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Teachers' Perceptions Of Student Achievement And Engagement In The Transition To High School

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

IN THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the extent that social-emotional learning of teachers and students impacts students' transition from middle school to high school. Existing research indicates that by implementing specific transition programs for freshmen, the dropout rate is greatly reduced, academic achievement increases, and the ability to transition to life after high school improves. Crucial to any transition program is staffing these programs with teachers who understand their own social-emotional learning and make relationships with students a priority. The study answered four research questions: 1) what elements and characteristics of freshmen transition programs (specifically, summer bridge and freshman orientation) do teachers perceive as helpful to the freshman transition? 2) How do teachers identify and express their self-efficacy in relation to how they perceive their own social-emotional learning? 3) How do teachers relate their social-emotional learning to the creation and implementation of successful transition program for freshman? 4) What recommendations do teachers have to strengthen intervention and support programs for incoming freshmen?

By conducting a qualitative case study using focus groups with nine teachers who taught in a summer bridge program or freshman orientation class at a large comprehensive high school, teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these transition programs were analyzed. Additionally, these teachers were asked to evaluate their own social-emotional learning and how they use it to support their students' academic

achievement and social-emotional learning. From this case study, five major themes related to freshmen transition programs were determined: 1) personal connections between students and teachers, 2) academic expectations in the transition from middle to high school, 3) real-world connections, 4) impact of teacher behavior on student success, and 5) support for students' social-emotional learning. Based on these themes, several recommendations were determined: treat the freshman year as a transition year, implementing some of the same middle-school structures to support freshmen as they begin high school; focus on students' social-emotional learning as part of this transition; focus on teachers' social-emotional competency so that their self-efficacy increases. This study extends existing research indicating that supporting teachers' and students' social and emotional well-being will increase academic achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

Ask teachers why they teach and most likely the response will be, "Because I love children!" However, this "human element" of supporting, nurturing, and caring about students is becoming lost in test scores, mandated instructional practices, and education code requirements. In order to meet these mandates and requirements, schools have become factories, turning students into products identical to those before them and after them, rather than viewing students as individuals with individual needs. Contemporary educational systems try to mold students to societal expectations rather than mold the system to fit the needs of the students. The educationalist, Sir Ken Robinson, describes the current system of education as a manufacture model of linearity and conformity, but suggests that we should base education on the principles of agriculture. He says that we cannot predict the outcome of human development but, like a farmer, we can create the conditions for growth (TED Talk, 2010). If students feel connected to the adults on the campus and that campus is a safe space, students will be engaged in learning. In fact, engaging adolescents emotionally is critical to maximizing their academic motivation (Allen, J., Gregory, A., Mikami, A., Lun, J., Hamre, B., & Pianta, R., 2013). Hattie (2009) determined a list of 138 influences and their positive or negative effect on student achievement. "Teacher-student relationships" ranked as the 11th most positive effect on student achievement, while influences such as "teacher subject-matter knowledge" ranked at 124 (pp. 266-268). While Hattie's List is not the definitive answer to improving

student achievement, it does highlight the need to focus on students' social-emotional growth in order to foster academic growth.

Additionally, more studies show that high school freshmen do not experience the connectedness that results in a successful transition from middle school to high school. Researchers call the 9th grade year the "make or break year" for completing high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). These researchers go on to report that high school freshmen have the lowest grade point average, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level (p. 60). A report by the National High School Center (2007) states that freshmen make up the highest percentage of high school populations because so many freshmen fail to be promoted to the next grade level. Researchers continue to study ways to combat this trend and help ninth graders successfully transition into high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Langenkamp, 2010; McIntosh & White, 2006).

While school transitions are common experiences for students, the transition from middle school to high school coincides with a tremendous shift in adolescents' social and emotional development (Benner & Graham, 2009). Research on the transition from elementary school to middle school is more common, as students make the change from smaller, personalized elementary schools to larger, more academically rigorous middle schools (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). However, middle school students often follow the same academic path and move less freely on campus (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Middle schoolers are often clustered into the same academic courses or have a "core" teacher (the same teacher for both English and Social Science) and grade levels are often grouped in the same building or wing; therefore, middle school students are not moving as often or

as far as they might on a high school campus. The transition to high school is receiving increased attention because the ninth grade failure and dropout rates exceed those rates at all other grade levels (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003; Roderick & Camburm, 1999, as cited in Smith, Feldwich & Abell, 2006). In the past, dropping out of school was considered a failure by the individual; however, there is an emerging view that dropping out is a product of the school's social and cultural environment (Davison, Vailes, Guererro, Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Pallas, 2002; Rumberger, 1991 as cited in Lys, 2009). School reforms are now including dropout prevention strategies, as well ways to bridge the transition from middle school to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to determine teachers' perceptions of freshmen interventions and supports, solicit their insights into the way these programs support student success and document the gaps in programming or challenges for students that require further action by the school and district. These teachers identified are actively engaged in implementing the intervention programs at a large, comprehensive high school.

Background information

There are four essential support components of staffing for successful freshman transitions: providing students and families accurate and useful information about high school, supporting students' social success, preparing for academic success, and working collaboratively (teachers, administrators, students, and parents) to adjust transition plans as necessary (Williamston, 2010). The case study took place at a large, comprehensive

high school in California, which has just over 1100 students and a freshmen class of 295 students, making it the largest grade level in the school. This school is located in a suburban area in the San Francisco Bay Area. The district serves over 31,000 students across 6 cities and 150 square miles. The school has seen a socio-economic decline over the years as immigrant populations, predominantly Latino, have moved into the area and the white, middle class families have moved into the more affluent surrounding areas and schools. The school is approximately 65 percent Hispanic, 19 percent White, 9 percent Asian or Filipino and 5 percent African-American. Over 65 percent of the student population is classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and over 50 percent is classified as an English language learner. The State of California had identified this district as significantly disproportionate in identifying African-American students for special education, as well as having disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in suspensions, expulsions, and related services, including English Language Learner services (CDE Guidance of Disproportionality, 2014). The school was one of six pilot schools, chosen by the district's Office of Equity to receive direct services related to equity and/or disproportionality.

One way the district-wide issues of equity and disproportionality was addressed was through the examination of practices that cause the freshmen students to be mislabeled, misplaced, or poorly prepared for high school, which results in behavioral and academic issues. Freshmen often do not understand the importance of academic performance when they begin high school. High school is the first time students must earn credits for graduation and many are ill-advised or unaware of graduation requirements (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). During the 2013-2014 school year, the

Office of Equity specifically examined students' transition from the eighth grade (middle school) to ninth grade (high school) to determine supports and interventions. As of the 2013-2014 school year, Puente was the only specialized program available to freshmen at this particular high school. Puente is a California program that serves high school and college students who have typically been academically underserved. Puente teachers strive to disrupt tracking students of color and/or low-socioeconomic status by holding high expectations and ensuring students and their families have college information and guidance. ("Puente History," 2012). However, by the end of the school year in June 2014, the school had plans to implement other measures to support the freshman transition. In the summer of 2014, students had the opportunity to attend a three-week summer bridge program. The summer bridge program was designed to introduce incoming freshmen to the high school campus, teachers, and upper classmen, as well take classes in math and English Language Arts, and a weekly elective rotation of PE, leadership, and ceramics. As summer bridge programs are just one of the recommendations that improve the transition to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009), a freshman orientation course was also implemented that all freshmen will be required to take, beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. The course helps students learn goal-setting and organizational skills through academic and career planning.

Research questions

With so much attention on the prevalence of ninth grade failure, more studies are focusing on interventions and supports that help freshmen succeed in their first year of high school. Among these recommendation are: providing parents and students on-going information about the high school, provide opportunities for peer interaction and social

support, provide opportunities for communication between the middle school and high school teachers, and provide targeted academic support (Successful transition to high school, n.d.). According to a report issued by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, ninth grade F grades and grade-point average can predict about 80 percent of high school graduates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). The report goes on to say that students do better in school when then have positive relationships with their teachers and see their coursework as relevant to their future (p. 39). Summer bridge programs and freshmen orientation courses would provide the opportunity for both. Based on the recommendations generated by several studies, the following research questions were determined:

1. What elements and characteristics of freshmen transition programs (specifically, summer bridge and freshman orientation) do teachers perceive as helpful to the freshman transition?
2. How do teachers identify and express their self-efficacy in relation to how they perceive their own social-emotional learning?
3. How do teachers relate their social-emotional learning to the creation and implementation of successful transition program for freshman?
4. What recommendations do teachers have to strengthen intervention and support programs for incoming freshmen?

Working definitions

For the purposes of this study, the following terms will be used with these definitions:

- Academic optimism: a collective set of beliefs held by the faculty as a whole that: the school faculty believes it can teach even the most difficult students (collective

efficacy), the school faculty trusts students and parents (faculty trust), the school faculty emphasizes academics (academic emphasis) (Hoy, n.d.).

- Academic rigor: learning experiences that help students understand knowledge and concepts that are complex, ambiguous, or contentious, and to acquire skills that they can apply in a variety of educational, career, and civic contexts throughout their lives. It also refers to lessons that encourage students to question assumptions, think deeply, and challenge themselves, rather than to lessons that merely demand rote memorization and information recall (The Glossary of School Reform, 2013).
- Disproportionate/disproportionality: there are more (or fewer) children from a particular group who are experiencing a given situation than we would expect, based on the group's representation in the general population (CalSTAT Technical Assistance and Training).
- Freshmen transition: one of the three major transitional points in the public-education system: when students move from middle school to high school. Transitioning students often experience significant academic, social, emotional, physical, or developments changes that may adversely affect their educational performance. (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).
- Puente: A high school and community college program begun in 1981 that has helped more than 400,000 underserved students thrive academically – by holding high expectations, valuing cultural and social capital, and ensuring that students and their families have critical college-going information and guidance. Puente

reaches schools as far north as Redding, California and as far south as the border with Mexico and has recently expanded into Texas ("Puente History," 2012).

- Significantly disproportionate: persistent (continued) disproportionality and is based on four years of data and has fiscal implications for a district (CalSTAT Technical Assistance and Training).
- Social and emotional learning (SEL): the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (Collaborative for Academic, Emotional, and Social Learning, 2014)
- Summer bridge program: a summer program for transitioning students designed to: improve academic skills for incoming students, build relationships with students and staff so they feel more connected to their school, better understand academic and social expectations, and teach about the culture and climate of the school (Timmons, 2013)
- Teacher self-efficacy: a teacher's judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

Conceptual framework

Two major concepts frame this study: the need for specific interventions for high school freshmen and how to best support social-emotional learning of students as they

transition into high school. While research into these two areas is fairly recent, the evidence supporting the need for specific freshmen interventions is growing, as more attention is given to supporting at-risk youth and the correlation between social-emotional competence and academic achievement is strengthened.

The high failure and dropout rates of high school freshmen receive a great deal of attention (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003, Roderick & Camburn, 1999, as cited in Smith, Feldwich & Abell, 2006). In large, urban districts, the dropout rate can exceed 30 percent and less than half of the freshmen class receives a high school diploma in four years (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenburg, 2001). Several studies have examined poor academic success as a reason for difficulty in transitioning to high school (Smith, 2006; Balfanz, 2009; Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010).

Programs that support students' transition from middle school to high school are able to reduce the dropout rate tremendously, from an average of 24 percent to approximately 8 percent (Quick fact sheet: The first year of high school, 2012). Middle school to high school transition programs also benefit students as they transition from high school to college (Smith, 2006). Common recommendations for freshman transition programs have been identified and successful programs include these elements: on-going information about high school for parents and students, deliberate opportunities for peer interaction and social support, communication between middle and high school teachers, and targeted academic support (Successful transition to high school, n.d.).The existing research indicates that regardless of the transition programs implemented for freshmen, they have far reaching impact. Transition programs not only support students as they move from middle school to high school, but they impact their success throughout high

school and as they make the transition from high school to college. This study examined two freshman intervention programs at a large, suburban high school to determine what elements of successful transition programs have been implemented in order to improve the existing programs and recommend them for more high schools.

The second concept framing this study is the need for teachers to connect with students on a socio-emotional level. Teachers' ability to connect with students and students' perception of their teachers is directly correlated to their success as they transition to high school (Langenkamp, 2010). Numerous studies have examined the connection between social-emotional competence and students' ability to overcome obstacles and stay focused in high school (Zins et al., 2004; Elias, 2006; Denham & Brown, 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Talyor, & Schellinger, 2011; Hattie, 2011). All of these studies conclude that teachers' ability to emotionally connect with students, particularly at-risk students who struggle academically, are not only more motivated in school and perform better academically, but they also learn the social-emotional skills to navigate obstacles and problem-solve. Therefore, this study examined teachers' perceptions of their freshmen students with regard to their social-emotional learning and competence. Teachers' own social-emotional competence was examined in an effort to express how their use of social-emotional learning impacts student achievement in freshmen transition programs.

These two concepts inform the structural characteristics of successful freshmen transition programs and the characteristics of the teachers who lead them. The research questions will identify and describe these characteristics by examining two newly implemented freshmen orientation programs. The teachers who teach in these programs

examined their own social-emotional competence and the strategies they employed to connect freshmen to high school. By comparing the research on effective transition programs to the summer bridge program and freshman orientation at this suburban, comprehensive high school with a large at-risk population, successful components can be identified and expanded and components that need to be improved can be identified. Furthermore, utilizing concepts around social-emotional learning and competence, for both freshmen students and freshmen teachers, can determine strategies, practices, and beliefs that support their self-efficacy.

Scope, limitations and assumptions

This study was conducted at a large comprehensive high school in California, in a district that covers several cities, geographic areas, and socio-economic statuses. With the highest dropout rate in the district and the second highest rate of severe chronic absenteeism, the assumption was that this school needed targeted transition supports more than other high schools. Additionally, the study only examined the perceptions of nine teachers, teaching approximately 300 students. There may be other, external factors, beyond the transition from middle school to high school that affect freshmen performance

Another limitation is that the teachers who taught in the summer bridge and/or the freshman transition class were particularly chosen for the programs because of their ability to connect with students. They already understand the social-emotional needs of students, particularly those most at risk. Therefore, their teaching style reflects their beliefs about students; their beliefs about teaching did not necessarily change because they are teaching in freshman transition programs.

In exploring this topic, two assumptions can be made. The first assumption is that ninth graders do not need "special treatment" upon entering high school. Many believe that it is the responsibility of the middle schools to prepare students for high school and once they get there, they should have the skills and the maturity to navigate through high school. However, this transition to high school occurs at a time in adolescents' lives when they are still exploring their identity and determining who they are and who they hope to become (Benner & Graham, 2009). Therefore, freshmen are not only trying to figure out how to be high school students with all the pressure and demands that come with that, but they are also trying to figure out their own identities and sort through the confusion and lack of self-confidence that teenagers often experience (Langenkamp, 2010).

The second assumption is that academic rigor is the most important factor in producing academically successful students. Much research now points to students' emotional well-being as most important in attaining academic success and that when students feel accepted, safe, and cared for by their teachers and other adults at the school, they will be more motivated and more academically successful. Faculty and staff need to make social and emotional intelligence a priority. Hargreaves' (2000) study supports the idea that teachers must be emotionally invested in their students to support their academic success. He found that elementary teachers are usually more emotionally engaged with their students while secondary teachers are often more business-like. This partially accounts for increased academic difficulties for students as they progress through school. Students at every level need an emotional connection to be motivated to learn and be successful. It stands to reason that if freshmen experience this connection upon entering high school, this will carry with them through the next three years of high school.

Transition programs have not been a priority in the high schools of this district. Many years ago, the school offered a one-semester orientation course that every freshman was required to take; however, it was more to introduce students to the culture of the school (learning the history of the school, various aspects of the campus, etc.) rather than to support students in their transition to high school. By piloting a summer bridge program and a freshmen orientation course and examining teachers' perceptions about the program and how that affects students' academic achievment, they can serve as a model for implementing similar programs at the district's four other high schools.

Significance of the study

This school was identified by the district as needing targeted supports because of its high dropout rates, high suspension rates, and high absenteeism. Consultants to the district recommended specific supports to address the high failure rates in the freshmen class. By examining the effects of the summer bridge program and the freshmen orientation course, teachers and site administrators can evaluate programs' effectiveness for the next school year. By identifying teachers' perceptions and implementation of social-emotional learning, those characteristics can be used when choosing teachers for freshman transition programs. If these programs are shown to increase academic performance and increase students' positive feelings toward school, those findings may provide the foundation for maintaining and perhaps increasing the scope of the programs. The summer bridge program could be expanded to include all of the middle schools that feed into the high school, not just one middle school. Summer bridge programs could be implemented in more high schools in the district. Additionally, this study highlights the need to train teachers specifically in adolescent development and focus awareness on

developing of students' social-emotional learning as they transition to high school. Furthermore, the implications of this study expand beyond this particular school district as more and more district leaders see the need for targeted interventions and supports for freshmen transitioning into high school. By identifying characteristics of effective transition programs and the teachers who work in them, schools and districts can implement similar programs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of specific interventions for high school freshmen by examining and describing teachers' experiences through an understanding of social-emotional learning. By examining these experiences, specific characteristics can be identified that create a successful transition for freshmen, as well as identify ways these programs can be strengthened for incoming freshmen, particularly around the use of social-emotional learning. The subsequent literature review will outline the existing research that supports the need for specific transition programs for freshmen and the role social-emotional learning plays in the success of the programs in supporting students' transition to high school. Chapter three will discuss the methodology used in the study, including data collection and how the data were analyzed. Chapter four will examine the initial data that lead to the creation and implementation of the transition programs and teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness. Finally, chapter five will examine the findings, recommendations, and conclusions that can be made based on the research study.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, literature will be reviewed on the factors that contribute to a smooth transition from middle school to high school. Students of color, especially Latino students, perceive the transition to high school particularly difficult (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Research shows that a difficult transition between middle and high schools has negative effects throughout high school and into college (Smith, 2006) and that particular attention needs to be paid to the relationships teachers create with freshmen in order to motivate students and keep them engaged (Gerzon-Kessler, 2006).

The need for freshmen transition programs

Ninth grade failure and dropout rates are the highest of all grade levels (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003; Roderick & Camburn, 1999, as cited in Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). The statistics are even worse for ethnic minority youth (Benner & Graham, 2009). Black students, in particular, face a number of stumbling blocks that contributes to this problem, including racial stereotyping which leads to lowered expectations and increased suspensions, lack of positive role models and cultural differences (Holcomb-McCoy, 2011).

The data is just as staggering for Hispanic youth. According to a 2008 report by the Pew Hispanic Center, approximately 33 percent of Hispanic 20-29 year olds were high school dropouts, compared with 19 percent for blacks, 12 percent for Whites, and 6 percent for Asians (Fry, 2010). Akos and Galassi (2004) found that minority students experience more negative transition outcomes, often compounded by poverty and large, crowded urban classrooms. Benner and Graham (2009) also found that the ethnic

composition of a school affects achievement levels, with schools of equal ethnic proportions experiencing higher academic achievement than schools that are ethnically imbalanced. Hispanic students and their families may be unfamiliar with the new expectations (graduation requirements, attendance, etc.) of high school, especially if these expectations are not explained both in English and in Spanish (Lys, 2009). In a study of 132,903 high school students in Florida, Bryan W. Griffin (2002) found that African-American and Hispanic students appear to place less importance on academic achievement than Asian or White students. This study further found that Hispanic students actually had a higher detachment from academics, or "academic disidentification", than African-American students. This means that when Hispanics decide to drop out of school, they place greater emphasis on their academic accomplishments (or lack of) as a reason to leave school than African-American students (Griffin, 2002).

Students who experience a difficult transition from middle school to high school may have lacked academic success in middle school. Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) found that students who failed in the eighth grade were more likely to fail at least one course in the ninth grade. Similarly, students who were often absent in the eighth grade had the same attendance problems in the ninth grade. Studies have shown that students who exhibit a low commitment to academics preserve their self-esteem by engaging in negative behaviors that helps them save face with their peers (Peixoto & Almeida, 2010). Smith (2006) notes that even when peers are supportive, most students experience a drop in grade point average when they make the move to high school. He also found that students who experience an achievement loss during the transition from middle school to

high school also have a difficult time transitioning into their first year of college. Furthermore, he concluded that, nationally, the achievement loss during the transition from middle school to high school was a strong predictor that students leave college in their first year, even if they were high-achieving in high school.

Other factors create stumbling blocks for students making the transition to high school. Racial stereotyping can create problems for students struggling to navigate high school. Research indicates that educators often transmit the belief that black students are not expected to excel academically but they are expected to excel in other areas, particularly sports (Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Students of color not only perform at lower achievement levels but also tend to be over-represented in special education classes and in remedial classes (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Both Latino and black males lack positive role models in schools that would help them address their low self-perceptions about academic achievement (Lys, 2009; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011).

Creating successful transition programs

Comprehensive high schools are often criticized for being too big, too impersonal, and too institutionalized to support the emotional needs that allow students to succeed (Stader & Gagnepain, 2000). This is even truer for incoming freshmen who often come from middle schools where they typically receive more individualized attention. According to the National High School Center, schools with a fully-functioning transitional program for freshmen had an average dropout rate of 8 percent. Schools without one had an average dropout rate of 24 percent (Quick fact sheet: The first year of high school, 2012). Creating transition programs that "downsize" these large high schools have a positive impact on attendance, student achievement, behavior, teacher morale, and

parent contact (DeWees, 1999, as cited in McIntosh & White, 2006). At one Kentucky high school, after data reports showed that 45 percent of the freshmen were likely to fail at least one class, freshmen were given a separate space on campus and more individualized attention. As a result, state standardized test scores have increased beyond the state average for ninth graders and the failure rate has dropped (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Most studies about effective transitions for freshmen include similar recommendations. These include: teaching students about high school before the eighth grade, create mentors so students can connect to high school, provide opportunities to learn the skills needed to be successful in high school, and assign teachers with high self-efficacy and willingness to establish positive relationships to the ninth graders (Cushman, 2006; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Whatever the transition program or class created for freshmen, efforts need to be taken to personalize high school and create an environment where students have a sense of belonging (Stader & Gagnepain, 2000). McIntosh and White (2006) found that, regardless of the transition program, if a student is successful in the freshman year, it is likely that the student will not only graduate from high school but will enjoy the entire high school experience.

Creating smaller learning communities of students at the ninth grade level is an appropriate measure that responds to all of the above recommendations. Ninth grade "houses" or "academies" meet the developmental needs of adolescents at this age (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2010). However, this is not just a matter of isolating ninth graders from the rest of the school population. Smaller learning communities are most effective when teachers are committed to building relationships with students, which stem from a

belief they can make a difference for their students (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Furthermore, it is known that student academic performance is better when students feel high levels of trust for their teachers and feel personally supported by their teachers and is further compounded when teachers exhibited more cooperation with each other (Allensworth & Easton, 2012). This finding suggests that it is not only about what happens in individual classrooms but about how teachers trust each other, collaborate, and feel responsible for all students.

A large, comprehensive high school took the idea of Professional Learning Communites (PLC) and created what is known as a Freshman Wing, a collaborative working group (McIntosh & White, 2006). Over a five year period, there was a decrease in the number of students failing more than one class, including most core classes, as well as a decrease in the number of expulsions, and an increase in attendance rates. The PLC model has allowed teachers to discuss practice, as well as student performance and alleviate feelings of isolation (p. 45).

This model was not the only example of Freshman groups that have been created. Ellerbock and Kiefer (2010) found that three crucial relationships were created through the deliverance of Freshman Focus programs: the teacher-to-program relationship, the teacher-to-student relationship, and the program-to-student relationship. They found that in order for the Freshman Focus to promote care, teachers need to hold positive beliefs about the ninth grade students and support the program and their colleagues. Students in the program report that their Freshman Focus teacher made them feel comfortable and connected, which helped them adjust to high school (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2010). Their

findings further support the notion that students attend class at higher rates when they have strong relationships with their teachers (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Similarly, another local California high school recently implemented a Freshman Academy in effort to connect students to school and the curriculum (Emmett & McGee, 2012). This large, comprehensive high school enrolls 2,100 students, the majority of which is Latino and of low socioeconomic status. Students were recruited based on their reading scores, believing that reading deficiencies caused difficulties in keeping up with the high school curriculum. Among the elements believed critical to a successful program were: building a culture of collaboration, creating connections, and developing a proactive approach to discipline. After the first year of the Freshman Academy, more than half of the students demonstrated a full grade-level improvement in their reading skills. By the second year of the Academy, 95 percent of the freshmen had accrued enough credits to be promoted to the next grade level, compared to 75 percent in the last year before the implementation of the Academy (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Futhermore, freshmen suspensions were reduced by more than half by the second year of the Academy (p. 78).

A culture of support for freshmen

Creating a positive environment for students, particularly freshmen, which makes them feel safe and connected to adults as they make the transition to high school, is at the forefront of transition interventions. Langenkamp (2010) points out that part of the risk during the transition is due to the loss of the social support students get from peers and teachers. Students' perception of their teachers influences their sense of community and their academic achievement. Gerzon-Kessler (2006) reminds us that being an effective

educator is more about one's ability to build relationships and less on one's knowledge of content. Teacher behavior has a clear impact on student behavior (Myers, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2011). Russell (2004) states:

> Staff behaviour, whether positive and encouraging or perceived as causing pain and humiliation, is of significance to students and affects the way they feel about the classes concerned … The behaviour of both staff and students has therefore been identified as an important contributor to classroom atmosphere (p. 261).

The majority of educators in schools want students to succeed academically, to meet district and state performance goals, to meet college entrance requirements, to be prepared to enter the workforce. However, a study by Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) suggests that academic achievement might be increased if the focus is not on achievement itself but on the belief that students can achieve. They call this "academic optimism", which Hoy et al. (2006) describe as a school culture and climate in which teachers believe they are up to the learning task and so are their students. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of a positive school climate are increased when they perceive students are better behaved and more motivated. This reduces their stress and increases their job satisfaction, which improves their teaching efficacy (Collie et al., 2012).

Bolshakova, Johnson, and Czerniak (2011) found that when teachers have a high self-efficacy, they engage in teaching practices that set increased expectations for students, create greater engagement with the subject matter for students, and develop warm and caring relationships with students. Fenzel and O'Brennan (2007) further support this idea, stating that when teachers create a supportive and respectful environment, students are more engaged academically. As Hierck, Coleman, and Weber

(2011) write, “We cannot change the students who come into our schools; rather, we must change our approach to working with them” (p. 13). According to Gehrke (2005), successful teachers believe all students can learn, so they maintain high expectations for them, regardless of the school or the background of the students. As a result, when students perceive warmth and encouragement in their relationships with their teachers, they are more motivated and willing to meet these teachers’ expectations (Balagna, Young, & Smith, 2013).

Dinham (2007) found that relationships were fundamental to the success of teachers and students. Furthermore, these relationships foster effective leadership and student achievement when they are based on concern for each other, mutual respect, professionalism, and high expectations of oneself and others. Conversely, in a study of school-wide positive behavior supports, Ross and Horner (2007) found that teachers with low efficacy and high stress levels are more likely to have negative relationships with students, which increases the chances of implementing punitive discipline strategies and less effective instructional practices. Students who are at risk for dropping out of school may remain in school when they have caring and supportive teachers, even when the school experience is difficult and they are not engaged in the curriculum (Barile et al., 2011).

In a study of common reward policies for teachers, Barile et al. (2011) found that the oft-used practice of giving higher performing teachers higher achieving students actually negatively impacted the school climate. Their study suggests that positive student-teacher relationships and a positive school climate are eroded when “good” teachers are given higher performing students, because lower performing students do not

feel worthy enough for the "good teacher". This lowers their motivation, their relationships with teachers, and negatively impacts their academic achievement. While numerous articles and studies attempt to define a "good teacher", most agree that they share several common characteristics. Good teachers engage students in authentic intellectual experiences and provide a safe place to makes mistakes and try again (Hargrove, 2005). Low and Ang (2011) identify ten core values of a good teacher: engaging in continuous learning, widening knowledge and opening new horizons, being persuasive and motivating, being a role model, having a loving heart, having a sense of humor, being disciplined and organized, being selfless, caring, and helpful, having a positive attitude, and having integrity. Most studies agree that the amount of training a teacher has are not good predictors of classroom performance (Hanushek, 2007). Gerzon-Kessler (2006) point out that being an effective or good educator hinges on the ability to build relationships rather than content knowledge. If students feel recognized and excited about learning, they are motivated to meet higher expectations (Gerzon-Kessler, 2006). Furthermore, emotional support is important for students, particularly adolescents. As they seek greater autonomy from their parents, having other settings where they receive this emotional support may be a powerful motivating factor (Allen et al., 2013).

Social-emotional learning and academic achievement

In examining the factors that interfere with students' academic success, much attention is being given to their social-emotional learning (SEL). Schools are social places and learning is a social process as it is colloborative, involving peers and teachers. Students' ability to connect to school, to teachers, and to peers, as well as their ability to perform successfully are all indicators of how well their SEL needs are met within the

school setting (Zins et al., 2004). Unfortunately, in an era of high-stakes testing, schools are often hestitant to focus on an aspect of schooling that does not have clear standards and expectations. However, SEL is sometimes called the missing piece in education because it links academic knowledge with a specific set of skills important to "success in schools, families, communities, workplaces, and life in general" (Elias, 2006). Ray, Lambie, and Currie (2007) support this finding by pointing out that caring, trusting, engaging, and inclusive school climate promotes students' achievement and holistic development.

Hamilton (2012) found that teachers who reported challenging behavior from students had difficulty connecting with the student. Without a positive connection, students fell behind academically and were disconnected from the learning environment (p. 184). Zinset al., 2004 (as cited in Greenberg et al., 2003) noted that students' social emotional competence fosters better academic performance in a variety of ways, including managing stress, increased confidence about learning abilities, the ability to set goals, and the ability to use problem-solving and relationship skills to overcome obstacles. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based social and emotional programs involving almost 300,000 kindergarten through high school students. They found that in addition to improved social and emotional skills and behavior, students also demonstrated an 11-percentile gain in academic acheivement. Denham and Brown (2010) found that students who have difficulties dealing with negative emotions may not have the personal resources to focus on learning, while students who are able to maintain positive emotions are able to remain engaged in classroom tasks. Futhermore, students who have highly aggressive

and low prosocial behavior had the biggest challenges to overcome in adjusting to schools (i.e., following rules and routines, lacking enthusiasm about learning) (p. 663). Parker et al. (2003) compared 667 high school students' grade point average (GPA) with their results on the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i:YV) and found that the higher their GPA, the higher their EQ-i:YV and, conversely, the lower their GPA, the lower their EQ-i:YV. While it is unclear in this study if GPA affected their emotional quotient or if their emotional quotient affected their GPA, there is a direct correlation between academic achievement and social-emotional learning and development.

Teachers' social-emotional development and well-being also has an impact on students' academic achievement. When teachers lack social-emotional competence, they are unable to handle classroom challenges, which impact their relationships with students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Additionally, students' perceptions of teacher support have a direct effect on their interest and motivation (Wentzel, as cited in Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). If teachers feel stress or lack classroom management skills, they are often unmotivated and unable to cultivate positive relationships with their students (p. 501). However, when students perceive that teachers care about them, they are likely to be more engaged with the academic content. Hargreaves (2000) says,

> If we are serious about standards, we must become serious about emotions too and look again at the organizational conditions and professional expectations that can increase emotional understanding between teachers and students as a basis for learning. (p. 825)

Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2012) examined teacher perceptions of social-emotional learning as it relates to teachers' sense of stress, teaching efficacy and job satisfaction and

determined that teachers who are comfortable with their own social-emotional abilities and understanding are then more comfortable with social-emotional learning in their own students and experience lower stress, greater teaching efficacy, and greater job satisfaction (p. 1197). Furthermore, Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, and Jacobson (2009) support these findings as they determined that teachers who are experiencing burnout (low social-emotional competence) lack the psychological energy to implement extra activities, such as social-emotional curriculum, that would benefit students. Teachers with higher self-efficacy (higher social-emotional competence) are willing to take on additional work if they believe it is beneficial to their students (p. 523).

Conceptual framework

As schools search for ways to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates, it is clear that interventions must begin as soon as students enter high school. The selected research suggests that specific interventions that support freshmen as they transition from middle school to high school are necessary if students are to be successful throughout high school and beyond. This study is focused on the research that emphasizes the need for specific intervention programs to support the transition to high school and the importance of supporting the social-emotional learning of these students as they make the transition. Freshmen need some of the same structures they experienced in middle school in order to adjust to the new demands and expectations of high school. While the structures and supports are an important component of the freshman transition, a great deal of attention must also be given to students' social-emotional needs. Teachers need to be aware of their own social-emotional learning and competence in order to help students make a successful transition. Both freshmen and their teachers need "academic

optimism" in order to have academic rigor to remain in school and graduate (Hoy et al., 2006).

Based on reports that show freshmen failure and dropout rates are the highest of all grade levels and that these rates are particularly alarming for Black and Hispanic students (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003; Roderick & Camburn, 1999, as cited in Smith et al., 2006; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Smith et al, 2006) it is imperative that schools and school districts implement programs that support students as they make the transition to high school. However, it is not enough to simply implement a transition program. The teachers who teach in these programs must be committed to building relationships with students. Students who struggle academically and are at risk for dropping out will remain in school when they have supportive, caring teachers (Barile et al., 2011). Social-emotional learning connects students to their school, teachers, and peers and fosters academic achievement (Zins et al., 2004).

This study examines two freshmen intervention programs, a Summer Bridge program and a freshmen orientation course, using these two key concepts. Implementing any type of freshmen transition program is beneficial to students. Therefore, this study evaluates the components of these two intervention programs and determines what elements are helpful to the freshmen transition, as well as how to improve and strengthen them. Additionally, by using social-emotional learning concepts as a way to connect students to school and academic achievement, the study asks freshmen teachers to discuss their use of social-emotional learning and competence in order to create a successful transition for freshmen.

Conclusion

The research is clear that freshmen need direct supports and interventions in order to be successful in high school. It is not enough to simply move them from the middle to the high school. School staffs need to be aware of their freshmen students' needs, areas where they struggle, and identify and implement specific ways to support them. Given the amount of research around this topic, it is obvious that this problem stretches far beyond a single district or state. Schools and districts across the nation need to make the ninth grade transition a priority.

The methodology presents an approach to learning more about teachers' perceptions of the freshman transition programs in which they participated. By identifying how their beliefs and behaviors impact the effectiveness of the programs, improvements can be made to the existing programs, as well as serve as a guide for other schools that want to implement similar programs.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to determine how teachers perceive the culture and climate of their classrooms, as they relate to the freshmen support programs, and how they believe they employ social-emotional learning to support this transition. Teachers from both the summer bridge program and the freshman orientation course participated in focus groups to determine how they create the identifiers the research indicates are important for a successful freshman transition. Because the research is clear on the need for specific transition supports for students as they move from middle school to high school, conducting this study generates data that addresses the rationale for implementing transition programs throughout the school district. It also helps identify teacher behavior and characteristics that are crucial to having successful transition programs.

Conducting the study

The study is a descriptive analysis of teachers' perceptions. Two focus groups were held. The first focus group was with the 5 teachers who participated in Summer Bridge. There was a math teacher, English Language-Arts teacher, a physical education teacher, leadership teacher, and ceramics teacher. The second focus group was held with the 5 teachers who currently teach the freshman orientation class. The focus group questions were structured to help teachers articulate their own attitudes and beliefs about teaching freshmen and supporting the transition to high school. Teachers were asked to provide specific case study information on students they believe have made a successful transition, but might not have without Summer Bridge or freshman orientation. The focus

groups were facilitated and guided in order to pinpoint teacher behaviors and attitudes that create a successful environment for students, as well as articulate their understanding of social-emotional learning and the use of social-emotional strategies they employ with students that help them feel supported and successful.

Participants and stakeholders

The data in this research comes from the teachers at the site high school who teach the freshman orientation class and those who taught in the Summer Bridge program, where the study took place. The school currently has a student body of just over 1100 students, a faculty of about 60, and an administrative staff of 5. The study focuses particularly on the teachers who teach the freshman orientation class and the teachers who taught in Summer Bridge, which is a total of 9 teachers.

There are two groups who would benefit from and be interested in my findings. The first group is the district's Office of Equity team. Last year, the team focused part of their attention on addressing the difficulties freshmen are experiencing in their first semester of high school. They provided the funding for Summer Bridge program, including paying teachers, administrators, and student mentors. They have also funded the training for the freshman orientation class, as well as paying for two class sections of the class and purchasing the materials and textbooks related to the class.

The administration and teaching staff of all the district's middle and high schools would also benefit from this research. This information could prove to be helpful in understanding the types of supports freshmen need, as well as provide a rationale for expanding and funding summer bridge programs and freshmen orientation courses to all incoming freshmen district-wide.

Site, scope and setting for the research

The research study took place at a large comprehensive high school in a suburban city in the San Francisco Bay Area. It focused on the ninth grade cohort, in particular the teachers who participate in the specific freshman transition programs.

Proposed data-collection instruments, procedures and timeframe

Data collection was completed by interviewing participants in focus groups. Two focus groups were held. One was with the five teachers who taught in the summer bridge program in the summer of 2014. The second group was the six teachers who currently teach the freshman orientation class. Two of the freshman orientation teachers also taught in Summer Bridge; therefore, they participated in both focus groups. Both focus group meetings were recorded and the meetings were then transcribed.

Focus group meetings were held at the end of the first semester, in late January and early February. By this time, teacher have a good understanding of their students and the freshman orientation curriculum and will have had sufficient time to reflect on their teaching practices, particular to these programs, as well as student performance. The focus groups were asked 8 questions, several of which have multiple sections. The questions focused on general freshmen transition supports, the supports specific to these particular programs, their own beliefs about meeting the needs of transitioning freshmen, and specific information related to their students' success in the programs.

The focus group sessions were audio recorded and notes were taken. After each focus group session, the audio recordings were transcribed. These transcriptions were provided to each focus group participant for their feedback. Members were asked to

review the transcripts in order to clarify what they said or meant. Members were invited to add or delete any part of their contribution.

Data analysis

Once the focus groups are conducted, notes and recordings were analyzed to determine if there were patterns or consistent responses among the participants. The focus group represents a "criterion sampling" (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling is used when all individuals in the group experienced the phenomenon and are chosen because of the similar experience (p. 128). In this case, the 8 members of the two focus groups all participated in a freshman transition support program. There were five teachers for Summer Bridge and there are six teachers for the freshmen orientation course. Two of the Summer Bridge teachers also teach the freshmen orientation course. The focus group questions were structured to have participants first examine to their thoughts and feelings about freshman transition programs, in general. The questions then asked participants to look specifically at Summer Bridge and freshman orientation and what they believe are effective components of the two program, as well as what might be improved. The focus questions then move into asking them to examine their own teaching practices and beliefs about the needs of students. Finally, teachers were asked to describe students that they feel have benefited from participating in the transition programs.

To analyze the data, the researcher used a multi-step process to code and analyze the data (Tesch, as cited in Roberts, 2010). First, all transcriptions and notes were reviewed in order to make sense of the entire focus group discussion, to review the mood, intent, and tone of the discussion. Secondly, each participant's information was analyzed one by one, identifying emergent topics. By using *in vivo coding,* that is using the exact

words used by participants to name the categories (Creswell, 2007, p. 153), categories and themes were identified. This technique reduces researcher bias since the researcher is not determining or naming the categories or themes; they are being generated by the participants own words and contributions to the discussion. The results and responses from the Summer Bridge focus group will be compared to the results and responses from the freshman orientation focus group. A common set of behaviors, beliefs, and characteristics that teachers share that help freshmen transition to high school were then identified. These responses were coded to identify emergent themes then compared to the literature to determine what findings are supported by the literature. Both elements will inform recommendations about transition programs.

Possible limitations:

The following possible limitations are identified:

- Teachers may not be truthful in the focus groups. They may say what they think they should say, particularly if they have a personal relationship with the researcher.
- There is no way to account for external factors that may influence responses. Teachers may have chosen to teach in freshman transition programs because of pre-existing beliefs about social-emotional learning.
- There is no way to control which students the teachers choose to discuss or to know if the student would have failed if not for the transition programs. Choices are based solely on teachers' perceptions and feeling about the students.

Significance of the study

A high percentage of students at this school have struggled with behavior and academic performance. This school has the highest dropout rate in the district and high incidences of referrals for attendance and behavior. Performance on state standardized tests has been stagnant or declining over the past 10-12 years while other schools in the district have steadily improved. By analyzing teacher perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors as they relate to the freshmen transition, systemic changes can be recommended both at the school site, as well as district-wide.

Usefulness of findings to stakeholders

The findings of the study would be useful to stakeholders, particularly to the teaching staff and district administrators, such as the Director of School Support, the Assistant Superintendent of Middle Schools, the Assistant Superintendent of High Schools, and the Superintendent, in identifying effective supports and interventions at schools with large at-risk populations. The findings could illustrate the need for more direct services and support for individual students or groups of students who are the most at-risk for dropping out, being suspended/expelled, or unnecessarily identified for special education, particularly those in the freshmen class.

Ethical considerations and participants' rights

The primary ethical consideration is the researcher's relationship with the focus group participants. The researcher has close ties to the school, as well as personal relationships with several of the focus group participants; therefore the issue of bias, both on the part of the researcher and the teachers will have to be taken into consideration. The issue of privacy must also be considered so that teachers cannot be identified by their

responses and any identifying information is omitted or changed to protect teachers' privacy. Because the focus group meetings were transcribed, it was necessary to provide copies of the transcription to each focus group participant. Member checking was employed as all participants had the opportunity to clarify, add, or omit any part of the focus group transcription.

Therefore, in this study, participants' rights were protected by maintaining anonymity. Any identifying factors were removed before reporting the findings and names will not be used. Further steps were taken to protect those involved. Informed consent and confidentiality was addressed by sending a letter to each of the focus group participants (Appendix B). The letter outlined the questions that were asked during the focus group sessions**,** purpose and intent of the focus groups, how the information will be used, and the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality, both of the participants themselves, as well as the students they may be discussing. Participants were also given the right to decline participating in the focus group or to have their responses omitted from the research. Copies of the signed consent form were given to each participant. Additionally, before beginning the focus groups, participants were asked to sign a statement of confidentiality in order to further protect the participants and the contents of the discussion (Appendix C).

Potential biases and/or subjectivity of the study

Given the researcher's long history and close ties with this school and staff, it is reasonable to believe that the research and/or conclusions and recommendations might be biased one way or the other. However, the belief is that the long-standing personal ties to the school and colleagues might provide an opportunity to have a much deeper and

honest conversation about the effectiveness of the programs, as well as student achievement. Teachers might also be more willing to be open about their own personal beliefs and biases than they might be with someone they do not know, who they may perceive as judging their teaching abilities.

CHAPTER 4:

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to determine teachers' perceptions of freshman interventions and supports and how their use of social-emotional learning support student success as they transition from middle school to high school. Specifically, this study focused on two freshmen intervention programs, a three-week summer bridge program that targeted at-risk in-coming freshmen and a freshmen orientation course that all freshmen are required to take, beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. The summer bridge program provided additional math and English Language Arts support for students and included an elective, as well as enrichment activities. The program was designed to provide academic support, as well as social-emotional support for students before they began high school. The freshmen orientation course connects students' academic goals and achievement to real world goals. Additionally, this study sought to identify the gaps in the programs or challenges for students that may require further action by the school or school district. This study addressed four research questions: 1. Which elements and characteristics of freshmen transition programs (specifically, summer bridge and freshman orientation) do teachers perceive as helpful to the freshman transition? 2. How do teachers identify and express their self-efficacy in relation to how they perceive their own social-emotional learning? 3. How do teachers relate their social-emotional learning to the creation and implementation of successful transition program for freshman? 4. What recommendations do teachers have to strengthen intervention and support programs for incoming freshmen?

This chapter summarizes the responses from the participants, and discusses the results of the data collection as well as examines how this data answers the research questions. In chapter 5, the recommendation and implications will be discussed. The results of this study were derived from transcripts from two focus groups and one one-on-one interview with 8 participants. Each focus group or interview lasted approximately 40-70 minutes with each participant recounting their personal experiences as a summer bridge and/or a freshman orientation teacher. From the data analysis, five overall themes were determined with their related elements.

To analyze the data, the researcher used a multi-step process to code and analyze the data (Tesch, as cited in Roberts, 2010). The focus group audio recordings and transcripts were reviewed several times to understand the mood, intent, and tone of the discussion. For member checking, copies of the transcripts were also provided to each focus group participant for their review, as well as to make corrections, additions, or deletions. In order to maintain the voices of the focus group participants, the researcher chose to use *in vivo coding*, that is using the exact words of the participants to determine the categories (Creswell, 2007, p. 153). Once the categories were determined, they were then narrowed to the five themes presented here.

Participant profiles

The participant profiles are shown in Table 1, and each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The focus groups were made up of 6 women and 2 men, all of whom teach at the same comprehensive high school. The length of their teaching experience ranged from 3 years to 17 years and their years of service at this

particular high school range from 2 years to 15 years. Only one teacher had any experience teaching at the middle school.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant Name	**Years of Teaching Experience**	**Years of Service at High School**	**Middle School Experience**
Lori	8	8	None
Courtney	13	14	None
Alan	4	3	None
Geoff	15	15	None
Emily	9	9	None
Sarah	11	11	None
Jane	17	2	Yes
Amber	4	4	None

Next, common themes will be discussed as they relate to each participant's perception of their ability to support students in the transition from middle school to high school, as it relates to their experiences in the summer bridge program or the freshman orientation class Based on the literature review, it was anticipated that the actual program structure of both the summer bridge and freshman orientation would be a common theme in the focus group discussions, with suggestions for improving the programs. However, most studies have determined that the structure of freshmen orientation programs is less important than the mere existence of such programs. Furthermore, as also supported by the literature, it was anticipated that these teachers would be able to understand and articulate their own social-emotional learning as it relates to student success. As seen in the literature review, teachers' own social-emotional competency is vital when it comes

to the success of students making the transition from middle school to high school, particularly students who enter high school already at-risk for failing or dropping out. By analyzing the participants' responses and reactions to the freshmen transition programs and their understanding of their own social-emotional learning, the researcher was able to identify five specific themes that have an impact of students' transition from middle school to high school: personal connections between students and teachers, academic expectations in the move from middle school to high school, real world connections, the impact of teacher behavior in student success, and support for students' social-emotional learning. These themes will be discussed in greater detail below.

Focus-group themes

By examining the transcripts and audio recordings of the focus groups and one-on-one interview, quotations and phrases that best characterized their experiences were chosen. The participants did not indicate that one theme or its connected elements was more important than another; therefore, the themes and connected elements are not presented in order of importance. Rather, they are presented in the order in which they emerged during the focus group discussions. Table 2 shows each theme with connected elements and a key component of that element.

Table 2
Focus-Group Themes

Main Theme	**Connected Elements**	**Key Component**
1. Personal connections between students and teachers	a. Personal connections between students and teachers	a. Providing students an opportunity to learn how to navigate the high school campus
	b. Trust teachers	b. When students trust their teachers, they are willing to do what you ask them.
	c. Teacher have a positive attitude	c. Caring about students as a human being, not just a grade or a test.
2. Academic expectations in the transition from middle school to high school	a. Understanding graduation requirements in high school	a. In-coming freshmen do not understand how credits work to promote from one grade to the next.
	b. 9th grade as a transition year	b. Implementing some of the same middle school structures to support the transition to high school.
	c. Better articulation between the middle school and high school	c. High school teachers should spend time at the middle school to understand what students need when they enter high school.
3. Real world connection	a. How does high school relate to the real world	a. Why is doing well in high school important to life after high school.
	b. Teaching transferrable skills	b. Understanding the decision-making process and how that affects academics and life choices.
	c. Life beyond their neighborhood	c. Many students do not think they have choices beyond what their parents do.
	a. Teacher behavior	a. Teachers have to believe that positive relationships with students are a priority.
	b. Understanding developmental needs of freshmen	b. Freshmen need more mothering and nurturing than older students.

Main Theme	Connected Elements	Key Component
4. Impact of teacher behavior on student success	c. Model behavior	c. By modeling behavior, students see how to behave and are not just told what to do.
	a. Don't hold a grudge	a. Every day is a new day for students so
	b. Understanding students' social-emotional needs as freshmen	b. Teachers have a responsibility to support students' social-emotional learning as they enter high school.
5. Support for students' social-emotional learning	c. Students' sense of belonging	c. When students' social-emotional learning is a priority, they feel connected to school and feel like they belong to a community.

Theme 1: Personal connections between students and teachers

"... Kids are willing to do what you ask them to do when they trust you and when they think that you like them ..."

The first theme that emerged immediately in the focus groups was the need for personal connections between freshman students and teachers. Participants identified a need for freshmen to have an adult or mentor, whether it is a teacher or a counselor or administrator, that students feel comfortable going to when they need help or have a question about how to navigate high school. Because of the summer bridge program, which ran for three weeks in the August prior to students' freshman year, many students knew at least 5 teachers on the high school campus when school began. Participants stressed the importance of students getting to know this person before school starts so students know who to go to. Courtney stated:

> I just think they need that time with an adult, or a mentor, that can go through their classes with them, resources we have available, how to do stuff on campus.

> They don't know how to join a club, join a sport, go to dances, go to the after-school program. They don't know how to do anything. They need somebody to show them how to do that stuff.

Geoff further supported Courtney's idea that having a program like Summer Bridge gives students someone they can go to on the very first day of school. This alleviates some of the students' anxiety about where to go or what to do. Having an adult that already knows you, even if that person is not your teacher helps them feel less anxious about starting high school:

> Then they also have a chance to be familiar with a person, make a connection before school starts, that one teacher that at least they can come talk to if something doesn't go right that first week of school. At least they know that one teacher.

Amber pointed out the importance of having an adult mentor for academic purposes, as well as for personal reasons. Students need to have someone they feel they can go to when they need support, whether it is for class or academic help or for personal reasons:

> Meeting with adults and making some connections, so when they get to the campus they don't feel as overwhelmed. They have connection points to go to and a mentor, a guide. Not just someone that check in with them at every grading period, but someone they can go to, that also is just checking with them at a personal level, on an academic level as well.

Participants also identified students' ability and willingness to trust teachers when they have made that personal connection. Teachers stated that students are more willing to take academic risks in the classroom when they feel like they can trust their teachers.

Jane explained: “How can I be an effective math teacher if they don’t feel comfortable in my room to try math? That’s what I work for … and they have to like me well enough to want to please me.” Lori supported Jane’s point, explaining the importance of building this trust with students so they understand teachers’ expectations and do not feel like they are just being told what to do:

> Like we’ve said, kids are more willing to do what you ask them to do when they trust you and when they think that you like them and that you have a reason for asking them to do what you’re asking them to do.

Emily shared an experience with a particular student who did not want to attend school anymore. This experience supports the idea that students are motivated to not only do well in school but attend school when they know they have an adult who cares about them:

> I found out from another teacher that she had said she’s only still at [this school] because of me. She’s never told me that, I’ve never heard that, but she was like, “I’m just here because I have Ms. H.” Every day, she gives me a hug and every day I check on her because she comes in some days and I just see it on her face that she’ll cry at any second, and I always check on her.

Every participant stressed that the key to making these personal connections with students involved having a positive attitude and looking at students beyond their academic success or failure. They believed that their own attitude about students and their ability to succeed had an impact on students and their behavior. Geoff pointed out what the students do for him:

> They make me want to come and be a better teacher that day because they're showing up. They're putting [in] the time. You learn a lot more from the kids. You learn a lot more about yourself from the kids. People never really admit it.

Amber summed the entire concept by explaining that her focus as an educator is to nurture students as human beings, more than their grade on a test or their success or failure in the class:

> I've always believed that I care more about my students as a human being and a whole person, not just the person that they will develop to be as a human being or just … going forward with their lives and making the best decisions they can with that they have to deal with. I care about that way more than if they failed that rest.

It is clear from the participants' responses that the personal connections they have with their students are more important than the content they are teaching. They believe that these connections are not only the key to academic success and, for some, keeping them at school, but these practices and attitudes help them be better educators. The participants understood that their students give them as much as they give their students, that the support and personal interest they take in their students motivates them to do their best as teachers. Their responses indicate that they see their relationships with their students as a truly reciprocal relationship.

Theme 2: Academic expectations in the transition from middle school to high school

"It was just obvious that the freshman year was the year that needs to be supported the most."

The second theme that emerged from the focus groups was related to the academic expectations placed on students as they make the transition from middle school

to high school and how to support students as they make this transition. One factor that many participants commented on was that incoming freshmen do not understand the graduation requirements and grade expectations of high school. Because middle school students are promoted from one year to the next with no clear criteria for promotion, incoming freshmen are often confused by graduation credits and how to meet these requirements. Courtney recounted conversations she has had to have with freshmen who, by the end of their first semester of high school, are already off-track to graduate and having to tell them that they will soon have to transfer to a continuation high school:

> They don't understand credits. It's a whole new world and I don't think there's ever a time when anyone explains it to them. Sitting down across from a 9th grader and saying, "You've got 6 F's. You're supposed to have 30 credits and you have zero. Let me tell you what's about to happen to you."

Emily explained how middle school does a poor job of preparing students for what to expect in high school:

> [8th graders have a difficult time transitioning to high school because of] definitely not understanding how credits work, especially since they're promoted on, they're promoted on, they're promoted on [in middle school]. [Ninth graders say,] "I do what I've done, I'm going to graduate!" If it's tried and tested in the past, it must be true now.

An interesting note that Jane, who was the only teacher in the focus groups with any middle school experience, pointed out was that she noticed a significant difference between the way her 8th grade students were able to function academically and the way her 9th graders behaved. She saw a marked difference between being the oldest group at

the middle school and then being the youngest at the high school. She explains that her 8th graders could do so much more than her 9th graders because they had so many middle school structures to support them. Without those structures in high school, her students were not able to meet these same expectations until their junior year:

> I found it interesting that 9th graders are so much less together than 8th graders. I expected things in my 8th grade algebra classes that I just now, by the time we're getting to, like, juniors do I think they could pull off … I think having the structure taken away is a complete regression for them.

Many teachers also felt that special attention needs to be paid to the 9th grade year and that the freshman year should be viewed truly as a transition year, with particular attention to the structures and supports that exist for students in their 8th grade year in middle school. The participants felt like many of those supports need to be carried from the 8th grade into the 9th grade so there is a sense of familiarity when students enter high school. Emily noted:

> There's this free fall of openness that they don't know how to control or how to handle and I don't know how to rein them in. Not that I don't know how, it's that I've never done it and never realized that maybe I should make that a priority to ease their stress level too.

Lori supported this point, when asked why she chose to teach in both the summer bridge program and teach the freshman orientation class, she stated:

> It was really becoming glaringly obvious that this was one of our biggest issues at this school is the way that 9th graders are not succeeding, whether it's the 9th grade year they don't succeed, or the next year they're dropping out, or they're juniors

with 50 credits. It was just obvious that the freshman year was the year that needs to be supported the most.

The participants also felt like the summer bridge program did provide some of that transition support for students, but it could be better utilized to fully understand what supports students are receiving as 8th graders and use that to help them transition into high school. Lori expressed the following:

> We could use time in [summer bridge] to talk about credits and grades and expectations … in the classroom they need help with things like, what does it really mean to study, what does it really mean to pay attention even … I think freshmen need structure and organization and be taught how to be organized themselves, and I think that they need to be supported into fitting into that structure and staying within that structure.

By viewing the 9th grade year as a transition year, there would be greater articulation between 8th and 9th grade teachers so that 9th grade teachers would understand what students need as they enter high school. Sarah stated "we should have 8th graders on our campus a lot more than we do, getting them used to what it's going to be like." While Lori agreed with Sarah, she also felt that 9th grade teachers should also be at the middle school more often, observing classes and understanding what the expectations are like for students at the middle school. She said "our teachers should be over there more often … what's going on over there, and what are the rules and expectations at that school?"

The focus group participants had a clear understanding that the freshman year is not structured in a way that helps students make the transition to high school. They saw

the need to understand what supports students get in middle school and the need to maintain some of those supports in the 9th grade. They also felt that the freshman year should be seen as something separate, as a true transition or bridge year between middle school and high school where students can learn how to navigate the expectations of high school.

Theme 3: Making real-world connections for students

"*Some of them, I just feel like, don't even understand what the options are for them."*

The third theme to emerge from the focus groups was related to making real world connections for students. The focus group participants felt that an important component to any freshmen transition program, whether a summer bridge or freshmen orientation class, is to give students a clear understanding of how their education and the transition process relates to their future and their lives after high school. Emily explained:

> I think … they need to start understanding what is in it for them, why do they need to do well in high school, why is high school important, and just connecting it to their life, to their future, to the progress of their family and their situation, anything that is going to get them realize that their education, in effect, is important, even if they're not planning to continue with education, there are so many other things you're trained for when in high school … They need a "why" by it.

Sarah supported Emily's opinion and added the importance of having these conversations with students when they begin high school and not at the end of high school:

> If no one says to them until they're seniors, "What are your strengths? How will you use them beyond high school? What you are going to do with all of the things you've learned here?" it's too late. Then they flounder for years. I can think of adults who, if someone had said to them a little bit earlier, "You need to think about this now, way before graduation," they might've gone on to the next step right away, and they'd be tens of thousands of dollars ahead of where they are in life right now.

Several participants commented on simple skills that teachers take for granted and do not explicitly teach or reinforce with students. They believed these skills would help students with the transition to high school but also in the transition out of high school. The participants believed these skills should be a specific component of the summer bridge or freshmen orientation programs to emphasize their importance with students. Amber supported this by pointing out that freshman orientation programs should focus on the whole child:

> Just to be a fellow community member, when they go into adulthood and I really felt like these … the [freshman orientation class] and the [summer bridge] program … I don't know, I just felt like they really seemed to have a deep concern to nurture the student as a whole person.

Geoff, relating it to sports, commented that students are more engaged when they're taking care of their community and feel like a part of something. When students are engaged, they feel more positive and make better choices:

> I relate it to sports. You have this proper gear, you feel like you're going to play better that day ... I got a little more pride, a little more pep in my step. It just leads to the next thing. You want to be part of a team.

Sarah talked about the decision-making process and practicing that skill in the classroom in order to help students understand how to relate it to life after high school. Furthermore, Sarah realized that when she does use non-academic examples and connects to the real world, students are more engaged and are able to see the connection between school and life beyond school:

> We sort of laid out a strategic process for making important decisions, and we applied it to, yes, thinking about what job you want after high school, but we also used some examples that were non-academic, so talking to them about how we make choices or why we make choices is a pretty big component of the class that's pretty engaging.

Lori related this skill to something as simple as allowing students to choose where to sit in her class:

> I tried to give them as much choice as I can in the matter. For almost all my students, I start off the year with, "You can choose who to sit with and then you earn the right to stay there." We work on what choice are you making and are you making the right choices, what are the results that you're looking for.

Both Courtney and Lori commented on the narrow view many at-risk students have of their world and that freshmen transition programs provide opportunities for students to see life beyond their neighborhood. Courtney said:

> It's just about getting them out of their environment and getting out of [this town]. It's amazing how many students have never left [this town]. It doesn't matter what socioeconomic or race or anything. It's that they're given that opportunity. What they do with it is what happens. We just need to give our kids as many opportunities as we can.

Lori further supported the fact that so many at-risk students do not see how their education expands their options and opportunities. The use of freshmen orientation programs can create that bridge between academics and the rea world:

> Our kids who live in poverty and who don't really understand that there is more to life outside of [their neighborhood] and that the way every single person they know lives, it's difficult for them to understand how school is going to help them do what it is their dad does, or how is it going to them do and become what their mom is. Some of them, I just feel like, don't even understand what the options are for them. They think their options are as limited as their parents' options were, so we just get them to understand what an education really can do for you.

This theme exemplifies the need for transition programs to focus, in part, on skills that will support students beyond high school, as well as providing students opportunities to understand their options. The participants' comments indicated that they felt that too little attention was given to the real-world connection that might help students succeed all through high school. Because freshmen orientation programs are not subject matter specific (i.e. math, science, social science), these programs can serve as the link between high school academic achievement and real-world opportunities and experiences.

Theme 4: Impact of teacher behavior on student success

"The teachers, if they don't have compassion already in their hearts to understand what that kid's going through just to come to school that day … it's more than content."

The impact of teacher behavior on student success was the fourth theme to emerge from the focus group. The participants were clear that the way teachers behave, treat students, and set expectations have a definite impact on students' behavior, motivation, and academic success. All of the focus group teachers placed a great deal of importance on the relationship between the teacher and student. The participants intuitively believed and understood that academic achievement occurs when students feel emotionally supported by their teachers. They also pointed out that it is not just what a teacher says to a student, but it is also how a teacher acts toward a student and behaves in the classroom.

Courtney supports this by pointing out how important the teacher-student relationship is:

> We can teach teachers to deliver content. If you don't know English, I can probably get you there … We cannot teach you how to have better relationships with your kids … You have to come from a starting point of, "I believe that the relationship is more important than what I'm teaching them."

Geoff elaborated, stating the need to consider a student's home or family life and what struggles they bring with them to school before a teacher reprimands or disciplines him/her:

> The teachers, if they don't have compassion already in their hearts to understand what that kid's going through just to come to school that day … If you yell at a

> kid, the first thing they get off the bus … which is what they heard all last night … then the teacher comes in and does the same thing … Having that ability to know to pick and choose your battles, I think it's a big part. It's more than content.

Geoff continued this idea, explaining that body language and a teacher's own mood impact the student-teacher relationship. He stated:

> Your body language, too. I know a lot of teachers' body language; he might as well not come to the classroom. He might as well walk back out. You're having a bad day. Everybody has a bad day but you can't show it … If you can't handle being in that day and showing the kids … because you're a professional. You're like an actor that day, hopefully not acting that you actually care about kids. You can't take out your problems on the kids, no matter. Even though we've all had those days.

Lori supported Geoff's idea that teachers' own behavior has an impact on these relationships, as well as explicitly teaching the behavior the teacher expects from students:

> I think it's great for the kids to see examples of what the right behavior is but you also have to teach that right behavior to some of our students ... if you're just being demanding and on a power trip, they definitely see that and understand that's where you're coming from.

Amber and Sarah both expressed that many teachers lack understanding of the developmental needs of freshmen, which impacts the way they treat students. Amber says:

> I do feel that a lot of teachers maybe aren't really aware of how to meet the developmental needs of 9th graders. I feel like that sounds horrible, but only because it is such a difference. I do feel like 9th grade, they're emotionally … You see them by sophomore year. A lot of them have grown up a lot and are trying to figure out how to fit in and deal with all of this.

Sarah supported Amber's statement by stating:

> … But I'm so enjoying teaching freshmen again this year because they are a little bit different. They're a little bit special, they're still a little bit immature in some ways, they still need a little bit more … kind of mothering or hand-holding than some of the other students do …

The participants also emphasized that teachers need to model the behavior they expect to see from their students. Alan gave an example of how his students tried to hold him to the same expectations that he holds the students to and he complied because he wanted to model the expected behavior:

> My class caught me today because I didn't have lunch. I started eating in my class. All the kids in my class, they go, "You've got to go outside." So I stood about a foot outside and started eating.

Courtney finished his point "You model the behavior because you could have argued back, 'This is my room. I'm the grown up.'"

Amber also commented on modeling behavior:

> Definitely through modeling, and having them learn it too, and practice it … With classroom management, I just try and be very specific and teach them what it

> looks like to be a respectful student in the class, and to make this a safe emotional and physical environment …

Jane pointed out how easy it can be to be influenced by one or two negative students and how that affects the entire class:

> In any group of several hundred people, there's a few jerks, and you have to be really careful not to feed the jerk. There's sometimes when the kid walks in and you're just like, "Mmmm-hmmm," and it's really easy to get caught up into all your energy, spinning around this kid, which is now giving that child power and taking away what you need to do, so I work really, really hard not to feed that negative energy … That keeps the class positive. It makes it very clear: "That's outside the norm" without me contributing negative energy. That's taken years to learn.

The participants also pointed out that, in many cases, it is simply the way a teacher speaks with a student that makes the difference, even when correcting behavior. They emphasized that students' negative behavior should not be taken personally Amber explained:

> I just kind of have that conversation. I let them know my reasoning on a lot of things, because … just as a human being … you definitely need to validate their feelings.

Jane supported this idea, saying it is often simply how the teacher phrases something:

> … you don't tell kids, "You're wrong," you tell them they're not right, and just whatever discipline I do, I try to do it in a positive way.

Both Sarah and Lori concurred. Lori expressed that a lot of negative behavior can be dealt with by keeping the matter small:

> At the end of class, I just say, "I need you to stay after,' don't make it a big deal, but have the conversation with nobody else around, so they feel a little bit safer, and they don't feel like they're being picked on.

Sarah explained that her behavior expectations in her classroom are not personal judgements of her student:

> I knew I had to be really clear about classroom expectations for language. I had to approach it in a very nonjudgmental way because they were very defensive to the idea that I was making some sort of moral judgement on them for using the language they were using … there are academic expectations for the classroom … They never get upset with me for having to nudge them.

The participants' statements demonstrate a need for teachers to be reflective about their own behavior and to have an understanding of how teachers' behavior impacts students' ability to be successful in the classroom. The focus group participants were clear that they held themselves to the same expectations that they held their students to and through modeling appropriate behavior, students could learn how to meet behavior and academic expectations in the classroom. None of these participants viewed themselves as an authoritarian in the classroom or held an attitude that students should simply fall in line because the teacher says so. The participants believe that it is crucial to engage their own social-emotional competency in order to connect with students. By holding this view of their students, they were able to support students' social-emotional learning.

Theme 5: Support for students' social-emotional learning

"I think they're really starting at this age to identify themselves as individuals ... and we need to make more of an effort to reach or to support the whole child ..."

The final theme to emerge from the focus group is how much these teachers consider their students' social-emotional learning and the belief they hold that addressing students' social and emotional needs impacts their academic achievement and their sense of belonging at school. In particular, participants spoke about the importance of not holding a grudge. Amber discussed a situation with a student who was upset and blew up at her. Instead of sending her to the office, Amber had a conversation with the student about the situation. Amber summed up the result of that conversation:

> She thought I was doing it [asking for her assignment after another teacher had asked for it] on purpose. She explained that to me, and it really helped me understand her and she really understood, also, that I'm not trying to put her on blast or make her feel bad … It was a really good conversation … we both use the classroom at the same time and what happened? We were able to move forward and never had that kind of situation again.

Courtney also described a situation in which she used restorative justice principles to remedy a situation with students:

> It's the first time I've really taken a step back and go, okay, let's not do the punitive. Let's look at a restorative measure and see how we can get these kids to learn what they did was wrong and then other people are going to benefit from their misbehavior … That's a skill many of our adults need, is that you don't get

> to hold a grudge … We had a meeting 4th period. Then 6th period … wash clean. You can't hold it against them for the next four years.

Geoff also recounted teaching a student that he also should not hold a grudge and to start with a clean slate the next day:

> That's what I told a kid today. After he explained his behavior, why he kicked the door, why he had a fall [out] with a teacher, and why it's the right thing to do [to apologize]. At the end, I said, "Tomorrow is a new day. What happens tomorrow, you'll learn from it today."

The participants also expressed an understanding that supporting students' social-emotional learning is their responsibility. They did not expect that students come into high school with the social-emotional skills needed to successfully navigate high school. They assume students enter with a deficiency in this area and believe it is their responsibility to teach students the skills necessary to transition to high school. Sarah expressed an understanding of the developmental changes freshmen are going through as they enter high school:

> I think they're really starting at this age to identify themselves as individuals, not just in the social sense or school sense, but also in their home lives and their family sense, and we need to make more of an effort to reach or to support the whole child, not just the academic part.

Amber elaborated on the responsibility that teachers have to support students' social-emotional learning as they enter high school and that teachers cannot assume it is not their responsibility:

> When people say, "You should have learned this in middle school …" Not everyone can assume everyone has had the exact same thing, and role models, and mentors … I think it's huge for students to have that social-emotional piece, that mentoring piece, because we can't assume every kid has that … Some people say, "That's not all of your job. You need the grades, and teaching the common core," and in the end, that's great, but I do think … working with the public, and the community, that is part of our job.

Several participants also discussed students' social-emotional learning as it relates to students' sense of belonging and being a part of the school community. Alan explained how the summer bridge program helped his students feel like they are a part of the school community:

> They're making that connection. Because we're actually doing a project that we did in the summer, right now. They're like, "We already did this." They're like, "I already know how to do this." They're actually teaching the other kids too.

Lori elaborated on this idea, explaining that even if it is not reflected academically, freshmen are feeling a sense of belonging on campus because they participated in the summer bridge program:

> Whether they're being academically successful or not, they have a connection on campus. They are being included on campus. A lot of the kids, when I see them walking around campus, even though you would think they're trouble-makers or that they would not be the best role models, I see them taking care of each other and being friends with each other.

Jane summed up the participants' feeling that the freshmen year and freshmen transition programs should be used to support students' social-emotional learning. By doing so, students' transition to high school would be an easier process, resulting in increased academic performance:

> … I think we really need to look at the freshmen year as a year of transition, where we're slowly taking those supports away and teach them what it means, you know, through having role models and through getting another year of maturity under their feet. It's very much a transformative year.

Review and analysis of the themes

The data from the two focus groups and the one-on-one interview uncovered key information related to the use of social-emotional learning in freshmen transition program, such as a summer bridge and a freshman orientation course. The five themes that emerged: personal connections between students and teachers, academic expectations in the transition from middle school to high school, making real world connections for students, impact of teacher behavior on student success, and support for students' social-emotional learning all indicate a concern for students' emotional well-being as they transition to high school. None of the focus group participants discussed grades or academic achievement as a priority. None of the participants discussed their subject-matter expertise as a means to engage students in the content. While the teachers in these focus groups care about their students' academic achievement, they did not consider an emphasis on curriculum as a way to engage students academically. They believe that engaging students socially and emotionally, building positive relationships with students

and caring about their well-being outside of school is how to motivate students academically.

Summary

This chapter has described the experiences and perceptions of nine high school freshmen teachers as they relate to freshmen transition support programs, particularly a summer bridge program and a freshmen orientation class. The participants were able to articulate that the freshmen year and freshmen transition programs need to be used to support students' social-emotional growth more than their academic achievement. Through the recognition of social-emotional learning needs, these teachers are able to teach the skills students need in order to be academically successful, even if the skills are not directly related to academic content. The participants felt a great deal of responsibility in helping students' social-emotional growth and believe their own social-emotional competency was key to their students' growth. None of the participants believed that an authoritarian stance of demanding certain behaviors from students or assuming they should enter high school with these skills was a benefit to students. Rather, they placed a great deal of emphasis on giving students a voice and a choice and the opportunity to make mistakes with support to learn from those mistakes. The next chapter will present the conclusions, implications, and recommendations based on these findings.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to identify how teachers use their own social-emotional learning to support students in the transition from middle school to high school. Furthermore, the study attempted to highlight what types of supports students need as they begin high school. Through the use of a qualitative case study, the following research questions were posed:

1. What elements and characteristics of freshmen transition programs (specifically, summer bridge and freshman orientation) do teachers perceive as helpful to the freshman transition?
2. How do teachers identify and express their self-efficacy in relation to how they perceive their own social-emotional learning?
3. How do teachers relate their social-emotional learning to the creation and implementation of successful transition program for freshman?
4. What recommendations do teachers have to strengthen intervention and support programs for incoming freshmen?

The study is based on two major concepts: the need for specific interventions for high school freshmen and how to best support social-emotional learning of students as they transition into high school. Programs that support students as they transition from middle school to high school reduce the dropout rate from an average of 24 percent to an average of 8 percent (Quick Fact Sheet: The First Year of High School, 2012). Research shows that regardless of the transition program implemented, they have a long-lasting

impact, often providing students with skills throughout high school, as well as in the transition from high school to college.

Two recently implemented high school transition programs, a three-week summer bridge for incoming 9th graders and a freshman orientation course, were used as the focus of the study. Both programs were implemented at a large, suburban comprehensive high school with the highest dropout rate in the district and a high freshmen failure rate. Two focus groups were held, one with each of the teachers from each program, as well as one one-on-one interview with a teacher who taught in both programs, for a total of 9 participants.

The focus group discussion addressed the teachers' personal experiences as a summer bridge and/or freshman orientation teacher. From the data analysis of these focus groups, five themes were determined. These themes were identified through a multi-step process to code and analyze the data (Tesch, as cited in Roberts, 2010). The audio recordings and transcripts were reviewed for intent, mood, and tone and participants were also given an opportunity to review the transcripts. Through *in vivo coding*, several categories were identified in the initial review of the data and then these categories were narrowed to five themes. This chapter will discuss the research findings based on these five themes and their implication. Finally, recommendations and conclusions will be presented.

Research Findings

The purpose of this research was to identify how teachers use their own social-emotional learning to support students in the transition from middle school to high

school. As stated earlier, this study addressed four research questions. Based on focus group responses to these questions, the findings are as follows:

Question 1. What elements and characteristics of freshmen transition programs (specifically, summer bridge and freshman orientation) do teachers perceive as helpful to the freshman transition?

The focus group participants strongly felt that freshmen transition programs provide opportunities for teachers to connect school and academics to real world experiences. Freshmen transition programs, such as summer bridge or freshmen orientation classes allow teachers the time to teach transferable skills, such as the decision-making process. While this skill can be taught within other academic courses, transition programs allow these skills to be the curriculum itself, rather than simply a by-product of the curriculum.

The participants also pointed out that transition programs allow those teachers to make connections with students, which provide freshmen an adult mentor to support them throughout the freshman year. Particularly in the case of the summer bridge program, students and teachers were able to make those connections before the school year began, giving students a sense of safety and community as soon as they began high school.

Question 2. How do teachers identify and express their self-efficacy in relation to how they perceive their own social-emotional learning?

The participants demonstrated a clear understanding that the way they behave, treat students, and set expectations have a direct correlation to students' behavior, motivation and academic success. They accepted that many freshmen begin high school

lacking the social-emotional and academic skills to successfully navigate high school and it was their responsibility to support students' growth and learning. Additionally, their responses indicated that they believed they should model the behavior they expected from their students, as opposed to merely demanding the behavior from their students.

Question 3. How do teachers relate their social-emotional learning to the creation and implementation of successful transition program for freshman?

The focus group participants felt that an important component of successful transition programs was identifying teachers who made social-emotional learning a priority. None of the teachers cited subject-matter expertise as the most important element in students' transition from middle school to high school. Transition programs, by their very nature, allow students and teachers to create a sense of community and build relationships. Therefore, teachers who instinctively focus on their own social-emotional learning, as well as that of their students should be identified as transition program teachers.

The participants also believed that by focusing on their own social-emotional learning and that of their students, they were more effective teachers. The connections they create with their students motivate their students academically but also motivate the teachers themselves. As one participant stated, "They make me want to come and be a better teacher that day because they're showing up … You learn a lot more about yourself from the kids." The participants did not believe that this was something that can necessarily be taught to teachers, but rather it has to be the foundation of their teaching philosophy.

Question 4. What recommendations do teachers have to strengthen intervention and support programs for incoming freshmen?

The most significant recommendation that the focus group participants had for freshmen intervention and support programs was the need to treat the freshmen year as a truly transition year. They felt that the freshmen year should carry over many of the structures and supports from the middle school. By doing so, students would be better equipped to handle the increased demands of high school. Teachers stressed the need to teach freshmen about graduation requirements and earning credits before students fall behind academically. Because there are no clear requirements to be promoted through middle school, students often enter high school with a false sense of reality pertaining to earning high school credits.

The participants also recommended that teachers, particularly those who teach in the transition programs, have a greater understanding of the developmental needs of students at this age. They noted that freshmen behavior seems to regress somewhat, as they move from the oldest group in middle school to the youngest in high school. By structuring the freshman year as a transition year and including some of the middle school supports, articulation between the middle school and high school would increase, which participants felt was currently lacking. They believed that 8th graders should be visiting the high school campus more often to have a better understanding of the high school culture. They also believed that freshmen teachers should be visiting 8th grade classes at the middle school, allowing them to observe classes, understand the middle school expectations, and begin making connections with students.

Implications and recommendations

As discussed in chapter 4, five themes were identified from the focus groups:

1. Personal connections between students and teachers
2. Academic expectations in the transition from middle school to high school
3. Real world connections
4. Impact of teacher behavior on student success
5. Support for students' social-emotional learning

The following section discusses these themes as they relate to the literature review.

Theme 1: Personal connections between students and teachers

The first theme to emerge from the focus groups was the importance of personal connections between students and teachers. Students need adults they feel comfortable with in order to navigate the challenges as incoming freshmen. As Langenkamp (2010) states, the middle school to high school transition is often difficult because of the loss of support students experience upon entering high school. Being an effective educator is more about one's ability to build relationships and less about one's knowledge of content (Gerzon-Kessler, 2006).

The focus group participants emphasized the need to have students trust them and that teachers need to show students they care and believe in them in order for them to want to be motivated academically. This supports Hoy et al's. (2006) idea of "academic optimism"; that is, focusing on the belief that students can achieve and not just on the achievement itself. Academic performance is better when students feel personally supported by their teachers (Allensworth & Easton, 2012). As Jane pointed out during the focus group, she does not feel she can be an effective math teacher if her students do not

feel comfortable enough in her class to take risks and try. Jane understood the clear connection between her students' emotional needs and their academic motivation. Further studies (e.g., Parker et al., 2003) show the correlation between high school students' grade point average and their Emotional Quotient Inventory. The higher their grade point average, the higher their Emotional Quotient Inventory and vice versa. The teachers in the focus groups intuitively understood this correlation and used that understanding to be more effective educators. As Amber stated, "I've always believed that I care more about my students are a human being and a whole person … I care about that way more than if they failed a test."

Theme 2: Academic expectations in the transition from middle school to high school

The second theme to emerge from the study was the need to focus on the transition from middle school to high school and explain the academic expectations to students in this transition. The focus group teachers felt that by implementing some of the supports in the freshmen year that students have in middle school, students will make a smoother transition. Additionally, teaching students the expectations for high school (for example, graduation requirements) need to be an explicit part of the freshmen year. In a high school with large populations of students of color, such as this one (Appendix D), Hispanic and African-American students experience more negative transitions to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Hispanic families in particular tend to have difficulties understanding the expectations of high school (Lys, 2009).

The participants stressed the need to create better articulation between the middle school and the high school so that teachers at both levels understand the expectations for students. Several studies (Cushman, 2006; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy,

2011) agree that high school needs to be introduced to students while they are still in middle school, as well as using middle school to explicitly teach students the skills they will need in high school. As one focus group participant pointed out, her high school students seemed to lose the skills her middle school students had because the middle school structures they were familiar with were gone. This observation supports the need to implement transition programs for freshmen. Students need to have exposure to the high school campus, teachers, and expectations so they are not attempting to navigate the new emotional, social, academic, and physical demands of high school simultaneously. As McIntosh and White (2006) found, regardless of the type of transition program, if a student is successful in the freshmen year, it is likely the student will not only graduate from high school but feel successful throughout high school. This concept alone sends a clear message to all schools and districts that freshmen transition programs are imperative for their students' success, to increase graduation rates, and reduce dropout rates.

Theme 3: Making real world connections for students

The third theme to emerge from the study was the need for students to understand not only *how* to navigate high school but *why* it is important. At schools with students of low socioeconomic status, their opportunities for experiences beyond their neighborhood are often limited. The participants agreed that part of the transitional supports for students also need to include connecting high school to the real world and to opportunities beyond what they are familiar with. Griffin (2002) found that Hispanic and African-American students place less importance on academic achievement than White or Asian students, which indicates the need to show students how their academic achievement connects to life after high school.

Participants pointed out that part of supporting students in the transition to high school and making those connections to the real world is an emphasis on community. Students need to not only feel part of a community while in high school but also need to understand the importance of the community in the real world. One of the core values of a good teacher that Low and Ang (2011) identified is the ability to widen students' knowledge and open new horizons for them. The focus group participants believed it was their responsibility to help students make that connection to the high school community and beyond.

The focus group teachers also believed that transition programs helped students make those real world and community connections early. More often than not, schools do not address this until the end of high school and students have not been given the skills to succeed beyond high school. Smith (2006) noted that students who experience an achievement loss in the move from middle school to high school also have a difficult time in the transition from high school to college. As Sarah stated, "If no one says to them until they're seniors, 'What are your strengths? How will you use this beyond high school?' it's too late. Then they flounder for years." The focus group teachers understood the need to help students make those connections to the real world as they enter high school, not as they're leaving it, that it needs to be part of high school students' education regardless of the subject matter.

Theme 4: Impact of teacher behavior on student success

The fourth theme to emerge in the research was the impact that teachers' own behavior has on students and their academic success. Through the focus groups, the participants revealed that they believe that the way they treat students, as well as the way

they behave in front of them has an impact on students' behavior and academic success. Hamilton (2012) reported that teachers who report challenging behavior from students have the most difficulty connecting with students. As one participant pointed out, the desire to build positive relationships with students is not something that teachers can be taught. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) found that when teachers lack social-emotional competence, particularly in their ability to establish and maintain relationships, they are unable to handle challenges in the classroom, thereby negatively impacting their relationships with students. When teachers are focused on negative behaviors, it is often because they have not made the effort to establish relationships with their students and have little or no understanding of their students' background, family life, or personal interests. However, there is a clear connection between students' perceptions of their teachers and whether or not teachers care about them and their academic achievement and motivation (Gerzon-Kessler, 2006).

Participants believed that in order to engage students academically, teachers have to be social-emotional role models, exhibiting the behavior and expectations they desire from their students. Barile et al. (2011) found that students who are at risk for dropping out may remain in school when they have made connections with teachers who are caring and supportive, even if they are not engaged academically. Furthermore, teachers' own perception of their social-emotional learning is related to their levels of stress and job satisfaction. As one focus group participant pointed out, even when a teacher is having a bad day, you cannot take it out on the students. Hargreaves (2000) emphasized the need to focus on practices that increase emotional understanding between students and teachers as a basis for learning. As many participants pointed out, this emotional

understanding is often nothing more than a simple conversation with a student, allowing students to express how they feel, and validating those feelings.

Theme 5: Support for students' social-emotional learning

The final theme to emerge from the research was supporting students' own social-emotional learning. Participants described the ability to hold students to behavior expectations without taking a punitive approach. As Russell (2004) states, teacher behavior "whether positive and encouraging or perceived as causing pain and humiliation, is of significance to students and affects the way they feel about the classes concerned". The participants did not expect freshmen to enter high school with the social-emotional skills necessary to navigate high school successfully. They all believe that it is part of their responsibility as their teachers to support their students' social-emotional development. As Allen et al. (2013) point out, adolescents are seeking greater autonomy from their parents; therefore, having other adults who provide that emotional support is a powerful motivating factor. Sarah supported this idea during the focus group when she recognized that students at this age are trying to figure out who they are and that, as they pull away from their parents, teachers need to focus on them as individuals, not just academics.

All of the participants believed that by implementing specific programs, such as a summer bridge or freshmen orientation course, students' social-emotional learning is supported. Transition programs allow a greater focus on social-emotional competence and less focus on academic standards. Transition programs also create a sense of belonging and community among students and their teachers. By implementing transition programs, students get a more personalized introduction to high school, which positively

impacts attendance, achievement, and behavior, as well as teacher morale and parent involvement (DeWees, 1999, as cited in McIntosh & White, 2006).

Ross and Horner (2007) found that when teachers have negative relationships with their students, they tend to use punitive discipline strategies more often. A recurring concept during the focus groups was the importance of not holding a grudge when students made a mistake. By taking a less punitive and more restorative approach, by teaching students how to own up to and atone for their mistakes, the positive relationship between teacher and student can be maintained and students continue to feel safe in the classroom. A punitive approach simply makes students afraid to make mistakes but does not teach them to learn from the mistake and make amends. Courtney pointed out that many adults, particularly teachers, need to learn to not hold a grudge and let go of students' mistakes. High school should be the arena where students learn these skills so they can continue to practice them as adults.

Recommendations for action

The results of this study showed that targeted supports are not implemented to help students transition from middle school to high school. Furthermore, little attention is paid to the use of social-emotional learning in order to create a sense of belonging and community in these students as they transition, resulting in increased academic motivation. Teachers receive a great deal of training in classroom management and subject-matter competency, but very little in the developmental factors of adolescents and the unique needs of students as they transition from middle school to high school. The data revealed that the freshman year should be treated as a separate entity from the rest of high school. Participants believed that this year should be structured in a way that allows

students to become familiar with high school expectations and make connections with teachers and other adults on the high school campus. Through the implementation of transition support programs such as summer bridge program or a freshmen orientation course, teachers would have the opportunity to connect with students, introduce them to the expectations of high school, and create a sense of community. While the research indicates that implementing a freshmen transition program drastically reduces the freshman dropout rate (from an average of 24 percent to 8 percent) (Quick Fact Sheet, 2012), the data indicates that particular attention needs to be paid to teachers' social-emotional competency and their desire to create positive personal relationships with students. Schools can implement transition programs; however, if they are not staffed with teachers who make the social-emotional needs of the students a priority, the programs will not be successful.

Limitations and recommendations for further study

Research on the needs of students as they transition from middle school to high school is not as prevalent as research on the elementary to middle school or high school to college transition. However, the research on the middle to high school transition is increasing. As a result, the implications for schools and school districts are increasing as well. The results of this study show the need to pay special attention to our freshmen as they navigate their first year of high school. Furthermore, the results provide valuable insight into the skills and characteristics of the teachers who provide this support. This research has areas that would benefit from further study.

The study focused on two transition programs at a large, suburban high school with a high freshmen failure rate and a high dropout rate. The study did not attempt to

correlate academic achievement and students' feelings of connectedness and belonging. Participants were asked to identify students they felt were doing well in high school because they had participated in summer bridge or the freshmen orientation class, but "doing well" did not necessarily mean succeeding academically (i.e. earning all of their credits in the first semester). These students were identified based on their teachers' observations about their social and emotional adjustment to high school. The study is limited by teachers' personal perceptions of these students and not specific data related to grades, credits for graduation, or attendance rates. Further study into the correlation between transition programs and academic achievement would be warranted in the future.

Additionally, data collection at schools with freshmen transition programs over several years would provide information related to the long-term effectiveness of these programs. This study was limited by the fact that this was the first year of implementation for both the summer bridge program and the freshman orientation class. At this point, there is no data to suggest that these freshmen, who have now completed their first year of high school, will continue to feel connected to school, that their grades will improve, or that they will remain on track to graduate.

This study is further limited by the small size of the focus groups and their pre-identified social-emotional competency. Because we had already determined these teachers understood the emotional needs of students, they were considered viable candidates as freshmen transition teachers. They believed they were successful as freshman transition teachers because they recognized that their teaching philosophy and teaching style put students' emotional needs first. It would be interesting to continue the study to determine if teaching in freshman transition programs change the way that some

teachers approach their relationships with students or if these programs help teachers make students' social-emotional learning a priority.

Conclusion

Academic achievement, standardized test scores, and graduation rates will always be used to measure the success or failure of a high school. A great deal of time and money are spent every year to determine the best reading programs, math curriculum, and assessment strategies; however, little attention is paid toward the social and emotional needs of our students and the teachers who educate them. It is clear from this study that when time and resources are focused on the social-emotional needs of students as they transition from middle school to high school, they feel a greater connection to school and their academic achievement. More importantly, this study shows when teachers make their own social-emotional competence a priority, they are able to support their students' social-emotional development. If schools focused more attention on social-emotional learning, the type of curriculum a school or district employs will not matter. This study has extended previous research on the importance of student-teacher relationships and their impact on student engagement and motivation. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that teachers' own perception of their effectiveness improves when they are making personal connections with students. Participants did not talk about their ability to deliver content or design lesson plans; rather, they discussed their emotional satisfaction of connecting with students.

This study has highlighted the need to build in opportunities for teachers and students to create relationships. Freshman transitions programs are one such opportunity. Freshman transition programs allow teachers and students to connect authentically

through the curriculum. School policies and practices that support and strengthen student-teacher relationships must be explicit for these programs to be successful. The benefits of transition programs are twofold. First, these programs support student engagement, achievement, and their ability to navigate through high school and beyond, which is the academic goal of every high school. Secondly, as the research shows, teachers who have the opportunity to build positive relationships with their students and have an emotional connection to their students are more effective teachers. If we want students with the social-emotional skills to successfully transition into adulthood, then we must provide experiences and opportunities to practice those skills and we need teachers with the high self-efficacy that allows them to be effective educators through their social-emotional connections with our students.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHER FOCUS-GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What specific supports do you think freshmen need in order to make a successful transition to high school?

    1a. What supports do you believe are the most important and why? Can you give examples?

2. Why do you think freshmen have such a difficult time making the transition to high school?

    a. (if necessary) The following are common reasons that freshmen have a difficult time transitioning to high school:

    - There isn't enough articulation between 8th and 9th grade teachers.
    - 9th graders don't understand the expectations of high school (i.e. graduation credits)
    - 9th graders aren't socially/emotionally ready for high school
    - High schools are often too large and overwhelming for 9th graders
    - Mixed grade classes that include 9th graders make it difficult to meet students' needs
    - Most teachers don't understand how to meet the development needs of 9th graders

    Of those, which do you feel might be most important to address in supporting the freshman transition? Why?

3. Do you feel that Summer Bridge and/or freshman orientation classes address these reasons? Why or why not?

3a. Are there any specific components of Summer Bridge and/or freshman orientation that you feel were particularly effective?

3b. Are there specific components that you feel were not fully utilized or could be improved to be more effective?

4. Why did you decide to teach in Summer Bridge and/or teach the freshman orientation class?
5. How do you engage students' social-emotional learning, particularly when you work with freshmen?
6. What consideration do you give to a student's social-emotional development with regard to classroom management, discipline, rules and expectations, feedback?
7. Please give me your thoughts on this statement: "Being an effective educator is more about one's ability to build relationships and less on one's knowledge of content. Teacher behavior has a clear impact on student behavior."
8. Do you believe that a positive classroom/school environment happens when students are well-behaved, engaged, and motivated students or do you believe that students are well-behaved, engaged, and motivated when they are part of a positive classroom/school environment? Can you provide some examples that lead you to believe that?
9. Can you provide some specific examples of a few students (one or two who participated in Summer Bridge and one or two who did not, but are in the freshman orientation class) who you feel might have had a difficult time transitioning to high school but seems to be benefiting from these programs?

8a. What are your thoughts regarding the “how” and “why” these students are succeeding?

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FOR PARTCIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Teachers' perceptions of student achievement and engagement in the transition to high school

Principal Investigator(s):
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University of New England
Doctoral Candidate

Advisor(s):
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You are being asked to participate in a focus group related to your involvement with Wildcat to Warrior and/or the Career Choices freshmen orientation class. The focus groups are intended to provide information related to the effectiveness of freshmen transition programs, the effectiveness of Wildcat to Warrior and Career Choices, in particular, as well as examine students you've identified as benefiting from these transition programs.

Please read this form. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine teachers' perceptions of freshmen interventions and supports, examine their insights into the way these programs support student success and the gaps in the programs or challenges for students that require further action. The information provided could highlight the need for similar programs at high schools throughout the school district, as well as encourage professional development and training in supporting students transitioning to high school.

Who will be in this study?

Teachers of the Career Choices, freshmen orientation course, and the teachers who worked in Wildcat to Warrior, the summer bridge program will be included in this study.

What will I be asked to do?

In early February, you will be asked to attend a focus group for either teachers who worked in Wildcat to Warrior and/or for teachers who currently teach the Career Choices

class. There are approximately 8 questions (some with multiple parts) that you will be asked to respond to.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

There are no risks in participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

The possible benefits of taking part in this study are providing qualitative support for specific interventions for freshmen. Your feedback might support the recommendation to continue programs such as the Wildcat to Warrior Summer Bridge and the freshmen orientation course, in addition to recommending their implementation at other district high schools. Your participation might also highlight the need for professional development related to the freshman transition.

What will it cost me?

There are no costs to you to participate in this study.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your name, your institution's name and all identifying information will be removed. If necessary, a pseudonym will be used if specific, individual information needs to be reported. All notes and files will be password protected and/or securely locked and only accessible to the researcher. The location of the focus group will be in an on-site location that assures a level of privacy.

Please note that the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

The results of this project will be used for a doctoral dissertation through the University of New England. It will be shared with members of the dissertation committee and may, at their request, be shared with district administrators and/or staff members (including the staff of Ygnacio Valley High). It may also be submitted for publication.

What are my rights as a research participant?

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University or Ygnacio Valley High/Mt. Diablo Unified School District. You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason and you may withdraw your participation in the focus group or the study at any time.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of New England has reviewed the use of human subjects in this research. The IRB is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of people involved in research.

What other options do I have?

You may choose not to participate in this study.

Whom may I contact with questions?

The researcher conducting this study is Laura Aguada-Hallberg. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at 925-360-1489 or via email at ldegladillo@une.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call the UNE Human Protections Administrator at (207) 221-4171 and/or email irb@une.edu

You may print/keep a copy of this consent form. A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal researcher for at least 3 years before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be securely stored in a location accessible only to the researcher and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

If you would like a copy of the completed research project, you may contact the principal researcher directly.

I understand the above description of the research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I understand that by proceeding with this survey I agree to take part in this research and do so voluntarily.

_____

Participant's signature/Legally authorized representative Date

_____

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_____

Researcher's signature Laura Aguada-Hallberg Date

APPENDIX C: STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group as part of my research study. My project, titled "Teachers' perceptions of student achievement and engagement in the transition to high school", is intended to identify what components of freshmen transition programs are most effective at supporting students as they enter high school.

Additionally, the study aims to look at how teachers use social-emotional learning/competence in order to engage and support freshmen. By doing so, recommendations could be made to expand such programs in the district, as well as understand how to implement them successfully.

Participation in the focus group is to be kept strictly confidential. The names of the other participants and the contents of the discussion, as well as students' names are not to be shared outside of the focus group. By signing this agreement and participating in the focus group, you acknowledge your understanding of the requirement for confidentiality and accept the responsibility for doing so.

I ensure you that I will take every precaution to ensure confidentiality in this study. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at HallbergL@mdusd.org. My advisor, Dr. Michelle Collay, can be reached at mcollay@une.edu.

Thank you for your assistance in this study.

I, _____, understand and agree to maintain strict confidentiality regarding the contents of the focus group sessions. I will not disclose names of participants, students, or any other information discussed in the focus group.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Statement

The named-above participant has been given sufficient time to ask questions, consider the information, and has voluntarily agreed to participate in the focus group.

Signature: _____ Date:

Laura Aguada-Hallberg

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHICS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION/DATA

During the 2013-2014 school year, the Office of Equity team looked at ninth graders' academic, attendance, and behavior data. Grades from the first semester were been gathered, as well as attendance data, and discipline data. Data was disaggregated by two subject areas, English I and Algebra I, since these classes have the highest freshmen enrollment and passing both are required for high school graduation. Data was also been disaggregated by ethnicity. These lists were then compared to similar data of ninth grade students who were enrolled in the Puente program. The Puente program is a program to help academically disadvantaged students of all ethnic backgrounds graduate from high school, become college eligible, and enroll in four-year universities. Students begin the program in the ninth grade and are enrolled in a college preparatory English class made up of only Puente students.

The school's population of 1, 126 was fairly evenly distributed across four grade levels, 9^{th}-12^{th}. The freshman class totaled 295 students, with 74 percent of those students classified as Hispanic, 13 percent classified as White, 5 percent classified as African-American, and the remaining 8 percent are other, including Asian, Pacific Islander, etc. There were also 274 sophomores, 288 juniors, and 269 seniors.

In this large, comprehensive high school, freshmen have had a difficult time transitioning from middle school to high school. They have a high failure rate, high suspension rate and high rates of being sent to the district's School Attendance Review Board (SARB) for attendance issues. In the first semester of the 2013-2014 school year, 152 ninth grade students received a semester F grade, with a total of 395 total F's issued

to those 152 students. By comparison, 348 F's were issued to sophomores, 211 were issued to juniors, and 115 were issued to seniors. Clearly, freshmen earned F's at a greater rate than the other three classes. Also disturbing was the rate at which Hispanic and African-American students earned F's. As seen in Table 1, Hispanic students made up almost 75 percent of the freshman class and earned almost 60 percent of all the F's earned. Even more disheartening is the fact that African-American students made up only 5 percent of the freshman class, but 80 percent of those students earned at least one semester F.

Table 3

F Grades by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	**Total**	**Percentage of Freshman Class**	**# With a Semester F**	**Percentage of Group**
Hispanic	218	74%	125	57%
White	38	13%	11	29%
African-American	15	5%	12	80%
Other	24	8%	4	16%
Total	295	100%	152	52%

The results were equally as dismal in two core academic classes that all high school students must pass to earn a high school diploma. Table 2 shows that of the 48 F's issued for English I, Hispanic students earned 36 of them, compared to only 4 F's given to White or African-American students, as well as 4 students in the "Other" category. Students in Algebra I fared much worse. Eighty-nine freshmen failed the first semester of Algebra I with 73 Hispanic students earning those F's, compared to 8 F's by White students, 3 F's by African-American, and 5 by Other.

Table 4

F Grades in English and Algebra I by Ethnicity

	# of F's in English I	**Percentage of F's in English I**	**# of F's in Algebra I**	**Percentage of F's in Algebra I**
Hispanic	36	75%	73	82%
White	4	8.30%	8	9%
African-American	4	8.30%	3	3%
Other	4	8.30%	5	6%
Total	48	100%	89	100%

In looking at data for attendance and suspensions, rates for freshmen were still quite high. Table 3 shows 156 freshman were referred to the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB), which is a district panel to address issues of chronic absenteeism or tardies. These 156 SARB students accounts for 53 percent of the freshman class. Of these 156 students, 115 of them were Hispanic, accounting for 74 percent of all SARB referrals. By comparison, 17 White students were referred to SARB, accounting for 11 percent of all students referred to SARB and 14 African-American students referred to SARB, accounting for only 9 percent of all students sent to SARB. For suspensions, the figures are quite disproportionate. There were 120 ninth graders suspended in the first semester, with 91 of those students being Hispanic. This accounts for 76 percent of all suspensions going to Hispanic students, when they account for 74 percent of the freshman class. The figures for African-American freshmen are even more disproportionate. Sixteen African-American students were suspended in the first semester, accounting for 13 percent of all suspensions when they make up only 5 percent

of the entire freshmen class. This means that African-American freshmen have more than twice as many suspensions.

Table 5

Referral to Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) by Ethnicity

	SARB	**Percentage Referred to SARB**	**Suspensions**	**Percentage Suspended**
Hispanic	115	74%	91	76%
White	17	11%	9	8%
African-American	14	9%	16	13%
Other	10	6%	4	3%
Total	156	100%	120	100%

Similar data was compiled for those freshmen who were enrolled in the Puente program as freshmen. Students are recruited in the eighth grade and must commit to remaining in the program throughout all four years of high school. Puente students take an English class together, with a teacher who is committed to building a community, support service learning, and building rigorous reading and writing skills to prepare for college-level work. Puente students also have a counselor who provides academic counseling and motivates students to attend college by organizing college visits.

In the 2013-2014 school year, the Puente program was the only specialized program available to freshmen and while Puente is open to students of any ethnic

background, all of the freshmen enrolled in Puente were Hispanic. Thirty ninth graders were enrolled in the Puente program for the 2013-2014 school year, creating one class section of Puente students. Freshmen Puente students make up just fewer than 10 percent of the entire freshman class and approximately 14 percent of the Hispanic freshmen. For the first semester, 15 Puente students, or 50 percent, earned a semester F. However, these F's only make up 9 percent of all F's issued to freshmen and only 7 percent of all Hispanic freshmen who earned an F.

By comparing Puente students' performance in the two core courses, English I and Algebra I, one can see that Puente students have much lower rates of failure overall. As Table 4 shows, only 4 Puente students failed English I. This represents only 8 percent of all freshmen who earned an F and 11 percent of Hispanic freshmen who earned an F. The rates of failure are even lower in Algebra I with only 3 Puente students earning an F, which is 3 percent of all freshmen who failed Algebra I and 4 percent of all Hispanic freshmen who failed Algebra I.

Table 6

F Grades in English and Algebra I by Puente Student

	English I	**Percentage of All English I F's**	**Algebra I**	**Percentage of all Alg. I F's**
Puente Student (% of All Freshmen who earned an F)	4	8%	3	4%
Puente Students (% of All Hisp. Freshmen who earned an F)	4	11%	3	4%

Attendance and discipline rates are also quite low. As Table 5 shows, of the 156 freshmen who were referred to SARB in the first semester, only 13 of those students were Puente students. This means that 8 percent of all students referred to SARB were Puente students and 11 percent of all Hispanic freshmen referred to SARB were Puente students. In looking at suspensions, no Puente freshmen were suspended in the first semester, compared to 120 freshmen suspensions and 91 Hispanic freshmen suspensions. It appears that the data supports the research that says students have less attendance and behavior issues when they feel connected to their teachers and feel their schoolwork has relevance.

Table 7

Referrals of Puente Students to SARB

	# of SARB Freshmen	**Percentage of all SARB Freshmen**	**Percentage of Hispanic SARB Freshmen**	**# of Suspended Students**	**Percentage of all freshmen suspended**
Puente Students	13	8%	11%	0	0%
All Hispanic Freshmen	115	74%	X	91	76%

Initial data from the first semester of the 2013-2014 school illustrates the need for a transition program or class for the freshmen. The failure, attendance, and suspension rates area alarmingly high and it is clear that current school-wide or classroom practices are not providing the support necessary for the freshmen to succeed. It is discouraging for more than half of the freshmen class to be off-track for graduation after only their first semester of high school.

On the other hand, the Puente program seems to be experiencing success with the freshmen. Although they only take one academic class together, this class, along with their teacher and counselor, appears to provide the sense of belonging and community that is necessary for freshmen to make a successful transition to high school. Although this Puente class had a high number of semester F's, when compared to the overall academic performance of all freshmen or all Hispanic freshmen, the rates are still lower than their overall representation in the freshmen population.