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PATTERNS OF SCHOOL IDENTIFICATION IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT: A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
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BY

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Dedication

"When you believe in yourself and those around you, anything is possible."

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother,
Mrs. Catherine A. Goodrich and my late father,
Major General David M. Goodrich, USAF.
You taught me to never be afraid to ask "Why?",
and more importantly to ask "Why Not?".
I will always be grateful for your insight into
thinking outside of the box.

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All 5600 of my students. I have spent 16 years of my life working as a teacher and administrator with high school students in Tulsa, OK. One day, I sat down to figure out how many students I had come in contact with as an urban educator. I roughly estimated 5600 students. That is a lot of students whose lives I somehow played a part in. I want to thank each one of them. The privilege of being able to work with them, learn with them, establish relationships with them, and teach them the value of education laid the ground work for this study. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

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Abstract

PATTERNS OF SCHOOL IDENTIFICATION IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT: A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify patterns of school identification across grade levels, and whether certain factors contributed to students' feelings of identification with school in an urban district in the mid-western United States. School identification is examined through the lens of self-determination theory and its sub-theories of cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, and psychological needs theory. The basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness established the framework for a closer examination of school identification.

The study focused on the school identification levels of fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grade student in Saxon Public Schools, with a particular emphasis on the freshmen year. The research on school identification in this district centered on improving student success in school by examining the school and individual factors which might have an effect on their levels of school identification. The study provides policy suggestions the district might use for improving the educational experiences of its students, especially students in the freshmen year of high school. By increasing students' levels of school identification, the district can increase student engagement, support academic success, and decrease the percentage of students dropping out.

Chapter I

Introduction

According to a national report from *Education Week* and the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center (2011), 1.2 million students fail to earn their high school diplomas each year. That is nearly 3 out of every 10 students in America's public schools who walk away from high school without a diploma (Rumberger, 2011). Most of these students will come from urban districts, and/or have faced economic hardship during their school years. Regardless of the reason, far too many American students are not experiencing school success. It is incumbent on educators to understand how the school environment contributes to or lessens students' identification with school.

As an urban educator with sixteen years experience in secondary schools, I have watched hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students disappear between their freshmen and sophomore years of high school. Freshmen classes of 350 plus inexplicably turn into sophomore classes of 250 or so. Freshmen classes that could fill an entire auditorium for an assembly would become sophomore classes that only needed the center sections of seats the next year. Where did these students go? They did not transfer to one of the other nine high schools in my district, because as district enrollment data suggest those schools experienced the same population decline. As in many urban school districts, a high percentage of students who dropout around their ninth and tenth grade years are disinterest in school, lack motivation, and are disengaged.

In pursuit of my doctorate degree I have focused on increasing school success for students by finding a way to reduce the number of freshmen students who are not successful in school. In addition to my academic work, my professional experience has led me to believe that the answer lied in connecting students to school. I have observed that those students in my classes who were an active part of a team or club, or had found an adult in the building, who related to them in some way, always seemed connected and well-adjusted in school. Other students who did not connect struggled academically and socially. These are the students who often do not return when school starts in the fall of their sophomore year. As I continued to research this phenomenon I learned about school identification and began to explore its relationship to students' experiences in school.

In her research, Voelkl (1997) defined school identification as a time when students experience a sense of belonging in school, and a valuing of school and school related outcomes. Investigations into school identification have shown the importance of school identification to student success (Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993 Voelkl, 1997). Feelings of belonging are crucial in all stages of life (Maslow, 1968) but have particular importance when applied to academic success. Students who identify with school are often described in terms of affiliation, involvement or commitment to school (Finn, 1989). When students identify with school they form attachments with caring adults, adopt the rules of the school, and engage in their academics (Goodenow, 1993). All of the above behaviors have positive consequences for student learning and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Steele (1997) maintains that all students begin their educational years by identifying with school. However, as some students grow older, they begin to disidentify with school. In their research, Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) found that students who dropped out began disidentifying and disengaging with school long before they actually became a drop out. Their educational experiences caused them to devalue school and its benefits for them (Steele, 1997).

The final decision to drop out all too often occurs in the freshmen year with over one third of all dropouts happening in ninth grade (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007). The freshmen year in high school can pose challenges for some students as they seek more independence but lack a sense of security in their academic skills. It is during this time in their lives when students are considering who they are, who their peer group is, and envisioning their future. At this age, students have a more prominent need to belong to a peer group and feel accepted by their peers and teachers (Goodenow, 1993; Littky, 2004). If their academic skills are insufficient for high school work, they will struggle to fit in and gain the approval they seek from their teachers. Students have a very prominent need to define who they are and where they fit in (Milyavskaya, Gingras, Mageau, Koestner, Gagnon, Fang & Boiche, 2009). The tendency to disassociate with school is more common when academic and social skills are underdeveloped.

High schools that are responsive to students needs for belonging develop procedures and environments where students can fit in and find value in education. School structures that are mindful to the physical, emotional, and intellectual disruption brought on by adolescence create enabling environments that help students

believe in themselves, and support their learning (Littky, 2004). Such environments can lead to high levels of student identification with school, and students who identify with school are more likely to experience greater educational gains (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1995; 2006) than those who have disidentified with school. Further, students' positive experiences in high school because of an enabling environment can help them have a better future, learn skills that will make them career-ready, and gain confidence in themselves (Littky, 2004). For the student who positively identifies with school, there is a long list of rewards and potential successes, not the least of which is graduation.

In order to shed some new light on school identification, this statistical descriptive case study will explore patterns in school identification across different school conditions and individual factors within an urban district. Furthermore, because the freshmen year is such a pivotal year to high school success (Wheelock, 1993), the patterns of school identification at this level will be examined across race, socioeconomic status (SES) level, prior achievement, attendance rates and school characteristics. The study seeks to explore variations in school identification for the purpose of designing structures that can respond to student needs. The results of this study will have practical benefits for school leaders in urban school districts wanting to gain an understanding of factors that influence school identification.

Significance of the Study

This study investigates school identification patterns of students at different levels in one urban school district in a mid-western state. Through comparisons of school identification values at different grade levels and an in-depth examination of

the freshmen data, the study focuses on how school identification changes over time and manifests itself in the freshmen year. Gaining a fuller understanding of school identification within an urban district has implications for policy that may lead to a decrease in high school drop outs.

Research Questions

1. What is the general pattern of school identification across an urban school district?
    a. Are there differences in school identification between fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grade students?
    b. What happens to students' identification with school as they matriculate from elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school?
2. Are there differences in school identification levels of freshmen students across high schools in an urban school district?
3. What school factors are related to school identification of freshmen students?
4. a. What student factors are related to school identification of freshmen students?

    b. How is school identification of freshmen students different from fifth grade students?

Overview of Methodology

This study is a statistical descriptive case study examining the current levels of school identification in fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grades within an urban mid-western school district. A descriptive case study is one that presents a detailed

account of the issue under study (Yin, 2009). Existing research on school identification may generalize to the typical urban district, but the absence of data specifically generated within this district signals a need for the study. The purpose of the research is to foster long-term school improvement through the use of scientifically designed and reliable data collection. The data for this study is part of a larger research project conducted by the school district and a team of researchers from Estara University. By examining data collected from schools within their district, this study aims to provide teachers and administrators recommendations of specific strategies addressing school identification which focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the schools where they work.

Participants and procedures. Data were collected from students at 83 schools in an urban district in the mid-western United States. Twenty-six students were randomly sampled from the fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grades. Administrators from the school district (some of who were also graduate students at Estara University) administered and collected student surveys during the school day in spring, 2011. The survey instrument was based on Voelkl's (1996) *Identification with School Questionnaire*. This survey is composed of 10 questions: 5 of which rate belongingness and 5 of which reflect feelings of valuing school and school-related outcomes. Responses to these questions are gathered using a Likert-scale.

Limitations.

- The data used for this study was pre-existing administrative data that limited the depth and direction of the study.

- The study will describe school identification not predict or explain determinants of school identification.
- The data collected provide an overall perception of school identification thus masking a variation or individual experience within the school context.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in five chapters with this chapter being the first (the introduction). In the next chapter, a review of the existing literature on school identification is presented. Within this chapter, school identification is defined. By drawing on research studies, the formation of identification in school and effects on students' experience in school are examined. Particular attention will be paid to the importance of school identification during the freshmen year. Further, school identification is examined through the lens of self-determination theory and its sub-elements of cognitive evaluation theory (CET), organismic integration theory (OIT), and psychological needs theory (PNT). The basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (the three psychological needs of PNT) establish the conceptual framework for the importance of school identification.

Chapter three contains details of the research methods including the instruments used, procedures, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four reports the study's findings and presents the relevant quantitative data. The final chapter includes interpretations and discussions of the results of the research questions and literature previously presented. It concludes with recommendations for policies aimed

at improving schools for urban high school students and possible directions for future research.

Definition of Key Terms

School Identification – when students experience a sense of belonging and a valuing of school and school related outcomes (Voelkl, 1997).

Belonging – the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported in the school social environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993)

Valuing – an assessment of the importance of school and the function of schooling as a necessity for future success (Newmann, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990).

Disidentification – the process that occurs when people stop caring about their performance in an area or domain that formerly mattered (Steele, 1992, 1997).

Autonomy – (in an educational setting) the degree that students have choices in the classroom (Ryan & Grolick, 1986).

Competence - a student's mastery over their environment and their ability to achieve desired outcomes (Milyavskaya et al., 2009).

Relatedness – the extent to which students feel like they are a part of the school or their perception of how the educational system supports their academic pursuits (Waters, Cross & Runions, 2009)

Freshmen student - is a first-year student in a secondary school

Chapter II

Literature Review

The emotional and physical withdrawal of students from school is one of the most prevalent problems facing American urban schools (Voelkl, 1996). Research has consistently determined that students who feel they do not belong in school tend to do poorly academically (Steele, 1992, 1994; Voelkl, 1996, 1997). When students withdraw from school, they are likely to underperform academically, have low motivation, and little social success (Goodenow, 1993; McCay, 2007), which can lead some students to drop out. Students' lack of motivation and confidence to pursue their interests, feelings of distrust and suspicions of school, and increasing numbers of high school dropouts are of great concerns to educators and researchers (Black, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Littky, 2004; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Voelkl, 1996).

Educators and researchers are looking for solutions to quell the alarming number of high school students who drop out. One avenue being pursued is that of seeking to understand school identification, and to what extent is it a factor in the educational success or failure of today's students. The literature on school identification provides a basis for understanding and explaining why some students are unmotivated or develop a dislike for school, while other students seem to thrive and grow in the same environment.

This review of literature on school identification begins with a definition of school identification. The definition is unpacked to examine its properties, its formation, and its effects on students. The literature review also addresses evidence on the experiences freshmen students and factors contributing to their tendency to

drop out (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007). This is a pivotal year when school identification can be instrumental in assisting students with connecting to school and placing a greater value on education.

Finally, the review of literature concludes by describing how self-determination theory can be used to explain how social factors shape school identification. Self-determination theory (SDT) is composed of three theories: cognitive evaluation theory (CNT), organismic integration theory (OIT), and psychological need theory (PNT). Through the lens of CNT, student motivation and how the school environment affects student motivation are discussed. OIT will be used to examine the value of education and how students integrate and internalize this value. PNT proposes that the fulfillment of three psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), is essential for human growth and development. This fulfillment can be transferred into the school setting as a necessary part of school success. SDT, especially the elements of PNT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), will lay the groundwork for my study on school identification in urban settings.

Definition of School Identification

A two-part definition of school identification was proposed by Finn (1989): (1) students feel they belong in a school community; and (2) students value school and have school-related goals. Similarly, Voelkl (1997) defined school identification as "having a sense of belonging in school and valuing school and school-related outcomes" (p. 295) (see Figure 1). The first part of Voelkl's definition, "belonging", was defined by Goodenow and Grady (1993) as the extent to which students feel

personally accepted, respected, included and supported in the school social environment. Students who have a sense of belonging see school as part of who they are, and feel they are a member of the school community (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). For example, students are engaged in the learning process, feel a sense of responsibility for their learning, and have positive relationships with adults in the school. Students who have a sense of belonging in school feel more connected in and have a positive view about school. They also value their education and consider it a necessity for achieving long-term goals (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). This sense of identification with their school and their peers might lead them to seek membership in a club or organization.

Valuing school, the second part of the definition, is defined as an assessment of the importance of school and the function of schooling as a necessity for future success (Newmann, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Students who value school see their education as important, and a necessity for achieving long-term goals. They view school as the first step in securing a better future and fulfilling their dreams. They persist in their academic studies, work hard to maintain good grades and actively participate in school functions to deepen their learning experiences. While Finn (1989) and Voelkl (1997) were among the first to develop the school identification construct (Figure 1), others have also contributed further understanding of its elements: sense of belonging and valuing which merit closer examination.

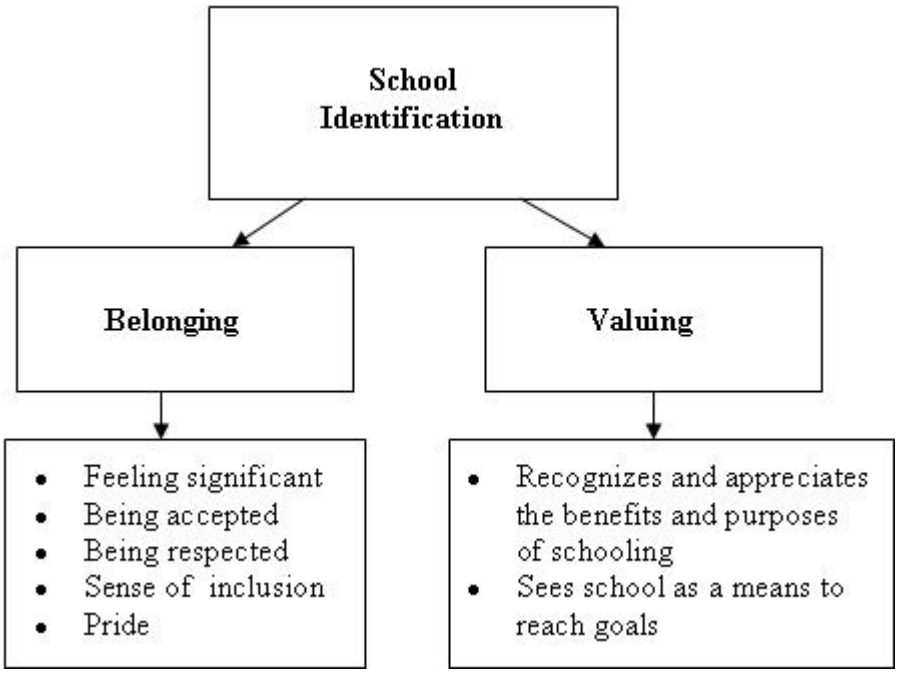

Figure 1: School Identification Diagram (Finn, 1992; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Newmann et al., 1992; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Voelkl, 1997)

A Closer Examination of Belonging and Valuing

In recent years, a body of literature (Connell, 1990; Deci, Vallerland, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Finn, 1989; Wehlage, 1989; Weiner, 1990) on student belonging has emerged linking positive academic achievement to a student's sense of belonging in school. A variety of terms have been used interchangeably to describe the sense of belonging. These terms include belongingness (Finn, 1989), relatedness (Connell, 1990: Deci, Vallerland, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991), connectedness (Weiner, 1990), or school membership (Wehlage, 1989). Some of these terms describe a reciprocal relationship between belonging and academic success: feeling like you belong in school leads to academic success which then leads to increased feelings of belonging.

Despite different conceptualizations and measures, belonging plays a significant role in school performance (Johnson, 2009).

The need for belonging is not a new concept in education. In fact, Dewey (1938) argued that learning and personal experiences are interconnected. Dewey viewed education as a social experience where students are members of a community working together to facilitate learning. Belonging, according to Dewey, drives engagement in academic tasks and student learning. Through interactions in school and the classroom, students gain life knowledge and skills by sharing common experiences. Dewey argued that the quality of education improved when students were permitted to work as a group, and promoted social interaction as an important basis for learning.

Vygotsky (1978) built on Dewey's belief in the importance of social interactions on learning. He proposed that the development of human mental functioning is social in nature and causes children to grow into an intellectual life similar to those around them. For example, as students learn how to relate and work with one another in a positive fashion, they learn appropriate behaviors for successful learning in a classroom. Once they acquire these skills, they make a commitment to this common value system (Resnick & Nelson-Le Gall, 1997), which leads to success in their academics and eventually the workplace. Students who fail to make the connection between positive behavior and flourishing in the classroom would then also fail to develop an understanding of this accepted value system. They do not have the tools necessary to build successful academic achievement. Because school culture particularly rewards certain patterns of learning and behavior (i.e. those connected

with success in school) (Resnick et al, 1997), those who do not engage in these acceptable behaviors of learning find themselves frequently in trouble, both from academically and behaviorally.

Indeed, research (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2003; Mitra, 2004) shows that dialogue and engagement between students not only facilitates the development of ideas but also helps students to appreciate others and experience a supportive community in which to work. Students value having relationships that make them feel part of the school community (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007). Members of a community, be it a school or a classroom, have the potential to develop and share a common belief or value about education and its importance. In this kind of environment, teachers help students believe in themselves and others, and love learning (Littky, 2004). It is in this environment where the value of school and taking ownership for ones' education is reinforced. Schools and classrooms who create this kind of environment help students maintain their love of learning beyond school. In contrast, alienation from the school or classroom community tends to result in disengagement from the educational process entirely. Studies show that support from fellow students and teachers not only helps a student feel connected to school but also has a positive effect on students' academic achievement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Johnson, 2009; Osterman 2000).

Further, a sense of belonging was established long ago by Maslow (1943), as a basic human need (see Figure 2). A sense of belonging is necessary for constructive self-esteem and self-actualized behavior. People naturally have a need to be accepted and cared for which help them thrive as individuals.

Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow (1970), it is only when individuals are anchored in community do they develop a positive self-esteem. Students who find a sense of belonging in the school and classroom community are likely to engage and interact with others, while those who do not are more inclined to exhibit maladaptive behaviors. Students who are alienated from school may feel a lack of self-esteem and experience a sense of devaluation. When the social conditions of the school or classroom are not inviting, students may become withdrawn, isolated, and eventually less motivated to persist in school. According to Kunch (1992), students who remove themselves emotionally from the school environment are more likely to drop out of school.

Like Maslow, Glasser (1986) argued that the need for belonging is one of the five basic needs of human beings. Meeting this need is essential for human growth and learning. Throughout adolescence, relationships with peers are instrumental to meeting this need for children. They provide emotional support, assistance with

identity development, and personal validation (Parker & Asher, 1993). Children who have positive relationships with peers have a high sense of belonging within a social structure. When children feel they relate to their peer group within the context of a school setting, they are likely to excel academically (Wentzel, 2005) and feel competent in the classroom setting. The social or cultural norms communicated by these peers help the student to define the acceptable level of academic achievement and appropriate behavior necessary to be accepted. Because students need this sense of belonging, they are motivated to act accordingly to these communicated levels, both academically and socially, in order to achieve social acceptance.

Valuing education is the second property of Voelkl's school identification definition. The value for education is embodied in the beliefs and actions of educational systems where students feel competent, engaged, and find enjoyment in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In classrooms where these feelings are fostered, students also find caring and supportive environments where they want to succeed.

Students who identify with school feel a part of the school environment and the school constitutes an important part of their lives (Finn, 1989). They value success in school and the achievement of their school-relevant goals. When their interests are nurtured, students identify with school as a safe place, one they want to be in, and are less likely to consider dropping out (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). For them, school is viewed as a means to an end; they understand its' worth. They have internalized the value of education because they feel supported and find their psychological needs are being met at school (Milyavskaya et al, 2009). Students, seeing themselves as competent and self-motivated, believe they belong in school.

They have a wealth of inner resources like self-confidence, reasoning skills and determination (Osterman, 2000). These students relate to the individuals at school and understand the behaviors expected of them.

Students who do not value school experience conflict between school expectations and their willingness to conform to those expectations. This internal conflict can be associated with behavioral problems in the classroom (Finn, 1989). These students, who may be considered "trouble makers" in school, are those who are often not achieving academically because they do not find value in what is expected of them by schools. In a sense they are unmotivated; unwilling to try challenging activities. Their psychological needs are not being met at school. They do not identify with school and reports show increased drop-outs amongst these students (Milyavskaya et al, 2009).

During adolescence, students begin to realize their physical and mental capabilities, aspirations, and the value of engaging in academic pursuits (Goodenow, 1993). If during this period they experience multiple academic failures, as well as failure in school activities, a diminished self-perception can emerge causing students to feel ineffective and powerless at school (Finn, 1989). Consequently, students may begin to disassociate themselves with school.

As a student experiences academic failure, their self-esteem tends to drop and their locus of control becomes external (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). They question their own abilities in an academic world in which they feel they have no control. The amount of effort they are putting into school does not appear to be achieving an acceptable result. They believe they are losing control of their academic success. In

their mind, it is the teacher's grade book that determines their success rather than their efforts. This mentality leads students to begin to question the value of education and to move away from the school community where failure has become the norm for them (Finn, 1989). This alienation from the school community is manifested in students' negative perceptions of the need for education (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). When students begin to see school as uninviting or non-supportive, they are more likely to distance themselves from it (Walker & Greene, 2009).

Students, who positively identify with school and realize value in their education, experience a long list of rewards and potential successes. Not only do they experience increased self-esteem, but they are more actively involved in school, which creates further opportunities for achievement. Students who feel competent achieve goals that are personally valuable to them, their parents, and their teachers (Wentzel & Looney, 2006). Further achievement contributes to an increasing sense of value for students as they begin to see what education can do for them as they get older. In contrast, failure to positively identify with school can lead to academic and personal challenges.

Effects of School Identification

As stated previously, the two key aspects of school identification are a sense of belonging in school and valuing education. As researchers have looked at school identification, they have found a correlation between the levels of these two aspects in the elementary and middle school grades and the possibility of becoming a high school dropout (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Studies (Finn, 1989; Finn & Cox, 1992) predicted potential dropouts by examining students' levels of identification with

school while in the early grades. If a student in the primary years has low levels of identification, then the potential for them to drop out of high school tends to be more likely.

For example, in 1989, Finn related classroom participation in the early grades to continued participation in school when combined with academic success. In other words, as students experienced educational success in the early grades, they internalized a sense of identification with school, which would keep them in school as they grew older. In a different study of fourth graders by Finn and Cox (1992), it was found that higher levels of achievement were experienced by students who actively participated in school. Those who felt left out or like they did not belong in school lacked the confidence to achieve academically. Over time this lack of confidence increased causing further classroom failure. There is a common theme in these studies; having a sense of belonging (through high levels of class participation) and finding value in education (through consistent academic achievement) discouraged students from disengaging in school and potentially dropping out.

Another example of early academic struggles signaling the potential for dropping out occurred at the middle school level. In a study by Kamer (1990), research showed seventh grade students in an inner-city high school who were at-risk had become more alienated from school and had more negative relationships with teachers than their more successful peers. The study found that their feelings of alienation and lack of positive relationships were major contributors to their at-risk status. As students began to feel more like they did not belong in school, they demonstrated lower levels of engagement in class.

Schooling is a central structure in the lives of children and adolescents in our society (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). If their psychological needs are not being met in school, students become disengaged and manifest this disaffection in their behavior and academic studies. Children who experience themselves as successful in school (or children who experience success in school) are more engaged and develop a positive pattern of academic accomplishment (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Those who do not experience such success develop a pattern of academic struggles or failure. Students disengage in school as a defense mechanism when they experience academic failure (Steele, 1997) to protect themselves from their feelings of being out of place or not quite good enough. They begin to feel that maybe they do not belong in school.

The Freshmen Year and School Identification

As students transition from middle school to high school, they have to adapt to a new school building, environment, set of friends, group of teachers, and comfort zone. They have passed from the three-year phase as a middle school student to a new four-year phase as a high school student. For many students, high school is a whole new world. After having experienced a full academic year as the oldest and physically largest student in the building, they become the low man on the totem pole. Senior students, many of whom will be four or five years older than them, will now fulfill the role of “big man on campus”. The freshmen year can be an overwhelming or an exhilarating experience for students.

The first year of high school is pivotal to academic and future success. According to Herlihy (2007), more students fail the ninth grade year than any other grade in high school and a disproportionate number of these students eventually

become drop outs. Neild, Stoner and Furstenberd (2002) conclude in their work that it is "easy for a ninth grader to get lost in the shuffle, skip school without consequence, or quietly fail without any concerted intervention by the school" (p. 9).

For incoming freshmen, becoming a part of the high school community includes adjusting to new classroom procedures, higher academic expectations, and a more mature peer group with new social rules for making friends. Behaviors which were appropriate in social settings in middle school might be seen as immature in high school. Ninth-grade students need assistance from caring adults to help find their way. Yet, Lounsbury and Johnston (1985) found that most high schools offered little or no guidance to help ninth-graders adjust academically and socially, leading to increased feelings of alienation.

Research on the freshmen year stresses the importance of this transitional year for predicting student success. Some researchers call it the "make or break" year (Heppen & Therriault, 2008) or a "critical juncture" for students (Herlihy, 2007). When examined in the context of the research on school identification, the importance of the freshmen year becomes more apparent. Current research (Haney, 2003; Patterson et al, 2007) provides evidence that in the freshmen year many urban high school students do not identify with school. Walt Haney of Boston College's Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy (2003) notes it is the ninth grade year when students give up on school and on themselves. Students may flunk classes and break school rules, but they do not make it to the 10^{th} grade. With one in three students dropping out before graduation (Greene & Forster, 2005), the importance of school identification cannot be ignored.

Nationally, about one third of students fail to pass the ninth grade year (Patterson et al, 2007). Failure to pass this pivotal year puts these students at a very high risk of not graduating. Research done by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1985) (NASSP) indicates that there is a mismatch between high school procedures and the developmental needs of a fourteen year old. Large urban high schools tend to have "dehumanizing conditions" (Patterson et al, 2007) causing freshmen students to not "bond" with school (Finn, 1989). These procedures, like teacher centered classrooms, ability grouping, and 50 minute class schedules, tend to cause freshmen students to go into shock when they encounter them (Black 2004; Wheelock, 1993). Many ninth-graders skip classes or flunk classes because they felt like school was much more difficult than they had expected. According to Mizelle and Irving (2000), many ninth-graders lose their self-confidence by the time they receive their first report card. Feeling alienated and incompetent, over time many freshmen will attend class less frequently and altogether abandon going to school.

The freshmen year is the year that students are most vulnerable to failure, become disengaged from school, and feel most disconnected with school (Wheelock, 1993). Student weaknesses in academic study skills and comprehension become very evident in this first year of high school (Stanley, Slate, & Jones, 1999). In a study of 56 Georgia and Florida high schools, Hertzog and Morgan (1999) found in their research that the transition from middle to high school is particularly stressful and leads to low self-esteem, academic failure, and potentially dropping out. Freshmen students in their study experienced a lack of guidance in developing their class schedule. Students were placed in classes whose academic expectations might not be

a match for their abilities causing them to become disengaged, bored, discouraged and lose interest in school. All of these characteristics describe students who have not identified with school.

Student who have identified with school demonstrate a sense of belonging by engaging in the many aspects of education including actively participating in class, increasing attendance, participating in extra-curricular activities, having feelings of loyalty to the school and believing in the legitimacy of school (Goodlad, 2004; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Participation in extracurricular programs, like sports and clubs, is one way students can increase their connection to school. Students want to be "intellectually, academically, socially, and emotionally engaged with the life and work of the high schools" (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007, p. 18). They believe they belong in school and value what the educational system has to offer.

Self-Determination Theory: A Lens to Understand School Identification

Self-determination theory provides a framework to tease out how and why students develop a sense of belonging in and value for school. SDT focuses on human behavior, particularly motivation, basic need fulfillment, and value integration. SDT starts with the assumption that human beings have a natural tendency to learn and develop. In other words, individuals possess inner motivation that allows them to actively participate in learning activities (Reeve, Ryan, Deci & Jang, 2008). From there, SDT expands into a compilation of these elements (see Figure 3): cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, and psychological needs theory (Reeve, Deci & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

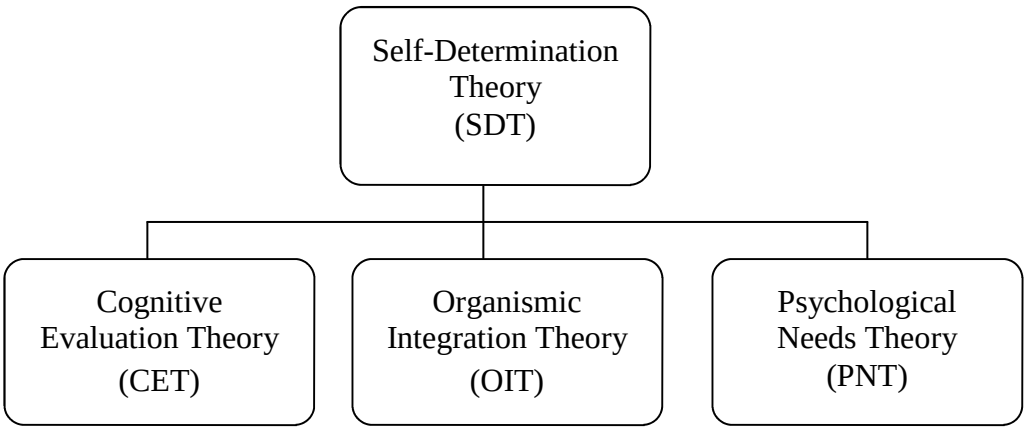

Figure 3. Self-Determination Theory

SDT, when applied to education, is about explaining how interest in learning, a value for education, and a belief in abilities develop (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). The three elements of self-determination theory are examined to fully consider how SDT contributes to the formation of school identification. Following that, the conceptual framework is presented which provides the focus for the present study.

Briefly, cognitive evaluation theory (CET) is concerned with student motivation and how the environment affects motivation. The second element, organismic integration theory (OIT), focuses on valuing and how values are integrated and internalized by the student. Psychological needs theory (PNT) explains human behavior as a function of relatedness, autonomy and competence. Collectively, these three elements contribute to the underlying sources of students' sense of belonging and value, and explain how students' interactions in school or lack thereof influence the degree they are motivated, are actively engaged in school and activities, and pursue lifelong goals. CET and OIT focus more on the individual sources which affect school identification. I will detail how all three of these elements play a part in school identification. An emphasis will be placed on PNT, which centers on what the

school can do to meet the psychological needs of a student and thus encourage a student's sense of belonging and value of education.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Belonging

Cognitive evaluation theory (CET) explains motivation as being a function of extrinsic and intrinsic factors (see Figure 4). Extrinsic motivation involves completing an activity to attain a reward or avoid a punishment (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). Grades issued by teachers are an example of extrinsic motivation. Students are motivated to complete their work because of there is a possibility of receiving passing grades (Ma, 2003). If students are extrinsically motivated, they pursue academic achievement to attain the academic incentive presented.

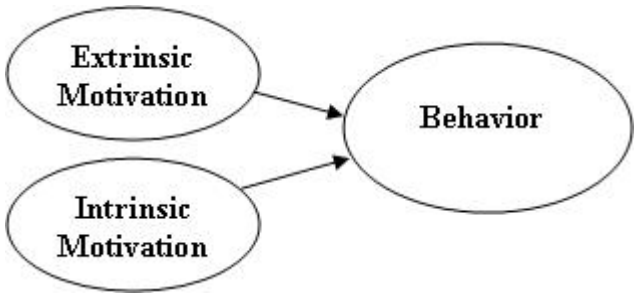

Figure 4. Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is defined as behavior that occurs because an individual finds it interesting and enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This type of motivation leads to success in the classroom because when students find learning enjoyable and fun, they generate their own interest in the subject. Intrinsic motivation feeds engagement and learning. Students who are intrinsically motivated want to be in school and derive pleasure from being there (Reeve, Ryan, Deci & Jang, 2008). They have internal motivation to achieve academically. They are motivated to engage in

schooling for the personal satisfaction of being involved in the activity (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Deci, 2006). Their reward is not the grade on the assignment, but their participation in the learning with their peers and teachers. Further, they are likely to go to class because of their interest and satisfaction to learn more about specific subjects (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Briere, Senecal & Vallieres, 1992).

For example, Ma's (2003) research of 6,883 sixth grade students in 148 schools and 6,868 eighth grade students in 92 schools in New Brunswick, Canada found that a student's academic achievement in both grades was affected by their levels of self-motivation. Higher levels of self-motivation led students to achieve academically. Their academic achievement was driven by an intrinsic motivator, self-confidence, which led to feelings of competence and academic achievement. Ma (2003 also found students who had high levels of self-confidence were highly motivated and had high levels of involvement in school. When children felt they were successful in school as demonstrated by increased self-confidence, feelings of competence and academic achievement, they found school to be a place where their needs for support, respect and friendship were fulfilled.

It is the innate psychological need of competence that drives a student's intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When students feel competent, they engage in subject matters or classroom experiences. Their level of involvement in assignments increases from simply completing the work for a grade to an investigative level that has depth and relevance. For some students, this leads to increased academic success and thus higher grades (a resulting extrinsic motivator). As students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are developed, so too is their sense of

belonging in school. They feel like they belong with their peers and in school because they are achieving the expected grades (extrinsic) and want to continue the positive feelings of competence brought about by their success in learning (intrinsic).

Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Valuing

A student's motivation to achieve also has a tremendous effect on their ability to succeed in school. Intrinsic motivation comes from within a student; it is an internal voice that encourages students to achieve academically. It signifies that students value the opportunity of education and want to take advantage of that opportunity. Extrinsic motivation involves completing an activity to attain a reward or avoid a punishment (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). The value becomes a grade not the learning itself.

Some students who are extrinsically motivated have not internalized the desire to achieve; their motivation comes from external factors. This behavior incentive starts with someone other than the student, like a teacher or a parent, offering a reward, like a grade or monetary gift, in exchange for a given behavior. Students who are extrinsically motivated by grades value the reward (externally motivator), but maybe not the education that occurred to receive the grade. While this motivation tends to work in the short run, it does not have long term success in academic areas (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999).

Studies show that extrinsic rewards can negatively affect intrinsic motivation by undermining the student's desire to learn (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999) and value for education. Students may choose to avoid academic challenges if they are driven by the external reward rather than the learning experiences. Instead, they choose the

easier academic road to success which garners passing grades, but a shallower level of learning. Their goal is to achieve the grade sometimes at the expense more scholarly work. Their learning ends when the extrinsic reward is received (Reeve, Ryan, Deci & Jang, 2008).

In a study of seventh through ninth graders, Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) researched student connectedness to teachers, parents, and peers. They found that students who felt secure, were intrinsically motivated, and had positive relationships with teachers were more likely to solicit assistance if they failed to understand a lesson in class. These students were more intrinsically motivated in school and had less behavior problems in the classroom than their fellow students who were extrinsically motivated. Students who possessed intrinsic motivation maintained high academic achievement and found value in the educational process. Research demonstrates that classrooms that promote feelings of belongingness and autonomy increase student confidence toward learning (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999).

Kellaghan, Madaus, and Raczek (1996) and Utman (1997) completed extensive reviews of research involving intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the classroom. They found that classroom evaluations (e.g., grades, tests, exams, etc.) did not increase students' intrinsic motivation, but diminished academic engagement and student persistence. All too often these evaluative tools resulted in surface learning and lower achievement because students felt stressed and competitive. The students' desire to achieve was extrinsically motivated by their need to not look unworthy in front of their peers or to the teacher.

Maier and Seligman (1976) found students who are often unsuccessful experience a learned helplessness or a lack of motivation to make any further attempts to succeed in situations where they have failed in the past. These students are no longer receiving the level of academic grades which once fed their extrinsic motivation. Since they do not have the intrinsic motivation necessary for academic success, these students begin to feel powerless in the classroom. Achievement becomes elusive to them and school becomes less of a priority, which may lead them to search for other activities that may be less publicly acceptable, but allow them to experience success (Finn, 1989). They choose to associate with peers (other drop-outs or delinquents) who display similar behaviors (Ekstrom et al, 1986; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981). Unfortunately, their value for education diminishes as their value for relating to peers with similar behavior issues increases.

Students who are extrinsically motivated can figure out what it takes to get a passing grade on an assignment or in a class. They may be able to earn the grades necessary to get by; yet when the work becomes too challenging, they lack the intrinsic motivation and value of learning to work harder to achieve that passing grade. On the other hand, intrinsically motivated students enhance their learning with creativity and greater depth (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) because they have a love for education. Their reward is not the grade in so much as it is the understanding of the topic at hand. They value what school has to offer and understand why it is useful to them.

Organismic Integration Theory and Valuing

Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) is utilized to expand on the importance of the value of education. The theory builds on this aspect of school identification by examining how motivation directly relates to the value of learning. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), OIT suggests humans are growth-oriented organisms who are inclined to develop and learn. OIT proposes that people are motivated to learn even when the topic does not generally interest them (Deci et al, 1991). This motivation relates to their internalization and integration of the value of learning. Internalization is the process by which a student converts an external value or regulation into an internal one (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Integration is how the student assimilates that value in their own life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Valuing education comes from internalizing (Ryan & Stilller, 1991) the importance of school and integrating that importance in their daily lives (see Figure 5). For example, students who have internalized and integrated the value of education work hard on their academics and apply these values in their daily behavior leading to success in school. These students tend to persist despite difficulties. In other words, internalization is the way in which a student learns to find value in an activity to make it their own. Integration is how the student assimilates that value in their own life (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

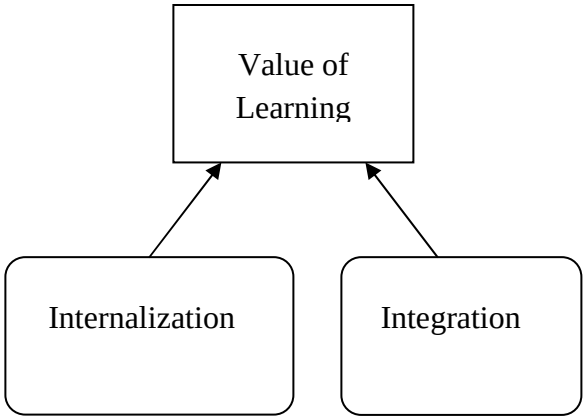

Figure 5. Internalization and Integration of the Value of Learning

Reeve, Ryan, Deci and Jang (2008) describe OIT as the conversion of a student's motivation for doing uninteresting school work from extrinsic to intrinsic. Students may initially do the work because their teachers or parents want them to. However, they eventually see the value in the learning and complete the assignments because they will assist them in their personal goal achievement. The grade or parent approval is but a small part of their motivation. The motivation to complete school related tasks moves from external (parent/teacher/academic grade) to internal and a full integration of the scholar's true self. Students do the work because they see its value in their lives and the relationship to their lifelong goals.

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), there are varying degrees of extrinsic motivation that individuals can work through before their motivation becomes internal (see Figure 6). These are external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation. The least autonomous of these is external regulation. This type of motivator encourages individuals to perform to satisfy an external demand, likes threat of punishment. The second type of extrinsic motivation is introjected regulation. This involves completing a task to avoid guilt or anxiety.

Individuals do not fully accept the reasons why they do something, but they do it to maintain feelings of self-worth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Identified regulation is the third type. In this type of regulation the individual accepts the task as personally important. They are conscious of the importance of completing the task, even though they may not want to. Finally, integrated regulation occurs when an individual evaluates a task and fully understands the value and need for completing it. This regulation is the closest to intrinsic motivation and where individuals begin to internalize the value. It differs from an integrated task because the individual is not completing the task for the simple enjoyment of doing it.

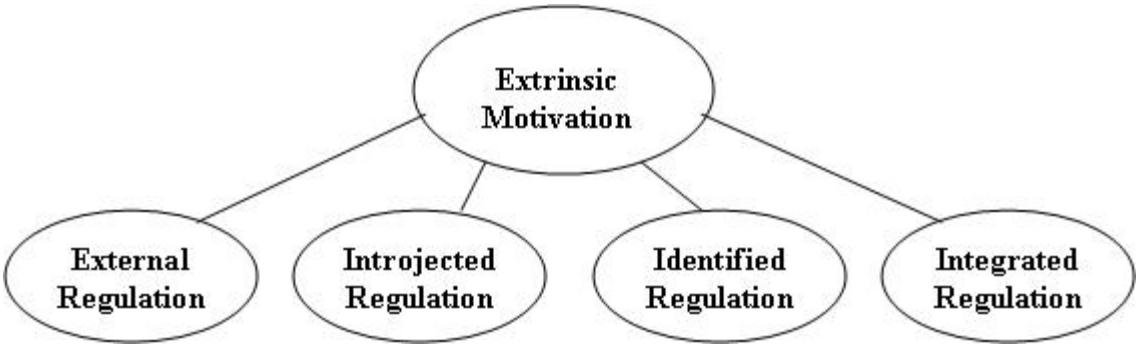

Figure 6. Levels of Extrinsic Motivation

Moyer and Motta (1982) found that some students do not see or understand the value placed on education because they have not reached integrated regulation or intrinsic regulation. As a result, they do not identify with school because they believe they do not belong in school nor have an interest in what school has to offer them (lack of value). They tend to exert less effort in school because they perceive their efforts will not be rewarded in real-life opportunities (Ogbu, 1978, 1992). The students do not bother to do the work because they do not feel there is a real purpose in doing so. They do not believe their school credentials will pay off for them in the

long run in the form of employment or wages. They also find the educational system does not value them as individuals, holds low expectations for them, and does not reward them equally (Taylor et al. 1994). Arguably, schools may contribute to the disidentification of students by not providing them with enough opportunities to develop the value of school (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) and by failing to emphasize the positive long-term goals of obtaining an education.

Finn (1993) examined, within a group of 5,945 nationally representative eighth grade students, why some of them were successful in school while others were not. The study included two groups: students considered 'at-risk' and others identified as 'not-at risk'. The students were considered at-risk based on their SES status, home language, and/or race. Of this sample, 1,590 students were considered at-risk for meeting at least one of the risk-related criteria. Their success, or lack thereof, was determined by their scores on reading and mathematics achievement tests. The study results showed 61% of the not-at-risk students were "successful", while only 34% of the at-risk group reached this level of academic achievement.

While these statistics are telling in themselves, Finn (1993) looked further at the at-risk group to determine if school identification was a cause of this difference in academic success. He reported very little difference in the sense of belonging to school between the successful and unsuccessful students. However, the research did show a significant difference in the value placed on school by the different groups of students. The unsuccessful, at-risk labeled students felt the school curriculum was not useful for their future endeavors. They could not relate to the program of study nor see how it was personally relevant. They lacked both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

to achieve. In contrast, those that were successful saw the curriculum as important to their economic and social goals. After further analyzing the data for "participatory behaviors", Finn concluded that student success was positively related to six participation and engagement measures, including attendance, preparedness for class, disciplined behavior, teacher support, and attentiveness in class (Finn, 1993). These measures are indictors of a sense of belonging to school. They are also indicative of why successful students internalized the value of education and were integrating these values in their lives. In sum, successful students identified with school.

The results of the Finn study mimic those of another earlier study by Feldlaufer, Midgley, and Eccles (1988). They also confirmed the importance of teacher support of students in their research. They found high school students who moved from teachers that they felt were highly supportive to teachers who were less supportive reported a decline in their perceived value of the class material. A lack of teacher support for student efforts caused a decline in student academic performance. Students felt lost (lacked a sense of belonging) and failed to see the value of the work assigned. It was difficult for them to internalize the value of school because they could not find a supportive teacher. This finding suggests the importance of positive and supportive relationships between students and teachers.

In a similar study, Valas and Sovik (1993) examined the influence of controlling and autonomy-supportive teachers on students' motivation and performance in mathematics. They found controlling teaching styles diminished students' intrinsic motivation in math. There was a decrease in student self-confidence, feelings of competence in math, and academic success. Students failed to

see value in the academic work, and saw it more as a chore. In sum, high school students have a growing desire for autonomy, need support in the classroom from teachers willing to help them discover the value of what they are learning, (Hargreaves et al, 1996) and need to be able to integrate the value of this work into their daily lives.

Students are more likely to engage and persevere in an activity, including academic work, when they find value and success in an activity (Urdan & Turner, 2005). The more value a student finds in an academic assignment or activity, the more willingly he or she undertakes the assignment and achieves success. Students who feel competent will achieve not only those goals that are personally valued but also those approved by others (Wentzel & Looney, 2006). This relates to their need for support and acceptance by their peers and teachers. Students find value in efforts that gain them approval by their peer group, which leads to internalization of that value. To continue to receive that approval, they will integrate those values in their daily lives.

Psychological Needs Theory (PNT)

CNT and OIT are instrumental theories that explain the formation of school identification in students by focusing on individual factors like motivation and the internalization of learning. On the other hand, psychological needs theory (PNT) examines student needs and how schools can satisfy those needs to help students identify with school. PNT is perhaps the most important of the three elements of self-determination theory for examining school identification when it comes to the importance of schools creating a supportive learning environment. PNT focuses on satisfying three specific human needs related to belongingness and valuing of school -

a*utonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Fulfillment of these needs in school is essential for growth and integration of knowledge (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). Proponents of PNT suggest that autonomy, competence and relatedness are psychological needs applicable to all humans. Satisfaction of these needs promotes good health and personal success (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

Within PNT's framework, a*utonomy* involves choices or the ability to make decisions about one's actions or activities. In the school setting this can be re-defined as the degree that students have choices in the classroom. In other words, students' educational experiences are self-endorsed or, at the very least, a conscious choice of the student (Ryan & Grolick, 1986). Connell & Wellborn found that students who feel they have choices or control over their own behaviors in the classroom are more engaged in learning (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) because their learning is self-determined.

Though teachers provide academic motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) to children to learn, it is the students, themselves, who must choose to participate in the learning. Successful students are intrinsically motivated to learn and participate in the classroom; their motivation comes from within. They are more likely to internalize the learning because they intentionally engaged in the lesson: they choose to learn. Students also demonstrate autonomy through their commitment to attend school regularly, arrive on time for class, complete their homework, and participate in extra-curricular activities. Schools can encourage these positive choices by providing a highly supportive environment and a strong connection to school. These behaviors are

choices students make daily in schools or classrooms in which they have a sense of belonging.

The second need, *competence*, refers to a student's mastery over their environment and their ability to achieve desired outcomes (Milyavskaya et al., 2009). Fulfilling the need for competence is a result of the satisfactions experienced when a student is exercising and extending their capabilities (Deci & Ryan, 1985). PNT suggests that when students are in an environment that is highly supportive, they are more likely to achieve academic proficiency. They believe they are participants (not just recipients) in their learning and seek support from adults to facilitate their educational path. Students associate with peers who have similar educational goals and interests and are likely to participate in school-related activities for personal growth (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). Student competence develops as a function of the environment and the individuals within it.

Peer and teacher relationships play an important role in academic competence, motivation, and success (Wentzel, 2005). The social support of teachers and friends provides positive and constructive feedback to students on their learning and social interactions. Students' social networks support their feelings of competence, resulting in students who are more intrinsically motivated to learn. Students seek out new challenges, explore, and learn because they have the support they need to feel competent, the ability to master their assignments, and comfortable in exploring and taking risks to achieve success.

Feelings of autonomy and competence are directly related to the final need of PNT, *relatedness*. This human need reflects students' connections with their peers

and teachers (Milyavskaya, et al., 2009). Relatedness is the extent to which students feel like they are a part of the school or their perception of how the educational system supports their academic pursuits (Waters, Cross & Runions, 2009). In other words, relatedness is how connected students feel to the school. Motivational research has shown relatedness to be a basic psychological need that is essential for human growth (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan, 1995). It also plays a part in school success. Having a strong connection to school is associated with higher academic achievement, motivation, and retention of material (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Littky (2004) asserts that students' positive experiences in school are tied to the three R's - relationship, relevance, and rigor. Therefore, having strong feelings of relatedness enhances students' feelings of autonomy and competence.

The importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for students' well-being and successful performance cannot be minimized when examining the reasons why some students are better adjusted in the classroom, demonstrate greater understanding of school rules and expectations, and exhibit enhanced performance in the classroom (Goodenow, 1993, Ryan & Deci, 2000, Ryan & Grolick 1986; Ryan & Stiller, 1991). In a study by Legault, Green-Demers, and Pelletier (2006), the researchers found when students experience high levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, these needs contribute to high levels of intrinsic motivation to do activities in which students derive pleasure and satisfaction from participation (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Connecting students to school is a function of the interaction between student autonomy, competence, and relationships with their peers and teachers.

Opportunities to experience autonomy, competence and relatedness are essential to school success.

In summary, fulfillment of these needs is essential for growth and the integration of knowledge (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). When a student feels like he or she is in control of their learning (autonomy), belongs in their school, social, and class environment (relatedness), and has the ability to master their assignments (competence), their motivation to achieve increases (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). On the other hand when students do not connect, academic challenges and behavior issues can ensue.

Psychological needs theory and belonging. A lack of connection or sense of belonging in school can cause students to experience daily academic struggles that could be eased through a highly supportive environment. Numerous studies have examined autonomy, relatedness and competence to see how they affect student participation in school. For example, in a study by Vallerand, Fortier and Guay (1997), they examined what motivated students to persist through their daily challenges. They found that students in a large sample of ninth- and tenth- grade urban students who had teachers and parents who supported their autonomy in a positive manner had higher levels of motivation. Hardre and Reeve (2003) found similar results in a similar study of rural students. They analyzed questionnaire data from 483 rural high school students to find the amount of autonomy support within classrooms predicted students' self-determined motivation and perceived competence. The need for relatedness and supported autonomy was evident in both geographic areas. Both studies conclude that the likelihood of students to achieve hinges on their

sense of belonging and identification with school, as well as the individuals (e.g., adults) associated with the school.

Other studies have shown that if students feel supported by their teachers, they are more willing to learn the task at hand. For example, the Child Development Project, a longitudinal study which occurred from 1982-1989, involved researchers who implemented programs designed to improve elementary students' sense of community or feelings of relatedness. The researchers then assessed the effects of these programs on students' motivation and behavior (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, Solomon, & Schaps, 1989) in school and compared the results to students in schools who did not have these programs. Results of the study indicate a positive relationship between sense of community or belongingness and academic motivation in school. Motivational research has shown relatedness (the need to experience belongingness or community) to be a basic psychological need that is essential for human growth (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan, 1995).

In another study focused on ninth graders in 48 states and the District of Columbia commissioned by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Lounsbury and Johnston (1985) found freshmen classes tended to be teacher-centered and lacking in teacher-student relationships necessary to connect students to school. By shadowing students and observing their daily schedules, the researchers found a lack of teacher supported autonomy and a focus on extrinsic motivation for students. In terms of PNT, the lack of these two factors reveals how unfavorable to student success the freshmen year can be.

The effects of the transition to high school on student autonomy were further documented in a couple of studies. Isakson and Jarvis (1999) discovered evidence of academic decline after the transition into high school in their small scale longitudinal study. They believe this decline was a result of students' lack of acclimation into the school and a decrease in student autonomy. In another study completed by Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, and Sanchez (2000), a sample of minority youth showed a decline in perceived school support after the students transitioned to high school. The transition to high school represented a time of vulnerability and anxiety for these students, negatively affecting their level of autonomy.

Finally, in a study of high school students by Niemiec, Lynch, Vansteenkiste, Bernstein, Deci and Ryan (2006), students were more intrinsically motivated to achieve academically when they felt their parents and teachers were supported the students' autonomy. This occurred even when the students considered the class work uninteresting. Niemiec et al (2006) found students internalized more information if their level of autonomy support was high Students performed better in the classroom when they had teachers who understood and related to them, provided learning choices when possible, and gave students opportunities to investigate topics in their own way.

Another factor that impacts how the students' need for autonomy is fulfilled is the context of the school. In the urban high school setting, students might have challenges adjusting to their new setting and relating to their surroundings. Several researchers argue that urban high schools are alienating institutions (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Hargreaves et al., 1996; Johnson, Farkas, & Bers, 1997; Newmann, 1981; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989). According to Rosenstock

(2003), “most urban public high schools are huge (more than 2,000 students), bureaucratic, and alienating institutions, where security, control, and discipline have become the most important concerns” (p. 180). Freshmen students find themselves struggling to find their way in large, impersonal competitive environments (Black, 2004). Many students find themselves alone in a crowd of thousands without the adult support or guidance that they had become accustomed to in the middle school setting.

Davidson and Phelan (1999) took an anthropological approach to understanding how students related to their peers, teachers and the school. They focused on the school level circumstances that students indicated had an influence on their motivation to be successful. They were interested in obtaining the students’ perspectives on what significantly affected their school experience. They conducted a two and one-half year longitudinal study (Students Multiple Worlds Study) of youth in four large inner-city high schools in California. Data collection included in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and informal interviews conducted at lunch or outside the school day. The results of their study found multiple factors that affected students’ efforts to succeed in school. While acknowledging that factors in their families and communities might affect their educational experiences, the study focused on those experiences that occurred at school which impeded the students’ chances for success. These included transition patterns, discipline procedures, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and competitive academic settings.

The conclusion for all these studies is that students have a need to connect with school (relatedness) and to feel they are cared about and respected by teachers in the classroom (autonomy and competence). Also, they need to feel like they belong and

can trust the policies of their school in order to find value in their academic pursuits. This educational environment is one in which students feel a sense of relatedness to their peers, feel competent in their ability to achieve, and feel supported in their level of autonomy with their teachers (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). Perhaps Connell and Wellborn (1991) were able to best clarify the importance of meeting these needs when they found in multiple studies they conducted that children and adolescents who experience themselves as regulating their own behavior, perceive themselves as competent, and find emotional security at school are more engaged in their learning. From here they determined that this high level of engagement is associated with superior levels of academic accomplishment.

Psychological needs theory and valuing. The second half of the definition of school identification (value of education) can also be examined through PNT. The positive association between valuing education and high student levels of academic engagement and achievement has been well established (Finn, 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandex, 1989). According to PNT a similar connection can be made between a person's well-being and the theory's three essential elements (autonomy, competence and relatedness) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Satisfaction of these needs leads to success in school and in life.

For example, Milyavskaya, Gingras, Mageau, Koestner, Gagnon, Fang, and Boiche (2009) examined how adolescents balance their psychological needs throughout different life contexts, such as school, home, friendships, and employment. The participants in the study were 720 adolescents ages 11 to 18 from three western

countries (United States, Canada, and France) who completed questionnaires about how their needs were met during the school day. The results of the study showed need satisfaction in school was a significant predictor of school adjustment. An unexpected finding that emerged from the study was that need satisfaction with friends was negatively related to school adjustment. The researchers found if adolescents choose to be part of a peer group that did not value education, then this disengagement affects school outcomes negatively. The study suggests that students who find their psychological needs met in school rather than by a peer group are more likely to report an interest to stay in school and value the educational experience.

In a second study, Osterman (2000) found students who have a sense of relatedness to school have more positive attitudes towards their environment, are more engaged in school, both academically and socially, and see the value of the learning process. Having a supportive positive peer group and an understanding of the value of school conveys that a student is capable of accomplishing academic success. This success eventually leads to graduation.

Failure to Meet the Psychological Needs

Psychological needs theory stresses the importance of meeting the needs of students. The self-confidence necessary to successfully face academic challenges derives from students' having their needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence met in school. In her research, Rhodes (2005) found students who did not have these needs met experienced social problems like becoming withdrawn and quiet. Others chose more negative behaviors like becoming aggressive or defensive towards school personnel and peers. Students who lack autonomy and competence in the classroom

have few opportunities for achievement and are less likely to succeed. As a result, they become angry, resistant to authority and disaffected by any attempts to improve their academic achievement (Taylor, 1991). They fail to relate to their peers and/or teachers, causing further disassociation with school. In sum, they are not likely to experience success in school or later in life.

The work of Anderman (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Anderman, 2002) further suggests that for most students, school belonging is related to both students' academic performance (competence) and their social well-being (McCay, 2007). Using a sample of 58,000 students from 132 schools, Anderman (2002) examined the association between school belonging and other variables. He found students not only need to achieve academically but they need to prosper socially – two goals that are linked to school identification. A high level of school belonging was directly linked to self-confidence, GPA, and optimism while a lower level was linked to depression, social rejection, and absenteeism. This relationship was supported in a study by Newmann (1981).

Newmann (1981) looked at adolescents and their feelings of powerlessness and how these feelings affected academic success. In his study, he found those students who had low levels of autonomy were alienated from school and on the verge of dropping out. They were disengaged, bored, and discouraged. Their behaviors include low levels of classroom participation and involvement in academic activities, lowered academic motivation and attention, verbal and physical abuse of school, skipping classes and truancy, disruptive behavior in the classroom, and, finally, dropping out of school (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993). They failed to see what school

could do for them and lacked the intrinsic motivation to keep trying. They felt inadequate in the school setting to the extent that they would rather be anywhere else than school (Voelkl, 1997).

This is particularly evident in the middle and high school years when students begin to explore their personal identity and personal relationships outside their parents and family. They often rely more on relationships outside their families for support (Steinberg, 2002). These non-family relationships include those they have at school with teachers, counselors, and peers. Wentzel and Looney (2006) found that as students progress into their high school years, their sense of "belonging" during earlier years of school tends to diminish. This is a result of the conflict between the adolescent's desire for personal freedom and their need for adult support. While adolescent students are looking for a sense of autonomy as they mature, they are also looking for a sense of belonging with their teachers, peers, and school community. The importance of belonging in a peer group or community cannot be understated. The peer group context can have measureable results, positively and negatively, on adolescent feelings of competence and relatedness (Schunk & Pajares, 2009), and thus academic success.

Students who feel rejected have significantly less favorable perceptions of school, higher levels of school avoidance, and lower levels of school performance than did popular or average students (Osterman, 2000). These students, many of whom are suffering with low self-esteem or high self-doubt, find themselves so alienated from school that they perceive dropping out as their only option. In their research, Legters and Kerr (2001) assert that many students who are "not successfully integrated into the

school community make the decision to drop out early in their high school career" (p. 2). In their study, Altenbaugh, Engel and Martin (1995) examined 100 Pittsburgh students who dropped out of school but later returned to complete their education in a Job Corps program. They found these students dropped out because they felt alienated and estranged from school, teachers, and peers. Those who feel alienated in the school community have little or no sense of connection or belonging to school.

According to Seeman (1975), alienated students feel powerless, meaningless, and socially isolated. There is no trust of the institution that is school or the individuals who represent it. They fail to see what school can do for them. In her research, Rhodes (2005) found some students experienced social problems like becoming withdrawn and quiet. Others chose opposite more negative behaviors like becoming aggressive or defensive towards school personnel and peers. None of these behaviors contribute to school success. In their research, Legters and Kerr (2001) assert that many students who are "not successfully integrated into the school community make the decision to drop out early in their high school career" (p. 2).

Wentzel and Asher (1995) reported that children who lack school identification were more likely to break school rules. The estrangement from their peers is sometimes demonstrated through behavioral problems in the classroom. Their behaviors included low levels of classroom participation and involvement in academic activities, lowered academic motivation and attention, verbal and physical abuse of school, skipping classes and truancy, disruptive behavior in the classroom, and, finally, dropping out of school (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993). They become susceptible to a pattern of negative school behaviors which cause discipline issues and

may eventually lead to withdrawal from school (Voelkl, 1997). In 1974, Elliott and Voss found there is a strong and clear relationship between low acceptance and dropping out of school.

When their needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000) are not met students do not connect with school causing academic challenges and behavior issues which can derail their journey to success. School identification, with its sense of belonging and valuing of school-relevant goals (Finn, 1989), can lead to an increase in the quality, as well as the quantity, of students' participation in school. The outcome of this successful collaboration is positive self-image and academic success.

Conclusion

The factors which influence a student's connection or disconnection to school are vast and varied. Today's high schools have been described as "breeding grounds" for alienation (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Some students have low levels of engagement and are frequently bored (Marks, 2000) in class. They do not feel connected to school nor do they see the value of what they are doing in the classroom. Often these are the students who are considered at-risk or on the verge of dropping out.

A student's level of school identification also reveals how they feel about school and about themselves. Because school is such a big part of an adolescent's day, it becomes instrumental to a student's self-view (Voelkl, 1997). A student's level of competence reveals how they believe they will do academically. The more positive their attitude towards school, the more likely they are to have a sense of their own

social abilities and are more likely to positively interact with their peers and adults (Osterman, 2000). Research has shown that this positive attitude about school and self translates into better grades and increased participation in class activities (Ma, 2003). According to Goodenow's (1993) research, children who felt they belonged were more motivated, had higher expectations of success, and believed in the value of their academic work. Crandall's (1981) research found students who related well to their peers had an enhanced sense of worth, increased self-confidence and valued the opportunities available in the classroom.

Achieving what Voelkl (1997) called a sense of belonging and value is a process that is influenced by a student's social environment, motivation, ability to integrate the value of education, and years in school (see Figure 7). Further, freshmen students they have to contend with a very demanding academic schedule, adolescent peer pressure, the many physical changes their bodies are going through, and the added pressures that come from outside the school walls on a daily basis. If high schools are to find solutions to the problems students face in identifying with school and the increasing numbers of high school dropouts, researchers should look at school identification specifically related to the basic needs of students (as detailed in self-determination theory), and the freshmen year experience to help them identify with school.

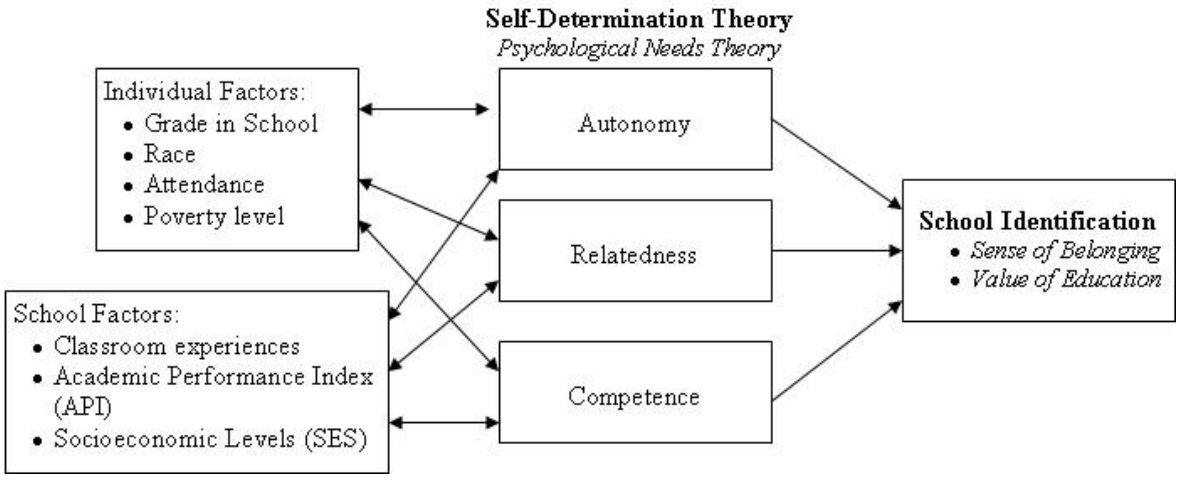

Figure 7. Conceptual Model

In summary, the importance of school identification is clear. It is rooted in self-determination theory and has been linked to academic success when all of the basic needs of students are met. The three internal elements of self-determination theory (CET, OIT, and PNT) provide a lens to examine the importance of school identification. Each element explains why students need to develop a sense of belonging in school and a positive value of school. CET and OIT place an emphasis on individual factors while PNT (i.e., competence, relatedness & autonomy) can be fostered through the school social environment to meet students' psychological needs leading to school identification. Students' needs can be fulfilled when they are in a school environment that promotes autonomy, competence-, and relatedness-. Based on the preceding discussion on PNT and its emphasis on school social factors, it serves as the conceptual framework for this study to understand patterns of school identification within an urban school district.

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe school identification among students in an urban district in the mid-western United States. The study focused on patterns in school identification across grade levels, and whether certain factors contributed to students' feelings of identification with school. School identification is defined as a time when students experience a sense of belonging in school, and a valuing of school and school related outcomes (Voelkl, 1997). Because it is so closely tied to student success (Finn, 1989, Finn & Voelkl, 1993, Voelkl, 1997), the study of school identification can lead to policy suggestions the district might implement to improve the educational experiences of students. By increasing the levels of school identification, the district can increase student engagement, support academic success, and possibly decrease its drop out percentage. This chapter outlines the methods used to investigate school identification within an urban district in one mid-western state.

Research Design

The design of the study was a descriptive case study. Descriptive research is one of the most basic forms of inquiry that seeks to collect information on a topic at a single, specific point in time (Kelley, Clark, Brown & Sitzia, 2003). It is usually used to describe a phenomenon (e.g. school identification) through the examination of items associated to it (e.g. school identification and poverty levels of students). A case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This technique is an all-encompassing method of research (Yin, 2009). Case study research includes the contextual

conditions that surround the phenomenon being studied, because these conditions are important aspects of the phenomenon that cannot be removed. Usually they play a key part in why or how the phenomenon being studied occurs.

This study examined the school identification patterns of students in fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grade in one urban mid-western school district. A particular focus was on freshmen students, a critical educational year when a number of students feel alienated at school and make the decision to drop out (Black, 2004). The study examined the contextual conditions surrounding school identification including student poverty levels, grade in school, race, attendance rates, school socioeconomic levels (SES), and school academic performance index (API) scores. The study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the general pattern of school identification across an urban school district?
    a. Are there differences in school identification between fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grade students?
    b. What happens to students' identification with school as they matriculate from elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school?
2. Are there differences in school identification levels of freshmen students across high schools in an urban school district?
3. What school factors are related to school identification of freshmen students?
4. a. What student factors are related to school identification of freshmen students?

b. How is school identification of freshmen students different from fifth grade students?

The Study Site

The site for this study was Saxon Public Schools (SPS), an urban school district. SPS is located in a mid-western city of approximately 390,000 people. According to the school district's website (2011), during the 2009-10 school year there were nearly 42,000 students attending approximately 59 elementary schools, 15 middle/junior high schools, and 9 high schools. The ethnicity of the district was Caucasian 29.6%, African American 30.9%, Hispanic 24.7%, Native American 8.0%, and Asian 1.3%. Over 83% of the district's students qualified for the free/reduced lunch program. As determined by federal law, 99.7% of the teachers in the district were considered highly- qualified.

Saxon Public Schools has nine high schools, five of which are designated as magnet school (see Figure 8). Each of the five magnet schools (i.e. HS1, HS4, HS5, HS8, and HS9) accepts students on an application/transfer basis. The other four high schools (i.e. HS2, HS3, HS6, and HS7) have a standard academic focus. Most of their students reside in the neighborhoods around the schools. They also feed into these high schools from the middle schools, and elementary schools for that matter, in the same neighborhoods. The compositions of the nine high schools vary from a low of 447 to a high of 1268 students. Four of the nine high schools have a student population of over 1000 students. The high schools have a teacher/student ratio ranging from a 10.6 to 1 ratio at the smallest school to an 18.9 to 1 ration in the most populous school.

For the 2010-2011 school year, Saxon had a freshmen dropout rate of 3.2% and a high school dropout rate of 7.1% (Oklahoma Department of Education, 2011). Of the 674 students who dropped out that school year, 304 of them were considered freshmen. Ninth graders made up more than forty-five percent of the dropouts in the district (Oklahoma Department of Education, 2011).

Figure 8

High School Population Information for Saxon Public Schools

High school	Population in 2010-2011	Magnet school (yes/no)	Magnet focus	Teacher/Student ratio
HS - 1	708	Yes	Fine Arts	15 to 1
HS – 2	1141	No		16 to 1
HS – 3	1198	No		17.6 to 1
HS – 4	999	Yes	Cuisine, Tourism, and Health & Human Performance	16.1 to 1
HS – 5	447	Yes	Science and Technology	10.6 to 1
HS – 6	1209	No		17 to 1
HS – 7	1012	No		16 to 1
HS – 8	1268	Yes	Academics/IB/AP	18.9 to 1
HS – 9	604	Yes	Broadcast, Digital Media, and Marketing	13.1 to 1

The district is currently on the Needs to Improve list as a result of low academic performance index (API) scores in reading and math, and a low attendance indicator as detailed in the latest data available from the 2009-2010 school year (see Figure 9). The district's dropout rate is almost three times the state rate at 7.1%. The state scores displayed in Figure 9 are the current averages for regular education

students within the state. Saxon's scores are the district's scores for regular education students (Oklahoma Department of Education, 2011).

Figure 9

Saxon's dropout rate and API scores for math, reading, and attendance.

	Math		Reading		Attendance		Drop Out Rate	
	State	Saxon	State	Saxon	State	Saxon	State	Saxon
2009-2010	1074	883	1060	932	618	603	2.2%	7.1%

Data Sources

Data were collected during the spring of 2011 from students at eighty-three schools in the Saxon school district. Twenty-six students were randomly sampled from the fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grades at each school. When selecting a random sample from a school, researchers must give every student in the school an equal opportunity to be part of the study to ensure survey validity (Salkind, 2008). Selection of any one student should not affect the possibility of another student being selected or not. For this study, twenty-six students were selected from each grade level. The population sample of students adequately represented the overall population of students at that grade level in each school.

District-level administrators from Saxon (some of whom were also graduate students at Estara University (EU)) administered and collected student surveys during the school day. Prior to conducting the survey, these administrators participated in a training session led by the senior research scientist from the Policy Center at EU. This session focused on ensuring survey reliability and consistency. The survey administrators made appointments with the individual school principals so that the survey could be distributed with as little interruption to the school day as possible. In

most instances the students took the survey as a group in the library or cafeteria. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would not be shared with the administrative staff or teachers of their school. The survey administrators instructed students on how to complete the survey, answered questions about the survey, and collected the surveys upon completion.

Quantitative Measures

This study was a subsidiary of reports produced by Saxon Public Schools and a team of researchers from the University of Estara, a local university. Saxon worked in collaboration with EU to foster long-term school improvement based on school data collected. The purpose was to provide the district and its schools with data collected from students that guide schools and the district with their performance measurement plan. School identification data were derived from a survey issued by the district. The district's goal was to collect data to help it decrease its dropout rate, assess student feelings of safety, and to increase student engagement in school.

The survey instrument used by the district was based on Voelkl's (1996) *Identification with School Questionnaire*. Voelkl (1996) developed an instrument specifically focused to assess a student's level of school identification called *Identification with School Questionnaire* (Voelkl, 1996). This survey is composed of 17 questions: 10 of which rate belongingness and 7 of which reflect feelings of valuing school and school-related outcomes. Responses to these questions were gathered using a Likert-scale. The validation of this instrument was based on data collected from 3,539 eighth grade students from schools across Tennessee. Their answers were tested in a goodness-of-fit statistical method for two-factor solutions and

single-factor solutions. This testing showed the questionnaire to be a highly reliable instrument for assessing belongingness and valuing. It has been extensively used in empirical studies (Voelkl, 1996, 1997). The creation of this questionnaire provides researchers a tool for measuring student attitudes towards school.

The Saxon Public Schools (SPS) survey adapted the Voelkl questionnaire but contained fewer questions so students could complete the survey in a reasonable amount of class time. The Saxon survey took the items that had strong factor loading without sacrificing the reliability of the survey. Saxon district's survey consisted of 10 questions: 5 of which related to belonging and 5 of which related to valuing. Statements on the survey questionnaire included *"I feel proud of being a part of my school"* and *"Most of what I learn in school will be useful when I get a job"*. Students responded on a 4-point Likert-type scale to the word that closely described how they felt about the statement. Student survey responses were collected and compiled by giving a numerical value to their responses for each question. For example, a 4 equated to "Strongly Agree", a 3 to "Agree", a 2 to "Disagree" and a 1 to "Strongly Disagree". These values were then combined to formulate a value representing the student's level of school identification with 40 being the high and 10 being the low number on the scale.

All measures for this study were supported with evidence of strong validity and reliability. Psychometric properties were also tested on the Saxon data with results confirming the validity and reliability of the surveys. Measures used in the district reports capture indicators of school identification. Data were excluded for a particular measure if the school had less than a 50 percent response rate. This was the

case for one elementary school. Raw data were converted to a scale score ranging from 10 to 40 with a mean of 25. The target score for the school identification indicator was set at 32.5, a point determined to be where a positive culture of school identification was present in the school. Individual scale scores represent school identification relative to other students in the district. School scale scores represent school identification relative to all other schools in the sample. Grade scale scores represent school identification relative to students in different grades in the district. Freshmen school identification scores were examined at the school level using different phenomena that are perceived to affect their values. These included race, SES level, and achievement.

Analytical Techniques

Data were obtained at the individual level aggregated to the grade, school, and educational level using SPSS, a computer program that provides statistical processes for analyzing data (Warner, 2008). Descriptive analysis was prepared by examining the mean differences between the various data sets. Data, in the form of mean values, were represented in histograms, line graphs, and box plot graphs. A histogram shows an empirical distribution of scores that is nearly normal in shape while a line graph is used to present a change in one or more dependent variables as a function of an individual variable (Warner, 2008). A box plot graph is a nonparametric exploratory procedure that uses medians and quartiles as information about central tendency and dispersion of scores (Warner, 2008).

Additional data that were needed to complete the comparative analysis were obtained from the school district. These included data on school API scores, school

SES levels, student poverty, attendance and race/ethnicity. The achievement and poverty data were aggregated at the school-level, while race/ethnicity, attendance, and poverty data were compiled at the individual student level. The representation of data varied based on the research question. The following explains how the data were used for each question.

Research question 1. What is the general pattern of school identification across an urban school district? Individual student data were aggregated to the school level. School level mean scores were then plotted on a histogram to examine variability in average school identification across schools within the district. A histogram is a "visual representation of the frequency distribution where the frequencies are represented by bars" (Salkind, 2008, p. 51). The histogram revealed the general pattern of school identification across the district for all schools and identified schools with high and low school identification.

All the school data were aggregated to a mean educational level score (i.e. elementary, middle, and high school). This was plotted in a line graph to examine educational grade level differences in school identification. This representation gave the researcher a set point for each educational level from which to determine the movement (up or down) of school identification levels as students progressed through school.

Finally, to further explore of variations in school identification, a box-and-whisker graph to view the data based on the students' levels of education was conducted. Because the majority of the students surveyed were in elementary school, moving the data into educational level groups gave more accurate view of the

differences across educational levels and variability within educational levels. Using this method to display the data, the range of school identification levels for each educational level is evident.

Research question 1a and 1b. Are there differences in school identification between fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students? What happens to students' identification with school as they matriculate from elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school? Average school identification scores were calculated for fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students. These values were represented in a line graph to visually represent the movement (up or down) of the value from one grade to the next.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a Tuckey HSD post hoc test (Salkind, 2008) was used to test the size of the differences in school identification by grade level. ANOVA estimates the degree to which school identification differences by grade level were systematic or a result of chance. Additionally, effect size estimates were used to test the size of the difference. Next, a Tuckey HSD, a post-hoc (after-the-fact) test (Salkind, 2008) was performed. This type of test is used to determine which grade levels in the sample of data differed significantly (Salkind, 2008).

Research question 2. Are there differences in school identification levels of freshmen students across nine high schools in an urban school district? To answer this question, the ninth grade student scores across the nine high schools were averaged to assess mean differences. These mean values were plotted on a line to compare levels of school identification to each other and also to the target score of 32.5.

Research question 3. What school factors are related to school identification of freshmen students? Additional data were collected from Saxon Public Schools which included poverty level and achievement data. The poverty and achievement (API) data were aggregated to the school level by the district. Additional data sources were used to examine the school identification data of freshmen students from two different angles.

Achievement data was examined using the schools' academic performance index (API) scores. The schools API scores were initially sorted into four categories (i.e. below, low, average, and high). Schools with an API score of "below" fell in a range of 0 – 721, "low" 722 – 918, "average" 919-1130, and "high" 1131 – 1500. The freshmen school identification data aggregated to the school level, and then these values were grouped based on the school's API scores. A mean value for each of the four API categories was computed and plotted on a line graph to see if there was a relationship between achievement and the students' level of school identification.

Similar steps were taken to determine if there was a relationship between students' poverty level and school identification. Four poverty levels were calculated based on the percentage of students qualifying for the free/reduced lunch program in each school. Low poverty schools had less than a 30 % F/R/ lunch rate. Medium poverty had a rate between 31 and 70 %. High poverty schools had a rate between 71 and 90 %. Extreme poverty schools had a rate between 91 and 100 %. Using the freshmen school identification data aggregated to the school level, different schools' values were aggregated based on their poverty level rate. This was followed by computing a mean value for each of the four poverty levels and plotting them on a line

graph to see if there was a relationship between poverty level and the students' level of school identification.

Research question 4a. What student factors are related to the school identification of freshmen students? The researcher received additional data from Saxon Public Schools relating to student factors that might affect school identification. These data included race, attendance, and poverty level.

To examine student level data and school identification, a correlation table was used to determine if individual student characteristics played a part in their level of school identification. A correlation table is a two-way tabulation of the relations between correlates (Salkind, 2008). The row headings of the table are the scores of one variable and column headings are the scores for the second variables. The values in the cells of the table show how many times the score on that row was associated with the score in that column.

Research question 4b. How is school identification of freshmen students different form fifth grade students? To answer this question, the data were averaged to the grade level. A comparison was done between the mean values received for each question of the survey (i.e. the elementary mean value (fifth grade) for survey question one was compared to the freshmen mean value for question one). The question focused on differences between the grade levels in the values representing belonging in school and valuing education. Data are represented in a comparative chart and line graph.

Limitations

This study was based on one data collection period which occurred in spring, 2011. Thus, it does not draw upon trend data to provide a broader scope on school identification in the district selected for this study. Also, while the administrators of the survey were given training before distributing the survey to students, the procedures were not standardized. Questions asked by students during the survey time may have been answered differently by each administrator. This may have changed the students' understanding of the survey or the survey responses. The twenty-six students who took the survey at each grade level were chosen at random. There were no concessions made for students' reading levels or level of understanding of the English language. The inability of a student to comprehend or read the survey may have led to a response bias. Completion of the survey was voluntary thus the sample population may or may not represent the true level of school identification within the school district.

The findings from this study have been drawn from data collected in Saxon Public Schools (SPS). It will be difficult to generalize the findings to other school districts throughout the country. While the policy suggestions derived from this study will be applicable to SPS because they are drawn from their data, perhaps they will be of benefit to other districts as well.

Lastly, the data collected provides an overall perception of school identification, masking a variation of individual experiences within the school context. The nature of the data collection and reporting eliminates the opportunity to examine individual levels of school identification. This eliminates the opportunity to study

varying levels of school identification within students' classes, with different teachers, etc.

Ethical Safeguards

This study used data from a survey that was administered to students by the Saxon Public Schools with assistance from Estara University. Students were made aware of the purpose of the survey and that their participation was voluntary. Survey data remained anonymous. District official made every effort to protect the security and confidentiality of the data. A proposal for this study was presented and approved by Estara University's Office of Human Research Participant Protection - IRB. A letter granting permission for the researcher to utilize Saxon Public School student data was also acquired from the district's superintendent.

Chapter IV

Results

The results for this study are organized into four primary findings. The first finding addresses the general pattern of school identification across an urban school district. This includes the differences in school identification between fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students. Finding two examines the differences in school identification levels of freshmen students across nine high schools in the urban school district. The student factors related to school identification of freshmen students is the focus of finding three. Finally, finding four focuses on student factors that might affect freshmen students' levels of school identification and the differences in the school identification values of fifth and ninth graders.

The General Pattern of School Identification across the District

Student data were aggregated to the school level by combining all of the scores of each student's survey in order to determine an average score for the school. All of the school scores were then plotted on a histogram for comparison (see Figure 10). A histogram is a "visual representation of the frequency distribution where the frequencies are represented by bars" (Salkind, 2008, p. 51). Using the histogram, the researcher was able to see a general pattern of school identification across the district for all schools.

The numbers along the x-axis of the histogram signify the average school identification score for each school in the district. The frequency numbers on the y-axis of the graph indicate the number of schools who had a school identification mean in the range on the x-axis. For clarification, the school at the right edge of the graph is

considered an outlier, an observation that deviates noticeably from other members of the sample (Urdan, 2010).

The dark, dotted line on the graph signifies a mean of 32.5, the target standard for a school demonstrating a culture of positive school identification (see Figure 10). This target was set as the point of reference at which survey respondents would have answered the majority of the questions with a strongly agree or agree response. Schools at 32.5 or higher have students who closely identified with their school. As this graph demonstrates, the majority of Saxon's schools do not meet the target score of 32.5. Only seven schools exceed this number. The one school with a score of 37 was an outlier whose data was determined to be invalid (This is the elementary school that did not have enough students complete the survey correctly). Thirty four schools were below 32.5 but within two points of the target score. Fourteen schools have school identification values of less than twenty-eight signify a culture with low school identification.

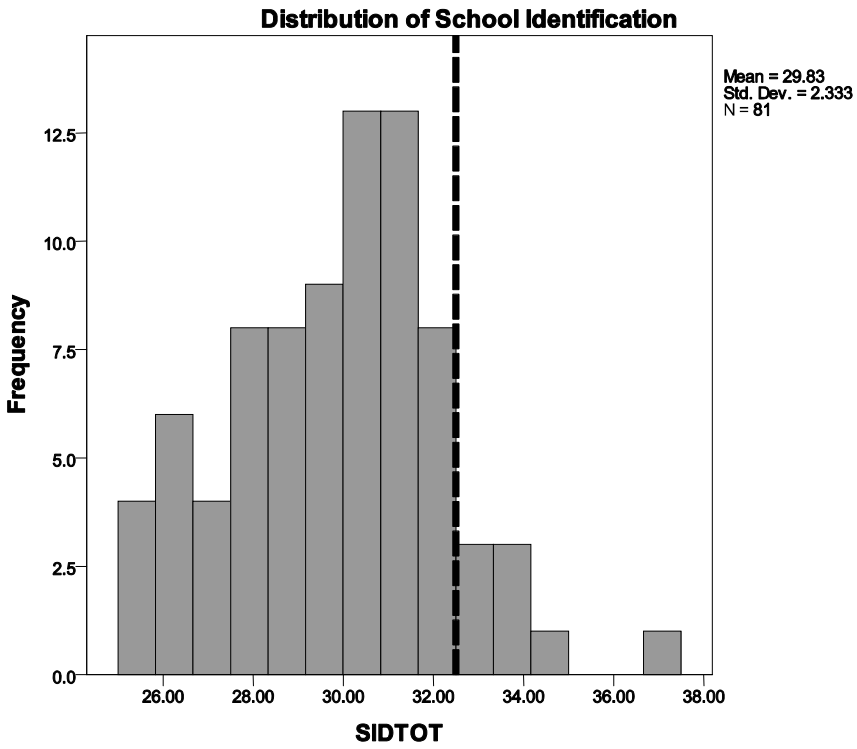

Figure 10. Distribution of school identification by school across the district

The school identification data were aggregated to the school level. Specifically, the data were separated by educational level to get a clearer picture of the average school identification across elementary, middle and high schools. The majority of schools in SPA are elementary schools. There are fifty-nine elementary schools, fifteen middle/junior high schools, and nine high schools.

Figure 11 uses a line graph to report differences in school identification between elementary, middle, and high schools. A line graph depicts the relationship between quantitative variables (Salkind, 2008), in this case school identification and educational level. The average school identification value for each education level was found by computing the average score for all of the schools at a similar education level. This line graph demonstrates a decline in school identification from elementary

to high school of 3.18. The decline between elementary and middle school was 2.29, and between middle and high school was .89. The mean of 27.43 for the high school student is 5.07 points below the target of 32.5.

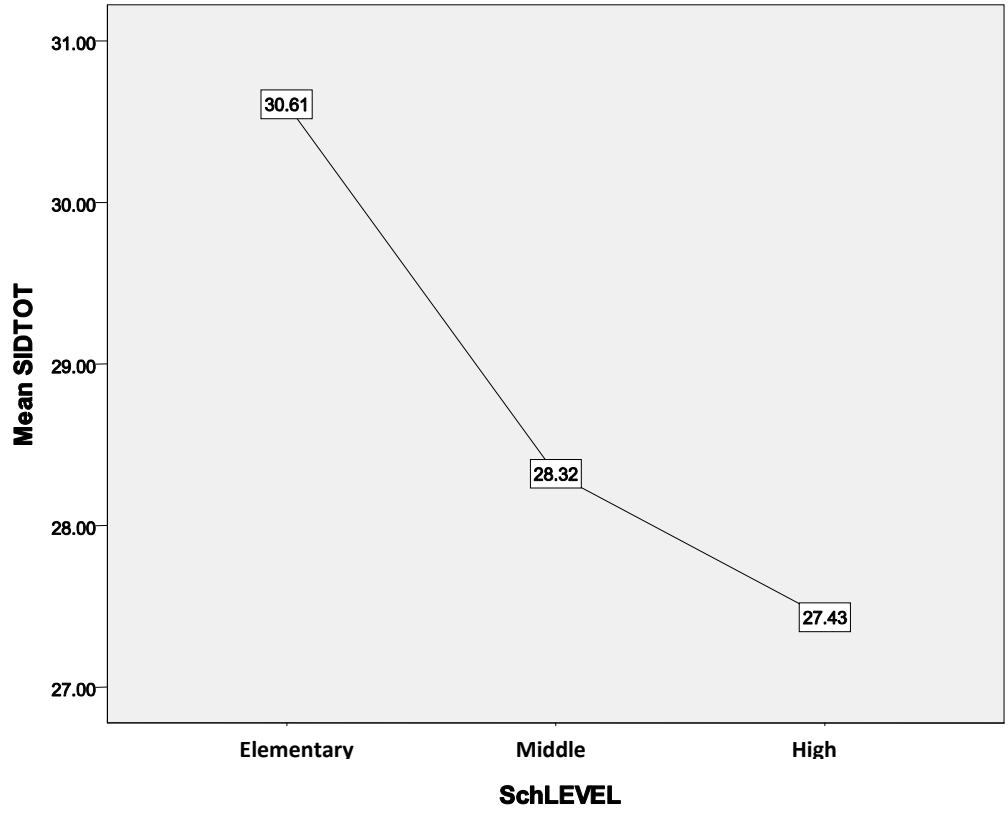

Figure 11. Distribution of School Identification by Schools at their Educational Level

Figure 12 displays the data plotted in a box-and-whisker graph. This type of graph displays the dispersion of scores within grade configuration. The line that is within the box on the graph is the median score for that grade level. The box represents the range of scores surrounding that median. As evidenced in figure 12, there are outliers at the elementary and high school level. The outlier at the top of the elementary school scale is the school that did not have enough respondents to validate their data. The lower elementary outlier and the two high school outliers are schools

which had valid surveys but whose average scores were disproportionate to the other schools in their group. In this case their school identification values were much greater than other schools at their educational level.

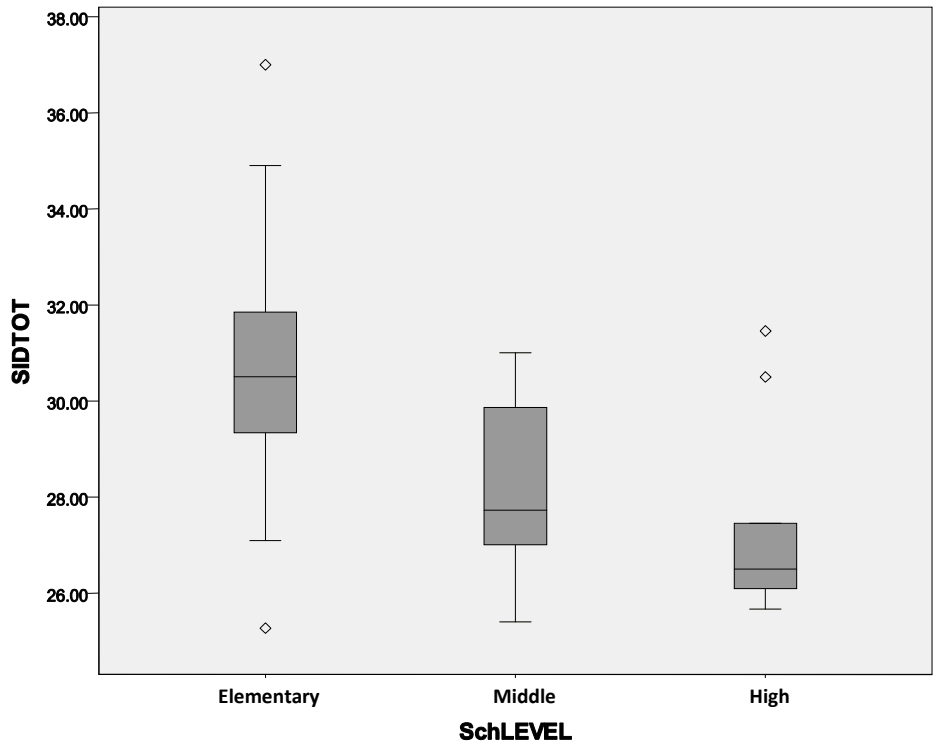

Figure 12. Distribution of School Identification by Schools at their Educational Level.

Differences in school identification between fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students. To further analyze the decline in mean value from the elementary level to the high school, data were aggregated to the grade level (see Figure 13). This was done by averaging student school identification scores at the grade level. This produced a value representing the average school identification level for fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grade students. Aggregating to the grade level separated the high school data into average scores for ninth and eleventh grade students. Disaggregating

the high school data gives a clearer picture of what might be occurring in the high schools. These values were represented in a line graph (see Figure 13).

The line graph shows a decrease in mean value from fifth grade to ninth grade as the level of school identification drops 3.166. There is a slight increase, though not significant, from ninth to eleventh grade (+0.35). By splitting the high school data into the two grades surveyed at this level, a clearer picture emerges of school identification in this district. There is a distinct drop in school identification from fifth to ninth grade. The low level of school identification seems to remain at least through the students' junior years.

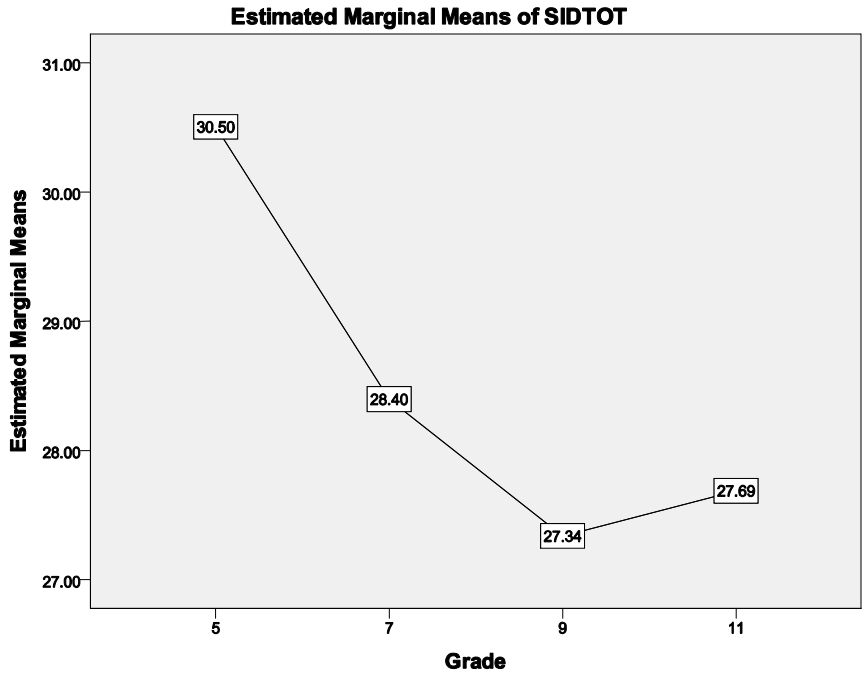

Figure 13. Distribution of School Identification by Grade (line graph).

An ANOVA test was conducted to report on significant differences and effect size in school identification across grade level (see Figure 14). ANOVA is an abbreviation for a statistical method that stands for analysis of variance (Cardinal &

Aitken, 2006). The ANOVA tests several groups against each other. In this case, the students' school identification scores were compared to other students based on the same grade level. This is a one-way ANOVA because the groups are compared based on one factor (grade).

The purpose of the ANOVA was to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in school identification between the average fifth, seventh, ninth and eleventh grade student that could not be attributed to sampling error, or random variation (Cardinal & Aitken, 2006). Results indicate that grade level differences in school identification were statistically significant ($F=20.011$, $p< .01$). Grade level accounted for 5.9 percent of all variability in school identification. According to Cohan (1987), partial eta squared of 5.9 is a medium effect size. The effect size estimates the magnitude of a relationship between variables (Salkind, 2008). With a medium effect size, it can be interpreted that experiences at school within each grade level played a large part in students' levels of school identification.

Figure 14

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: SIDTOT

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1449.456[a]	3	483.152	20.011	.000	.059
Intercept	392834.481	1	392834.481	16270.590	.000	.944
Grade	1449.456	3	483.152	20.011	.000	.059
Error	23105.653	957	24.144			
Total	870421.000	961				
Corrected Total	24555.109	960				

a. R Squared = .059 (Adjusted R Squared = .056)

Following the ANOVA analysis, a Tuckey HSD a post-hoc test was performed to determine which grade levels in the sample of data differed significantly (Salkind, 2008). Results report significant group differences between fifth grade and seventh grade (-2.11), fifth grade and ninth grade (-3.16) and fifth grade and eleventh grade (-2.82). Significant differences were not found between the average seventh grade student and ninth grade student, seventh and eleventh grade student, and ninth and eleventh grade student (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Tuckey HSD - Distribution of School Identification by Grade.

Dependent Variable:SIDTOT

	(I) Grade	(J) Grade	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tukey HSD	5	7	2.1078*	.44056	.000	.9740	3.2416
		9	3.1664*	.58234	.000	1.6677	4.6650
		11	2.8164*	.58234	.000	1.3177	4.3150
	7	5	-2.1078*	.44056	.000	-3.2416	-.9740
		9	1.0586	.67718	.400	-.6842	2.8014
		11	.7086	.67718	.722	-1.0342	2.4514
	9	5	-3.1664*	.58234	.000	-4.6650	-1.6677
		7	-1.0586	.67718	.400	-2.8014	.6842
		11	-.3500	.77691	.970	-2.3494	1.6494
	11	5	-2.8164*	.58234	.000	-4.3150	-1.3177
		7	-.7086	.67718	.722	-2.4514	1.0342
		9	.3500	.77691	.970	-1.6494	2.3494
Scheffe	5	7	2.1078*	.44056	.000	.8740	3.3415
		9	3.1664*	.58234	.000	1.5356	4.7972
		11	2.8164*	.58234	.000	1.1856	4.4472
	7	5	-2.1078*	.44056	.000	-3.3415	-.8740
		9	1.0586	.67718	.486	-.8378	2.9550
		11	.7086	.67718	.778	-1.1878	2.6050
	9	5	-3.1664*	.58234	.000	-4.7972	-1.5356
		7	-1.0586	.67718	.486	-2.9550	.8378
		11	-.3500	.77691	.977	-2.5257	1.8257
	11	5	-2.8164*	.58234	.000	-4.4472	-1.1856
		7	-.7086	.67718	.778	-2.6050	1.1878
		9	.3500	.77691	.977	-1.8257	2.5257

Based on observed means.

The error term is Mean Square(Error) = 24.144.

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

To summarize, the first three findings determined that school identification in the district for majority of the schools fell below the target score of 32.5. Delving further into the data, school identification levels of elementary schools were found to be higher than that of middle schools and high schools. By further disaggregating the

data into grade level values, a significant drop in school identification between fifth and ninth grade was found.

Differences in School Identification Levels of Freshmen Students across Nine High Schools in an Urban School District.

One of the purposes of this study was to highlight school identification levels of freshmen students. With that goal in mind, freshmen data were examined across the nine high schools (HS1 to HS9) in the Saxon School District (see Figure 16). Each school code is noted at the bottom of the graph (i.e. HS1, HS2, HS3, etc.). The values for school identification represent the mean score for all of the freshmen at the individual high schools. The scores range from a low of 24.13 for HS3 to a high of 31.15 for HS8.

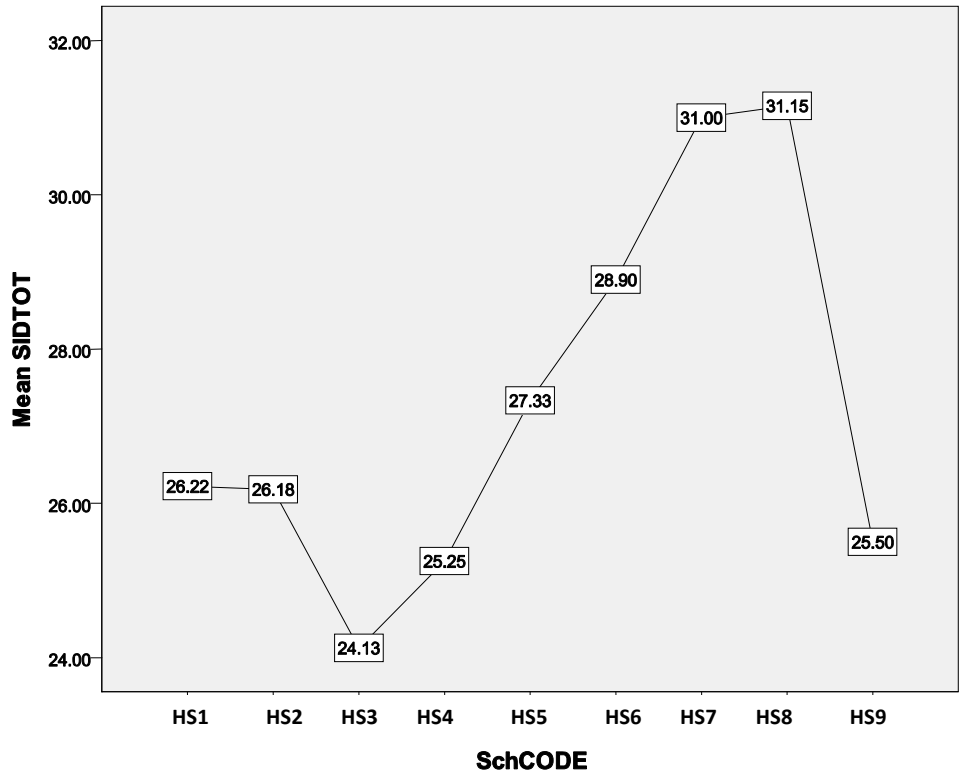

Figure 16. Distribution of School Identification of Freshmen Students by High School.

The average freshmen school identification score did not reach the target value of 32.5 in any high school, and the mean values for four schools were less than 28. HS8 had the highest average school identification score among the nine schools. Data suggest that the average freshman student in all 9 high schools struggled to feel a sense of belonging to school and value for education.

School Factors Related to the School Identification of Freshmen Students.

To achieve a better understanding of school identification for freshmen, school identification was compared to school factors that potentially shape belonging to school and value for school. These factors included academic performance of the school (API), and school socioeconomic status (SES) levels. Each of these factors was studied individually to determine if it was related to students' levels of school identification.

Academic Performance Index (API). School identification data were grouped based on students' high schools' overall Academic Performance Index (API) score (see Figure 17). The API score is computed annually by the state and reflects the school's performance level based on the results of the statewide testing program. Since all schools' APIs are determined using the same formula, using the scores as a point of comparison is reliable and has been extensively used. School's API scores were clustered into three categories (i.e. low, average, and high) (see Figure 17).

Figure 17

High School API Levels

Category	Range
Low	0 - 721
Average	722 - 1130
High	1131-1500

The freshmen students' identification values were plotted on a line graph (see Figure 18) by school API category. Those with an API score in the low category had a mean school identification value of 27.333. Schools in the average category had a mean school identification value of 25.929. Those schools in the high range had the highest mean value of 28.613. There was a difference in average school identification between low, medium, and high performing schools, but these differences were more likely the result of random variations than something systematically different in student experiences. When a one-way ANOVA was conducted on the data, the test indicated this difference was not statistically relevant ($F = 2.12$, $p = .13$) It was determined that the school's API score was not relevant in determining freshmen students' levels of school identification.

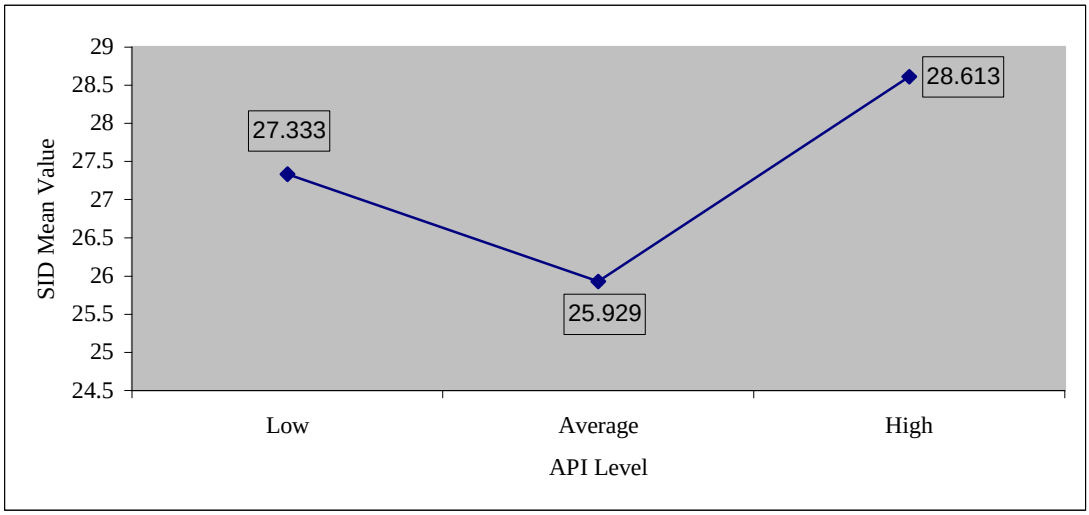

Figure 18. Distribution of School Identification of Freshmen by High School API Score.

Socioeconomic Status (SES) Level. Freshmen level data were also examined based on students' SES levels. Poverty levels were determined by looking at the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch at each school. These percentages were separated into three categories (see Figure 19). Low poverty schools had less than seventy percent of their students enrolled in the Free/Reduced lunch program. Medium poverty schools had between seventy-one and ninety percent of students. High poverty schools had a rate between ninety-one and one hundred percent.

Figure 19

High School SES Levels

Category	Range
Low	< 70%
Medium	71 – 90%
High	91 – 100%

The freshmen students' identification values were plotted on a line graph (see Figure 20) by poverty level. Students who were enrolled in a school with a low poverty level had a mean school identification of 28.613 (see Figure 20). Those with a medium poverty level had a mean of 25.789 while high poverty level had a mean of 27.000. There was a difference in average school identification between low, medium, and high poverty schools, but these differences were more likely the result of random variations than something systematically different in student experiences. The difference between these two means was not significant as determined by a one-way ANOVA test ($F = 1.9$, $p = .14$). Therefore, it can be determined that poverty level was not relevant in determining a freshmen student's level of school identification.

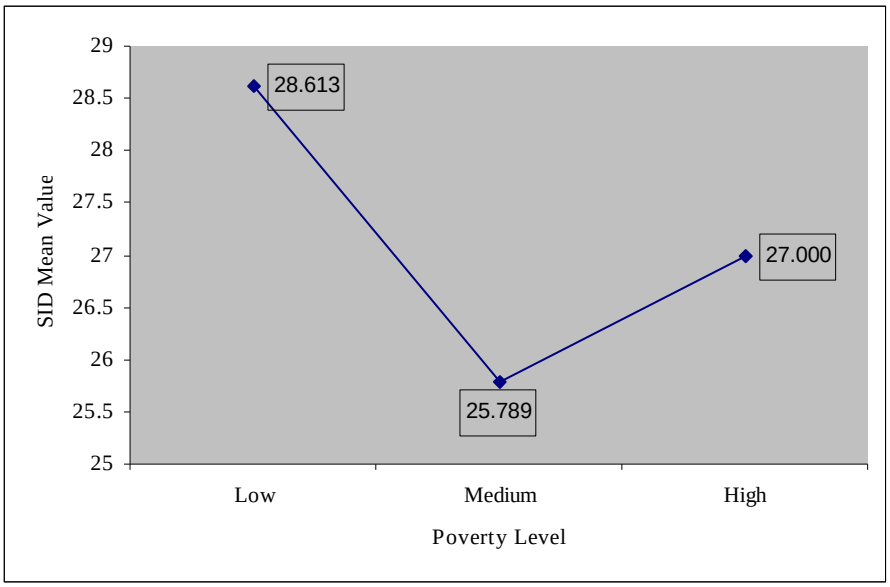

Figure 20. Distribution of School Identification of Freshmen by School SES Level

In conclusion, the elements of achievement as measured by API and the SES levels of the schools do not have a significant effect on freshmen students' levels of

school identification. The findings suggest that there is something outside these two elements that determines whether freshmen students feel like they belong in school and value education. Perhaps looking at student factors affecting school identification will provide some insight into their school identification.

Student Factors Related to the School Identification of Freshmen Students

When school factors failed to show any effect on school identification levels, student factors were considered (see Figure 21). These factors included race, poverty level, and attendance rates. Data were acquired from Saxon Public Schools at the individual level in order to do comparisons with students' school identification values acquired through the survey.

To study the relationship between student factors and school identification, a Pearson correlation, a numerical index that investigates the relationship between two variables (Salkind, 2008), was conducted. The correlation table (see Figure 21) displays the numerical index of the relationship between two variables, school identification and a school factor (i.e. race, poverty, or attendance). A two-tailed test was conducted because a nondirectional research hypothesis (looking for differences in school identification between student factors) was used. The two-tailed test looked for a positive or negative difference in the two variables.

Figure 21

Correlation Table of Student Factors (race, poverty level & attendance)

	White	Hispanic	Asian	Black	Poverty	Days Absent
School Identification	0.077	0.08	-0.097	-0.037	-0.179	-0.309

Race. The first factor examined was race. The correlations between school identification and race are displayed in Figure 21. All four of the correlations are very close to zero, indicating a very weak or non-existent relationship between the two variables. Because the correlation values are so low, it was determined there is no relationship between a student's race and their level of school identification.

Poverty Levels. The next analysis involved comparing poverty levels to student school identification values. This was also done in a correlation table (see Figure 21). As with the race, the poverty correlation (-0.179) is very close to zero, though higher than the race values. The correlation between poverty level and school identification would be considered weak, signifying no real relationship between these two variables.

Attendance rates. In the final correlation test, the relationship between school identification and absences was analyzed (see Figure 21). There appeared to be a negative relationship between these two variables, also known as an inverse correlation (Salkind, 2008)). With a correlation value of -.309, this relationship would be considered moderate. Because of a lack of qualitative data, it could not be determined whether students have a lower level of school identification because they were absent frequently or whether the students were absent so often because they had low school identification.

Based on these findings, the school and student factors do not appear to have a significant relationship to the school identification levels of students. Given that, the data were analyzed from another perspective to determine why students' sense of

belonging and value of education tended to deteriorate from elementary school to high school.

Differences between School Identification of Freshmen Students and Fifth Grade Students

When the school and student factors did not demonstrate a clear relationship to the school identification levels of the students surveyed, the researcher examined the data to see if the students' individual experiences at school were having an effect on their level of school identification. In order to look at individual experiences a comparison was done between fifth and ninth grade student responses to each question on the survey. The analysis for this section began with an examination of the mean scores of fifth graders and ninth graders for each question on the survey. This item analysis is displayed in Figure 22.

When taking the survey, students responded on a 4-point Likert-type scale to the word that closely described how they felt about each statement. Student survey responses were collected and compiled by giving a numerical value to their responses for each question. For example, a 4 equated to "Strongly Agree", a 3 to "Agree", a 2 to "Disagree" and a 1 to "Strongly Disagree". These values were then combined to formulate a value representing the student's level of school identification with 4 being the high and 1 being the low number on the scale. For two of the questions, the scoring was reversed in order to establish uniformity with the rest of the survey. Questions three and five were scored with a 1 equated to "Strongly Agree", a 2 to "Agree", a 3 to "Disagree" and a 4 to "Strongly Disagree". A standard score of 3.25 was established as the point demonstrating a strong culture of school identification.

Sense of belonging. On the whole the fifth grade students had agreed or strongly agreed with the survey questions more often than their freshmen counterparts (see Figure 22). Interestingly enough, almost half of both grade levels (see Figure 24) claimed school was not one of their favorite places to be (as shown in their responses to question eight). According to their responses on question five, they would much prefer to be anywhere else other than school.

There are a few questions in particular that require notable mention. For example question nine has almost the exact same mean value for both grade levels. This question refers to a student's sense of belonging in school and the interest that the faculty has in the student's feelings about school. Based on the data, 39% of fifth graders and 43% of ninth graders (see Figure 24) seemed to believe that there are not people in the school who are interested in what they have to say. With a fifth grade mean of 2.62 and a freshmen mean of 2.58, the grade levels demonstrate a similar value of disagreement (see Figure 22).

This lack of perceived adult support by many ninth grade students is again demonstrated in question four. Both groups agree with the feeling that most of their teachers do not really care about them. The fifth graders have stronger feelings of agreement with a mean score of 3.31 then the freshmen with a mean score of 2.88. Student who felt they belonged in school and had teachers who were concerned about them would have shown more disagreement to this question, thus lowering the mean value.

Particularly telling is the mean difference in the answers of each group to question six. This question deals with having adults in the school who students can

talk to about a problem. The average fifth grade student either agreed or strongly agreed with this item. Freshmen students more frequently disagreed with this question. Their mean value was 2.64. It appears as students reach the upper grade levels, they believe there are fewer individuals for them to communicate with about any problems they might be having.

Sense of value. The responses to question seven and three, questions dealing with the value of education give insight into how students feel about the information presented in class. Question three asked about the usefulness of education in helping a student secure a job. The average fifth grade students either agreed or strongly agreed to this question. On the other hand, freshmen students have a lower perception about the usefulness of education (see Figure 22). The data show a .52 drop between the fifth grade students' and ninth grade students' belief in the usefulness of education as it pertains to future job performance. This feeling of uselessness was seen in the freshmen students' responses to question three as well. While the fifth graders would strongly disagree (3.23) with the things they learn in school being useless, the freshmen would agree (2.71) that the things they learn in class are useless.

Figure 22

Individual Item Analysis of School Identification Survey Results

#	Question	Fifth Grade	Ninth Grade
1	I feel proud of being a part of my school.	3.21	2.99
2	School is one of the most important things in my life.	3.21	3.08
3	Many of the things we learn in class are useless.	3.23	2.71
4	Most of my teachers don't really care about me.	3.31	2.88
5	Most of the time I would like to be any place other than in school.	2.55	2.38
6	There are teachers or other adults in my school that I can talk to if I have a problem.	3.26	2.64
7	Most of what I learn in school will be useful when I get a job.	3.38	2.86
8	School is one of my favorite places to be.	2.46	2.26
9	People at school are interested in what I have to say.	2.62	2.58
10	School is often a waste of time.	3.28	2.98

Displaying the data in a comparative line graph (see Figure 23) emphasizes the differences in responses to items on the school identification scale between fifth grade and ninth grade students. There is a distinct difference in the levels for fifth graders and ninth graders. The variation in the level of agreement and/or disagreement with each statement is visually apparent. The dips in the line graphs at question five and eight correspond to the students' feelings that school is not their favorite place to be.

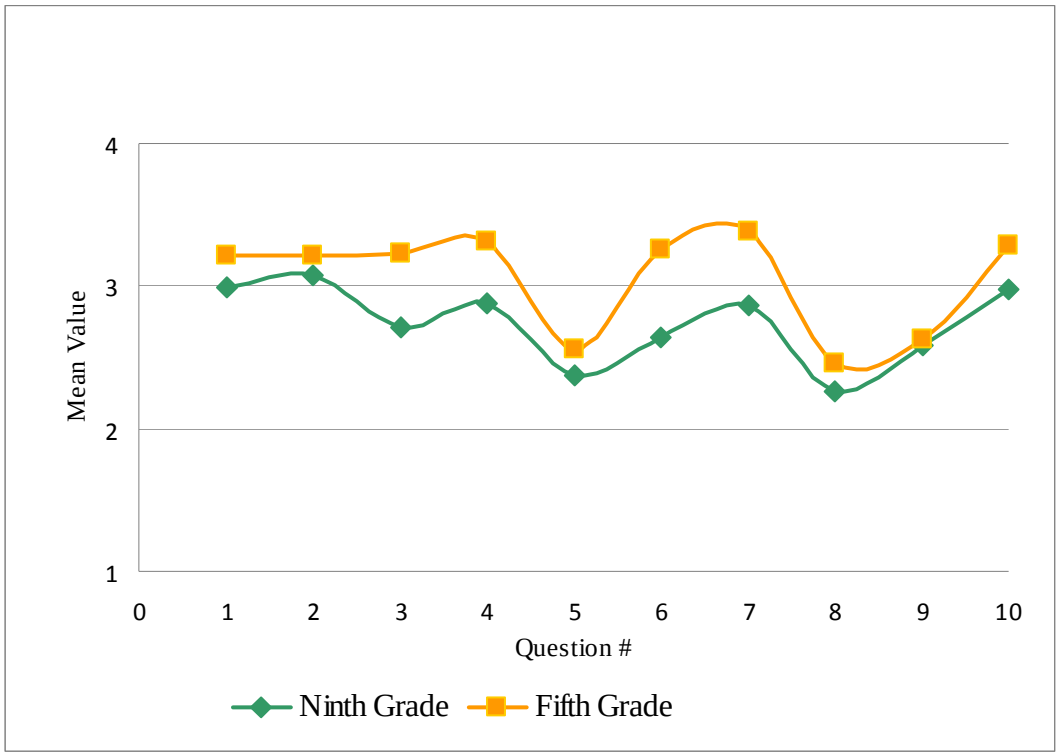

Figure 23. Item Analysis of School Identification (comparative line graph)

Further examination of the item analysis of school identification was completed by examining the percentage of students who responded disagree or strongly disagree to each question (see Figure 24). A great percentage of students in both groups responded negatively to the questions about school as a chosen place to be. Forty-three percent of fifth graders and fifty-four percent of freshmen would rather be any place else other than school (question five). School is clearly not a favorite place to be for either group with forty-seven percent of fifth graders and sixty percent of ninth graders responding negatively to question eight. At least twenty percent of the freshmen responses to each question were in the "disagree" or "strongly disagree" categories. This equates to one-fifth of the freshmen class struggling with their sense of belonging in school and the value of education.

Figure 24

Item Analysis of SID by Percentage of Students who Answered Negatively

Question		Percentage of Students who Disagree or Strongly Disagree	
		Fifth Grade	Ninth Grade
1	I feel proud of being a part of my school.	12%	20%
2	School is one of the most important things in my life.	17%	21%
3	Many of the things we learn in class are useless.	17%	36%
4	Most of my teachers don't really care about me.	15%	24%
5	Most of the time I would like to be any place other than in school.	43%	54%
6	There are teachers or other adults in my school that I can talk to if I have a problem.	13%	40%
7	Most of what I learn in school will be useful when I get a job.	13%	26%
8	School is one of my favorite places to be.	47%	60%
9	People at school are interested in what I have to say.	39%	43%
10	School is often a waste of time.	15%	20%

The final analysis of data involved grouping the survey questions into those that dealt with belonging (questions one, four, six, eight, and nine) and those dealing with the value of education (questions two, three, five, seven, and ten). Once grouped, a mean value was calculated for both grade levels for each set of questions (see Figure 25). The fifth grade students had a 2.972 mean for the sense of belonging questions while the ninth graders had a 2.67, a -.302 difference. There appears to be a drop in students' sense of belonging as they progress through school. The same can be said for their sense of value for education. The fifth graders had a 3.13 mean value, but the ninth graders had a 2.802. The data show a drop in the sense of value of -.328.

Figure 25

Item Analysis of School Identification by Type of Item

	Fifth Grade	Ninth Grade	Difference
Sense of Belonging	2.972	2.67	-0.302
Value of Education	3.13	2.802	-0.328

Conclusion

In summary, results of the study depict that levels of school identification vary from one grade level to another. In Saxon Public Schools there appears to be a lack of school identification in the district with 73 schools scoring below the target of 32.5. There was a significant drop in the mean school identification between the fifth grade year and the seventh, and then again between seventh and ninth grade. When looking at only the high school data, Saxon Public Schools appears to have challenges with the school identification of freshmen students since none of the schools reached the target school identification value of 32.5. School factors like API scores and SES level do not appear to have a significant effect on school identification. Other factors more closely associated with students, like race, poverty level and attendance rate, also do not affect school identification levels.

When comparing fifth and ninth grade students to each other, it is clear that some members of both groups do not want to be in school as it is not their favorite place to be. Students in both groups report experiences with teachers who do not seem to care about them and/or schools lacking caring adults for the students to talk to. These feelings contribute to a lower sense of belonging in school. Some members of

the freshmen class see less value in school as well. They find the school curriculum to be useless and not helpful in their pursuit of employment. Overall, freshmen students as a whole have a lower sense of belonging and of the value of education then their fifth grade counterparts. In chapter five, the findings are further discussed to interpret their meanings by drawing on the existing literature on school identification.

Chapter V

Discussion and Conclusions

A student who drops out of high school is a student who will likely miss many opportunities a high school education can offer them. Often, students drop out of school because they feel alienated and become disinterested in school (Vallerand et al, 1997; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Urban high schools face the challenge of engaging and retaining students so they may actualize their potential to prepare for and pursue lifelong goals. Increased dropout rates, low graduation rates and achievement on standardized tests, and lack of preparation for college or workforce readiness are a growing trend in urban high schools (Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, & Easton, 2008). This study provides insights on patterns of school identification in an urban school district which has implications on how to increase school success for students by helping them to connect with school and teaching them the value of what school has to offer. Researchers have labeled this sense of belonging and valuing of education as school identification (Voelkl, 1997). When students identify with school, they are more academically engaged and committed to school (Styron, 2010; Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011). Hence, they are less likely to become dropouts.

The challenges of academic engagement and student commitment to school seem especially true for freshmen students in urban high schools given their performance in proportionate to upper grade students. According to Herlihy (2007), more students fail the ninth grade year than any other grade in high school and a disproportionate number of these students eventually become drop outs. In Saxon Public Schools, more than forty-five percent of the dropouts for school year 2010-

2011 were freshmen (Oklahoma Department of Education, 2011). If the goal of educators is to keep students in school and help them to be academically successful, one area of investigation that merits consideration is school identification.

In this study, school identification includes an analysis from a district perspective, across grade levels, and an in-depth look at high school freshmen. If more were known about the factors that affect school identification at the district level and at specific grade levels, districts could use this knowledge to realize more positive educational outcomes for their individual students. Looking at school identification from a district perspective called for comparisons across 83 schools at the elementary, middle, and high school level. The majority of the schools had school identification levels below the target mark (32.5) which was chosen to demonstrate a positive culture of school identification. These results show that students as a whole in this district are disconnected with school and school based activities, making it challenging for them to achieve academic success

The results of these comparisons indicate a relationship between student levels of school identification and grade level because students' feelings of belonging and valuing decrease as students' grade levels increase. To better capture school identification, data were disaggregated to draw comparisons between fifth and ninth grade students to examine the degree it changes from fifth grade to the onset of the high school years. According to Wigfield & Wagner, 2005, this is a time of change in children's lives as they try to reach a deeper understanding of themselves. The researchers found these changes can influence the students' thinking and behavior.

Since the freshmen year is considered a critical educational year (Black, 2004) due to the high potential for students to drop out, an exacting focus was put on this year. The transition to high school and the initial challenges of a new school year could accelerate the deterioration process that leads to students dropping out (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Close attention needs to be paid to this time frame to reduce the probability of students feeling alienated. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be happening in Saxon Public Schools, as none of the nine high schools studied reached the target mark for school identification of freshmen students. This should be of great concern to the school district as it signifies students' lack a value for the education being provided and lack of belonging in school. When students lack these important connections to school, they are at risk of various negative outcomes, including dropping out of high school (Vallerand et al, 1997; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Styron, 2010).

Several studies (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Voelkl, 1996 & 1997; Osterman, 2000) have examined school identification; none have examined it from the perspective of how it affects students across grade levels in one district. From the large environment of the district level to the individual level of each student, especially the freshmen students, the importance of school identification cannot be diminished. Determining what is needed at each grade level to insure students continue to feel like they belong in school and value what school has to offer is essential to an urban district's understanding of school identification. By facilitating the structures and environments necessary for high levels of school identification, school districts can influence their students' success in a positive manner. In the

ensuing discussion, the study's data are more closely examined to consider the broader meanings and implications of the results found.

School Identification at the District Level: Improving School Conditions

According to Niemiec and Ryan (2009), people are innately curious creatures who possess a natural love of learning, and value the knowledge and skills education provides. These natural tendencies of children to value schooling and to want to learn should and can be cultivated in schools through opportunities for students to develop a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in school. In Saxon Public Schools, evidence of this development could be found in the levels of school identification that are above the target score (32.5) set by this research. Seven schools met or exceeded this target. The survey data for the students at these schools demonstrated a respect for education and a positive relationship with the teachers who are working within their schools.

Unfortunately, the pattern of school identification across Saxon Public Schools depicts that the majority of the eighty-three schools were below the target score of 32.5. Thirty four schools are below 32.5 but within two points of the target score. Fourteen schools have school identification values of less than 28, signifying a culture that that has low school identification. It appears that the inquisitive nature for learning naturally possessed by students is being replaced by other feelings that cause them to devalue school (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The normative conditions that would enable students to believe in themselves and support their learning (Littky, 2004) do not appear to be in place.

Royer, Provost, Tarabulsy, & Coutu (2008) contend the feelings of pleasure, enthusiasm, and interest in education present in elementary school students have become less evident in high school students. Students' school identification levels dropped from a high of 30.61 for elementary school students, to a low of 27.43 for high school students. These numbers suggest that elementary teachers are doing a better job of encouraging students to be in school and to appreciate what school has to offer. It also suggests a decline in the feelings of belonging and valuing students have between the elementary years and high school. This appears to be the case in Saxon Public Schools.

Within a theoretical perspective, specifically self-determination, research studies suggest that it is a lack of support for student autonomy and competence that contribute to this decline from elementary to the high school level (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; and Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). In Niemiec & Ryan's study (2009), they found when students were in classes with teachers who supported their autonomy and encouraged their competence, they were more intrinsically motivated and performed better in school. Students, also, are more willing to engage in classrooms where they find teachers who convey respect for their capabilities and establish relaxed, friendly relationships with them (Davidson & Phelan, 1999). Additional research suggests when students feel connected to a teacher they tend to internalize and share the same values of education as that teacher (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). They appreciate teachers who appear human with similar challenges, thoughts and feeling as their students. By sharing their experiences, teachers begin to build bridges between the students and themselves. They lessen the sense of hierarchy and

social differences (Davidson & Phelan, 1999) in the room, conveying instead a team or group atmosphere focused on academic achievement. Thus, their students' school identification values are higher than those of disconnected students.

In a different study, Steele (1997) concludes in his study on achievement barriers of women and African-Americans in school that all students begin their educational years by identifying with school. His study found that as they progressed through their educational years, students begin to disidentify with school, feel isolated, and less competent than their peers. Students began to believe that their teachers and other adult members in the school have a low opinion of them or doubt their abilities. Consequently, the students perceptions of the value of the lessons declined as did their confidence in their academic abilities. These results were mimicked in a study by Vallerand et al (1997) who found when students finally made the decision to drop out they had lower levels of intrinsic motivation, perceived themselves as less competent, and felt less autonomous at school. They also perceived their teachers as being less supportive of their autonomy. Lan & Lanthier (2003) found these students also had very low levels of self-esteem.

Further, the smaller class sizes, lack of classroom transitions, and greater opportunity for individual attention at the elementary level encourages school identification. Most elementary level students spend their day with one teacher. They have the opportunity to build a warm and supportive relationship with that adult (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Wentzel& Looney, 2006). High school students, who may have as many as seven or eight teachers in a school day, have less of an opportunity to establish this connection (Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009).

Saxon Public schools has 59 elementary schools, 15 middle schools and 9 high schools. Based on school demographic data, Saxon Public Schools has made an effort to limit elementary class sizes to 23 students, but set the high school limit at 27. While one elementary school teacher may have a class of 23 during the school day, high school teachers frequently see as many as 150 students. High school teachers tend to have large numbers of students in their classes, making it difficult to build relationships and causing them to focus exclusively on the academic subject at hand and not individual student needs (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). This may hinder efforts to foster positive relationships between a teacher and student which may lead to students over time becoming disconnecting with adults in school.

This disconnection over time is evident in the school identification levels of fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students in Saxon Public Schools. Fifth grade students have the highest level of school identification (30.50). There is a large drop in school identification value for seventh graders to 28.40. Then another drop occurs to the freshmen value of 27.34. This supports the research by Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) which found that students begin disidentifying and disengaging with school long before they actually became a drop out.

Based on the results of the current study of Saxon Public Schools, it appears students start disidentifying with school as early as seventh grade then continue on this path into high school. Their educational experiences over time may cause them to devalue school and its benefits for them (Steele, 1997) possibly leading them to become drop outs. As they mature they receive more evaluative information/feedback from teachers which cause them to question their sense of competence and challenge

their academic motivation (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). It also appears their psychological needs (i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness) are being relatively met in elementary school, but as they matriculate to higher grade levels there is a decline in meeting those needs. Strategies for providing additional support to older students so this decline in school identification will cease need to be examined by Saxon Public Schools

School Identification: The Decline between Fifth and Ninth Grade

To further investigate the differences in school identification in the district, the study compared the values for fifth graders to those of ninth graders. Fifth graders had a higher sense of belonging (2.972) and valuing (3.13) than the freshmen. The ninth grade sense of belonging was 2.67 and their value for education level was 2.802. While none of these values reached the target mark of 3.25, the fifth grade values are considerably higher than their freshmen counterparts. These numbers support previous research which found the value students have for school declines as they progress through school, especially across the middle school years, (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). It also supports the argument that students want to be in school (belong), they just do not understand why they are there (value).

Moyer and Motta (1982) found that some students do not see or understand the value placed on education. This appears to be case for fifth and ninth graders in Saxon Public Schools. Ironically, this lack of understanding or value for education increased over time as students lost their appreciation for school. Specifically in Saxon Public School students, 15% of fifth graders and 20% of ninth graders felt school was a waste of time. Seventeen percent of fifth graders and 34% of ninth graders believe the

things they learn in class are useless. That is twice as many freshmen as fifth graders who did not see the value of their schoolwork. Since they do not understand why they are doing the work, they are not motivated to do it. Students who find school work a waste of their time and fail to see the purpose behind the work also did not see the value of school. When students do not value achievements and are not intrinsically motivated, they usually are less academically focused and achieve minimal success (Vallerand et al, 1997; Balfanz et al, 2007; and Wigfield & Wagner, 2005).

The study draws on self-determination theory, specifically the organismic integration theory (OIT) to situate this finding. OIT proposes that people are motivated to learn even when the topic does not generally interest them (Deci et al, 1991). There are two kinds of motivation: internalization and integration. Internalization is the process by which a student converts an external value into an internal one, while integration is how the student assimilates that value in their life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In other words, a student must first find value in something through internalization, and then honor that value in his/her own life through integration. This occurs over time. In terms of school work, value integration and internalization occurs as students' progress through their school years. Their experiences in school, for example influence the degree they internalize, in this case the value of education.

According to this study's findings, the internalization and integration of education is low for fifth and ninth grade students in Saxon Public Schools. This is evident in the value students placed on their education. Between fifth and ninth grade there is an 11% drop in the value placed on education.

Another element of self –determination theory is psychological needs theory (PNT). This theory focuses on meeting student needs and how schools choose to address those needs. There are three specific human needs within PNT – autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Deci et al (1994), when students have autonomy, they have the ability to make choices about their education. Students who feel competent have confidence they can achieve their desired goals within a supportive environment. Relatedness means students have connections with their peers and teachers. They feel like they belong at school.

The data in this study indicate that many schools in Saxon Public schools have not adequately met the psychological needs of students. For example, in terms of autonomy and the choices students have in their education, 39% of fifth graders and 43% of freshmen students felt that no one at school was interested in what they had to say. When student voices are not heard, they become less engaged in learning (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Littky, 2004) because the lessons become teacher directed and not integrated to include their perspectives or input. One way teachers can show support for students is by listening to student opinions and creating a climate where students feel comfortable to share their thoughts (Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009). Students who lose their sense of autonomy in class can also lose their will to complete the work. As students competence beliefs and autonomy decline so too does their value for education (Anderman, 2002).

The literature of school identification shows that peer and teacher relationships play an important role in academic competence, motivation, and success (Wentzel, 2005). In Saxon Public Schools 15% of fifth graders and 24% of freshmen felt their

teachers did not care about them. Also, 13% of fifth graders and 40% of ninth graders believe there is no one in the school that they can talk to if they have a problem. In other words, almost half of the freshmen class (or three times as many ninth graders as fifth graders) feel there are no adults in the school who will talk to them if they are facing a challenge. Without a highly supportive environment, students tend to lose motivation to learn (Vallerand, Fortier and Guay, 1997). When students lack adults in their lives who can associate with and guide them towards a more successful path, their academic performance tends to slip. They lose their way. On the other hand, students whose need for competence is fulfilled are more likely to achieve academic proficiency (Ryan & LaGuardia, 1999). They feel like they belong in school and can be successful there.

The final need of psychological needs theory, relatedness, clearly represents the students' need to connect with their peers and teachers. In other words, relatedness is how connected students feel about the school. Connell and Wellborn (1991) showed that relatedness played a significant part in school success. In this current study, a number of students are struggling with this feeling of belonging. In Saxon, 12% of fifth graders and 20% of ninth grade students do not feel a part of their school. Many of them would rather be any place other than in school (43% of fifth graders and 54% of ninth graders). Majority of the freshmen (60%) indicate that school was not one of their favorite places to be. Having a weak connection to school is associated with lower academic achievement, motivation, and poor retention of material (Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, & Easton, 2008; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009).

In sum, students need to believe they belong in school, feel they are cared about and respected by their teachers and peers, and have the ability to make some choices about their education. The overall conclusion from the data gathered from Saxon Public Schools is that there is a need for school personnel to focus on improving conditions that foster more positive interactions between students and adults in the school. Groups of students in both the elementary and high school levels do not feel motivated to learn, failed to see the value in education, and lacked a sense of belonging in the schools. By meeting these needs Saxon Public Schools could potentially improve the chances of academic success for these students.

Breaking the Cycle of Disidentification for Freshmen Students

Adolescence is a time of change; changes occur in their bodies, in their levels of autonomy, and in the circumstances that affect their schooling. Add to that becoming a freshman in a new school community and learning the rules that guide that community, and one can understand why this is a "make or break" year (Heppen & Therriault, 2008) or a "critical juncture" for students (Herlihy, 2077). The freshmen year is the period that students are most vulnerable to failure, become disengaged from school, and feel most disconnected with school (Wheelock, 1993).

School identification of freshmen students was a focus in this study and begun by disaggregating the freshmen data to the school level. There are nine high schools in Saxon Public Schools. The data showed a vast difference in the school identification levels of freshmen students at the nine high schools. Specifically, scores ranged from a low of 24.13 to a high of 31.15. None of the schools met the target score of 32.5, demonstrating school cultures that are struggling to support school

identification. Majority of the scores were a full two points away from the target score.

Even the magnet schools with their specific focus and application based programs failed to reach the target score. The school score closest to the target was HS8, the academic based magnet. One explanation for this high school identification value could be a result of these students applying to attend the academic program at this school. They already have the intrinsic motivation to succeed at that level and value the educational focus this school can provide. In contrast, the school that has the lowest school identification value is HS3, a non-magnet school. Further, the schools with the next two lowest values are both magnet schools. There is no significant difference between the school identification levels of magnet schools and non-magnet schools. Despite Saxon's efforts to connect students to school through magnet programs and/or neighborhood schools, there are still issues with students' identification with school.

Arguably, a magnet school would likely have higher level of school identification than a non-magnet school because students elect to attend a magnet school based on their interest. This suggests that it is the environment of the school – interactions between students and adult that has the greatest potential for freshmen students to identify with school. Regardless of the type of school they attend, all freshmen students are at a point in their lives when they are exploring career options and different academic challenges (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). In order to do this successfully, they must have the support of an attentive teacher or administrator.

Establishing an attentive, caring relationship with an adult in the building is one of the most important tools to fostering student resiliency (Davidson & Phelan, 1999).

Given that the type of school did not seem to positively or negatively support the differences in school identification levels for freshmen, the study looked at other factors that might play a role in the differences noted. The school factors examined included academic performance index (API), and socioeconomic level (SES). Regardless of their API score or SES level, none of the high schools reached the target score of 32.5. In terms of API, the schools closest to this mark had an "average" API score and a school identification level of 30.75. In terms of SES, schools with a low poverty level (less than 30% free/reduced lunch) had the highest school identification score (31.21). While there was some variation in the levels of school identification within each factor, neither factor had a significant effect on school identification for freshmen students. The school level factors seem to be too far removed from the individual students to affect their school identification levels directly. Students who are struggling with school identification are a diverse group with a varying list of needs (Finn, 1993; and Nasir et al, 2011). These school level factors do not seem to address their challenges.

Since the school level factors did not have a significant effect on school identification levels, some student factors (i.e. race, poverty level, and attendance rates) were examined. Similar to the school factors' results, while there was some variation in the values, none of these factors appeared to have a significant effect in students' levels of school identification. Attendance had the largest correlation to school identification at .31, signifying a direct relationship between these variables.

One interpretation of these findings is students with low identification have high absenteeism because over time they may become alienated and find the subject matter more difficult; therefore, they stop attending school. Research shows students will engage in avoidance tactics (like not coming to school) if they perceive themselves as having low levels of competence or as an outsider (Kazdin, 1993; Schoeneberger, 2012). Elevated rates of absenteeism do indicate disengagement with school but without exploring this further through qualitative study of freshmen students in this study, it is difficult to explain the correlation.

However, a closer examination of specific questions on the school identification survey provides more insights about differences in student beliefs regarding sense of belonging and valuing school. For example, sense of belonging became apparent when ninth grade students were specifically questioned about their relationships with adults in their schools. The data found that freshmen students indicated a lack of adult support in school and a lack of adult interest in what the students had to say. Forty-three percent of freshmen felt the adults at school were not interested in their perspective about school matters. Further, 24% felt that the teachers did not really care about them. These two findings might provide a clue as to why those freshmen students with low school identification were frequently absent from school.

Weinstein (2002) concluded that the use of positive adult relationships plays a very important role in assisting students to find value in school. It is through these relationships that students learn to internalize the value of education. The implication is that when students interact with caring adults, they are likely to live up to the

expectations set for them and are committed to achieving the academic goals set for them. When school-based leadership and teachers get involved in the lives of their students, dropout signs like poor attendance, incomplete homework, etc. can be avoided (Schoeneberger, 2012).

Lounsbury and Johnston (1985) found that most high schools offered little or no guidance to help ninth-graders adjust academically and socially. This lack of adult support leads to freshmen students increased feelings of alienation. Other researchers, (see e.g., Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Hargreaves et al., 1996; Johnson, Farkas, & Bers, 1997; Newmann, 1981; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989), found high schools to be alienating institutions. Despite the number of adults in the building, ninth graders did not have a caring and responsive adult to guide them through their first year in high school. Freshmen students find themselves struggling to find their way in often large, impersonal competitive environments (Black, 2004). Many students find themselves alone in a crowd of thousands without the adult support or guidance that they had become accustomed to in the middle school setting. This study of Saxon Public Schools supports these findings.

In their study, Feldlaufer, Midgley, and Eccles (1988) confirmed the importance of teacher support of students. They found high school students who had teachers that they felt were less supportive reported a lower perceived value of the class material. A lack of teacher support for student efforts caused a decline in student academic performance. This played out in my study as well with 34% of freshmen students finding their most of their school work to be useless. Twenty-six percent of freshmen students also did not see how what they learned in class would help them

when they got a job. In sum, 20% of freshmen students found school a waste of time. These feelings mimic those found by Taylor, Flickinger, Roberts, and Fulmore, (1994). Their subjects felt the educational system did not value them as individuals, held low expectations for them, and did not reward them equally.

In general, high schools struggle with holding students' interest during a time when their focus is on a wider range of activities, many of which are outside of school or are job related. Several researchers contend (e.g., Ogbu, 1978, 1992; Taylor, 1991; and Rhodes, 2005), students who do not value school tend to exert less effort because they perceive their efforts will not be rewarded in real-life opportunities. This seems true of some of the Saxon freshmen since 26% of freshmen do not believe what they are learning in school will be useful later in life. Arguably, Saxon Public schools may be contributing to the disidentification of students by not connecting them to caring adult or providing them with appropriate opportunities to develop a value for school. They may also be failing to communicate effectively the life-time benefits of a good education.

In sum, freshmen students have the lowest level of school identification in Saxon Public Schools because they lack a sense of belonging to school and an understanding of the value of education. They would rather be anywhere other than school because it is not one of their favorite places to be. They find the things they learn in class to be useless, and not helpful to acquiring a future job. Many of them believe teachers do not care about them and are uninterested in what students have to say. For many freshmen, there is no adult in the building who they trust to discuss their adolescent problems and challenges. These students appear to feel lost and

alone in the urban high schools of Saxon Public Schools. The compounding factors on why freshmen students in this study have a low sense of belonging and valuing for school are things that can be remedied through concerted efforts to create a positive environment that fosters students' competence, relatedness and autonomy.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify patterns of school identification across grade levels, whether certain factors contributed to students' feelings of identification with school in an urban district in the mid-western United States. Overall, the results show that it is not school factors or student factors that affect school identification of Saxon Public School students, but it is their personal experiences as they progress through school that determines their sense of belonging and their value for education. Humans are born with a love of learning (Dewey, 1938; Deci & Ryan, 2000). This joy seems to be present in fifth grade, begins to diminish in seventh, and further decreases by ninth grade. Something seems to be missing for these students as they progress through their educational experiences.

The keys to school identification are a sense of belonging in school and a value for education. In essence, students need to belong in school and feel cared for, be listened to, be permitted to make educational choices, and feel secure in their own abilities. Students need a caring, positive adult relationship to assist them as they progress through school. They need to have the ability to question the purpose of what they are learning and to understand the rationale behind the lesson. This helps them feel autonomous and take ownership of their work. Students also need to feel

competent in their learning and encouraged to share when they feel challenged or successful.

Freshmen students are especially vulnerable as they matriculate to high school. This is a critical year when a number of students make the decisions to drop out. The freshmen in Saxon Public Schools found their high school's lacked the adult support they needed and found themselves struggling to find their way in their new environment. Over one-quarter of them do not believe what they are learning in school is relevant nor will it help them find a job in later life. In other words, they are not connected to school and do not see the value of the education they are being provided. As a result, a majority of them would rather be anywhere else than school. Saxon Public Schools needs to focus on these issues if it hopes to improve is students' levels of identification with school.

Implications for Practice and Policy

According to Goodenow's (1993) research, children who felt they belonged in school were more motivated, had higher expectations of success, and believed in the value of their academic work. For freshmen students to experience this sense of belonging and value of education in Saxon Public Schools, the students need to establish a positive relationship with their teachers or other caring adults in their school, and understand the value of a high school education to their future success in life. Research has shown that ninth-grade urban students who had teachers who supported their autonomy in a positive manner had higher levels of motivation and academic success (Hardre and Reeve, 2003). When students connect with school and consider it a place they want to be, they are less likely to drop out (Vallerand, Fortier,

& Guay, 1997). Additionally, when students find value in the work they are doing in class, they become intrinsically motivated to complete the work to the best of their ability. Saxon Public Schools needs to convey to its students not only the "what" of education but the "why".

How can they accomplish this goal? The implementation of new programs and professional development for teachers aimed at increasing school identification can improve the sense of belonging and valuing felt by students in the building The Youth Asset Study (2012), a survey of 1,117 students between the ages of 12 and 17 and their families conducted by the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City, found that feeling a sense of belonging in school is something that can be improved. School districts help students feel safe, improve academically, and stay out of trouble when they design their professional development programs to teach teachers to be better role models and to build relationships with students. Saxon needs to focus its attention on similar programs to improve the students' sense of belonging and valuing of education.

Supporting Freshmen Students as They Transition to High School

There are a number of initiatives that can be implemented by Saxon Public Schools to support freshmen students in their transition to high school. These include transition programs, advisory classes, peer mentors, professional development for teachers, and student centered learning plans. The research behind each of these reforms demonstrates their success in assisting freshmen students.

Prior to the start of school freshmen students will participate in assemblies and or small group classes focused on introducing them to each other, the teachers, the

school and the school policies. For example, all of the sports/clubs available for student membership should be presented to incoming freshmen through an activity fair or assembly. Extra-curricular activities are important because students who participate in school activities identify with the school's mission and culture (Styron, 2010). The almost instantly develop a sense of belonging and a relationship with their teammates or fellow club members. Also included in these presentations should be introduction to the school support staff (i.e. counselors, social workers, school nurse, librarian, etc.). It is important for the students to know who these people are and where there offices are as these adults will assist students when they experience challenges during the school year.

These transition events are a time for the teachers to begin establishing relationships with their students. According to Davidson & Phelan (1999), teachers can build a positive relationship with students by taking a personal interest in their lives outside the classroom (i.e. summer activities, sports teams, clubs, hobbies, etc.). This includes participating in conversations about the students' lives outside of school, their hopes, and aspirations. Students notice and relate to teachers who show concern for their lives and challenges. They appreciate when teachers communicate with them directly and regularly about their academic progress. A teacher who conveys sincere interest in students and their progress may win student respect and trust, and thereby encourage their motivation to learn (Davidson & Phelan, 1999; Erickson, 1993).

Once school begins, freshmen students should participate in daily advisory time. This class provides a "consistent environment where they are able to truly

connect with a small group of kids and one adult" (Littky, 2004, p.62). The advisor becomes the caring adult in the life of the freshman student: the student's true advocate. With only 15-17 students in each advisory, the teachers have the opportunity to really get to know the students, and assist them with the many challenges of high school. Advisors can help the students navigate their first year by providing insight to the school structure and counseling if the students start to struggle. Also, included in advisory time should be some extras that other classes cannot provide. For example, during this time students should have access to special resources like college visits, computer labs, tutoring, and their teachers' e-mail address to use for support after hours, etc. (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011). The advisory teachers should really get to know the student through the building of a positive, supportive relationship.

During advisory time, freshmen should have access to an older student such as a Junior or Senior. This individual should be paired with the student for the entire school year to provide the attention and positive support of an older peer mentor. These students provide the "student view" of the school. For example, they know how to quickly get through the lunch line, where to go to get basketball tickets, and also how to pass Freshmen English. They can provide not only academic, but social support. Mentoring has great potential for improving the freshman transition experience (Sims, 2010) by providing freshmen students with a human connection to school and an opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills. Older students have already established a sense of belonging to school and understand the value of education. They can convey these beliefs to another adolescent in a way that an adult

might not be able to. Hopefully, freshmen students will develop the skills necessary to one day be mentors themselves.

When looking a professional development for high school teachers, one focus needs to be put on integrating student's experiences and knowledge into the subject matter. Education needs to start with the student not the subject (Littky, 2004) or the pacing calendar. Teachers need to be reminded they are in the business of teaching students, not academic subjects. With that in mind, student's educational programs should be designed with input from their parents, teachers, and themselves (Littky, 2004). In order to build autonomy and competence, students need to have input into their academics. For example, student experiences and cultures need to be included in the instructional moments (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011). Teachers need to plan instructional events around student interests, sense of curiosity and "sense of being challenged" (Reeve et al, 2008). When teachers consider the students' frame of reference, students display a greater curiosity, make more independent attempts to master the task at hand, and have higher levels of self-esteem (Davidson & Phelan, 1999; Deci et al, 1981).

When students appear to be disinterested or struggling, teachers need to think outside of the box for solutions to their challenges. Students who lack motivation need to be seen as a student with a performance problem, not necessarily as a student with a challenging attitude. Teachers need to break down assignments into short-term goals to allow for small student victories, permit different ways for individual students to complete repetitive tasks, and encourage students to work with their classmates. When students balk at completing an assignment, instead of disputing students'

feelings, teachers should accept the students' negative feelings as valid, personal reactions (Reeve et al, 2008). These feelings should be acknowledged and then worked through so students feel heard. Teachers can further increase motivation by explaining the rationale behind the assignment, developing its meaning to the student and thus enhancing the activity's value. These suggestions encourage student competence, create autonomy, and build relationships between students and teachers.

Any initiatives adopted by Saxon Public Schools for improving the transition of freshmen to high school need to focus on establishing a sense of belonging in each of the high schools and demonstrating to the students the value of the education they will receive there. Their individual needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness should be addressed prior to the start of school and continue throughout the school year. By focusing on these needs, the high school faculty and staff can tie these students to school and increase their chances of graduating.

Building Relationships with Middle School Students

In addition to the abovementioned, attention needs to be paid to the teachers in the middle schools as this is where the students' levels of school identification experience the greatest decrease. The District needs to understand what is happening across middle schools leading to a decline in school identification. What is different about the middle school experience that causes students to feel like they are less important than when they were in elementary school? The survey results demonstrating much higher elementary levels for school identification than the middle and high school levels suggests grade school teachers seem to be developing supportive teacher-student relationships which encourage school identification. These

relationships appear to diminish when students reach middle school. Intensive intervention needs to take place during middle school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). The earlier the intervention occurs, the better.

Identifying struggling students early is critical to providing necessary interventions to those students who are struggling with school identification. Though it would require additional research, attendance is one area in which these signals might be apparent. Because attendance had the highest correlation to school identification in this study, district personnel should look to it as a possible indicator of students in trouble. Through the use of its attendance collection software, the district could look for patterns of attendance indicating student are disengaged in school to build in interventions. Every student absence must bring a response from the school (Balfanz et al, 2007). This response could range from a phone call home to a conversation with the student when they return to school.

Other early interventions that middle school teachers and administrators might use to identify struggling students include examining behavior challenges and failure rates. Both of these indicators could be potential dropout predictors. Balfanz et al (2007) found in their research four flags that were early predictors of dropping out. These included less than 80% attendance, failure of sixth grade math or English, or recipient of an out-of-school suspension during sixth grade. Monitoring and reacting to these warning flags could assist middle school teachers in keeping their students on the path to graduation.

Through professional development, middle school teachers can learn how to develop positive, caring relationships with students so the adolescents will continue to

value education and see school as a positive place for them to be. Effective professional development that focuses on enhancing the learning skills of and provides strategies for dealing with struggling students will benefit their academic performance (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Teachers need to know how to adapt instruction to the students' current skills and developmental level. For example, these adaptations could include increased one-on-one time with teachers or tutors for students who are struggling.

If focused attention can be placed on students at the middle school level, it will have a lasting effect on the students when they become freshmen in high school. They will enter school with higher levels of school identification and be better prepared for their freshmen experience. This will require additional efforts by middle school teachers and administrators, but is necessary if Saxon Public Schools is to discover the key to unlocking why school identification decreases so extensively in the middle school years.

Supporting All Students: From Elementary to High School

At every level (i.e. elementary, middle and high school) meeting the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness is paramount to students identifying with school. Teachers can encourage autonomy by providing clear expectations of students, permitting equal opportunities for students to be responsible in class, and allowing students to make decisions about their own education through collaboration between student and teacher. Students who are permitted to develop and demonstrate their learned skills frequently in the classroom will develop a level of competency that will help them to succeed. The final need,

relatedness, is encouraged by developing a sense of community in the classroom. In order to meet this need, teachers need to listen to students' opinions and enable students to share their thoughts in a safe and secure climate.

Research (Littky, 2004; Reeve et al, 2008; Sims, 2010; and Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011) has shown there are multiple easy ways for teachers to support students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. These include:

- Greeting the students daily at the door to let them know the teacher is glad to see them.
- Creating independent work time when students can work their own way on projects they design.
- Providing students with rationales in student friendly language for why they are learning a topic and why it might be useful to them.
- Communicating praise, encouragement and suggestions for progress.
- Being positively responsive to and respectful of student questions, suggestions and ideas.
- Asking students to evaluate classes, and then using the information to improve teaching within the school.
- Allowing the student council to be included in making decisions about the school.
- Monitoring student attendance and genuinely inquiring about the students' reasons for missing school.
- Having students interview someone who works in a career field that interests them to discover what academic skills they'll need to do that job in later life

- Giving positive incentives for good behavior and not just negative results when students misbehave.
- Replacing the electives of struggling students with extra-help courses which are linked to core curriculum and/or one-on-one tutoring.
- Providing numerous sports, clubs and activities that are culturally-responsive and of interest to all types of students
- Building positive relationships between caring adults and a students

Focusing on school identification is instrumental to improving academic success for students in Saxon Public Schools. Supportive teachers promote positive academic attitudes and a greater satisfaction with school. These teachers are also able to positively affect student motivation because they convey to the students that they are competent and able to do the task at hand (Vallerand et al, 1997). By emphasizing the importance of student-teacher relationships through the district, Saxon can promote a culture where students feel like they belong and value education. This will result in improved student engagement, increased graduation rates, and school environments that are positively focused on student success.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The results presented in this study suggest some key patterns of school identification within Saxon Public Schools. There is still additional research that is needed to understand more closely why students in particular, freshmen are more likely to disidentify with school leading them to drop out. Through a longitudinal study, the results may provide more insight to the cause of low school identification.

Such a study would also monitor the positive/negative effects of any efforts by Saxon to improve school identification in the district, in particular the high schools.

An additional qualitative exploration of the seven schools that scored above the target score of 32.5 may provide data on what procedures and policies the schools employ to increase their levels of school identification. These seven schools have in affect the appropriate policies and transition programs which encourage positive school identification. It would seem the schools that are below the target score could learn something from the success of these schools. Whatever programs the seven schools are implementing need to be shared with the other schools in the district to help them improve the school identification levels of their students.

Qualitative research would also add additional insight to the school identification levels of students. Conducting student interviews or focus groups would contribute to the body of knowledge on school identification. Being able to have the students share their school experiences would allow for greater understanding about the personal aspects of school identification. For this study, I was unable to acquire the academic achievement data for each student who took the survey. Possessing this data to correlate with the students' survey data would have personalized the school identification data and allowed for comparisons between high-achieving and low achieving students.

Finally, comparative research would also provide some unique insight into school identification. By conducting this study in a similar urban school district in another geographical area with a similar demographical population would determine if the findings of this study were consistent with other districts. Also, it would be

interesting to see if their school and student level factors had similar effects on school identification levels of their students.

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OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT PROTECTION - IRB

December 14, 2011 **REVIEW DATE: December 13, 2011**

Michelle Butler
OU-Tulsa (EACS)
[redacted]

RE: Determination of Human Research Worksheet – *"Patterns of School Identification in an Urban School District"*

Dear Ms. Butler,

I have reviewed your submission and have determined this type of research does not meet the criteria for Human Subjects Research. The proposed activity involves analyzing data that is not individually identifiable. Therefore, IRB approval is not necessary so you may proceed with your project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at (405) 325-8110 or you may send an email to irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Aimee Franklin, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

OS_Ltr_HSR