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THE MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS: STUDENT  
PERCEPTIONS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### THE MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

By Eileen Irby Atkinson, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

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Students transitioning into the middle school often experience difficulty adjusting to their new environment. During this transition, declines in academic motivation, academic achievement, and connectedness have been noted. Most research on this transition has taken place in public school settings. This research investigated the impact of the middle school transition in a private school setting. This study examined students' perceptions of the middle school transition as it related to the connectedness students perceived to their new school, those individuals whom students perceived as most helpful during their transition, academic motivation and achievement following the transition, and perceived helpfulness of transition activities conducted by the school. In addition, the study examined significant differences of the transition experience based on gender and race.

Five hundred and two private middle school students in 35 private schools in Virginia completed a paper and pencil survey in which they responded to 47 questions

regarding their transition into middle school. It was found that students generally felt connected to middle school, and the number of extracurricular activities in which a student participated did not appear to correlate significantly with connectedness. Most new middle school students did not perceive their transition experience as difficult. Middle school teachers, parents and friends appeared to be the most helpful to students during their transition. As compared to elementary school, newly transitioned middle school students were more academically motivated, and academic achievement showed a slight improvement in middle school. Students reported that visits made to the middle school as an elementary student were most helpful to their transition, and that the summer orientation and tour were also found to be helpful.

Males perceived parents, middle school teachers and elementary school counselors as more helpful to their transition than did females, who considered friends most helpful. Parents were perceived as most helpful to the transition by Asian students. Caucasians reported higher academic achievement in middle school than African American students, and African American students perceived their academic achievement as higher than that of Hispanic students. African American students, more than any of the other groups represented, believed that the information given to the middle school by the elementary school was very helpful to their transition. Native American students, and students identifying their race as “Other” felt that the assignment of an older middle school buddy was more helpful to the transition than did Caucasian or Hispanic students.

In terms of the relative contribution of the variables to the prediction of ease of transition, the number of transition activities has the greatest influence, followed by level

of support from others, perception of connectedness to middle school, and middle school academic performance.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

Current research shows that for many young adolescents, the transition that students make as they move from elementary school into middle school can be an extremely stressful life event (Smith, 1997; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Odegaard & Heath, 1993; Irvin, 1992). Most students move from a small, nurturing elementary school into a larger environment characterized by subject area departmentalization and increasing academic demands (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). Along with increased responsibilities, students at the middle school level often have several different teachers with varying expectations, and relationships with those teachers are often weaker than at the elementary school level (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998). Eccles et al (1993) found that a student's academic motivation and attitude towards school are related to the quality of the student-teacher relationship. A decline in the perceived value and usefulness of subject matter has been noted in students moving from a highly supportive elementary school teacher to one who provides less support in middle school (Eccles et al, 1993). Not all students experience negative outcomes related to transition to middle school (Gardner and Carpenter, 1984). Some students are able to adjust to the changes and remain resilient. Students have identified having more freedom, changing classes, opportunities to play sports, having

expanded elective options, and having a wider choice of friends, as some of the most positive effects of transitioning into a different level of schooling (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Nevertheless, many researchers have considered the negative effects of the middle school transition as a serious problem for students, and much research has been conducted in this area. Declines in academic achievement following this transition have been identified (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman, Maher, & Midgley, 1999; Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Diemert, 1992; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). More specifically, Alspaugh (1998) found a significant loss in achievement for students transitioning into sixth grade as compared to sixth graders attending K-8 schools.

Indeed, statistics show that academic performance of American eighth graders has dropped significantly between the fourth and eighth grades. Results of the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessment show that American fourth graders scored at the international average in math and 28 points above the national average in science. In 2003, these same students as eighth graders scored 22 points below the international average in math and nine points below the international average in science (Juvonen, Le, Kagnoff, Augustine and Constant, 2004). Moreover, the 2003 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) found that out of 29 countries, America's 15-year olds ranked 24<sup>th</sup> in math literacy and problem solving. Additionally, even though middle schools comprise only 14 percent of Title I schools in 2004-2005,

they constituted 37 percent of Title I schools deemed needing improvement as related to the No Child Left Behind Act (Yecke, 2005).

There seems to be evidence that grade configuration may make a difference to academic achievement. A 1992 study using data from the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) showed that eighth graders in K-8, K-9 and 3-8 settings performed better than eighth graders in other configurations including 6-12, 7-12 and 8-12 (Wihry, 1992). A report in Philadelphia concluded that high poverty K-8 schools have higher test scores than high poverty middle schools. This report is significant in that socioeconomic factors are equal, leading the researchers to hypothesize that the transition to middle school may have a negative effect (Balfanz, Spiridakis and Neld, 2002). Contradicting this finding is a 2002 study performed in Dade County, Florida in which Stanford 9 Reading Comprehension and Mathematics scores were compared. In the study, both K-8 and middle school students began the sixth grade with identical mean scale scores. K-8 students showed greater improvement through the eighth grade, but by ninth grade, the scores showed no statistical difference. The same pattern was found for mathematics scores (Abella, 2000).

Student self-concept of ability and motivation also experience decline during this transition (Wingfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Researchers have discovered evidence of decline in student self-perception and self-esteem related with the transition from elementary school to middle school (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Mullins and Irvin (2000) found that motivation decreased during the transition into middle school. They also reported that students who were aggressive,



disruptive, and frequently truant in elementary school, became even more so following their transition into middle school. Results of research by Kagan and Neuman (1998) found that students not having effective transitions are more likely to have problems making friends, are less successful academically, and may be prone to mental health issues.

A lack of connections with teachers and peers has been found to be related to disengagement from school, which manifests itself in lower achievement and an increase in negative behaviors following the transition to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993). Research indicates that the more involved an individual is to conventional activities, the more connected his or her attachments to others will be, and the less likely rules and expectations of society will be broken (Hirschi, 1969). According to Hirschi (1969), the loosening of ties to family, friends and school result more frequently in behaviors which oppose societal norms. Indeed, students having unfulfilled social relationships in school experience a lack of development of ties of attachment, less involvement in school-related activities, and a tendency to consider rules as being unfair (Coker, 2001).

While researchers have seen both positive and negative effects related to the transition into middle school, there are contradicting findings of the ways in which the transition experience differs among males and females and among different races. Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush (1979) conducted a longitudinal study which showed a greater propensity for girls to experience a decline in self esteem. In contrast, Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman (1994) found no gender differences following transition in self esteem and academic achievement. Akos and Galassi (2004)

found pronounced achievement loss and distress for Latino students. Another study found greater achievement losses for African American students (Rice, 1997). School administrators should note these differences in transition outcomes in order to understand the specific needs of different student populations during the transition.

The transition of students from elementary school into middle school is often challenging for students. As students leave the nurturing elementary environment, they often enter environments in which academic demands are greater, social interactions are more stressful, less support is provided by adults and others, and school practices are out of sync with the unique physical, cognitive and social needs of early adolescents. The Middle School Concept, which was developed in response to these needs, is implemented to varying degrees across schools. Very often, students experience decreased academic motivation and achievement and lowered self-esteem. Not only do these challenges affect the student's academic and social well-being during the transition period, but they may have longer term implications for students as they transition into high school and eventually into higher education or the workforce.

#### Rationale for the Study

The middle school years are important both socially and academically for students, and middle school students have specific needs that should be addressed before and during the transition into the middle school. Students transition into middle school during a time of significant psychological and physiological change. Middle school transition is significant in that it has implications for a new stage of academic

development for students, and it has serious implications for future success in school and in other life transitions. During the transition to middle school, increased academic demands along with social challenges increase the demands upon schools to provide transition practices which respond to these challenges. The literature leads one to believe that students who do not feel a sense of belonging and connectedness in their new school are more likely to have negative perceptions of their transition experience and experience lowered academic achievement and motivation.

Much has been written regarding the negative and positive effects of school transitions on adolescents; however, this research has taken place in public school settings. It is important as well, to study transition effects in a private school setting, particularly for minority students. Males and females have shown different issues related to the middle school transition in public schools, but very little transition research relating to gender in private schools is available. Research is needed in private schools to see if gender differences exist in that setting school as well. While some general information has been gathered about private schools, it does not reflect the same information gathered about public schools such as data relating to student perceptions of motivation, achievement and connectedness across the transition, or to successful transition activities within schools. Student perceptions of transition have not been reflected in the studies of private schools as they have in studies of public school students. Private school leaders believe that such data would be useful in planning and implementing programs, and aid in the attraction and retention of students, particularly minority students (B. Hunroe, personal communication, July 7, 2009).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine private school students' perception of the middle school transition as it relates to the connectedness students perceive to their new school, those individuals whom students perceive as most helpful during their transition, academic motivation and achievement following the transition, and transition activities conducted by the school. In addition, the study will examine if there are significant differences based on gender or race.

### Overview of the Literature

#### *History of Middle Schools*

Until the 1800's in America, the educational system consisted mainly of elementary schools and high schools. In 1888, it was proposed that grades seven and eight be incorporated into the high school or secondary level because it was believed that this would improve student success upon entering the university level (Clark & Clark, 1994).

During the early 1900's, in response to an alarming high school drop -out rate, junior high schools were created, which primarily consisted of grades seven through nine (Clark & Clark, 1994). More geared to the characteristics of younger adolescents, junior high schools were designed to further skill development and to enhance the academic program being offered (Wavering, 1995). A heavy emphasis was placed on content, departmentalization of subjects, and strict class schedules. This design was quite a departure from the safe, nurturing environment typically enjoyed by students at the elementary level (Clark & Clark, 1994).

In the mid-1960's, the middle school movement developed as a result of dissatisfaction with the junior high school concept. It was felt that the departmentalized organization "provided too abrupt a change from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school, too little relationship between the subjects and the interests and needs of young adolescents, and too little time for any teacher to carry out the varied type of program needed by young adolescents" (ASCD, 1954). The same organizational changes that promoters of the junior high school model considered important to the needs of young adolescents were now considered inappropriate (Clark & Clark, 1993). Efforts were made to correct the junior high school framework; however, the criticism of the model was too great for it to continue (Irvin, 1992). New ideas emerged and the formation of middle schools took shape.

### *The Middle School Concept*

Following the reform period of the junior high schools, the Middle School Concept emerged as a set of accepted, common practices considered essential for early adolescents. The concept consisted of several components including, "A comprehensive curriculum plan, a home-based advisory plan, continuous progress arrangements, team planning/teaching, a variety of instructional plans, many explorations, adequate health/physical education programs, and planning/evaluating systems" (McEwin, 1992). The National Middle School Association (NMSA) further defines the Middle School Concept as one that includes these components: "Educators committed to the young adolescent, interdisciplinary teams, an adult for every youngster, exploratory curriculum,

integrative curriculum, varied teaching and learning approaches” (NMSA, 1995). These manifest themselves in the following practices: Advisory Programs, Transition Programs, Varied Instruction, Interdisciplinary Teaming, and Exploratory Programs (NMSA, 1995).

While the middle school concept is still evolving, research continues to show that early adolescents possess specific developmental needs, many of which may be addressed through the educational system. Given that a significant transition takes place from elementary school to middle school during this challenging developmental period, the middle school concept is regarded as a viable way to address developmental needs through specific practices during that transitional period.

### *Adolescent Development*

Historically, the developmental model of the adolescent has been given special attention. While views on adolescence differ, agreement exists that biology and the environment are important to adolescent development. These aspects are linked to the development of the “self” as an autonomous being. The definition of adolescence is culturally determined, and in Western culture, adolescence has been looked upon as a “condition” or a “natural problem” (Moore, 2002). Some sociologists believe that Western society’s ideas about adolescence create a “self fulfilling prophecy” in which our institutional practices are affected (Moore, 2002). Early adolescence is a time when most significant life changes occur (McEwin & Thomason, 1989). These changes are commonly described as physical, cognitive, social or emotional.

### *Theories of Group Affiliations and Connectedness*

In the eighteenth century, social organizations began to shift from a centralized family orientation to one in which purposively constructed organizations were predominant (Coleman,1993). Coleman states that schools are constructed social organizations that are now considered the primary child-rearing institutions; and he believes that adolescents are often abandoned psychologically and socially and are made to feel less valuable to society. The grade six through eight middle school model represents a system in which a large number of similar aged children are placed in an artificial construct, magnifying the disconnection to society, which many adolescents already feel. In this structure, greater effort must be made to increase opportunities for the strengthening of affiliations.

Sociologist Georg Simmel (1955) described the interaction between and among individuals, and envisioned relationships as a network of intersecting circles, each circle representing an activity which the individual may select for membership. Simmel believed that the individual personality becomes stronger if more diverse memberships are attained. Students experiencing this structure have more opportunity to contribute more to the society because they are enmeshed within overlapping circles and the web of affiliation is tighter.

Sociologists Pescosolido and Rubin (2002) have established a looser web affiliation which illustrates social networks and affiliations as temporary, leading to greater potential for alienation, isolation, and fragmentation. Middle school students in the grade

6-8 configuration must often attend huge schools far away from their neighborhood. This severs affiliations and forces students to either create new ones or risk isolation.

### *Transition from Elementary School to Middle School*

Transition is a point at which students move from one segment of the education process to another (Rice, 2001). According to McEwin (1996), the primary purpose of the middle school is “to provide a gradual transition from pre-adolescent education to an educational program suited to the needs and interests of adolescent boys and girls.” While many students transition well (Akos, 2004), studies have shown that many are not as fortunate. The middle school transition is often characterized by negative effects related to achievement (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman, Maher, & Midgley, 1999; Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Diemert, 1992; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Some studies have shown that the middle school transition results in decreased motivation (Wingfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991), and lowered self-esteem and self-concept (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). The middle school transition believed to have significant long-term negative effects; however, schools have implemented programs and practices specifically targeted towards making the transition more successful for more students. The importance and components of such programs have been articulated by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Council on Middle Level Education.



### *Private Schools*

Private schools are owned and operated independently of government entities and their financing comes through nonpublic sources. Enrollment choice is characteristic in private schools, as parents may choose and apply to a private school, and the school may choose whether to admit a student or not (Alt & Peter, 2002). Since the 1890's private school data has been gathered sporadically (Broughman, Swaim & Keaton, 2009), but in 1989, the U.S. Bureau of the Census began collecting private school data biennially using the Private School Universe Survey (PSS). Data collected during the period from October of 2007 through May of 2008 found that there were 33,740 private elementary and secondary schools with 5,072,451 students. More than half of those schools had a religious affiliation, and most were located in suburban locations. Most private school students attended schools located in a city setting, followed by suburban schools, rural schools and towns. Approximately three fourths of private school students were white, non-Hispanic, one tenth were Black, non-Hispanic, and one tenth were Hispanic. Other minorities present in lower percentages included Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native. Most private schools were coeducational, 1.8 percent enrolled girls only, and 2.2 percent consisted of male students only. (Broughman et al, 2009).

In 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published a report entitled *The Condition of Education* (Alt & Peter, 2002) which included public and private school data on 44 indicators in six areas including enrollment trends, student characteristics at different levels of education, student achievement, effort and rates of progress, courses taken, teacher characteristics, postsecondary education, and school

support through financing, parents and communities. Data in the report was gathered from several sources including the NCES Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS: 1999-2000), the National Assessment of Educational Progress High School Transcript Study of 1998 (NAEP:1998) the NAEP 2000 student achievement tests, and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, “Fourth Follow-up” (NELS:1988/2000) (Alt & Peter, 2002). A separate analysis in *The Condition of Education* was included for private schools. Information was gathered on class size, pupil/teacher ratio, race and gender demographics, Limited English Proficiency data, teacher autonomy within the school, standardized test scores, graduation rate and college completion rate (Alt & Peter, 2002).

### Research Questions

The central question in this research is: What factors may affect a student’s perception of his or her transition into middle school? This research will address the following research questions:

1. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their connectedness to their new school?
2. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive the success of their transition?
3. Which individuals do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive as most helpful to them during the transition?

4. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic motivation in elementary school and middle school?
5. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic performance in elementary school and middle school?
6. Which transition activities do newly transitioned private middle school students find most helpful?
7. Are there any racial or gender differences in newly transitioned private middle school student perceptions of connectedness, transition difficulty, most helpful individual, academic motivation, academic achievement or helpful transition activities?
8. What is the relationship among connectedness, level of support by others, academic achievement and number of transition activities to difficulty of transition?

### Design and Methods

A quantitative approach is proposed for this study. A survey instrument will be developed which measures student perception of the connectedness they feel toward their new school, student perceptions of the difficulty of their transition experience, the helpfulness of various transition activities, the student's perception of their academic motivation and achievement during the transition, and which individuals students considered the most helpful to them during the middle school transition. The survey

would be administered in January of the transitioning students' first year in the middle school. Data will be examined to see if significant race or gender differences exist in their perceptions.

### Delimitations

Participants in the survey will attend one of 61 private middle schools in Virginia. These schools are current members of the Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS). Students surveyed will be first year middle school students in the winter of the 2009-2010 school year. The number of students is approximately 1,860.

### Definition of Terms

- Connectedness- A student perception that teachers treat them fairly, that they feel close to people at school, and that they feel as if they are a part of the school (Blum, 2005).  
Students feel like a part of their school and feel cared for. (McNeely, C., Nonnemaker, J., & Blum, R. 2002).
- Early Adolescence- A stage of human development which occurs usually between the ages of 10 and 14 when individuals begin to reach puberty (Wiles & Bondi, 1993).

- Elementary school- A school that instructs students at the beginning level and usually consists of grades K-5 (Wiles and Bondi, 1993).
- Middle School- A school designed to be attended following elementary school and before high school. It is usually housed separately from elementary and high school grades, and includes students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades (Wiles & Bondi, 1993).
- Private School- Schools that are owned and operated independently of government entities. Financing for private schools comes through nonpublic sources (Alt & Peter, 2002).
- Transition- A point at which students move from one segment of the education process to another (Rice, 2001). In this study, the transition period under consideration is the orientation and remediation period which begins in the spring of the final elementary school year and extends approximately through the end of the first semester of the student's first middle school academic year (P. Akos, personal communication, December 2, 2008).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### The History of Middle Level Education in America

Middle level education in America has seen many changes in concept and configuration throughout history. In the 1800's in America, the educational system consisted mainly of elementary schools and high schools with no separation of grades at the middle level. This changed in 1888, when it was proposed that grades seven and eight be incorporated into the high school or secondary level because it was believed that this would improve student success upon entering the university level (Clark & Clark, 1994).

This grade configuration remained predominant for several decades; however, the concept and grade level configuration changed in response to social events. During the early 1900's, in response to an alarming high school drop-out rate, junior high schools were created, which primarily consisted of grades seven through nine (Clark & Clark, 1994). This model continued to develop slowly, until events such as Sputnik, the beginning of the international space race, and the entrance of the populous "baby boom generation" into the educational system spurred junior high school development at a rapid pace (Wavering, 1995). More geared to the characteristics of younger adolescents, junior high schools were designed to further skill development and to enhance the academic program being offered by teaching foreign languages, and increasing science and mathematics course offerings (Wavering, 1995). According to Irvin (1992), these junior high schools operated with few standards or policies appropriate for early adolescents,

and junior high school teachers were rarely trained in early adolescent education. With its heavy emphasis placed on content, departmentalization of subjects, and strict schedules, this design was quite a departure from the safe, nurturing environment typically enjoyed by students at the elementary level (Clark & Clark, 1994).

In the 1950's and 1960's, however, the junior high school configuration came under scrutiny. Wiles and Bondi (1993) have proposed several reasons for the dissatisfaction with junior high schools which eventually led to the emergence of middle schools. Criticisms of the American education system surfaced in the late 1950's and early 1960's as teacher shortages developed, tax rates soared, the launching of Sputnik spurred math, science and foreign language education, and books such as *Why Johnny Can't Read*, written in 1955 by Rudolf Flesch, raised concerns about the quality of American education.

Another factor was the belief that middle schools were developed as a solution to de facto racial segregation, by creating large schools which had several feeder elementary schools located in diverse neighborhoods. Additionally, a surge in the school age population led to overcrowded buildings, resulting in the movement of ninth grade students into the high school, and sixth grade students into the junior high school, leaving seventh and eighth graders together in the middle. The "bandwagon effect" also influenced the popularity of the middle school. When one particular middle school received favorable reviews in educational literature, school administrators decided that middle schools were the answer (Wiles & Bondi, 1993). According to Bondi (1977), the development of middle schools was intended to serve early adolescents between the ages

of ten and fourteen who were going through a unique period of development. The question arose as to whether or not this purpose was actually being addressed.

In the mid-1960's, the middle school movement continued to develop as a result of dissatisfaction with the junior high school concept. It was felt that the departmentalized organization and rigorous academic programming of junior high schools were inappropriate for, and did not meet the needs of early adolescents. (Clark & Clark, 1993). According to Wavering (1995), it was the dissatisfaction with the junior high school programs themselves, and not with the particular grade level configuration that garnered the criticism. In other words, the middle school movement arose as a “protest against the program, not against the concept of the junior high school” (Eichhorn, 1968, p.2). Eichhorn (1987) further described the need for middle schools as a reflection of research which showed the following:

1. Adolescents between the ages of ten and fourteen share developmental characteristics, and they are all in the same unique stage of development
2. Puberty was occurring at an earlier age than previously
3. Society was being profoundly affected by technology, racial integration and a knowledge expansion; and
4. The junior high school was viewed as being patterned after the high school, which was perceived as a negative.



In the mid-1960's, educators were seeking an alternative to the junior high school concept, one that would use more appropriate methods to educate early adolescents. This idea is expressed by Clark & Clark (1994), who defined the middle school as:

A separate school designed to meet the special needs of young adolescents in an organizational structure that encompasses any combination of grades five through nine, wherein developmentally appropriate curriculum and programs are used to create learning experiences that are both relevant and interactive. (p. 6)

In 1986, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development was formed through the Carnegie Corporation of New York. In 1989, the council published a landmark report: *Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The report stated that “middle grades school, junior high schools, intermediate schools, and middle schools are potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, and help every young person thrive during early adolescence” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 8). In addition, this report encouraged the continued development of the middle school concept.

During the first twenty years of middle school development and implementation, much criticism ensued. According to George, Stevenson, Thompson, & Beane, (1992), central office administrators realized that reorganizing the existing system of junior high schools into middle schools would be an effective method of complying with school desegregation requirements, leading to the creation of hundreds of middle schools while neglecting the programmatic changes called for in the junior high school reform

movement. The middle schools created were “simply junior editions of the junior high school with departmentalization moved down one more grade” (Irvin, 1992, p. 11).

Criticism regarding the intermediate phase of education continues today, as some researchers believe that, instead of bridging the transition from elementary school into secondary school, it actually contributes, instead to the disengagement and alienation of young adolescents, particularly those who are members of marginalized groups (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004).

### The Middle School Concept

Middle school reformers continued their efforts to improve middle level education and close the gap between the proposed middle school concept and the existing practices in most middle schools. Organizations such as the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), and the National Association of Elementary Principals (NAEP) stepped forward to advocate for middle level education by providing resources, research, support and leadership (Wavering, 1995; Clark & Clark, 1994; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Irvin, 1992).

The Middle School Concept was originally developed by William M. Alexander, a professor of education and a leader in the movement to replace the existing junior high school model with one that provides young adolescents with a smaller and more intimate educational environment. The Middle School Concept emerged in the 1960’s as a set of accepted, common practices considered essential for the early adolescent (McEwin,

1992). The concept consisted of several components, including “a comprehensive curriculum plan, a home base advisory plan, continuous progress arrangements, team planning/teaching, a variety of instructional plans, many explorations, adequate health/physical education programs, and planning/evaluating systems” (McEwin, 1992).

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) further defined the Middle School Concept as one that includes these components: “Educators committed to the young adolescent, interdisciplinary teams, an adult for every youngster, exploratory curriculum, integrative curriculum, varied teaching and learning approaches” (NMSA, 1995). These components manifest themselves in the following practices: Advisory Programs, Transition Programs, Varied Instruction, Interdisciplinary Teaming, and Exploratory Programs (NMSA, 1995).

While the Middle School Concept is still evolving from its inception in the 1960’s, its basic tenants remain the same. The goal is to provide a framework through which the unique and distinct developmental needs of early adolescents are addressed within the educational system. Research continues to show that early adolescents possess specific developmental needs, many of which may be addressed through the educational system. Given that a significant transition takes place from elementary school to middle school during this challenging developmental period, the Middle School Concept is regarded as a viable way to address developmental needs through specific practices during that transitional period.

## Adolescent Development

The developmental model of the adolescent has been given special attention by philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, and more recently by Sigmund and Anna Freud, Piaget and Erikson. While each of those individuals had different views on the adolescent, most were in agreement that the basis of the model lies a tension which exists in adolescence between biology and the environment. The biological aspects include changing bodies and the environmental aspects are linked to the development of the “self” as an autonomous being. The definition of adolescence is one that relies on cultural influences. In our western culture, adolescence has been looked upon as a “condition” or a “natural problem” (Moore, 2002). Foucault believes that western society’s ideas about adolescence create a “self fulfilling prophecy” in which our assumptions about “youth, “adolescence” and “childhood” influence institutional practices which, in turn, affect the perceptions that society has about this age group (Moore, 2002). Early adolescence is a time when the most significant life changes occur, and these changes are commonly described as physical, cognitive, social or emotional. (McEwin & Thomason, 1989).

### Physical Development

Physically, young adolescent development is characterized by a rapid increase in growth accompanied by the development of secondary sexual traits (Irvin, 1992). During this developmental period, hormonal changes affect mood stability, and any development which the adolescent feels is abnormal is a source of anxiety that can affect social and emotional development (George & Alexander, 1993). Transitioning into a new school

environment during this intense developmental period may cause additional stress, as students struggle to adjust to increasing academic and social demands.

According to Irvin (1992), adolescent physical development is a period marked by pronounced and accelerated growth during which primary and secondary sexual characteristics develop during growth spurts. These changes do not occur at the same time in each individual, and girls tend to reach sexual maturity approximately two years before males. The greatest variability in size and development occurs at approximately thirteen years of age, and any perceived differences between themselves and their peers are considered by the egocentric adolescent to be deficiencies and inadequacies (Irvin, 1992). As students struggle to adjust to their new physical form, they are also attempting to adjust to their new school, new friends and new teachers. This stress is overwhelming for some students.

Internally, hormonal fluctuations occur which result in mood swings, while rapid physical growth brings about increased nutritional requirements (George and Alexander, 1993). Hormonal imbalances may result in skin problems, allergies, and eye and teeth problems (Wiles & Bondi, 1993). Body contours change, resulting in large noses, protruding ears and long arms and legs. Boys tend to gain accumulate fat around hips and thighs, and occasionally, boys attain fat deposits beneath their nipples, which causes them great anxiety that they are not developing correctly. Boys also develop receding chins, cowlicks, and changing voices, all of which cause them great embarrassment (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). The rapid physical growth is often disproportionate, with bone growth

exceeding muscle growth, leading to a period of physical awkwardness accompanied by lower self-esteem and self-concept (NMSA, 1992).

According to McEwin and Thomason (1989), “No other period brings about such potential for social, emotional, and intellectual changes and the positive and negative results that frequently accompany them” (p.3). One must wonder if this early adolescent period is conducive to any major changes for a child such as moving from a small, nurturing elementary school environment into a larger and often more impersonal middle school.

### Cognitive Development

Cognitive development varies among adolescents, but typically, most are operating at Piaget’s concrete and formal operational stages. Studies have found that most students remain in the concrete operational stage throughout middle school (George & Alexander, 1993). At this age, it is common for students to be egocentric and have difficulty reasoning from experiences or points of view other than their own (Mallea, 1984). As is true for physical growth, there is also a wide variation in mental growth among adolescents; however, most adolescents are capable of more abstract thinking than they were in elementary grades (Lounsbury, 1991).

Early adolescent thought is developing into the abstract, as students seek to hypothesize and to reflect more critically (Manning, 1993). Students at this age will learn best through cooperative learning opportunities, positive interaction with their teachers, hands-on and manipulative learning opportunities, and through tasks which involve hypothetical and abstract thinking (Swafford & Bryan, 2000). If the middle school is not

providing these opportunities, students may have difficulty adjusting socially and academically. A transition during this important time period of abstract thought development could be detrimental for the adolescent.

### Social and Emotional Development

During the time period when adolescents make the middle school transition, their social and emotional development is undergoing rapid change. Erickson's (1963) stages of psychosocial development describe eight stages during which the individual must deal with a new problem, which may result in either emotional growth or in arrested development. At the adolescent stage, individuals are forming a picture of who they are biologically, socially and psychologically. At this stage, the importance is placed on the physiological changes that are occurring, and the choices the individual is making about the opposite sex (Erickson, 1963).

According to Scales (1991), seven distinct developmental needs are characteristically present in the early adolescent. These include: "Positive social interaction with adults and peers; Structure and clear limits; Physical activity; Creative expression; Competence and achievement; Meaningful participation in families, school, and communities; and Opportunities for self-definition" (p. 16). Emotionally, the early adolescent behavior is characterized by frequent mood swings, restlessness, self-consciousness and varying degrees of self-concept (Whisler, 1989). They are "psychologically at-risk; at no other point in human development is an individual likely to encounter so much diversity in relation to oneself and others" (Superintendent's Task Force, 1987, p.146).

Young adolescents desire to become more independent from their family while gaining acceptance from their peers. Peers are usually selected on the basis of similarity to one's self (Milgram, 1992), and the influence of peers as models of behavior is the strongest between the ages of 11 to 17 (Irvin, 1992). As they strive to be accepted by their peer group, they tend to seek peer approval rather than parental or adult approval (McEwin & Thompson, 1989). The pressure to conform to the standards of the peer group can lead to behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, sexual activity (George and Alexander, 1993), and self-perception during this developmental period which tends to guide decisions about social situations, cognitive activities, and feelings of self-worth (Rice, 1990). Researchers have found, however, that most adolescents will not deviate to a great extent from the basic family values set by their parents (George and Lawrence, 1982).

The transition from elementary school into middle school is often characterized as problematic for the student. Research has found that this transition into middle school is accompanied by a lowering of self-esteem and an increase in self-consciousness (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). These effects are not always permanent, and by the spring of the seventh grade, self-esteem has been found to improve as students develop new social networks and define their role in the new environment (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). For some students, though, failure to adjust during the transition may lead to continued academic difficulty, and negative social outcomes. The mismatch between adolescent developmental needs and the middle school environment during a time of personal and ecological transition is often offered as an explanation for the negative



outcomes during transition. It is believed that the magnitude of the physical, emotional and cognitive changes during puberty may intensify the adjustment challenges to the new environment.

### Students' Sense of Connectedness

As students transition into the middle school, they are often severing long-term relationships with students they may have known since kindergarten. Students moving into the middle school must forge new friendships and form new relationships with teachers. Some students are more successful at building these connections than others. Researchers have defined connectedness in several ways, but the overlying theme is that of achieving a sense of belonging in the environment. According to Juvonen (2007), the terms *connected* and *belongingness* are frequently used interchangeably, and refer to a sense of acceptance, respect, support, and caring. Blum (2005) has defined *connectedness* to school as “feeling that teachers treat them fairly, feel close to people at school, and feel a part of school” (p.3). Barber (2005) defines connectedness as:

“a tie between the child and significant other persons (groups or institutions) that provides a sense of belonging, an absence of aloneness, a perceived bond.

Depending on the intimacy of the context, this connection is produced by different levels, degrees or combinations of consistent, positive, predictable, loving, supportive, devoted, and/or affectionate interaction” (p.4).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) define connectedness as a need for a “frequent, affectively pleasant interactions in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern” (p.497).

For this discussion, it is useful to examine the historical and sociological perspectives of the individual as a part of a larger group or organization such as a school. In the eighteenth century, social organizations began to shift from a family orientation, in which the family was the central element, to one in which unnatural, purposively constructed organizations were predominant (Coleman,1993). Coleman (1993) notes that in family-like institutions, social control comes from group established norms, reputation and moral force. He states that schools are constructed social organizations that are now considered the primary child-rearing institutions, and he believes that adolescents are often abandoned psychologically and socially and are made to feel less valuable to society. When relating Coleman’s “Rational Reconstruction” concept to the middle school configuration issue, one may relate the K through eighth grade configuration model to the more natural, primordial, family-like organization, and the grade six through eight model to a purposively constructed one. In the K through eight model, older students may mix with very young students, and there tends to be more parental involvement which creates more of a nurturing family model. The grade six through eight middle school model, in contrast, is a system in which a large number of similar aged children are placed in an artificial construct, magnifying the disconnection to society, which many adolescents already feel. In this structure, greater effort must be made to increase opportunities for the strengthening of affiliations.

According to sociologist Georg Simmel (1955), the interaction between and among individuals is what makes up society, and it is the patterns of this association which should be studied. Simmel sees relationships as a network of intersecting circles, each circle representing an activity which the individual may select for membership. The individual is defined by the number, the overlap and the configuration of the circles. Simmel believes that the individual personality, the self, will be stronger if more diverse memberships are attained. The grade K through eighth grade configuration model may establish the sort of environment which would produce this type of web of interaction. These students have more opportunity to contribute more to the society because they are enmeshed within overlapping circles and the web of affiliation is tighter. They are members of their school society for nine years and are often able to attend school with their siblings and neighbors.

Pescosolido and Rubin (2002) have proposed a looser web affiliation in which the individual stands outside the circle. This web, which could be used to represent the grade six through eight middle school configuration, illustrates social networks and affiliations that are temporary, leading to greater potential for alienation, isolation, and fragmentation. The possibility for individuals to “fall through the cracks is enormous” (Pescosolido and Rubin, 2002, p. 64).

Middle school students in the grade six through eight configuration must often attend huge schools far away from their neighborhood. This severs affiliations and forces students to either create new ones or risk isolation. Given the social and emotional

challenges characteristic of this age, some students find it very difficult to create connections with others following the transition.

Researchers have found that a lack of connections with teachers and peers is responsible for disengagement from school, which manifests itself in lower achievement and an increase in negative behaviors following the transition to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993). It is believed that students who feel that “people like me do not belong in this school” are not motivated to behave in ways that are expected by the institution (Walton & Cohen, 2007). In order to gain a wider perspective of this issue, it is important to examine whether the issue of connectedness is universal, or is characteristic to American schools only. Juvonen (2004) analyzed 1997-1998 World Health Organization data on the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey. The survey was administered to 11, 13 and 15 year olds in North America, parts of Europe, and Israel; and it asked questions which related to student perceptions of school climate, social isolation, teacher support and peer culture. The sample included approximately 2,000-4,000 students in each of the 12 countries for a total of 32,793 students. A factor analysis was conducted and the scale scores were standardized so that the mean (international average) was zero and the standard deviation was one. The results of the analysis show that American students scored the lowest (two standard deviations below the 12-nation sample mean) for school climate factors, indicating that American students do not believe their school is a pleasant place or that they feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, middle school students in the survey indicated that they feel more socially isolated than students in eight of the other 11 countries. Rankings for perceptions of teacher support

show American students rank sixth among the 12 countries. American students ranked 10<sup>th</sup> of 12 nations for peer culture which includes perceptions of peers as accepting, kind and helpful.

Another study examined the relationship between school connectedness and the school environment in order to identify ways to increase school connectedness (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum, 2002). Surveys of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and in-school administrator surveys were examined. Add Health is applicable to understanding school context as it relates to school connectedness because it includes data on students' sense of connectedness and school attributes. The sampling frame was all high schools in the United States having an 11<sup>th</sup> grade level and a minimum of 30 students. Eighty high schools were then selected, as well as one feeder middle school for each high school selected. In all, 75,517 students in 127 schools participated. Students completed a paper and pencil survey during the 1994-1995 academic year. Seventy-seven percent of the students completed the survey. The results showed the following:

1. School connectedness is lower in schools with difficult classroom management climates.
2. School connectedness is lower in schools having strict expulsion policies for infractions such as alcohol possession. Zero tolerance policies tend to make students feel less connected rather than safe.
3. Students in smaller schools feel more connected than students in larger school.

4. Class size is not associated with school connectedness.
5. Connectedness is high in racially or ethnically segregated schools, and lowest in integrated schools, however, some racially integrated schools in the Add Health study had high levels of school connectedness.
6. Students who participate in extracurricular activities, who earn higher grades and who do not skip school feel more connected to school.

Research has shown that negative perceptions middle school students have about their schools and connectedness may be related to parental education attainment and to socioeconomic factors. Students with parents who did not complete high school scored lower for connectedness. (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Battistich et.al. (1995) found positive associations between a student's sense of community (perceptions of caring and supportive interpersonal relationships) and motivation (liking school, enjoying classes, intrinsic motivation). These findings indicated a stronger association in schools serving the most economically disadvantaged students, perhaps indicating that connectedness is particularly important for these students.

As students transition to middle schools, their friendships play an important role in their sense of connectedness. Benner and Graham (2007) found that school transitions are associated with a failure to connect with teachers and peers. Instead of promoting a sense of connectedness, disruptions in social networks which result from school transitions cause increased anxiety in students. Students with stable, close friendships make a more successful transition than students lacking these relationships (Berndt, Hawkins and Jiao,

1999). Students who lack friends in the first year of middle school were more distressed and earned lower grades than those with friends (Wentzel, Barry McNamara , and Calwell, 2004). It is important to note that some friendships may have a negative impact in that those involving conflict, rivalry or competition increase disruptive behavior, and students having friends who misbehave become more disruptive themselves (Berndt & Keefe, 1995).

The role of peer rejection and bullying play an important role in school connectedness. Bullying incidents in the fall of the sixth grade year are associated with an increased chance of bullying in the spring, accompanied by psychological maladjustments, health problems, increased absences and lower grades in the spring of that school year (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2006).

Adolescents are more likely to feel connected to school if their developmental needs are being met. The primary needs of adolescents include opportunities to attain autonomy, demonstrate competency, caring and support from adults, developmentally appropriate supervision, and acceptance by peers (Eccles, et al., 1993). The adolescent desire to affiliate with peers may be capitalized upon to increase student engagement in the middle school. Unfortunately, the middle school environment is at odds with adolescent needs, in that affiliation in the classroom is typically discouraged as students are discouraged from talking to one another in class and are encouraged instead to work independently. Students should not be isolated based on academic or behavioral difficulties because this has been found to cause social alienation and disengagement due

to the lack of connections with prosocial and academically competent peers (Guillford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion and McCord, 2005).

Students are more likely to feel connected to the school if they participate in extracurricular activities (Eccles et al., 2003), and school-based community volunteer programs have been shown to be effective in improving adaptive behaviors such as behavior and academic performance ( Allen, Kuperminic, Philliber, & Herre, 1994). Other steps (Blum & Libbey, 2004) may be taken to improve a student's sense of connectedness following school transitions. The center for Adolescent Health and Development at the University of Minnesota convened a conference in 2003 in order to bring together key researchers in the government, education and health sectors to identify current knowledge related to school connectedness. Based on the evidence presented in the papers shared at the conference, a set of core principles was developed which are intended to guide schools in improving connectedness. The statement is identified as *The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections*, and the key elements are as follows:

1. Student success can be improved with strengthened bonds with school.
2. In order to feel connected, students must experience high expectations for academic success, feel supported by staff, and feel safe in their school.
3. Critical accountability measures can be impacted by school connectedness such as academic performance, fighting, truancy, and drop-out rates.



4. Increased school connectedness is related to educational motivation, classroom engagement, and better attendance. These are then linked to higher academic achievement.
5. School connectedness is also related to lower rates of disruptive behavior, substance and tobacco use, emotional distress, and early age of first sex.
6. School connectedness can be built through fair and consistent discipline, trust among all members of the school community, high expectations from the parents and school staff, effective curriculum and teaching strategies, and students feeling connected to at least one member of the school staff.

A student's connectedness to school has been linked to several outcome variables including academic attitudes, attendance, achievement, participation in school activities, and dropping out of school (Osterman, 2000). School transitions may serve to undermine connectedness and may also serve as an indicator of transition success, and these effects may be felt differently across race and gender (Osterman, 2000). Based on empirical research and theories of school-based social bonds, sense of belonging, and school functioning, Juvonen (2006) has concluded that social isolation, alienation, and lack of support increase educational risks, but supportive teacher-student relationships have been found to protect students with early behavior problems from educational risks. Even though relationships with other students may help a student feel more connected, the behaviors of the friends the student selects determines the degree of connectedness felt. Finally, the source of belonging varies across the student's developmental spectrum.

Having friends is more important to the early adolescent moving into middle school, so connectedness to others has more of an impact on achievement, motivation and behavior; and student behavior is affected by the values of the peer group.

Maslow (1962) found that having a sense of belonging is important throughout life. If a student lacks feelings of being a valued and welcome member, he or she is less academically engaged and committed. If students have established social bonds with others in the school (adults or other students), they have a sense of connectedness (Goodenow, 1993). The need for belonging is even greater during early adolescence when individuals are establishing their identities. As they do so, their families take on less of a role, and the relationships with peers takes on greater importance. During this period, the adolescent is influenced in negative and positive ways by others, as they strive to find their “place” (Goodenow, 1993).

Having a sense of connectedness to one’s school is very important. However, even in supportive school environments some students feel excluded for various reasons. Sometimes students who feel “disinvited” by teachers and other students may develop their own peer group with their own set of anti-academic norms. This may result in lowered academic motivation, connectedness, academic achievement, and eventually, perhaps withdrawal from school (Goodenow, 1993).

## Effects of Transition from Elementary School to Middle School

As students progress through the educational system in America, they make several significant transitions. A variety of definitions exist in relation to the meaning of transition as it applies to the educational setting. Kagan and Neuman (1998) define transition as the manifestation of the developmental principles of continuity, creating approaches that transcend and continue between programs. A transition is defined as a time in which a student moves from one aspect of the educational process to another (Rice, 2001). According to Rice (2001), school transitions are associated with major changes for students relating to social structures, school climate and educational practices.

Many students proceed through this transition with little difficulty. A few researchers have found no significant negative factors relating to the middle school transition. Nottleman (1987) found that perceived competence and self esteem changed in a positive direction in transitional and non-transitional groups. Hirsh and Rapkin (1987) also found no decrease in self-esteem across the transition. This study was followed by another (Hirsh and DuBois, 1991) which confirmed these results and also found an increase in self-esteem for some students. Others (Fenzel and Blyth, 1986) found small changes in self-esteem and in participation in extracurricular and non-school activities.

However, some students experience increased stress from making the elementary school to middle school transition. This stress affects the student's adjustment to the new environment in many ways (Eccles et al., 1993). Negative effects related to school

transitions include declines in perceived competence, declining intrinsic interest in school, a decrease in academic achievement, and lower levels of classroom engagement (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983). Results of research by Kagan and Neuman (1998) found that students not having effective transitions are more likely to have problems making friends, are less successful academically, and may be prone to mental health issues.

Research has shown that as students begin the middle school grades in a new school their ability to adjust may be impaired leading to negative effects on their motivation, self-esteem and psychological adjustment (Mac Iver, 1990). The middle school transition is considered significant in that it marks a major step toward adulthood as students enter adolescence and begin to form an identity within the confines of a more structured and demanding environment (Elias, 2002). The transition to middle school is frequently marked by a period of decline in motivation for many students. It is during this time that students begin to experience academic difficulties from which they do not recover, thus leading to school dropout (Eccles et al., 1993). According to Anderman et al. (1999), the middle school context is at odds with the unique needs of the adolescent. A child of this age struggles with questions of self identity, self worth, and competence. The middle school system, however, undermines adolescent development by providing an environment which often lacks supportive adult relationships for students (Anderman et al., 1999). Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell & Feinman (1994) surveyed 580 students and found declines in self-perception of performance and social standing, regardless of race, gender or ability level. However, another study found that girls transitioning from the

sixth grade in elementary school into the seventh grade in junior high school experienced a decline in self-esteem, whereas the boys in the study did not experience the same decline. (Simmons, et al., 1979).

Anderman and Midgely (1996) conducted a three year longitudinal study of 283 middle school students and found declines in the students' sense of academic efficacy in English and math in the first year of middle school. These levels returned to pre-transition levels during the second year of middle school.

Wigfield, et al (1991) surveyed students over a two year period in order to measure students' academic and social self-confidence. The study, which included 1,850 students, found that academic and social self-confidence levels decreased significantly in the transition year, only to increase slightly in the year following transition. These levels never regained their pre-transition levels during the study period. In this study, they found that "contrary to what might be expected, the mathematics self-concept of high ability adolescents declined across the transition to junior high school, whereas the math self-concept of lower ability students increased somewhat" (p.562).

Wigfield and Eccles (1994) followed this study with a separate longitudinal three year study that included a survey of a group of students during the last two years of elementary school and the first year of middle school. The findings showed that self-esteem levels remained constant in elementary school, but decreased during the transition year.

Barber and Olsen (2004) conducted a five year longitudinal survey of 993 adolescents as they transitioned from elementary school into middle school and then into

high school. As students transitioned into the middle school, students reported a multitude of negative results. As they transitioned into the middle school setting, students reported receiving lower grades, having lower self-esteem, receiving less adult support, experiencing more feelings of loneliness and depression, and experiencing a lower tendency to initiate social interactions with teachers and other students. Additionally, Alspaugh (1998) found that when academic failure and a loss of self-confidence exist, the propensity towards dropping out increases.

Mullins and Irvin (2000) found that student self-concept and self-esteem initially decline following the middle school transition, as students adjust to their new surroundings and make new friends. These researchers have also found that adolescents experience the highest levels of low self-esteem and highest self-consciousness between the ages of twelve and fourteen (1993). Long term implications may result as students begin to perceive school as a negative entity which influences their course choices and ultimately their career choices, and perhaps leads to other negative alternatives as well (Anderman et al., 1999).

Academically, it is common for student performance to decline in the year following a school transition (Rice, 2001). A 1995 study conducted by Alspaugh and Harting found that achievement loss occurred in fifteen of sixteen Missouri school districts, as measured by the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests (MMAT). Alspaugh (1998) conducted a follow-up study, which confirmed these results. Of the 48 districts included in the study, all demonstrated either no change or a decrease in MMAT scores following the middle school transition. This effect was found to be most notable in students who transitioned

into large middle schools that pulled sixth graders from multiple elementary feeder elementary schools than in students who made the transition with their elementary peers into one middle school. Alspaugh (1998, p.24) also found that a greater negative academic result occurred in high school achievement at the transition grade for students making two transitions into high school. “Students involved in a pyramid transition of multiple elementary schools into a single middle school experienced a greater achievement loss than did the students in a linear transition of a single elementary school to a middle school.”

Several researchers have examined student grade point averages (GPA) in order to measure academic performance during the transitional year into middle school. Crockett et al. (1989) examined the grade point averages of students in two school districts, and found that GPA's decreased by over one full grade mark for 253 students. This decline continued in all subjects areas throughout the entire transition year. Girls were more negatively affected by double transitions than boys. Researchers in this study found that the ability of a student to cope with the transition depended largely upon factors such as personal maturity, coping resources, the nature of the new school environment, the level of preparation for the transition, and the network of support available to the student both prior to and following the transition.

Additionally, a five-year longitudinal study conducted by Blyth, Simmons, and Carlton-Ford (1983) measured the grade point averages of 594 students in the years following the transition to middle school. These students showed a half-point decline in

GPA during this time period. While both genders showed declines, greater declines were noted in males.

Academic motivation is “a concept which has been introduced to explain some of the differences in the school attainment of children with similar measured abilities” (Entwistle, 1968, p. 181). The motivation to perform academically has been shown to be affected across the middle school transition. Also referred to as “academic engagement,” motivation refers to “cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicators of student investment in and attachment to education” (Tucker, Zayco, & Herman, 2002, p. 477). Students may be motivated by goals such as proving competence in relation to other students. Other students are task-oriented and are motivated by a desire to become more knowledgeable or by their enjoyment of the learning process (Anderman & Midgley, 1996). Some students are motivated by social goals such as social approval, social compliance, social solidarity, and social concern (Urda & Maehr, 1995).

Another type of goal that students may be motivated to attain is work avoidance (Dowson and McInerney, 2001). These students put their effort into avoiding tasks by copying others’ works, getting the teacher to do the work, or avoid doing the work all together. Other factors related to academic motivation include the desire of the student to feel a sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness to others (Anderman & Midgley, 1996). Given the emotional and psychological needs of the developing adolescent, these motivational factors are very important to consider.

Motivation among minority students has been studied. One longitudinal study followed a cohort of 117 African American students from first through twelfth grade. For



these students it was found that the strongest predictor of motivation was the level of teacher support they received, but that these students felt that they received less teacher support than Caucasian students (Tucker et al., 2002).

The role of gender and race in the outcome of school transition appear to be important. Akos and Galassi (2004) studied gender and race as variables in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade psychosocial adjustment following school transitions. In the middle school study, student participants included 173 sixth graders from one middle school (83 boys and 86 girls; Caucasian  $n=99$ , African American  $n=34$ , Asian American  $n= 15$ , Latino  $n=14$ , multiracial  $n=7$ , and unspecified  $n=4$ ). A sample was selected that reflected the gender and racial composition. The middle school drew students from three elementary schools, and it was considered part of a high performing district. The researchers created a student perception questionnaire (the School Transition Questionnaire-STQ) which assessed student perceptions about the difficulty of transition, sense of connectedness to the new school, and persons who they perceived as most helpful during the transition. Connectedness questions in the STQ related to student perceptions such as feeling close to peers, feeling part of the school, feeling cared for by faculty, and feeling happy at school. The questions on the STQ were adapted from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health; and it was administered in the fall semester of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, with a 72% completion rate. School counselors matched gender and race to precoded identification numbers on the anonymous surveys.

Gender was not found to be a significant factor in the students' perception of transition difficulty; however, gender was a factor in student perceptions of

connectedness. The results showed that girls felt more connected to school following the transition than males. No significant differences were found for race in feelings of connectedness; however, Latino students perceived the transition to middle school as significantly more difficult than Caucasian or African American students. Students in this survey perceived their transition as somewhat easy and felt strongly connected to school. Statistically significant differences were found for individuals considered to be the most helpful during the transition.

Latino students reported middle school counselors and family other than parents more helpful than did Caucasian and Asian American students. Latino students also reported that other family members were more helpful than that reported by African American students (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Research has found that minority students are at greater risk of becoming disengaged in school, possibly leading to lower academic achievement and a higher dropout rate than their Caucasian peers (Natriello, McDill, and Pallas, 1990). It is during this period of adolescent development that students begin to develop a stronger sense of ethnic identity (Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo and Cota, 1990). They begin to become aware of racial labels as well as values and behaviors that society identifies with their particular race or ethnicity. The student's racial and ethnic identity begins to become more influenced by their association with others of the same culture. It is difficult for a student who is a member of a minority group within a school to develop a good understanding of their ethnic identity while interacting with a social group from another ethnic or racial background (Bernal et al., 1990). Students from some ethnic groups are better able than

others to adjust to the dominant cultural behaviors in a new school, resulting in greater academic success. African Americans and Latinos have considerable differences and conflicts with cultural values from those that are predominant in the current educational system which is dominated by the values of one ethnic group. However, as minority students adjust their behaviors to better match the dominant cultural values in the school, they lose their own cultural identity and change their cultural frame of reference which negatively impacts their academic performance (Ogbu,1993). In contrast, well-balanced ethnic diversity in which no dominant culture exists has been found to increase a sense of connectedness among African American and Latino students in large, urban middle schools (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006).

#### Articulation of Effective Transition Programs

Research regarding the negative student outcomes relating to the middle school transition has encouraged the development of policies and practices designed to make the transition more successful for more students. The importance and components of such programs have been articulated by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). These two associations have developed a joint position statement encouraging school administrators, teachers, parents and students to plan and implement transition strategies (NMSA, 2002). The NMSA recommends that elementary school students visit the receiving middle school, middle school and elementary school teachers meet on articulation and programs, and that middle school counselors meet with elementary counselors (NMSA, 2002).

According to Mac Iver (1990), the most effective transition programs include a variety of activities which provide parents information about the new school, provide social support for students during the transition, and bring personnel from the receiving school and the feeder school together to become familiar with curriculum and requirements. Mac Iver & Epstein, (1991) also found that the more extensive transitional programs are found at schools that have high socioeconomic status and high achievement. These researchers also found that student success within the first year is more likely if three or more transition activities are articulated within the first transition year (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) recommend elementary students attend regular classes at the middle school, visit the middle school during the summer, and experience buddy pairings with older middle school students.

Additionally, providing a challenging and supportive educational experience is essential to a successful transition (Belcher & Hatley, 1994; Mizelle, 1995). Research has shown, for example, that students who experience integrated instruction, cooperative learning, hands-on, life related learning opportunities, and who have the same teachers throughout their middle school years, experience the greatest transition success (Mizelle, 1995).

Most students enter the middle grades through a much larger school, with increased academic demands, more teachers and a wider variety of classmates who change throughout the day, from class to class. According to Mac Iver and Epstein (1991), approximately 75 percent of middle school students are enrolled in advisory programs

(also referred to as teacher advisory, homeroom, home base, or life skills). The purpose of these programs is to ensure that each student has an adult advocate in the school who can communicate for that student's behalf to the student's teachers, and who can assist the student with questions or problems related to early adolescence. Midgley and Urdan (1992) have found that these programs are beneficial for early adolescents who are at a stage in which they are seeking relationships with adults other than their parents. Larson (1982) also found that the advisor-advisee relationship assist students in adjusting to middle school by providing an environment in which there is a teacher-pupil closeness similar to that of the elementary school, but within the departmentalized structure, similar to that of a high school.

Transition programming which focuses on student academic needs and coping mechanisms in conjunction with support mechanisms such as teachers, peers and the home environment, can become the components of a well-structured, effective transition program (Anderson et al, 2000). According to Perkins and Gelfer (1995), transition programs that focus on the following goals have been shown to provide successful transitions:

1. Assist the student in expediently adapting to the new environment.
2. Encourage collaboration among all stakeholders including the student, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, and key school personnel.
3. Encourage family involvement in the transition process.
4. Encourage student independence and involvement in the new school.

## Private Schools

Private schools are owned and operated independently of government entities. Their financing comes through nonpublic sources. Enrollment choice is characteristic in private schools as parents may choose a school for their child, and the school may choose whether to accept a student or not (Alt & Peter, 2002).

In 1988, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) proposed the development of a program to gather data on private schools. Until that time, private school data had been gathered sporadically since the 1890's (Broughman, Swaim & Keaton, 2009). Since 1989, the U.S. Bureau of the Census has collected private school data for NCES biennially using the Private School Universe Survey (PSS). Private schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia are included in this study. For this survey, private schools are defined as those not supported primarily by public funds, consist of at least one grade in kindergarten through grade 12, and which have at least one teacher (Brougham et al, 2009).

The most recent PSS survey which consists of data gathered from October of 2007 through May of 2008 found that there were 33,740 private elementary and secondary schools with 5,072,451 students. Of these schools, 22,458 reported membership in a private school association of some sort. Sixty-eight percent of those schools had a religious affiliation, and sixty-eight percent conducted a regular education program as opposed to other program emphasis categories such as Montessori, special education, alternative education and early childhood education.

Most of the private schools in the survey were in suburban locations (12,665), followed by cities (11,212), rural areas (6,563) and towns (3,300). Most private school students attended schools located in a city setting followed by suburban schools, rural schools and towns. The average private school enrollment was 150, with kindergarten being the most highly attended grade.

Demographic information from the survey found that approximately 75 percent of private school students were white, non-Hispanic, 9.8 percent were Black, non-Hispanic; 9.6 were Hispanic; 5.4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander; and .6 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native. Most private schools reported that they are coeducational (96 percent), while 1.8 percent enrolled girls only and 2.2 percent consisted of male students only.

Survey results also revealed that private school students have a high rate of graduation, with 98 percent of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in October of 2006 graduating by the fall of 2007, and 65 percent of these students enrolled in 4-year colleges by the fall of 2007 (Brougham et al, 2009).

In 2002, the NCES published a report entitled *The Condition of Education* (Alt & Peter, 2002). It included data on 44 indicators in six areas including enrollment trends, student characteristics at different levels of education, student achievement, effort and rates of progress, courses taken, teacher characteristics, postsecondary education, and school support through financing, parents and communities. Data in the report was gathered from several sources including the NCES Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS: 1999-2000), the National Assessment of Educational Progress High School Transcript

Study of 1998 (NAEP:1998) the NAEP 2000 student achievement tests, and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, “Fourth Follow-up” (NELS:1988/2000) (Alt & Peter, 2002). A separate analysis in *The Condition of Education* was included for private schools. Findings from that report include the following:

1. Private schools generally have smaller enrollments, class sizes and lower student/teacher ratios than public schools.
2. Private schools generally have lower percentages of Black and Hispanic students than public schools, but no difference was noted in the Asian/Pacific Islander percentages.
3. Catholic private schools are more likely than nonsectarian or other religious private schools to have a minority population which reflects that of public schools.
4. Private schools enroll fewer Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students or students who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program.
5. Private school teachers report having more influence on teaching practices and school policies and express a higher degree of satisfaction with their school’s leadership and report a higher level of satisfaction with their school than do public school teachers.
6. Private school students generally perform higher on standardized achievement tests, have more demanding high school graduation requirements, are more likely to have completed advanced level science, math, and world language



classes than are public school students. They are also more likely than public school students to complete a bachelor's or advanced degree by their mid-20's (Alt & Peter, 2002).

While much transition research has been conducted in public schools, very little data exists regarding the middle school transition in private schools. There is a lack of substantial research relating to the middle school transition in independent schools, yet there exists an expressed need for such information. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) provides only two references when queried regarding middle school transition research (D. Priel, personal communication, July 7, 2009). One of those references, which has previously been referenced in this review of the literature, is a position paper jointly adopted by the National Middle School Association and The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NMSA, 2002). This document is a statement which encourages school administrators, teachers, parents and students to plan and implement transition strategies; however, it does not include quantitative or qualitative research data. The other reference provided by NAIS is the *NAIS Middle School Handbook* (2008). While the book provides helpful suggestions for school leaders regarding the middle school transition, it does not describe quantitative or qualitative data.

The Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS) indicates that there is a lack of research relating to the middle school transition. VAIS believes that transition research would be very helpful to VAIS schools in improving the transition and in the

marketing of their programs, especially in consideration of the current economic challenges facing many private schools in Virginia and across the country (B. Hunroe, personal communication, July 7, 2009).

One doctoral dissertation has been conducted relating to the middle school transition in private schools (Beachy, 2006). That research was conducted in partnership with the California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS). The mixed-methods study focused on transition programs and how they compare with current research on transitional practices. School leaders, parents and students were asked to evaluate their school's program in terms of its effectiveness. Findings showed that while parents, students and school leaders perceived the transition programs effective, students experienced the same transitional challenges described in the literature based on public school research. The researcher recommends more systematic transition planning as well as the implementation of more structured feedback loops within programs. The researcher also found that attracting and retaining high quality teachers is difficult in private schools, but the retention of such teachers is essential to the success of a school's transition programming (Beachy, 2006).

### Summary

The development of middle schools has been relatively recent. They came about as a result of changing beliefs about the special needs of developing adolescents. The movement of early adolescent students from elementary school into middle school coincides with several physiological and psychological changes. Traditionally, educators

and parents have attributed declines in academic performance, behavior and motivation to these changes. However, research has shown that the school environment and philosophy are actually at odds with the specific needs of developing adolescents, and that much of the academic and motivational success of students depends upon the responsiveness of the academic environment toward the needs of the student (Eccles, Wigfield, & Midgley, 1993).

During the elementary school to middle school transition, students move into a larger and more complex environment which offers less emotional support from teachers, and less peer to peer contact (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). This disruption in social networks and connection to school can affect the outcome of the transition experience.

Transition programs in schools are varied and in some schools, non-existent. In planning transition programs, school leaders should consider adolescent physical, social, emotional and cognitive development and needs. It is also important to consider the influence of gender and race as variables in the process and include that information in the transition planning.

While some data is available regarding certain components of private schools, very little research has been done specifically on the transition of private middle school students from elementary school into middle school. This research will address specific components of the transition experience in ways which have not been previously identified or studied in private schools. Private school leaders believe that this information would be timely and useful in developing and administering transition programs. Results of this study could be helpful in terms of attraction and retention of

students, especially minority students. It would also shed light on the experiences of minority students in private schools and perhaps lead to an understanding of factors which may lead to their enrollment in or attrition from those schools during the middle school years.

This research attempts to identify factors which may lead to an understanding of components of successful transition programs. Given the unique mission and philosophy of each private school, these components could be implemented in each school in the areas of transition planning and implementation in such a way as to address specific transitional needs of that school. The most important component of this research is that the student's personal experience during the transition would be studied, shedding light on their sense of connectedness, academic achievement and motivation, and those individuals in the school who are identified as the most helpful to the transition experience. The student perspective is extremely important to measure, as schools may believe they have adequate transition programs in place, yet they may not be meeting the needs of the students as they had hoped. These factors have not been previously investigated for private schools through research, especially the student perspective, which is why this particular study is needed.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Little research has been conducted in the area of private school transition to middle school, so it was the aim of this investigation to explore relationships that may broaden this research base and encourage future research in this area. This research addressed the following questions:

1. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their connectedness to their new school?
2. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive the success of their transition?
3. Which individuals do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive as most helpful to them during the transition?
4. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic motivation in elementary school and middle school?
5. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic performance in elementary school and middle school?
6. Which transition activities do newly transitioned private middle school students find most helpful?
7. Are there any racial or gender differences in newly transitioned private middle school student perceptions of connectedness, transition difficulty, most helpful

individual, academic motivation, academic achievement, or helpful transition activities?

8. What is the relationship among connectedness, level of support by others, academic achievement and number of transition activities to the difficulty of transition?

### Type of Study

This investigation utilized survey research to examine student perceptions of variables related to their transition experience following their transition from elementary school into middle school.

### Population and Sampling

The population of this investigation was based on a convenience sample comprised of 61 private schools in Virginia. All 61 of these schools have middle schools and all are accredited by the Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS). Each of these schools was asked to voluntarily participate in the study.

The VAIS is non-profit voluntary membership organization and approved accrediting body which is recognized by the Virginia Board of Education and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), (VAIS, 2009). In 2009, there were 86 VAIS member schools having a variety of grade level configurations (VAIS, 2009). Sixty-one of these schools had middle schools, but one of these was used for the pilot study and therefore was not included in the sample. VAIS has designated six divisions in Virginia.

They are: Northwest, Northern Virginia, Richmond, Hampton Roads, Valley, and Southwest Virginia.

Within these schools, every student who made the transition into middle school during the 2009-2010 school year was eligible to participate. These students were in grades five, six or seven, depending upon the manner in which the individual schools establish their grade divisions. Students participated on a voluntary basis, after parental consent and student assent has been granted.

The decision to include all of the VAIS schools having a middle school was made in order to increase the generalizability of the study. To be generalizable, 52 of the 60 schools must agree to participate (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). By increasing the sample size, the variability of the sampling distribution is reduced and thus the standard error of the mean is reduced (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

#### Procedure/Data Collection

Following prospectus approval, this research proposal was submitted to the Institutional review Board (IRB) at Virginia Commonwealth University. Following IRB approval, the Executive Director of the VAIS sent a letter to the heads of all 60 VAIS member schools that have middle schools (Appendix B). The letter outlined the purpose of the study and asked those qualifying schools to consider participating since the research could be useful to school leaders and to the VAIS organization. Participation in was study was voluntary and student confidentiality was assured by coding surveys by school only.

One week following the mailing of the letter from the Executive Director of the VAIS, permission to conduct the survey was then solicited from the targeted VAIS member school heads. This correspondence consisted of a letter and response post card to qualifying schools (those having a middle school), outlining the purpose and procedures of the study (Appendix C). Heads of those schools were asked to respond by returning the stamped, pre-addressed post card, included in the letter (Appendix D). On the card, the school heads indicated whether or not they wished to participate. If they agreed to participate, they stated the number of first year middle school students in their school.

One week following my letter, I sent a follow-up post card to all of the school heads included in the initial mailing. I thanked those who had responded, and asked those who had not responded to do so by a specific date (Appendix E).

One week after sending the follow-up post cards, I sent all non-responding schools an email reminder describing the research and giving them a final opportunity to participate.

I then organized the participating schools by region, as I planned to administer the survey by the six VAIS regions in order to consolidate my travel time and expenses. I contacted participating school heads by phone and email in order to let them know when I would be in their region and arranged survey dates and times with them. During that communication, I answered any questions they had about the procedures.

Following this communication, participating school heads were sent a confirmation letter describing the survey procedures confirming the date of administration, and asked them to contact me if they had any questions (Appendix F). Included with those



instructions was a parent packet which was to be sent home by the school with newly transitioned middle school students. Enough parent packets were sent to each participating school to include the number of students indicated by each head on the response card. The packet included a letter of explanation and instructions written by me (Appendix G). It also included a Parent Consent Form which explained the project and gave parents the opportunity for their child to participate in the survey (Appendix H). Included in the materials was the Student Assent Form which had to be read and signed by the student if they wished to participate (Appendix I). Parents returned the parental consent and student assent forms to their school before survey administration if they wished to have their child participate in the study.

School heads were asked to collect signed consent and assent forms and keep them until my visit. One week following the distribution of the parent packet, I emailed school heads and asked them to remind families to send in the forms if they wished to have their student participate. Heads used their school's standard method of communication to remind the families involved. School heads gave the consent and assent forms to me when I visited the school to administer the survey.

In January and February of 2010, I traveled to the schools who agreed to participate and who had students having signed parental consent and student assent forms allowing them to participate. After gathering the consent assent forms, I reviewed each form to make sure it had been completed correctly and signed appropriately by parent and student. I then administered the survey in a location in each school which had been pre-determined by the school head.

By administering the survey in person, I ensured that the administration of the survey was consistent and controlled among all of the schools. A script was read at each administration, giving the same instructions to each group of students (Appendix J). Surveys were not administered to students who had not returned the signed consent form and/or who did not sign the Student Assent Form. I completed an accounting sheet at each school listing the number of newly transitioned middle school students, the number of students who completed the survey, the number who chose not to answer the survey, and the number of students in their class whose parents had returned the signed consent form (Appendix K). The surveys were completed anonymously, and no incentives for completion were offered. If the survey location included students who had not returned consent and assent forms as well as those who have returned them, those students not completing the survey were given a seat work activity by their teacher to complete during the survey period. School heads were given the option of receiving their school's results. Student surveys from those schools were coded with a number so that the raw survey data could be forwarded to those schools. Students were not asked to provide their names on the survey.

In summary, the procedure was as follows:

1. Introductory letter was sent to all VAIS middle school heads by Executive Director of VAIS.

2. Letters were sent by me to school heads requesting participation in the study. A response post card enclosed was to be returned to me by a specific date.
3. Post cards were sent to all schools, thanking those who had responded and asking those who had not responded to do so by a specific date.
4. All non-responding heads were emailed and asked for a response via email by a specific date.
5. I called or emailed each participating school head to arrange survey administration dates.
6. Confirmation letters were sent to school heads agreeing to participate. It included a parent packet which was sent home by schools with a letter of instruction and explanation, as well as parental consent and student assent forms.
7. I contacted participating schools via email and asked them to remind parents to return consent and assent forms to school by a specific date should they wish to participate.
8. I traveled to schools to administer the survey.

#### Instrument

A self-administered paper and pencil survey was completed by the newly transitioned middle school students. A review of literature related to the middle school transition failed to indicate any standardized instrument which would measure all of the variables included in this study, so the survey was designed by me to reflect several themes indicated in the literature on middle school transition. I developed a 47 item

survey which was adapted from four previously developed measures of these constructs (Appendix A). The survey consisted of six parts, each measuring a different transition theme. The demographic information was included as a categorical variable for comparison among the six themes. The sections of the survey included the following:

- Section I-*Connectedness*

The first connectedness measure used was the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale (Goodenow, 1993). Seven questions from this nineteen item measure were included in the survey. These items were measured on a four point Likert format with responses ranging from “not true at all” to “completely true.” The questions asked for student perceptions relating to statements such as “I feel like a real part of my new school” and “I am included in lots of activities at my school.”

The second part of Section I included thirteen questions which were adapted from the Student Transition Questionnaire (STQ), (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This measure is based on questions included in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (1998). These questions assessed student participation in a variety of school activities.

- Section II- *Success of Transition*

Five questions were included in this section. One question came from the STQ (Akos & Galassi, 2004), and the other four questions were created by

me, based on the literature. These included questions relating to the level of success students may have experienced finding classrooms and other places in the school. Students were also asked how they perceive their safety in the school and about making friends. Student responses ranged from “easy” to “difficult” on a four point Likert scale.

- Section III- *Most Helpful People*

Ten survey items were included for this measure. They were adapted from the STQ (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students rated various individuals such as school administrators, teachers, parents and other students on a four point Likert scale from “not helpful” to “very helpful” to the student’s transition.

- Section IV- *Academic Motivation*

These seven questions were selected from the Aberdeen Academic Motivation Inventory (AAMI) (Entwistle, 1968) which is a twenty-four item self-administered questionnaire that measures student motivation for academic success. Question responses were “never” to “always” on a four point Likert scale. Students were asked to respond for both their elementary and their middle school experiences to questions such as “Do you work hard at school?” and “Do you like to leave your homework until the last minute?”

- Section V- *Academic Performance*

Students were asked to report their academic performance using the Perceived Academic Performance Scale (PAPS) (Nonis, Hudson, Logan & Ford, 1998). This two item self-report measure was adapted for this study to include a four point Likert response scale ranging from “very poor” to “very good” when asked “How would you rate your academic performance?” and “How would you rate your academic performance as compared to other students?” Students were asked to respond to these questions for both their elementary and middle school experiences. In addition, students were asked to provide information regarding their grades in elementary and middle school.

- Section VI- *Transition Activities*

Six items on the survey asked students to rate the helpfulness of several school initiated activities they may have participated in as new middle school students. Items such as “A visit to the middle school last year” and “The orientation and tour we had this past summer” are included in this section. Responses are measured on a four point Likert scale ranging from “Not Helpful” to “Very Helpful.” The items are based on the STQ (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Additional space was provided on the survey for students to write in any activities their school provided which they felt were helpful, but which were not included on the list.

- Section VI- *Demographic Information* was gathered about each student's gender and race. These were self-reported.

Reliability for items in survey Sections I through VI was determined through measurement of internal consistency using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. This determinant is useful for instrumentation that measure attitudes or perceptions which have scaled responses, in which one test is administered, and in which the items are correlated to each other (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), correlation coefficients may range between .00 and .99, and an acceptable range for reliability coefficients is .70 to .90.

Validity is "a judgment of the appropriateness of a measure for specific inferences or decisions that result from the scores generated" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.179). To insure the validity of the instrument proposed for this study, a panel of experts comprised of educational leadership faculty, school leaders, teachers, and research professionals examined the instrument and determined the degree to which it measured predetermined criteria, namely the six themes of the survey. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), such evidence, which is based on test content, will demonstrate the extent of the appropriateness of the content of the survey and provide a measurement of instrument quality. Changes to the survey were made in response to these recommendations.

Pretesting the survey included several components. One of these, obtaining feedback on the draft survey from individuals having specific knowledge of aspects of survey quality (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) was accomplished through the validity examination described previously. Responses from the expert evaluators were used to make necessary changes to the survey. These changes included adding descriptive statements at the top of each section of the survey, describing the nature of the questions that follow. It was believed by the experts that this would help the student better understand what the questions were asking. Another addition to the survey based on expert feedback was a free-response question asking students to write any transition activities their school implemented which may not have been included in the list provided on the survey. Expert evaluators agreed that the survey was clearly written, comprehensive, well organized, and addressed the research questions well.

Another pretesting component, pilot testing, was conducted with a subsample of the population which helped to evaluate implementation procedures and the interconnection among the questions (Dillman, et al., 2009). The instrument was pilot tested before administering to the sample. Eighteen sixth grade students in a VAIS school not included in the sample population of 60 piloted the instrument and provided feedback to the researcher about the clarity of the instrument. Students were asked to review the survey and make comments regarding the clarity of instructions and questions, and the overall organization of the instrument. Students were interviewed following the pilot test. They reported no difficulties understanding the questions; however, they reported lack of



understanding of the term “Caucasian” in the demographics section. This was clarified for subsequent survey takers during survey administration.

### Data Management and Analysis

The PASW Statistics 17.0 software program was used to store, manage and analyze the data. As surveys were completed and gathered, the data was entered in PASW. Table 1 provides a summary of the research questions, the survey items relating to those questions, and the data analysis procedure. The analyses used included descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies), independent samples *t*-tests, ANOVA’s, factor analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Relationships and interactions were determined. Post hoc comparisons were used to determine significance among multiple comparisons at the  $p \leq 0.05$  level.

To analyze survey questions in Section I, part one, a factor analysis was used to create a “Connectedness” variable using questions one through seven. Factor analysis is useful in reducing information contained in several scores into a smaller number of more clearly defined variables. Responses for questions eight through 13 in Section I, part two were scored on a zero to six scale. The number of extracurricular activities for each student was added together to create the score. For Section II of the survey, a factor analysis was used to create a “Difficulty of Transition” variable using responses to items 14-18. Items 19-28 in Section III were analyzed using descriptive statistics and then ranked from highest to lowest mean. Factor analysis was used to create an “Academic Motivation” variable for questions 29-35 in Section IV. In order to compare elementary

to middle school perceptions of academic motivation, descriptive statistics followed by an independent samples *t*-test to compare means were used.

Items 36 and 37 were averaged together to create an “Academic Performance” variable. Descriptive statistics were then used to analyze the data from Section V. Responses to items 39-44 were analyzed through descriptive statistics followed by and the means ranked from highest to lowest.

To determine if differences exist on each of research questions one through six, a *t* test was used to compare means for gender, and an ANOVA followed by post hoc analysis was used to compare means for race. Finally, the relationship among connectedness, most helpful person, academic motivation, academic performance, and most helpful transition activities to student perceived difficulty of transition was examined. A multiple regression analysis was used in this analysis.

Data was stored in PASW Statistics 17 software, and the paper surveys will be kept by me through January 2011. All data will be destroyed by the researcher in February of 2011. Some participating schools elected to have their school data sent to them. For this purpose, a school identification code was added to the survey instrument for those schools.

#### Delimitations

The results of the investigation were delimited to the population of the study. The study included recently transitioned middle school students attending private schools in Virginia having middle school divisions during the 2009-2010 academic year. The

schools are accredited members of the Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS).

Table 1

*Data Analysis Method*

Research Question	Survey Question(s)	Data Analysis Method
1. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their connectedness to their new school?	1-7 8-13	Factor analysis to create a "Connectedness" variable Add scores: 0-6 scale; means and descriptive statistics
2. How do newly transitioned private school students perceive the difficulty of their transition?	14-18	Factor analysis to create an "Ease of Transition" variable
3. Which individuals do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive as most helpful to them during the transition?	19-28	Descriptive Statistics Rank order
4. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic motivation in elementary school and middle school?	29-35	Factor Analysis to create an "Academic Motivation" variable; descriptive statistics and then a <i>t</i> -test to compare elementary to middle school
5. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic performance in elementary school and middle school?	36-38	Average of questions 36 and 37 creates "Academic Performance" variable; followed by descriptive statistics
6. Which transition activities do newly transitioned private middle school students find most helpful?	39-44	Compare means using descriptive statistics and rank ordered

Table 1 (continued)

Research Question	Survey Question(s)	Data Analysis Method
7. Are there race or gender differences for research questions 1-6?	Section VII	For each research question a t-test for gender and an ANOVA ( $p \leq 0.05$ sig.) for race to determine if race or gender differences exist on each of the research questions 1-6. Post hoc test for significant $F$ values.
8. What is the relationship among connectedness, level of support by others, academic achievement and number of transition activities to difficulty of transition?		$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 C + \beta_2 S + \beta_3 AP + \beta_4 TA$ where: $Y$ = Ease of transition, $C$ = connectedness $S$ = Level of support by others $AP$ = Academic performance (middle school) $TA$ = Number of transition activities provided by school

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that may affect a student's perception of his or her transition into middle school. These factors included the sense of connectedness students feel towards their new school, their perception of the overall difficulty of their transition, which individuals were the most helpful to them during their transition, how the students perceived changes in their academic motivation and academic achievement since moving into the middle school, and which transition activities provided by schools they found particularly helpful. Since most transition research has been conducted in public schools, this study was conducted in private schools in order to determine if students perceive similar challenges during the transition into middle school. The purpose of the study was achieved by examining private school student responses to survey items designed to measure student perceptions of the transition factors.

Descriptive statistics were reported first, followed by the results of data analyses for each research question. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Overall findings were presented in tables. Factor analyses were used to create variables for connectedness, difficulty of transition, and academic motivation. Analysis of variance, *t* test, and multiple regression analysis were used to examine relationships between factors such as difficulty of transition, connectedness,

support, academic motivation and achievement, and transition activities. Additional analysis was included for one survey response which was not included in the quantitative analysis. This questions asked students to list any helpful transition activities their school used which may not have been mentioned on the survey.

### Descriptive Statistics

#### *Response Rate*

Table 2 represents the response rate of the 60 schools in the sample. Of the 60 schools, 35 agreed to participate in the survey. This represented a 58 percent response rate from schools. Sixteen schools returned response cards declining participation. Nine schools gave no response. Within the school populations who agreed to participate, there were 1013 students who had made the middle school transition in the fall and were therefore eligible to participate in the survey. Of those, 502 students returned both the parental consent form and the student assent form, and were allowed to take the survey. This represented a 49 percent response rate from students.

Table 2

#### *Response Rate*

	Number invited	Participated	Did not participate	No response
Schools	60	35 (58%)	16 (26%)	9 (15%)
Students	1013	502 (49%)	511 (50%)	*

\*Due to self-selection, a non-response was considered decline to participate.

Non-response bias may occur if a certain percentage of members of the targeted sample do not respond to or participate in the survey. There is a risk that these non-responders may have perceptions that are statistically different from those who return their surveys. In this study, because the percentage of responding schools (58 percent) was less than the 70 percent generally agreed upon by statisticians as adequate to eliminate non-response bias as an issue, a statistical analysis for non-response bias was necessary. In order to accomplish this, a subsample of the first 30 respondents was compared with a subsample of the last 30 respondents. An independent sample *t* test was conducted to compare the response means of the two groups. No significant difference between the two subsamples was found ( $p < 0.05$ ). Based on these results, the data are valid for this sample population.

Because 42 percent of the schools did not participate it was important to determine if there was anything about those schools that may have influenced their decision to not participate. Most of the schools not participating tended have larger enrollments, so *t* Test analysis was used to compare the enrollment of participant schools ( $M = 375$ ) to non-participant schools ( $M = 501$ ). The results were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that enrollment is a limitation in this study, with lower enrollment schools tending to participate more than higher enrollment schools. Thus, there is a sample bias.

Although there is a non-response bias based upon size of school, differences by size of school are not evident in an analysis of connectedness ( $F = .870, p = .457$ ), ease of transition ( $F = 2.33, p = .073$ ), and middle school academic performance ( $F = .670, p = .571$ ).

### *Demographic Data*

The data in Tables 3 and 4 include the demographic variables relating to the gender and race of the students who completed the survey. Two hundred and twenty-two of the students were male, representing 44 percent of the students. Two hundred and seventy-seven students were female, representing 55 percent of the students. Three students did not respond. Compared to the population, 53 percent are female and 46 percent are male.

Table 3

#### *Sample Population by Gender (n=502)*

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	222	44
Female	277	55
No Response	3	0
Total	502	100

As for the race of the students completing the survey, 82 percent were Caucasian, five percent were African American, two percent were Asian, one percent was Native American, two percent were Hispanic, three percent were Mixed/Biracial, and one percent reported “Other”. One percent of the students did not respond. As compared to the population, 81 percent are Caucasian, six percent African American, three percent Asian, two percent Native American, two percent Hispanic, two percent Mixed/Biracial, and four percent report “Other.”



Table 4

*Sample Population by Race (n=502)*

Race	Frequency	Percent
Caucasian	412	82
African American	28	5
Asian	12	2
Native American	7	1
Hispanic	2	2
Mixed/Biracial	17	3
Other	9	1
No Response	7	1
Total	502	100

## Research Questions

The eight research questions in this study were investigated using descriptive and inferential statistics. To investigate research questions one and two, factor analyses were used to create variables for “Connectedness” and “Difficulty of Transition.” Scores from survey questions 8-13 were added to create a connectedness scale related to the number of activities in which a student participated. Responses for research question three were ranked from highest to lowest means, most helpful to least helpful. This data was then correlated with the “ease of transition” variable created in research question two. A paired samples *t* test was used to analyze research question four, and survey questions 36 and 37 were averaged to create an “Academic Performance” variable for research question five. Single sample *t* tests and analysis of variance tests were used to analyze research question six. For research question seven, *t* tests for gender and an analyses of variance for race were used. Multiple regression analysis was used for research question

eight. Descriptive statistics were used to investigate research questions one, four, five and six. For each statistical analysis in this study, the level of significance .05 was used.

### Research Question One

*Question 1: How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their connectedness to their new school?*

Connectedness was measured in two ways. The first is through a variable called “connectedness” that describes how students feel about their involvement in school. The second is through a new variable that computes the number of school activities in which the student participates. Each of these two variables corresponds to a separate section in the survey.

Survey Section I consisted of survey questions one through seven, and included questions asking students if they felt as though they were connected to the middle school in terms of being included, recognized, noticed, liked and respected. All of these questions were taken from the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), (Goodenow, 1993). The descriptive statistics for this research question are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Items Used in Determining Student's Level of Connectedness to the School*

	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>
Factors used in determining connectedness			
Q1 I feel like a real part of middle school	502	3.19	0.79
Q2 People here notice when I am good at something	500	3.01	0.79
Q3 Most of my teachers seem interested in me	494	3.17	0.80
Q4 There is at least 1 teacher or other adult I can talk to if I have a problem	497	3.44	0.86
Q5 I am included in lots of activities at my school	495	3.12	0.87
Q6 I am treated with as much respect as other students	497	3.26	0.84
Q7 Other students here like me the way I am	497	3.31	0.83

*a* on a scale where 1 = Not true at all to 4 = Completely true

A factor analysis for survey items one through seven was performed in order to create a “Connectedness” variable. Factor analysis revealed that student responses on the survey were grouped into one factor which was “Connectedness.” Table 6 summarizes the loadings which identify one connectedness component with eigenvalues of at least one. Every value above .44 was accepted. The one component accounts for 41 percent of the variance. The connectedness variable mean is 3.217 and the standard error is .0237. Most students reported that they felt “mostly” connected to middle school. Missing data were not included in the analysis.

There were 153 missing responses for items one through seven among the 502 student responders. Students did not answer survey questions for which they did not know the answer or which they intentionally chose not to answer.

Table 6

*Factor Reduction Values of Connectedness Survey Items*

Survey Question	Value
Q1 I feel like a real part of middle school.	.742
Q2 People here notice when I am good at something.	.697
Q3 Most of my teachers seem interested in me.	.614
Q4 There is at least 1 teacher or other adult I can talk to if I have a problem.	.445
Q5 I am included in lots of activities at my school.	.459
Q6 I am treated with as much respect as other students.	.746
Q7 Other students here like me the way I am.	.704
Eigenvalue	1.00
Total Variance	41.00%

Another way to consider connectedness is to explore involvement in school activities. It may be speculated that students who participated in many activities would feel more connected. Section II of the survey, which included question eight through 13, asked students in which school activities they participated in middle school. These included activities such as clubs, sports, drama, music, leadership and yearbook. These questions were adapted from the Student Transition Questionnaire (STQ), (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

*Activities Determining Student's Level of Connectedness to the School*

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent</i>
At school I currently participate in:		
Q8 A sports team	288	45
Q9 A school play or drama group	139	22
Q10 The choir, band or orchestra	226	36
Q11 A leadership position or student government	65	10
Q12 A school club	185	29
Q13 The school newspaper or yearbook	48	8

Of the 502 students completing the survey, 54 reported that they had not participated in any of the listed school activities since moving into middle school. One hundred and forty-three students had participated in at least one of the listed activities, 107 students had participated in at least two of the activities, 122 students reported participation in at least 3 of the activities, and 35 students reported participation in at least four of the activities listed. Three students reported participation in at least five of the activities, and no students reported that they had participated in all of the six activities listed on the survey.

These reports were used to create a new variable to indicate the number of activities in which each student participated. This variable was called "Sum of Activities" ( $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ). Of those who are involved in any of the listed activities, most students appear to be involved in two of the activities.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to test for a correlation between a student's level of connectedness, as determined by the

“Connectedness” variable, and level of extracurricular activity participation as indicated by “Sum of Activities”. There was no significant correlation between the two variables at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),  $r = -0.050$ ,  $n = 502$ ,  $p = 0.278$ . Since no correlation exists, connectedness was determined using both the connectedness variable derived from the factor analysis and the variable created from participation in extracurricular activities.

### Research Question Two

*Question 2: How do newly transitioned private school students perceive the difficulty of their transition?*

Research question two included survey questions 14-18. These questions were taken from the STQ (Akos & Galassi, 2004) and were also created by me, based on the literature. Table 8 references the descriptive statistics for student responses to each of the survey items 14-18.

Table 8

#### *Student's Perceived Level of Transition Difficulty*

	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>
How would you describe each of the following since moving to middle school?			
Q 14 Class work, homework, tests, quizzes	499	2.23	0.71
Q 15 Finding my classrooms, locker, lunchroom and other places in the school	499	1.08	0.34
Q16 Feeling safe from being harmed by other students in the school	493	1.26	0.55
Q 17 Making friends	499	1.35	0.66
Q 18 Overall, how would you describe your transition to middle school?	497	1.77	0.75

*a* on a scale where 1 = Easy to 4 = Difficult

To answer research question two, a factor analysis was used for survey items 14-18. Factor analysis using varimax rotation identified relationships among items 14-18 by reducing them to two components. Combined, components one and two accounted for 86 percent of the total variance.

Table 9 summarizes the survey items and corresponding factor loadings, which identify two components with eigenvalues of at least one. An item was said to load on a given component if the factor loading was .50 or greater. Using these criteria, three items were found to load on the first component. Survey questions 15, 16 and 17 make one component which was labeled “Comfort Level” ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = .599$ ,  $SE = .027$ ). This component accounted for 30 percent of the variance.

Two items (survey questions 14 and 18), loaded on the second component which was labeled “Ease of Transition” ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = .369$ ,  $SE = .016$ ). This component accounted for 56 percent of the variance.

Overall, students reported that their transition to middle school was easy. The level of difficulty of homework, tests and class work was reported to be somewhat easy. Students also reported that finding places around the school and making friends were easy, and they felt safe from being harmed by other students.

Table 9

*Component Loadings and Reliability Coefficients for Difficulty of Transition Factors*

Items	Component	
	1	2
Q15 Finding classrooms, locker, lunchroom, and other places in the school	.521	
Q16 Feeling safe from being harmed by other students in school	.754	
Q17 Making friends	.746	
Q14 Difficulty of middle school class work, quizzes, tests		.871
Q18 Overall difficulty of transition		.739

## Research Question Three

*Question 3: Which individuals do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive as most helpful to them during the transition?*

Research question three included survey questions 19-28 in Section III of the survey. Each survey item listed an individual or individuals who may have been helpful to transitioning students in their first year of middle school. These questions were adapted from the STQ (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students rated each individual on a four point Likert scale from “Not Helpful at All” to Very Helpful.” Table 10 includes the descriptive statistics for these survey responses, ranked from most helpful to least helpful. Parents ( $M = 3.54$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ ) were rated as most helpful to the transition, followed by middle school teachers ( $M = 3.51$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ).



Table 10

*Student Perception of Helpfulness of Individuals to the Transition: Most Helpful to Least Helpful*

	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SE</i>
Helpfulness of the following people to the transition:			
Q 24 Your parents	489	3.54	.035
Q 21 New middle school teachers	485	3.51	.033
Q 26 Friends and other students in my grade	491	3.08	.040
Q 20 Elementary/Lower school teachers	496	2.89	.043
Q 25 Family members other than parents	481	2.88	.050
Q 19 Head of School/Principal	483	2.70	.043
Q 23 Middle school counselors	339	2.69	.056
Q 28 Other adults in the school such as coaches, librarians, secretaries	487	2.56	.042
Q 22 Elementary/Lower school Counselors	304	2.37	.059
Q 27 Older students in the middle school	484	2.27	.047

*a* on a scale where 1=Not helpful at all to 4 =Very helpful

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to test for a correlation between the previously created variable “Ease of Transition” and each of the individuals listed on the survey. Several significant correlations were noted. These are summarized in Table 11. Parents, family, friends, middle school teachers and older middle school students each showed a significantly significant correlation to “Ease of Transition.” However, none of these relationships rose to a meaningful variance. “Friends” account for 6.2 percent of the variance of ease of transition, but this still leaves 94 percent of the reasons for ease of transition unexplained.

Table 11

*Significant Correlations Among Ease of Transition and Helpful Individuals*

Individual	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i> *	<i>n</i>
Parents	.183	.033	.000	489
Middle school teachers	.198	.039	.000	485
Family	.197	.038	.000	481
Friends	.249	.062	.000	491
Older students in the Middle school	.238	.056	.000	484

\*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Cohen (1988) indicated that effect sizes may be determined using the  $r^2$  of the correlation. An effect size of  $r^2 = .01$  is considered small,  $r^2 = .09$  is medium, and  $r^2 = .25$  is considered large. All of the effect sizes for this correlation are considered small, meaning that while the correlations between these individuals and ease of transition are significant, they are considered weak.

#### Research Question Four

*Question 4: How do newly transitioned middle school students perceive their academic motivation in elementary school and middle school?*

Section IV of the survey was used to determine student perception of academic motivation. This section consisted of survey questions 29-35 and was organized into two sections. Students provided responses for both elementary school and middle school. Survey section IV included questions asking the students if they felt as though they always tried their hardest in school, enjoyed intellectual challenges, and liked being asked

questions in class. All of these questions were taken from the Aberdeen Academic Motivation Inventory (AAMI) (Entwistle, 1968). Descriptive statistics for this section are included in Table 12.

Table 12

*Factors Used in Determining Student's Perception of Their Academic Motivation*

	Elementary School			Middle School		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>
Factors used in determining academic motivation:						
Q 29 Do you like being asked questions in class?	498	2.93	0.70	500	2.93	0.73
Q 30 Do you enjoy most class lessons?	496	2.97	0.59	498	3.07	0.60
Q 31 Do you leave your homework until the last minute?	497	1.84	0.91	498	1.69	0.84
Q 32 Is it important to you to do well at school?	496	3.84	0.45	497	3.89	0.38
Q 33 When you are given a difficult problem, do you enjoy trying to find the answer?	498	2.72	0.84	500	2.84	0.88
Q 34 Do you work hard at school?	495	3.61	0.55	495	3.72	0.46
Q 35 Do you always try your hardest to get your homework right?	498	3.56	0.55	502	3.61	0.54

*a* on a scale where 1 = Never to 4 = Always

A paired samples *t* test was conducted for survey items 29-35 which compared elementary school responses to middle school responses. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 13. All items except "I like being asked questions in class" showed significant differences. Of the significant differences, students reported enjoying middle school class lessons more than elementary class lessons ( $M = .109$ ,  $SD = .629$ ). They also report that they leave homework until the last minute less in middle school than they did

in elementary school ( $M = .161, SD = .748$ ). It is more important that they do well in middle school than in elementary school ( $M = .048, SD = .368$ ), and they enjoy solving difficult problems more in middle than in elementary school ( $M = .124, SD = .644$ ).

Middle school students reported that they work harder than in elementary school ( $M = .099, SD = .414$ ), and they try harder to get their homework correct than they did in elementary school ( $M = .044, SD = .493$ ).

Table 13

*Paired Sample t Test results for Elementary and Middle School Responses to Academic Motivation Items*

	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i> <u>Elementary</u>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i> <u>Middle</u>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.*</i>
Q29 I like being asked questions in class	2.93	2.93	.233	.816
Q30 I enjoy most class lessons	2.97	3.07	- 3.85	.000
Q31 I usually leave homework until the last minute	1.84	1.69	4.80	.000
Q32 It's important to me to do well at school	3.84	3.89	-2.93	.004
Q33 I enjoy solving difficult problems	2.72	0.84	-4.31	.000
Q34 I work hard at school	3.61	3.72	-5.33	.000
Q35 I always try to get my homework right	3.56	3.61	-1.99	.046

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

*a* on a scale where 1 = Never to 4 = Always

### Research Question Five

*Question 5: How do newly transitioned middle school students perceive their academic performance in elementary school and middle school?*

Section V of the survey was used to determine student perception of academic achievement in elementary school and in middle school. All of these questions for this section of the survey were taken from the Perceived Academic Performance Scale (PAPS) (Nonis, Hudson, Logan & Ford, 1998). This section consisted of survey questions 36-38 and was organized into two sections. Students provided responses for both elementary school and middle school. Survey Section V included questions asking the student to rate their own academic performance, to compare their academic performance against others, and to list their grade averages in elementary and middle school. The purpose was to see if any significant differences existed in academic performance since the transition to middle school. Descriptive statistics for this section are included in Table 14.

Table 14

*Items Used in Determining Student's Perception of Their Academic Achievement*

	Elementary School		Middle School	
	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>
Factors used in determining academic achievement:				
Q 36 How would you rate your academic performance?	3.58	0.55	3.59	0.53
Q 37 How would you rate your academic performance as compared to other students?	3.39	0.63	3.41	0.63
Q 38 My grades are mostly (A,B,C,D,F)	1.38	0.64	1.37	0.61

*a* on a scale where 1 = Very poor to 4 = Very good (Q 36 and 37), and A=1 to F=5 (Q 38)

Questions 35 and 36 were averaged to create an “Academic Performance” variable for elementary school and for middle school. In elementary school, the average for this new variable was  $M=3.48$ , ( $SD=.521$ ). In middle school, the average was  $M=3.49$ , ( $SD=.509$ ). Overall, in both middle school and in elementary school, students believed their academic performance was good to very good. In elementary school, the mean grade average was  $M=1.38$ , ( $SD=.643$ ), and in middle school it was  $M=1.37$  ( $SD=.602$ ). (1=A, 2=B, 3=C, 4=D and 5=F).

#### Research Question Six

*Question 6: Which transition activities do newly transitioned private middle school students find most helpful?*

Research question six included survey questions 39-44 in Section VI of the survey. Each survey item listed transition activities that the elementary or middle school may have implemented as part of their transition program. These survey questions were adapted from the STQ (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students rated each activity on a scale from “Not Helpful” to Very Helpful”. Table 15 includes the descriptive statistics for these survey responses.

Table 15

*Factors in Determining Student's Perception of the Helpfulness of Transition Activities to Their Transition to Middle School: Most to Least Helpful*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>
Factors use in determining most helpful transition activities			
Q 41 A visit to the middle school last year	401	3.13	.931
Q 42 Summer orientation and tour	248	2.93	.995
Q 43 Being assigned an older middle school student as a buddy	250	2.84	1.10
Q 44 Special transition activities or classes since I came to middle School	328	2.82	.890
Q 39 Middle school teachers, counselors and heads coming to my elementary school to talk about middle school	410	2.76	.896
Q 40 Information my elementary school gave to the middle school about me	444	2.64	.994

*a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful to 4 = Very helpful

According to the descriptive statistics, a visit to the middle school ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .931$ ) was rated as most helpful to the transition, followed by the summer orientation and tour ( $M = 2.93$ ;  $SD = .995$ ). Students perceive the information their elementary school gave to the middle school about them as least helpful ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .994$ ).

#### Research Question Seven

*Question 7: Are there race or gender differences for research questions 1-6?*

Demographic information regarding race and gender was gathered from survey participants. This information has previously been summarized in Tables 3 and 4.



### *Gender*

To answer question seven for gender, an independent-sample  $t$  test was performed on the survey data to analyze the gender distribution of males and females in each of the transition components. The  $t$  test results are then summarized in tables 16-19. Significant differences were noted in the area of most helpful individual to the transition. Males perceived parents ( $t=2.47, p=.014$ ) as more helpful ( $M = 3.66$ ) than did females ( $M = 3.48$ ). Females felt that friends ( $t = -2.02, p = .044$ ) were more helpful to their transition ( $M=3.14$ ) than did males ( $M= 3.00$ ). Males ( $M = 3.53$ ) perceived middle school teachers ( $t = .540, p = .018$ ) as more helpful than did females ( $M = 3.50$ ), and males also believed that elementary school counselors ( $t = -1.66, p = .006$ ) were more helpful ( $M = 2.21$ ) than did females ( $M = 2.49$ ).

Significant differences were also noted in perceived helpfulness of the various transition activities. Females ( $M = 2.97$ ) thought the assignment of an older middle school buddy was more helpful than did males ( $M = 2.65$ ). Males thought that the information the elementary school gave to the middle school about them was more helpful ( $M = 2.66$ ) than did females ( $M = 2.62$ ).

Table 16

*Independent Samples t Test Results for Gender Differences on Transition Variables: Connectedness and Ease of Transition*

	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> *
	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>		
Connectedness	212	3.24	267	3.19	.994	.321
Extracurricular activity number	222	1.95	277	2.05	-.562	.575
Ease of transition	221	1.96	273	2.02	-1.103	.271

\*Significant at  $p < .05$  (2-tailed)

*a* on a scale where 1 = Not true at all to 4 = Completely true (Connectedness); 1 = 1 activity to 6 = 6 activities Extracurricular Number), and 1 = Easy to 4 = Difficult (Ease of Transition)

Table 17

*Independent Samples t Test Results for Gender Differences on Transition Variables: Most Helpful Individual*

	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> *
	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>		
Most helpful individuals						
Parents	220	3.66	275	3.48	2.47	.014*
Family	217	3.00	269	2.84	1.60	.109
Friends	215	2.98	273	3.14	-2.02	.044*
Older students	216	2.20	269	2.36	-1.72	.085
Other adults	217	2.49	267	2.61	-1.33	.641
ES teachers**	220	2.90	273	2.89	.104	.453
MS teachers**	216	3.53	266	3.50	.540	.018*
ES counselors	135	2.21	168	2.49	-2.36	.006*
MS counselors	150	2.59	186	2.77	-1.66	.786
Head of school	218	2.77	262	2.65	1.37	.685

\*Significant at  $p < .05$  (2-tailed)

\*\*ES = elementary school, and MS = middle school  
*a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful at all to 4 = Very helpful

Table 18

*Independent Samples t Test Results for Gender Differences on Transition Variables: Academic Motivation and Achievement*

	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> *
	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>		
Academic motivation	313	3.06	262	3.08	-1.19	.234
Academic performance MS**	206	3.50	263	3.49	-.330	.742
MS grades**	218	1.40	270	1.33	1.268	.206

\*Significant at  $p < .05$  (2-tailed)

\*\* MS = Middle school

*a* on a scale where 1 = Never to 4 = Always (Academic motivation), 1 = Very poor to 4 = Very good (Academic performance, MS), and 1 = A to 5 = F (MS grades)

Table 19

*Independent Samples t Test Results for Gender Differences on Transition Variables: Transition Activities*

	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> *
	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>		
Most helpful transition activities						
Activities after getting to middle school	147	2.84	180	2.81	.315	.500
Older student assigned	99	2.65	151	2.97	-2.27	.001
Summer orientation/tour	110	2.93	138	2.93	-.002	.435
Visit to MS while in ES**	173	3.07	225	3.19	-1.30	.523
Info. my ES** gave the MS about me	198	2.66	243	2.62	.370	.001
MS people came to my ES to talk to me	190	2.87	218	2.67	2.29	.138

\*Significant at  $p < .05$  (2-tailed)

\*\* ES = Elementary school, and MS = Middle school  
*a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful to 4 = Very helpful

### Race

To answer question seven, a one-way ANOVA was performed to analyze the relationship between race and the transition components. Tables 20- 23 provide a summary of the ANOVA results.

Table 20

*ANOVA Results for Race Differences on Transition Variables: Connectedness and Ease of Transition*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.*</i>
Connectedness			1.056	.392
Caucasian	397	3.215		
African American	28	3.270		
Asian	12	3.345		
Native American	7	3.081		
Hispanic	6	3.428		
Mixed/Biracial	17	3.033		
Other	8	3.156		
Extracurricular activity number			1.148	.331
Caucasian	412	1.997		
African American	28	2.857		
Asian	12	1.833		
Native American	7	1.857		
Hispanic	10	1.500		
Mixed/Biracial	17	1.647		
Other	9	1.888		
Ease of transition			.693	.678
Caucasian	407	2.002		
African American	28	1.964		
Asian	12	2.083		
Native American	7	2.285		
Hispanic	10	1.700		
Mixed/Biracial	17	2.029		
Other	7	2.071		

\*Sig. at  $p < .05$

*a* on a scale where 1 = Not true at all to 4 = Completely true (Connectedness); 1 = 1 activity to 6 = 6 activities Extracurricular number), and 1= Easy to 4 = Difficult (Ease of Transition)

Table 21

*ANOVA Results for Race Differences on Transition Variables: Most Helpful Individuals*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.*</i>
Most helpful individuals				
Parents			3.050	.004*
Caucasian	408	3.55		
African American	28	3.57		
Asian	12	4.00		
Native American	7	3.71		
Hispanic	10	2.70		
Mixed/Biracial	17	3.82		
Other	9	4.00		
Family			1.343	.228
Caucasian	401	2.78		
African American	28	3.29		
Asian	12	3.17		
Native American	7	3.43		
Hispanic	8	3.00		
Mixed/Biracial	17	2.82		
Other	9	3.44		
Friends			1.494	.167
Caucasian	403	3.09		
African American	28	2.68		
Asian	12	3.33		
Native American	7	2.71		
Hispanic	8	2.88		
Mixed/Biracial	17	3.00		
Other	9	3.33		
Older students			2.030	.050
Caucasian	400	2.34		
African American	28	1.96		
Asian	12	2.25		
Native American	7	1.57		
Hispanic	8	.535		
Mixed/Biracial	17	2.24		
Other	9	2.56		
Head of School			3.560	.001*
Caucasian	399	2.67		
African American	24	3.00		
Asian	12	3.17		
Native American	7	2.43		
Hispanic	10	2.00		
Mixed/Biracial	15	3.07		
Other	9	3.56		

Table 21 (continued)

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i> *
ES Teachers			2.490	.016*
Caucasian	406	2.91		
African American	28	3.04		
Asian	12	2.92		
Native American	7	2.29		
Hispanic	10	2.40		
Mixed/Biracial	17	2.41		
Other	9	3.67		
MS Teachers			2.180	.034*
Caucasian	397	3.49		
African American	28	3.57		
Asian	12	3.83		
Native American	7	3.43		
Hispanic	10	3.50		
Mixed/Biracial	15	3.73		
Other	8	3.45		
ES Counselors			3.060	.004*
Caucasian	244	2.30		
African American	23	2.70		
Asian	10	3.20		
Native American	6	1.67		
Hispanic	8	3.00		
Mixed/Biracial	9	1.89		
Other	3	3.33		
MS Counselors			2.170	.036*
Caucasian	274	2.69		
African American	22	2.86		
Asian	10	3.50		
Native American	6	2.00		
Hispanic	8	3.00		
Mixed/Biracial	12	2.08		
Other	4	2.75		
Other Adults in the School			3.730	.001*
Caucasian	400	2.55		
African American	27	2.63		
Asian	12	2.92		
Native American	7	1.86		
Hispanic	8	2.00		
Mixed/Biracial	17	2.88		
Other				

\*Sig. at  $p < .05$ *a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful at all to 4 = Very helpful



Table 22

*ANOVA Results for Race Differences on Transition Variables: Academic Motivation and Achievement*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.*</i>
Academic motivation			1.583	.138
Caucasian	395	3.07		
African American	25	3.09		
Asian	9	3.01		
Native American	7	3.05		
Hispanic	10	3.19		
Mixed/Biracial	17	2.96		
Other	8	3.25		
Academic performance MS			2.468	.017*
Caucasian	387	3.49		
African American	27	3.37		
Asian	12	3.50		
Native American	7	3.57		
Hispanic	10	3.80		
Mixed/Biracial	17	3.47		
Other	5	4.00		
MS grades			2.783	.008*
Caucasian	401	1.34		
African American	28	1.75		
Asian	12	1.50		
Native American	7	1.43		
Hispanic	10	1.00		
Mixed/Biracial	17	1.41		
Other	9	1.11		

\*Sig. at  $p < .05$

*a* on a scale where 1= Never to 4 = Always (Academic motivation), 1 = Very poor to 4 = Very good (Academic performance, MS), and 1 =A to 5 = F (MS grades)

Table 23

*ANOVA Results for Race Differences on Transition Variables: Transition Activities*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.*</i>
Most helpful transition activities				
Activities after getting to middle school			2.085	.045*
Caucasian	263	2.83		
African American	19	2.89		
Asian	10	2.80		
Native American	4	3.00		
Hispanic	8	2.75		
Mixed/Biracial	15	2.73		
Other	4	3.75		
Older student assigned			4.776	.000*
Caucasian	194	2.89		
African American	20	2.65		
Asian	9	2.33		
Native American	4	4.00		
Hispanic	7	1.57		
Mixed/Biracial	8	2.00		
Other	6	4.00		
Summer orientation and tour			1.487	.173
Caucasian	193	2.91		
African American	16	2.81		
Asian	9	2.33		
Native American	6	3.00		
Hispanic	4	2.46		
Mixed/Biracial	13	3.60		
Other	5	4.00		
Visit to MS while in ES**			2.292	.027*
Caucasian	317	3.14		
African American	27	3.11		
Asian	7	2.83		
Native American	10	3.71		
Hispanic	14	2.80		
Mixed/Biracial	9	2.71		
Other	5	3.89		

Table 23 (continued)

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig. *</i>
Info. my ES gave the MS about me			3.785	.001*
Caucasian	365	2.57		
African America	27	3.33		
Asian	8	3.25		
Native American	5	2.40		
Hispanic	8	2.00		
Mixed/Biracial	16	2.81		
Other	8	3.25		
MS people came to my ES to talk to me			2.176	.035*
Caucasian	330	2.72		
African American	24	3.21		
Asian	10	2.90		
Native American	5	2.60		
Hispanic	10	2.40		
Mixed/Biracial	16	3.00		
Other	8	3.33		

\*Sig. at  $p < .05$

\*\* ES = Elementary school and MS = Middle school  
*a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful to 4 = Very helpful

Results indicate that many significant differences exist among race within the transition variables. Several differences exist for the most helpful individual to the transition. These include parents ( $p = .004$ ), head of school ( $p = .001$ ), elementary teachers ( $p = .016$ ), middle school teachers ( $p = .034$ ), elementary counselors ( $p = .004$ ), middle school counselors ( $p = .036$ ), and other adults in the school ( $p = .001$ ). Differences were seen for academic performance in middle school ( $p = .017$ ) and for middle school grades ( $p = .008$ ). Differences also exist for some of ratings of the helpfulness of various transition activities. These include activities for students after

entering middle school ( $p = .001$ ), a visit to the middle school while still in elementary school ( $p = .035$ ), the assignment of an older student as a helper ( $p = .000$ ), and information given from the elementary school to the middle school about the student ( $p = .013$ ).

Post hoc multiple comparisons were conducted using the Tukey method. This method is useful when all possible pairwise comparisons are of interest. The Tukey method accurately maintains alpha levels, so the probability of making a Type I error is limited. In addition, this post hoc method may be used in situations with equal sample sizes per group, but it may adapt for unequal sample sizes, as well (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Several significant differences were seen in student perception of their parents as helpful to the transition. Caucasian students ( $M = 2.87$ ), Mixed/Biracial students ( $M = 2.82$ ), and students who identified themselves as “Other” ( $M = 2.56$ ) did not perceive their parents as helpful in the transition as did Hispanic students ( $M = 3.00$ ). Asian students ( $M = 3.17$ ) thought their parents more helpful than did Hispanic students ( $M = 3.00$ ). Significant differences were also noted in the perceived helpfulness of middle school counselors. Asian students ( $M = 3.50$ ) perceived middle school counselors as more helpful to their transition than did Mixed/Biracial students ( $M = 2.08$ ).

In terms of statistically significantly significant results for most helpful transition activities, Hispanic students ( $M = 1.57$ ) perceived the assignment of an older student buddy in the middle school as less helpful than did Native Americans ( $M = 4.0$ ), and students identifying their race as “Other” ( $M = 4.0$ ). Caucasian students ( $M = 2.89$ ) identified having an older middle school student buddy assigned to help them as more

helpful to the transition than did Hispanic students ( $M = 1.57$ ). In addition, Caucasian students ( $M = 2.57$ ) perceived the information given to the middle school about them from the elementary school as less helpful than did African American students ( $M = 3.33$ ). African American students perceived this information to be more helpful than did Hispanic students ( $M = 2.00$ )

In terms of academic achievement, Caucasian students ( $M = 1.34$ ) reported higher middle school grades than did African American students ( $M = 1.75$ ), and Hispanic students reported higher middle school grades ( $M = 1.00$ ) than African American students. Results of the post hoc analysis are summarized in Tables 24-26.

Table 24

*Post Hoc Analysis of Significant Variables by Race: Most Helpful Individuals*

Variable	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Mean Diff.</i>	<i>Sig*</i>
Most helpful individuals			
Parents		.847	.020
	Caucasian Hispanic	2.87 3.00	
		1.300	.003
	Asian Hispanic	3.17 3.00	
		1.124	.009
	Mixed/Biracial Hispanic	2.82 3.00	
		1.300	.008
	Other Hispanic	3.44 3.00	
Middle school counselors		1.41	.035
	Asian Mixed/Biracial	3.50 2.08	

\*  $p \leq .05$  using Tukey HSD post hoc test

*a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful at all to 4 = Very helpful

Table 25

*Post Hoc Analysis of Significant Variables by Race: Transition Activities*

Variable	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Mean Diff.</i>	<i>Sig*</i>
Most helpful transition activities			
Older Students assigned to help		1.320	.003
Caucasian	2.89		
Hispanic	1.57		
Native American	4.00	2.429	.007
Hispanic	1.57		
Hispanic	1.57	2.429	.001
Other	4.00		
Info. my ES gave the MS**		.763	.003
Caucasian	2.57		
African American	3.33		
African American	3.33	1.33	.020
Hispanic	2.00		

\*  $p \leq .05$  using Tukey HSD post hoc test

\*\*ES = Elementary school, and MS = Middle school

*a* on a scale where 1 = Not helpful to 4 = Very helpful

Table 26

*Post Hoc Analysis of Significant Variables by Race: Academic Achievement*

Variable	$M^a$	Mean Diff.	Sig*
Academic achievement			
Middle school grades		-.411	.013
Caucasian	1.34		
African American	1.75		
African American	1.75	.411	.019
Hispanic	1.00		

\*  $p \leq .05$  using Tukey HSD post hoc test  
 $a$  on a scale where 1 = A to 5 = F



### Research Question Eight

*Question 8: What is the relationship among connectedness, level of support by others, academic achievement and number of transition activities to difficulty of transition?*

In the preceding analyses, several variables emerged which showed strong significant relationships. Based on this, four predictor variables were selected to relate to the ease of transition. The predictive relationship between connectedness, the support of helpful individuals, academic performance in middle school, and the number of transition activities provided, to the difficulty of a student's transition was examined with multiple regression analysis,  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1C + \beta_2S + \beta_3AP + \beta_4TA$ , where:

Y = Ease of transition variable (scale: 1 = Easy, to 4 = Difficult)

C = Connectedness variable (scale: 1 = Not true at all, to 4 = completely true)

S = Level of support by others variable (scale: 1 to 10)

AP = Academic performance in middle school variable (scale: 1= Very poor, to 4 = Very good)

TA = Number of transition activities provided by school (scale: 0 to 6)

The “ease of transition variable” is defined as the composite variable created from responses to survey questions 14 and 18. These questions asked about the difficulty of tests, quizzes and class work since moving to middle school, and about the students overall description of the difficulty of their transition.

The “connectedness” variable was created by combining the first seven survey questions which asked students if they felt a part of middle school, if teachers were interested in them, if they were included, and if others liked them.

The “level of support by others” is a variable created from the sum of all of the support members for each student divided by ten which is the number of individuals on

the list. “Middle school academic performance” was created by averaging responses to survey questions 36 and 37. The “number of transition activities” variable was created by adding the number of activities in which each student reported participation and dividing by six which was the total number of possible activities on the survey list.

The predictor variables in this regression were selected based on several criteria and assumptions. Variables that fail to satisfy assumptions may be used; however, it must be noted that the solution may under-report the strength of the relationships.

Each variable had reliability levels of at least 0.70 as measured using Cronbach’s alpha, showing strong reliability. For connectedness, the value was 0.75 for transition activity number, the value was 0.78 for the level of support from others, the value was 0.76 and for middle school academic performance, the level was 0.71.

Another consideration for predictor variable selection is that the length of time between reporting the predictor variable and the dependent variable should be short, in order to increase reliability. In this study, students responded to questions within a time frame of several months. This is considered a short time span (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Other assumptions made in selection of the predictor variables include scatter plot analysis which revealed linear relationships between the independent variables and ease of transition. Two of the four predictor variables were selected because they demonstrated the same level of relationship throughout the range of the independent variable, ease of transition. A Levene’s test of homogeneity of variance test showed that connectedness ( $p = .001$ ) and the number of transition activities ( $p = .015$ ) were

homogeneous. Even though the level of support variable ( $p = .000$ ) and academic performance in middle school ( $p = .000$ ) show no variance in homogeneity, they were included in the analysis since this is the only assumption upon which these variables showed weakness.

The final assumption used for predictor variable selection was that the variables have normal distributions. In order to do this, histogram analysis was performed for each predictor variable, and outliers were removed accordingly before the multiple regression analysis. Missing data was coded as “nine” and was not used in the analysis.

Table 27 represents the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics for the regression of ease of transition on connectedness, level of support from others, middle school academic performance, and number of transition activities provided. Note that the correlation of number of activities is negative (-.022). Thus, as the number of activities increases, respondents are less likely to perceive their transition as easier.

Table 27

*Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics for Connectedness, Level of Support, Number of Transition Activities, Middle School Academic Performance, and Ease of Transition*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
Ease of transition <sup>a</sup>	1.0				
Connectedness <sup>b</sup>	.249	1.0			
Level of support <sup>c</sup>	.035	.108	1.0		
Number of transition activities <sup>d</sup>	-.022	.049	.823	1.0	
Middle school academic performance <sup>e</sup>	.305	.366	.058	.077	1.0

Note:  $N = 274$ , Ease of Transition is the dependent variable.  $p < .01$ .

*a* on a scale where 1 = Easy to 4 = Difficult

*b* on a scale where 1 = Not true at all to 4 = Completely true

*c* on a scale from 1 to 10

*d* on a scale from 0 to 6

*e* on a scale from 1 = Very poor to 4 = Very good

The multiple regression analysis using these four variables found that two of the variables (Level of Support and Number of Transition Activities) do not add meaningful variance to the model. The total variance accounted for by all four variables was seven percent. Therefore the model was changed to include only the Academic Performance (middle school) and Connectedness variables ( $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1C + \beta_2AP$ ). This model was significant at the  $p < .000$  level. Connectedness explained seven percent of the variance and Academic Performance five percent of the variance, so the two variables together accounted for 12 percent of the variance. These results are shown in Tables 28 and 29.

The results of the multiple regression analysis are summarized in Table 28. The  $R^2$  value indicates that nearly 12 percent of the variance in ease of transition may be explained by the combined influence of the two independent variables; connectedness and academic performance in middle school. The amount of variance explained by the regression equation is statistically significant at  $p < .05$  level.

Table 28

*Multiple Regression Analysis Model Summary of Ease of Transition for Connectedness and Middle School Academic Performance*

$R$	$R^2$	Adjusted $R^2$	$SE$
.307 <sup>a</sup>	.095	.093	.55702
.349 <sup>b</sup>	.122	.118	.54917

*Dependent Variable: Ease of transition*  
*a is academic performance in middle school*  
*b is connectedness*

Table 29

*Multiple Regression Analysis Coefficients for Connectedness and Middle School Academic Performance to Ease of Transition*

	$B$	$SE$	$\beta$	$t$	$Sig.$
Connectedness	.200	.054	.178	3.732	.000
Middle School Academic Performance	.277	.054	.243	5.098	.000

*Dependent Variable: Ease of transition*

### Additional Analysis

Survey question 47 was the only part of the survey in which written responses could be provided. For this question, students were asked to provide examples of helpful transition activities their school may have done, which the student may have perceived as particularly helpful to them during their transition, but are not included in the survey list. Students mentioned these activities as helpful:

- School projects that helped me find new friends
- Sixth graders coming to my fifth grade class to answer questions
- The school play last year when we got to work with middle school students
- Sports with other, older middle school students
- Electives we get to take with older middle school students
- Having electives and classes in different parts of the school helped me learn my way around
- Summer parties
- The seventh graders did a little skit about what to do and what not to do. There was also a handout that had common questions answered by the seventh graders.
- Going bowling with the seventh graders last summer
- Being a “shadow”
- Advisory
- Having PE and lunch with the middle school last year
- The pre-season sports practice in August
- Doing middle school work in lower school
- Having a hot dog roast so we could meet the older middle school students

### Summary

This chapter first provided an introduction to the statistical analyses and tests which were to be addressed. This was followed by demographic and basic descriptive data about the sample. Detailed statistical analysis of the research questions was then carried

out and presented. Results revealed that overall, students feel ‘mostly’ or ‘completely’ connected to middle school. The number of extracurricular activities in which a student participated did not appear to correlate significantly with connectedness.

Analysis also revealed that most new middle school students perceived their transition experience as “easy” or “somewhat easy”, whereas 14 percent described their transition as “somewhat difficult” or “difficult”.

Middle school teachers, parents and friends appeared to be the most helpful to students during their transition, while older students in the middle school were perceived by newly transitioned students as least helpful to the transition.

As compared to elementary school, newly transitioned middle school students were more academically motivated. They liked middle school classes better, put forth more effort, enjoyed academic challenge more, and were more concerned about getting their homework answers right. Academic achievement showed a slight improvement in middle school.

Students reported that visits made to the middle school as an elementary student were most helpful to their transition. The summer orientation and tour was also found to be helpful.

In terms of gender differences across the transition, males perceived parents, middle school teachers and elementary school counselors as more helpful to their transition than did females, who considered friends most helpful.

No significant differences were noted among race for connectedness or ease of transition; however, significant differences among race were seen for most helpful

individuals, academic achievement and most helpful transition activities. Parents were perceived as most helpful to the transition by Asian students. Caucasians reported higher academic achievement in middle school than African American students, and African American students perceived their academic achievement as higher than that of Hispanic students. African American students, more than any of the other groups represented, believed that the information about them given to the middle school by the elementary school was very helpful to their transition. In addition, Native American students and students identifying themselves as “Other” felt that the assignment of an older middle school buddy was more helpful to the transition than did Caucasian or Hispanic students.

Multiple regression analysis showed that connectedness to middle school, and middle school academic performance are predictors of ease of transition.

Some of these findings agree with transition literature, yet others vary. The next chapter contains an analysis of these findings as they relate to the literature. Since most of the transition research has been conducted in public schools, differences in private schools on the transition components included in this study will be examined.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

This chapter includes a synthesis of the study components, including a summary of the study, discussion and evaluation of findings, recommendations for practice and future research, and conclusions.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to learn how new middle school students feel about their recent move from elementary school into middle school. Previous research on this topic has focused on public school research. The goal of this research was to see if differences exist on the transition components in private schools.

Eight research questions were addressed:

1. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their connectedness to their new school?
2. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive the success of their transition?
3. Which individuals do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive as most helpful to them during the transition?
4. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic motivation in elementary school and middle school?

5. How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic performance in elementary school and middle school?
6. Which transition activities do newly transitioned private middle school students find most helpful?
7. Are there any racial or gender differences in newly transitioned private middle school student perceptions of connectedness, transition difficulty, most helpful individual, academic motivation, academic achievement, or helpful transition activities?
8. What is the relationship among connectedness, level of support by others, middle school academic achievement, and number of transition activities to the difficulty of transition?

### Discussion of the Findings

#### *Research Question One*

*How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their connectedness to their new school?*

The findings for this question show that most students feel connected to middle school, and that there is no significant relationship between the sense of connectedness a student has and the number of extracurricular activities in which a student participates. This finding is not consistent with previous research which found that newly transitioned students experience more loneliness (Barber & Olsen, 2004) and that middle school students often feel socially isolated (Juvonen, 2004). Juvonen (2004)

also found that students participating in extracurricular activities feel more connected to school (McNeely et al., 2002; Eccles et al., 2003). One possible explanation for this discrepancy could be that private schools are generally smaller than public schools. This has been shown to increase a sense of connectedness in a student (McNeely et al., 2002).

Another possible explanation for the difference could be the grade level configuration of the school in the study. None of the schools in this study were exclusively comprised of the middle grades. Most were kindergarten through eighth grade, and several were kindergarten through twelfth grade. Coleman (1993) noted that family-like institutions are more conducive to establishing connectedness. The K-12 school is much like a family in that students have a wide range of ages. Older students also have access to their elementary teachers throughout their educational experience which helps them establish and maintain connections over a long period of time if they remain at that school for several years. In the K-12 or K-8 configurations, social connections are not disrupted as much as they are when students move from a K-5 school into a 6-8 school.

### *Research Question Two*

*How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive the success of their transition?*

The findings for research question two indicate that most students perceive their transition as “easy” or “somewhat easy.” This contradicts findings from most transition studies conducted in public schools. Barber & Olsen (2004) found that students transitioning into middle school reported a number of difficulties such as lower grades, lower self-esteem, receiving less adult support, experiencing more loneliness and depression, and a lowered sense of connectedness to others. Again, the possible explanation for this difference could be in the nature of the grade level configurations of the private schools which appears to lessen the negative impact of transitioning.

### *Research Question Three*

*Which individuals do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive as most helpful to them during the transition?*

Findings for this research question indicate that middle school teachers, parents, and friends are perceived as most helpful to students as they make the transition into middle school. Previous studies (Juvonen, 2004) have found that American middle students ranked perceptions of teacher support sixth out of twelve countries included in the study, and that teacher support has been found to protect students with early behavior problems from educational risks. This result may be linked to the student’s overall sense of connectedness. Eccles et al., (1993) found that adolescents are more likely to feel connected if their needs are being met. These needs include caring support from adults which the students in this study have reported.

The findings of this study agree with previous research which found that advisory programs in which each student has an adult advocate in the school are very helpful to

the transition (Midgley & Urdan, 1992; Larson, 1982). Differences in student perceptions of support from various individuals were found among gender and race. These differences will be discussed in the research question seven summary below.

#### *Research Question Four*

*How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic motivation in elementary school and middle school?*

Results of this study found that the school students considered their middle school academic motivation higher than in elementary school. They put forth more effort, like classes better, enjoy academic challenge more, and are more concerned with the accuracy of their homework. This differs with previous research which shows that it is common for motivation to decrease upon entering the middle school (Blyth, et al., 1983; Eccles, 1993; Mac Iver, 1990). This difference could be related to the high level of connectedness reported by private school students in this study. Battistitch, et al., (1995), and Blum & Libby (2004) found positive associations between a student's sense of belonging and motivation. Students who are more connected are more likely to be academically motivated.

#### *Research Question Five*

*How do newly transitioned private middle school students perceive their academic performance in elementary school and middle school?*

In this study, the results showed that academic achievement improved following the transition into middle school. This contradicts previous research which has found that

academic achievement is negatively affected by the transition (Eccles, et al., 1993; Blyth, et al., 1983; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Wigfield, et al., 1991, Barber & Olsen, 2004, Rice, 2001; Crockett, et al., 1989). Seidman, et al., (1994) found that self-perception of performance declines significantly following the transition year.

A possible explanation for the differences in the research and the results from this study could be in the grade level configurations of the private schools in this study. Alspaugh & Harting (1995) found that academic achievement loss was most noted in newly transitioned middle school students who moved into large middle schools that pulled students from multiple elementary schools. The loss of academic achievement was less when students transitioned with their elementary peers. Alspaugh & Harting (1995) found that the more transitions a student makes, the greater the achievement loss. None of the private schools used in this study consisted exclusively of middle grades. Most were kindergarten through eighth grade, and several were kindergarten through twelfth grade. Even though all of the schools had middle school divisions which were considered separate entities from the lower or upper school divisions, the negative effects of transition on academic achievement were not seen.

#### *Research Question Six*

*Which transition activities do newly transitioned private middle school students find most helpful?*

In this study, students reported that visits made to the middle school as an elementary student was the most helpful transition activity. The second most helpful

activity was the summer orientation and tour before their transition, and the third most helpful activity was the assignment of an older middle school buddy. These findings agree with previous research (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991) who recommended that elementary student visit the middle school frequently during the school year and the summer, and that they be paired with older middle school student during their first year of middle school.

While most of the schools in this study were K-8 or K-12, the middle school divisions were clearly defined, separate components of each school. They are usually defined physically, being housed in separate areas of the school. They are also divided from the rest of the grades by scheduling differences, different teachers, and different behavioral expectations. These may range from dress code differences to additional privileges such as moving from class to class independently, to having separate areas in which to socialize. Even though students may move from elementary school into middle school within the same school, the middle school divisions within each school are clearly defined, and different from the rest of the school. The school mission, philosophy and culture, however, do permeate throughout the school, making the transition within the school easier.

#### *Research Question Seven*

*Are there any racial or gender differences in newly transitioned private middle school student perceptions of connectedness, transition difficulty, most helpful individual, academic motivation, academic achievement, or helpful transition activities?*

In this study, gender and race differences were found for most helpful individual, academic achievement, and most helpful transition activities. Males perceived parents and middle school teachers as most helpful to their transition, whereas females considered friends the most helpful. Asian students found parents most helpful. Caucasians perceived their academic achievement higher in middle school than did African American students, and African American students perceived their academic achievement as higher than did Hispanic students. Native American students and students identifying their race as “Other” perceived the assignment of an older middle school buddy as more helpful than did Caucasian or Hispanic students.

A previous longitudinal study involving African American students found that the strongest predictor of academic motivation was the level of teacher support they received; however, these students reported feeling less teacher support than Caucasian students (Tucker, et al., 2002). Another study found that Hispanic students perceived middle school counselors more helpful than did Caucasian and Asian American students. Hispanic students also reported that family members other than parents were more helpful than did Caucasian, Asian American, and African American students (Akos & Galassi, 2004). No gender difference were noted in this study for academic achievement; however, research has shown that academic achievement declines for both genders after the transition, and the effect is greater for males than for females ( Blyth, et al., 1983).

Most of the findings from this study agree with prior research. Possible explanations for any differences in results from this study and from previous research



could be in the sample composition which had very low minority numbers. In addition, this study was not longitudinal which could also affect results, as several of the previous studies were longitudinal studies and used different instruments.

### *Research Question Eight*

*What is the relationship among connectedness, level of support by others, academic achievement and number of transition activities to the difficulty of transition?*

In this study it was found that connectedness and middle school academic performance are predictors of ease of transition. These findings are somewhat consistent with existing research (Juvonen, 2006; Maslow, 1962; Goodenow, 1993, Akos & Galassi, 2004) which found that each of these variables is important to making a successful transition. Students having comprehensive transition programs experience fewer adjustment difficulties. The same is true for the level of support from others. When students have at least one adult to whom they may turn to for help, their transition has been found to be more successful. Students who feel connected to the school make easier transitions as well. Middle school academic performance was shown to be significant in relation to ease of transition. Academic difficulties upon entry into middle school may indicate that the student is having transition difficulties.

### Implications for Practice

The design of this study was important in that it gave voice to newly transitioned students, giving them the opportunity to describe their perceptions of their transition.

The information gathered in this study leads to the formulation of several recommendations for school teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Recommendations include the following:

1. Provide training for teachers regarding the specific learning styles of all students, but for males, in particular. Training should include specific strategies for teaching minority male students since these students rate their academic achievement lower than non-minorities.
2. Provide training for elementary and middle school teachers and administrators regarding adolescent development and transition. These teachers were found to be very helpful to the transition, so they must be armed with information and strategies to assist students as much as possible.
3. Since girls reported that friends are most helpful individuals to their transition, teaching strategies for girls should include opportunities for them to interact frequently with others, both inside and outside of the classroom.
4. Since minority male students found teachers to be very helpful to the transition, teachers should be trained as advisors to prepare them to meet the needs of these students.
5. Assign older middle school student buddies for new middle school students. This was found particularly important for minority and male students in this study.

6. Family members were found to be very helpful to the transition. To ease the transition, schools should involve family members in the transition process through education and special events before, during and after the transition.
7. Transition activities for students should include several visits to the middle school during the pre-transition year, education at the elementary level about middle school, and a comprehensive summer orientation. These activities were found most helpful to students in this study.
8. This study found that the difficulty of transition is greatest for students having lower elementary school grades. To ease the transition to middle school for such students, communication across the grade levels, from elementary to middle school, among teachers, counselors, and administrators should be ensured. Additional resources for new middle school students who demonstrate low academic motivation in elementary school should be provided.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

Several future studies should be considered in order to expand the focus on factors investigated in this study. These include the following:

1. Longitudinal research including a cohort of students from elementary school through middle school, and then into high school.

2. Research focusing on the effects of transition on a student's self-esteem, disciplinary behavior, and drop out frequency.
3. A qualitative study in which students, parents and administrators are interviewed regarding the transition.
4. Further research studying transition effects exclusively on minority students and students with special needs.

### Conclusions

Private school students reported feeling very connected to their new middle school, and they felt that their transition was easy. Students found teachers, parents and friends most helpful to the transition. Contrary to previous research involving public schools, students reported increased academic motivation and achievement. Students perceived visits to the middle school while in elementary school, summer orientations and tours, and the assignment of an older middle school buddy as most helpful to their transition. A major finding from this study is that teacher support is essential for minority students. Also, transition activities should begin at the elementary level and continue throughout the first year of middle school. Given the nature of the grade level configuration of the schools involved in this study, it appears that grade level configuration may play an important role in maintaining connectedness following the transition.

The results of this study are limited by several factors. The number of schools participating was fewer than needed in order for the results to be generalizable to the population. Schools with smaller enrollment participated at a statistically higher rate than did schools having higher enrollment. Additionally, a longitudinal approach would provide greater context to the length of the adolescent development process, rather than a small snapshot into the lives of the students. The results are also limited by geographical location, and that the results were based solely on student self-reporting. Socioeconomic data for each school was not gathered or included in the analysis.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### STUDENT SURVEY: PERCEPTION OF TRANSITION

This survey consists of 47 statements that new middle school students may consider. Please read each statement carefully and check the one box that best matches your response. Check only one box for each statement.

*In this section, I am going to ask you how you feel about middle school.*

Section I part 1:	Not True At All	Some- times True	Mostly True	Completely True
1. I feel like a real part of middle school.				
2. People here notice when I am good at something.				
3. Most of my teachers seem interested in me.				
4. There is at least one teacher or other adult I can talk to if I have a problem.				
5. I am included in lots of activities at my school.				
6. I am treated with as much respect as other students.				
7. Other students here like me the way I am.				



*In this section, tell me what activities you do at school this year.*

<b>Section 1, part 2:</b>	Yes	No	No, But I will in the Future	Not Offered at My School
At my school, I currently participate in:				
8. a sports team.				
9. a school play or drama group.				
10. the school choir, band or orchestra.				
11. a leadership position or in student government.				
12. a school club.				
13. the school newspaper or yearbook.				

*In this section, tell me how you feel about these since moving to middle school.*

<b>Section II</b> How would you describe each of the following since moving to middle school?	Easy	Somewhat Easy	Somewhat Difficult	Difficult
14. Class work, homework tests, quizzes				
15. Finding my classrooms, locker, lunchroom and other places in school				
16. Feeling safe from being harmed by other students in school				
17. Making friends				
18. Overall, how would you describe your transition to middle school?				

*In this section, I am going to ask you about the people who may have helped you getting used to middle school.*

Section III:						
How helpful has each of the following people been to you in moving from elementary to middle school:	Not Helpful At All	A Little Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	There is no one with this title.	
19. Head of School or Principal						
20. Your elementary school teachers						
21. Your new middle school teachers						
22. Elementary school counselors						
23. Middle school counselors						
24. Your parents						
25. Family members other than parents						
26. Friends and other students in my grade						
27. Older students in the middle school						
28. Other adults in the school such as coaches, librarians, secretaries						

*In this section, tell me about your classes this year and last year.*

Section IV:	Elementary School				Middle School			
Answer the following questions for elementary school and middle school:	Never	Hardly Ever	Most of the time	Always	Never	Hardly Ever	Most of the time	Always
29. Do you like being asked questions in class?								
30. Do you enjoy most class lessons?								
31. Do you like to leave your homework until the last minute?								
32. Is it important to you to do well at school?								
33. When you are given a difficult problem, do you enjoy trying to find the answer?								
34. Do you work hard at school?								
35. Do you always try your hardest to get your homework right?								

*In this section, I am going to ask you about your grades this year and last year.*

Section V:	Elementary School				Middle School			
Answer the following questions for elementary school and middle school:	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good
36. How would you rate your academic performance?								
37. How would you rate your academic performance <i>as compared to other students?</i>								
My grades are mostly:	A's	B's	C's	D's	A's	B's	C's	D's
38.								

*In this section, I am going to ask you which activities helped you get used to middle school.*

Section VI					
How helpful have each of the following been to you in your move from elementary to middle school :	Not Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	This was not done.
39. Middle school teachers, counselors and school heads coming to the elementary school to talk about middle school.					
40. Information my elementary school gave to the middle school about me.					
41. A visit to the middle school last year.					
42. The orientation and tour we had this past summer.					
43. Being assigned an older middle school student as helper or buddy.					
44. Special transition activities, meetings or classes since I came to middle school.					
45. List other activities that were helpful.					

*In this section, I am going to ask you about your gender and cultural background.*

Section VII
Check the responses that apply to you:
<p>1. I am a:</p> <p>Male _____</p> <p>Female _____</p>
<p>2. I am:</p> <p>Caucasian _____</p> <p>African American _____</p> <p>Asian _____</p> <p>Native American _____</p> <p>Hispanic _____</p> <p>Pacific Islander _____</p> <p>Mixed/Biracial _____ List background _____</p> <p>Other _____ Please specify _____</p>

**You are finished. Thank you for your help with this important study!**

## Appendix B

## Letter From Head of VAIS to School Heads

To: VAIS Heads of School

From: Sally K. Boese, Ed.D.  
Executive Director

SUBJECT: Participation in Doctoral Research Study

I am pleased to invite you to consider participating in a research study that may be of interest to you and to others in your school. The focus of this doctoral research will be on aspects of the transition of lower school students to the middle school setting in independent schools. It is our feeling that having an opportunity to learn more about students' perceptions of this transition may not only be timely but advantageous in developing programs and services that address significant issues related to that transition.

The research itself that will begin in January 2010, will be the basis of a doctoral dissertation conducted by Eileen Atkinson, a VCU doctoral candidate and the Assistant Head at Millwood School, a VAIS school located in Midlothian, Virginia. Eileen plans to contact VAIS heads of school in the coming weeks to determine their possible interest in participating in this study and to describe the research protocol. She would then schedule appointments to visit interested schools and to administer student surveys beginning in January, 2010. While student responses would be gathered for the study, no student names nor school names would appear in the dissertation nor in any other publication. All data would be presented in the aggregate, although schools may receive their individual data, should they request it.

Dr. Cheryl Magill, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at VCU is the Chair of Eileen's dissertation committee. Dr. Magill is the Principal Investigator for the study and will oversee the investigation. She may be contacted at [ccmagill@vcu.edu](mailto:ccmagill@vcu.edu). Your participation or that of your school in this research project is, of course, entirely voluntary. We hope that you will consider supporting one of our colleagues' initiatives that will not simply help to further her own education but also contribute to our understanding of student life in independent schools. Thank you.

**Sally K. Boese, Ed.D.**  
**Executive Director**

Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS)



6802 Paragon Place, Suite 525  
Richmond, VA 23230  
Telephone: (804) 282-3592 ext. 303  
FAX: (804) 282-3596  
[www.vais.org](http://www.vais.org)

Sharing a Common Wealth of Experience

## Appendix C

### Letter to Heads of Schools

Dear (School Head),

My name is Eileen Atkinson and I am the Assistant Head at Millwood School, a VAIS school in Midlothian, VA. I am also a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership at VCU. Recently, you received a letter from Dr. Sally Boese of VAIS regarding a doctoral dissertation study I would like to conduct in VAIS middle schools in January, 2010. I am sending this letter to you to inquire as to whether you would be willing to have your students participate in a brief survey regarding their perceptions of their recent transition into middle school.

I am interested in surveying students **who have just transitioned into middle school from lower or elementary school in the fall of 2009**. For some of you this may be the current fifth, sixth or even seventh grade class, depending on which grade constitutes the beginning of your middle school. The survey is a pencil and paper document which consists of a 44 item check-list and would take students approximately 15 minutes to complete. The self-report student questionnaire would measure student responses relating to the ease of transition, most helpful people, academic adjustment, academic motivation, and the level of connectedness students feel in middle school.

The names of students and schools will remain confidential and will not appear in the dissertation or in any other publication or presentation. Data will be analyzed and reported in the aggregate. Should you wish to see your school's data, I would be happy to provide that information. I will come personally to your school to distribute and collect the survey. You will be asked only to send home and collect parent consent and student assent forms, and provide the time and location in your school for me to administer the survey. Surveys will be administered only to those students returning these two signed documents. Your school will incur no cost as a participant in this study.

If you are interested in participating in the project, please complete and return the enclosed card. I will then send you the required number of parent consent and student assent forms along with a letter to parents. I will contact you to arrange a day and time to visit your school in January, 2010 to administer the survey.

I appreciate your consideration of participation in this research, and I hope to hear from you soon. Please contact me or my Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Cheryl Magill, should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Eileen Atkinson

Email-atkinsonei@vcu.edu

Dr. Cheryl Magill  
Department of Educational Leadership, VCU  
ccmagill@vcu.edu

## Appendix D

## Postcard to Heads of Schools

***Please complete and return this response card by (Date)***

Name of School \_\_\_\_\_

A. \_\_\_\_ I would like for my school to participate in the Private Middle School Transition Survey of VAIS schools in January 2010.

We have \_\_\_\_ (number) of students who are new middle school students this school year.

B. \_\_\_\_ We do not wish to participate.

***Thank you for your response!***

## Appendix E

## Follow up Postcard to Heads of Schools

(Date)

Dear (Insert School Head's name)

Several weeks ago information regarding a Private School Middle School Transition survey of VAIS schools was mailed to you.

If you have already completed and returned the response card that was enclosed in the letter, please accept my sincere thanks. I will be contacting you shortly.

If you have not returned the response card, I respectfully request that you consider participation in this important study and return your response card to me before **(Date)**.

If you did not receive the information about the study, please contact me at **atkinsonei@vcu.edu**

Sincerely,

Eileen Atkinson  
Assistant Head, Millwood School and VCU Doctoral Student

Appendix F  
Confirmation Letter

Dear (Head of School),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Private Middle School Transition Study of VAIS schools. I am sending this letter as confirmation of my appointment to visit your school to administer the student transition questionnaire. My visit to your school is scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_, 2010 at \_\_\_\_\_ (time).

I will arrive at least 30 minutes in advance of this time in order to collect the parental consent and student assent forms.

According to my records, you (are/are not) requesting your school's data obtained through this research. Please let me know if any of the above information is incorrect.

Please remind parents to return the signed consent and assent forms to you should they wish to have their student participate in the research project. As these forms are returned to school, please collect them. I will collect the forms when I visit your school to administer the survey. Student names will not appear on the survey, as it is anonymous. Before my visit, please determine a location in your school where I may administer the survey, and assemble the students who have returned parental consent and student assent forms.

Again, I appreciate your willingness to allow me to conduct my research in your school and I look forward to seeing you and your students in January.

Sincerely,

Eileen Atkinson

Email-atkinsonei@vcu.edu

## Appendix G

## Parent Letter

Dear Parents,

I am a doctoral student conducting a dissertation study on the transition students make from elementary school into middle school in private independent schools. I currently serve as the Assistant Head of School at Millwood School, a *VAIS* school in Midlothian, VA.

I am asking for your permission to have your child complete an anonymous survey in class in January of 2010. Students will be asked to check responses relating to statements regarding their transition into middle school. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

The *Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS)* and your school have given me permission to conduct the study, as they believe the information would be timely and would be useful to schools as they plan their transition programs.

Attached are the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board consent and assent forms for research. If you and your child agree to have your child participate, both of you should sign the forms and return them to your child's school by **(Date)**. Only students returning both signed forms will be allowed to participate in the survey.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me at [atkinsonei@vcu.edu](mailto:atkinsonei@vcu.edu). You may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Magill, at [ccmagill@vcu.edu](mailto:ccmagill@vcu.edu). I look forward to working with your son or daughter to understand the middle school transition from a student perspective so that others may benefit from their experience.

Sincerely,

Eileen Atkinson

## Appendix H

**RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE:** THE MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

**VCU IRB NO.:** HM12542

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to learn how new middle school students feel about their recent move from elementary school into middle school. This information will be helpful to schools as they develop programs to ensure that students adjust well to their new surroundings.

Your child is being asked to participate because they have recently made the transition into middle school and they attend a school accredited by the Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS).

*DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR CHILD'S INVOLVEMENT*

If you decide for your child to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand your child's involvement in the process.

In this study your child will be asked to complete a short survey asking questions about their move to middle school. They will be asked about school activities they are involved with, people they think are helpful during their transition period, how they feel about their grades and motivation, and how successful they think their recent transition has been. The survey should take about 15 minutes. Students will not be asked to write sentences, but will be asked to check boxes on the survey instead. The survey is anonymous and your child will not be asked to write their name on the survey.



Significant new findings developed during the course of the research which may relate to your willingness for your child to participate will be provided to your school head in the aggregate, should they request it.

### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Sometimes answering questions about feelings makes people upset. Your child will not have to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable, and they may stop the survey at any time.

### **BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**

Your child may not get any direct benefit from this study, but, the information we learn from this study may help school leaders design better transition programs for parents and students who have yet to make the middle school transition.

### **COSTS**

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time at school your child will spend filling out the survey.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

The alternative to participation in this study is to decline for your child to participate in the study.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

No potentially identifiable information about your child will be gathered. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Your child's survey data will be identified by a school ID number only if the school head requests school data. Data will be provided in the aggregate only, and individual student data will not be identified.

Surveys will be stored by the researcher in a locked area away from school grounds. All school ID information will be kept in password protected files and these files will be deleted in December 2010. Student surveys will be kept in a locked file cabinet for one year after the study ends and will be destroyed at that time. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel.

We will not tell anyone the answers your child gives us; however, information from the study consent form signed by you may be looked at or copied for research or legal purposes by Virginia Commonwealth University. Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized officials of the Federal Food and Drug

Administration, or the Department of Health and Human Services (if applicable). What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your child's name and the name of your child's school will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

### **IF AN INJURY HAPPENS**

Virginia Commonwealth University, the student researcher, and the VCU Health System do not have a plan to give long-term care or money if your child is injured because she/he is in the study. If your child is injured because of being in this study, tell the study researcher right away. Bills for treatment may be sent to you or your insurance. Your insurance may or may not pay for taking care of injuries that happen because of being in this study.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your child does not have to participate in this study. If you choose for your child to participate, your child may stop at any time without any penalty. Your child may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. Your child's participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the study staff or the sponsor without your consent. The reasons might include:

- the study staff thinks it necessary for your child's health or safety;
- your child has not followed study instructions;
- the researcher has stopped the study; or
- administrative reasons require your child's withdrawal.

### **QUESTIONS**

In the future, you may have questions about your child's participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Dr. Cheryl Magill, Assistant Professor, Department of Education  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
ccmagill@vcu.edu

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant in this study, contact:

Office for Research  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113  
P.O. Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298

*You may also contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.*

**PERMISSION**

*I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing for my child to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to allow my child to participate.*

---

Name of Child

---

Participant name printed

Participant signature

Date

---

Name of Parent or Legal Guardian

(Printed)

---

Parent or Legal Guardian Signature

Date

---

Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)

Date

## Appendix I

**YOUTH ASSENT FORM**

**TITLE:** THE MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS:  
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

**VCU IRB NO.:** HM12524

This form may have some words that you do not know. Please ask someone to explain any words that you do not know. You may take home a copy of this form to think about and talk to your parents about before you decide if you want to be in this study.

**What is this study about?**

The purpose of this study is to learn how new middle school students feel about their recent move from elementary school into middle school. This information would be helpful so that schools can do a good job of making sure that new students adjust well to their new surroundings.

**What will happen to me if I choose to be in this study?**

In this study you will be asked to complete a short survey asking questions about your move to middle school. You will be asked about school activities you are involved with, people you think are helpful, how you feel about your grades and motivation, and how successful you think your recent move has been. The survey should take about 15 minutes. You won't need to write sentences; you will only need to check boxes on the paper. The survey is anonymous and you will not need to write your name on it. If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this form. Do not sign the form until you have all your questions answered, and understand the survey process. If you decide not to participate, you will be given a pencil and paper activity to complete.

**What might happen if I am in this study?**

Sometimes answering questions about your feelings makes people upset. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable, and you may stop the survey at any time.

**Will you tell anyone what I say?**

Since the survey is anonymous, I will not know which answers are yours. I will not tell anyone the answers you give me, but your anonymous answers will be added to the answers that many other students across the state have given. I will add all of the student answers together and look at the data as a whole. I will not share your answers with your teachers or parents or friends. The answers you and your classmates give may be added together and shared with your school head, but they will never know which

answers are yours. If I talk about this study in speeches or in writing, I will never use your name or your school's name.

**Do I have to be in this study?**

You do not have to be in this study. If you choose to be in the study you may stop at any time. No one will blame you or criticize if you drop out of the study.

**Questions**

If you have questions about being in this study, you can talk to me or you can have your parent or another adult contact me:

Mrs. Eileen Atkinson  
atkinsonei@vcu.edu

Do not sign this form if you have any questions. Be sure someone answers your questions.

**Assent:**

I have read this form. I understand the information about this study. I am willing to be in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Youth name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Youth signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Conducting Informed Assent Discussion / Witness \*, printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Discussion / Witness \*

*\* [A witness to the signature of a research participant is required by VA Code. If the witness is to be someone other than the person conducting the informed assent discussion, include a line for the witness to print his/her name and lines for signature and date.]*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)

## Appendix J

## Test Script

Good Morning/Afternoon Everyone,

My name is Mrs. Atkinson and I am doing a project that studies the move that students make from lower school or elementary school into the middle school. Since you moved into the middle school this year, you may have some valuable opinions to share about your experience. I am surveying private school students across Virginia, and I really appreciate your help today.

I am going to give you a questionnaire with 43 statements. I would like you to check the answer for each question that best describes how you feel about the statement. Please check only one answer for each question. It is important that you respond to each statement honestly. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time. I am happy to answer questions you have about any of the statements on the questionnaire.

Your results are totally confidential and I will report only group results from your school and other private schools together. (Your school ID number is filled out because your head wants to know the overall results for the school. He/she or anyone else from your school will not find out how you yourself answered these questions.)

Does anyone have any questions?

I am going to pass out the questionnaires now. Please wait until I say to begin before you start. (Pass out Surveys.)

Please turn your questionnaires over. On the left side, you will see 39 statements. On the right side there are boxes for responses. Please check only one box for each statement. (Show students on the board what a check mark looks like.) Think carefully about each statement before answering.

At the end of the survey there are a few questions about your gender and race. Please check the choices that apply to you.

When you are finished with your questionnaire, please keep it at your desk and sit quietly until everyone is finished.

(Students complete the survey. Researcher collects them.)

Thank you again for helping me today. If you have any questions, please let me know.  
Have a great day!

Appendix K  
School Participation Record

**School ID#** \_\_\_\_\_

**School Participation Record**

Directions: One of these sheets is to be completed by the researcher for each school visited.

Total Number of newly transitioned middle school students in the school \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Parental Consent Forms Signed and Returned \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Parental Consent Forms not Returned \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Student Assent Forms Signed and Returned \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Student Assent Forms not Returned \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Students Completing the Survey \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Students who returned consent and assent forms who are absent today \_\_\_\_\_



### Vita

Eileen Irby Atkinson was born on January 11, 1959, in Arlington, Virginia, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Oakton High School, Oakton, Virginia in 1977. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg in 1981 and subsequently taught in Hanover County public schools in Ashland, Virginia (1981-1983), Gwinnett County public schools in Duluth, Georgia (1983-1988), and Citrus County public schools in Hernando, Florida (1988-1989). She is currently a school administrator and teacher at Millwood School (1999-present), a private school in Midlothian, Virginia. She received a Master of Education in Educational Leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2004.

