (2016) study, the "value of social support is dependent upon each adolescent's personal positioning and representation of this support" (p. 203). As schools and educators focus on school connectedness, they should "focus efforts on improving the sense of community and belonging among students as a means of supporting instruction" (Nitza & Dobias, 2015, p. 92) and the infrastructure within the school and wider school community.

Educational climate – Infrastructure of school systems. According to Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi (2018), a school can be regarded as a microcosm of society; therefore, the structures within schools must be created and maintained in a way in which a student is able to develop positive attitudes towards the society he or she is living in. The purpose of education in the United States, according to Pretsch and Ehrhardt-Madapathi (2018), is "to educate students to be part of a democratic society which comprises the approval of democratic norms, values, and attitudes" and "overall school experiences have an impact on global outcomes such as life satisfaction" (p. 658). Given that schools are microcosms of society, it is critical that school system administrators

evaluate how the “educational infrastructure” of their schools may impact a student's sense of school connectedness. In order to successfully implement systems that support all families, schools “must reflect on their communication practices, ensuring that they have addressed the demands and opportunities of an increasingly diverse transnational community and the globally mobile world” (Hennig Manzuoli et al., 2019, p. 37).

Educational infrastructure as defined by Spillane, Seelig, Blaushild, Cohen, & Peurach (2019) includes “the roles, structures, and resources that school systems use to coordinate and support instruction, maintain instructional quality, and enable instructional improvement” (p. 848). However, schools are more than just instruction. Infrastructures within schools could include policies, bricks and mortar, class schedules, intervention programs, standards, and/or curricula. Within the last 30 years, much attention has been focused on the school accountability factor of educational infrastructure and has transformed the environment of the U.S. school system (Spillane et al., 2019). Accountability is often in the form of policies capable of perpetuating the “school to prison” pipeline system including, but not limited to, zero tolerance discipline policies (Mallett, 2016). The connection of student success to zero tolerance policies is further explored later in this chapter in the section called “School Based Factors.” Though policies are critical to a school system’s function, many policies have eliminated administrators investigating why events occur, what motivates students’ involvement, and any mitigating history impacting an event (Mallett, 2016). Biag (2016) stated, “Some contend that current education policies, which emphasize standardized tests, scripted curriculum, and high-stakes accountability measures, only serve to exacerbate teacher burnout” (p. 35).

Hopkins and Woulfin (2015) stated, “Schools must balance the structures and tools that policymakers use to implement large-scale reforms and how these structures and tools are implemented by leaders and teachers in their local contexts” (p. 372). Ellerbock and Kiefer’s (2014) study on middle school programming suggested that “responsive school organizational structures . . . helped set the stage for an adolescent-centered community” (p. 233). May (2011) claimed, “Few of us feel a sense of belonging merely to one group, culture or place but rather experience multiple senses of belonging” (p. 370). Hopkins and Woulfin (2015) suggested that “explicit attention needs to be paid to particular student populations and how issues of race, ethnicity, language, and immigration and socioeconomic status impact the educational infrastructure” (p. 376). Murphy and Zirkel (2015) claimed “feelings of belonging are important for everyone in academic settings, they are especially important for stigmatized students of color” (p. 33). Therefore, it is imperative for educators, schools, and school districts to understand potential positive and negative implications that may be associated with school connectedness for all students.

Possible Outcomes Associated With School Connectedness

According to St-Amand, Girard, & Smith (2017), a sense of belonging positively contributes to an individual’s psychological development and is a basic need that assists in building social bonds and group affiliations. The CDC (2009) claimed “that students who feel more connected to school are more likely to have [a number of] positive health and education outcomes” (p. 16) including: attending school more regularly, having higher grades and test scores, being less likely to smoke or drink alcohol, being less likely to suffer from emotional problems. Having a connection to school may serve as a

potential protective factor for students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009):

> **Protective Factors** are individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events; increase an individual's ability to avoid risks or hazards; and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future" (p. 3).

Research has also shown that school connectedness "has been associated with multiple protective health effects including lower emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, acting out, violence, substance use, and higher age of sexual debut" (Bersamin et al., 2019, p. 12). School connectedness may serve as another significant protective factor against the effects of bullying victimization (Arango et al., 2019; Liu, Carney, Hyunhee, Hazler, & Xiuyan, 2020).

There is substantial research indicating students who are connected to their school are more likely to graduate from high school (Dupéré et al., 2019; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Hennig Manzuoli et al., 2019; Lemkin et al., 2018; McWhirter et al., 2019; Rumberger et al., 2017; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). However, educators must be able to recognize and understand possible student indicators that may manifest in students at risk for dropping out of high school prior to graduation.

Possible Student Indicators for Early School Leavers

Leaving school early or "dropping out [of high school] is a process" (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000, p. 542), not a singular event, and according to Balfanz, Horning Fox, Bridgeland, and McNaught (2009), "During the middle grades and the first two years of high school, . . . we can identify the majority of students who –

without sustained intervention – will likely not graduate" (p. 66). Within extant research, three factors described in the "ABCs of Dropping Out" (Kansas State Department of Education, n.d.), are generally the strongest predictors of students likely to drop out, are often interrelated, and can serve as early warning indicators of students who are likely to drop out unless they receive effective intervention (Balfanz, 2008; Balfanz et al., 2009; Christie et al., 2019; Coleman, Baker, & Stephenson, 2019; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Mac Iver, Stein, Davis, Balfanz, & Fox, 2019). The framework of the ABCs of Dropping Out include three broad areas, actionable items as Coleman et al. (2019) calls them that can be effectively used to predict early those students that may be off track to graduate, including patterns of concern in attendance, behavior, and coursework completion (Kansas State Department of Education, n.d.). However, a student's reasons for dropping out should not be framed as a "function of the student's behavior and background characteristics, [as] it places the blame on the student and does not consider organizational implications of the school" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016, p. 25).

Another existing dropout framework to consider is that of students who are pushed, pulled, or fallen out of school. The idea, mentioned in 1994 by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland and by Watt and Roessingh earlier in the same year, focuses on articulating reasons behind dropout behavior. Push out factors are school based internal factors, pull out factors are those that are tied directly to a student's life outside their school, and fall out factors are those that take place over time and gradually lead to an individual's ultimate disengagement from school – dropping out (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Balfanz (2008) used "pull out" factors and "life events" interchangeably in his framework. Polidano et al. (2015) used the term "early school leaver" rather than high

school dropout, which is the term this researcher will also use throughout this report. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to be able to identify and intervene appropriately when there is evidence that is symptomatic of an individual leaving school prior to graduation including school based, individual (student) based, home based, and community based factors (Kearney, 2008).

School Based Factors

Though schools can act as a protective factor for some students, they can also perpetuate the cycle of dropping out for some. As it pertains to this study, school based factors have been broken down into policies and school environments that sustain dropping out patterns.

Policies, such as Zero Tolerance or "killer policies" (Wilkins & Bost, 2016, p. 268) allow inequities within schools to survive. Students may understand these policies to be unfair and may interpret a school system as being against them, sustaining the notion that they are unwelcome (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Much research has been conducted on schools identified as "dropout factories," where the school-to-prison pipeline is maintained at alarming rates (American Psychological Association, 2012; George, 2015; Peguero, Merrin, Hong, & Johnson, 2019; Quin, 2019; Williams, 2018). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, n.d.) defined the school-to-prison pipeline as "children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems" (para. 1). The ACLU claimed "'zero-tolerance' policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in schools lead to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school" (para. 2). Cassidy and Bates (2005) stated that schools can actually perpetuate societal or structural inequities through their

practices by focusing interventions on individual students instead of tackling these broader issues as a whole. Other policies that are used as accountability measures, often at the expense of students who are at risk for early school leaving, include attendance policies and eligibility rules related to academics.

A school environment can also play a role in pushing students out before graduating. A school that "lacks resources, processes, or has limited structures" in place to support all students may inadvertently perpetuate the dropout cycle (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016, pp. 25-26). Students from multi-ethnic or non-Caucasian backgrounds may perceive school as not culturally relevant (Wilcox, 2015) or New Americans may struggle with navigating an educational system different from their previous school (McWhirter et al., 2019). Schools that are perceived to be unsafe or have increased levels of school disorder can lead to student disengagement (Lee-St. John et al., 2018; Peguero et al., 2019). Students perceiving school as an environment that maintains gender or racial inequities may also lead to disengagement (George, 2015; Peguero et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). Finally, students who feel bullied may feel limited connections to their schools which in turn can lead to early school departure (Dupéré et al., 2019; Williams, 2018).

Individual Student Based Factors

"Dropping out of school is a complex process influenced by a variety of variables" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016, p. 25) and this process is unique to each student even though the outcome is identical. However, research indicates that "graduating from high school is an educational achievement that is strongly linked to gainful well-paying employment, higher personal income, better personal health, reduced

risk of incarceration, and lowered reliance on social welfare programs" (Coleman et al., 2019, p. 732). Early school leavers each have their own reasons as to why they leave school before graduating. However, trends explaining why students drop out emerged through this literature review including: academic, behavioral, and attendance difficulties; student perceptions of school as irrelevant; and the transition itself from middle school into high school.

Previous literature describing failure to complete courses and academic difficulties of early school leavers cannot be ignored. Hickman et al. (2017) stated academic achievement is essential for academic success and school completion. Previous research studies indicated academic achievement difficulty, such as failing courses, low achievement test scores and grade retention, as one of the strongest relationships or predictors of dropout (American Psychological Association, 2012; Balfanz et al., 2009; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Lee-St. John et al., 2018). Educational researchers Alex J. Bowers and Ryan Sprott labeled subgroups of students as "quiet, jaded, and involved" (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015, p. 207); where "the quiet group of students makes up the largest percentage of dropouts and includes students with lower academic performance, lower attendance, and lower extracurricular involvement" (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015, p. 207). We also know that academic achievement in math and English are essential. Balfanz et al. (2009) specifically stated that, "middle and high school students who receive an F, particularly in mathematics or English, or two or more F's in any course are falling off the graduation path" (p. 66). According to Dupéré et al. (2019), students who struggle academically could breed social isolation and negative feelings about the self,

others, and school, which could lead them to other pursuits in life instead of school such as employment.

"Chronic absenteeism and multiple behavioral infractions are themselves strong predictors of course failure, and course failure affects the rate of credit acquisition which may impact a student's path towards graduation" (Mac Iver et al., 2019, p. 364). Balfanz et al. (2009) stated, "Attendance is often a key barometer of a student's connection with schooling" (p. 28) and "6th to 10th graders who miss 10 or more, 20 or more, and 40 or more days of school are sending increasingly loud distress signals" (p. 66). Research has also continued to demonstrate that students of color as well as Latinx and American Indian students are disproportionately suspended and/or removed from school than their white peers, for a variety of non-violent offenses, which correlates to a loss of instructional time and inability to successfully complete courses necessary for graduation (Bal, Betters-Bubon, & Fish, 2019; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Freeman, Kern, Gambino, Lombardi, & Kowitt, 2019; George, 2015; Wilcox, 2015). Also, students in special education, most notably students of color and Native Americans are "two to three times more likely to be labeled as emotionally disturbed" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 247), and "African American students were seven times more likely to be removed from the learning environment" (Bal et al., 2019, p. 256) than their white peers. This all leads to reduced time spent in general education classes necessary for graduation.

Another individual student factor cited by early school leavers is the perception that school is irrelevant. Students will often weigh the opportunity or cost of staying in school versus a variety of other factors, such as obtaining employment, or as Balfanz et al. (2009) stated remaining "simply idle" (p. 12), neither in the labor force nor

participating in an educational program. Students are more likely to leave school early prior to graduation if they perceive school as not relevant to their lives, not structurally fair, or unable to assist them towards their long term goals (American Psychological Association, 2012; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Garcia et al., 2018). "Negative school contexts and experiences . . . are likely to increase academic disengagement" (Garcia et al., 2018, p. 1046); therefore, "school completion interventions must include multiple components, with efforts to increase student engagement at their core" (Wilkins & Bost, 2016, p. 267). Previous research has also claimed "students who reported that they placed less value on school" (Parr & Bonitz, 2015, p. 505) or "believed that school was not important" (Parr & Bonitz, 2015, p. 505) were more likely to drop out (Parr & Bonitz, 2015; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). With regards to ethnicity and dropout, students of color, Latinx, and American Indian students have historically felt underrepresented within curricula, school culture, and structures, and thus have felt as though their educational experiences have largely focused around white culture and assimilation, leading to eventual dropout for many (Johnson, 2018; McWhirter et al., 2019; Wilcox, 2015).

Finally, the transition process from middle to high school can also be an individual student based factor for dropping out of school. The transition from middle school to high school has been "frequently referred to as the most difficult and cumbersome transition in K–12 education" (Ellerbrock et al., 2015, p. 83) for any student, but for students deemed at risk this poses bigger problems (DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016). Wexler, Pyle, and Fall (2015) stated, "Transition from one school level to the next . . . can cause anxiety, which can lead to academic struggles and increased

inappropriate behavior" (p. 143). The transition itself, according to Wilcock (2007), "does not just involve the physical re-location of students[,] it involves a comprehensive range of physical, emotional, educational and perceptual issues" (para. 38). "The trajectory for dropping out of school begins prior to the time that students actually step foot on a high school campus" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016, p. 26); however, according to Dupéré et al. (2019), "recent exposure to any types of severe and moderate stressful events was associated with dropout" (p. 9), as well. Research has continued to cite that ninth grade is "pivotal" and "often sets the student's trajectory throughout the high school years, as well as the probability of graduation" (Corsello et al., 2015, p. 1). Therefore, each early school leavers' pathway is unique and many students cite additional reasons for dropping out besides solely individual reasons, including home based factors.

Home Based Factors

Early school leavers not only have to contend with school based and individual (student) based factors when considering leaving school before graduation, but also home based factors that may be outside their locus of control. Through this literature review, prominent themes discovered for why students sometimes drop out of school included: low socioeconomic status (SES), lack of parental involvement in their education, and family obligations.

There continues to be a strong correlation between low SES and dropout rates in the United States (American Psychological Association, 2012; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Vera et al., 2016; Wilcox, 2015) though it may be important to note that SES is not the sole factor influencing dropping out. Low SES includes several characteristics: poverty status, parental education, parental employment, homelessness, limited access to

food, history of trauma or abuse, as well as use of social welfare programs (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lee-St. John et al., 2018; Lemon & Watson, 2012; McWhirter et al., 2019; Peguero et al., 2019). The dropout rate for students with families of low SES was five times greater than their peers from high-income families, and "students who drop out of high school are more likely to come from low-income families and/or single-parent households" (Lee-St. John et al., 2018, p. 2). Lee-St. John et al. (2018) claimed that "children from stressful socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have lower school engagement due to their increased daily life stress" (p. 2).

Other home based factors that may impact early school leavers include lack of parental involvement (in their education) and familial obligations. According to previous research, "family plays a significant role in shaping children's lives" (Somers, Wang, & Piliawsky, 2016, p. 200) and "parental education level is a strong predictor of high school completion" (Lee-St. John et al., 2018, p. 2). Wilkins and Bost (2016) stated, "It should not be assumed that parents have the information and skills needed to help their children succeed in school" (p. 269). Somers et al. (2016) found that parental authority, parental expectations for children's education and parent–adolescent interactions have been found to contribute to students' decisions to continue in versus drop out of school. Having access to fewer educated adults limits the number of examples of educational success a student, especially students of color, may be exposed to (Johnson, 2018; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Through his research on early childhood education, Puccioni (2015) found that "parents who place more importance on school readiness have children with higher average achievement scores at the beginning of kindergarten and experience more rapid

rates of growth" (p. 141); however, "individual and family risk factors on students may change as students get older" (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015, p. 207). The organization of the family unit also plays a role. Montgomery and Hirth (2011) stated that "positive family relationships are related to higher reported levels of scholastic self-concept, while rejection by parents points to worse school adjustment" (p. 247).

Finally, family obligations may play a role in an individual's reasoning for leaving school before graduating. Students who may leave school early due to these reasons, or not because they are negatively impacting their education, but rather, "other circumstances in their lives (e.g., family facing financial hardship) may have more immediate value than going to school" (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016, p. 25). In 2006, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, a report for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation described how "approximately one-third [of students] left [school] for personal reasons (to get a job, become a parent, or care for a family member)" (Balfanz et al., 2009, p. 14). Edeburn and Knotts (2019) noted within their research on Latinx families that "conflict [may occur] between school and family obligations, especially in the hours after school" (p. 6). Dupéré et al. (2019) found that "crises involving . . . family members (e.g., conflicts with a parent) were just as frequent among rural and urban early school leavers" (p. 14). Montgomery and Hirth (2011) stated, "There are family obligations or events that may lead to a student's early school departure including helping with childcare, earning money (usually low-skilled jobs at minimum wage) or navigating pregnancy or marriage" (p. 250). Students must often weigh the pros and cons of remaining in school; however, there are many familial obligations that may tip the scale towards early school departure.

Community Based Factors

All students are part of many communities including school, peers, home and society, as a whole. Therefore, it is important to note community based factors that may play a role in a student's decision to leave school early. Having an "understanding of ecological perspectives on student development can help to reframe dropout prevention as a 'bidirectional process' in which schools and families must come together to support school completion" (Vera et al., 2016, p. 161). Some community members may claim "that passing GED (General Education Development) tests is equivalent to a regular high school diploma and substitutes for a high school education" (Balfanz et al., 2009, p. 19); this is not true. According to Johnson (2018), "local employment structures bring about the collective socialization of adolescents in various ways and perceptions of racial discrimination in . . . the labor market are likely to encourage teens to pursue other ways of gaining social acceptance, resulting in lower achievement" (pp. 303-304). Within their research Dupéré et al. (2019) found that early school leavers from rural communities were "likely to quit following incidents of social exclusion, whereas legal events played a prominent role only among" (p. 13) early school leavers from urban communities. Kearney (2008) stated community-level risk factors including unsafe neighborhoods, gang activity, and lack of social services and support subsequently lead to school dropout. Garcia et al. (2018) stated that "there are a number of interlocking risks embedded within individual, family, community, and organizational factors that are likely to increase school dropout" (p. 1047). Therefore, it is important to "involve the entire community in dropout prevention" (Balfanz et al., 2009, p. 45).

Ninth Grade Transition Programs

As the research has shown, student's reasons for leaving school prior to graduating are "multifaceted and complex" (Somers et al, 2016, p. 199). However, according to Vera et al. (2016) schools can intervene in a variety of actionable ways including improving "support that students receive from school during important transitions (e.g., eighth grade into ninth grade)" (p. 162). Research on the transition from elementary to middle school is more abundant than that of middle to high school, however, previous research has noted that the "transition to high school includes new academic, social and emotional [and structural] challenges for many students" (Vera et al., 2016, p. 162) and is one of the "most difficult and cumbersome transition[s] in K-12 education" (Ellerbrock et al., 2015, p. 83). We also know that the "transition is often even more difficult for students categorized as at-risk" (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011, p. 246). Therefore, (middle and high) schools must incorporate specific interventions to ease the transition for incoming ninth grade students and most specifically can do so through the adoption of a ninth grade orientation or transition program.

Through a search of the literature, research on ninth grade transition or orientation programs are still in their infancy and are mostly based upon "short-term longitudinal investigations" (Benner, 2011, p. 320), but it has been noted that transition programs should be "comprehensive, on-going and begin while students are still in middle school" (Ellerbrock et al., 2015, p. 86). However, some key components have begun to emerge as necessary programmatic aspects that should be embedded within these programs including academic, social-emotional and structural supports.

As students transition into high school, grades are or academic success is often the greatest areas of concern (Vera et al., 2016; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Hickman & Wright, 2011), and "the freshman year experience for students can be a predictor as to whether or not a student will stay in high school and graduate" (DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016, p. 33). Therefore, ninth grade transition or orientation programs should include ongoing academic assistance components such as early warning intervention systems (Balfanz, 2008; Christie et al., 2019; Lemon & Watson, 2012; Mac Iver et al., 2019) to continuously assess student attendance, behavioral and course completion data, ninth grade transition course(s) to teach students the skills needed to be successful in high school and beyond (Corsello et al., 2015; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Vera et al., 2016, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2015b), provide opportunities for tutoring and mentoring (Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Nitza & Dobias, 2015; Somers et al., 2016; Wexler et al., 2015) and create ninth grade teams or academies to provide a small community-like atmosphere within the school setting (Corsello et al., 2015; DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2015a).

Next, social emotional learning is also a critical aspect that must be embedded within a ninth grade transition or orientation program. Within high school, students may experience teachers whose "primary focus is the subject matter and not the student, students have different teachers for each subject, and teachers have little or no opportunity to learn how students are doing in other classes" (Corsello et al., 2015, p. 1) which could lead to feelings of isolation (Corsello et al., 2015; Neild, 2009). Therefore, according to the literature, schools should implement practices within a ninth grade

transition or orientation program that emphasize building relationships amongst students, staff and families (Corsello et al., 2015; DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011), improving student's perceptions of school connectedness (Corsello et al., 2015; Loukas et al., 2016; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Nitza & Dobias, 2015; St-Amand et al., 2017; Vera et al., 2016) as well as explicitly teaching life skills or "soft" skills training such as inter- and intra-personal skills (DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Vera et al., 2016) . There are many social-emotional programs or curriculum available for implementation within secondary schools, however, further research on these programs was not conducted within this research study.

Finally, students will also experience structural changes once they arrive at high school including navigating a new building, earning credits towards graduation, meeting new teachers as well as experiencing new expectations, routines and rules. Therefore, according to the literature, schools should implement practices within a ninth grade transition or orientation program that include (transition and orientation) activities that begin in the eighth grade (DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016), and also include both academic and non-academic learning and are ongoing and comprehensive in nature. Transition or orientation activities should be coordinated between the middle school and the feeder high school and will be most effective when supported by school administration (Corsello et al., 2015; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Through the research, transition or orientation activities could include, before and after school programs (DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016), small group visits/field trips/tours to the high school (DeLamar & Graham Brown, 2016; Ellerbrock et al., 2015), summer enrichment

opportunities (Vera et al., 2016) and parent-student orientation opportunities (Ellerbrock et al., 2015).

Research has continued to demonstrate that the process of leaving school early is not made easily, nor is it made due to one (risk) factor or event. However, as schools determine appropriate interventions to implement for a strong transition program it is critical that these interventions meet the needs of the students who are considering leaving school early by matching interventions with risk factors. According to Freeman and Simonsen (2015), "Findings indicate that despite research indicating the need to address multiple risk factors [of dropping out] and the need for early intervention, the bulk of current empirical research is focused on single-component, individual, or small group interventions" (p. 242). Freeman and Simonsen found "only 48% of studies [in their research] included multiple intervention components to address multiple risk factors" (p. 239). Therefore, more research is needed to explore the implications of the transition from middle school to high school and the correlation to high school graduation and dropout rates in the United States.

Summary

Chapter II consisted of a review of literature related to the study's topic that is necessary to enhance the reader's understanding of the subject. The review included literature on Schlossberg's transition theory, school connectedness, possible student indicators for early school leavers and ninth grade transition programs.

Chapter III outlines the methodology of the study which includes the research design, research methods, data analysis and validation techniques. Chapter IV includes the study's findings which are broken down based upon the research question as well as a

merged findings section which includes interpretation of both the qualitative and quantitative data. Chapter V includes integration of the theoretical frameworks, recommendations, implications for future research, generation of grounded theory, evaluation criteria of the grounded theory as well as a summary.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter III includes the methodology of this study including the research design, research methods, validity techniques, and a summary. Grounded theory mixed methods were employed due to the researcher's desire to understand a situation (the situation being students' perceptions of transitioning into high school) and to identify the cause of a problem (possible reasons and/or motivations behind a student's successful or unsuccessful integration into high school). The participants of this study's online survey included students (10^{th}-12^{th} graders) enrolled in high school at the time of this study for a total of 513 (N = 513) students. Data triangulation strategies for three public high schools included in the study were employed including: piloting an online survey, providing an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity.

Research Design – Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) Mixed Methods

The research design for this study used a grounded theory, mixed methods approach. Grounded theory is a strategy for doing research and a style of analyzing the resulting data. At its core, grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that "attempts to bridge the gap between research and theory" (Sebastian, 2019, p. 1). Even further, constructivist grounded theory or CGT, according to Charmaz (2005), . . .

> . . . emphasizes the studied phenomenon rather than the methods of studying it. Constructivist grounded theorists take a reflexive stance on modes of knowing and representing studied life. That means giving close attention to empirical realities and our collected renderings of them—*and* locating oneself in these realities. It does not assume that data simply await discovery in an external world or that methodological procedures will correct limited views of the studied world. (p. 509)

Note that "CGT fully implicates the researcher in generating data *and* theory" (Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018, p. 3), and "Theory is not discovered; rather, theory is constructed by the researcher who views the world through their own particular lens" (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019, p. 3). Therefore, the researcher decided to employ CGT for this study.

The researcher of this study followed the CGT approach in order to best understand current transition processes and practices within participant high schools. "A grounded theory study involves going out into 'the field' and collecting data" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 162). In this study, the researcher engaged high school students through an online survey with the intention of correlating data and allowing the data to lead to construction of substantive theory.

CGT can be used for research on policy and applied educational concepts due to the relationships between policy, or the lack thereof, and the realities which exist in public schools. Additionally, in policy research, educators are seeking best practices which may have yet to be defined. Indeed, Robson and McCartan (2016) stated on a list of attractive features of grounded theory that grounded theory is "particularly useful in

applied areas of research, and novel ones, where the theoretical approach to be selected is not clear or is non-existent" (p. 161). Another reason that grounded theory is a good fit is that it allows for and encourages purposive sampling (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Robson & McCartan, 2016) instead of random sampling. Given the timeframe of a legislative cycle, the limited access to some stakeholder groups, and the need for data related to specific populations, random sampling would not be practical while purposive sampling allows researchers to gather and analyze data with expediency.

Grounded theory was envisioned (theorized) by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, both American (western) sociologists in the late 1960s. It is considered both a methodology and a theory. According to Sebastian (2019), "Grounded theory pushes researchers to be enthusiastic and driven towards finding the right answers to the right questions" (p. 1). Sebastian believed researchers use grounded theory to "provide a usable theoretical explanation for a complex problem" (p. 1). Grounded theory "seeks to generate a theory which relates to the particular situation forming the focus of the study. This theory is 'grounded' in data obtained during the study" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 161), particularly surrounding participants of a study including their "actions, interactions, and processes" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 161). Considered a flexible design research strategy, grounded theory is not exclusive only to qualitative studies as "there is no reason why some quantitative data collection should not be included" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 161).

Site Selection

The site selected to include in this study was one public North Dakota school district. The purpose of selecting this site was due to the researcher's desire to understand

possible similarities and differences between transition practices and perceptions amongst students within one school district as well as to view perceptions of students from an urban school setting in North Dakota. This district was also selected due to the physical movement of students from one building (middle school) to another (high school) during their 8th to 9th grade transition. The schools and district which participated in this study will not be specifically named in this report to respect the confidentiality of participants.

Participants

Participants of this study included students from one large, public school district in North Dakota, and consisted of three high schools. Students were enrolled in high school (Grades 10-12) at the time of this study and during the 2020-2021 school year for a total of 2,623 potential participants (Appendix A). Of those potential participants, 513 (N = 513) students participated in the survey. Of the 513 participants, 10th grade students represented 35.2% of the overall respondents, 11th grade students represented 31.9% of respondents, and 12th grade students represented 32.7% of respondents. Student racial backgrounds included: White (82%), Black (6%), Asian (5%), Native American or Alaska Native (3%). Enrollment data for the participant school district was located on the district's public website.

Participant Selection

Participants of this study were selected based upon their enrollment status at the time of this study as 10th, 11th, or 12th graders within one North Dakota school district. The purpose of selecting these stakeholders (students) was due to the researcher's desire to understand possible similarities and differences between transition practices and perceptions of students within one school district. The study's data may assist in

increasing understanding of how transitioning from middle to high school may impact students and how schools can best respond to and support students as they journey towards high school graduation regardless of which school the student is enrolled in.

Students who were ninth graders during the 2020-2021 school year were not selected to participate in this study due to the unique circumstances surrounding their transition into high school resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with full/partial school closures which impacted their transition. The researcher included 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students (from the 2020-2021 school year) because their traditional transition into high school aligned with previous research on students in transition.

Data Collection Methods

This study was conducted as a grounded theory mixed methods study, consisting of one data collection method, an online survey, with the goal of substantive-level theory creation as is true with grounded theory. A mixed methods study, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), consists of "collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks" (p. 4). This study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative questions embedded within one online survey.

Before collecting data, the researcher reviewed the research policy (Appendix B) of the school district targeted for participation. The researcher also filled out a request form (Appendix C) to conduct research. Last, a formal letter was sent to the school district requesting permission to conduct research in the district (Appendix D).

Online Survey Development

The researcher focused on an electronic survey design as outlined in Creswell and Creswell (2018). An online survey was chosen due to its rapid turnaround in data collection, low cost, and relative ease in accessing the quantity of stakeholder voices required through this method. The survey was cross-sectional in nature with data collected at one point in time (over the course of five school days). The online survey was created using Qualtrics, a software available through UND for designing, distributing, and analyzing surveys. Purposive sampling was selected due to the need for data to be related to specific populations (i.e. high school students, Grades 10-12).

The researcher developed survey questions that were "designed to help achieve the goals of the research and in particular to answer the research questions" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 258). After reviewing research questions, the researcher drafted survey questions for the student survey in coordination with four components—situation, self, supports, strategies—of Schlossberg's Transition Theory as well as four components of school connectedness—adult support, belonging to positive peer groups, commitment to education, and positive school environment (CDC, 2009; see Table 1).

While drafting survey questions, the researcher reviewed a "checklist to help avoid problems in question wording" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 264) especially focusing on keeping language simple, avoiding double barreled questions where an interviewer might seek two types of information with one question, avoiding unnecessary and objectionable detail (e.g. using pay ranges or age ranges instead of exact income or ages), and trying to "ensure that the questions mean the same thing to all respondents" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 264).

Table 1

Survey Questions Organized by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Components of School Connectedness

Survey Questions Based Upon the 4 S System of Schlossberg's Transition Theory			
Supports	**Self**	**Strategies**	**Situation**
10. What supports have been helpful for you during your time in high school (including academic, social-emotional/behavioral, financial)?	16. Describe your overall high school experience in one word.	1. Since the transition from middle to high school, what has supported your transition into high school? 17. What advice do you wish you would have received about high school (before you started high school)?	2. Since the transition from middle to high school, what has hindered/hurt your transition into high school?
Survey Questions Based Upon CDC's School Connectedness Components			
Commitment to Education	**Belonging to Positive Peer Groups**	**Positive School Environment**	**Adult Support**
13. Currently, how important is consistent attendance at school for you? 14. Currently, how important are passing grades (D or higher) to you? 15. Currently, how important is it to you to graduate from high school?	11. How important is having a social life during high school? 12. List three (3) traits or characteristics you look for in a friend.	3. How satisfied were you with your middle school's preparation for transitioning you into high school? 4. How satisfied are you with your current (high) school's preparation for transitioning you into high school? 5. List three (3) beliefs/feelings that you have about your current (high) school. 6. How satisfied were you with your middle school's overall efforts to assist you in feeling/believing as if you were a part of the middle school and larger school community? 7. How satisfied are you with your current (high) school's overall efforts to assist you in feeling/believing as if you are a part of the high school and larger school community?	8. How many adults at your current school would you contact or reach out to if you needed support at school? 9. List three (3) traits or characteristics that describe a supportive adult.

To accomplish a link between research questions and survey questions, the researcher piloted the survey questions with doctoral cohort members (Appendix E), who were professional educators and administrators at the time of this study, the researcher's doctoral advisor, and three principals within participating high schools. After obtaining feedback on the piloted survey, the researcher made appropriate updates to survey questions and/or response choices available to respondents for certain survey questions prior to sending to actual participants.

The final survey (Appendix F) included 17 questions, which were worded in easy to understand language (no jargon) for user friendliness. The survey included a 5-point scale from *Extremely Satisfied* to *Extremely Unsatisfied* or *Extremely Important* to *Not Important At All,* multiple choice questions, and open response questions, which were intended to be completed through self-completion methods and were chosen due to "scores on objective measures of attitude, temperament, and personality are usually assumed to be [of] equal interval" (Holcomb, 1998, p. 4).

Online Survey Distribution

The online survey (developed and distributed using Qualtrics) was sent to 10th-12th grade high school students enrolled within three high schools in the participating public school district at the time of this study. According to enrollment data for the 2020-2021 school year, there were 2,623 students (Grades 10-12) within the three participating high schools. They were selected to ensure that the survey and its results were "feasible within the resources available" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 257). There were two qualifiers for students to participate in the survey; first, at the time of this study, they had

to be an enrolled high school student in the identified participating school district and be a current 10th-12th grade student as of the 2020-2021 school year.

Prior to sending the survey, a parental/family letter (Appendix G) was created and sent electronically to families to outline the research to be conducted in the district. Due to some student participants being under 18 years old at the time of the study, the researcher completed an application to the University of North Dakota for a Waiver or Alteration of Informed Consent (see Appendix H). Parents were also provided a with a link to a "Study Information Sheet" (Appendix I) in the communication prior to the study start date. However, all students had an option to not click on the survey link; and therefore, not participate in this study.

The researcher sent the secure survey link to one high school administrator at each of the three high schools within the study. The administrator then sent the secure link to enrolled 10th-12th grade students within their buildings via school email. Once sent, the online survey remained open for five school days in November 2020 (for a timeline of the distribution of the survey, see Appendix J). If a student completed the survey, once the student submitted the survey, data was automatically saved and collected through the online Qualtrics software program. Students who chose to participate only completed the survey once as the survey only allowed for one submission per individual. To encourage participation and provide compensation for their time as participants, students who participated in the online survey were given the option to enter their name and school into a form linked to a random drawing for one of four $20 gift cards (see Appendix K).

The researcher focused on obtaining an overall survey response rate of 33% in accordance with guidelines set forth by the University of North Dakota. At the conclusion of the survey, a total of 513 participants' responses were recorded, equating to a 19.5% response rate.

Data Analysis

Convergent Mixed Method Design

The researcher selected a convergent mixed methods one-phase design to analyze data due to the diversity of the data collected, an analysis that encompassed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated the purpose of analyzing qualitative and quantitative data is "to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (p. 15). Robson and McCartan (2016) stated, "Because quantitative research circumscribes variables of interest, measures them in prescribed ways, and specifies the relationships among them that are to be investigated, quantitative data analysis has a mechanistic, non-judgmental component in the form of statistical inference" (p. 175), whereas qualitative research allows the researcher to "capture complex phenomena" (p. 185) through participants' accounts. Qualitative research is less numerical in nature and relies more on words (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The use of convergent design was selected due to the online survey containing both qualitative and quantitative questions as well as the researcher's belief in the multimethod, multitrait idea envisioned by "Campbell and Fiske (1959), who felt that a psychological trait could best be understood by gathering different forms of data" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 217). A researcher "converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 15).

The survey data was analyzed to provide a more in depth understanding of student perceptions by allowing the data to guide the process.

Using a side by side comparison approach, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the researcher compared qualitative findings to quantitative findings before a final interpretation of data. In order to do this, the researcher organized online survey qualitative data (themes) based upon the framework which the data represented, including the 4 S framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the CDC's school connectedness components. Next, quantitative data was organized into categorical data based upon responses. For example, all survey questions that required an *Extremely Important* to *Not Important At All* response were organized and analyzed together onto one table. Finally, the researcher merged the two forms of data into a joint display in order to merge them into a single visual for final interpretation with the goal to seek convergent or divergent patterns and to shed light on meaning in the data (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Qualitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

Organization of data. In order to analyze the data, all survey information had to be imported from the Qualtrics program into Google Sheets, a free, web-based spreadsheet. After, data was copied and pasted into individual sheets and columns within Google Sheets based upon each question. Once all data was imported into Google Sheets, the researcher began the coding process, starting in Column B from the first cell at the top of the sheet. For each student entry, the researcher inputted a coded response in the cell to the right. For each cycle of coding a new column was added on the individual Google Sheet which allowed the researcher to easily access or hide data within the sheet

itself. Cells were also color coded to indicate patterns in responses. If responses were not recorded or the response "I don't know" or "N/A" were coded with an "X" in a cell, then those responses were not included in the final analysis of data. There were eight individual sheets created for the eight qualitative questions on the online survey. All Google Sheets have been stored in a personal Google Drive account on a password protected computer. After 3 years, data has been scheduled to be destroyed. For analysis (and interpretation) of qualitative data, Saldaña's (2016) coding methods were implemented as follows: (a) in vivo coding, (b) focused coding, (c) axial coding, and lastly (d) final assertions were gleaned.

First cycle: In vivo coding. In vivo coding was applied to the first cycle of coding of participants' responses from the online survey. This coding process was chosen due to "child and adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult's understanding of their culture and worldviews" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106) as well as its application to grounded theory research. Through in vivo coding, the researcher coded words spoken by participants using "the actual language found in the qualitative record using the terms used by the participants themselves" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). The researcher read each individual statement then coded them based upon "significant statements" that were present. An example of the in vivo coding process in action within the study included discovering significant statements such as, "Learning how to manage priorities and time" from the original statement of "Learning how to manage your priorities and time is crucial when transitioning to high school." The first cycle of coding allowed the researcher to review and reflect upon participants' responses and determine what significant statements were present in order to

then move into a second cycle of coding, which allowed the researcher to uncover themes from significant statements.

Second cycle: Focused and axial coding. During the second cycle of coding, focused coding and axial coding methods were employed. The purpose of a second cycle of coding is to "develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual and/or theoretical organization from your first cycle of coding" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). This process was selected due to its user-friendliness with grounded theory, its use with a variety of data forms, and its practicality in determining dominant and non-dominant codes from initial data sets.

Focused coding, according to Saldaña (2016), assists a researcher in "developing categories without distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions" (p. 240). The researcher employed a focused coding method to identify major categories from participant responses to questions on the online survey. An example of the focusing coding process in action within the study included discovering major categories including "Friends, Available Courses, and Activities" that describe what students perceived to have supported their transition into high school.

Axial coding, a process Saldaña (2016) identified as "determining which codes are dominant, which ones are less important [all the while] reorganizing (the data) and then determining which codes are best representative of the data" (p. 244), was conducted. The researcher employed an axial coding method to break down dominant codes found through focused coding into more representative categories for analysis in the final cycle of coding, and the discern eventual assertions of the study. An example of the axial coding process in action within the study included discovering categories

including: “Others (Individuals), School Based, and Self” as describing what students perceived to have supported their transition into high school.

Qualitative themes discovered. Finally, after axial coding, and through constant comparative analysis, themes were discovered including “students relied heavily upon their connections with others,” “the structures of the building are important to know,” and “understanding and joining extracurriculars was very beneficial.” The researcher then interpreted overarching themes and transferred them to being assertions which included: (a) students have a need for connections with others, (b) students believe that being involved in extracurriculars benefit them in a variety of ways, and (c) students need to know more about the “unknowns” prior to arrival.

Quantitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

To analyze quantitative data, the researcher employed the advice of Robson and McCartan (2016) to keep this process as simple as possible as “everyday numbers can be used successfully for research purposes without the need for complex statistical situations” (p. 406). Therefore, the researcher decided to employ descriptive statistics methods. “*Descriptive statistics* are used to organize and summarize data whether they come from studies of populations or samples” (Holcomb, 1998, p. 2). The researcher used an online survey as the main instrument of data collection within this study. Once quantitative data, which included nine quantitative questions, was collected from survey respondents, the researcher classified the data into equal interval data. Equal interval data is “assumed to have equal intervals among them” (as defined by Holcomb, 1998, p. 4). In other words, if respondents were given five options to answer a question, such as in the use of a Likert scale (1 = *excellent*, 2 = *good*, 3 = *fair*, 4 = *poor*, 5 = *unacceptable*), “the

distance between numbers 1 and 2 is the same as the distance between 2 and 3, and between 3 and 4, and so on" (Holcomb, 1998, p. 3).

Once the quantitative data was arranged using equal interval data measurement methods, the researcher converted all data into percentages. Percentages were selected by the researcher due to her desire to communicate her data in a user-friendly format for the target audience of this study: educators. To report out the percentages of the quantitative data, the researcher selected the use of tables. There are four tables included within this study to share quantitative data responses (see Chapter IV).

Validation Techniques

As researchers, we should strive to identify our biases and possible conflicts within our research and clearly define our transparency measures to our readers and stakeholders. According to Fusch, Fusch, & Ness (2018), "Enhancing the validity of the study results through triangulation ensures that one's research is worthy of a contribution to the existing body of knowledge out there" (p. 28). Therefore, to establish trustworthiness and validity within this study, the researcher enlisted methodological triangulation of data. Methodological triangulation is the "combining [of] quantitative and qualitative approaches" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 171). Due to the nature of this study as a mixed methods approach, between-method (or across method) triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018) strategies were employed including: piloting an online survey, providing an audit trail, and providing researcher reflexivity.

Piloting of Online Survey

Before the online survey was sent to participants (high school students), the researcher had her doctoral cohort and advisor preview and pilot the survey to assess the

readability and credibility of the questions and possible responses. Also, to establish transparency with participating high schools, the survey was sent to the three high school principals to preview prior to sending the survey to students.

Audit Trail

An audit trail is considered a credibility and dependability measure that provides transparency of a study. Auditing a study requires researchers keep meticulous notes so future readers or researchers can assess methods used and determine whether or not methods were adequate for the study to be valid. It is critical that researchers "keep a full record of . . . activities while carrying out the study" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 172), which includes raw data, journals, and details of the analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The researcher of this study focused on trustworthiness, as outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985), through establishing confidence in the truth of the inquiry for participants of the study by presenting an audit trail of codes, themes, and assertions from qualitative responses to qualitative survey questions.

The researcher used Google Drive and Google Sheets as the main tools for organizing data, which was imported from the Qualtrics-based online survey. The reasons for using these tools included: password protection, cost free, easy to search and organize data, as well as continuous syncing and saving to the online cloud.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher has striven to be transparent in her beliefs and reasons for this research to be conducted. First, the researcher has had previous high school teaching and administration experience within the state of North Dakota, solely within public schools. The researcher has acknowledged that her "personal background, culture, and

experiences . . . may shape the direction of the study" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182) and due to the study's implementation of CGT, the researcher has attempted to construct meaning from the data. However, the researcher has commented on her past experiences and how those experiences shaped interpretations within the study through memoing, especially during data analysis, and recommended phases of the study.

Summary

Chapter III provided a description of the methodology of this study. The research design of this study is rooted in grounded theory, and a mixed methods conceptual framework was implemented. The study's participants included high school students enrolled in 10^{th}, 11^{th}, or 12^{th} grade at the time of this study. A total of 513 (N = 513) students participated in the study. The site selection for this study included three public high schools within one public school district in North Dakota.

This study was conducted as a mixed methods (one-strategy design) study, consisting of one distinct data collection method; an online survey created through Qualtrics which contained both quantitative and qualitative questions and responses. The survey was completed through self-completion methods. The researcher obtained 513 student responses which correlated to a response rate of 19.5%.

To establish trustworthiness and validity within this study, the researcher enlisted methodological triangulation of data. Due to the nature of this study as a mixed methods approach, between-method (or across method) triangulation strategies were employed including piloting of online survey, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity.

Chapter IV presents the findings of this study in which data is reported out through narration and tables. In Chapter V, the researcher restates the research questions,

discusses the integration of theoretical frameworks into this study, provides an interpretation of the findings, and offers recommendations for educators, state education departments, and students. The chapter concludes with implications for future research, discusses generation of theory and discusses evaluation criteria of constructivist grounded theory.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents 513 high school students' perceptions within one public school district in North Dakota regarding their transition from middle school into high school as uncovered through a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) mixed methods study, as well as to answer the study's research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students towards transitioning into high school in one public North Dakota school district?
2. How can a student's experienced transition from middle to high school impact their feelings of school connectedness?

Findings from this study are reported out into two main sections organized by the research question they (findings) are associated with. Findings will be reported out through narratives and tables. There is both qualitative and quantitative data reported out within each research question section. Under each research question, major themes have been identified from the student perception data associated with the specific survey question itself.

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students towards transitioning into high school in one public North Dakota school district? The first

research question sought to understand perceptions of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students enrolled in one public school district at the time of this study towards transitioning into high school. Survey questions were developed based upon research questions. Survey responses for Survey Questions 1, 2, 10, 16, and 17 supported Research Question 1 and are reported out by sections of themes which emerged from student's qualitative responses including: (a) the transition itself (from middle to high school), and (b) student's overall high school experience since the transition (see Table 2).

Table 2

Research Question 1 – Qualitative Themes

Overarching Themes	**The Transition Itself**	**Student's Overall High School Experience Since the Transition**

Categories of Themes	• Teachers
	  ○ Ninth Grade Teachers
	  ○ Middle School Teachers
	  ○ High School Teachers
	• Friends
	• Family Members
	• Extracurriculars
	  ○ Clubs
	  ○ Sports
		• Increases in homework and responsibilities
		• Unawareness of building structures
		• Selecting high school courses

The Transition Itself

When students were asked about supports that helped their transition into high school (Survey Question 1), supports that continued to assist them throughout their transition period, an overwhelming number of students reported that connections with

"others" were instrumental in their transition. Based upon the qualitative data collected, student responses detailed below include connections with: teachers, friends, and family members. Students reported that their beliefs about extracurriculars were also instrumental in their transition into high school.

Teachers. When asked, student participants stated that they sought out adults who are "caring, understanding, a good listener, and helpful." Students shared they believed a supportive adult is "ready to truly listen, genuinely cares for you, [is] always there for you when you need help or need someone to just talk to" or someone who "actively listens to what you have to say, actually caring about what you are saying and doing everything in their power to help you." Another student noted that supportive adults "care about and see you as a person and not just a number in a class or a name on a roster." Overwhelmingly, student participants reported they had a desire to be "cared" about by teachers. Many students felt very strongly about their connections with their teachers. One student reported, "they are willing to help you with anything" and "they make me feel like I [a student] am their top priority." Ninth grade, middle school, and high school teachers were all identified as adults who were most trusted within a school setting.

***Ninth grade teachers*.** Students reported that their ninth grade teachers were instrumental in assisting them in their transition into high school, including during the first days of school. "I remember my first day of school. I had no idea where my classes were. In all directions, teachers/staff were around helping students find their classes or even explaining to them the sections of the school." Another student said, "I had a lot of support from my teachers during the transition. I had and still have a couple of amazing teachers that I have felt comfortable talking to and confiding in." Other students noted:

"My teachers in [my] freshman year helped with making the transition from middle school to high school smoother"; "authentic ninth grade teachers who showed compassion and helped as much as possible made my transition easiest"; and "many of the teachers going into 9th grade were very supportive and were easy to talk to if you had any questions or concerns."

Middle school teachers. Middle school teachers were also noted as assisting with the transition into high school. "My teachers in middle school treating us somewhat like high schoolers in 8th grade and [they] did a good job at guiding students towards high school expectations and all that." Another student stated, "They did a lot of prep for high school during middle school," and "one of my teachers from middle school who also works at the high school. I could go to him about anything." However, joint efforts by the middle school and high school staff were also noted as appreciated by students. "The efforts by both the middle school and high school were very supportive in transitioning to high school," and "both the middle school and high school teachers were great in helping with the transition."

High school teachers. Students also reported that high school teachers have continued to be avenues of support during their high school journey, not just during their initial transition phase. One student reported, ""I had a lot of support from my teachers during the transition. I had and still have a couple of amazing teachers that I have felt comfortable talking to and confiding in." Another said, "Staff and teachers make sure you are involved, and they check in on us besides just academically," as well as "having great, supportive teachers in and out of school has been very helpful for my social/academic/mental health." Many students reported having time and help from their

teachers outside of normal class hours was appreciated. “Teachers who have study sessions during and outside of class” or “the ability to email my teachers with questions has been very helpful.” As one student summed it up, “The teachers are very understanding, and there are lots of ways for students to get any help that they need . . . a good backbone for support and success is key to the transition to high school and that can all be done with support from others.”

Friends. Overall, students stated they sought out friends who were “fun, caring, and honest.” “I look for friends who are trustworthy, fun, and a good person to be around”; or as another student put it, “They need to have a good heart and be nice, a sense of humor, and they are fun to be around which makes me want to be their friend.” Students shared that they sought friendships for a variety of reasons including emotional and academic support as well as for fun times. One student stated their friends helped them emotionally as “they really helped me find my true self while being there for me when I was going through a rough patch in my life.” Another noted, “They know when I'm not being myself, and they try their best to help me be the best I can be.” As for academic support from friends, students mentioned, “My friends help me with my homework. They also motivate me to do well,” or “my friends have provided an outlet to commiserate and collaborate on school work.” One student stated, “I’ve known most of them since middle school so that fact that we are still getting through this together has helped a lot.” Others noted that friends will come and go but “finding a good group of friends, even though it might take a few tries to find some good friends, is always helpful to have them around” or helped them in feeling “that I'm not the only one going through

this, and my friends help me succeed." Another student summed up the importance of friendships by stating:

> The thing that has probably supported me most through my transition from middle school into high school would probably have to be my friends that I made in high school. They really helped me figure out my place in the school and how to function in a large scale school.

Family members. Students also reported that family members, including parents and siblings, were instrumental in their support system as they transitioned into and through high school. As previously mentioned, student participants stated that they sought out adults who were "caring, understanding, a good listener, and helpful." Most frequently mentioned supports received by students from family members included emotional support as well as providing motivational pushes. Students reported their family members "helped a lot with all my worries and answered a lot of my questions about high school" and "when I get behind or need advice/help they do not judge but instead help me grow." Parental/familial motivational pushes were also mentioned as important during the transition to high school. "My parents are understanding and always push me to do my best in school," and "my parents push me to get good grades and do well in school." One student concluded, "My parents support me through everything, and having them continue to help me made my life a lot easier." The first assertion that students need connections with others including teachers, friends, and family was the most prevalent source of qualitative data and will be explored further in the recommendations section.

When students were asked about supports that helped their transition into high school as well as continued to support them during their high school experience an overwhelming number of students reported their participation in extracurriculars was paramount. The top student responses included involvement in clubs and sports.

Clubs. When asked about advice they wished they would have received prior to attending high school (Survey Question 17), students overwhelmingly stated they wished they would have known to get involved in activities and meet new people right away to help ease their transition. “Clubs have been a great way to get involved” and a club “has helped [me] retain a sense of normalcy.” Students reported that being involved in clubs helped them in a variety of ways, but most notably in building relationships with others. “You get to build really good relationships with other students and teachers, and it feels good to know that there is always someone there to talk to.” Others stated, “By being involved in many clubs and activities, this has helped me get to know many of my classmates and staff”; or “join any and all clubs as they help you to make so many new friends in different grades.” A number of students mentioned that there are “lots of clubs to join to get involved” and they “love all the choices of clubs.” Others advised, “Join groups, clubs, or activities even if your friends aren't in it and make an effort to meet people.” “Be willing to talk to people and get help in any ways that would be helpful for you,” and “there are people to help you if something does go wrong.” For some students, joining a club in high school is a reminder of how important being involved in a club is. “Technical theater was/is the only thing keeping me going to school, and it is the safest and most accepting place I know.”

Sports. Students also credited being involved in sports as being an important aspect of their transition into high school. The most reported reasons included doing better at school, meeting new people, as well as a positive way to decompress. One student stated:

> I have found that sports really supported me in high school. It has been a way to relieve stress, and it's a good distraction from school. Sports also make me feel more a part of the school and its community.

Another stated, “Sports have always been my safe place. They have really helped me get better grades and so [do] well in school.” Many reported that by being involved in sports they were able to meet other students. “Being involved in sports and being able to meet new people in different grades than me has been great. I’ve had a steady and healthy friend group throughout my years.” Also, by “being in sports you get to know the older kids because there is a lot of interaction between grade levels.” Another student stated, “Being in a sport helped me adjust to the new environment, and my sports teams have provided me with good support systems, and it's a nice outlet for being frustrated after school.” By being involved in sports throughout high school, students should, as one student noted, “participate in sports or extracurriculars to look good on your school resume.” For some students, participating in high school sports prior to entering ninth grade was also noted as helpful through student comments such as, “Being able to participate in 7-12 activities was a really good experience, because I got to meet and learn a lot from high schoolers.” Again, for some students joining a sport in high school is a reminder of how important being involved in a sport is. “Sports are probably the only thing keeping me going.” The second assertion that students believe in the benefits of

extracurricular involvement as they transition into high school was the second most prevalent source of qualitative data and will be explored further in the recommendations section.

Overall High School Experience (Since the Transition)

When students were asked about their overall high school experience since their transition (Survey Questions 10 and 16), student responses claimed they wished they would have known more about high school and/or listened to the advice others gave them prior to attending. It is important for researchers to understand hindrances or roadblocks in a student's entry into high school (Survey Question 2) just as importantly as which supports were helpful. It should be noted that through the analysis of the qualitative data, student participants wished they would have known that "high school is not as scary or bad as others claimed it would be" and "don't procrastinate." However, the most frequent hindrances or roadblocks for student participants to achieve a smooth transition included an increase in homework and responsibilities, unawareness of building structures, and not understanding the process of selecting courses that might be most beneficial for them.

Increases in homework and responsibilities. A significant number of participant students reported that the increase in homework/workload and responsibilities was stressful as they transitioned into high school life. Many reported feeling pressure and stress. "Moving up in the ranks of school you have more responsibilities" or "when you start getting more into the school year, it gets to the point where it's actually stressful and makes it hard to actually learn and focus on what you are doing." Students also reported feeling as though the amount of homework assigned was unreasonable. "The insane amount of homework and unrealistic due dates" as well as "the amount of work that I

have gotten. I don't have time to do it with the things going on at home." With an increase in homework, students found they were spending more time working on homework as well as navigating an increase in responsibilities. One student reported, "The more homework you get; it takes up much much much more time." Other students stated, "The amount of homework there is in high school and how independent you have to be" as well as "not understanding how much more work and serious school gets" were hindrances to their transition. Procrastination was also a common topic to which students advised others to avoid. One student advised, "Don't procrastinate on your work. . . . It feels so much better when you get your work done early and aren't scrambling to finish it last minute" since "the work will never stop" and "trust me you don't want to have to be doing your homework at 2 am the night before when you already had three whole days to finish it." Yet, another noted, "Learning how to manage your priorities and time is crucial when transitioning to high school. It is your responsibility to do your work and to be timely. Developing time management skills early will help ease the transition."

Unawareness of building structures. Another hindrance which was prevalent in participant student responses were the unknowns about high school overall. As one student put it, "The unknowns were tough (what to do when scenario a, b, or c happens)." These included the change from teams (in middle school) to individual teachers/departments at the high school level, building layout, as well as building-wide structures (such as grading practices and the bell schedule). "In middle school we had teams, so all teachers talked to each other and coordinated assignments; in high school there is no reason for an English teacher to coordinate and plan with a Western Civ teacher." It was also "harder to communicate with all teachers individually since you are

not a part of pods anymore"; and "they do not base assignments and tests off of the other teachers so you will have many assignments and tests back to back." These students noticed how the lack of teams (of teachers) at the high school impacted their homework/workload as alluded to previously.

Students also reported not knowing where to go or how to get around their building was stressful. "The first time going around a new building is honestly pretty confusing as you're trying to take everything in, and also figuring out where you are." As another student proclaimed, "Having my classes spread all over the building and not really knowing where your classes are can really stress you out!" Yet, other students felt like having the ability to tour the school prior to entering high school was beneficial. "It helped to have an orientation to get acquainted with the building and all of the facilities and classes it provides." Another stated, "Having the option to receive a tour or go to the open houses to explore myself was very helpful." Other common hindrances included grading changes. "The change in some classes from traditional grading to standards based when in middle school it was all traditional grading in the grade book." For others, hindrances included the bell schedule itself. "It was difficult adjusting to the time change, as I had to get up much earlier for high school." One student stated that it is important for teachers to remember "incoming freshman have no knowledge of the school and might have more questions than expected that they don't know they should ask."

Selecting high school courses. Students reported another significant hindrance was not knowing how the process of selecting courses would help or hinder future educational opportunities. Students reported that they did not know which classes to take. "I also found it difficult to choose what classes I wanted to take"; "I felt like I was given

rather little information about how dual credit and AP classes work" or "They put me in classes that were way too difficult and stressful." Other students reported dissatisfaction with policies regarding course selection. Students complained about "too many classes that I want to take and not enough time," "taking classes that take too much time or are too difficult to fit into my schedule," or "requiring a minimum amount of class credits each year." One student reported that "luckily, when my parents and I would challenge the policies and ask my counselor/principal to override, they would, and I was able to take the best schedule for high school." For other students being in courses with older peers was also difficult to navigate. "I think sometimes teachers would forget it was my first year in high school, and I wasn't as comfortable as I could have been in class"; or "some teachers who mainly taught juniors and seniors didn't necessarily fully communicate what they expected to their younger classes." The third assertion that students need to know more about the "unknowns" prior to transitioning into high school will be explored further in the recommendations section.

Student responses to Research Question 1 suggested that students' perceptions of their transition into high school were based upon their connections with others, their beliefs in the benefits of extracurricular involvement, and their desire to know more about the "unknowns" prior to transitioning into high school.

Research Question 2

How can a student's experienced transition from middle to high school impact their feelings of school connectedness? The second research question sought to understand a student's experienced transition from middle to high school and how that transition impacted their feelings of school connectedness. Survey questions were

developed based upon research questions. Survey responses contained both qualitative and quantitative data that answered Research Question 2. Results are reported out by sections of themes derived from students' responses including: (a) feelings about middle and high school, (b) feelings about others, and (c) feelings about themselves.

Feelings About Middle and High School

Findings suggest student participants received support from both their middle and high school before and during their transition (see Table 3).

Table 3

Students' Feelings of Satisfaction Towards the Transition Process

	3. How satisfied were you with your middle school's preparation for transitioning you into high school?	4. How satisfied are you with your current (high) school's preparation for transitioning you into high school?	6. How satisfied were you with your middle school's overall efforts to assist you in feeling/ believing as if you were a part of the middle school and larger school community?	7. How satisfied are you with your current (high) school's overall efforts to assist you in feeling/ believing as if you are a part of the high school and larger school community?
Extremely Satisfied	14.20%	23.66%	14.92%	28.98%
Somewhat Satisfied	47.63%	43.53%	37.14%	34.71%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	25.24%	23.34%	26.98%	20.06%
Somewhat Dissatisfied	8.83%	7.26%	14.60%	9.24%
Extremely Dissatisfied	4.10%	2.21%	6.35%	7.01%
Totals	100.00%	100.00%	99.99%	100.00%

Approximately 61.83% of student responses indicated they were *Somewhat Satisfied* (47.63%) to *Extremely Satisfied* (14.20%) with their middle school's efforts in preparing them for their transition into high school (Survey Question 3). One student shared, "My MS didn't give much explanation of how high school works"; while another stated, "I was told by a few middle school teachers and upperclassmen that it's not that big of a difference." However, 67.19% of students reported they felt *Somewhat Satisfied* (43.53%) to *Extremely Satisfied* (23.66%) with their "current" (at the time they completed the survey) high school's efforts (Survey Question 4). One student stated, "My high school teachers were very understanding of the fact that high school was new to us." However, other students believed their high school teachers may not have been so understanding. "The teachers who expected us to be at a certain level already hurt the transition from middle to high school," and "I think sometimes teachers or students at the high school forget that incoming freshmen have no knowledge of the school and might have more questions than expected that they don't know they should ask." Overall, student participants felt more satisfied with their high school's efforts to transition them into the building than their middle school's efforts.

Also, the researcher was interested in understanding student perceptions about both their middle and high school's abilities to create a sense of community. Approximately 52.06% of student responses indicated they were *Somewhat Satisfied* (37.14%) to *Extremely Satisfied* (14.92%) with their middle school's efforts in assisting them in feeling/believing they were a part of a larger school community (Survey Question 6). Around 27% (26.98%) of students reported feeling *Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied* with their middle school's efforts to create feelings of community. However,

63.69% of students reported they were *Somewhat Satisfied* (34.71%) to *Extremely Satisfied* (28.98%) in their high school's efforts to create a larger school community (Survey Question 7), with 23.34% reporting feeling *Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied* with those efforts.

Overall, student participants felt their high school's efforts to create a larger school community was more prevalent or observable than in their middle school. Patterns in student responses regarding their current high school's atmosphere (Survey Question 5) included positive feelings of safety ("Teachers and the staff create a safe environment for students."), a sense of community ("We are a close community, and we have good core values."), as well as the facilities themselves ("The quality of materials and the building itself is very good."). These were the most noted ideas regarding students' current feelings/beliefs about their high school (Survey Question 5). However, patterns in student responses regarding their current high school's atmosphere also included negative feelings regarding racism ("Racism goes unchecked."), issues with peers/other students ("Lots of kids get away with bad stuff."), and teachers/staff who are not understanding ("There can be a lack of considering feelings from staff."). There were mixed results in student's overall feelings about their high school. One student stated, "I love my current high school. It's great, and am so glad I am away from middle school." Another stated, "Both the middle school and high school teachers were great in helping with the transition."

Feelings About Others

Findings suggest student participants received support from others, most notably teachers and friends during their transition into high school. When asked, 71.34% of

students reported they had between 1-5 adults at their current school who they could contact or reach out to if they needed support at school (Survey Question 8; see Table 4).

Table 4

Student Responses Regarding Supportive Adults at School

Total Supportive Adults	Percentage Responses
0	11.46%
1-5	71.34%
6-10	10.19%
More than 10 adults	05.41%
Other	01.59%
Total	99.99%

When asked about what traits or characteristics describe a supportive adult (Survey Question 9), the most reported responses included adults who were "caring, understanding, a good listener, and helpful." One student noted a supportive adult is "willing to listen, non-judgmental, care about and see you as a person and not just a number in a class or a name on a roster." However, 11.46% of students reported they had no supportive adults at school. This is a concerning statistic, as research notes the importance of students having connections with adults at school (McWhirter et al., 2019; Murphy & Zirkel, 2016; Loukas et al., 2016; Nitza & Dobias, 2008).

Friends were also noted as helping ease the transition from middle to high school. Patterns in student responses included the most prevalent traits or characteristics that they look for in a friend (Survey Question 12) as "fun, caring, and honest." Friends served a

variety of support roles during the transition including emotional, academic, and for fun times, and the importance of friends has been confirmed through previous research on school connectedness (Hernandez et al., 2016; Makara & Madjar, 2015; Nitza & Dobias, 2015). According to responses, a total of 70.70% of student participants claimed having a social life during high school was *Very Important* (31.31%) or *Extremely Important* (39.39%) to them (Survey Question 11; see Table 5).

Table 5

Student Feelings on the Importance of Having a Social Life in High School

	11. How important is having a social life during high school?
Extremely Important	39.39%
Very Important	31.31%
Moderately Important	20.54%
Slightly Important	6.40%
Not Important At All	2.36%
Total	100.00%

Feelings About Themselves

Findings suggest student participants had varying perceptions about the importance of attendance, passing grades, and the importance of graduating (Table 6). Youth commitment to education is one component of school connectedness and the researcher sought to understand student participants' current levels of commitment to attendance, passing grades, and graduation.

Table 6

Student Responses Regarding Their Feelings of Commitment Towards Education

	13. Currently, how important is consistent attendance at school for you?	14. Currently, how important are passing grades (D or higher) to you?	15. Currently, how important is it to you to graduate from high school?
Extremely Important	41.69%	68.35%	86.20%
Very Important	32.20%	18.52%	10.77%
Moderately Important	19.32%	10.10%	1.35%
Slightly Important	4.75%	2.02%	1.01%
Not at all Important	2.03%	1.01%	0.67%
Totals	99.99%	100.00%	100.00%

According to the students, consistent attendance at school (Survey Question 13) was *Very Important* (32.20%) or *Extremely Important* (41.69%) to 73.89% of participants. However, 19.32% of students claimed it was only *Moderately Important* to them. A review of the qualitative data from the survey showed no mention of school attendance within written responses of students for any of the survey questions.

When asked about how important passing grades (earning a 60% or higher) were to them (Survey Question 14), 86.87% of all student participants reported grades were *Very Important* (18.52%) or *Extremely Important* (68.35%) to them. Students offered their insights into the importance of grades in high school. One student noted, “Get your work done when it’s due and help your future grades out.” Another proclaimed:

> Focus on grades! Even if it's a drag to get into hard work, even that first year of school will affect you and your ability to get into colleges for the rest of your life. There are long-term consequences if you don't get your act together now."

However, some students noted that grades are not everything. "Work hard, but grades aren't everything—try your best also you don't have to do assignments when you get them if they aren't due—pace yourself."

Finally, students shared their feelings on the importance of graduating from high school (Survey Question 15) with 86.20% of all student participants reporting that it was *Extremely Important* (86.20%) or *Very Important* (10.77%) to graduate. Graduation rate for the participant school district during the 2019-2020 school year was 87% (Appendix L). This offers an insight into student's perceptions of the importance of graduating from one of the three participating high schools within the district. One student summed up their advice about high school as:

> Focus on school but not to the point where you shut everyone out, be careful about what you do and make sure you don't ruin your life and try to have fun and keep in mind your goal is to survive and graduate.

Merged Findings

After analysis and interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data from the study, the researcher merged both data sources together and displayed results in a joint display of data (see Table 7).

Table 7

Joint Display—Qualitative, Quantitative, and Merged Results Data From Survey

	Qualitative Themes	Quantitative Descriptive Statistics	Merged Results
Schlossberg's 4 S Transition Components	**Supports:** Connections to staff, friends, and extracurriculars **Self:** HS elicited more positive feelings/beliefs than negative **Situation:** Increased responsibilities and homework were hindrances **Strategies:** Leaning on others for help, being involved as well as offering advice to others	**Youths' Commitment:** 86% of participants believed graduation is extremely important, 68% believed passing grades are extremely important, and 42% believed regular attendance is extremely important **Peer Relationships:** 39% of participants believed a social life is extremely important **Supportive Adults:** 71% of participants reported having 1-5 trusted adults in their lives **School Climate:** 62% of participants were extremely or somewhat satisfied with their MS* preparation for HS** compared to 67% with their HS preparation for HS; 52% of participants were extremely or somewhat satisfied with their MS "community like" atmosphere compared to 64% being extremely or somewhat satisfied with their current HS "community" atmosphere	Connections made with teachers who are "caring, understanding, helpful, and good listeners" as well as with peers who are "fun, caring, and honest" supported students' transitions into HS Being involved in extracurriculars increases social interactions and connections with others Attending school, passing grades, and graduating from HS are extremely important for over 40% of participants "Don't procrastinate, not as scary or bad as originally thought, get involved, meet people, and have fun" were advice themes students wished they had known before their transition into HS An increase in the homework load, increased responsibilities, the "unknowns" about HS itself, as well as others (most notably teachers) hindered students' transition into HS The staff and atmosphere of the building can evoke positive or negative experiences/feelings for students HS elicits more "community like" feelings and prepares students for the transition into HS more than MS
School Connectedness Components	**Peer Relationships:** Seek friends who are "fun, caring, and honest" **Supportive Adults:** Seek out adults who are caring, understanding, helpful, and good listeners **School Climate:** Staff and the atmosphere of the building are critical for a positive experience		

* MS = middle school. ** HS = high school.

Through this analysis and interpretation process, merged results were constructed by students' responses and the researcher as follows:

- Connections made with teachers who are "caring, understanding, helpful, and good listeners" as well as with peers who are "fun, caring, and honest" supported students' transitions into high school; however, the staff and atmosphere of a building can evoke positive or negative experiences/feelings from students.
- Being involved in extracurriculars increases social interactions and connections with others and a high school itself thereby improving the transition process.
- Students believed their high school elicited more "community like" feelings, and prepared them for their transition into high school more than their middle school did.
- The most frequently reported hindrances to student participants' transitions into high school included an increase in homework load, increased responsibilities, unknowns about high school, as well as "others," most notably teachers.
- Attending school, passing grades, and graduating from high school were *Extremely Important* for over 40% of student participants. Students described their feelings/beliefs about high school as "Interesting, Good/Great, Fun, Growth, and Stressful."
- Students reported that they wished they would have known (prior to their transition into high school) to not procrastinate, have fun, get involved, meet new people, and high school was not as scary or bad as they originally thought.

Summary

Chapter IV presented the findings of this study in which data was reported out through narratives and tables. In Chapter V, the researcher restates research questions; discusses the integration of theoretical frameworks into the study; provides an interpretation of findings; and offers recommendations for educators, state education departments, and students. The chapter concludes with implications for future research, discusses the generation of theory, and ends with an evaluation criteria of constructivist grounded theory.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter restates the research questions; discusses the integration of theoretical frameworks with the study; provides an interpretation of the findings; as well as recommendations for educators, state education departments, and students. The chapter concludes with implications for future research and generation of theory.

Research Questions

There were two research questions which guided this study including:

1. What are the perceptions of 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students towards transitioning into high school in one public North Dakota school district?
2. How can a student's experienced transition from middle to high school impact their feelings of school connectedness?

Research Question 1

The first research question focused on the meaning of an event to the individuals involved (students experiencing the transition into high school). The rationale behind the first research question included the importance of obtaining student voices (about their experiences), and the information gathered from the study will assist the researcher in giving voice to students who otherwise may not have been heard. It is important to note that any transition in one's life is truly a unique experience, and no two individuals

experience an event the same. Therefore, by infusing Schlossberg's Transition Theory into this study, the researcher was able to identify patterns within students' responses as they pertained to Schlossberg's 4 S Framework of "taking stock" of a situation (the transition into high school) including factors pertaining to: (a) self, (b) a situation, (c) supports, and (d) strategies.

The researcher applied the study's data to Schlossberg's 4 S Framework and determined that student responses correlated to the 4 S Framework across four factors related to taking stock of a situation as described in Chapter I, the situation being a transition into high school. Students indicated that overall they regarded their transition into high school as "positive" through trends found within the data, including the frequent use of the words "interesting, good/great, fun, and [experienced] growth" (relates to self factor of Schlossberg's 4 S Framework). Students also reported that their responsibilities increased once they entered high school, which included an increase in their homework/workload (situation factor of Schlossberg's 4 S Framework). As students experienced their transition into high school, their forged connections with others and to extracurriculars were critically important to them (support factor). Finally, students proclaimed that leaning on others for help, getting involved in school based activities, and offering other students advice (or receiving advice from peers) were essential in their transition (strategies factor).

Schlossberg (2011) claimed, "It is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159). The transition from middle school into high school is simply more than just a movement from one physical space to another; it is a culmination of changes that each student will have to

individually experience. However, this may make identifying strategies for improving transition practices (for all students) difficult as all individuals experience transitions in different ways.

Research Question 2

The second research question focused on processes by which specific events, activities, and their outcomes occurred. The rationale behind the second research question included the importance of addressing systemic inequities within the participating school district regarding transition practices, programs, or policies for incoming high school students. By infusing school connectedness into this study, the researcher was able to identify patterns within students' responses as they pertained to components of school connectedness including: (a) school climate, (b) relational climate, and (c) educational climate.

Student participants regarded their high school as eliciting a more "community like" atmosphere most notably due to support offered within their high school, both academically and social-emotionally (school climate component of school connectedness). Nearly 40 percent of students claimed having a social life is extremely important to them, and their connections with friends, teachers, and family members were the most critical support systems they had during their transition into high school (relational climate). Over three-quarters of the students within this study regarded graduating from high school as extremely important to them, and over half indicated that earning passing grades was extremely important to them. Students also proclaimed that their high school (staff, practices, and policies) was more helpful in their actual transition to high school than their middle school due to students having access to more

extracurriculars, freedoms, and student selected course options in their high school than in their middle school (educational climate). Next, the researcher will discuss the integration of theoretical frameworks that guided this study including Schlossberg's Transition Theory and school connectedness.

Discussion of Theoretical Frameworks Applied to Study

This study's theoretical frameworks included Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the idea of school connectedness. The integration of both frameworks is critical in understanding how student participants experienced their transition into high school as well as unearthing aspects of school life that may have contributed to the overall transition experience itself. Merging the two frameworks provided a more multidimensional glance into students' perceptions than either framework alone would have, and that may have impacted participants' descriptions of their "lived" transitions and helped find new pathways forward for middle and high school transition practices and processes through the integration of school connectedness components into the study.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was developed in order to glean understanding about how transitions within our lives, whether anticipated or unanticipated, can elicit feelings and experiences that may or may not shape our future lives. Schlossberg's theory played an integral part in this study due to a need the researcher had to understand how students within one school district perceived their transition into high school and to understand the role middle schools and high schools played (or did not play) in participants' overall experiences regarding their transitions into high school. Factors within transition theory of "taking stock" were evident within this study as follows: (a)

the lived experiences of students transitioning from middle school to high school (the situation), (b) personal acknowledgment of changes to themselves since their transitions occurred (self), (c) participants disclosing their need for connections with others (supports), and (d) participants identifying methods for coping through their transitions (strategies).

Situation. Situation refers to a "person's situation at the time of transition" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). When asked about what helped and/or hindered their transition into high school, students reported their teachers and friends at the time of the transition were most helpful, yet school based aspects such as increased responsibilities and increased amounts of homework were hindrances.

It is imperative to remember that all individuals experience transition in their own way, and so varied responses regarding transition experiences were to be expected. Yet it is critical to allow for student voices to be shared. Student participants shared their varied experiences depending upon their situation at the time of and during the transition into high school. Some students referred to being new to America or realizing that middle school and high school have similarities and differences. Others also shared that there are going to be many ups and downs during the high school years, but to focus on the situation as one that is not permanent.

Self. Self refers to a "person's inner strength for coping with the situation" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). Students' responses often showcased their inner strengths during their time of transitioning into high school. Some students claimed to have a seamless transition while others experienced more turbulence and inner strife.

Overall, student participants' responses highlighted more positive feelings and

beliefs about their high school transition experience than negative. Students highlighted staff and atmosphere most often while they reflected upon their overall feelings about their current high school. Important to showcase is that there were students who also discussed feelings that were negative towards their high school. Schlossberg (2011) noted that the power of positivity should not be understated and framing a transition in a positive manner is the best method to move through a transition.

Supports. Schlossberg (2011) said, "Support available at the time of transition is critical to one's sense of well-being" (p. 160). Students most frequently credited others, including teachers, friends, and their involvement in extracurriculars as supports they benefited from the most through their transition. Students repeatedly shared their feelings of gratitude towards teachers who supported them during their transition and after. Friends were also critical for support. Students claimed that friendships would come and go throughout high school; however, it was important from the student's perspective to find friends who were "fun, caring, and honest." A need individuals have for human connections unearthed within this study cannot be ignored.

Lemkin et al. (2018) found that students, most specifically maltreated youth, who participated in a school club/sport were two and a half times more likely to graduate from high school than those who were not involved in a school club/sport. Joining an extracurricular club or sport has been shown to be a "predictor of student motivations, GPA, attendance and graduation rate, social and life skills, leadership, and future mindset" (Shaffer, 2019, p. 9) as well as a way to "find and develop their gifts—especially disadvantaged youth" (Heath, Anderson, Turner, & Payne, 2018, p. 22). Students revealed that being involved in a club or sport was an essential component of

high school life and a great strategy for gaining support. One student advised, “Join as many clubs or sports [as] you can and meet a bunch of people.”

Strategies. Strategies are methods that attempt “to change the situation, . . . reframe the situation . . ., and those that help reduce [the] stress” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 161) of a transition. Individuals should attempt to use a variety of coping strategies during a time of transition. Within this study, students found through their experiences that leaning on others for help, avoiding procrastination, and having fun during their high school years are strategies that can improve the high school transition phase. Also, as mentioned in the previous section, joining clubs, extracurriculars, and sports is one strategy an individual can employ to meet people.

At the crux of joining extracurriculars was the theme that joining would allow an individual the ability to meet new people and this appeared highly important to participant students. Upon reflection of their transition into high school, many offered advice to incoming students such as getting engaged in school life by joining sports, clubs, or theater. Also, it is imperative that students continue to build upon their self-advocacy and emotional intelligence skills prior to entering and eventually leaving high school as this skill is highly sought after within the workforce (Millet, 2020). These skills can certainly be developed and honed by participating in extracurriculars prior to and during high school.

Students offered stark warnings regarding procrastination. Many shared their previous experiences with procrastination and how the work truly never stops so attempt to deal with procrastination issues prior to entering high school. Their advice to incoming students included developing time management skills, asking for help early, and doing

assignments right away when they are assigned.

Students referenced having fun quite frequently as a strategy to cope with the transition into high school. Students discussed meeting new people, trying out new experiences and just being themselves. They also referred to the fact that high school goes by quickly so take advantage of any fun opportunities since it will be over before one knows it.

Getting outside of their comfort zone was another highlighted strategy. One way to accomplish this is by becoming involved in extracurricular or school-wide activities. Many students shared that it is important to get outside one's comfort zone to meet new people, try out new activities or experiences, and discover new passions. Research has shown being involved improves a student's feelings of school connectedness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

School Connectedness

School connectedness is a multidimensional term that has no standard definition within research; however, the underlying purpose of this framework has been to improve school climate and culture (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Joyce, 2015; Loukas et al., 2016). School connectedness played an integral part in this study because the researcher wished to discover new pathways forward for middle to high school transition practices and processes. The components of school connectedness evident within this study included: (a) school climate, (b) relational climate, and (c) educational climate.

School climate. A standard definition for school climate has not been agreed upon; however, a common theme within existing research includes an understanding that

the climate or atmosphere of a school itself is critical for student success (Cohen et al., 2009; Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016). Students reported having positive thoughts about their school's atmosphere most notably their feelings of safety, high standards, and a place that welcomes others.

Students shared that individuals within their schools created a safe environment, not only physically, but socially and emotionally as well. Students noted that their school environment was safe (limited fights) and felt welcoming. However, they also noted they felt safe not only in the building itself, but within classrooms, as well. They noted this was accomplished due to the work of teachers and staff who created spaces where they felt safe and at home.

Another component of school climate is the importance of holding students accountable by having high standards or expectations for all. Many student participants noted that their school held them to high standards, and they (teachers, administrators, staff) expected to get the best from all students. Even though holding students to high standards is critical, educators must provide support when students are in need. One student noted, the importance of reaching out at any time to an adult within the building was critical in their transition. Other students stated the importance of holding oneself to high standards, as well.

Relational climate. Relational climate refers to "students' perceptions of their relationships with peers and adults at school" (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018, p. 430). A majority of students in this study reported that both teachers and friends significantly assisted their transition into high school. They stated that teachers and staff were kind and understanding which helped them feel supported during and through their transition.

Students also reported having friendship circles helped them feel more connected to school since everyone was going through similar experiences. Social connections students made and felt were reported throughout the study, whether discussing supports or hindrances, describing their feelings about their high school, or advice they'd give others, relationships were the constant.

Educational climate. According to Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018), educational climate can be described as "students' perceptions of learning transmission quality and the school's efforts to promote learning and other school tasks" (p. 430). Much of the existing research at the time of this study centered around instructional practices (Hopkins & Woulfin, 2015; Mallett, 2016; Spillane et al., 2019); however, within this study, the educational climate also included building level practices as well as policies regarding transition practices and processes.

Student statements highlighted a need to find relevance within their high school experience such as a desire to learn about what they want to do for their future career as well as building upon their work ethic. Other students commented on their feelings about their school's transition practices and policies, some of which were helpful and others which were not. Many referred to the positive experiences around their schools' orientation sessions which included building tours. However, other students noted that practices in their building included room for improvement such as the numbering of classrooms, information about courses, or consistent grading practices. Again, it is important to remember that all individuals experience a transition event uniquely, yet it is critical for educators to consider how to best support the transition from middle school

into high school, which has been dubbed “the most difficult and cumbersome transition in K-12 education” (Ellerbrock et al., 2015, p. 83).

Recommendations

One of the benefits of conducting research is unearthing new understandings about others’ lived experiences, and this study was no different. One goal of this study was to add to the existing literature on how middle to high school transition practices impact students and how educators can bridge gaps to better the outcomes for students, including increasing their feelings of school connectedness and eventual graduation from high school. To ensure students’ voices are heard, the researcher has proposed a diverse body of recommendations for educators, state educational departments, and high school students.

For Educators

Student participants overwhelmingly praised educators for their support during students’ transitions into high school; therefore, the researcher, by actively incorporating student voice, decided to focus on recommendations for educators first.

Program evaluation. To best understand practices within a school, educators should undertake an evaluation of their transition activities and programming. To engage in a program evaluation, a task force should be created featuring both middle and high school educators (from the feeder network). The task force should select an appropriate program evaluation approach such as an Objectives Based Approach or Participatory Approach as outlined in Spaulding (2014). Once an agreed upon approach is selected, the task force should evaluate practices within their schools, gather data, and determine how

to improve their practices to better outcomes for their students, especially helping students during their transition from middle to high school.

Orientation and transition activities. After a program evaluation has been conducted, a list of current and future orientation/transition activities should be planned specifically to address the needs of students and their community. This includes addressing the need for students to feel connected to others, promoting participating in extracurriculars, and eliminating barriers that prevent participation in extracurriculars as well as addressing the "unknowns" about high school prior to students' arriving. Some ideas students mentioned within this study as positive transition experiences included: multiple building tours, high school students coming to the middle school to answer questions and talk about their experiences in high school, orientation nights prior to the start of a new school year.

Ninth grade transition program/course. High school educators in North Dakota should consider adding a ninth grade transition program or course that all ninth grade students be required to participate or enroll in. Through participation in this program or course, all students would engage in activities geared at easing their transition into high school life for the entirety of their ninth grade school year. The program would focus on building students' feelings of school connectedness. The Freshmen Mentor Program (FMP) model at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, may be a resource for educators seeking more information on how to implement a sustainable program or course for ninth grade students.

Incorporating student voice. Another recommendation for educators is to actively engage, obtain, and incorporate student voices in school-wide initiatives, which

can lead to betterment of social, emotional, and physical aspects of a school climate and environment according to Voight (2015). According to Biddle and Hufnagel (2019), "Youth-adult partnerships and the inclusion of students in school decision-making both refer to meaningful involvement of youth in school decision-making processes" (p. 491). In order to do this work, educators must be prepared to engage in dialogue with students outside typical forums, such as student government/council. Biddle and Hufnagel's research on the rules of civility and student voice is a resource educators could seek out to better understand how to avoid "traditional models of schooling [that] position youth as passive recipients of their education, blank slates without agency or culture" (p. 489).

Social-emotional learning competencies. Within this study, it was evident that student participants credited their connections with others as a main source of support during their transition into high school. Therefore, building and maintaining relationships, advocating for oneself, managing an increase in responsibilities, as well as navigating changes within their worlds as they age are all skills students must be taught and have the ability to practice on a consistent basis. There cannot be an assumption that all students should know these skills or be able to internalize these skills without adult support. Incorporating social emotional learning instruction is a critical piece of instruction that can be embedded within all content areas as well as across building-wide initiatives; all individuals within a building should carry out social emotional expectations. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and CASEL's framework for integration of social emotional learning focuses on five core competencies including: relationship skills, responsible decision making, social awareness, self-awareness, and self-management. Educators can explore social emotional

learning curricula available or can create a task force to explore options for integration of CASEL's core competencies into their classrooms and across all settings within their school building.

Availability of intervention courses/programs. Not only is emotional and relational support critical for students during their transition into high school, but ongoing academic support, is critical as well. High schools should create a yearlong course for students to enroll in to support their academic needs. This course should be flexible in design and allow students to enroll at any time to obtain support they need at that time. As we know, many students reported the increase in homework/workload as they aged was stressful and at times difficult to manage.

Schools must support all students throughout their four years, not just simply during the transition into high school. However, research points to the ninth grade year as a "pivotal point" in a student's career, and research has warned that failing courses during this year can lead to long term consequences such as leaving school early without a diploma (Balfanz et al., 2009; Corsello et al., 2015; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Wexler et al., 2015). Therefore, it is critical that student's academic needs are met through intervention courses or programs that support those who need to access them; not providing access to these classes may create unintended equity issues.

Mentoring opportunities. Another recommendation for educators is incorporate a formal mentoring program within high schools. The goal would be to utilize current upperclassmen, such as 11th and 12th grade students, as mentors for ninth grade students. It would be best if all ninth grade students were connected to a mentor. The goals of the program could be aligned with a ninth grade transition program/course as outlined above.

Many student participants alluded to the benefits of knowing upperclassmen (from clubs and sports) as they transitioned into high school; therefore, this recommendation could allow all students to have access to positive peer role models within a high school's upperclassmen. This recommendation also meets an ESSA (2015) guideline of "providing mentorship opportunities to aid in the transition for incoming high school students."

Professional development on transition theory and a transition model. A final recommendation for educators is to participate in a one hour professional development session on transition theory and Schlossberg's Transition Model. This session should be led by a school counselor or possibly through consultation with social services or a local university/college psychology department. The goal of this session would be to discuss transition theory as well as a transition model as outlined by Schlossberg (2011) to assist in educators' understandings of what the transition experience may elicit within incoming students. Components of Schlossberg's Transition Model include:

- The type of transition (anticipated, unanticipated, or non-events);
- The degree to which one's life is being altered (changes in roles, relationships, routines, assumptions);
- Where one is in the transition process (considering a change, beginning the change, 2 years after the change); and
- The resources one can apply to making it a success.

(Schlossberg, 2011, p. 161)

Summary of recommendations for educators. Within this study, student participants shared that their connections to their teachers were critically important to

them; therefore, it is the intent of this researcher to continue to empower educators to build upon their current transition activities to best meet their students' needs. Recommendations for educators included undergoing evaluations of transition programs regularly, incorporation of many orientation and transition activities into transition programs, creating a ninth grade transition program or course, incorporating student voices in decision making processes, instructing students on social-emotional learning competencies, making sure intervention courses or programs were available to students throughout their high school careers, creating mentoring opportunities for students to take advantage of, and making professional development on transition theory and a transition model available for educators. Recommendations for state education departments are discussed next.

For State Education Departments

School districts need to be held to the standards and policies set forth by their state education departments. Since the Department of Public Instruction is the overseer of education within the state of North Dakota, when changes are needed, it is critical stakeholders provide recommendations to the Department of Public Instruction for consideration. For recommendations suggested in this study, recommendations require funding as well as adding a new course code for a transition course/program for ninth graders to high school curricula.

Funding for orientation/transition activities. This recommendation is imperative as implementing new programs or processes into schools requires funding sources. As outlined in the new ESSA guidelines, districts may "target Title I funds to high schools" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2016, p. 1). ESSA "requires states to

utilize 7 percent of their Title I funds to support school improvement activities. In addition, states may use 3 percent of their Title I funding to provide 'direct student services'" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2016, p. 1). ESSA also focuses efforts on improving graduation rates and since 86% of student participants stated that graduating from high school was extremely important to them, continuing to build upon and improve orientation/transition activities for incoming ninth grade students would be important to consider. Many orientation/transition activities require funding including: transportation (bussing students from middle to high school), food/drinks for families, curriculum changes, supplies, welcome gifts (t-shirts or other school clothing), compensation for advisors or other educators assisting in hosting activities which often fall outside teachers' contract hours. Therefore, working with a school district as well as the state to obtain funding sources for transition activities will be critical to ensure transition activities are robust and offer equitable opportunities for students to experience a high school setting prior to enrolling.

Addition of transition course/program into school course codes. According to the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (2019a) or NDDPI website there is a current Course Code Directory or CCD that high schools in North Dakota must adhere to. "The CCD provides schools, districts and the state a framework to identify state courses by specific course number. . . . Schools may assign their own title for courses but must retain the required state course code number for recording purposes" (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2019a, para. 1). However, schools can request new codes as NDDPI reviews requests three times per year. There is also a fillable PDF form on the NDDPI website that can be completed if one is requesting a new course code. By

creating a course code for a transition course or program itself, high schools would be able to formalize their transition process for ninth grade students as well as grant high school elective credit for completion of this course or program. This recommendation could be created statewide for all high schools to use; however, specific school districts (educators, specifically) could request a course code through NDDPI, as well. State education departments can assist school districts with transition practices for incoming ninth grade students by providing funding as well as approving course codes for transition courses or programs.

For High School Students

All students experience the transition into high school in their own unique way; however, by using student voices from this study to amplify prior lived experiences of students, recommendations derived from study data can be presented to future high school students to consider. Therefore, final recommendations are for incoming high school students. Recommendations include: getting involved in extracurriculars, attending orientation/transition activities, using "your" voice, and practicing gratitude.

Get involved in extracurriculars. Overwhelming numbers of participant students claimed their involvement in extracurriculars was one of the most supportive aspects of their transition into high school. Therefore, this researcher encourages all students to find an activity, club, or sport to join during their high school career. If unsure about where to locate an activity to join, students should reach out to their counselor or student services department at their school for more information. Many schools post club and activity information on their public websites or on social media accounts. Also, educators need to work to ensure that barriers are removed for students to participate

including, but not limited to, costs and transportation. As stated by student participants, joining a club or sport allowed them to meet new people, forge friendships, decompress from school and life, motivated them to do well in school, and engaged them in activities they enjoyed doing. It should be noted that many students also mentioned one piece of advice they wished they would have received prior to entering high school was they should get involved in a club or sport early and to join even if they did not know anyone or even if their friends weren't joining.

Attend orientation/transition activities or events. Students in this study reported they felt like the "unknowns" about high school were a hindrance to their transition; however, they also voiced advice they wished they would have received prior to entering high school. Those who attended orientation events and sessions claimed this helped them navigate their new building as well as start to build familiarity with high school life. Therefore, it is critical students and their families attend orientation and transition activities and events hosted by their middle school and feeder high school to start the transition process as soon as possible. By attending these events, students have the ability to physically go into their new high school building, walk the hallways, ask questions, access school provided presentations and materials, as well as hear advice from students and teachers present at the time of a transition event like a tour.

Transition events are usually free, yet are generally hosted outside of school hours, which can be difficult for some who do not have transportation to their school. Educators, again, will need to ensure that barriers are addressed so all students (and families) have the opportunity to attend transition events. Students are encouraged to explore their high school's website and reach out to their counselor prior to transitioning

into their high school building as these are great ways to begin a transition process and forge relationships with educators at their new high school. Students, who are offered an opportunity to participate in high school clubs or sports as a middle schooler, should be encouraged to do so as this provides them the ability to start their transition process early.

Use your "voice." Employers are increasingly seeking individuals who have high "emotional intelligence or quotient (EQ), which refers to a person's ability to process his or her own emotions, understand the emotions of others and respond in a healthy and productive way" (Millet, 2020, para. 2). Previously referred to as "soft skills," the EQ is a skill set that must be practiced and developed over time. Therefore, cultivating a healthy sense of "voice" is critical for students to practice while in high school, prior to leaving for post-secondary education or entrance into the workforce. Students should pursue opportunities to serve on task forces within their school or district or on student leadership panels. Students should also advocate to educators and building level administrators for the creation and adoption of new school clubs or policies that address inequities within their school environment. Finding adult allies within a school building (and beyond) is also important to consider. Students can utilize action research frameworks to assist them in creating actionable plans for change within their schools. Students can also refer to the ASPIRE (Adults and Students Partnering in Reforming Education) model of youth-adult engagement or research on understanding and defining civility in discourse to lead change within their schools (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019). Students should seek to find their "voice" throughout their educational experiences and know they are not simply an empty vessel waiting to be filled by teachers and have the ability to enact change to better the educational climate within their schools.

Gratitude exercises. A guiding assertion of this study is the importance of students' needs to form connections with "others" including teachers and friends, most significantly. Therefore, in order to continue to build and sustain relationships with others, students should be taught how to practice and perform gratitude exercises. According to Emmons and McCullough's (2003) research on gratitude, individuals who practice and perform daily gratitude exercises of recording things they are thankful for are more likely to have a higher sense of well-being (more optimistic and feel better about their lives) than those who do not. By taking time to thank or acknowledge individuals within their lives on a consistent basis, students will not only build and sustain relationships with others as they so desire, but will positively impact their outlook on life as well. Students can perform gratitude exercises by writing emails or thank you notes, thanking individuals in person, doing small acts of kindness for others, performing gratitude rituals (saying "thank you") or writing in a gratitude journal. Educators would certainly welcome these acts and should also reciprocate them.

Summary of Recommendations

The goal of this study was to add to the existing literature on how middle to high school transition practices impact students and how educators can bridge gaps in transition practices to better the outcomes for all students, including increasing their feelings of school connectedness. This study was conducted in response to students' lived experiences of transitioning into high school through a multitude of interventions and/or solutions, and includes recommendations for educators, state education departments, and incoming high school students regarding transition practices and how they might be improved. The researcher will now discuss implications for future research opportunities.

Implications for Future Research

This study allows for future research opportunities given the nature of grounded theory focusing on problems to be solved through discovery or construction of theory from patterns within data. This allowed this researcher to individualize solutions for problems based upon data collected by this study's participants. Knowing the transition from middle to high school will continue to be an experience generations of students will live through, future research on this transition period is imperative given the limited amount of existing research available on the transition from middle to high school. There are three implications for future research given the results of this study: (a) researchers should consider incorporating student focus group sessions into a research design, (b) researchers should consider creating questions using the 4 S Framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and (c) researchers should consider correlating data between their transition practices, student's feelings of school connectedness, and graduation rates.

By incorporating focus group sessions into this study's framework, a researcher may be able to dig deeper into the qualitative and quantitative data originally gleaned from online survey results from this study. Data from focus group sessions may also allow a researcher to, based upon the data originally collected, formulate questions that speak to students' lived experiences more personally. "By engaging in face to face interactions, a researcher may also glean messages through non-verbal cues" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 286) more readily than in an online survey which participants complete alone.

Next, in order to extract more information about a student's transition experience, future researchers may also want to create questions that are specifically based on the 4 S

Framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory which includes taking stock of a transition and includes four factors: situation, self, supports, and strategies. This would allow a researcher to not only garner more information specifically on each of these factors (or the 4 Ss) but would also assist in discovering solutions based upon response patterns within student participant data.

A final implication for future research includes focusing on correlating student perception data based upon students' transition experiences and their feelings of school connectedness with high school graduation rates. Important to note, this study was conducted with 10^{th}-12^{th} grade students during the 2020-2021 school year; ninth grade students were not included in this study because their transition into high school during the 2020-2021 school year occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many non-traditional programs and processes were in place at the time. Extant research claims dropping out of high school is a process, not a singular event (Dupéré et al., 2019; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Jimerson et al., 2000; Williams, 2018) and is the "ultimate form of school disconnection" (Biag, 2016, p. 33). According to Balfanz et al. (2009) "during the middle grades and the first two years of high school, . . . [schools] can identify the majority of students who – without sustained intervention – will likely not graduate" (p. 66). Therefore, future research should attempt to correlate student perception data, transition theory, school connectedness, and high school graduation rates to determine if additional supports are needed within schools to address needs of students before they become early school leavers. Due to its use of grounded theory mixed methods research, an explanation of the generation of theory is presented next.

Generation of Grounded Theory

The researcher concludes this study by disclosing the theory constructed from data obtained through lived experiences of student participants from one public school district in North Dakota during the 2020-2021 school year. The study focused on student participants' transitions into high school and their feelings on school connectedness, in conjunction with lived experiences of participants constructed by the researcher herself. This study was fundamentally a constructivist grounded theory or CGT study due to the researcher's desire to understand a situation (student's experiences transitioning into high school) and to identify the cause of a problem (feelings of school connectedness).

The theory generated was based upon select CGT components including: (a) "viewing reality as social, (b) studying processes, (c) seeking multiple perspectives, and (d) providing a method for critical inquiry" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 38). To conclude this chapter, evaluation criteria as outlined in Bøttcher Berthelsen, Grimshaw-Aagaard, & Hansen (2018) is explored.

An individual's lived experience or reality is shaped by previous experiences and shaped by the world around them; therefore, it is critical for individuals to seek to understand the perceptions of others. Students within this study overwhelmingly believed their high school supported them as they transitioned from middle to high school. However, per students' responses, there were still improvements that could be done within their schools/district to continue to ensure students feel connected to their school and schools support their students, not only during the ninth grade transition year, but beyond and through graduation. Students also perceived their connections with others,

including teachers, friends, and family members were their main supports during their transition into high school.

Student participants' realities, which were both positive, negative, and neutral in nature were certainly shaped through social interactions with others. In theory, schools must develop processes and programs to assist ninth grade students with their transition into high school. Possible activites or programs could include evaluating transition programs, incorporating more orientation and transition activities, creating a ninth grade transition program or course, incorporating student voices in decision making, instructing students on social-emotional learning competencies, making available intervention courses or programs for helping students transition, mentoring opportunities for incoming ninth graders, as well as professional development on transition theory and the transition model for educators.

In order to gain insights into students' realities, the researcher sought to discover processes that were in place within participants' high schools to assist with the transition process into high school as well as any that addressed school connectedness components. Through her research, the researcher uncovered that the three participating high schools had similar processes or events that are district approved for current eighth graders to start their transition process including: a parent-student night (in the spring of the year of eighth grade), a high school building tour (towards the end of the school year), as well as another parent-student night (immediately prior to the start of the school year). However, each high school and their feeder middle school had some autonomy within these district approved processes or events. With that being said, sometimes autonomy can perpetuate inequities during the process of transitioning.

At the time of this study, processes allowed students access to transition activities while still in middle school; however, there were no processes in place within the participating school district to specifically address a student's feelings of school connectedness during this period. We know that feelings of school connectedness are defined individually by each student based upon their lived reality, and student participants clearly identified "unknowns" about high school impacted their transition into high school. In theory, if a student has more opportunities to learn about processes and policies at a high school, explore the building, and have multiple opportunities to experience high school-like events, be organized on teams or in a ninth grade academy, the more connected the student will become prior to and during their transition.

One goal of this study was to give voice to students, and hopefully, this study may inform school officials of the importance of understanding how a student's transition may impact their perceptions of school connectedness. Therefore, it was critical to seek out multiple perspectives across three high schools within the participating school district. Each high school has a unique demographic student body as well as differing perspectives from 10^{th}, 11^{th}, and 12^{th} grade students. Within education, adults are in control of much of a student's experience, so it is essential to obtain student voice in order to acknowledge their realities and seek to build upon school-based practices that are driven by student voices and needs. In theory, if a school is driven by student voices and CASEL's social-emotional competencies are embedded in a school's culture, competencies of relational skills, self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, and social awareness, students will feel more connected to their school (through good relationships with adults and peers, by being committed to their education, and

through an overall comfortable environment), and therefore, be more apt to experience the value of school and graduate from high school.

Finally, the researcher sought to provide a method for critical inquiry the participating school district could consider regarding their current transition practices based upon their students' lived experiences. Charmaz (2017) stated:

> Critical inquiry usually begins from a researcher's explicit value position that defines the meaning of the research question in advance of conducting the study. A critical researcher may pursue a cause and intend to advocate in the public realm or to educate in the academic domain. (p. 35)

The researcher is fully aware of her role within the construction of the study's theory. However, the researcher has interest in the subject due to her educational leadership role at the time of the study, especially regarding the direct role she plays in transitioning students from middle school to high school. In theory, the researcher has been seeking to display what currently "was" at the time of the study through student perception data and use student realities, as well as her own understanding about the transition process and practices, to advocate for and strengthen those transition practices and to increase student's feelings of school connectedness with anticipated increases in high school graduation rates in her school district. Kuntz and Pickup (2016) claimed, "If productive critique is to occur within the field of education it must necessarily invoke a way of being other than we currently are" (p. 172). Figure 1 shows a visual presentation of the constructivist grounded theory generated by this study.

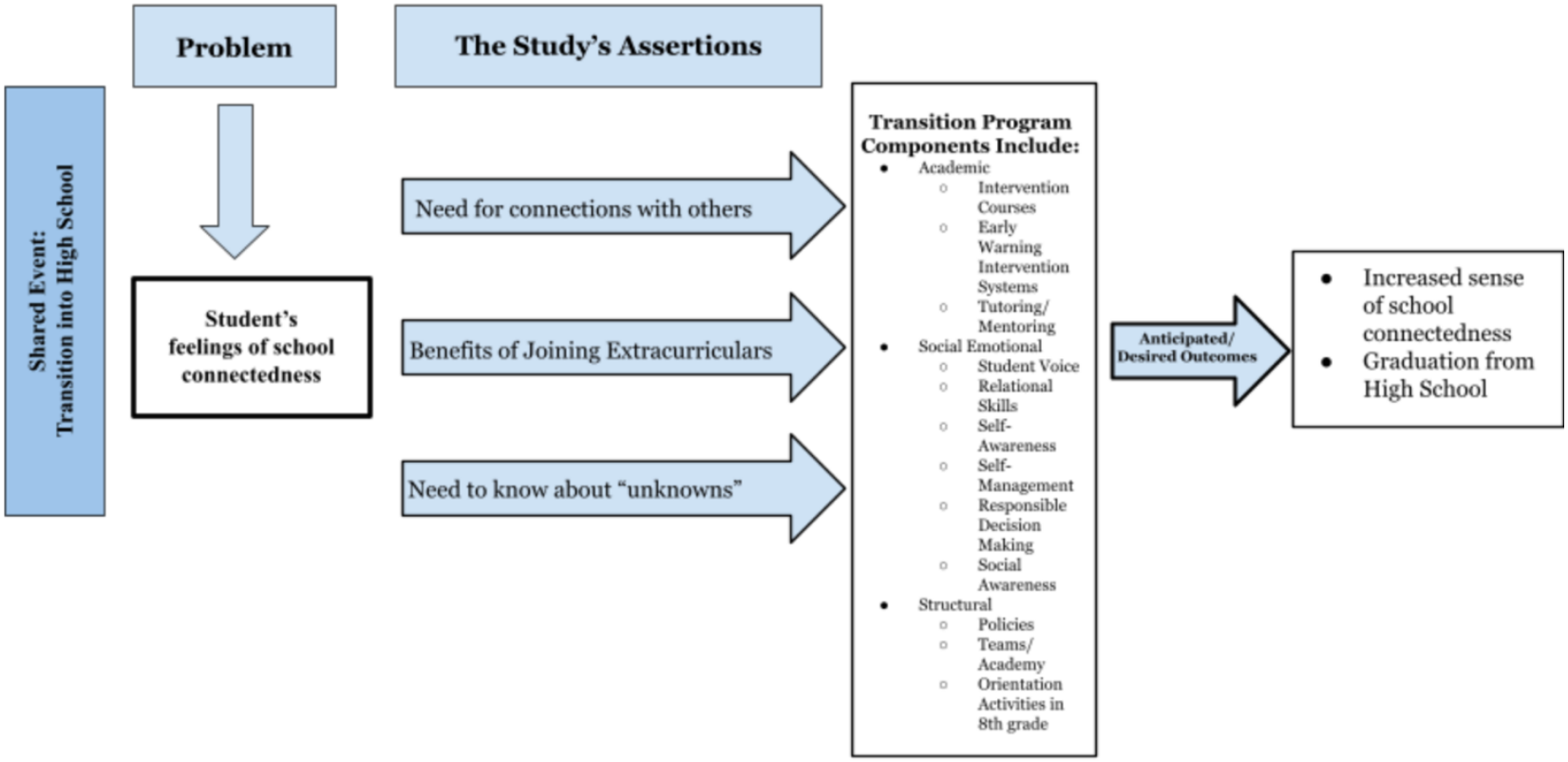

Figure 1. Constructivist grounded theory generated during this study.

Evaluation Criteria of Constructivist Grounded Theory

Using Bøttcher Berthelsen et al.'s (2018) article for "Developing a Guideline for Reporting and Evaluating Grounded Theory Research Studies (JGUREGT)," credibility, resonance, and usefulness of this study will be discussed in order to "present and explain . . . criteria for evaluating the quality of a grounded theory study, in order to allow the reader to assess the consistency of the grounded theory study" (Bøttcher Berthelsen et al., 2018, p. 74).

Credibility occurs when others who have a lived experience as the one being outlined in a study immediately recognize it as their own (Cooney, 2010). "*Credibility* begins with having sufficient relevant data for asking incisive questions about the data, making systematic comparisons throughout the research process, and developing a thorough analysis" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p. 11). One continuing goal of the researcher was to continue to reflect upon her own views and actions throughout the research process and provide an audit trail of her memoing and data analysis. The researcher also identified as an active educational practitioner at the time of this study and desired to produce a research study that could be replicated within another school district to improve upon their middle to high school transition practices. The goal of this researcher was also to use language that would be familiar to educators in order to promote credibility amongst fellow practitioners.

Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) stated that researchers can achieve *resonance* by demonstrating "that the researchers have constructed concepts that not only represent their research participants' experience, but also provide insight to others" (p. 12) and "researchers must fit their data-gathering strategies to illuminate their participants'

experience" (p. 12). The researcher was able to construct themes and assertions through participants' responses that communicated their lived experiences but could also be shared with educators through language that is easily understood. Also, the researcher chose data-gathering strategies that were aimed to appeal to the study's participants (online survey), used student friendly language, and minimal time commitment (10 minutes) to complete, communicated to students in a preferred method (email and student announcements), and distributed the survey in a way that was student-friendly (link in an email).

Finally, "*usefulness* includes clarifying research participants' understanding of their everyday lives, forming a foundation for policy and practice applications, contributing to creating new lines of research, as well as revealing pervasive processes and practices" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, pp. 12-13). The researcher's priority was to amplify students' voices from students in high school at the time of this study in order to provide voice to a group of individuals who are often silenced as well as to seek to understand students' perspectives regarding the process of transitioning into high school to advocate for needed changes.

Transition Practices, Processes, and Policies in Place During Study

Another goal of the researcher was to investigate transition practices, processes, and policies in place and current within one school district in North Dakota at the time of the study. There were practices and processes in place at the time of this study to help students transition from middle school into high school; however, there were no records of a statute requiring North Dakota schools to implement school-wide programs or activities focusing on students transitioning from middle to high school, which according

to this study, should become a future policy. Legislative support through resources and funding would contribute to the ability of North Dakota high schools to implement programming specifically addressing the needs of ninth grade students.

As for future research endeavors, the researcher believes there are more opportunities to correlate Schlossberg's Transition Theory and school connectedness components. One opportunity includes correlating a ninth grade transition program to students' experiences in high school to determine if there are relationships between transition programs and high school graduation rates or early leaver rates.

Finally, the researcher found that the participant school district had informal practices and processes in place to help students transition from middle to high school across all three high schools yet transition activities were not systemic in nature. Overall, students overwhelmingly believed connections they forged, the benefits of joining extracurriculars, and learning about the "unknowns" in high school prior to entering the high school building assisted them the most in making the transition into high school. Therefore, even though our lived experience is our own, it is imperative to seek to understand how others (students) interpret the world (school, home, community) around them and to advocate for and enact needed changes within our transition practices from middle to high school.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Participant School District's High School Enrollment Numbers, Fall 2020

Grade	Number of Students Enrolled
10	840
11	803
12	979
Total Enrollment	**2,623**

Appendix B
Participant School District's Research Policy

AP 4800 Research Studies

Research studies may be conducted in the district when it appears that the results of the study will be of significant value to the school district. A list of topics considered worthy of study will be maintained in the office of the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, but researchers may propose other topics as well. All studies must be approved in advance by the Superintendent or the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning.

1. Staff members having topics to be researched should submit them to the office of the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning.

2. Graduate students, including participant School District's Public School employees, wishing to complete a research study as part of their requirements, should be referred to the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning.

3. In addition to the list of topics on file in the Instruction Office, graduate students may propose topics for the consideration of the administration.

4. Instructional research projects in which students are requested to respond to questionnaires concerning personal information are discouraged. No researchers may elicit by written or oral inquiry from any student information of a personal or private nature concerning the following areas:

    a. Religious beliefs
    b. Sexual behavior and/or attitudes
    c. Critical appraisals of other individuals with whom the student has close family relationships
    d. Mental or psychological problems potentially embarrassing to student or family
    e. Legally recognized privileged communications

5. Prior to the granting of approval for a research project, the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning will consult with other appropriate administrative personnel: assistant superintendents, principals, directors or coordinators.

6. Researchers approved to conduct studies in the district will work closely with the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning in developing a research design and any instruments to be used in securing required data. The Associate Superintendent will supervise and approve all phases of the research.

7. Researchers will be required to:

    a. Submit a Research Study Request (Form AF 4800) to the Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning for consideration and action. The request must include a copy of the following items: abstract of the project, questionnaire(s) to be used, and a consent letter to be sent to parents.

    b. Conduct research in a professional manner and assure the anonymity of students or staff members who are part of the study.

    c. Provide at least one bound copy of the completed study for the files of the school district. No release of the findings of the study will be made until a copy is on file in the District Office.

Appendix C
Participant School District's Research Study Request Form

RESEARCH STUDY REQUEST

I hereby request permission to conduct a research study in the School District during the period from _____ to _____.

TOPIC:_____

_____

If this request is granted, I agree to abide by Administrative Policy 4800

Signature of Researcher_____

Institution of Higher Education_____

Signature of Graduate Advisor_____

Date_____

In addition to completing the Research Study Request Form, a copy of the following items are attached for review:

1. Abstract of the project
2. Questionnaire(s) to be used
3. Consent letter to be sent to parents

Endorsement: This request is ____approved ____disapproved

Building Principal:_____

Date:_____

Associate Superintendent:_____

Date:_____

Both signatures above are required prior to conducting a survey

Please print your name and the mailing address where you want this form returned:

Name:_____

Street Address:_____

City, State & Zip:_____

Appendix D
Letter to School District Administration Regarding Research Study

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study in (Name) Public Schools

Dear Superintendent, Assistant Secondary Superintendent & Cabinet,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in (Name) Public Schools, most specifically at the high schools. I am currently enrolled in the Educational Leadership Ed.D program at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks and am in the process of writing my Doctoral Dissertation. The title of my study is entitled, "Bridging the "Transition" Gap: Possible Links Between Middle to High School Transition Practices and School Connectedness". This study is focusing on five public high schools, most specifically 10th-12th grade students, within (Name) Public Schools. Throughout the research, the school district will not be specifically named in any documentation, including the final dissertation itself; the district will only be identified as a public school district.

The purpose of the study is to give attention to current high school students' perceptions (grades 10-12) regarding the transition from middle school to high school and how their schools bridged the transition gap between the buildings/grade levels and if there is a correlation to school connectedness and graduation rates.

The stakeholder groups of this study includes current 10th-12th grade students. It is important to note that 9th grade students, as of the 2020-2021 school year, were not selected to participate in this study due to the unique circumstances surrounding their transition into high school due to the worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and full/partial school closures that impacted their movement/transition into high school. The researcher decided to include 10th, 11th and 12th grade students (as of the 2020-2021 school year) in this study due to their "traditional" transition into high school and aligned with previous research conducted on this topic for this study.

The study will encompass one phase: an online survey.

During the first phase, an online survey (created through Qualtrics through UND) would be distributed via email to all 10th-12th grade students across the public high schools in (district name) through a secure link sent to the building level administrator in each high school *(See Enclosure 2).* This email with the survey link would be sent the week of November 16, 2020 and would remain open for five school days. The survey will take students approximately 10 minutes to complete. No personal identifiable information is asked of the students, unless they would like to enter their first/last name and current school for a chance to win one of four total $20 gift cards at the end of the survey.

Due to the age of the student, parents/guardians (of 10th-12th grade students under the age of 18 years old) would be presented with Assent information/documentation during

the week of November 2, 2020 via email/letter. This study is voluntary; students have the choice to not participate or not submit their survey responses.

All data collected by the researcher will be kept on a password secure, personal home computer. The survey results will be pooled for the doctoral study and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either your schools/district or the individual participants.

If you would have any questions, concerns or comments that you would like to discuss, I would gladly arrange and/or participate in a telephone call or video conference. You may contact me at my email address or on my cell phone at any time. Feel free to also contact my doctoral advisor, (name), at (cell phone) or (email).

I have also included a completed district's Research Study Request Form for this study as according to (note policy number).

The researcher is currently going through the Institutional Review Board or IRB approval process, as well, and will provide each district with that approval number once obtained.

If you agree to the above research as outlined above, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution's letterhead acknowledging your written consent and permission for me to conduct this survey/study within your district and return in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

Sincerely,

(Name of Researcher), University of North Dakota

Enclosures (4 total)

cc: (Name), Research Advisor, University of North Dakota

Appendix E
List of Doctoral Cohort #8 Members

Amanda Quintus

Charles Dalusong

David Wheeler

Elisa Diederich

Holly Larson

Jackie Bye

Matthew Bakke

Sarah Ricks

Thomas Warman

Appendix F
Qualtrics Online Student Survey

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
Institutional Review Board Study Information Sheet

Title of Project: *Bridging the "Transition" Gap: Possible Links Between Middle to High School Transition Practices and School Connectedness*

Principal Investigator:

Advisor:

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research study is to give voice to high school students regarding their perceptions towards their "transition" into the high school setting to identify the relationship between a student's perceptions of school connectedness and school-wide programs focusing on students transitioning from middle to high school.

Procedures to be followed:

You are being asked to complete an online survey containing multiple choice and open-ended questions.

Risks:

There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

Benefits:

You may not benefit from this research, but we hope that your participation will help others by creating awareness for educational leaders and policy makers.

Duration:

It will take about 10 minutes to complete the questions on the survey.

Statement of Confidentiality:

The survey does not ask for any information that would identify who the responses belong to. Therefore, your responses are recorded anonymously. If this research is published, no information that would identify you will be included since your name is in no way linked to your responses. If you choose to provide your first and last name, as to be entered into the random drawing for the $20 gift card, that information will be linked through a Google Form, which is separate from your responses on the survey.

All survey responses that we receive will be treated confidentially and stored on a secure computer. However, given that the surveys can be completed from any computer (e.g., personal, work, school), we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on which you choose to enter your responses. As a participant in our study, we want you to be aware that certain "key logging" software programs exist that can be used to track or capture data that you enter and/or websites that you visit.

Right to Ask Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is *(researcher)*. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact *(researcher) at (email) or (advisor) at (email) or at (phone)* during the day.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279 or UND.irb@UND.edu. You may contact the UND IRB with problems, complaints, or concerns about the research. Please contact the UND IRB if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is an informed individual who is independent of the research team.

General information about being a research subject can be found on the Institutional Review Board website “Information for Research Participants” http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/researchparticipants.html

Compensation:

You will have the opportunity to enter into a random drawing for one of four $20 gift cards.

Voluntary Participation:

You do not have to participate in this research. You can stop your participation at any time. You may refuse to participate or choose to discontinue participation at any time without losing any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Completion and return of the *survey* implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to participate in the research.

Please keep this form for your records or future reference.

Introduction to Survey & Directions

Click the link to watch a short video on how to complete this survey.

Click Here to View Video

Demographic Questions

What middle school did you transition from?

Middle School A

Middle School B

Middle School C

Other

What grade are you currently enrolled in?

10th Grade

11th Grade

12th Grade

What is your racial background (may select more than one)?

American Indian or Alaska Native (North, South or Central America)

Asian (Far East, Southeast Asia, India)

Black (Africa)

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, Pacific Islands)

White (Europe, Middle East, North Africa)

Other

Transition

1. Since the transition from middle to high school, what has supported your transition into high school?

2. Since the transition from middle to high school, what has hindered/hurt your transition into high school?

School Connectedness

3. How satisfied were you with your middle school's preparation for transitioning you into high school?

Extremely satisfied

Somewhat satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Somewhat dissatisfied

Extremely dissatisfied

4. How satisfied are you with your current (high) school's preparation for transitioning you into high school?

Extremely satisfied

Somewhat satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Somewhat dissatisfied

Extremely dissatisfied

5. List three (3) beliefs/feelings that you have about your current (high) school

6. How satisfied were you with your middle school's overall efforts to assist you in feeling/believing as if you were a part of the middle school and larger school community?

Extremely satisfied

Somewhat satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Somewhat dissatisfied

Extremely dissatisfied

7. How satisfied are you with your current (high) school's overall efforts to assist you in feeling/believing as if you are a part of the high school and larger school community?

Extremely satisfied

Somewhat satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Somewhat dissatisfied

Extremely dissatisfied

8. How many adults at your current school would you contact or reach out to if you needed support at school?

0 adults

1-5 adults

6-10 adults

More than 10 adults

Other

9. List three (3) traits or characteristics that describe a supportive adult

Transition

10. What supports have been helpful for you during your time in high school (including academic, social emotional/behavioral, financial)?

School Connectedness

11. How important is having a social life during high school?

Extremely important

Very important

Moderately important

Slightly important

Not at all important

12. List three (3) traits or characteristics you look for in a friend

13. Currently, how important is consistent attendance at school for you?

Extremely important

Very important

Moderately important

Slightly important

Not at all important

14. Currently, how important are passing grades (D or higher) to you?

Extremely important

Very important

Moderately important

Slightly important

Not at all important

15. Currently, how important is it to you to graduate from high school?

Extremely important

Very important

Moderately important

Slightly important

Not at all important

Transition

16. Describe your overall high school experience in one word.

17. What advice do you wish you would have received about high school (before you started high school)?

$20 Gift Card Random Drawing

Would you like to be entered into a drawing for one of four $20 gift cards?

(One winner will be selected randomly from each participating high school in (name) Public Schools).

Please ensure that you submit your survey.

If yes, please click the link below which will take you to a Google Form that you can submit to have your name entered into the drawing.

Click Here for Link to Google Form (to be entered into drawing)

Appendix G
Communication to Parents About Online Survey

Dear (Name) Public Schools parent/guardian/adult student,

You are receiving this notification due to being a parent/guardian of a student or are an adult student within one of the comprehensive high schools in (Name) Public Schools including (name high schools here).

My name is (researcher) and I am currently enrolled in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, ND. I am currently conducting research for my doctoral dissertation titled, "Bridging the 'Transition' Gap: Possible Links Between Middle to High School Transition Practices and School Connectedness."

The purpose of my study is to give attention to current high school students' perceptions (those currently in grades 10-12) regarding their transition from middle school to high school. The results of this study may provide recommendations for North Dakota high schools, school leaders and policy makers to consider implementation of school-wide transition practices, programs or policies to bridge the transition gaps within the lives of our high school students.

The study will include one, public North Dakota school district—(name) Public Schools—with a possible total participant count of 2,623 students across three high schools.

As of 8-21-2020, (name) Public Schools has granted me permission to conduct this study within the following schools (names here). (Advisor Name) is the researcher's doctoral advisor at the University of North Dakota and is assisting the researcher with this study. A waiver has been submitted through the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee for parental and student assent/consent. As of 10-9-2020, this study has been approved by UND IRB. The IRB Project Number: IRB-202010-053.

The online survey (created through UND Qualtrics) would be distributed via email to all 10th-12th grade student's emails across the high schools in (name) Public Schools through a link sent to the building level administrator of each school from the researcher. This email with the survey link would be sent on the morning of November 16, 2020 and would remain open for five school days; closing on November 20, 2020 at 11:59 p.m. There are seventeen (17) total questions on the survey and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Students are also able to complete the online survey at home if desired through the link sent to their school email address. Students also have the choice to not take the survey and therefore, not participate in the research study.

The survey is anonymous and no personal identifiable information is asked of the students.

Students are able to enter their first/last name and current high school onto a Google Form (not tied to this survey) for a chance to win one of four (4) $20 gift cards at the end of the survey if they choose to. It is not required.

All data collected by the researcher will be kept on a password secure, personal computer. The data from the survey results will also be stored on the Qualtrics online program, which is also password protected. The survey results will be pooled for the doctoral study and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either you, the schools/district or the individual student participants.

Thank you for your consideration in assisting with this research.

Further Information:

If you would like to view the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board Study Information Sheet for this study, please see the attached document to this ConnectEd message.

Appendix H
University of North Dakota Waiver or Alteration of Informed Consent

University of North Dakota Application for Waiver
or Alteration of Informed Consent Requirements

Principal Investigator: _____
Title of Project: _____

Written documentation of informed consent that embodies all the required elements of informed consent, as described in 45 CFR 46.116, is required for all research subjects. With sufficient justification, the IRB may approve a consent process that does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent provided that it finds and documents specific requirements. Choose **EITHER** option A or B below and complete that section. Sign the form and submit it with your application to IRB.

A. If requesting a waiver or alteration of the requirements to obtain informed consent, justify such in accordance with each of the following four criteria established under 45 CFR 46.116(d) (1-5). (This option not allowed for FDA regulated research)

1. The research involves no more than minimal risk* to the subjects;

Overall, there are no anticipated risks involved in this study. The survey is anonymous and all potential participants have the right and choice to not click on the link (which would take them to the UND Qualtrics survey) to participate. If they do not click the link to the Qualtrics survey, no responses will be recorded and nothing further is needed.

2. The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects;

Parents/Guardians of all potential participants, students in grades 10, 11 and 12, will receive a communication (informational letter/email) sent to them through their high school's communication system before the link to the survey is sent to students. A parent communication (informational letter/email) will be shared with all families of high school students (in grades 10, 11 and 12) within the three public high schools who are participating in this research study. The school district has approved in writing this research study as of August 2020 after the principal researcher completed and submitted the district's Request to Conduct Research protocol.

3. The research could not practicably** be carried out without the waiver or alteration;

Within this study, the participant group includes current 10th, 11th and 12th grade students within three public high schools within (name of school district) for a total of 2,623 possible student participants. Due to the number of participants within the study itself, where the identification and contact of thousands of potential subjects would not be feasible for the anticipated results of the study, the researcher is requesting that this study could not be fully carried out without the waiver of parental consent for students under the age of 18 years old.

4. Whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation; **AND**

On the parental informational letter, the principal researcher's name and email will be provided along with the Co-Researcher/Doctoral advisor's name, email and daytime phone number, as well. There are also statements in the Assent information on the Qualtrics survey that provides additional contact information for parents/guardians and potential participants after the study has concluded.

5. If the research involves using identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, the research could not practicably be carried out without using such information or biospecimens in an identifiable format.

There will be no identifiable private information collected from the Qualtrics survey itself besides the name of the middle school attended. All student responses will be anonymous and private.

If participants choose to enter their first/last name and current high school information into a separate Google Form (which will be linked onto the Qualtrics survey) to be entered into a random drawing for a $20 gift card, they are able to. The Google Form will not be linked to any of the student's responses on the survey itself. This is not required of participants.

B. If requesting <u>a waiver or alteration from the requirements for written documentation of informed consent</u>, justify such in accordance with at least one of the criteria established under 45 CFR 46.117(c) (1 or 2).

1. The only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. In this case, each subject will be asked whether s/he wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern (this option is not allowed for FDA regulated research); **OR**

2. The research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

The research study, Bridging the "Transition" Gap: Possible Links between Middle School to High School Transition Practices and School Connectedness, presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects. The online survey is anonymous and no personal identifiable information will be collected besides the name of the middle school the student attended. However, if a student would like to be entered into a random drawing for a $20 gift card they would provide their first/last name as well as their current high school. However, this information would be collected through a separate link from the Qualtrics survey (through a link on the survey to a Google Form). As part of the data analysis process regarding the survey or focus group results, the student's first/last name is not to be used to correlate or link data or information to a specific student. The school district has already approved this research study to occur within the three public high schools. The principal investigator completed the Request to Conduct Research protocol previously.

If requesting a waiver of the documentation of consent, attach a verbal consent script and/or a subject information sheet that describes the study and includes the relevant consent form elements.

(Principal Investigator Signature) Date:

(Institutional Review Board Primary Reviewer Signature) Date:

**Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.*

***Practicable refers to instances in which the additional cost would make the research prohibitively expensive, or where the identification and contact of thousands of potential subjects would not be feasible for the anticipated results of the study. Practicable would not mean an inconvenience or increase in time or expense to the investigator or the research.*

Appendix I
University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board Study Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
Institutional Review Board Study Information Sheet

Title of Project: *Bridging the "Transition" Gap: Possible Links Between Middle to High School Transition Practices and School Connectedness*

Principal Investigator:

Advisor:

Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of this research study is to give voice to high school students regarding their perceptions towards their "transition" into the high school setting to identify the relationship between a student's perceptions of school connectedness and school-wide programs focusing on students transitioning from middle to high school.

Procedures to be Followed:
You are being asked to complete an online survey containing multiple choice and open-ended questions.

Risks:
There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

Benefits:
You may not benefit from this research, but we hope that your participation will help others by creating awareness for educational leaders and policy makers.

Duration:
It will take about 10 minutes to complete the questions on the survey.

Statement of Confidentiality:
The survey does not ask for any information that would identify who the responses belong to. Therefore, your responses are recorded anonymously. If this research is published, no information that would identify you will be included since your name is in no way linked to your responses. If you choose to provide your first and last name, as to be entered into the random drawing for the $20 gift card, that information will be linked through a Google Form, which is separate from your responses on the survey.

All survey responses that we receive will be treated confidentially and stored on a secure computer. However, given that the surveys can be completed from any computer (e.g., personal, work, school), we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on

which you choose to enter your responses. As a participant in our study, we want you to be aware that certain "key logging" software programs exist that can be used to track or capture data that you enter and/or websites that you visit.

Right to Ask Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is *(researcher name)*. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact *(researcher) at (email) or (advisor) at (email) or at (phone)* during the day.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279 or UND.irb@UND.edu. You may contact the UND IRB with problems, complaints, or concerns about the research. Please contact the UND IRB if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is an informed individual who is independent of the research team.

General information about being a research subject can be found on the Institutional Review Board website "Information for Research Participants" http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.html

Compensation:
You will have the opportunity to enter into a random drawing for one of four $20 gift cards.

Voluntary Participation:
You do not have to participate in this research. You can stop your participation at any time. You may refuse to participate or choose to discontinue participation at any time without losing any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Completion and return of the *survey* implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to participate in the research.

Please keep this form for your records or future reference.

IRB Project Number: IRB-202010-053.

Appendix J
Timeline of the Distribution of Online Survey in (Name) Public Schools

Date	Task
November 2 - November 13, 2020	● Building Level Administrator to send families information regarding the student survey ○ Including: Parent Communication Letter & UND IRB Study Information Sheet *(Building Administrator choice –Parent communication email, newsletter, ConnectEd, or etc.)*
November 14, 2020	● Researcher to send the email with the Qualtrics survey link to Building Level Administrator of each building
November 15, 2020	● Researcher to send email reminder to Building Level Administrator about survey starting on Nov. 16th as well as reminder about the ConnectEd message and/or Student Daily Announcements
November 16 - November 20, 2020	● Building Level Administrator to input information about survey into the building's daily student announcements (for one week) or send the first ConnectEd message to students.
November 16, 2020	● Building Level Administrator to send student survey to 10th-12th grade students before/on 8:00 am
November 19, 2020	● Building Level Administrator to send second ConnectEd message to students as reminder *(same message as the first ConnectEd message)*
November 20, 2020	● Student survey closes at 11:59 pm.

Appendix K
Communication to Students about Online Survey

Hello (Name) Public Schools Student,

Below you will find a link to a survey that is being distributed to all (name) Public School students in 10th, 11th and 12th grade to seek student voice regarding their transition from middle school to high school.

The survey will take approximately 10 minutes and is anonymous. All participation in this study is voluntary and all parents/guardians have been previously informed about the study.

At the end of the survey, to thank those who participate, students are able to enter their first/last name and current school into a Google Form that will be linked to a random drawing for a $20 gift card!

If you are interested in participating in this research study, which is a survey about your experiences transitioning from middle school into high school, **please click on the link below to complete the survey.**

Your school administrator has been made aware of this survey and this research has been approved by (name) Public Schools.

The survey will be open from 8:00 am on Monday, November 16th and will close on Friday, November 20th at 11:59 pm.

Thank you for your consideration in this research project.

Click link below to take the survey:

(link survey here)

Appendix L
Graduation Rates of Participant School District and State Average
(As of 2019-2020 school year)

	Graduation Rate
Participant School District	87%
State of North Dakota	89%

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