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## Development of the Steppin' Up for Success Program

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*Nova Southeastern University*

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Development of the Steppin' Up for Success Program

Capstone Project

Nova Southeastern University

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Department of Occupational Therapy

Post-Professional Doctor of Occupational Therapy (Dr.OT) Program

Submitted April 07, 2020 by

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to

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For the Doctor of Occupational Therapy (Dr.OT) degree

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### Abstract

School transitions can be challenging for students, especially when students enter junior high school. Junior high school students experience significant developmental growth in the areas of autonomy, relationships, acceptance, cognitive skills, as well as physical differences associated with hormonal changes. When a student transitions into junior high school, evidence indicates possible declines in motivation, school interest, and academic achievement. Personal relationships, self-worth, and coping skills are essential for a successful transition between schools. Adolescents engage in the occupations of education, leisure, social participation, and activities of daily living. Occupational therapy is perfectly positioned as a support service within the school to assist elementary school students transition successfully into junior high school through a universal approach to support positive mental health. This capstone project details the results of a needs assessment conducted with administrators, teachers, parents, and seventh-grade students at the junior high school. Based on the needs assessment, *Steppin' Up for Success: A Transition Program for Sixth-Graders* was developed and created to assist sixth graders transition successfully from elementary to junior high school.

Key words: transition, occupational therapy, junior high school, positive mental health, occupation

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Occupational therapy is the “therapeutic use of everyday life activities (occupations) with individuals or groups for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation in roles, habits, routines, and rituals in home, school, workplace, community, and other settings” (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014, p. S44). Occupation can either be the means to achieve the desired result, the actual final outcome, or both (Fisher, 2014). Education is an essential occupational area for children; however, academic success can be a challenge for the students in Uvalde, Texas. The Steppin' Up for Success Program is developed from a literature review, experiential observations, and a needs assessment methodology to address the challenges that students are experiencing when transitioning from elementary school to junior high school (seventh and eighth grades) in Uvalde. The overall occupational goals, impact, and benefits of the Steppin' Up for Success Program involve supporting students' educational pursuits by improving the skills associated with social participation, leisure, and school-based occupations. Specific skills addressed include social skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and coping strategies. Within the Steppin' Up for Success Program, occupation is both a tool to achieve positive mental health, as well as an end result of enhancing positive mental health among the youth participants to allow them to improve their performance in their occupations. The desired outcome of the Steppin' Up for Success Program is to improve social skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, coping strategies, academic success, positive mental health, and well-being of the sixth-graders in Uvalde as they enter junior high school. This preventative approach will ultimately lead to participants from the Program becoming successful and productive young adults who have an occupational balance among their



occupations of social participation, future academic performance, instrumental activities of daily living, and leisure pursuits.

### **Background**

Merriam-Webster.com (2019) defines transition as “passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another.” In K-12 education, transitions typically occur between elementary school, middle/junior school, and high school; however, this may vary based on the size of the school district and the geographical region as some areas have grades K-8 or K-12 within the same school. Transition to junior high school is a difficult time in development from middle childhood to adolescence. Youth attempt to become more independent and form their own unique identity amid increased autonomy, physical and hormonal changes, peer pressures, and increased academic demands. Notable declines are evident in school interest, academic motivation, and achievement in the adolescent years (Juvonen, 2007; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). School failure and dropout is a risk if a student, particularly one from an ethnic minority, has difficulty transitioning between schools. Nationally, of 16 to 24-year-old students, 22% are Hispanic; however, dropouts amongst Hispanics are at 31% compared to 6.1% dropouts among all races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). A review of a sixth to twelfth-grade cohort found that physical aggression, which peaked in seventh-grade, was predictive of high school dropout (Ehrenreich, Nahapetyan, Orpinas, & Song, 2015). Thus, intervention needs to start before a student reaches high school to prevent high school dropouts and improve academic success in high school.

The Middle Grades National Longitudinal Study of 2017 was the first study to examine associations between contextual factors and school outcomes for middle school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). The data obtained from the Middle Grades

National Longitudinal Study of 2017 makes connections between junior high school outcomes that lead to success in high school. Thus, emphasizing the importance of addressing future success in high school while students are in junior high school. If a student has difficulty transitioning into junior high school, he/she will have greater difficulty succeeding in high school. Chronic absences (missing approximately 14 days of school in a year) in middle school reduced the probability of four-year graduation by diploma by 18 percentage points (Smerillo, Reynolds, Temple, & Ou, 2018). Reasons cited for chronic absenteeism involve: a) students who do not attend school due to illness or family responsibilities; b) children who do not attend school for safety concerns; and c) students who do not attend school because they see no value in it (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). For students to be successful in junior high school, they need to learn the skills necessary for them to achieve their desired success. Some predictors of success in high school include middle school grades, attendance, and personal relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Mckee & Caldarella, 2016). Specifically, for Latino students, the transition experience to middle school includes a decreased sense of school belonging and behavioral engagement (Hughes, Im, Kwok, Cham, & West, 2015). Meaningful social relationships, coping, and self-worth are all crucial aspects as an adolescent transitions into middle school (Rew, Arheart, Johnson, & Spoden, 2015). Furthermore, upon review of data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, school disengagement relates to school dropout for late adolescent youth (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Consequently, social connections, coping, and self-worth within the school culture need to be addressed within the Steppin' Up for Success Program to ensure students are engaged to have a successful transition to junior high school and future occupations.

Occupational therapists are uniquely trained in a holistic approach and positioned within the school system to incorporate occupation-based activities into a school-based program to promote health, well-being, and academic success, leading to productive community members. The foundation of occupational therapy is “the understanding that active engagement in occupation promotes, facilitates, and maintains health and participation” (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014, p. S4). Thus the “goals of occupational therapy are to promote physical and mental health and well-being” in our clients (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017a, p. S1). Occupational therapists are uniquely qualified to address the mental health needs of adolescents by promoting occupational performance in the areas of occupation. Occupations are daily life activities that people engage in within varying contexts and influences the interactions of client factors, performance skills, and performance patterns (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Occupations specific for adolescents include education, leisure, social participation, and activities of daily living within their differing contexts of school, home, and community in their daily routines. Occupational therapy contributes to the promotion of mental health as a state of well-being, when a person realizes one’s abilities, copes with challenges, and contributes to the community (World Health Organization, 2013). In a school-wide systematic capacity, there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of occupation-based interventions, as well as activities that focus on occupational performance skill-building, which include both social-emotional learning, after-school, and stress management activities (Arbesman, Bazyk, & Nochajski, 2013b).

### **Need**

Uvalde is a town in Texas approximately 90 miles west of San Antonio and 60 miles east of the Mexican border. The population in Uvalde was estimated to be 16,298 as of July 2017

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). A majority of the population (78%) is white, 0.8% African American, 0.7% Asian, and 17.4% as some other race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). There is a strong Hispanic influence within the community, with approximately 81% of the population identified as either Hispanic or Latino, 67% of which are Mexican (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Nationally, 16% of the population is Hispanic or Latino; however, within the state of Texas, 37% of the population is Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The median household income is \$38,185, which is \$17,000 below the national average, while 22% of the population in Uvalde is below the federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Uvalde, a small rural town in southwest Texas, has struggled with academic success, evidenced by a low high school graduation rate, with only 79% of the students graduating from high school in the past three years. This graduation rate is below the national average of 84% and significantly below the state of Texas average of 89% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). Four of the six schools in the district recently received failing grades. Approximately 79% of students within the school district are considered economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District provides free breakfast and lunch for all students. Sixty-eight percent of the population has a high school diploma or greater, while 32% of individuals over 25 years of age do not have a high school diploma or equivalent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Approximately 30% of the population is under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Of students age 10-14, 94% are in school; however, enrollment improves in students age 15-18 to 96% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Anecdotal evidence collected by this therapist indicated that there are limited resources within the community to address the mental and behavioral health needs of the youth in Uvalde.

There are only one psychiatrist and one psychologist at Community Health Development, Inc. (local health department) to address the mental health needs of the children in the community. The local hospital does offer mental health services for geriatrics but not for children. Since there are limited mental health professionals, those seeking mental or behavioral health services are often placed on a waiting list and/or the frequency of treatment sessions is limited (M. Conolly, personal communication, September 20, 2018). According to D. Connell (personal communication, October 8, 2018), Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District (UCISD) emphasizes student success and has offered before and after school tutoring options as well as enhanced academic schedules during the school day to provide additional academic assistance to those students who need it. However, academic supports have limitations in availability. Besides, this approach is only addressing the academic needs of the student, not the social and emotional needs, nor the necessary coping strategies and problem-solving skills that are essential for social participation, leisure, and school-based occupations.

Currently, the social and emotional needs, as well as coping mechanisms of the sixth graders, are not being addressed adequately to ensure a successful transition into junior high school. These transition difficulties contribute to youth having difficulty with school success and later becoming productive, successful adults within the community. Occupational therapists use occupations to promote skill acquisition, for example play, to impact coping skills, as the level of playfulness in male adolescents significantly positively correlated with coping skills (Hess & Bundy, 2003). Occupational therapists also assist students, as well as provide training for educators to ensure the school is a social support, especially when addressing extenuating circumstances such as vulnerability (Gontijo, Marques, & Alves, 2012). Occupational therapists have the knowledge, experience, and opportunity to engage students in occupations to make

sustainable efforts in their lives to be successful in school through positive mental health in the occupational areas of social participation, leisure, and education. Occupational therapists utilize a holistic lens to promote a positive relationship between participation in a balance of meaningful occupations and health in a variety of contexts, including school, community, and home (Bazyk, 2011). Furthermore, occupational therapists ensure occupational justice by providing for all students the opportunities to engage in chosen occupations (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Occupational therapists address psychosocial determinants, including social acceptance, emotional functioning, and peer difficulties, which play an essential role in a child's enjoyment and intensity of participation in leisure activities (King, Law, Petrenchik, & Hurley, 2013). Thus, occupational therapists uniquely contribute to promoting the health and participation of all people through engagement in occupation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

UCISD has undertaken the "Attendance Matters" initiative to improve school attendance and thus grades. The school district is acknowledging and praising attendance at school to promote student success with attendance. Students with perfect attendance for each grading period receive a yard sign and a celebration luncheon with their parents and the school administration. However, limited resources apply to those students who have poor attendance, aside from calling to ask why a student is not at school. More considerable efforts are needed to help those students who have poor attendance and are struggling in school. Building relationships and making connections with these struggling students can increase accountability, attendance, and engagement (Coffey, 2013). Other district-wide initiatives include assemblies, bully prevention, and character word of the month.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this capstone project is to establish a program that addresses social participation, leisure pursuits, and school-based occupations needed for a successful transition from elementary school to junior school, through a needs assessment methodology. The Steppin' Up for Success Program will intentionally address social skill development, communication, healthy coping strategies, relationship-building skills, and problem-solving skills through occupational engagement modules. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework supports these performance skills (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014), which ultimately lead to improved occupational participation and performance. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (2014) is an official document of the American Occupational Therapy Association that summarizes the interrelated constructs that define occupational therapy practice. The occupations that an adolescent engages in are activities of daily living, education, leisure pursuits, and social participation, which are the basis for his/her identity. To be successful in these occupations, one needs to master the performance skills mentioned above and ensure a balance among the occupations. Thus, the Steppin' Up for Success Program is seeking to obtain an occupational balance between school, leisure, and self-care for youth to be more successful and independent.

### **Objectives**

The following objectives serve as the guide for the Steppin' Up for Success Program:

- Conduct a literature review for evidence-based research in support of the transition program as well as a theoretical foundation to base the program upon;
- develop and create the Steppin' Up for Success program based on the needs assessment results, literature review, and experiential observation;

- establish program evaluations to measure the outcomes of the Steppin' Up for Success Program; and
- collaborate with the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District and community partners for the Steppin' Up for Success Program.

### **Definition of Terms**

Active engagement- involvement in a life situation (World Health Organization, 2001).

Adaptation- modify a task or the environment to promote occupational engagement (James, 2008).

Becoming- to reach the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, an individual must be able to identify and to realize aspirations (World Health Organization, 1986).

Being- state of existence; the needs and interests that drive individuals (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Belonging- sense about having the right personal and social attributes to be recognized as part of a specific group (belong, 2020).

Caring- arranging or providing care for others (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Citizenship- viewed as a member of the school community (citizenship, 2019).

Communication- sending, receiving, and interpreting information (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Context- interrelated conditions (cultural, personal, temporal) that influence the performance of a client (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Coping Strategies- deal with difficulties adequately (cope, 2019).

Discipline referrals- problem behavior that is handled by the school administration.



Doing- the underlying background essential of what people can or cannot be; it is the foundation of living (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Honest- sincere, honorable (honest, 2019).

Identity- a sense of who one is and wishes to become (Schell, Gillen, Scaffa, & Cohn, 2014).

Junior high school- grades seventh and eighth.

Learning style- how the student learns the material presented.

Leisure pursuits- participating in a non-obligatory activity that is intrinsically motivating (i.e., extracurricular activities) (Parham & Fazio, 1997).

Middle school- grades sixth through eighth.

Occupation-daily activities that people engage in (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). These occupations occur over time and in context which are influenced by the interconnections and interactions of client factors, performance skills, and performance patterns (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Occupational balance-relationship between health, work, education, rest, self-care, and play/leisure (Rogers, 1984).

Occupation-based practice- founded on the philosophical belief that occupation is the therapeutic agent of change, in which occupation is the means to an end (Fisher, 2014).

Occupation-centered practice- "occupation as the center of occupational therapy research, education, and practice" (Nielsen, 1998, p. 387), in which occupation is the end product.

Occupational performance- the act of doing and accomplishing a specific performance skill or activity (Fisher, 2009) resulting from the dynamic interaction between the client, the context, and the activity (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Parent involvement- the amount of parent participation in a child's school life.

Relationships- connection with others (relationship, 2019).

Respect- shows regard or consideration for others (respect, 2019).

Responsibility- accountable for one's self (responsibility, 2019).

Self-advocacy- advocating for oneself to make one's own decisions (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).

Sleep/wake cycle- alertness/lethargy at school, energy level (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014)

Social and emotional learning- the process when students learn and apply social and emotional knowledge for effective coping and relationships (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2017a)

Social participation- involvement in activities that involve social situations with others (Bedell, 2012).

Social skills- performance skills necessary for reciprocal social exchange (Schell et al., 2014).

Study skills- efficient strategies for learning.

Tier 1 (universal) services and supports- activities to foster positive social, emotional, and behavior skills, and well-being of all students (National Center for School Mental Health, 2020b).

Tier 2 (early intervention)- services and supports provided to mildly impaired or at-risk students (National Center for School Mental Health, 2020a).

Tier 3 (intensive intervention)- addresses mental health concerns for students who are experiencing significant distress and impaired functioning (National Center for School Mental Health, 2020a).

Transition- the passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another (transition, 2019). Specifically, for the context of the Steppin' Up for Success Program, the transition is entering a new junior high school environment after completing elementary school.

Trustworthy- dependable, reliable (trustworthy, 2019).

Values- acquired beliefs and commitments (Kielhofner & Burke, 1980).

Well-being- state of flourishing consisting of positive emotion, engagement, meaning (sense of belonging), positive relationships, and achievement (Seligman, 2011).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

A public health model focus seeks to develop and maintain positive mental health since its interest is to ensure that conditions are such so that people can maintain health, through health promotion (Institute of Medicine, 1988). The problem of difficulty with the transition to junior high school is evident, and the need for a transition program to promote success within the students in Uvalde is justified. This literature reviews and discusses the difficulties that students experience as they transition from elementary to junior high school. This review also identifies specific characteristics of transition difficulties, including cultural and bilingual implications for Hispanic students. In addition, exploration of the influence of relationships with teachers, peers, and parents is crucial to fully understand the transition from elementary school to junior high school. Additional influences that contribute to difficulty in transitioning from elementary to junior high school will also be discussed. The importance and relevance of engagement in occupation is outlined and applied to the Steppin' Up for Success Program. Also, this review

explores and expands upon occupational therapy's unique contributions to assist with the challenges of the junior high school transition. Finally, this review provides an explanation of the theoretical background and the occupational therapy conceptual framework, which is the foundation of the Steppin' Up for Success Program.

### **Transition**

In the United States, school transitions typically occur between elementary school, middle/junior school, and high school. This literature review examined the transition from elementary to junior high school, which typically happens after the fifth or sixth grade in the United States. Research supports that when students transition between school environments, adverse effects are evident in many areas, not just academics. When students transitioned into the fifth grade, they reported lower levels of self-esteem and self-concept in academic, emotional, and physical contexts (Coelho, Marchante, & Jimerson, 2017). Comparison of seventh graders who transitioned into a new school after sixth grade to those who remained at their school and transitioned in a later grade, reveals the students that transitioned reported a more significant decline in the mastery of goals (Madjar, Cohen, & Shoval, 2018). Although Coelho et al. (2017) conducted their study in Portugal where students transition at an earlier age than most U.S. schools and Madjar et al. (2018) conducted their study in Israel which may have limited applicability to schools in the United States, their results support the difficulty that students have when they transition between schools. Examination of end of grade scores trends, shows that academic advancement was substantially diminished compared to previous years when students transitioned from the fifth to sixth grade, thus indicating the most considerable difficulty with maintaining academic standards is the transition from fifth to sixth grade (Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015). Akos et al. (2015) also found that Black and Hispanic children

underperformed and experienced less growth in both reading and math test scores compared to Caucasian children. Furthermore, the same negative pattern emerged for low-income students versus higher-income peers and for children living with a single parent versus living with two parents (Akos et al., 2015).

The Akos et al. (2015) study found substantial overall performance decline upon the transition to sixth grade, however minority students, lower-income students, and children living with a single parent had more significant declines. This study produces relevant findings for the population in Uvalde, Texas, which has a sizable Hispanic influence within the community, with approximately 81% of the population identified as either Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Additionally, the median household income is \$38,185, which is \$17,000 below the national average, while 22% of the population in Uvalde is below the federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Based on Akos et al. (2015) findings, these statistics place students in Uvalde at a higher risk for academic challenges as they transition to junior high school.

Teachers influence the transition to middle school, through relationships, interpersonal contact, and school climate. As a student transitions to middle school, often the relationship with teachers changes as students have different teachers for each subject and spend less time with any given teacher. From a longitudinal trajectory analysis of 550 academically at-risk and ethnically diverse adolescents, the transition to middle school produced a significant decline in teacher-perceived warmth above the norm before the transition (Hughes & Cao, 2018). Students who experienced less decline in teacher warmth had higher academic math scores, were more engaged in learning and school; however, they had no changes in reading scores or a sense of school belonging (Hughes & Cao, 2018). While the results of the Hughes and Cao (2018) study are promising, one limitation was that the teacher questionnaires were primarily completed by

the language arts teachers who may represent a student who struggles with English as a non-engaged student. In a study of three private schools in the United Kingdom, some students perceived staff lacked basic constructs for effective personal relationships (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). However, systems with schools having multiple teachers, larger class sizes, and inconsistent/changing rules may not foster the development of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Although the generalizability of the Tobbell and O'Donnell study is limited, it does support organizational, systematic challenges that exist in middle schools that transitioning students need to learn to navigate. Findings from a qualitative case study indicated that hands-on teacher practices promoted an adolescent-centered community where students felt cared for and perceived learning as both fun and educational (Cheryl R. Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). While the Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) findings are from a small qualitative sample, they emphasize the importance of experiential learning opportunities and incorporating fun components into lessons. These findings support an occupational therapy approach to utilize occupation-based experiential modules to support a positive transition to middle school from elementary school.

### **Cultural and Bilingual Influences**

Cultural influences also impact the trajectory of success for a student's transition to middle school. A parent's cultural socialization which included direct teaching about being proud of one's Mexican heritage and encouraging Mexican values predicted youth ethnic pride. This pride of heritage creates positive attitudes toward one's ethnic group, and the relationship becomes more robust when parents were high in warmth, which was measured through observation and use of the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (Hernández, Conger, Robins, Bacher, & Widaman, 2014). These findings support the importance of the parent-child

relationship during the middle school transition, especially within the Hispanic community. While results predicted ethnic pride, the limitations of the study including no academic applicability and the requirement for the student to live with his/her mother could restrict its usefulness in the current project as ethnic pride is not a focus, and it is not realistic to expect that participants live with their mothers when many caregivers in this community are grandparents. Akos et al. (2015) support the difficulties that underperforming Hispanics have with a successful middle school transition. Additionally, in a study with academically at-risk Latino students, the students experienced a drop in school belonging and behavioral engagement during the middle school transition (Hughes et al., 2015). Hispanic students who are English Learners (EL) may also be at risk for a full successful transition. While Umansky (2018) found that English Learners received services as intended to support their education, English Learners also had unintended adverse outcomes. English Learners were limited in access to English speaking peers and did not enroll in a full academic load (math, science, and English development class simultaneously) in middle school (Umansky, 2018). If English Learners are not able to manage a full academic load in middle school, they will most likely have difficulty with the academic demands of high school as well; thus a successful transition into middle school is crucial to ensure later academic success in high school. The Steppin' Up for Success Program will provide ample opportunity for English Learners to interact with English speaking peers and not isolate them in a Spanish only speaking environment.

### **Relationships**

Research indicates that relationships are essential in the transition to middle school (Coffey, 2013). In addition to relationships with teachers, relationships with friends and parents can also be meaningful in a successful transition to junior high school. Support from friends and

family relationships is significant to subjective well-being before and after the transition to middle school (Oriol, Torres, Miranda, Bilbao, & Ortúzar, 2017). Not surprisingly, friend support revealed greater importance than family support during the middle school transition (Oriol et al., 2017), as there is often a shift in relationship importance from family to peer groups during adolescent development. Although Oriol et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of peer social support in the middle school transition, most of the participants in the study were from South Korea, with only 14% from the United States. In a small study of primarily African American and European American students, youth disclosure about their friends was dependent upon the relationship with their parents and parental response pattern (Fletcher & Blair, 2018).

In addition to relationships, positive youth experiences with their parents led to more sharing and more support for students (Fletcher & Blair, 2018). Although Fletcher and Blair (2018) anecdotally address parental support in the middle school transition, it did not connect to academics and did not have any Hispanics in the sample. However, the study does produce positive experiences when there was a positive relationship with their parents, and thus needs to be explored further in this population of primarily Hispanic students. For Latino students, negative friendship quality had a negative relationship with academic achievement (Seban, Guimond, & Lutgen, 2016). Seban et al. (2016) found that the social interaction perspective (quality of the friendship) was more important than the social belonging perspective (feelings about the friendship). Thus, students need to know how to appropriately interact with others as well as have opportunities for peer interactions while at school. The onset of puberty can also impact friendships when one transitions into middle school. In a sample of 609 sixth grade Latinas, girls who started menarche during the sixth grade reported more school connectedness than those who started menarche before or after the sixth grade (Morales-Chicas & Graham,



2015). It is, therefore, vital for girls to find where they fit in and build their relationships during school since the onset of puberty can create challenges for young girls.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

The foundation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory states people have innate needs that are motivating forces in life. Needs lower on the hierarchy must be fulfilled before people can attend to needs higher up on the hierarchy. From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Figure 2.1 depicts Maslow's original hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). Growth to reach self-actualization in the hierarchy is achieved by the desire of the person; however, life experiences that may impact basic needs can hinder self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). Based on life experiences, a person may fluctuate between levels in the hierarchy.

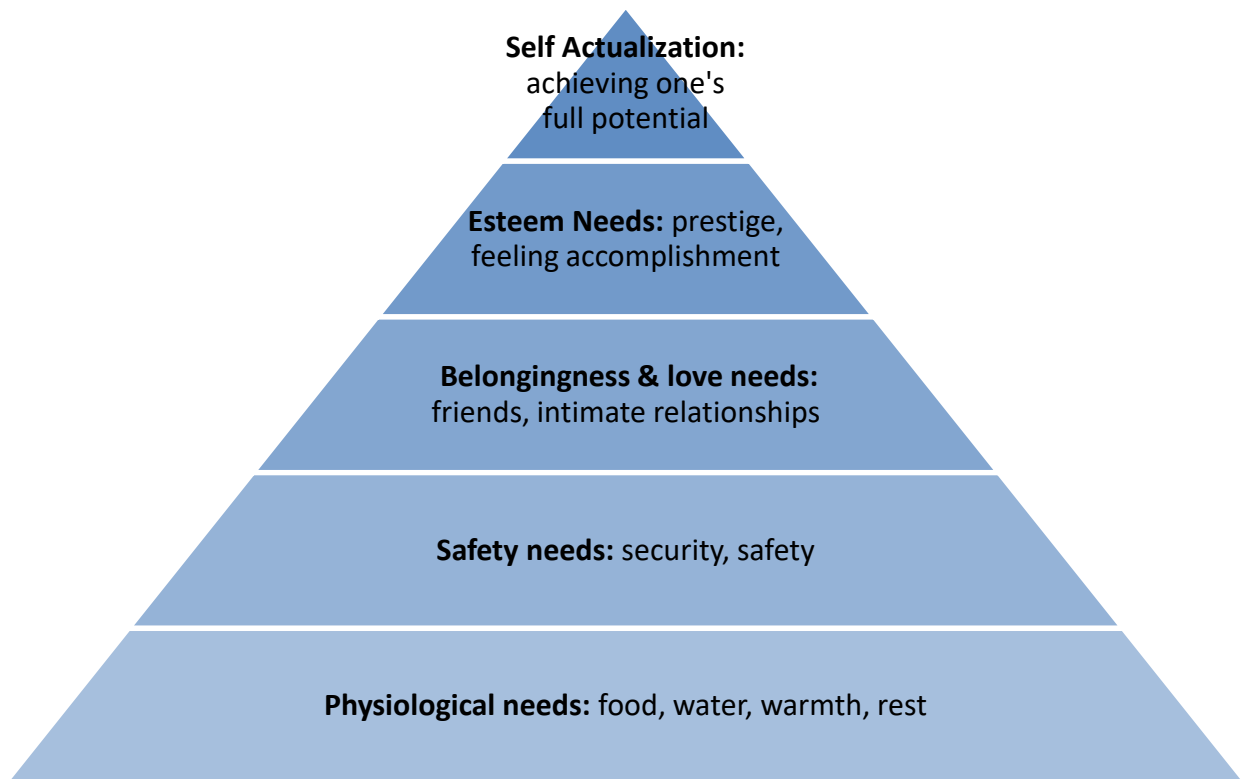


Figure 2.1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

At the bottom of the hierarchy are physiological needs, which are basic needs such as shelter, food, water, and clothing required for basic human survival (Maslow, 1968). Thus, if the physiological needs are unmet, then one cannot function optimally. The safety needs ensure stability and protection through order and law from various elements (Maslow, 1968). Love and belongingness are searching out the fulfillment of social, interpersonal relationships that motivate behavior once basic needs are met (Maslow, 1968). Esteem needs are both esteem for oneself (dignity, independence) and respect from others (prestige) (Maslow, 1968). Maslow posited that the need for respect or reputation is the most essential element for adolescents and precedes genuine self-esteem (Maslow, 1968). Self-actualization is the desire “to become everything one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1987, p. 64). Maslow (1954) posited that people seeking fulfillment and change through personal growth defines human motivation.

### **Occupation**

Occupation is the central philosophy for occupational therapy; occupational therapists use it therapeutically as well as the intended outcome of intervention. Occupations include the things people do within their contextual lives and their relationship with health (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Classifications of occupations are work, rest, leisure, play, education, social participation, activities of daily living, and instrumental activities of daily living (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Even though occupations can be ordinary, they are also complex and vary widely between people (Blanche & Henny-Kohler, 2000). The importance of occupations and the complexity of occupations differ among people. However, engagement in occupations is essential to health and well-being from a physical, mental, and social standpoint (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015; Yerxa, 1998). People are occupational beings and have an innate desire to engage in meaningful

occupations. The multidimensional concept of occupations is a prerequisite of health and well-being (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Occupation is a holistic concept achieved through *doing*, *being*, *belonging*, and *becoming* (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). In addition to ensuring there is a unique client-centered approach to therapeutic interventions, it is also necessary to ensure that mental, physical, and social well-being are supported within the environment to allow engagement in meaningful activities (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Experience, including mistakes that occur, can teach people valuable lessons (Byrne, Raphael, & Coleman-Wilson, 2010; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). *Doing*, *being*, *belonging*, and *becoming* within the Steppin' Up for Success Program is multi-faceted with applications for the student as he/she learns and grows throughout participation in the program.

### **Doing**

*Doing* is the underlying background essential of what people can or cannot be; it is the foundation of living and a prerequisite for existence (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). As a result of *doing*, one may experience either positive or negative consequences within their own state of health (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The *doing* of occupation centered practice will be centered within the therapeutic relationship of the Steppin' Up for Success Program (Fisher, 2014). Estes and Pierce (2012) used a grounded theory approach to investigate the perspectives of occupation-based practice with 22 pediatric occupational therapists. The results indicated that the use of occupation-based practice within a pediatric setting was more productive, which was viewed as enjoyable and rewarding, as well as individualized, in which the child guided treatment (Estes & Pierce, 2012). Furthermore, their results indicate that occupation-based practice was valued and understood more by the children and families (Estes & Pierce, 2012). These results emphasize the importance of occupation-based practice within the Steppin' Up for Success Program to

motivate students and provide an enjoyable and rewarding occupation-based program. *Doing* within the Steppin' Up for Success Program establishes relationships among the participants and staff conducting the program. *Doing* for the participant also provides opportunities for developing social skills, work skills, communication skills, and personal skills. *Doing* provides positive health benefits for both the participants and potentially the staff. In a more global sense *doing* within the Steppin' Up for Success Program can contribute to a positive school climate environment.

### **Being**

*Being* is a state of existence, the needs and interests that drive individuals (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). *Doing* and *being* are a continuum that includes reflection on occupation, rest, recuperation, and stillness (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). As with many aspects of occupational therapy, balance is critical in the *doing* and *being* continuum. *Being* and *doing* are multifaceted and complex, thus must be addressed in many ways throughout the therapeutic relationship. *Being* is essential to health and well-being (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Prerequisites of health include peace, feeling safe, learning, nutritional fulfillment, income, environment, social justice, and equality (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Human capacity is a central concept of *being* and varies based on age and each individual (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). In a study with women with arthritis, those that engaged in an occupation-based intervention scored higher in self-care skills and self-esteem/self-efficacy than the control group (Landa-Gonzalez & Molnar, 2012). With this unique young population, it is crucial to understand the uniqueness of *being* for each participant and provide a safe environment to ensure a positive learning and growth opportunity. Homeless shelter clients demonstrated improvements in their ability to follow directions, attend to detail, and appropriate socialization when engaged in an occupation-based art initiative (Byrne

et al., 2010). Within the Steppin' Up for Success Program, the participants experience the positive benefits of *being*. The participant will have the opportunity for reflection through the journaling activities, as well as the experiential engagement activities within the program. The participant will have the opportunity to engage in various occupations and reflect on the meaning and purpose of these occupations. The program environment will create meaningful opportunities for the participant, thus leading to mental, physical, and social well-being.

### **Belonging**

*Belonging* is a sense of having the right personal and social attributes to be recognized as part of a specific group (belong, 2020). *Belonging* is an ongoing and changing process (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Relationships that satisfy the need for belonging are instrumental for positive mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Keyes, 2005; Ng, Ho, Wong, & Smith, 2003). The sense of *belonging* can be experienced by engaging in everyday activities with others and creating supportive environments to manage complex contextual situations (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). A sense of belonging is a crucial tenet to enable social acceptance and inclusion through engagement in meaningful occupations (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). *Doing* with others fosters relationships among people and provides meaning to the occupation since it is through *doing* with others that creates bonds, shared interests, and intimacy (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Various attributes of *belonging*, such as courage, creativity, patience, and honesty, are discovered and refined through engagement in occupation (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Groups of people may experience a sense of *belonging* based on family, ethnic background, religion, or sports. A workshop conducted in London to explore *belonging* within the occupation of gardening, found that the participants experienced *belonging* as an individual to accomplish a specific task; a group to complete parts of a project; as well as the community since others

enjoyed what the gardening group completed (Diamant & Waterhouse, 2010). Maslow (1968) identified the human need to *belong* as critical in forming and maintaining relationships with others. *Belonging* through *doing* is developed through relationships that have familiarity, commitment, affection, and attachment (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The Steppin' Up for Success Program will offer opportunities to develop a sense of *belonging* from both an individual and a group perspective. As an individual, participants will participate individually in collective occupations and share their experiences; as a group, participants will work together to accomplish a common or shared goal. The Steppin' Up for Success Program will offer opportunities for the participants to gain a sense of solidarity by being part of a collective. *Belonging* with an identified group and having acceptance by others provides a sense of fitting in, inclusion, and feeling comfortable and secure in one's actions (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). *Belonging* leads to positive social and mental health benefits through a support network. Occupations in which contact with others is established provide a foundation for physical well-being and are a crucial component of mental well-being (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). The Steppin' Up for Success Program will provide a proactive program to improve social skills to increase social connections and *belonging*.

### **Becoming**

*Becoming* is to reach the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, an individual must be able to identify and to realize aspirations (World Health Organization, 1986). *Becoming* is an ever-changing, ongoing, and evolving process (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Maslow (1968) viewed self-actualization as a process of discovery for one to become what he/she can become. Thus, one experiences possibilities or potentials. When people evaluate their engagement in occupations for worth and competency, they are on their way to *becoming*

(Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). As children develop, their *becoming* needs change; thus, it is essential to explore and nurture meaningful occupations to ensure a positive growth and development experience (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). *Becoming* is a prerequisite of health for peace, shelter, learning, nutritional fulfillment, income, environment, social justice, and equality (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). If people do not have a peaceful environment, adequate shelter to feel safe or adequate nutrition, they could be challenged to be able to reflect upon occupational engagement in the pursuit of *becoming*. Price and Miner (2007) described five categories of therapeutic strategies used with a pediatric client when moving her toward or away from what she wanted to become. The five strategies include changing therapeutic conditions, cognitive strategies, assisting with the person-task-social context, pushing participation, and use of negotiations (Price & Miner, 2007). The therapeutic use of self is crucial with children to ensure the 'just right' challenge of occupational engagement to guide the child toward *becoming* within their current life challenges. The participants will explore various avenues of *becoming* to move toward occupational fulfillment as they experience challenges in their lives. Self-reflection is also crucial on the journey to *becoming* and, as such, the journaling opportunity within the Steppin' Up for Success Program is provided for self-reflection and growth within the therapeutic relationship to facilitate *becoming*. Finally, it is of utmost importance to ensure engagement in meaningful occupations to support the evolution of *becoming*. An outcome related to *becoming* is the opportunities for self-actualization leading to feelings of competency and self-worth through the Steppin' Up for Success Program. The participant will turn out to be a more active member of the junior school environment to increase his/her independence and meet societal demands. The participant will have the opportunity to explore interests and

potential, which in turn can lead to positive feelings, including satisfaction, happiness, contentment, commitment, and *becoming*.

### **Occupational Therapy**

Engagement in “meaningful” occupations has been a central tenet in occupational therapy, which was derived while working with psychiatric populations. Adolph Meyer (1922) referred to “proper use of time in some helpful and gratifying activity [as] a fundamental issue in the treatment of any neuropsychiatric patient.” Another central tenet of occupational therapy has been to treat the whole person. Meyer (1922) stated, “respect...capacities and interests of the patient.” Mary Reilly (1962) writes, “that man, through the use of his hands as they are energized by mind and will, can influence the state of his own health.” Robert Bing (1981) stated, “mind and body are inextricably conjoined.” A balance between work, rest, leisure, and sleep has maintained as an anchor in occupational therapy throughout the years. Meyer (1922) referred to a “rhythm of rest and activity” and “the big four-work and play and rest and sleep.” To achieve balance, one must be active and practice (Meyer, 1922). A public health model focus can help children develop and maintain positive mental health (Bazyk, 2011). The American Occupational Therapy Association’s (2017) vision of 2025 supports maximizing “health, well-being, and quality of life for all people.” The foundational constructs of occupational therapy are grounded in active engagement in occupation to promote, facilitate, support, and maintain health and participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Occupational therapists in school-based practice can address the promotion of positive mental health of students, which can be viewed as a state of well-being to allow others to realize abilities, cope with challenges, as well as work and contribute to the community (World Health Organization, 2013).



Occupational therapy as a profession is occupation-based, and thus, occupation is the foundation that drives the profession (Fisher, 2014). Occupation-based allows the therapist to utilize occupation as a therapeutic change agent with clients to acquire occupational skills (Fisher, 2014). It ensures occupation is meaningful. Occupation-focused ensures that attention is on occupation, which allows the occupational therapist to address the quality of occupational performance (Fisher, 2014). The different views of occupation allow occupational therapists to ensure occupation is the foundation of the therapeutic relationship, to infuse meaningful occupations throughout interventions, and to solidify the professional foundation as a whole.

Evidence suggests benefits of occupational therapy interventions for mental health promotion and prevention for youth and children (Arbesman, Bazyk, & Nochajski, 2013a; J. Kugel, Hemberger, Krpalek, & Javaherian-Dysinger, 2016; J. D. Kugel, Javherian-Dysinger, & Hewitt, 2017; Tokolahi, Hocking, & Kersten, 2016). Tokolahi et al. (2016) designed a school-based group intervention for children with subclinical levels of anxiety. The program was eight weeks long, with weekly sessions to provide children with knowledge about health-promoting occupations and how to participate in, balance, and sustain these occupations (Tokolahi et al., 2016). Although the design of this group intervention addresses childhood anxiety, it can be a wellness model for health promotion and prevention in a school with a focus on occupation.

With the challenges that are present in school-based practice and youth mental health, fresh perspectives may lead to further opportunities to promote positive mental health in children. Exploring occupational therapy school-based practice through a critical lens may identify potential barriers and opportunities for positive change. From a case review, opportunities to reframe school-based practice were discussed as having a collaborative dialogue, using guiding principles, and have a part in the process (Phelan & Ng, 2015). Occupational

therapists can be an essential member of the team to contribute to the promotion of positive mental health in students. In a small pilot sample in Canada, staff education could help support the occupational therapist's global role in supporting positive mental health in schools (Cahill & Egan, 2017). However, for occupational therapists to support positive mental health within the school system, they must have a good understanding of the different ways to impact positive mental health within the school system. Occupational therapists have an opportunity to expand and further define our role in addressing social participation in school (Leigers, Myers, & Schneck, 2016). In an opinion paper, there is support to expand connections with theoretical frameworks to support the expansion of the traditional school-based role of occupational therapy to address the person, environment, and occupational constructs to enable school participation (Bonnard & Anaby, 2016). A study out of Brazil further supports the importance of an integrated team approach and incorporating what is considered traditional medical treatment into school-based opportunities. Fernandes, Cid, Speranza, and Copi (2019) concluded that positive active interventions contributed to the positive development in children and adolescents, which sets the foundation for an occupation-based intervention that provides opportunities for active student engagement in the development of positive mental health in students.

Occupational therapists need to be a crucial team member to assist with the development of positive mental health in children. A six-month building capacity process expanded practitioner knowledge, renewed energy, and promoted confidence to result in change leaders who can advocate and implement changes reflecting occupational therapy's role in addressing children's mental health (Bazyk et al., 2015). From a system-wide organizational perspective, strong evidence exists for the effectiveness of occupation-based and activity-based interventions in many areas including social-emotional learning, bullying prevention, performing arts, and

stress management activities (Arbesman et al., 2013b). At a more targeted level, substantial evidence indicates that social and life skills programs are useful for rejected or aggressive children and teenage mothers (Arbesman et al., 2013b). An integrated team is a crucial aspect to support positive mental health development in children. Shared decision-making between students, parents, and the team of professionals is instrumental in the development of positive mental health. In a small Canadian sample, the role of occupational therapy, client factors, the therapeutic relationship, and the nature of the decision influenced the process and outcome of the shared decision-making (Tam-Seto & Versnel, 2015). Thus, the therapeutic relationship and client factors can be critical elements to ensure shared decision-making, leading to positive mental health. Teachers who had special needs students preferred a collaborative model with occupational therapists to support the needs of their students (Wilson & Harris, 2018). Occupational therapists can address the continuum of mental health with students from a global level to an individual level. As such, occupational therapists can be instrumental in the change process with all team members to identify opportunities to support positive mental health development among students.

Intensive (tier 3) occupational therapy services on an individual level for those who need it can also create positive impacts to improve social behavior and self-management (Arbesman et al., 2013b). Some students that may need intensive occupational therapy services are those with mental illnesses, severe behavior disorders, or autism spectrum disorder. For youth with mental illness, there is moderate to strong evidence for supported education to improve social skills and occupational outcomes, while there is strong evidence to support family psychoeducation to improve problem-solving skills and general functioning (Read, Roush, & Downing, 2018). While Read et al. (2018) considered students with serious mental illness, there is evidence to

support early intervention with various approaches to improve different aspects of positive mental health, such as improved social and occupational outcomes. This study supports a global or universal (tier 1) occupational therapy approach within the school system proactively to provide early intervention to support positive mental health development in children. Of the many intervention options for mental health, occupational therapy emphasizes a holistic approach incorporating psychoeducation addressing skill acquisition with occupation-based techniques in a group setting (Chan, Dennis, Kim, & Jankowski, 2017).

### **Positive Mental Health**

Mental health can be defined as “a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1999, p. 4). Mental health is a continuum ranging from mental illness to languishing to “moderately mentally healthy” to “complete mental health and flourishing” (Keyes, 2007). Mental illness and mental health are not interchangeable. The absence of mental illness does not imply mental health (Keyes, 2007). Mental health is a dynamic system that varies throughout one’s life based on varying contexts (Barry & Jenkins, 2007). The development of positive mental health includes changes in cognition, emotional, and behavioral abilities throughout one’s development (Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002). Doble and Santha (2008) introduce the concept of occupational well-being, described as seven occupational needs: accomplishment, affirmation, agency, coherence, companionship, pleasure, and renewal. This concept expands the holistic approach to client-centered treatment. These occupational needs also feed into meaningful and purposeful occupations. Students need to view their mental health positively on a continuum as they would their physical health. Within the school system, positive behavioral

interventions and supports are an initiative to improve student behavior. Connecting positive behavioral interventions and supports to school mental health in a blended system can provide numerous opportunities in a multi-tiered framework of prevention, support, and intervention (Anello et al., 2017). Well-being is using individual and collective strengths and motivation to achieve one's potential (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Social connectedness, social competence, coping, and self-worth are all crucial aspects as an adolescent transitions into middle school and high school (Rew et al., 2015). In a large study with African American and European American students, GPA and intrinsic value for school work declined during the middle school transition (Ryan et al., 2013). Additionally, in a study by Ryan et al. (2013), researchers found that African American student's self-worth increased around friends, with girls significantly higher than boys, however not when compared to European American girls. Although the study did not include Hispanics, the results support an academic decline upon transition into middle school as well as cultural and ethnic differences of self-worth around friends. Successful coping strategies are also crucial in the transition to middle school as students encounter many new situations, some of which may be stressful. In a sample of 123 young adolescents presented with peer challenge situations, engaged coping strategies were marginally associated with academic performance and significantly associated with positive academic adjustment (Erath, Bub, & Tu, 2016). One limitation of this study was that academic performance was self-reported on a Likert scale and not actual GPA results; thus the validity of the self-report measure may not reflect actual academic performance. However, the study does support positive coping strategies to assist with a successful transition into middle school. Seventh and eighth-grade students who experienced more significant stress had lower grades, higher school anxiety, and lower school bonding during the middle school transition

(Goldstein, Boxer, & Rudolph, 2015). Therefore, to ensure a successful transition to junior high school, dealing effectively with stressful situations by using positive coping strategies is essential to prepare the students for the transition. Students need to be able to cope with stress positively to provide an optimal opportunity for learning.

Qualitative data from a phenomenological study with low-income urban youths attending after-school care who participated in occupational therapy groups focusing on occupational engagement, the group process, and social-emotional learning, revealed two themes. The themes were groups were fun because the students engaged in novel leisure occupations within a supportive context and the participants were able to talk about their feelings and learn strategies for dealing with anger (Bazyk & Bazyk, 2009). The goal of the Comfortable Cafeteria program seeks to build cafeteria workers' and students' capacity to create a positive mealtime environment to foster healthy eating and healthy socialization with peers (Bazyk, Demirjian, Horvath, & Doxsey, 2018). The qualitative findings from the Comfortable Cafeteria program suggested that children learned some social skill values, cafeteria workers actively encouraged positive social interactions, and both the students and cafeteria workers experienced positive changes (Bazyk et al., 2018). For the transition from middle school to high school, a ninth-grade transition course that addressed procedural, social and academic aspects of the transition can potentially foster a more successful transition when students' primary and developmental needs are considered (Cheryl R. Ellerbrock, Denmon, Owens, & Lindstrom, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theory, essential to validate and guide practice, justifies reimbursement, clarifies specialization issues, enhances the growth of the profession and the professionalism of its members, and creates competent practitioners (Miller & Schwartz, 2004). Anne Mosey defines

theory as “an abstract description of a circumscribed set of observable events” (Mosey, 1981, p. 30). Theories are a “set of ideas in a logical system (a mixture of values, beliefs, and assumptions) formulated and argued for publicly, commonly known and acknowledged” (Boniface & Seymour, 2012, p. 17). Theory specifies and organizes knowledge to guide practice and treatment (Miller & Schwartz, 2004). Model is an overall unique descriptor of a profession which guides the direction of the profession and practice (Boniface & Seymour, 2012). According to Mosey (1981), there are six critical components of a model: philosophical assumptions, ethics, a theoretical foundation, a domain of concern, nature/principles for sequencing aspects of practice, and legitimate tools. According to the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, occupational therapy’s domain is “achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation” (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014, p. S2). The following discussion will provide the theoretical foundation rationale for the Steppin’ Up for Success Program.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Healthy behavior and habits are not only an individual issue but a societal issue as well (Bandura, 2004). Reciprocal determinism in social cognitive theory is the interdependent relationship and interaction between the person, behavior, and the environment (Bandura, 1977). Within the social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is key to motivation to change health behavior (Bandura, 2004). Bandura (1977) also identified outcome expectations as the belief that a specific behavior will produce a particular outcome. In addition, health behavior is also impacted by personal values and goals in conjunction with potential facilitators and barriers (Bandura, 2004).

Social cognitive theory aligns with occupational therapy models in its' view of the person, behavior (occupation), and environment. Thus, from both an individual perspective and a community view, the social cognitive theory is concerned with the interaction with the individual and collective person and the environment. The social cognitive theory allows for the development of self-efficacy skills, thus allowing the youth within this program to become more self-confident in themselves, as well as more self-assured as productive members of the community. Occupational therapy can guide the progressive challenges of the activities to lead to success in continuing to foster increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. Besides, the social cognitive theory approach can lead to specifically creating opportunities for one's future. Thus, incorporating a promotion and prevention component for the Steppin' Up for Success Program. The stepwise approach taken in social cognitive theory complements this program to allow students to develop health behavior changes using strategies tailored specifically for each individual student, thus allowing students to grow at their own pace when given the "just right challenge" to succeed in the challenges presented to them. The postulates within the social cognitive theory: reciprocal determinism, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and human agency support this program.

### **Paulo Freire's Liberation Education Model**

The central tenant of Paulo Freire's liberation education model is a dialogue relationship between the student and the teacher (Freire, 1970), that allows a collaborative exchange in which teachers and students critically examine each other's viewpoints and establishes a new joint shared viewpoint (Beckett, 2013). The teacher and student develop a joint process in which both are responsible for the process and their growth (Freire, 1970). Liberatory education uses a problem-posing method for both the teacher and student to be critical co-investigators (Freire,



1970). When people are responsible for their own learning, they develop critical consciousness to deal with future situations instead of just a single event (Freire, 1970). By allowing the students in the community to have multiple life experiences, this will increase their critical consciousness and, in turn, increase their independence and success in the community at large. Since many children learn by doing, allowing youth to engage in learning experiences actively will provide them opportunities for crucial skill development, specifically, higher-level cognitive skill development to include: judgment, cognitive flexibility, executive function, problem-solving, and insight (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). In addition to cognitive skill development, this program will allow social skill development to include: expressing emotion, turn-taking, disagreeing, clarifying, acknowledging, and encouraging (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Thus, offering opportunities for the students to create “culture circles” with their school community. By establishing youth experiential opportunities within the school community setting, they feel empowered to create changes within their own part of the community. With these opportunities, youth could envision their contribution to both social justice and social change within their broader community. The dyad and small group component of the program provides opportunities for “listening-dialogue-action-reflection” (Minkler, 2012, p. 66). This process also allows for reflection upon actions, goals, and outcomes, which will lead to critical consciousness. In liberatory education, students are “producing and acting upon their own ideas- not consuming those of others” (Freire, 1970, p. 108). Within this program, the liberation education model transforms not only the student but also the school environment, with the anticipation of transforming the community at large in the future. Thus, creating personal and community change through the development of critical thinking from the reflection process within this program. The liberation education model not

only provides opportunities for developing critical thinking skills but also empowerment. As empowerment develops in youth, they explore advocacy and taking responsibility for making changes within both their personal lives and the community (Scaffa & Reitz, 2014).

### **Ecology of Human Performance Model**

The ecology of human performance (EHP) model emphasizes the dynamic environmental context as inseparable from occupation and is essential to human performance (Dunn, Brown, & McGuigan, 1994). Ecology refers to the “interrelationships of organisms and their environments” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 595), in which the model emphasizes the interrelated characteristics of the person, context, task, and human performance. The EHP model has a broad concept of its first construct the environmental context as it is more significant than just the physical environment and can shape task performance (Dunn et al., 1994). Specifically, the environment includes “physical, temporal, social, and cultural elements” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 596). This broad contextual view of the environment, emphasizes the complexity of the environmental influence on both the person as well as the tasks or occupations the person engages in (Dunn et al., 1994). In Dunn, Brown, and Youngstrom (2003), further clarification of EHP reinforces the client-centered framework in which the client is unique and complex. The second construct is the person which takes into account the personal attributes of the client which are values, interests, experiences, sensorimotor skills, cognitive skills, and psychosocial skills (Dunn et al., 2003). The third construct of EHP is the task, influenced by both the contextual environment and the attributes of the person (Dunn et al., 1994). Thus, an individual may have multiple task engagement opportunities; however, the actual available tasks decrease based on the attributes of the person and the context of the environment. The final construct is human

performance, referring to the outcome or result of the interaction between the person, environmental context, and the task (Dunn et al., 1994).

The ecology of human performance also addresses interventions in the areas of establish/restore, alter, adapt, prevent, and create (Dunn et al., 1994). *Establish* or *restore* indicate treatment interventions that either establish previously unused skills or restoring lost skills due to a disability (Dunn et al., 1994). The treatment intervention *alter* refers to changing the contextual environment in which the task is engaged in (Dunn et al., 1994). The third intervention is *adapt*; this refers to changing various contextual aspects of the environment and/or the demands of the task (Dunn et al., 1994). The fourth intervention, *prevent*, corresponds to “maladaptive performance in context” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 604). The final intervention is to *create* “circumstances that promote more adaptable or complex performance in context” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 604).

The ecology of human performance model applies to a variety of populations such as people with a chronic disability, people with a short-term injury or disability, or people who have no disability at all. The critical conceptual view in EHP is a dynamic context in which occupational performance occurs. Every person has an extensive range of potential tasks to engage in, which is reduced by the environmental context and the attributes of the client, thus producing the human performance.

### **Coping Frame of Reference**

Coping is “the process of making adaptations to meet personal needs and to respond to the demands of the environment” (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999, p. 432). Coping is a cognitive skill and a component of the adaptive process for a child to deal with their contextual environment (social, physical, temporal, or cultural) and various situations that they encounter.

The goal of coping is to enhance feelings of well-being and positive mental health (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999). A child's coping ability is determined the child's resources and the demands of the situation. The coping frame of reference assumes the coping process is transactional and coping strategies are learned (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999). The environmental context is a dynamic entity within the coping mechanism. Personal needs and the environmental demands create stress, which generates a response from the coping mechanisms (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999). The coping response may be adaptive or maladaptive based on the coping skills of the person and the environmental influence. From a child's viewpoint, the transactional coping mechanism is an interrelated process which includes the following four steps:

1. determine the meaning of an event,
2. develop an action plan,
3. implement a coping effort, and
4. evaluate its effectiveness (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999, p. 435).

The environmental influences on coping include the creation of external demands, environmental resources, and the environmental response. Environmental feedback influences how the child evaluates the effectiveness of the coping effort (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999).

### **Summary**

As the literature reviewed has indicated, students face many obstacles when attempting to transition from elementary to junior high school. Students have difficulty not only with academics, but also relationships, coping, and managing stress healthily. These challenges can be even more significant for minority students. Relationships with teachers, peers, and parents impact the transition from elementary to junior high school. Thus, there are many factors in

varying contexts such as social relations, stress management, problem-solving, and academics which are necessary to ensure a successful transition to junior high school.

Occupational therapists are readily available to offer services on a universal level to youth in schools to promote positive mental health and ensure a smooth transition from elementary school to junior high school. The American Occupational Therapy Association's Vision 2025 and the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework support health promotion. Occupational therapy has the opportunity to address positive mental health proactively within the schools instead of reactively addressing mental health with interventions.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The literature previously discussed provided evidence that identified the problems that students experience when they transition between schools, thus requiring a program to address the needs of the students to ensure a more successful transition. In this section, the methodology will be provided for the development of the Steppin' Up for Success Program. Occupational therapy is vital within the Steppin' Up for Success Program. As part of the program development process, the needs assessment identifies gaps in service provision. Research methodology can be qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of both. Thus, finalization of the Steppin' Up for Success Program will use a mixed-methods approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data. The full methodology and rationale for the development, revision, and implementation of the Steppin' Up for Success Program will be detailed and discussed. Finally, the program evaluation of the Steppin' Up for Success Program will also be reviewed and justified.

### **Occupational Therapy Connection**

A public health model focus can help children develop and maintain positive mental health (Bazyk, 2011). The American Occupational Therapy Association's (2017) vision of 2025 supports maximizing "health, well-being, and quality of life for all people." The foundational constructs of occupational therapy are grounded in active engagement in occupation to promote, facilitate, support, and maintain health and participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Classroom teachers provide educational resources for their students with significant emphasis placed on academic achievement on standardized tests. With educational focus on accountability for student academic success on standardized assessments, many areas of crucial adolescent development are missing from the educational environment to produce productive, competent, mentally healthy youth. Occupational therapists in school-based practice are exceptionally prepared to address the promotion of positive mental health of students from a holistic lens, which can be viewed as a state of well-being to allow a people to realize abilities, cope with challenges, as well as work and contribute to the community (World Health Organization, 2013). Since the Steppin' Up for Success Program will be an occupation-based initiative, occupational therapists have a unique skill set to carry out the program. A needs assessment using focus groups, interviews and surveys will ensure the needs of the stakeholders are met within the content of the Steppin' Up for Success Program.

### **Participants, Sampling Design, and Recruitment Procedures**

All the seventh-grade teachers at the only junior high school, as well as sixth-grade teachers from the elementary school will receive invitations to participate in the focus group sessions. From the teachers that respond to be part of the focus group, eight randomly selected teachers in each grade level will participate in the focus groups. It is crucial to recruit teachers

who have experience and interest in a student's successful transition to junior high school; thus their willing participation is necessary to obtain a range of experiences, views, and ideas (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The ideal focus group size is six to eight, because a small group size may limit the quantity and diversity of responses due to insufficient interactions between the participants, while a large group size may prohibit participation from all members (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

This therapist will invite junior high school students of parents who are acquaintances to participate in a focus group. From the interested students, eight randomly selected students will participate in the focus group. The parent will sign permission for the student to participate in the focus group. See Appendix A for the permission form. The data obtained through the focus group sessions will create the transition program and will not be used as the final reported results. Since this project is a needs assessment that is exploratory in nature and not research, an institutional review board approval will not be necessary.

This therapist will conduct interviews with the principals, counselors, and the family/student support counselor, who is a licensed professional counselor referred to as "family specialist" from the elementary and junior high schools. Additional interviews may include the seasoned assistant principal at the elementary school to obtain additional information or clarification based on the initial interviews with the elementary administrative staff.

This therapist will ask known parents, who have children in junior high school, to complete a questionnaire about the challenges and successes of the transition from elementary to middle school. All people participating in focus groups, interviews, and surveys will contribute demographic information. Besides, all participants will complete a characteristic rating scale to indicate how important the stated characteristic is for a student to succeed in junior high school.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

This needs assessment will include a convenience sampling of students at the only junior high school in Uvalde, whose parents are known to this therapist. Seventh-grade students who are in junior high school will be eligible for participation. Exclusions from the needs assessment process are students who receive special education services or who are new to UCISD. The Steppin' Up for Success Program is designed to meet the needs of normed students, not special education students who may have different needs than their normed peers. Furthermore, students who are new to the district may present with confounding positive or negative variables that could skew the information used to develop the program. Seventh-grade teachers who teach at the junior high school will be eligible to participate in the study. However, new teachers (less than two years of experience) and experienced teachers who have not taught junior high school before will be excluded from participating in the study. Novice junior high school teachers will not have the experience of the student transition process to develop patterns of difficulties. Therefore, items that may be potential concerns may be due to teacher inexperience. Novice teachers may also have more instability within their classrooms due to adjustments within the curriculum throughout the school year. Parents who have children in junior high school will be eligible for the study. This therapist will interview three administrative staff (principal, counselor, and family specialist) at the elementary school and the junior high school. Three assistant principals are excluded from this study as they are new to the positions in both schools, two of which are new assistant principals.

**Needs Assessment**

For this program, a needs assessment methodology will calculate the needs of a specific population to determine if specialized services are necessary to fulfill a gap in current services or



programming (Polit & Beck, 2017). Specifically, occupational therapists can utilize a needs assessment methodology to identify the needs of a specific population related to health, including positive mental health, wellness, and occupational engagement (Doll, 2010). Information for a needs assessment can be from both quantitative and qualitative methods (Doll, 2010). A quantitative methodology is an objective approach to study relationships and to examine cause and effect relationships among and between variables (Grove, Burns, & Gray, 2013). Qualitative methodology is a subjective means for description and meaning and life experiences (Grove et al., 2013). The qualitative methodology can take the form of open-ended questions to obtain a personal perspective and may be obtained through interviews, focus groups, observation, or document review (Grove et al., 2013). The needs assessment for the Steppin' Up for Success Program is a mixed-methods design. A descriptive design using focus groups, interviews, surveys, and demographic information will obtain the data necessary to revise and refine the Steppin' Up for Success Program (McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorne, 2019). The focus groups of students and teachers in sixth and seventh grades, as well as interviews with other stakeholders and parent questionnaires, will yield information to refine the Steppin' Up for Success Program before piloting this intervention program. Observation and document review would not glean adequate data from the perspective of the teachers or students. The goal of this initial phase is to conduct a needs assessment to develop this intervention program for students entering junior high school to promote positive mental health for a successful transition from elementary school to junior high school. There are three phases of a needs assessment: pre-assessment, assessment, and post-assessment (McDavid et al., 2019). The pre-assessment phase examines existing information with some informal data gathering to determine and focus on the composition of the needs assessment procedure (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010). The assessment phase is a data

collection period designed to identify and prioritize discrepancies as well as analyzing causal relations of the needs identified. The additional data collection and analysis lead to the initial identification of solution criteria and conceivable approaches (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010). The post-assessment phase focuses on preparing to take action with solutions for the identified problem. In this final phase, action plans are developed and communicated; implemented and monitored, and; the evaluation of the entire needs assessment process (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010). The steps of a needs assessment are: (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 34)

1. Focus the assessment
2. Form the needs assessment committee
3. Learn as much as possible about “what should be” and “what is” in the current situation
4. Determine if further investigation is needed or should the process be stopped
5. Conduct a full assessment of “what should be” and “what is” criteria
6. Identify gaps
7. Prioritize gaps
8. Causally analyze needs
9. Preliminary solution identification and possible solution strategies
10. Determine if further investigation is needed or should the process be stopped
11. Make final decisions to resolve needs and select solution strategies
12. Develop action plans for solution strategies, communicate plans, and build a support system
13. Implement and monitor plans
14. Evaluate the overall needs assessment process

### **Focus Groups**

While one focus group can identify issues, two groups can provide an additional comprehensive understanding of the issues (Hennink, Kaiser, & Weber, 2019); thus three focus groups will be conducted. Focus groups with semi-structured interview questions will be used per accepted guidelines to explore issues and challenges of the transition from elementary to junior high school (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The flexibility of this approach allows for the discovery and elaboration of information that is necessary to the participants, however, may not have been deemed as relevant or important by the investigators (Britten, 2006). This method was chosen because, typically, children will be more comfortable around their peers and thus more willing to share information with a group instead of an unknown adult (Horner, 2000). Focus groups also empower the students and others to be part of the process and to contribute to a solution (Horner, 2000). This method allows for a distribution of power, which promotes empowerment and shared responsibility in responding (Horner, 2000). Conducting a focus group will also allow dialogue between the members of the focus group to explore alternatives that may escape in an individual interview (Britten, 2006). Besides, focus groups can explore views, experiences, beliefs, and motivations of people on specific matters (Britten, 2006); therefore, focus groups are the best method to obtain reliable information from this group to ensure the Steppin' Up for Success Program meets the needs of the stakeholders.

The focus groups planned with the students will consist of students who have recently transitioned into junior high school. The students will be asked what their biggest challenges were when they started junior high school, and also what their most significant concerns were about entering junior high school. Dougherty & Sharkey (2017) explored the effectiveness of a dropout prevention program to improve academic success and explored whether improved social

support and emotional competencies were associated with improved student outcomes. While students in the intervention group in the Dougherty & Sharkey (2017) study demonstrated improved academic achievement, the means for the improvement was unclear; therefore, further exploration is warranted to examine potential impacts for improved academic success. Research has shown that relationships are essential for success in school (Hughes & Cao, 2018; Juvonen, 2007). Thus, this needs assessment will explore the relationships that students have with teachers, peers, and administrators. These findings guide questions for the focus groups to address relationships with teachers from elementary and junior high schools. In addition to relationships, the focus group discussion will address self-worth. During the transition from elementary school to middle school, students' self-worth was found to be stable around teachers, but declined around peers (Ryan et al., 2013). Various sources related to student difficulty in middle school guided the focus group questions for the students (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017; Juvonen, 2007; Rueger, Chen, Jenkins, & Choe, 2014; Ryan et al., 2013). See Appendix B for the student focus group questions.

The focus group approach will be used with the teacher group to obtain a deeper understanding of the contextual influences impacting a student's transition into junior high school. There will be two teacher groups, one with sixth-grade teachers and one with seventh-grade teachers. The questions for the teachers will focus on the challenges that entering students have had in junior high school. Evidence supports a positive teacher-student supportive relationship for success in school (Hughes & Cao, 2018; Rueger et al., 2014); thus, the teacher-student relationship will be explored. Since there is a significant change between the elementary school and middle school environments, multiple aspects of the policies and procedures in middle school will need to be explored (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Various sources that explore

various aspects of student difficulty in middle school guided the focus group questions for the teachers (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Hughes & Cao, 2018; Rueger et al., 2014). See Appendix C for the teacher focus group questions.

This therapist will conduct the focus groups. This therapist will take field notes and record the focus groups to ensure accuracy of information obtained.

### **Parent Questionnaire**

The parent group will consist of parents of students who have already entered junior high school. The questions for the parents will primarily inquire about the challenges that their children encountered or changes in their children as they entered junior high school, as well as what support they provided for their child. Various sources that focus on the difficulty that students have in middle school, contributed to the questions for the parent survey (Dougherty & Sharkey, 2017; Rueger et al., 2014). See Appendix D for the parent questionnaire. The information from the parent questionnaires will be used to incorporate parent concerns as a stakeholder into the content of the Steppin' Up for Success Program.

### **Interviews**

This therapist will interview select administrative personnel at the only junior high school. The school personnel to be interviewed include the principal, counselors, and the family specialist. In addition, interviews with the principal, counselors, and the family specialist from the elementary school will take place. However, based on the information obtained from the interviews at the elementary school, the seasoned assistant principal may be interviewed to seek out additional clarification. Interviews are the chosen method for this stakeholder group to ensure free discussion with the investigator without their immediate supervisor present. Likewise, the administrative staff is not included in the focus group methodology to allow staff

greater comfort in speaking freely about the transition from elementary to junior high school without the fear of reprisal. The interview questions will center around current transition preparation, challenges students experience as they enter junior high school, resource allocation to aid transition difficulties, successes, and challenges with the current system. See Appendix E for the questions to be asked during the interviews with the administration. From the information gained from the administrative staff, the Steppin' Up for Success Program will include components to address the needs of the administrative stakeholders.

### **Characteristic Trait Rating Scale**

This therapist developed the characteristic trait rating scale based upon a literature review. Various characteristics potentially contributing to the success of a student transitioning to junior high school identified through the literature review were operationalized and defined in chapter one. All participants will complete the characteristic rating scale. The character traits will be rated based on the importance of success in junior high school on a Likert scale. The scale is as follows 5-very important, 4-somewhat important, 3- neutral, 2- not very important, 1-unimportant. Refer to Appendix F for the characteristic trait rating scale. Upon completion of the rating scales, the average score of each trait will determine its importance in the success of a student's transition to junior high school. Also, exploration of the ratings of each trait will undergo group comparisons to determine group trends and differences. Discussion of the findings of the results will follow.

### **Program Evaluation**

The overall impact and benefits of the Steppin' Up for Success Program include increasing the mental health and academic success of the students entering junior high school in Uvalde by increasing their social skills, communication, problem-solving, and coping strategies.

Additionally, the Steppin' Up for Success Program will increase parent satisfaction with their child's transition into junior high school. Participants will be tested on their social skills before and after the program using The Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales (SSIS-RS) to test the effectiveness of this intervention program. For the coping strategies, the participants will complete the Brief COPE before and after the program. Additionally, they will be measured six months after the intervention program to see if they have maintained the gains in coping strategies and social skills they made from the program. In addition to the Brief COPE inventory and the SSIS-RS, data collection will also include demographic data. The student's occupational performance and participation will be measured using the Child Occupational Self-Assessment. Data analysis will be through a pre-test/post-test methodology. Finally, analysis of additional school data, including the Student Teacher Rating Scale will determine the effectiveness of the program.

### **Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales (SSIS-RS)**

Social skills of the participants will be measured using the SSIS-RS, which can elicit standard scores in three domains: social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competency (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). The social skills domain includes subscales of communication, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, and self-control. The SSIS-RS is a multi-modal assessment to measure the child's behavior from three perspectives: child, parent, and teacher. The SSIS-RS is easy to administer and takes 10-25 minutes. The parent scale is on a fifth-grade reading level, and the student scale is on a second-grade reading level. The reliability of the SSIS-RS is good, with high median alpha levels for the overall scale areas of social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence (Crosby, 2011). Test-retest reliability results indicate general stability across administrations. Interrater reliability for the parent and teacher

forms produced coefficients in the upper .50s to .60s. Statistical analysis including factor analysis established validity, and only items with a moderate to a strong relationship with their respective subscale were retained (Crosby, 2011). According to Crosby (2011), concurrent validity of the SSIS-RS was supported when compared to the Behavior Assessment System for Children (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) and the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Before the initiation of the pilot program, after the conclusion of the pilot program, and six-months following the conclusion of the pilot program the students will complete the SSIS-RS to see if the students retained the skills learned in the Steppin' Up for Success Program. This measure was selected to triangulate the information obtained from three stakeholders- students, parents, and teachers to obtain a complete view of the student's social skills.

### **Brief COPE**

Coping strategies of the participants will be measured using the Brief COPE, which is available in Appendix G (Carver, 1997). The Brief COPE consists of 28 items that measure 14 conceptually different coping reactions (Carver, 1997). It is a quick and easy-to-administer self-reporting questionnaire. An exploratory factor analysis of the Brief COPE revealed consistent results with the full inventory, and further evaluation demonstrated good internal reliability of the abbreviated scales (Carver, 1997). Before the initiation of the pilot program, after the conclusion of the pilot program, and six-months following the conclusion of the pilot program the students will complete the Brief COPE to determine if the students retained the skills learned in the Steppin' Up for Success Program. The Brief COPE is selected due to its ease of administration and its sole focus on measuring coping strategies as opposed to other measurements that only have a small component looking at coping strategies.



**Child Occupational Self-Assessment (COSA)**

Occupational performance and participation will be measured using the COSA, which is a self-report instrument. The COSA is a unidimensional construct of occupational competence and values with good internal validity (Keller, Kafkes, & Kielhofner, 2005; Keller & Kielhofner, 2005; Kielhofner, Forsyth, Kramer, & Iyenger, 2009). It is also deemed to be sensitive to distinguish differences between people on the constructs of occupational competence and values and used reliably by the majority of people (Keller et al., 2005; Keller & Kielhofner, 2005; Kielhofner et al., 2009). The COSA is selected to measure occupational engagement within the occupation-based program.

**Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)**

The Student Teacher Relationship Scale is a 15-item, which is available in Appendix H, the 5-point scale that examines a teacher's relationships with his/her students and yields scores on conflict and closeness (Pianta, 2001). It is a quick and easy-to-administer self-rating scale. The STRS has good psychometric properties across multiple studies and samples, including internal consistency from .86-.89 (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). This measure was selected to determine the closeness of the teacher-student relationship.

**School Data**

Objective data will be obtained from both the elementary school and the junior high school to determine if the Steppin' Up for Success Program has made a positive impact on academic success. Comparison analysis of the student's attendance record from the final nine weeks of elementary school and the attendance record of the first nine weeks of junior high school will determine differences in attendance. Comparison analysis of the student's grades from the last nine weeks of elementary school and grades from the first nine weeks of junior high

school will determine changes in grades. This data may also be obtained from 12 randomly selected seventh-graders who did not participate in the program to determine if there is a statistical difference in grades or attendance for those who participated in the Steppin' Up for Success Program.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

After transcription of the focus group audiotapes, this therapist will analyze the data using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to determine the content of the responses from the participants. This therapist will then rank concerns from the focus group by order of importance and compare the list of concerns with the content of the Steppin' Up for Success Program. The interviews will also be analyzed with content analysis to determine the concerns of the school administration. In addition, compiling the parent survey data will identify the most significant concerns of the parents. Adjustments to the content of the Steppin' Up for Success Program is necessary to ensure the primary concerns of these various stakeholders are in the program.

Program development requires pre-planning through a needs assessment to ensure that the idea or program meets the needs of the community (Doll, 2010). As part of the needs assessment, a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is a necessary component of the planning process to identify the role of occupational therapy within the team as well as the program (Doll, 2010). A SWOT analysis can be a powerful tool in program development to create strategies to amplify strengths, benefit from opportunities, while disabling weaknesses, and reducing threats (Minkler, 2012). A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is part of the needs assessment for the program development process.

Upon implementation of the Steppin' Up for Success Program, this therapist will collect data from the Brief COPE, the SSIS-RS, the COSA, the STRS, grades, and attendance by

administering the instruments to the sample at the specified times. Data entered will be subject to inferential statistics by a statistical consultant. Analysis of the descriptive statistics from the demographic data is necessary to determine differences. Observances of statistically significant differences in social skills, coping strategies, teacher relationships, attendance, and grades before and after the program will determine the effectiveness of the Steppin' Up for Success Program. A pre- and post-test analysis of the sample aggregate data will determine achievement of positive changes. Also, an analysis will examine if differences are sustained six months after the program. These statistics will assist in determining the effectiveness of the program.

The participants, parents, and professionals conducting the Steppin' Up for Success Program will complete satisfaction surveys. The satisfaction surveys will provide a check and balance for the pilot intervention to ensure the program is working as designed and intended, as well as help guide further refinement of the program to ensure it meets the needs of the participants. The ideal number of participants for the pilot intervention is twelve students.

### **Summary**

This investigator will conduct a needs assessment with various stakeholders who are essential in the transition from elementary to junior high school. Focus groups, interviews, and surveys will be the methodology used for the needs assessment to refine the components of the Steppin' Up for Success Program to ensure that it meets the needs of its stakeholders. It is best to use a focus group with the students to provide peer comfort support instead of speaking with the investigator individually. Focus groups are also the best method for the teacher group, as it will foster discussions based on what the members of the group deem as necessary to this specific population. This investigator will individually interview the administrative personnel as best practice to avoid both supervisors and employees present during a single interview.

Concerns of parents will be determined through a questionnaire to allow for diverse backgrounds of parents. All participants will have the opportunity to provide this investigator with individual feedback to assist in revising the Steppin' Up for Success Program to ensure it meets the needs of its stakeholders.

#### **Chapter 4: Results**

A needs assessment for community program development obtains necessary information for change and empowerment (Minkler, 2012). This therapist completed the following needs assessment to understand the transition process needs for a student entering junior high school in Uvalde, Texas, in order to develop an occupational therapy program to promote successful transition for those students. Demographic information, including the physical environment and secondary data, is reviewed. This investigator conducted phase I and II interviews with key individuals at both the elementary school and the junior high school. Discussion of the results of the interviews follows. This investigator conducted focus groups with teachers at the elementary school and the junior high school as well as seventh-grade students. Thus, the details of the results of the evolution of the needs assessment regarding the transition from elementary school to junior high follows.

#### **Demographic Information**

Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District serves 4,250 students on seven campuses. Six of the schools are within the city of Uvalde and are within two miles of each other. The seventh school is approximately 20 miles south of Uvalde and serves 101 elementary students from kindergarten to sixth grade (14 students). Three other elementary schools house two grades each, and one junior high school also serves two grades. The high school includes grades 9-12. The Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) Program is on the school campuses

through junior high. There are 12 sixth-grade teachers at the elementary school; however, students switch between two core teachers. There are 615 students at the junior high school, 297 seventh graders, and 318 eighth graders. There are 26 limited English proficiency students at the junior high school. There are 51 special education students at the junior high school, 35 in the seventh-grade. There are 19 seventh grade teachers at the junior high school with an average class size of 27 students; however, the range is 12-30, with the elective classes having the highest number of students.

### **Physical Environment**

Analysis of demographics as well as the physical environment of the community is necessary to develop an effective community program. A community profile examines the resources within a community to develop an understanding of the services provided in the community as well as opportunities for growth to supplement or enhance services (Fazio, 2008; Scaffa & Reitz, 2014). Community mapping allows for identifying locations of various entities within the community, such as public buildings, landmarks, and transportation.

The junior high school campus is the same size as the elementary school campus; however, the layout covers a larger flat area. Over 600 students transition between classes at the junior high school campus within five minutes. Sports offered at the junior high school campus include football, volleyball, cross country, tennis, basketball, and track. Band, choir, student council, cheerleading, and gaming club are the extracurricular activities at the junior high school. Transportation can be a challenge in Uvalde since there is no public transportation, taxis, or Uber. There is one park and recreation complex (disc golf, basketball, volleyball, skateboard park, pool, walking trails), one public golf course, a birding sanctuary, a few small museums, a civic center, a public library, and the track at the football stadium.

### **Secondary Data**

Uvalde is located within Uvalde County and serves as the county seat. The downtown exists at the intersection of Main and Getty streets, which is anchored by the post office, county courthouse, city hall, and the city square. Antique shops, furniture shops, boutiques, specialty shops, and some restaurants complete the downtown area.

The local hospital, a community health department, private sector medical community, and an urgent care facility provide healthcare services for the community. The Uvalde Food Pantry offers canned goods and various other food items including, bread, tortillas, meat, and vegetables weekly. Local churches also offer ministries such as toiletries, clothing, and coins for the laundry mat. The Uvalde Ministerial Alliance provides Helping Out The Town (HOTT) days which are designated times when people within the community provide various yard or home maintenance/cleaning services for those in need in the community. South Texas Rural Health Services is an outpatient substance abuse program. Wesley Nurse Health Ministries is a faith-based, holistic program designed to assist individuals and communities to achieve improved health and wellness through self-empowerment and access to healthcare resource information (Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, 2018). Southwest Texas Junior College and Sul Ross State University are two higher education institutions within the city of Uvalde.

There are a few youth programs in the community. Texas 4-H (2018) clubs offer opportunities for children in third grade through twelfth grade, as well as programs for younger children in kindergarten through second grade. The programs range from food science and robotics to fashion design and photography, while also including animals and outdoor education (Texas 4-H, 2018). There are a minimal annual membership fee and possible costs associated with the child's chosen project. There is an annual junior stock show for students in either 4-H

or Future Farmers of America (FFA). Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are also active within the community, and require annual membership costs, as well as uniform costs and costs of various activities in which the troop participates. There are also youth sports programs available including, flag football, basketball, soccer, baseball, and rodeo. The sports programs have registration fees and uniform fees. School-sponsored sports start in junior high school.

### **Phase I Interviews**

Partnerships and assets are essential to ensure successful community programs (Minkler, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to identify not only deficiencies within a community, but capacities, skills, and assets as well. This investigator interviewed many key people to obtain information for this needs assessment. The interviewees included an administrator, two counselors, and the family/student support counselor (licensed professional counselor) at both the elementary school and the junior high school. Also, this investigator spoke with the speech-language pathologist at the junior high school. These phase-I semi-structured interviews proved essential to formulate the phase II focus group questions for the teachers and student groups. The interviews were 30-60 minutes in length. The semi-structured interviews with the administrative teams at the elementary school and the junior high school revealed transition strengths and barriers. Several similar themes emerged in conversations with these stakeholders. When documenting the interactions with the participants, the use of initials maintained anonymity.

### **Elementary School Administration**

The administrative team interviewed at the elementary school consisted of one male and three females. All had been at the elementary school for the previous three years. The elementary school administrator (AB) has been with UCISD for 20 years and been in administration for eight years. The administrator encourages teacher-student connections using

positive behavioral intervention supports (PBIS) and expressed that most teachers (90%) have good relations/connections with their students. The administrator stated that strong parental support and connection with their child are crucial for a student to be successful in both elementary school and junior high school (AB, personal communication, February 27, 2020). He also stated that a junior high student needed to be self-directed and connected with the junior high school community. The administrator's advice to students entering junior high school was, "Never give up, even when you approach the speed bumps of life" (AB, personal communication, February 27, 2020). When a student transitions from elementary school to junior high school, the elementary administrator expressed that teachers need to remember that as the students enter junior high school, they are still immature and need nurturing.

The family specialist (CD) discussed the difficulty with transitions, especially among immature students. She recalled that when there are too many transitions, and there is no stability, the student cannot develop a sense of comfort or belonging. They also do not see a safe place within the chaos of the transitions. She also discussed the challenge with only having two grades within the schools at UCISD since the students do not have role models to look up to in older students on the same campus (CD, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Also, without others to look up to, it is hard for young students to envision the future. She discussed the importance of the social-emotional learning component for the students to form safe, nurturing relationships with peers and teachers. She also discussed the importance of resiliency factors of a child to be successful in school (CD, personal communication, March 3, 2020). When a child's basic needs are met, he/she is better equipped to learn and deal with stress, and conversely, when basic needs are not, he/she is not able to learn or deal with the stressors of school and/or home life. For example, if a student witnessed an argument between his/her



parents and did not eat breakfast before coming to school, he/she will not be mentally prepared for a testing situation at school (CD personal communication, March 3, 2020). She feels that students transitioning to junior high school need more ongoing exposure to the environment before the transition, not just a quick single visit (CD personal communication, March 3, 2020).

The counselors (EF & GH, personal communication, March 2, 2020) expressed that most students are ready to transition from elementary school to junior high school, however as a cohort, the students struggle with social skills, problem-solving, and coping skills. However, the counselors did state that the behavioral intervention class students had the most considerable difficulty with the transition. To improve the success of the transition for these students, the counselors from both campuses participate in transition meetings to discuss students who may need additional support upon entering junior high school. The counselors also have instituted various initiatives to assist students, parents, and teachers. Each month, the counselors invite parents to “Coffee with the Counselors,” however stated that attendance is low, fluctuating from eight people initially to one most recently. Food was initially offered; however, it was changed to coffee since there was limited participation. The counselors also meet with both the students and the teachers as groups twice each month. They had previously used a commercially available character education product; however, the students said it was boring. Now they teach different character traits each month, which are often guided by student needs that present in their office. Some of the topics they have covered are friendship, problem-solving, mediating conflict, social media, and bullying (EF & GH, personal communication, March 2, 2020). The counselors expressed the frustration of lack of parental involvement in the student’s school unless it is sports-related. The counselors also expressed that students who needed additional supports struggle more in junior high school. The advice from the counselors was, “Don’t give

up. Roll with the punches. Things aren't always easy all the time" (EF & GH, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

### **Junior High School Administration**

The administrative team interviewed at the junior high school consisted of four females and one male. All had been at the junior high school for the previous three years. The junior high school administrative team includes the speech-language pathologist. Like the elementary school administrator, the junior high administrator (IJ) has extensive experience in his 20 years at UCISD, including seven years in administration. However, the interview process does not include the assistant principals at the junior high who were new to the position for the 2017-2018 school year, the 2018-2019 school year, and again for the 2019-2020 school year. Both the administrator and the counselors agreed that the existing transition program, which consists of a field trip to the junior high campus and a brief tour of the campus was superficial. Discussions about the current field trip are that it offers a brief look at the school campus with the counselors; however, incoming students do not have the opportunity to interact with teachers, administrators, or other students. The field trip occurs at the very end of the school year in the last week of school, which may not be conducive for a student to take-in, observe, learn, and recall from the experience to make an impact when they start attending the junior high school in August. These important contextual issues are addressed within the occupation-based Steppin' Up for Success Program.

The administrator discussed the different personalities of each entering cohort and the difficulty that the students from smaller feeder schools had when they entered junior high school (IJ, personal communication, February 24, 2020). Most of the students entering junior high school had been among the same cohort since kindergarten, and it was difficult for the students

coming into the junior high school from private schools to form friendships and determine where they belonged within the larger cohort. The administrator felt social life was the hardest part for a student to deal with as he/she becomes a junior high school student (IJ, personal communication, February 24, 2020). Throughout his interview, he discussed the observable social maturity changes throughout the school year as well as when entering the eighth grade. The administrator felt that the single most significant success factor for a student in junior high to be successful was the culture of the classroom, which needs to be a safe and comfortable environment for learning. His advice for a student entering junior high school was “Be your own person” (IJ, personal communication, February 24, 2020).

The speech-language pathologist (KL, personal communication, March 2, 2020) felt that students are not prepared academically or socially to enter junior high school. She expressed the difficulties that students have with dealing with conflict and managing their own emotions (KL, personal communication, March 2, 2020). She also recounted the difficulty the students have dealing with transitions between classes and increased independence. With the increased structure in elementary school, she recalled that students struggle when the expectations demand the student to manage on their own at junior high. Her piece of advice for a student entering junior high school is, “You are not alone; everyone is confused” (KL, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

The family specialist (MN, personal communication, March 2, 2020) discussed that students entering junior high school struggle more with the social aspects of school, and that boys struggle more with anger and girls struggle more with peer relationships. She also expressed the difficulty the students experience from having a transition in elementary school between two teachers who are right next door to each other and transitioning between eight

classes, which are all over the campus. The family specialist also agreed that the students who enter the junior high school from the small feeder schools have greater difficulty adjusting not only socially but also dealing with a much larger student population on one campus and larger class sizes (MN, personal communication, March 2, 2020). She stated that teachers who are involved with extracurricular activities are more able to relate to their students and form more trusting relationships with students that they are with more frequently (MN, personal communication, March 2, 2020). She also recounted that most students lack resiliency, often getting upset and bothered by a single comment, and lack the skills to protect themselves. She also discussed the importance of communication skills to address problems and explore solutions to problems.

The counselors (OP & QR, personal communication, February 24, 2020) discussed the challenges that the entering students have from a social-emotional standpoint. They also reflected on the observable growth in maturity in the students throughout the school year. The counselors instituted a mentoring program, pairing a student with a teacher to assist with the transition. However, the counselors did state that this is the first year of the initiative and has identified struggles with the program (OP & QR, personal communication, February 24, 2020). Advice offered from one counselor was “Ask questions” (OP, personal communication, February 24, 2020). While the administrators and the counselors agreed that the students face academic challenges, they stated that the most significant adjustment is dealing with their increased independence and the social aspects of entering junior high school (IJ, OP, & QR, personal communication, February 24, 2020). All the administration also agreed that it is difficult for the students to handle the increased freedom that they have in junior high school (IJ, OP, & QR, personal communication, February 24, 2020).

### **Phase II Interviews**

Based on the information obtained through the Phase I interviews, the questions for the focus groups were modified. Phase II interviews consisted of two focus groups with teachers: one with sixth-grade teachers and one with seventh-grade teachers; and one focus group with seventh-grade students. Five sixth-grade teachers at the elementary school participated in a focus group. Seven seventh-grade teachers at the junior high school participated in a focus group. Both teacher focus groups were approximately 90 minutes. Eight seventh-graders participated in a focus group, which lasted approximately 60 minutes. Six parents of seventh-grade students completed a questionnaire. All participants (administration, teachers, students, parents) completed a character rating scale using a Likert scale to indicate whether the characteristics listed were essential for a student's success in junior high school. The qualitative data derived from the focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires will be reviewed and compared. The quantitative data from the characteristics rating scale will be reviewed as a total and groupings and then compared.

#### **Elementary School Teachers**

The five female and one male elementary school teachers that participated in the focus group were experienced teachers, ranging from 6-20 years, with an average of 13 years. More strikingly, three of the five teachers have only taught sixth grade at this school for six, eight, and eleven years. Overwhelmingly, the teachers expressed that they do not feel the students are ready academically or socially for junior high school (focus group, personal communication, March 5, 2020). They also expressed that they do not feel the students are ready to enter the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade campus upon leaving the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade campus, stating the most significant challenge is poor reading skills. The teachers expressed concerns that students know strategies to manage

state testing, however, they cannot explain the purpose of the strategy used. From a social-emotional perspective, the teachers stated that the students could not handle conflict or take responsibility for their actions (focus group, personal communication, March 5, 2020). They also stated that despite their immaturity, the students seek out mature relationships with the opposite sex.

The teachers revealed that the students struggle with critical thinking skills, often looking for the teacher for the answer instead of guidance to determine the answer. Some factors that the teachers stated as contributing to the difficulty with success in school are lack of empathy, lack of communication skills, and their need for instant gratification. They cited difficulty with students identifying a goal and setting a path to achieve the goal; instead they spend time looking for a “short cut.” One teacher also commented about the limited experiences of the students, which provides them with a limited background to imagine. Teachers also expressed an increase in anxiety/stress among students who may react impulsively or explosively because they have limited coping strategies to deal with the social and academic demands of school (focus group, personal communication, March 5, 2020). The teachers also felt that the students in elementary school are in a nurturing environment that is lacking in junior high school. Teachers expressed concern over the students’ lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. The behavior teacher expressed concern over the lack of social skills training at junior high school (AA, personal communication, March 5, 2020). Within the elementary school, social skills are taught in small groups and on an individual basis, and the behavior teacher “checks in” with the student in the classroom to ensure skills are being utilized and carried over. Overall, the teachers reported that students come from a very structured environment at elementary school to an unstructured environment that provides them with tremendous freedom, which creates challenges. Finally,

the elementary teachers expressed concern about the lack of preparedness for students to have homework and assignments in multiple classes at the same time (focus group, personal communication, March 5, 2020). One teacher reflected on seeing a previous student who commented about the difficulty managing multiple classes at the same time as well as stating that he missed the teacher and gave him a big hug (BB, personal communication, March 5, 2020). Advice for students entering junior high school from the teachers at the elementary school included: “Nothing worth having is ever going to come easy (CC, personal communication, March 5, 2020); be more than what people say you are (DD, personal communication, March 5, 2020); and use the skills you have been taught to communicate and take responsibility” (AA, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

### **Junior High School Teachers**

Five female teachers and two male teachers from the junior high school participated in the focus group. There was more diversity in work experience with the junior high school teachers, with previous experience ranging from pre-kindergarten to high school, however, all had been in junior high for at least two years. Teachers at the junior high school reported that the students struggle both academically and socially as they enter junior high school; however, see noticeable observable improvements in both areas at various points throughout the school year (focus group, personal communication, March 3, 2020). The teachers also discussed student struggles with time management and organization, specifically regarding transitions between classes and managing homework assignments (EE & FF, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Teachers discussed how students have difficulty getting to class on time and then ask if they can go to the bathroom, indicating that the students have limited forethought of what to do during the transition time. Teachers also reported that a student would come to class during the

transition period and ask to use the restroom even though it is not necessary. Teachers expressed that it seems that students do not know what to do with the transition time, so they socialize with their friends until the late bell rings. Teachers also reported that students struggle since teachers have varying teaching strategies and expectations (focus group, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Many teachers stated that student success is related to the mindset and motivation of the student, not necessarily skills (FF & GG, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

The junior high school teachers also expressed the importance of having a trusting relationship with the students; however, it is difficult due to the number of students in each class (focus group, personal communication, March 3, 2020). The teachers who were also coaches stated they more often formed relationships with their athletic students compared to the non-athletic students (FF, HH, & II, personal communication, March 3, 2020). English teachers expressed a more exceptional ability to form relationships with their students as they teach English in a block format where the students remain in the classroom for two periods totaling 90 minutes (II & JJ, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Those teachers who had formed relationships with students expressed that the students felt comfortable coming to the teacher to discuss a myriad of issues, not just concerns related to the class. One English teacher who recently served as a substitute for the art teacher expressed his frustration of attempting to deal with 200 students throughout the day for seven different periods. He expressed the significant challenge to learn student names much less form a relationship (II, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Teachers also expressed the importance of being flexible with their teaching style and “going with the flow” to allow students to guide the lesson with student interest (focus group, personal communication, March 3, 2020). A couple of teachers have encouraged peer support for struggling readers and have observed the student helper provide cues as the teacher



would. The teachers also expressed concern about students who receive support for reading in English, but not in other subjects such as history or science; however, if a student is struggling in reading, he/she will more than likely struggle with other classes since they all require reading. Thus, they felt that as the academic demands of junior high school increase, the previous supports for the students are not adequate.

As with the elementary teachers, the junior high teachers expressed that technology is a great tool, however, it must be used and managed appropriately (focus group, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Junior high teachers also expressed the necessity for students to be comfortable with the decisions that they make because there are consequences (positive or negative) for their decisions. The teachers agreed that those students involved in athletics at the junior high school were more likely to have better grades since their participation in athletics was dependent upon passing grades (focus group, personal communication, March 3, 2020). The behavior teacher expressed that students who have had behavior issues in the past were frequently able to turn their behavior around if they were involved in sports or had a positive adult influence (HH, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Advice offered by junior high teachers were: "Put academics first" (HH, personal communication, March 3, 2020). "Be confident, comfortable, and advocate for yourself" (JJ, personal communication, March 3, 2020). "Believe in who you are" (EE, personal communication, March 3, 2020)."

### **Student Focus Group**

Four girls and four boys participated in the seventh-grade focus group with parental permission. The students answered questions about what they liked about elementary school and junior high school, their friends and teachers in elementary school and junior high school, as well as advice they would give to an incoming student. As the students answered some of the

questions, additional questions were posed to gain further explanation. Some of the students indicated that they liked recess, getting out early, and never having a reason to being late to class in elementary school (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020). One student stated she felt like a prisoner in elementary school, having to face forward and walk in a line with their teacher, escorting them to their next class (SS, personal communication, March 6, 2020). They stated that they liked greater freedom, sports, and additional activities that they could be involved in while at junior high school. While the students stated they enjoyed getting out of elementary school early, they did not enjoy starting elementary school earlier.

Six of the students indicated they felt a connection with their elementary school teachers, which was split equally between math/science teachers and English/reading teachers (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020). The reasons provided for the connection to their elementary school teachers were: “comfort level, increased time with the teachers, and cared about them” (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020). The other two students indicated they did not feel they made connections with their elementary teachers. In junior high school, the students indicated a wide range of teachers that they connected with, including two each with science, technology, and coaches, and one each with band and reading. Reasons provided for the connection to their junior high school teachers were: “individualized tutoring, nice, and attentive” (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Several of the students indicated that their friend relationships had changed since they entered junior high school, stating that their friendships now were based on common interests such as sports (SS, TT, & UU, personal communication, March 6, 2020). They also indicated that some of their friends from elementary school who they no longer had common interests with have turned to drugs. The students indicated that it was harder to deal with more “inappropriate/teenager stuff

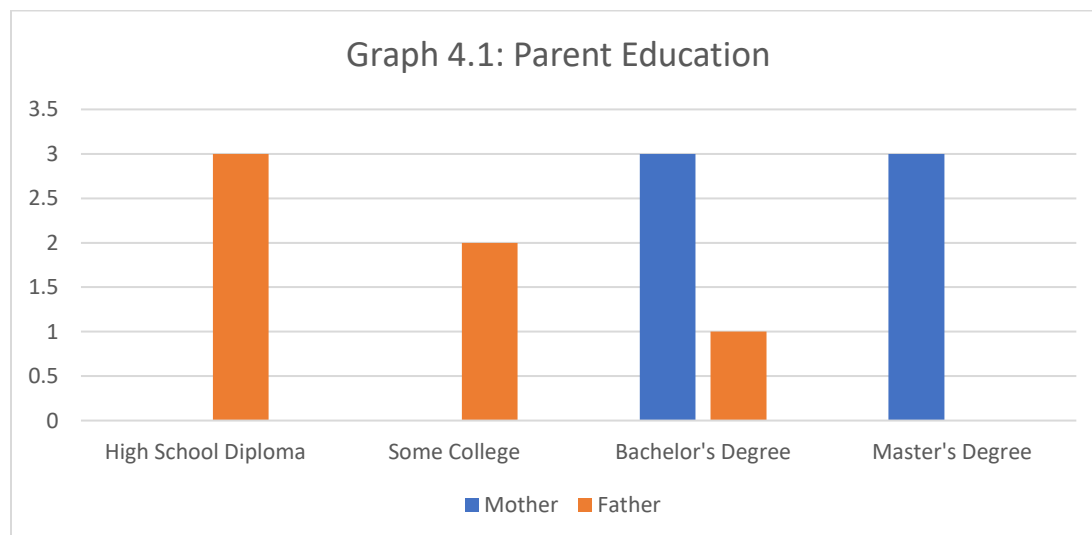
such as drugs and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships” (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Students stated that their friends could either positively or negatively impact their stress levels. One student stated that she went running when she was stressed (TT, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Another student stated that she had difficulty recognizing her own stress but would take a few deep breaths when her family told her to calm down (SS, personal communication, March 6, 2020). The remainder of the students were not able to state how they managed stress in their lives; however, they were exploring various tactile balloons during the focus group session. Students stated that they had greater difficulty completing their homework in junior high school than they did in elementary school (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020). One student admitted she needed to organize her homework, set a plan, and follow through with the plan instead of getting caught up in distractions such as going to the movies with friends (UU, personal communication, March 6, 2020). All the students agreed that grades were more important in middle school because it impacted whether they could participate in sports (focus group, personal communication, March 6, 2020). A couple of students also admitted that they would have to answer to their parents if they received poor grades (SS, & VV, personal communication, March 6, 2020). All the students stated they felt they had a greater connection with the junior high school teachers, stating they were “patient, and supportive,” as well as helpful in changing negative thinking into positive. The students stated they enjoyed the junior high school because there were more opportunities such as sports, gifted and talented program, college exploration, and extra help available for specific areas instead of global tutoring at the elementary school (focus groups, personal communication, March 6, 2020). They also stated a few negative experiences at the junior high school, such as

getting pushed around in the hallways during transitions between classes since there are so many students in the hallways and the larger class sizes. All students agreed that they preferred smaller classes with approximately 12 students. Some advice the students would give to new students entering junior high school was “smile (so people don’t think you’re mean)” (SS, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Additional advice was, “pay attention to your schedule” (XX, personal communication, March 6, 2020), “be on time to class” (YY, personal communication, March 6, 2020), “be responsible” (ZZ, personal communication, March 6, 2020), “don’t make bad decisions that have lasting consequences” (WW, personal communication, March 6, 2020).

### Parent Questionnaire

Six mothers completed the parent questionnaire. The living situation was traditional with both parents and other children living in the house, except for one household in which the student’s grandfather also lived in the house. Two of the six families had moved once in the past five years; however, they remained within this community. Graph 4.1 represents parental education level, which varied from a high school diploma to a master’s degree. Overall, mothers were more educated than the fathers of those that responded.



Graph 4.2 represents annual household income, with half of the respondents making \$75,000-\$100,000.

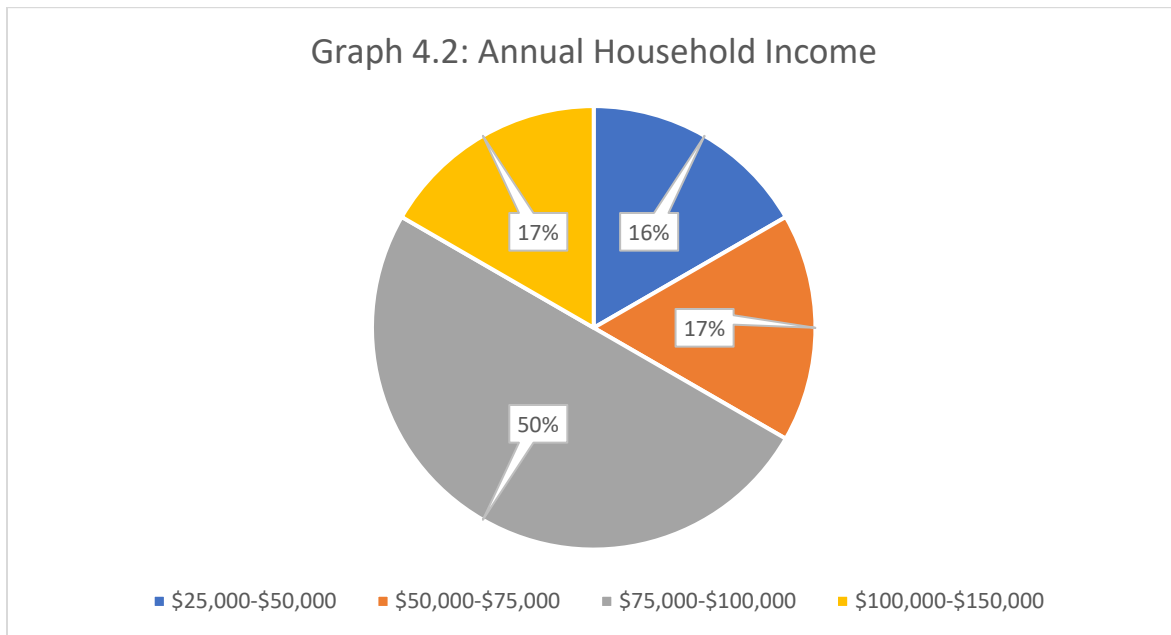


Table one represents the answers to the YES/NO questions on the parent questionnaire. Medical diagnoses reported were primarily anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. None of the students had been retained; however, one student moved to a higher grade in the middle of the fifth grade. After school sports that students participated in included: track, basketball, football, and softball. Other extracurricular activities noted were band, student council, and cheerleading. Of the four that participated in extracurricular activities, all of them participated in at least two sports/activities. Regarding connections with teachers in elementary school and junior high school, the student who did not have connections in elementary school is not the same student who did not have connections in junior high school. Half of the parents indicated that their child's grades remained the same when he/she entered the junior school, and the other half indicated that their child's grades declined upon entering junior high school.

Parental support provided for their junior high student was primarily in the form of assisting with homework.

<b>Question</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Was your child born prematurely?	0%	100%
Does your junior high student receive academic support?	33%	67%
Does your junior high school student have any medical diagnoses?	50%	50%
Does your junior high school student take any medications?	50%	50%
Has your junior high school student been retained for any grade?	0%	100%
Does your junior high school student participate in the ACE afterschool program?	33%	67%
Does your junior high school student participate in other after school sports or programs?	67%	33%
Did your child have connections with his/her elementary school teachers?	83%	17%
Have you provided support for your junior high school student?	83%	17%
Has your child made connections with his/her teachers at junior high school?	83%	17%

Table 4.1: Parent Questionnaire Responses

Parents reported that they also sought outside assistance for their child as needed, such as counseling and tutoring. One parent reported that she provides an after-school routine in which her daughter works on her homework. Parents had a variety of responses to challenges in junior high school, including naïve/sheltered students exposed to other students not doing the right thing and another student threatened as she did the right thing and told the principal about an incident. Others expressed concerns about the higher number of classes, the transitions, communication, academic concerns, and teacher relationships. Parents responded to “my child is successful in school” as follows: “socially, emotionally and academically functioning; successful

in academics and future; socially comfortable and independent; and having good relationships will all teachers.”

### **Character Traits**

A total of 34 character trait rating scales were returned. The character traits were rated based on the importance of success in junior high school on a Likert scale. The scale was as follows 5-very important, 4-somewhat important, 3- neutral, 2- not very important, 1-unimportant. Table 4.2 reflects the ratings of each trait as a total and by smaller sub-groupings.

Coping strategies and responsibility were viewed as the most essential characteristic for success in junior school by all participants. Respect and values also rated as very important in a student's success in junior high school; however, respect was not viewed as necessary by the elementary school administration, and values were not viewed as necessary by the junior high school teachers. Communication was viewed as very essential overall, however elementary administration and junior high school teachers did not view it as necessary. Parent involvement rated as very important, however elementary administration and students viewed it as less important. Relationships were also rated as very important overall; however elementary teachers only rated it as somewhat important. Social skills were rated somewhat important by elementary teachers to very important by the junior high school administration.

**Table 4.2: Character Trait Ratings**

	TOTAL	ELEM ADMIN	ELEM TEACHER	JH ADMIN	JH TEACHER	PARENT	STUDENT
Active Engagement	4.70	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.86	4.67	4.13
Adaptation/Flexibility	4.70	5.00	4.80	4.50	4.29	4.83	4.88
Caring	4.24	4.50	4.00	4.50	4.57	4.50	3.63
Citizenship/Connectedness	4.55	4.33	3.80	5.00	4.43	5.00	4.63
Communication	4.79	4.25	5.00	4.75	4.57	5.00	5.00
Context	4.38	3.75	4.80	5.00	4.57	4.50	3.88
Coping Strategies	4.94	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.86	5.00	4.88
No Discipline Referrals	3.88	3.25	3.20	3.50	4.14	4.67	4.00
Honest	4.62	4.00	4.80	4.50	4.71	5.00	4.50
Identity	4.71	4.50	4.80	4.75	4.29	5.00	4.88
Learning Style	4.53	4.00	4.00	5.00	4.29	4.67	5.00
Leisure Pursuits	4.26	3.75	3.80	3.75	4.71	4.00	4.88
Parent Involvement	4.76	4.50	4.80	5.00	4.86	5.00	4.50
Relationships	4.74	4.75	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.83	4.75
Respect	4.85	4.25	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.75
Responsibility	4.97	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.88
Self-Advocacy	4.62	4.50	4.80	4.50	4.71	4.67	4.50
Sleep/Wake Cycle	4.58	4.50	4.20	5.00	4.83	5.00	4.13
Social Skills	4.47	4.25	4.00	5.00	4.71	4.83	4.13
Study Skills	4.68	4.50	5.00	4.50	4.71	4.83	4.50
Trustworthy	4.67	4.25	4.75	4.75	4.57	4.83	4.75
Values	4.82	4.75	5.00	5.00	4.71	4.83	4.75

### Summary

Several themes emerged from the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires completed. The current transition “program” is a brief visit to the junior high campus without



addressing the skills necessary for success in junior high and not temporally effective. Both students and teachers viewed relationships as important. Coping strategies, responsibility, communication, social skills, and organization skills were deemed as necessary for success in junior high school; however, they were not part of a program to develop and improve these skills.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

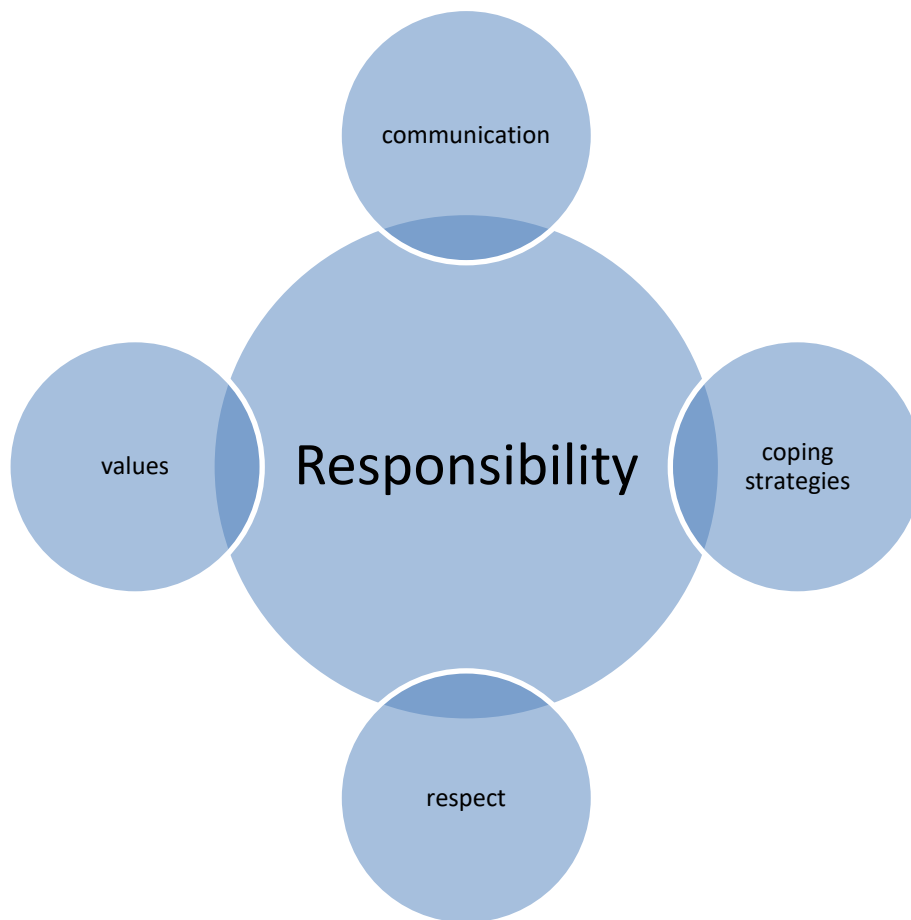
The purpose of this capstone project was to conduct a needs assessment to establish a program to address the specific skills needed for a successful transition from elementary school to junior high school. The needs assessment consisted of interviews, focus groups, parent questionnaires, and a character trait rating scale. Administrative staff of the elementary and junior high schools participated in interviews. Sixth-grade teachers from the elementary school and seventh-grade teachers from the junior high school participated in focus groups. Parents of middle school students completed questionnaires. Finally, a focus group was conducted with seventh-graders at the junior high school. This investigator obtained valuable information from interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and the character chart rating scale, for the needs assessment examining the transition process from elementary school to junior high school. According to the character chart rating scale completed by all participants, responsibility was rated as the most essential characteristic that a student needs to be successful in junior high school. Relationships with both peers and teachers were viewed as necessary, which is consistent with the literature (Coffey, 2013; Oriol et al., 2017). Coping strategies, communication, social skills, and organization skills were identified as essential skills for success in junior high school. Many of the character traits that were rated as very important to a student's success in junior high school have a significant relation to each other, often supporting

another trait. Specifically, communication, coping strategies, respect, and values-all contribute to both relationships and responsibility. The resounding themes evident from the needs assessment are discussed. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is applied to the junior high school student. The theoretical framework is revisited, considering the results of the needs assessment from the perspective of a seventh-grade student in junior high school. Data analysis using SWOT analysis determined the necessary steps for program development. The Steppin' Up for Success Program is introduced to assist sixth-grade students with a successful transition into junior high school. Finally, a discussion of the limitations with this needs assessment follows.

### **Responsibility**

The strongest necessary character trait for a student's success in junior high school is responsibility. This character trait received a 5.0 (indicating that the trait was very important in a student's success in junior high school) by all groups except the student group, which rated it a 4.88 out of 5.0. Additionally, the other top four rated character traits all support the responsibility trait. A student's values can guide their desire to be responsible for themselves. Besides, for one to be responsible, a student needs to have good communication skills and coping strategies to deal with his/her responsibility maturely. Respect, an essential component of responsibility, must be earned from adults for an adolescent to prove that he/she is responsible. In addition to these highly-rated character traits, social skills, self-advocacy, and identity can also contribute to a responsible student. The student rated the self-advocacy trait as a 4.5 out of 5.0, which was the low end of the character rating among the groups. However, this result may be because seventh-grade students have not experienced many opportunities to date to demonstrate or use their self-advocacy skills. When students discussed they had difficulty with tutoring from a specific teacher, they stated that they repeated what they had initially asked

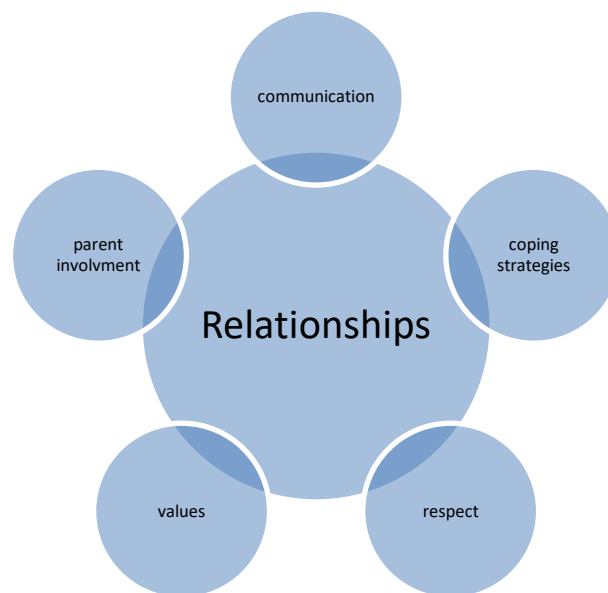
about, instead of framing the question differently. Thus, this may be an emerging skill that will develop throughout their junior high school career. The same logic could apply to identity as a junior high school student's identity evolves during the formative years of junior high school. Therefore, a seventh-grade student may not see the value in his/her own identity until later in his/her junior high school career. Effective social skills can also be a contributing character trait leading to successful, responsible students. Students need to use a myriad of social skills to navigate interactions with teachers, administrators, parents, and peers to demonstrate responsibility. See Figure 5.1 for the most influential traits that equally influence a responsible student.



**Figure 5.1: Character Traits Supporting Responsibility**

## Relationships

Relationships were rated high among all groups (administrators/teachers at elementary/junior high, parents, and students) with an average of 4.74 out of 5.0 as being very important to a student's success in junior high school. Junior high school administration and teachers rated this trait as a 5.0. When further examining the trait of relationships, many supporting traits contribute to successful relationships. Communication is necessary to discuss and manage potential conflict situations in relationships. Coping strategies are necessary for also dealing with changes in relationships throughout a student's school career as well as potential negative or positive consequences from decisions made within relationships. Values can serve as the foundation for what a student views as essential and thus can lead to various relationships. Respect for oneself and others is also a vital component in relationships to ensure the relationship has a sound foundation. Finally, parental involvement can contribute to healthy relationships with parents as well as an observance of healthy relationships in role models. See Figure 5.2 for the most influential traits that support relationships.



**Figure 5.2: Character Traits Supporting Healthy Relationships**

**Other Character Traits**

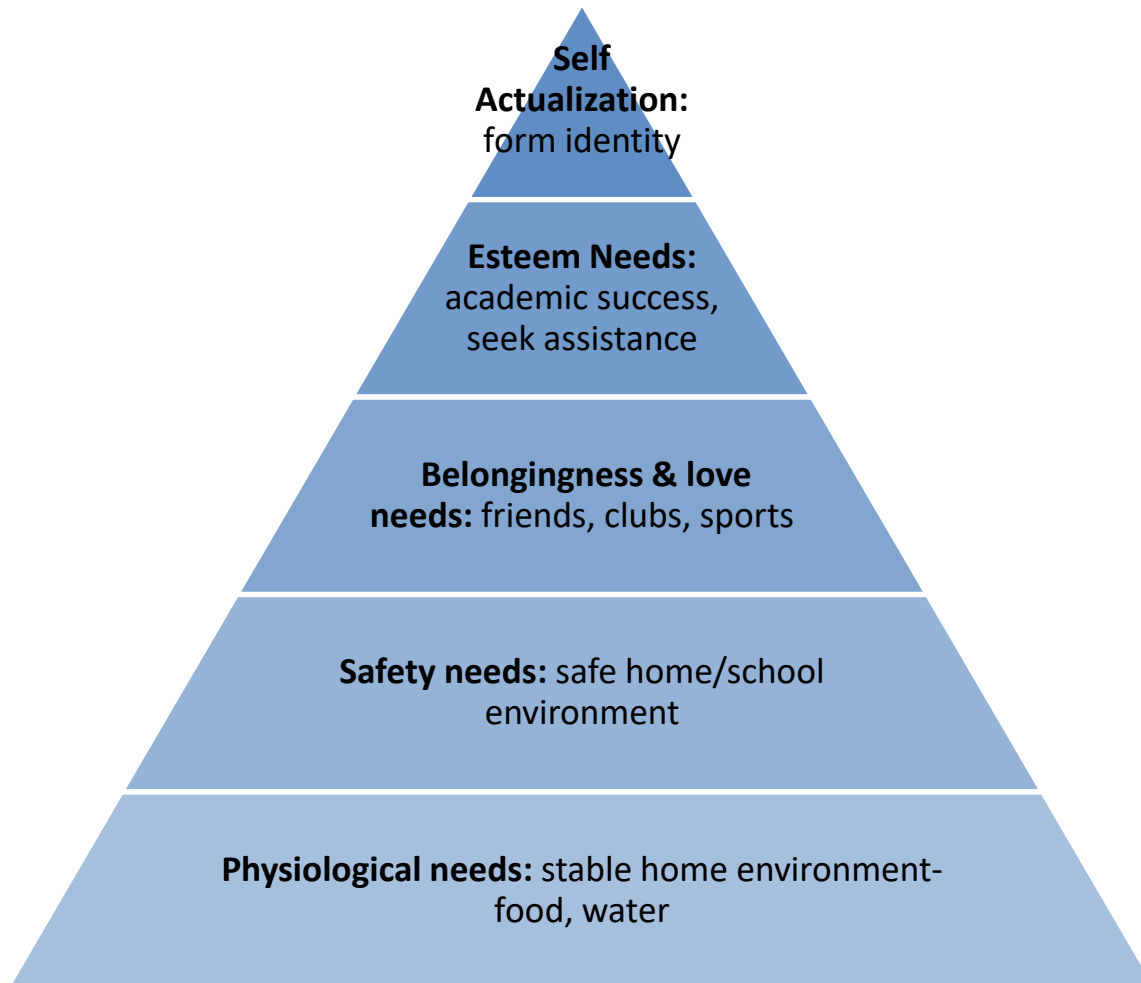
Other notable findings from the character trait rating scale were the student responses for active engagement, citizenship/connectedness, context, and leisure pursuits. The responses on the rating scale did not appear to be consistent with their discussion within the focus group. All the students were involved in extracurricular activities and were happy they were offered at the junior high school; however, they rated context as low importance; additionally, active engagement was also rated as low. Contextually, the students overwhelmingly expressed during the focus group that the junior high school was of contextual importance, as they felt as though they were contributing members of the school. The students rated leisure pursuits as very important, with an average rating of 4.88, higher than the rest of the groups, which is consistent with their extracurricular activities. Since the traits were discussed with the students as they rated each one, they may have had a different understanding of the traits than the other groups. Citizenship/connectedness varied in its rating of importance among the groups with a low of 3.8 from elementary school teachers to a high of 5.0 from junior high school administration and parents. Students rated citizenship/connectedness slightly higher than the average with a rating of 4.63. These findings could also be evidence of student maturation and the evolution of a connection with the school. Interestingly, learning style and study were rating similarly and did not fall among the most essential traits for a student to be successful in junior high school.

**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Revisited**

Based on the needs assessment completed, the students are moving through Maslow's hierarchy of needs throughout their academic career. Students need to have a stable home environment that provides adequate food and water to set the foundation for their success at school. UCISD is assisting in ensuring the physiological needs of the students are met by

providing free breakfast and lunch to all students as well as available food items throughout the day for students to eat or take home with them. Overwhelmingly, students, teachers, and junior high administration discussed the importance of safety within the school environment. Students can see the administrative presence on campus as well as a campus police officer assigned to the junior high school campus. The administrator supports a “safe and comfortable classroom culture” in which the students learn to become comfortable with themselves and can make mistakes without reprisal. The teachers discussed how the students felt comfortable to talk about any issues with them, reinforcing the safe and comfortable culture within the classroom. The students in the focus group also felt connected and safe within their classrooms to support academic learning, even when they struggled with a particular subject matter. The students’ belongingness and love were evident in their relationships with their teachers, which they said was better than their elementary teachers, as well as their connectedness to the school through sports and extracurricular activities. The students demonstrated maturity in their friend relationships, noting that shared interests can change and thus adjust friendships. The student responses included an additional indication of maturity; they expressed the ability to change the previous friendship to an acquaintance and not maintain contact through texting and social media. The students indicated esteem needs, the second highest tier of the pyramid, by seeking out assistance from teachers whether they needed help with a particular subject or to talk about something else. The focus group students also strived for academic success to ensure they could continue with their extracurricular activities and sports. The students are on their way to forming their own unique identity as they move through the stages of the hierarchy and learn more about themselves. Since their identity is still forming, it is not surprising that the identity rating did not

score as high as some of the other characteristics. See Figure 5.3 for the student hierarchy of needs.



**Figure 5.3: Student Hierarchy of Needs**

### **Occupation Revisited**

#### **Doing**

As students begin *doing* in junior high school, they are engaging in activities and beginning to realize that their decisions have consequences and are thus beginning to deal with both positive and negative consequences of their decisions and actions (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). As noted in the focus group responses from the students indicate that they are engaged in activities at the school and enjoy that aspect of junior high school. Within the

Steppin' Up for Success Program, the participants will have the opportunity of *doing*, by engaging in the various activities within the program. The occupation-based Steppin' Up for Success Program will offer *doing* opportunities for the participants to develop social skills, coping skills, and communication skills to foster positive relationships with others. This occupation-based approach will also offer individualized capabilities and provide an enjoyable and rewarding environment (Estes & Pierce, 2012).

### **Being**

The students' state of existence is in a state of flux in junior high school. Since their needs have changed since elementary school, this adds to their state of flux. The junior high students are starting to realize that they are each unique, have unique needs that may be met or unmet by different people around them. They are trying to follow the path for a safe and learning environment as they engage in various activities in junior high school. The junior high school student is discovering their *being*, as was evident in the focus group as the participants discussed the changes in their friendships from elementary school. The students are seeking to understand their prerequisites of health and their human capacity, which is essential to *being* (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Through the occupation-based Steppin' Up for Success Program, the participants will have the opportunity to explore their *being* throughout the activities offered and anticipate improvements in social skills, problem-solving skills, and coping skills (Byrne et al., 2010).

### **Belonging**

The students who participated in the focus group were trying to be recognized as members of several groups, such as sport teams, band, etc. The students are solidifying their relationships with peers as well as educators, especially those teachers who were also their



coaches, through involvement with others. Interestingly, none of the students seemed to identify with a group solely because of gender or ethnicity. As a collective group, the students expressed support of one another in response to their discussion within the focus group. The students are beginning to realize that their relationships often provide a positive environment and that they seek comfort in *belonging* with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The Steppin' Up for Success Program will offer *belonging* opportunities for the participants on an individual level, a group level, as well as a broader school level. The participants will experience comfort, security, and inclusion within the Steppin' Up for Success Program (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015)

### **Becoming**

The students in the focus group are at the periphery of *becoming*. They can recognize and acknowledge that their grades are necessary to participate in their extracurricular activities, and they are beginning to take ownership of themselves to hold themselves accountable to seek out necessary assistance to achieve the grades that they need. The participants will start to experience *becoming* in the Steppin' Up for Success Program as it will provide the "just right" challenge of occupational engagement (Price & Miner, 2007). The participants will have the opportunity to evolve in self-actualization and *becoming* through the reflective nature of the journaling exercise in the Steppin' Up for Success Program.

## **Theoretical Framework Revisited**

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

The social cognitive theory views the interdependent relationship and the interactions between the person, behavior, and the environment as a critical component (Bandura, 1977). This concept is essential for the junior high school student who is beginning to navigate a new environment and engage in different behaviors to formulate the person that they will become.

The junior high students are beginning to develop their self-advocacy skills to motivate changes they make in their lives (Bandura, 2004). The social cognitive theory provides the groundwork for the Steppin' Up for Success Program to provide opportunities for participants to explore self-efficacy, outcome expectations, reciprocal determinism, and human agency (Bandura, 1977, 2004, 2006).

### **Paulo Freire's Liberation Education Model**

Paulo Freire's Liberation Education Model sets the stage for people to be responsible for their own learning (Freire, 1970). Through taking responsibility for one's learning, one develops critical consciousness to manage various life situations (Freire, 1970). The students within the focus group acknowledged that they are beginning to accept responsibility for their own learning and making adjustments within their lives to accomplish it. However, the students did not realize the importance of self-advocacy to take responsibility for their own learning. Also, the Steppin' Up for Success Program will provide the students with tools for them to use within their quest for becoming responsible for their learning. This is a crucial skill for future educational success. The Steppin' Up for Success Program will also offer empowerment opportunities for the students as they take on different roles within the program.

### **Ecology of Human Performance Model**

The ecology of human performance model expands the environmental context, to be dynamic and more than the physical environment, as well as inseparable from occupation and human performance (Dunn et al., 1994). The environment for the junior high school student is changing both physically and contextually. While the size of the elementary school is the same as the junior high school, the layout is more spread out, and the students transition independently all over the school campus instead of "transitioning" to the classroom next door. Thus, both the

physical environment has changed as well as their freedom of movement within the environment. Also, the temporal context has changed in that the hours of the school day start later and end later, as well as additional time that the student devotes to extracurricular activities and thus must manage their homework differently to complete it promptly to obtain sufficient grades to continue with their extracurricular activities. The social context of junior high school has changed as well as student friendships are changing; some friends are becoming acquaintances while some acquaintances are becoming friends. Thus, the student needs to navigate this changing social context while preparing for more mature relationships. The student is influenced by the entire contextual environment to shape the person they are becoming and impact their occupational engagement and their resultant human performance.

**Intervention.** The ecology of human performance presents five areas of intervention as establish/restore, alter, adapt, prevent, and create (Dunn et al., 1994). The occupation-based Steppin' Up for Success Program will utilize all these intervention areas. The Steppin' Up for Success Program will assist students in *establishing* those skills that are necessary to be successful in junior high school. In addition to establishing, *altering* or changing the contextual environment allows improved occupational engagement. *Adapting* may be necessary based on the skill set of the participants, which would ensure that the intervention is client-centered and individually focused. The Steppin' Up for Success Program is also a *prevention* intervention in that it is preparing students to have positive mental health and thus, resiliency to prevent “maladaptive performance” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 604) within their contextual environments. Finally, the Steppin' Up for Success Program is creating experiences in which participants enhance their personal variables to “promote more adaptable behavior or complex performance” (Dunn et al., 1994, p. 604).

### **Coping Frame of Reference**

Coping is a cognitive skill and a component of the adaptive process for a child to deal with their contextual environment (social, physical, temporal, or cultural) and various situations that they encounter (Williamson & Szczepanski, 1999). In a study with 123 young adolescents, engaged coping was found to be significantly associated with academic adjustment, and engaged planning significantly predicted improved academic performance. The student focus group indicated that they could identify some stressful situations; however, they often had to be told about their increased stress level by someone else. Fewer students were able to state any coping strategies to deal with the stressful situations which they encountered. The Steppin' Up for Success Program will offer opportunities for the participants to learn and practice different coping strategies in various stressful situations. The participants will also have the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of their coping strategies through the use of the journaling experience throughout the program.

### **SWOT Analysis**

The needs assessment identified many strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats when examining the transition from elementary school to junior high school. See Figure 5.4 for a diagram of the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.



**Figure 5.4: SWOT Analysis**

### **Strengths**

Strengths identified through the needs assessment process were supportive staff who were eager to make changes to help students achieve a successful transition between elementary school and junior high school. The students who participated in the focus group had the unexpected insight and desire to achieve; however, this select group of students was motivated to achieve because of their extracurricular activities. These students could be ambassadors to a transition program to welcome the incoming sixth graders to junior high school in the future. UCISD is committed to ensuring the students have adequate nutrition during the school day, weekends, summer, and school breaks.

### **Weaknesses**

The foremost observable weakness is the lack of a transition program and the timing of the field trip to the junior high school. A recurrent theme among staff was the lack of parental support from parents who needed to be involved. Thus, consistent parental support is a weakness. Another challenge is the academic weakness of the students entering junior high

school. Since many students are entering junior high school with academic struggles, it is difficult for them to meet the demands of the junior high school curriculum. Transportation is also a weakness since for a student to participate in extracurricular activities, he/she would need to be transported reliably to practices and games. The final weakness is the lack of opportunity for after school engagement for the students who are bused from 20 miles away. They do not have access to tutoring since it occurs after school.

### **Opportunities**

Opportunities for program development derive from many sources. For the student, there are opportunities for extracurricular activities and tutoring to assist them with their academic achievement and goal attainment. The staff was open to explore various ways to improve the transition process. During the interview with the junior high school administrator, he stated a few ideas that could improve the current field trip. Relationships with teachers can also be an opportunity, as some students indicated they did not connect with all of their teachers. There is also a training opportunity to conduct with teachers to assist with nurturing productive relationships with their students. Finally, the community support to help students succeed is an opportunity to build community relations and expand student exposure and networking.

### **Threats**

Threats to student success are drug and gang exposure, which creates challenging and stressful situations for students. Students who are exposed to drugs and gangs must stand up for themselves and not succumb to peer pressure. They may also have to act responsibly to inform a staff member of illegal activity. Another threat to student success is the decreased value placed on education. Students who have limited exposure to professional role models may not see the value in education because they do not see how it can help them. Since many people within the

city do not have a high school diploma, much less a college degree, students may not see the value in education or expect to continue their education to graduate high school and attend college.

### **Evidence-based Practice**

Tăușan (2011) reinforced the difficulty in transitioning from elementary school to middle school, precisely because of the student's fragile emotional and mental imbalance in the face of identity formation in which adaptive behaviors are integrated. The student is experiencing increased academic demands which require a variety of cognitive skills and critical thinking to manage to study for different subjects from different teachers with varying teaching styles (Tăușan, 2011). Social acceptance, emotional functioning, and peer difficulties were all identified as determinants in a child's enjoyment and intensity of participation in leisure activities (King et al., 2013). When examining social competence, four themes emerged as the importance of social skills, the effects of poor social skills, difficulties with planning and problem-solving in social situations, and the impact of social competence on occupational performance (Carman & Chapparo, 2012). The study with ten participants and their mothers revealed that social participation was perceived to be integral for occupational performance (Carman & Chapparo, 2012). Furthermore, children in the study indicated that their social skills were sufficient for individual situations, however not for group situations.

A qualitative study with 14 middle school teachers revealed common themes around social challenges with students in middle school (Gontijo et al., 2012). These findings solidify the role of occupational therapy working with junior high school students to improve their social skills to ensure appropriate social engagement and to collaborate with teachers for social competence within the school setting. Some reasons for chronic absenteeism in adolescents are

social factors, perceived lack of safety, poor school climate, economic disadvantage, and unreliable transportation (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten, & Rollins, 2018). Two themes when evaluating student success at a charter school, were important and helpful relationships with teachers and the charter school family (Tichy, 2017). In a case study involving 16 schools, higher academic performance related to actively promoting trusting and respectful relationships among students, teachers, administrators, and community members (Wilcox, 2011). In a study with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, children's sense of responsibility to parents and school engagement during early adolescence may protect children from moving away from school (Qu & Pomerantz, 2015; Qu, Pomerantz, Wang, Cheung, & Cimpian, 2016). Gifted students benefited from direct teaching about self-advocacy in four areas of understanding their rights/responsibilities, assessing personal learning styles, investigating alternative experiences, and connecting with people who can bring about change (Douglas, 2004).

Four themes were identified when analyzing the effectiveness of interventions used by occupational therapists in mental health. The four themes were professional artistry, facilitating occupational engagement, pacing to support client goal achievement, and inclusion to promote client participation and a sense of belonging (Wimpenny, Savin-Baden, & Cook, 2014). Therefore, occupational therapy interventions need to provide opportunities for occupational engagement, self-discovery, identity formation, and community participation for belonging. Collaborative relationships with other professionals are critical in program implementation. Examining collaboration between teachers and occupational therapists identifies five primary themes as collaboration benefits, collaboration methods, attitudes, collaboration obstacles, and overcoming obstacles (Hargreaves, Nakhooda, Mottay, & Subramoney, 2012). Limited knowledge about occupational therapy, teacher attitudes, and time can be barriers to the



collaborative process, which offer opportunities for growth to improve the process (Hargreaves et al., 2012).

### **Steppin' Up for Success Program**

Based upon the needs assessment and evidence-based practice, an occupation-based school community program (Steppin' Up for Success) will address occupations and character development. There will be five-hour sessions (ideally 10:00 am -3:00 pm) four days for a week before starting junior high school. One session will be in the morning from 10:00 am-12:00 pm. Lunch will be provided from 12:00 pm-1:00 pm. A second session will be in the afternoon from 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm. Two moderators (one will be the occupational therapist, and one will be a guest moderator) will lead the groups, and two assistants will also be available to assist with the small group activities. There will be a total of twelve student participants, who will be randomly selected from the incoming seventh-grade students who are interested in participating. Ideally, there will be some English Learner students within the group of participants. The modules will be occupation-based and include a character component. The modules will follow a general format (see Appendix I). Small groups will consist of four participants and will change throughout the program; thus, the small groups will not be the same every time. The dyad and small group component of the program will provide opportunities for “listening-dialogue-action-reflection” (Minkler, 2012, p. 66). This collaborative process will also allow reflection upon actions, goals, and outcomes, which will lead to critical consciousness. If the small group dynamics are such that the groups are non-productive, the moderators will assign small group membership to ensure successful pairings based on the strengths and needs of each student.

### **Introduction to Occupation and Character**

An overview of the program modules will be provided, and the expectations of participation will be reviewed. The six pillars of character values and occupation will be introduced. Ideally, two occupational therapists will lead this session; however, a school counselor could serve as the second moderator. Ground rules within the group setting will be established and agreed upon. All students will sign the ground rules as well as a commitment to participate form. The commitment to participate will delineate the attendance and timeliness expectation, as well as the active participation requirement. An ice-breaker activity will allow the students to get to know one another. Each participant will have to obtain one piece of interesting information about five different students and then report the information to the group. The participants will also take one candid photo during the group session that is a visual representation of something that they want to discuss. Participants will engage in an occupation activity. Two beach balls will be used with words in the sections. One ball will have six character words and one ball will have six occupation words (occupation, well-being, balance, hidden occupations, main occupations). The balls will be on a giant parachute and the participants will be in a circle holding the edges of the parachute. They will toss the parachute in the air for one minute and try to keep the balls in the middle of the parachute. Each student will have a turn to get one beach ball and talk about one of the words on the ball to obtain an understanding of the concepts discussed. This activity will also guide moderators to determine what information needs to be clarified. The group will then look at various pictures to identify emotions within the pictures. The moderators will complete a closing activity. Participants will have homework to write in their journals about the occupations and character traits of the module

they see in their lives. They will also take pictures, representing the occupations and/or character traits discussed.

### **Sleep/rest Occupations and Trustworthiness**

The guest moderator for this module will be a social worker or a family specialist. The two moderators will review the previous session as an example for the participants who will summarize the remaining sessions. The group will divide into three smaller groups (which will be led by a student participant) to discuss their pictures. The leader of the group will then share with the entire group. Sleep and rest occupations, balance, barriers/enablers, occupational performance related to sleep/rest, and trustworthiness will be introduced. The small group activity will focus on trust, as one student will be blindfolded and led through an obstacle course by the other student. In the parachute activity, the participants (a dyad) will incorporate a word from two different balls and discuss how they interact.

### **Active Occupations and Caring**

The guest moderator for this module will be the adaptive physical education coach. Active occupations will be discussed, and participants will share their own active occupations. Balance and imbalance of active occupations and caring will be discussed. Occupational performance will be evaluated in both balanced and unbalanced situations. Caring will be introduced to facilitate the discussion that illustrates both individual and community caring. The small group activity will focus on the skills needed for active occupations. The groups will choose two active occupations and list skills that are necessary for the occupations.

### **Communication in Occupations and Respect**

The guest moderator for this module will be a speech-language pathologist. Forms of communication will be discussed, including verbal, non-verbal, written, virtual, and social

media. The vital role of an active and attentive listener will be emphasized, and respect will be discussed. The positive and negative influences of communication on respect will be discussed as well. Skits will solidify the differences in various forms of communication. Communication break downs and repair options will be discussed. The impact of good and bad communication on occupations will be explored. The small group activity will be sharing a failed communication experience and one way that it can be repaired.

### **Occupational Disruption and Responsibility**

The family specialist or the psychologist from Community Health Development, Inc. will be the guest moderator for this module. Barriers for occupational engagement is the discussion topic, which includes sickness/injury, fatigue, nutrition, skill ability, emotions, mental ill-health, positive mental health, and other factors. These barriers are categorized into physical, cognitive, affective, and temporal components. The group will share solutions for overcoming the barriers. The participants will discuss responsibility as it pertains to individual, family, and community contexts. The impact of responsibility on occupational engagement will be explored. The small group activity for this module is to identify an example of an individual, family, and/or community responsibility from their lives and share with the small group.

### **Coping Occupations and Fairness**

The family specialist or the psychiatrist from Community Health Development, Inc. is the guest moderator for this module. Emotions and dealing with challenging emotional situations are the focus of this module. Strategies to deal with emotions will be introduced and practiced. Some strategies are sensory strategies, relaxation techniques, action plans, and back-up plans. The impact of emotions and inadequate coping mechanisms on occupational performance will be discussed. Fairness will also be explored and discussed in the context of coping with different

situations. The small group activity for this module is to complete a timed puzzle; however, they will not have all the pieces to the puzzle, nor will they have enough time to complete it. They will not be able to talk with each other and will not be able to ask questions. The moderator will be stating the number of seconds left to complete the project. After the activity, the small groups will discuss their feelings about the activity and discuss strategies to deal with the frustrating situation.

### **Values, Identity Occupations, and Citizenship**

Ideally, two occupational therapists will moderate this module, or a social worker can substitute for one occupational therapist. In this module, the discussion will center around values and citizenship and the connection between the two. Citizenship within the school and community will be discussed and compared. If available, the mayor or another civic leader could be a guest speaker. The small group assignment for this session will be developing a personal mission statement. Additional assistants will be available for this session to facilitate if necessary.

### **Round-up**

Ideally, two occupational therapists will lead the final session; however, a school counselor could also fulfill this role. All the modules will be reviewed and discussed. Photos will be reviewed and discussed. The participants will select some of the pictures to create a collage representing the group. The small group activity for this session will be to develop a mission statement for the group. Finally, the participants will discuss the personal achievements they have made and positive experiences from the program.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations with this needs assessment process exploring the transition from elementary school to junior high school. There are several limitations within the sampling: not much variation in the education level of the parents, who were primarily professionals from middle-class families known to this investigator, and the small sample sizes. In the elementary school, there were only eight possible teachers to participate in the focus group; thus it was complicated to obtain all eight of them for the focus group. The elementary school focus group of five was a small sample size. Another potential limitation with the elementary school teachers is the fact that they had all worked together for a long time and may have discussed similarly themed ideas in the past and thus did not have many variations in their responses. In the student focus group, the girls were much more talkative and often dominated the discussion. In the future, conducting two focus groups, one with boys and one with girls, may be helpful to ensure all students can participate fully in the discussion and to determine if there are differences between the needs of the boys and girls. The administrator interviewed at the elementary school was the assistant principal. Multiple attempts were made to make an appointment with the principal; however, she was unavailable. Reportedly, students coming from the smaller feeder schools have greater difficulty in junior high school, it would be beneficial in the future to talk to some of those students to ensure their needs are met. The student focus group was primarily made up of athletes since those were parents known to this investigator. When the students completed the character trait rating scale, they had questions about each trait. With this development, the investigator discussed each trait with the group as they rated the importance. No other participants asked for clarification regarding the rating scale; however, it was typically completed in isolation without the therapist present; therefore it is unknown if others needed

clarification for the scale. Finally, there are no commercially available products to evaluate the school readiness for junior high school or the effectiveness of a student's transition from elementary school to junior high school or what is necessary for a successful transition from elementary school to junior high school.

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## Appendix A

## Consent Form

**Participation in Transition Needs Assessment Consent Form**

You are being invited to participate in a focus that is being conducted by a Doctorate of Occupational Therapy (DrOT) student at Nova Southeastern University. The focus group will last approximately 45 minutes in which the students will be asked questions about the transition from elementary school to junior high school.

**Purpose of the study:**

The purpose of this study is to gather, analyze and synthesize information regarding the involvement of Occupational Therapy (OT) practitioners in the successful provision of student transition between elementary school and junior high school.

Participation in this program is voluntary.

**Benefits of this study:**

Your information will be used to contribute to occupational therapy practice.

**Confidentiality:**

All names will be deidentified and FERPA rules will be followed.

**Withdrawal:**

Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time. You also may choose to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

**Contact information:**

If you have concerns or questions about this program, please contact Darlene F. Guckenberger, MS, OTR/L at 727-560-0244. She is being supervised by Nicole Quint, Dr. OT, OTR/L at 954-262-1526.

By signing the form below, you acknowledge that you have read this information and agree to participate in this program, and have your responses written and shared, with the knowledge that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time.

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

## Student Focus Group Questions

- What did you like about elementary school?
- What do you like about middle school?
- Tell me about your friends? What do you do together? How have your friendships changed since elementary school?
- Tell me about the teachers who are important to you in middle school? Tell me about the teachers who were important to you in elementary school?
- Tell me about who has helped you in middle school? Explain.
- Who is your favorite teacher in middle school? Why? Who was your favorite teacher in elementary school? Why?
- What do you look forward to in middle school? What did you look forward to in elementary school? Explain.
- What has been the hardest adjustment/change from elementary school to middle school?
- What could have helped with the difficult adjustment?
- What piece of advice would you give students entering middle school?

## Appendix C

## Teacher Focus Group Questions

- Describe your teaching style.
- Describe your classroom.
- How long have you taught junior high school?
- Tell me how students prepare for the transition to junior high school?
- Which students struggle more as they enter junior high school- girls/boys?
- Describe type of support you have provided to students new to junior high school.
- Are students prepared for the academic demands of junior high school? Explain.
- Are students prepared for the social demands of junior high school? Explain.
- Does elementary school behavior predict junior high school behavior?
- What do you see as the greatest challenge for students entering junior high school?
- How would you describe your relationships with your students?
- What one piece of advice would you give students entering junior high school?

## Appendix D

## Parent Questionnaire

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_ Ages of children living in your home? \_\_\_\_\_

Circle other family living in the home: spouse, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, great grandmother, great grandfather, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew

How many times has your family moved in the past 5 years? 1 2 3 4 5 or more

Education level of mother: HS diploma Some College Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree

Education level of father: HS diploma Some College Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree

Household income: under \$25k \$25k-\$50k \$50k-\$75k \$75k-\$100k \$100-\$150k \$151k+

Age of junior high school student? \_\_\_\_\_ Was the student born prematurely? YES NO

Does your junior high school student receive academic support? YES NO If yes, in what capacity? \_\_\_\_\_

Does your junior high school student have any medical diagnoses? YES NO If yes, what? \_\_\_\_\_

Does your junior high school student take any medications? YES NO If yes, what? \_\_\_\_\_

Has your junior high school student been retained for any grade? YES NO If so, what grade and why? \_\_\_\_\_

Does your junior high school student participate in the ACE afterschool program? YES NO

Does your junior high school student participate in other after school sports or programs? YES NO If so, what? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you like about the elementary school experience? \_\_\_\_\_

Did your child have connections with his/her elementary school teachers? YES NO If so, who? \_\_\_\_\_

What have you liked about the junior high school experience? \_\_\_\_\_

What challenges has your child experienced as he/she entered junior high school? \_\_\_\_\_

What does "my child is successful in school" mean to you? \_\_\_\_\_

Did your child's grades **improve**, **decline**, or **stay the same** upon entering junior high school? (circle one)

Have you provided support for your junior high school student? YES NO Explain \_\_\_\_\_

Has your child made connections with his/her teachers at junior high school? YES NO If so, which teachers? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

## Administration Interview Questions

How long have you been an administrator? \_\_\_\_\_

In what capacity have you been an administrator? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been with UCISD? \_\_\_\_\_

- Is there a transition program for preparing students to attend junior high school?
- What is currently in place to prepare students for the transition from elementary school to junior high?
- Who participates in the transition program?
- Are there specific skills that are addressed in the current transition program?
- What has been successful about the transition program from elementary school to junior high?
- What do you think would help the current transition program?
- What do you think is the hardest part for the student in the transition from elementary school to junior high?
- What would you say is the single greatest factor in the success of a student in elementary school?

In junior high?

- Do you encourage student-teacher connections? If so, in what capacity?
- What one piece of advice would you give students as they enter junior high school?

## Appendix F

## Characteristic Trait Rating Scale

<b>Active Engagement</b> <i>involvement in a life situation</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Adaptation/Flexibility</b> <i>modification to accomplish a task</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Caring</b> <i>arranging or providing care for others</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Citizenship/Connectedness</b> <i>viewed as a member of school community</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Communication</b> <i>sending, receiving, interpreting information</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Context</b> <i>interrelated conditions within and around a person which influences performance</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Coping Strategies</b> <i>Dealing with difficulties adequately</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>No Discipline Referrals</b> <i>Problem behavior handled by school admin.</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Honest-</b> <i>sincere, honorable</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Identity</b> <i>sense of who one is and wishes to become</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Learning Style</b> <i>how the student learns material presented</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Leisure Pursuits</b> <i>participating in a non-obligatory activity which is intrinsically motivating (i.e., extracurricular activities)</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Parent Involvement</b> <i>amount of parent participation in child's school life</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Relationships</b> <i>connection with others</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Respect</b> <i>shows regard/consideration for others</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Responsibility</b> <i>accountable for one's self</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Self- Advocacy</b> <i>advocating to make one's own decisions</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Sleep/wake cycle</b> <i>alertness/lethargy at school; energy level</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Social Skills</b> <i>performance skills for reciprocal social exchange</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Study Skills</b> <i>efficient strategies for learning</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Trustworthy</b> <i>dependable, reliable</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant
<b>Values-</b> <i>acquired beliefs and commitments</i>	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Not Very Important	Unimportant

## Appendix G

## Brief COPE

1. Active Coping ( $\alpha = .68$ )  
I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.  
I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.
2. Planning ( $\alpha = .73$ )  
I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.  
I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.
3. Positive Reframing ( $\alpha = .64$ )  
I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.  
I've been looking for something good in what is happening.
4. Acceptance ( $\alpha = .57$ )  
I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.  
I've been learning to live with it.
5. Humor ( $\alpha = .73$ )  
I've been making jokes about it.  
I've been making fun of the situation.
6. Religion ( $\alpha = .82$ )  
I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.  
I've been praying or meditating.
7. Using Emotional Support ( $\alpha = .71$ )  
I've been getting emotional support from others.  
I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.
8. Using Instrumental Support ( $\alpha = .64$ )  
I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.  
I've been getting help and advice from other people.
9. Self-Distraction ( $\alpha = .71$ )  
I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.  
I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV,  
reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.
10. Denial ( $\alpha = .54$ )  
I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."  
I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.
11. Venting ( $\alpha = .50$ )  
I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.  
I've been expressing my negative feelings.
12. Substance Use ( $\alpha = .90$ )  
I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.  
I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.
13. Behavioral Disengagement ( $\alpha = .65$ )  
I've been giving up trying to deal with it.  
I've been giving up the attempt to cope.
14. Self-Blame ( $\alpha = .69$ )  
I've been criticizing myself.  
I've been blaming myself for things that happened.



## Appendix H

## Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)

Response Scale Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements currently applies to your relationship with this student.

1=Definitely does not apply

2=Not really

3=Neutral, not sure

4=Applies somewhat

5=Definitely applies

## Items

1. I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.
2. This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.
3. If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.
4. This child is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me.
5. This child values his/her relationship with me.
6. When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.
7. This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.
8. This child easily becomes angry at me.
9. It is easy to be in tune with what this student is feeling.
10. This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.
11. Dealing with this child drains my energy.
12. When this child arrives in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult day.
13. This child's feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.
14. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.
15. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experience with me.

Factors: Closeness 1, 3, 4R, 5, 6, 7, 9, 15; Conflict 2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Scoring Subscale scores are the mean of included items. Item 4 is reverse-scored.

## Appendix I

## Steppin' Up for Success Program Format

**Dates:** August 2020 (4 consecutive days before school starts)

**Location:** Junior High School

**Time:** 10:00 A.M.-3:00 P.M. (5 hours each day, lunch provided)

**Participants:** 12 incoming seventh graders

**Goal:** Teach performance skills and provide resources for students to improve their occupational engagement to ensure a successful transition from elementary school to junior high school

**Expected Outcomes:**

1. Participants will improve their social skills to improve their relationships with others.
2. Participants will articulate coping strategies to deal with daily stressors.
3. Participants will improve their communication skills to improve both their relationships with others, their conflict resolution skills, and their self-advocacy.
4. Participants will demonstrate the ability to advocate for themselves.
5. The participants will demonstrate problem solving skills to deal with challenges presented to them throughout the school day.

**Topics**

**Day 1: Occupation/Character Introduction; Sleep/rest Occupations and**

**Trustworthiness***Morning Session:*

- Review program format and establish ground rules
- Introduction to occupations, including sleep/rest, values, identity, communication, occupational disruption, and occupational balance
- Introduction to character traits, including trustworthiness, caring, respect, responsibility, fairness, and citizenship

*Afternoon session:*

- Review balance of sleep/rest occupations and resultant occupational performance
- Discuss occupational balance, including barriers and enablers
- Introduce trustworthiness and its impact on individual relationships and connectedness within the school

### **Day 2: Active Occupations, Caring, Communication, and Respect**

*Morning Session:*

- Review active occupations, including leisure
- Discuss occupational balance, including demands of school, family, and friends
- Introduce caring and its impact on individual relationships and connectedness within the school

*Afternoon session:*

- Introduce communication, including non-verbal, verbal, and virtual
- Explore communication breakdowns and strategies to repair them
- Introduce respect and its impact on individual relationships and connectedness within the school

### **Day 3: Occupational Disruption, Responsibility, Coping, and Fairness**

*Morning Session:*

- Discuss barriers for occupational engagement, including physical, cognitive, affective, and temporal components
- Problem solve solutions for barriers to occupational engagement
- Introduce respect and its impact on individual relationships and connectedness within the school

*Afternoon session:*

- Review emotions, including anger, love, tension and anxiety
- Discuss emotional regulation and strategies for successful emotional balance
- Introduce fairness and its impact on individual relationships and connectedness within the school

### **Day 4: Values, Identity, Citizenship, and Round-up**

*Morning Session:*

- Introduce value perspectives, including individual and community

- Explore identity, including personal mission statements
- Introduce citizenship and its impact on individual relationships and connectedness within the school

*Afternoon session:*

- Review occupations and character traits presented in the program
- Develop group mission statement
- Discuss personal achievements

**Educational Techniques:** Large group for didactic information, small group break-out sessions, journaling exercises, experiential learning opportunities