

STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT ADAPTATION AT MAJOR POINTS OF  
TRANSITION IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY GRADES: A CASE STUDY

By

RONI D. MCKEE

Bachelor of Arts in Education  
Southeastern Oklahoma State University  
Durant, OK  
2008

Master of Education  
University of Central Oklahoma  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
2012

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
December, 2020

STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT ADAPTATION AT  
MAJOR POINTS OF TRANSITION IN THE EARLY  
ELEMENTARY GRADES: A CASE STUDY

Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Katherine Curry

---

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Ed Harris

---

Dr. Jentre Olsen

---

Dr. Juliana Gail Utley

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been told that one must possess tenacity to survive the dissertation process. What I have come to realize is that tenacity is not only required of the scholar, but of those closest to her. This was a path I certainly did not travel alone. There is absolutely no way one can finish a doctoral program while simultaneously being a building principal, wife, and mother without the support of others. Thank you to supportive faculty and advisors, dear colleagues, cohort members, extended family, my children, and my husband.

Thank you to the faculty and advisors of Oklahoma State University for providing the support and education needed to accomplish this goal of mine. Dr. Curry, I appreciate your tireless commitment to providing me feedback and support along the way. Also, thank you to my colleagues who rode along the journey through my stories. Your support and participation were invaluable to me. Thank you to my extended family of my parents and siblings who listened tirelessly to me talk about the dissertation process and for always encouraging me to complete the journey. To my cohort members thank you for making sure there was never a dull Wednesday night class or Sunday afternoon study session. Despite all being educators, we sure were a varied group of people with unique perspectives and opinions. I appreciate the grand, yet respectful, discussions.

Thank you to my beautiful children. You all push me to do my best and be my best each day and I hope I have made you all proud! I promise to never utter the words, "I have to go work on my paper" again. I hope to have been an example to you that tenacity and hard work do pay off. Never give up even when the road is challenging and appears endless, lean on others for support, and take care of yourself in the process.

Shawn, thank you for always pushing me to be my best. You were always there to encourage me when I doubted the journey always willing to "hold down the fort" in my absence. I appreciate your sacrifice of my time away with weekly classes, study groups and time writing. Without you I would not have finished and most certainly would never have even begun! Your support has gotten us to the end of the doctoral road!

Finally, my dear Ketcher, I made a promise to you five years ago that I would finish this thing. You were with me during my most challenging semester, and I knew I had to honor you with finishing. I think of you every day and love you with everything I have - all the way to Neverland and back.

Name: RONI MCKEE

Date of Degree: December, 2020

Title of Study: STUDENT ADAPTATION AT MAJOR POINTS OF TRANSITION IN  
THE EARLY ELEMENTARY GRADES: A CASE STUDY

Major Field: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Abstract: Students are experiencing major transitions between education settings more often than in previous decades (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). While, historically, transitions have occurred between elementary and middle school, and middle and high school, for a number of reasons districts are increasing the number of major transitions for students from three to six or more (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). Additionally, whereas students previously transitioned after fifth or sixth grades when they were cognitively and developmentally more mature, students in schools today are often transitioning at younger ages (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010), sometimes while still in early childhood education. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and counselors of the influence of major student transitions between school buildings between third grade and fourth grade on student adaptation to the learning environment. This study looked at the transition process through the lens of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. The transition at Huntsman Elementary is a success in big part due to the number of visits to the school the students have before school begins. Additionally, communication is crucial in the transition process. This is not just limited to school officials communicating with incoming students and parents, but also the communication between the sending schools and the receiving school. While a solid transition plan helps support transitioning students, no process is all encompassing for all students. Additional supports may be required by some students to transition successfully.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Problem Statement .....	4
Statement of Purpose and Research Questions .....	6
Epistemological Perspective .....	6
Theoretical Perspective .....	7
Methods.....	9
Population and Sample .....	9
Data Collection .....	10
Data Analysis .....	11
Significance.....	12
Research .....	12
Theory .....	12
Practice.....	12
Definition of Terms.....	13
Summary .....	15
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	16
History of Education in the United States.....	16
No Child Left Behind.....	19
School Configuration .....	21
Impact of School Configuration.....	21
Attempts to Support Students in Transition.....	24
Freshman Academies .....	24
Student Visits .....	25
Other Supports .....	25
Theoretical Framework .....	26
Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development .....	26
Sensorimotor .....	27
Preoperational Stage .....	27
Concrete Operational Stage .....	27
Formal Operational Stage .....	28
Cognitive Process of Intelligence .....	29
Assimilation .....	29
Accommodation.....	30
Use of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.....	30

Use of Theory in this Study .....	30
III. METHODOLOGY .....	32
Research Design.....	33
Population and Sampling .....	33
Data Collection .....	35
Data Analysis .....	36
Researcher's Role .....	39
Ethical Considerations .....	40
Assumptions.....	41
Trustworthiness of Findings .....	41
Summary .....	43
IV. PRESENTATION OF DATA .....	44
Community Context.....	45
School Context.....	46
Participants.....	49
Teacher 1.....	49
Teacher 2.....	50
Teacher 3.....	50
Teacher 4.....	51
Counselor 1 .....	51
Counselor 2 .....	52
Assistant Principal .....	52
Principal .....	53
Transition Strategies .....	53
3rd Grade Visits .....	54
Parent Meeting .....	56
Communications .....	58
V. DATA ANALYSIS.....	63
Major Themes .....	63
Easing Fears and Anxieties.....	63
Open Communication .....	68
A Team Approach.....	72
Summary .....	74

VI. FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	75
Summary of Study .....	75
Research Questions.....	76
Summary of Findings.....	77
Finding Through the Lens of Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development .....	95
Concrete Operational .....	96
Assimilation .....	98
Accommodation.....	98
Adaptation.....	99
Discussion.....	102
Numerous Visits.....	102
Communication.....	103
Additional Supports .....	104
Implications.....	104
Implications for Practice .....	104
Implications for Research .....	105
Implications for Theory .....	105
Summary .....	106
REFERENCES.....	108
APPENDICES.....	119

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Trustworthiness Criteria and Examples .....	42
2. Participants' Years of Experience in Current School.....	49



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.....	28
2. Concrete Operational Stage.....	95

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Students are experiencing major transitions between education settings more often than in previous decades (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). While, historically, transitions have occurred between elementary and middle school, and middle and high school, for a number of reasons some districts are increasing the number of major transitions for students from three to six or more (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). Additionally, whereas students previously transitioned after fifth or sixth grades when they were cognitively and developmentally more mature, students in schools today are often transitioning at younger ages (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010), sometimes while still in early childhood education. Due to district needs and circumstances, these transitions also manifested differently even in proximate districts. For example, three adjoining suburban districts in Oklahoma had three different transition plans, with varying points of major transitions and varying number of major transitions for students in their academic career.

In District A, students experienced four transitions during their education career in which they moved from a number of elementary schools into one main middle school, and then one main high school. In this district elementary students transitioned to a new building after fourth grade into a fifth and sixth grade building. Next, these students transitioned from the fifth and sixth grade building into a junior high setting of seventh

and eighth grades. Finally, students transitioned twice in high school, once into the Freshman Academy, and finally into the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade building. In each of these transitions, students transitioned from lower population schools to higher populations, combining area schools into fewer buildings as students progressed through the grades.

In District B, students also transitioned four times, but at different grade levels. Students in this district attended primary school for Pre-K through third grade, and then transitioned to a fourth and fifth grade building. After fifth grade, the students transitioned twice during middle school. First the students transitioned into a sixth-grade building on the campus. Then, they transitioned into a larger seventh and eighth grade building. After middle school, students transitioned to the high school where they attended all four grades ninth grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the same building. Again, in District B, students transitioned from lower population elementary schools to higher population middle and high school settings.

The final district, District C, had the most transitions. In this particular district, students transitioned a total of six times from Pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The district had structured its elementary and middle schools to house only two grades each. One campus housed all of the Pre-K – Kindergarten students. Then, the students transitioned to separate campuses for first and second grade, third and fourth grade, fifth and sixth grade, and seventh and eighth grade. After eighth grade, the students transitioned into one comprehensive high school with ninth through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Unlike the other districts, students in this district moved together, all students at the same grade level attended school in the same building.

Transitions between school levels such as those exemplified in districts A, B, and C can be a tremendously stressful time for students. Research shows, for some students, the transition from one educational environment to another is associated with achievement loss and academic challenges (Smith, 2006). Difficult transitions from middle school to high school have been linked to an increase in high school dropout rates (Alsplough, 1998), behavior problems (Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996), a decrease in GPA (Isakson and Jarvis, 1999), and a lowered sense of self-esteem and self-perception (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Research also indicates that the number and type of transitions that a child experiences effects the overall impact of the transition. Students who experience more transitions between Pre-K and 12, students who transition in larger districts, and students who transition in a pyramid structure (from lower population schools to higher population schools within the same district), appear to demonstrate higher rates of achievement loss and drop-out rates (Asplough, 1998; Asplough, 1999). In an additional study conducted by Asplough and Harting (1995), findings indicated that students transitioning from a 6-8 middle school building to high school did experience greater achievement loss than those students transitioning from a K-8 school building to high school.

If research shows transition can have negative impacts on student outcomes, why then are districts currently increasing the number of transitions for students? Restructuring major transitions points for students is due to a variety of elements. In some instances, schools restructured to ease the coordination of professional development for teachers who are in high-stakes testing environments due to the requirements of legislation such as No Child Left Behind (Cohen-Vogel, 2011). These efforts are more

easily coordinated if teachers who teach similar content and are held to similar accountability standards are in the same building (Cohen-Vogel, 2011). School district restructuring is also influenced by decreases in funding and high rates of student mobility. Because funding is allocated to districts based on average enrollment, tremendous emphasis has been placed on districts to find structural answers to address challenges produced by highly mobile communities (McCann, n.d.) While some districts faced decreases in enrollment, others were tasked with meeting the challenges associated with a growing student population (Miles, 2001). One strategy that many districts, primarily large, urban districts, have implemented is to restructure in a way that maximizes building capacities. This restructuring can result in the closing of buildings, the addition of buildings, and often a shift in the grade levels of students that attend certain buildings in a district (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010).

### **Problem Statement**

Students are experiencing major transitions between education settings much more frequently and at younger ages than they have in the past. Historically, districts have been structured in Pre-K through fifth grade elementary schools, sixth through eighth grade middle schools, and ninth through 12 high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), thus the major transitions for students in these settings occurs when students move from fifth to sixth grade and when students move from eighth to ninth grade. (Barton & Klump, 2012; Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010; UNC, 2002; Offenber, 2001; Williamson, 2009; Williamson, 2012). However, in an effort to address the NCLB-mandated testing process, one of the issues considered by schools was how best to configure student populations to maximize all aspects of the educational setting while

simultaneously maximizing student achievement by looking at grade configurations. Decisions about campus grade configurations included other factors such as projected enrollments, transportation costs, size of schools, school goals, fiscal constraints, political tensions, geographic realities, and financial accountability. As student populations shifted, educational leaders looked for grade span configurations that best fit their community culture and current facilities, focusing financial resources on other means of improving academic achievement, thus possibly increasing the amount of school transitions that students encounter (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010)

Sometimes students adapt to major transitions well, and other times they do not. According to Alspaugh (1998), there is a statistically significant achievement loss during the time of transition from elementary school and middle school. This loss was noted to be more significant when the transitioning students came from multiple elementary schools merging into one middle school, known as “pyramid transition.” In addition, students who attended middle schools displayed greater loss in achievement in ninth grade when they attended a middle school as opposed to a K-8 school (Alspaugh 1998). The lack of successful transition caused the high school dropout rate to rise, in particular for freshman (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Therefore, research suggests that multiple transitions within a student’s educational experience can negatively influence students (Alspaugh, 1998, Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin & Vigdor, 2007; Gordon, Peterson, Gdula, & Klingbeil, 2011; Offenber, 2001; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Parker, 2009; Smith, 2006; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991; Wren, 2003).

One reason transition may not be successful is that while schools develop transition strategies to support students, the strategies may not align with the cognitive

development of students, posing challenges to the assimilation, accommodation, and ultimately adaption of the student to the new environment. Much of the existing literature on major transitions has been conducted at the secondary school level (Alspaugh, 1998 & Smith, 2006), and while there is some research on the transition between late elementary school and middle school, (Parker, 2009; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991) little is known about the impact of major transitions on students when they are forced to change buildings in the early elementary years and in the earlier stages of cognitive development. Additionally, many of the research-based strategies used by schools to ease transitions are based on strategies that have proven successful with older students (Smith, 2006). Understanding the impact of major transitions in the early childhood years, prior to fifth or sixth grade, may provide useful information for district administrators who are seeking to maximize use of district funds while also improving student outcomes. Research in this area may also better support administrators and teachers in addressing the needs of students who experience major transitions into new buildings within the early childhood grades.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and counselors of the influence of major student transitions between school buildings between third grade and fourth grade on student adaptation to the learning environment. Thus, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How does a select school in one school district implement transitions for students between third and fourth grade?

- a. What are the strategies used to support students before, during, and after student transitions between third and fourth grade?
  - b. How does school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) perceive their role in student transitions between third and fourth grade?
2. What challenges have school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) experienced in student transitions between third and fourth grade?
  - a. How have school staff addressed these challenges?

### **Epistemological Perspective**

Schwandt (2000) identifies the epistemological stances in qualitative inquiry, one of which is interpretivism. The interpretivist point of view asserts that the difference between human social action and the movement of physical objects is that human action is naturally meaningful (Schwandt, 2000). In order to understand social action such as accommodation, the inquiring mind must understand the meaning that forms those actions (Patton, 2012).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development was developed in response to earlier ideas about children—cognitive capacity was fixed at birth, cognitive behavior was extrinsically motivated (Flavell, 1996), and children and adults cognitively functioned in a similar manner (Flavell, 1996). Piaget, however, focused his theory of intelligence on “functional continuity” (Muller, Ten Eycke, & Baker, 2015) meaning there is no defined beginning of intelligence or linear end to intelligence, but developmental stages through which each person moves while interacting with their spatial environment (Muller et al, 2015). Additionally, Piaget theorized that children did not cognitively function similarly



to adults, but acquire knowledge in a “gradual, step-by-step process of structural acquisition and change” (Flavell, 1996, p. 200). According to Piaget, children move through four stages as intelligence is developed: sensorimotor (approximately the first 18 months of life); preoperational (approximately ages two through seven); concrete operational (approximately age six through the start of adolescence); and formal operational (occurs during adolescence) (Muller et al, 2015). During these stages, children are continuously interacting with their spatial environment through two functions, assimilation and accommodation, which ultimately lead to adaptation.

The assimilation-accommodation cycle is a function of intelligence by which a child learns to adapt to new information or a new environment. During assimilation, new information is introduced and integrated or merged in the pre-existing knowledge of the child (Muller et al, 2015). Through the process of assimilation, children create relationships between pieces of knowledge (Muller et al, 2015). During accommodation, children move beyond assimilating the knowledge to developing modifications for existing knowledge based on the new information (Muller et al, 2015). Children are no longer merely relating information, but forming new schema based on the information (Flavell, 1963). Together, the functions of assimilation and accommodation lead to adaptation to the larger environment (Flavell, 1963; Muller et al, 2015).

Both the stages of cognitive development and the cognitive processes of assimilation, accommodation, and adaptation are relevant to this study and can provide insight for better understanding of how school staff perceive major transitions in the early elementary years influences the ability of children to adapt to a new learning environment.

## **Methods**

This qualitative case study sought to explore the perception of the influence of student transitions from the perspectives of participants who were involved with students making a transition from third grade to fourth grade in a mid-west suburban district. Qualitative research allowed the researcher to investigate experiences, which included feelings and thought processes (Straus & Corbin, 1998). This study was a case study because that allowed the researcher to study the complex phenomena of transitions within this school district (Yin, 2014). This also allowed the researcher to explore perceptions as well as lived experiences of the participants regarding third to fourth grade transitions into a new building (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

### **Population and Sample**

The study was conducted in a mid-sized, suburban district in a Midwestern state. The district enrolled approximately 8,500 students. Of these students, 71% identified as Caucasian, 12% as Hispanic, and 16% identified as other ethnicities. District-wide, 44% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. As indicated earlier in this chapter, this study was chosen because the district created a feeder pattern that increased the number of transitions for children, often at an earlier age. The district included seven early childhood centers (Pre-K-3), two elementary schools (4-5), one middle school (6-8), and one high school (9-12).

One school in the study population was selected for this study. This school was selected because it is a fourth and fifth grade center, and the student demographics in the school closely parallel student demographics in the district. This school enrolled approximately 600 students of which 74.6% identified as Caucasian. 43% of students were

eligible for free and reduced lunch. This school was comprised of students from three feeder schools within the district. Two of the feeder schools were Title I schools, and one was not.

The sample for this research was based on the intention of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997). The researcher selected participants whom “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1998, p. 150) within the researcher’s current district. Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Participants of this study included two fourth grade teachers, two third grade teachers, two administrators of fourth and fifth grade students, and two counselors of fourth and fifth grade students who attended a suburban elementary school in Oklahoma. According to Merriam (2016), qualitative research involves a qualitative inquiry that is richly descriptive. In order to contribute to the descriptive nature of qualitative research, the researcher interviewed participants for this study who are those that have experienced working with students who transitioned prior to their fourth-grade year. The administrators and counselors were selected because they interact with all students in the building.

Therefore, data was collected from three different perspectives (Patton, 2002): administrators, teachers, and counselors. Boyd (2001) suggests that two to 10 participants is sufficient in reaching saturation.

### **Data Collection**

To ensure good data collection the researcher used multiple sources of evidence, created a case study database, maintained a chain of evidence, and exercised care when using data from electronic sources (Yin, 2014). A majority strength of data collection for a case study was the possibility to use many different sources of evidence. Therefore,

three primary data sources were utilized in this study: interviews, observations, and documents.

Eight interviews were conducted with school staff. Interview participants included teachers, administrators, and counselors who worked directly with fourth grade students as well as two teachers who with the students as third graders. Participants of the study signed an informed consent (Holloway, 1997; Kvale 1996) to ensure ethical research was being conducted. Observations occurred during the Spring semester when transition activities were planned for students and parents. Events that were observed included parent and student meetings and student visits to the school. The documents collected included flyers, handouts, and other material distributed to students and families related to transitions. Additionally, meeting agendas, minutes, and electronic communications will be collected.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis in this study was guided by Merriam (1988). Data analysis was conducted in a spiraling approach, reflexively during data collection and more intensely after data was collected. Data was organized, coded, and categorized using the steps recommended for qualitative case study by Merriam (1988). Data was analyzed for both emerging themes as well as themes related to the theoretical framework of this study. Keeping with Merriam's recommendations for reporting of case study findings, a narrative approach was taken for reporting the results of this study in Chapters Four and Five.

## **Significance**

### **Research**

While the impact of transitions on students has been studied extensively at the high school and middle level, limited research has been conducted on the impact of transitions on students transitioning between the third and fourth grades. By exploring transitions at this age level, research on transitions was deepened. Due to the minimal research available, this study may serve as a basis for further research on the impact of transitions at younger ages.

### **Theory**

This study looked at the impact of transitions on students through the lens of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. Typically, it is assumed that students are able to assimilate and accommodate to new environments. However, transitions between buildings may take place during the Concrete Operational Stage which may inhibit a student's developmental ability to adjust to a new environment and therefore may undermine the transition process. By utilizing Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development to explain the influence of transitions on student learning, a better understanding of the influence of transitions on student growth and development resulted. This study also encourages further research on specific strategies that can be employed within schools to ease the impact of transitions on students.

### **Practice**

The information that this study provides will benefit district administrators faced with the task of restructuring schools or dealing with changes in grade configurations. At

the district level this information may impact decisions made by superintendents and school boards when deciding how to respond to increasing student populations or to adjust current practices within a district. This may aid in the decision in how the district should proceed with adding buildings or dividing grades per building within the district. Building principals may use this information to inform their decisions and practices in buildings experiencing transitions. As a result of this study, building principals may discover key issues to address when students are transitioning in or out of their buildings. As a classroom teacher, this may speak to some activities that could be utilized to increase students' academic success during a transition.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Age Grading:* Age grading is based on the notion that children of the same age are at the same level of social and intellectual maturity and, therefore, should be taught at the same pace as other students in the same grade (Hunt, 2010).

*Grade Configurations:* How schools divide up their grade levels among buildings within a district (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010).

*Pyramid transitions:* for the purpose of this study this term refers to student transitions from one of several schools to one larger school. In this study, third graders transition from one of three schools to attend a fourth grade and fifth grade center (Alsbaugh, 2011).

*Transitions:* for the purpose of this study this term refers to students moving from

one grade level to another while also changing school buildings.

Possible limitations of this study include sample size, researcher experiences, diversity of school population, reader interpretation as well as limitations common in qualitative data collection. While conducting observations, the observer may have affected the situation in unknown ways which could have led to participants acting in atypical ways (Patton, 2002). Observations could only focus on external behaviors and could be limited due to the number of sample activities observed (Patton, 2002). As with all qualitative studies, the sample size limits generalizability of the findings (Creswell, 2007). The sample size was limited to eight participants and could have limited the ability of these study findings to be directly applied to a larger population of teachers and parents. The demographics of the school may lead to limitations of the study. The diversity of the population may impact the outcome as students may have reacted differently to transition. In addition to diversity, the amount of parent participation within the school, which is high at 94% could be a limitation to this study as well as the low number of out of school suspensions, the number of special education students, and low mobility rate of students. Additional to the limitations in regard to the student population, it should be noted that a limitation is in the diversity of the educators participating in the study. All interview participants in this study were White, thus possibly impacting their perceptions presented in the study. The overall layout of the school in which students are organized into “pods” could impact this study the study in comparisons to schools that do not have similar layouts. A significant limitation to this study is that the researcher worked within the district. While safeguards were taken to limit researcher bias, the

researcher realizes that working within the district could have inadvertently impacted the findings. A final limitation to this study is that the theory of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development has not been applied to research on transitions. Therefore, this study attempts to do so with little prior research to reflect upon.

## **Summary**

This chapter introduced the study for this dissertation, set up the background of the problem by noting the struggle students experience when transitioning, causes of transitions, the problem statement, outlined the purpose of the study, specified the research questions and significance of the study, and defined conceptual definitions used for this dissertation. Due to the lack of research on the influence of transitions from elementary schools to fourth grade and fifth grade centers, research conducted on this topic was vital. Further research needs to be conducted on administrator, counselor, faculty, parent and student perceptions of the impact of transitions on student learning. A better understanding of early transition on student adaptation helps to inform educators and identifies transition strategies that can be employed to minimize the negative impact of transitions. Chapter II will review literature of transitions, focusing on the history of public education, school configuration, transition challenges, and will introduce the theoretical framework of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. Chapter III identifies the methodology, research design, including population and sample, data sources and collection, the researcher's role, data analysis, and ethical considerations, assumptions, research questions and trustworthiness. Chapter IV discusses the findings



for this study including narrative from the study participants, and Chapter V provides the implications of this study's finding and recommends direction for future researchers.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **History of Education in the United States**

The first American schools began in New England. The first public school in what is now the United States was founded in 1635 (Clark, 1998). Following in Massachusetts in 1644, the first tax-supported school was opened (Clark, 1998). In the mid-1600's, many colonies made "proper" education compulsory. At this time, most schools were under local control and publicly supplied by the local town. However, schools were not free as they were supported by tuition, or "rate bills", (Small, 1902). A majority of school systems remained private and unorganized until the 1840's. At this time, Public Schools were controlled locally, and there was no federal role and little state role in the funding or oversight of public schools (American Board, 2015). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "Common Schools" appeared, and students of all ages were taught in one classroom under the supervision of one teacher (American Board, 2015). Typically, these schoolhouses ran under the Monitorial System, where more capable students were used as peer tutors, passing on information that they had learned to other students (Monitorial,

2016). This was common practice until Horace Mann introduced the idea of “age grading.” Following Mann’s influence, students were assigned by age to different grades and progressed through the grades, regardless of differences in ability. With the introduction of age grading, multi-aged classrooms diminished significantly (Hunt, 2010). After the American Revolution, Common Schools became more usual throughout the states, with both males and females attending. There were public schools available for black students, but they were typically underfunded by legislators (Robenstine, 1952). During the 1900’s high schools became available, but few Southerners of either race went beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade until 1945. From 1910-1940, high schools began to grow in number and in size, becoming accessible to more of the population (Goldin & Katz, 2009). The high schools provided necessary skills for students to become teachers, and they prepared students with the essential skills for those who planned to work white-collar jobs and some blue-collar jobs.

Several key court cases played a significant role in shaping American Education today. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation of students based on race was allowable by law as long as the quality of education and facilities was “separate but equal” (Anderson, 1988). However, equality was soon challenged, and *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 ruled that the “separate but equal” doctrine violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and that segregation adversely affected African Americans (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). In 1975, congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This is one of most impactful laws in the history of public education. This law made free, appropriate education available to all eligible students with a disability (Chambers & Hartman, 1983). This law was amended

in 1986 and 1997 and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Longmore, 2009).

In 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report titled *A Nation at Risk* (Edwards, 2009). This report brought attention to a perspective that the academic performance of American children was falling behind peers in other developed countries in the world. The report sparked a call for increased academic rigor and higher testing standards. Little progress was made in increasing student achievement, and in the 2000's, legislation was passed resulting in "No Child Left Behind." (Edwards, 2009). This required states to measure progress and punish schools not meeting goals measured by standardized state exams in math and reading (Rhodes, 2012). This legislation also resulted in a change in funding for state schools as NCLB sanctions limited federal funding for underperforming schools (Rhodes, 2012). NCLB came with the expectation that all students would be 100% proficient by the year 2014 (Rhodes, 2012). However, the goal that 100% proficient by 2014 was deemed unrealistic, and many states were granted waivers when it became apparent that the 100% goal was not going to be accomplished (Resmovits, 2012).

All of these influences on American education have also been joined with increasing school populations and increased diversity within these school populations (Stevenson, 2006). These changes have resulted in the need for schools to look and adjust how they are structured to meet the growing demands of the federal government, the increase of students, and the decrease of funding (Lashway, 2000). As a result, the typical structures of schools in the 1990's and early 2000's have shifted, impacting students (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010).

Historically, schools have been structured in one way: elementary school, middle school, and high school, resulting in two major transitions in the Pre-K-12 school setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). However, more recently schools have structured in ways that require students to transition more often. Currently, school systems have buildings that have one or two grade levels within a common building structure (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). For example, districts may house Pre-K through third grade in one building, fourth grade and fifth grade in another, sixth through eighth grades in another, and a high school with a freshmen academy housed separately, thus, increasing the amount of transitions to students tremendously.

The current purpose of the grade level system in the United States is that a student can transition from grade to grade upon successful completion of content material at each grade level. The transition to the next grade level takes place after a break from school, typically after summer. Although the intention is that all students will transition successfully from one grade level to the next, it is not always the case (Alspaugh, 1998; Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991; Hall 2007; Neild, 2009).

### **No Child Left Behind**

Over the past decade, public schools have had to adjust to a variety of challenges. New accountability systems have been put in place, decreases in educational funding have emerged, and enrollment has increased or decreased significantly in certain schools and districts all which have influenced district decisions when deciding upon structure of the schools within their respective districts – impacting the level at which students transition. School districts, individual buildings, administrators, and teachers have

responded to these challenges in various ways, some successful and some unsuccessful (McCann, n.d.)

The enactment of *No Child Left Behind* in 2002 left schools responding to the pressures of high-stakes accountability systems in ways that are productive and also unproductive (Carnoy, Martin, & Loeb, 2002). NCLB required that by the 2005-2006 school year that each state measures every child's progress in reading and math in grades third through eighth and at least once during grades 10 through 12 (NCLB, 2002). By the school year 2007-2008, states were required to have science assessments in place to be administered at least once during grades third through fifth grade, grades sixth through ninth, and grades 10-12 (NCLB, 2002).

In order to receive certain federal funds, school districts were required to fulfill extensive accountability requirements of NCLB. In the early stages of implementation of NCLB, states were assured that federal funding would cover a significant portion of the costs associated with the new requirements. However, federal funding did not meet district needs that resulted from the implementation of these high stakes mandates. Currently, states claim to be “under-funded,” testifying that the federal government did not adequately support implementation costs of NCLB legislation (McCann, Clare, n.d.) These changes in accountability, later coupled with legislation that provided for the establishment of charter schools, sometimes including the implementation of vouchers, have impacted school funding and schools’ autonomy to spend the limited funds that they have (Atlas, 2015). Because of these varying factors, schools have looked at the way they are configured to address needs such as potential gains in student achievement, better use of facilities, enrollment/diversity needs, or budgetary reasons (Barton & Klump, 2012).

## **School Configuration**

In an effort to address the NCLB-mandated testing progression, one of the issues schools faced was how best to form student populations to maximize all aspects of the educational setting while also increasing student achievement. One way to do this was changing longstanding grade configurations, or changing which grades were housed in the same building. In deciding how to configure their campuses, districts considered variables such as enrollment numbers, demographics, overall school goals, transportation options, and fiscal responsibility. Districts also considered best fit for their communities and capacity of facilities. There are several factors that influence a district's decisions concerning how to configure their school district. Sometimes isolated, or combined, the factors driving the decision include cost, equity, socio-economic balance, demographics, curriculum/instruction, space, geography, size, philosophy, transportation, and facilities (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). Many districts also conducted extensive studies and gathered public input before implementing a change in grade spans in buildings throughout a district, although the weight of the factors varied depending on the culture and state of the district (Douglas, 2012). As a result of these changes, some districts saw an increase in the amount of transitions students experienced before graduation (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010).

## **Impacts of School Configurations**

John W. Alspaugh (1998) conducted ample research on the impact of school transitions on student achievement. Findings from his study indicate a correlation

between poor educational outcomes with student's learning as the result of school transitions. Many other studies coincide with the results of poor educational outcomes during transition years (Akos, 2004; Cook et al, 2007; Brown, 2004). Student achievement loss is consistently connected with achievement loss with students transitioning from self-contained elementary schools to intermediate schools (Alspaugh, 1998). This loss was documented when students transitioned at grade fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth (Asplaugh, 1998). Fortunately, Alspaugh (1998) found that the students' scores recovered to their pre-transition scores in the year following the transition. However, experience with transitioning did not diminish the loss of achievement with each new transition (Alspaugh, 1998). This means that students do not get better at transitioning because of experiencing more transitions. Each transition maintains its challenges.

This achievement loss was noted to be more significant when the transitioning students came from multiple elementary schools merging into one middle school, again, known as "pyramid transition" (Asplaugh, 2011). In addition, students who attended middle schools displayed greater loss in achievement in ninth grade when they attended a middle school as opposed to a K-8 school (Asplaugh, 1998). Therefore, research suggests that multiple transitions within a student's educational experience can negatively influence student achievement. Arguably, the transition is especially important in 9<sup>th</sup> grade as success in the first year of high school has been shown to predict students' future successes in school, thus, increasing the importance of a successful freshman year (NHSC, The First Year of High School, 2007).

Several explanations have been given for the difficulty that students experience in transitions from middle to high school. Eighty percent of students in the United States enter this transition in a new environment that is larger in size and more impersonal than they experienced in middle school (Neild, 2009). The lack of a successful transition causes the high school dropout rate to rise, in particular for freshman (Hertzog & Morgan 1999). There is a significant effect on student achievement, attendance rates, and student discipline for students entering their freshman year (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991; Hall 2007). This trend is seen nationally (Brown, 2004; Renchler, 2002). For example, 32.1% of all high school dropouts happen during the ninth-grade year according to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2010). In order to meet NCLB requirements, districts are left with the challenge of alleviating some of these challenges for students in order to increase student success. While these challenges are evident there have been some strategies that schools have employed to offset the difficulties of transitions.

Studies also indicate that more than just academic achievement is affected by transitions. Renchler (2000) states that school transitions can impose stress on students, thus negatively impacting the identity of a school and its' sense of community. One study examining the impact of a district's elementary grade span structure on family-school partnerships stressed the influence of grade structure on family-school relationships (Moffitt, 1996). Moffitt's (1996) research concluded that narrow grade configurations in school have a negative impact on family-school partnerships. Much is known about the importance of family/school partnerships for student success in school. When parents are involved, children perform better in school (Moffitt, 1996). However, this study added to



the body of knowledge because it provided a better understanding of how grade configurations can influence parent involvement and, thus, influence the contribution of families' time and support to their children's success, as well as the support that families receive from educators to guide their children through school (Moffitt, 1996).

Additionally, Howley (2002) found that when students transition from one narrowly configured school to another that it also seems to disrupt the school social structure in which learning takes place. This can result in a decrease in time of family contribution to their children's education when children attend multiple schools within a district.

### **Attempts to Support Students in Transitions**

While these challenges are evident, there have been some strategies that schools have employed to offset the difficulties of transitions.

#### **Freshman Academies**

One answer to the difficulties experienced by high school freshmen is the idea of "freshman academies", where ninth grade students are insulated from stress caused by larger environments. These academies offer the advantage of smaller school settings and smaller student to teacher ratio. Many schools have made an effort to create these small schools, freshman academies, on high school campuses. These academies isolate the freshman students' core academic classes from the upperclassmen. Often, these academies offer classes in departmental clusters. The teachers in these academies typically have frequent common student-centered plan time. Often the benefit of the freshman academy is that it creates a smaller, more intimate community for students and teachers (Bennett, 2012). Although there are benefits to freshman academies, the introduction of a freshman academy often simply adds one additional layer of transition

into the experience of high school students as they transition into the larger high school at the beginning of their 10<sup>th</sup> grade year.

### **Student Visits**

Some schools implement transition plans that include visiting the new school before the transition. This visit will normally focus on the routines of the new school, the layout of the school, locker and combination locks, and intermixing with older students. Often, when the transition happens from elementary to secondary there is a focus on the elective choices, extracurricular activities, and advanced paths available to students. Orientation activities that help students walk through the new routines are common. Schools also reach out to parents to ensure that there is a strong relationship between the parent and school. This allows the schools to help parents become more knowledgeable about the students' developmental needs and concerns at this age (Anderman, 1999).

### **Other Supports**

Symonds (2015) published a book about how to understand what happened to children and how to help them during times of school transition. The study took place in the United Kingdom and the United States, however, the focus was students at the ages of 11 or 12 years old. Symonds (2015) contends that transition interventions are an essential component of transitions plans. She states that schools need to support the wellbeing of the students by bridging between the sending school and receiving school. Among those interventions recommended by Symonds (2015) are students allowing relationships to form with induction days, student information communicated clearly between the schools, the sending school and working on enhancing student organizational and social

skills prior to the transition, and teachers sharing pedagogy between the two schools through visits and observations. Symonds also suggests hosting parent nights in an attempt to relieve fears and anxieties of both the students and the parents (Symonds, 2015).

While much can be gleaned from the published research on student transitions at the middle or high school level, research is still needed for students transitioning at the elementary level to ensure that elementary schools can provide transition programs that meet the needs of the students experiencing the transition.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Jean Piaget was one of the most significant researchers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in regard to developmental psychology (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Piaget believed that humans were different from animals because they are able to do abstract symbolic reasoning. Piaget's main contribution to the field was related to intelligence, specifically the intelligence of children (Flavell, 1996). Through his work, he found that there was difference in thinking based on the age of the child and a qualitative difference in how younger children answered questions versus how older children answered questions (Flavell, 1996). Unlike other psychologists of his time who believed children and adults had much of the same capacity for intelligence, Piaget theorized this difference in thinking to be the result of children in different stages of life gradually building intelligence (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). This idea is the basis for Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, which focused on two primary topics: the process of how we come to know and the stages we move through as this ability is acquired gradually.

### **Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development**

Unlike other researchers of his time, Piaget believed that intelligence was not fixed. Instead, Piaget believed that cognitive development occurred in stages, and developed a general structure that designates a child's behavior for each area of cognitive functioning. While Piaget believed that age was a condition for each stage, he also acknowledged that the age of acquisition of operations is highly influenced by the amount of cognitive stimulation to which a child was exposed (Muller et al, 2015). The cognitive stages begin with simple learning and progress through each stage characterized by a more complex understanding of the world.

### **Sensorimotor**

The sensory motor stage is a stage that happens in infancy and typically lasts until 18 months of age (Muller, 2009). This stage has six stages within. Intelligence is displayed through motor activity. Knowledge of the world is very minimal and is based on physical interactions and experiences. Object permanence is acquired by about 7 months which is a skill that involves memory. Mobility allows infants to begin to develop new intellectual abilities and some language (symbolic abilities) begins to develop (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

### **Preoperational Stage**

This stage happens in toddler years and early childhood (age 2-7) and has two substages. Memory and imagination are developed, language is acquired and matures, and intelligence is demonstrated through the use of symbols. Thinking is nonlogical and nonreversible in this stage. Children are extremely egocentric during this time (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

### **Concrete Operational Stage**

This stage emerges around six to seven years and lasts until about age 11.

Operations become coordinated and integrated into logical systems. Children in this stage are able to focus on more than one aspect of a situation. They are also able to mentally reverse transformations that have occurred in reality. In this stage possibility remains an extension of reality (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

### **Formal Operational Stage**

This stage begins in adolescence (age 12) and continues through adulthood.

During this stage adolescents and adults begin to think abstractly and are able to reason through hypothetical problems. Their thinking is not solely reliant on their reality. This allows beings to think more about philosophical, moral, ethical, social, and political issues. These issues require theoretical and abstract reasoning. Beings are able to use more deductive reasoning and can reason from general information to more specific information (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

Figure 1. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.

<b>Sensorimotor Stage</b> Birth - age 2	<b>Peroperational Stage</b> age 2- age 7	<b>Concrete Operational Stage</b> age 7- age 11	<b>Formal Operational Stage</b> age 12- adulthood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• motor responses</li><li>• sensory input</li><li>• development of object permanance</li><li>• Differentiates self from objects</li><li>• begins to act intentionally</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• symbolic thought, learns to use language by images and words</li><li>• irreversibility of thought</li><li>• egocentric</li><li>• Classifies objects by a single feature</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• hierarchal classifications</li><li>• mental operational applied to concrete events</li><li>• can think logically about objects and events</li><li>• classifies objects by several features</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• mental operations applied</li><li>• logical and systematic thinking</li><li>• can think logically about abstract propositions</li></ul>

## **Cognitive Processes of Intelligence**

Piaget described intelligence in terms of adapting to the environment (Reinking, et al., 2000). Piaget theorized that beings adapt to their environment by controlling schemas, or mental organizations, used to represent the world and impact how beings respond to their environment and decide to respond to their environment (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Piaget believed that humans were born with reflexes, or certain schemas that began at birth. In animals, these reflexes were used throughout life to control behavior (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). In human beings, however, these reflexes are quickly replaced with constructed schemes. In Piaget's theory there are two processes by which individuals develop schema in order to adapt to his/her environment: assimilation and accommodation (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

Assimilation and accommodation define a developmental reality in which individuals conceptualize new information, eventually leading to adaptation. The two processes are described in more detail below.

### **Assimilation**

Assimilation is the process of merging current knowledge with new information without changing the existing structures. During assimilation, children attempt to use existing schema to understand a new situation or phenomena (Reinking, et al., 2000). Assimilation is a pre-cursor to accommodation and therefore, learners in the stages of development of assimilation may not be able to accommodate certain information presented (Reinking, et al., 2000). This creates an environment in which assimilation

alone is inadequate for knowledge acquisition (Reinking, et al., 2000).

### **Accommodation**

Accommodating new information requires that existing schema are restructured based on new information. Eventually, this new information results in a fundamental restructuring and reorientation of schema allowing the child to view and experience the world in new terms (Reinking, et al., 2000). Accommodation requires a combination of maturation and experience. Each of the cognitive stages of Piaget's theory, then, leads to increased capacity to accommodate and adapt to new information (Reinking, et al., 2000).

### **Use of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development in Education**

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development was not explicitly developed for education. However, researchers have been applying it to learning and teaching for decades (McLeod, 2018). Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development is considered to be a major contribution to the field of cognitive development. Halford (1987) stated that Piaget's works have contributed to present day theories of schema and the concept of constraints on learning. Gelman (1979) claimed that Piaget gave psychology some of the most reliable phenomena which supported the assertion that field of cognitive development was relevant. A study conducted to look at integrating digital technologies into literacy instruction (Reinking, et al., 2000), used the developmental framework of Piaget's theory of development to look at how learning develops through the process of assimilation and accommodation. Piaget's theory of Cognitive Development is a theory that is used as a cornerstone to furthering theories on cognitive development.

### **Use of Theory in This Study**

The stages of cognitive development as well as the cognitive processes of assimilation, accommodation, and adaptation help provide insight to better understand how school staff perceive major transitions in the early elementary years effects the capability of children to adapt to a new learning environment. Students in this study were experiencing transitions at the age stage of Concrete Operational. Thinking at this stage is when children begin to discover logic and utilize inductive reasoning. The brain learns to rearrange thoughts and understand that actions can be reversed by doing the opposite. Children at this age begin to understand themselves better and have the realization that their thoughts and feeling are unique and may not necessarily match those of others. During this stage children may not always think rationally. This is a critical time in development to experience a transition. Students are presented with new information with varying abilities to assimilate and accommodate this information. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development helps explain the ability of students at this age to accommodate to their new environment based on previous knowledge and experiences.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Schools and districts are reconsidering grade configurations in buildings because of many factors: accountability systems, funding, and facilities. However, research shows that while some students transition successfully from building to building or grade to grade, other students are not as successful (Alspaugh, 1998). Additionally, most research on transitions has been conducted at the secondary level, with little literature studying the impacts of transitions at early ages (Parker, 2009; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). This study attempted to address the gap in literature, and using Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development theory, to understand how transitions may or may not meet students' basic needs in order for students to adapt to the new school environment. This qualitative case study sought to explore teacher, administrator and counselor perceptions regarding the influence of transitions between third and fourth grades on 4th grade student adaptation to the educational environment.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does a select school in one school district implement transitions for students between third and fourth grade?
  - a. What are the strategies used to support students before, during, and after student transitions between third and fourth grade?
  - b. How does school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) perceive their role in student transitions between third and fourth grade?
2. What challenges have school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) experienced in student transitions between third and fourth grade?
  - a. How have school staff addressed these challenges?

### **Research Design**

This qualitative case study sought to provide an understanding of the influence of transitions from third to fourth grades from the perspectives of participants who were involved with students who made this transition from third grade to a new fourth grade and fifth grade school in a mid-west suburban district. Qualitative research allowed the researcher to investigate experiences, which included feelings and thought processes (Straus & Corbin, 1998). As a case study, the researcher was able to study the complex phenomena of transitions at a fourth grade and fifth grade level within this school district (Yin, 2014). This allowed the researcher to explore perceptions as well as lived experiences of the participants regarding third to fourth grade transitions into a new building (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

### **Population and Sampling**

**Population.** The population of this study included counselors, administrators, and teachers from within a suburban school district just outside a large urban district. The

school district had a school population of over 8,000 students in 2014. The district was organized into four levels: seven early childhood programs housing Prekindergarten through third grade, two fourth/fifth grade elementary schools, one middle school containing sixth through eighth grades, and a high school campus which housed grades nine through twelve.

The study was conducted in a mid-sized, suburban district in a Midwestern state. The district enrolled approximately 8,500 students at the time the study was conducted. Of these students, 71% identified as Caucasian, 12% as Hispanic, and 16% identified as other ethnicities. District-wide, 44% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. As indicated earlier in this chapter, this study was chosen because the district had created a feeder pattern that increased the number of transitions for children, often at an earlier age. The district included seven early childhood centers (Pre-K-3), two elementary schools (4-5), one middle school (6-8), and one high school (9-12).

One school within the selected school district was chosen as the case for this study. This school was selected because it was a fourth grade and fifth grade center, and the student demographics in the school closely paralleled student demographics in the district. This school received students from three feeder schools. Two of the feeder schools were Title I schools, and one was not. Students attended the selected school for the short span of two years.

In 2017, the selected school had greater than a 95% attendance rate for student daily attendance and 96% parent participation at Parent/Teacher conferences. Approximately 17% of the student population qualified for special education services, and 43% of students qualified for Free/Reduced lunch. The population of the school met

the needs of the study because a majority of the students attending the school previously attended and transitioned from a Pre-K through third grade school within the district.

**Participant Selection.** Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for this study. Participants of this study included two third grade teachers, two fourth grade teachers, two administrators of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, and two counselors of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students who attend a suburban elementary school in a Midwestern state. Administrators, teachers, and counselors were selected so that varied perspectives from different individuals within the school were collected. The school had two administrators, a principal, and an assistant principal, and both were asked to participate in the study. Additionally, both counselors in the school were asked to participate. Twelve fourth grade teachers were invited to participate although only two teachers participated. Twelve third grade teachers were also invited to participate, and only two accepted the request. Teachers that volunteered were selected for the study.

### **Data Collection**

Construct validity is the accuracy within a case study's measures to reflect the concepts being studied (Yin, pg .238, 2014). To ensure good data collection I used multiple sources of evidence, created a case study database, maintained a chain of evidence, and exercised care when using data from electronic sources. A strength in data collection for a case study was the possibility to use many different sources of evidence. Therefore, three primary data sources were utilized in this study: interviews, observations, and documents. Interviews were conducted with two 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers from the sending schools, two 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers from the receiving school, two counselors from the receiving school, and two administrators from the receiving school.

Participants were asked about their role in the transition process, the perception of the success of the transition plan for incoming 4<sup>th</sup> graders, and how this process supports or does not support students cognitively at this age. Observations of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade Parent Meeting and each 3<sup>rd</sup> grade school visit to the school were conducted. Finally, artifacts/documents that were used to aid in the student transition were collected. This included a third grade information card template that was filled out by 3rd grade teachers and given to 4th grade teachers, handouts from the parent meeting, Facebook posts and videos, and newsletters sent to families of incoming 4<sup>th</sup> grade students.

**Interviews.** Patton (2002) describes the need for interviews to collect qualitative data. Interviews allowed me to find out directly from the participant information that could not be observed such as thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Patton, 2002). Eight interviews were conducted as part of this study. Interviews questions sought to extract responses that helped answer the research questions. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized. The interviews were approximately 25 minutes. The interviews for the counselors and administrators took place at the school where the study was conducted. The interviews with the third-grade teachers took place at the researcher's school, and the two interviews with the fourth-grade teachers were conducted via Facetime on cell phone. All interviews were audiotaped, with permission of the interviewee, and interview transcripts were transcribed to aid in analysis.

**Observations.** To understand the complexities of the interactions between people, observation was a tool that allowed me to go a step further than what could be obtained verbally (Patton, 2002). For this study, observations were made of transition opportunities and experiences for students. As data collection took place in the Spring,

observations of transition activities for students who began fourth grade Fall 2019 were observed. These events included parent and student meetings, and student visits to the receiving school.

During observations, detailed field notes were taken. As appropriate, maps of the setting were drawn, descriptions of the setting and interactions of participants were recorded, and notes related to Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development were balanced with emerging observations of the experience. Then, I followed the recommendations of Merriam (1998) and reflectively wrote down any notes remembered after the observation. Observation field notes were used as raw data in the data analysis process.

**Document review.** Merriam (1998) states,

In judging the value of a data source, one can ask whether it contains information or insights relevant to the research question and whether it can be acquired in a reasonably practical yet systematic manner (p. 105).

For this study, these questions were used to guide document collection and review.

Documents that were provided by the school for parents and students with the intent of easing transition were reviewed. Relevant documents included information and communication given to third grade students or parents prior to the transition, during the summer, and/or at the beginning of the school year. These included flyers, handouts, meeting agendas and notes, and electronic communications. Documents or excerpts from documents were captured in a way that records and preserves context.

### **Data Analysis**

Huberman & Miles (1994) state that data analysis in qualitative studies is not off-the-shelf; rather, it is custom-built, revised, and "choreographed". For this study, the data

analysis process was guided by Merriam's (1988) data analysis strategies for case study. Merriam (1988) states that "data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (p. 123) and "analysis becomes more intensive once all the data are in" (p. 123). Based on Merriam's (1998) approach, the data analysis process for this study was approached from a spiraling approach as opposed to a linear approach. Although analysis began during the data collection process with reflective reading and followed emergent ideas to refine the study, steps were also taken after data collection to ensure intensive analysis. The following steps were followed by the researcher:

**Code data.** As the data was organized, I looked for connections within the data that presented themes. During the first read, I took notes on the data related to codes through the process of open coding. During subsequent reads, I transferred identified codes onto another paper utilizing highlighters to organize likeness. This allowed for a closer look at data collected that may have otherwise become lost in the surrounding text. I then created an individual paper for each participant group and highlighted the similar themes with a highlighter. I also organized the papers by participant group (teacher, administrator, counselor) and based on the levels of needs found in the theoretical framework in this study. Codes were organized into categories through the process of axial coding and finally into themes.

**Organize Data.** Interviews were transcribed verbatim after interviews are conducted. All of the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were organized in a format that allowed the researcher to review the data easily. While transcribing the interviews I looked for emerging themes. First, I took notes of possible categories on paper and color coded the categories by highlighting similar concepts of

significance. I then printed the transcript interviews and highlighted in the interview quotes that supported the emerging concepts or themes. I then reviewed all interview transcripts yet again to ensure that no other emerging themes or categories were missed. Once this was completed, I transferred the emerging categories or themes and quotes to another piece of paper with quotes to begin writing my results.

**Generate categories or themes.** As mentioned above, the coded data was organized into categories. Similar data that appeared to be connected was placed together in a category. If a piece of data supported multiple categories, the data was presented more than once. Categories were used to identify themes within the data. Data was analyzed both for emerging themes and themes related to the theoretical framework of this study.

**Interpret findings.** Once themes were clearly identified, concept maps were used. This was another safeguard to ensure that regularities and irregularities that existed among the themes were identified.

### **Researcher's Role**

The data collected was mediated through the human instrument, the researcher. I, as the researcher, collected data through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. Therefore, it was imperative that I communicated any pre-existing assumptions or biases while also being transparent about how I fit into the context. I was previously employed in the district as a principal at the sister school in this study. This could have created bias in the responses from the principals, counselors, and teachers of the chosen school. One way I limited bias was by not studying her school and selecting the sister school in the district. Another important aspect for me was to



recognize these biases and let the interviewees voice and opinion speak in the findings of this research regardless if it aligned with my own personal views.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I was an administrator in the district for seven years. I did not work in the building where the research was be conducted. However, given my familiarity of the district and the process for transitions in the district, I had to pay particular attention to the bias I may have harbored. As the researcher, I had to enter the environment with unbiased eye to ensure that the research was conducted in an authentic manner. Reflexivity is the practice of intentionally revealing any underlying assumptions or biases have an influence on the type of questions the researcher asks or influences the way the researcher presents findings (Gay, Mills, Airasian, 2011). In my role as a former principal within the district, I inevitably knew more about the participants than if I was an outside entity coming into the building to conduct research. To truly record what the teachers' experiences were in this structure, I needed to be aware of and report how my role of principal had the potential to affect the questions asked and how the data was collected is presented, and I had to take precautions to remove my biases from the process. In this particular study context, I served as the administrator at a fourth grade and fifth grade building within the same district. This responsibility and experience of this position may have naturally created bias for me. Because of this, as researcher, I had the responsibility to be reflective about how my former position may have influenced my opinion and bias. I had the responsibility to recognize these challenges and bias and to minimize the impact

it had on my research and findings. I was careful to listen to the voices of participants in the study to gain an understanding of their perceptions. I was aware of my preconceived notions and prevented those from influencing my research and results.

Reflexivity is a reminder to the qualitative researcher to attend to the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological beginnings of one's own perspective (Patton, 2002). With qualitative research, the collection and investigation of interviews, observations, and documents all depend on the judgment and thoroughness of the researcher. This requires researchers to be forthcoming with experiences and avoid bias in reporting data.

### **Assumptions**

Patton (2002) states that a key assumption of action research is that people in a setting are able to solve problems by studying themselves. It is assumed that the participants in the interviews were forthcoming and honest in their responses. It is assumed that the interviewer presented concerns that when addressed could help lessen the negative impacts of transitions on students. It is also assumed that the participants of the study treated me as such, and not as a principal in the sister school within the district. While coding and transcribing it is assumed that there have been no errors.

### **Trustworthiness of Findings**

In order for research to have merit, it is essential that I acted with neutrality. The research was conducted in such a manner that sought honest, meaningful, credible, and empirically supported findings. There were no predetermined results. My role was to understand the world as it unfolded, allow multiple perspectives, and be balanced in reporting.

Table 1

*Trustworthiness Criteria and Examples*

<i><b>Criteria/Technique</b></i>	<i><b>Result</b></i>	<i><b>Examples</b></i>
<b>Credibility</b>		
Prolonged engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Built trust</li> <li>• Developed rapport</li> <li>• Built relationships</li> <li>• Obtained accurate data</li> </ul>	I worked in the district and have worked with teachers and counselors at this building for years through PLC's.
Persistent observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtained in-depth data</li> <li>• Obtained accurate data</li> <li>• Sorted relevancies from irrelevancies</li> </ul>	I observed the school setting on multiple days.
<b>Triangulation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verified data</li> </ul>	I collected multiple sources of data: interviews, observations, documents, and website information.
Peer debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tested</li> </ul>	I worked with doctorate cohort members and faculty members to review my process.

<i>Criteria/Technique</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<b>Transferability</b>		
Referential adequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided a comprehensive picture of the program</li> </ul>	Data gathered from observations and interviews helped provide the staff perceptions of the students' transitions.
Thick description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided a data base for transferability judgment</li> <li>• Provided a vicarious experience for the reader</li> </ul>	I provided a detailed description of the site and participants selected for the study.

The credibility of qualitative research relies on three main criteria: rigorous research techniques and methods that attend to validity, reliability, and triangulation, the credibility of the researcher, and philosophical beliefs in the value of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Triangulation is the premise that not one single view can provide an adequate explanation. Triangulation calls for multiple means of data collection, often done in the form of observations, interviews and document reviews (Patton, 2002).

### **Summary**

Chapter III gives a description of the qualitative research methodology used in this study. The research design including data collection, site selection, participant selection, observations, interviews, document reviews, the researcher's role, and data analysis were all examined. Next, Ethical considerations and assumptions were explored with bias

stated. Finally, the trustworthiness table with descriptions of credibility, triangulation, and transferability is included.

## Chapter IV

### PRESENTATION OF THE CASE

The purpose of this case study is to better understand the perspective of teachers, counselors and administrators involved in the student transition process between third grade and fourth grade in one select school district and explore how the transition process aligns to the cognitive development of early childhood students. The focus will be described from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers', 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers', counselors' and administrators' perspective of how the transition process supports the cognitive development of the transitioning students. This section outlines the data that was collected during research. A description of the school where the study was conducted, data collections, data analysis, and any emerging themes.

This chapter will present data gathered through documents and artifacts, staff interviews, and observations all relating to the transition process for incoming 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. All collected data will be viewed through the lens of Piaget's Theory of

Cognitive Development. The interview questions, observations, and data collection were completed with looking through the lens of assimilation, accommodation, and adaptation according to Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and the Concrete Operational Stage that students at the age of this transition are expected to be experiencing. This was done informally as the data was collected but was formalized after data analysis once the themes emerged. The chapter begins with a description of the school where the study took place, followed by an analysis of observations, dissection of documents and artifacts collected, and finally a presentation of themes that emerged through this analysis.

### **Community Context**

The Gene School District [a pseudonym] in this study is located within a suburban community in a Midwestern state. According to the 2010 census, the population of this community was 22,709. The town, Morrowville [a pseudonym] was founded in the 1890's and was originally designed with one main street where the blacksmith, bank, restaurants, lumber yards, grocery store, saloons, and barbershop were located. The original town had an organized library that was established by 1905. Over 120 years later, many descendants of the families that were part of the homesteading of the original town live in the community instilling a strong sense of history and pride within the community.

Within the current public-school system there is high community involvement. Each school year is started with a back-to-school event hosted by the Chamber of Commerce where gifts and coupons from community businesses are given to teachers new to the district, a district-wide breakfast for all district employees (teachers, bus drivers, custodians, secretaries, teachers' aides, etc.) is sponsored by local businesses, and the superintendent hosts an August meeting at the administration building. To sustain

community involvement, the superintendent attends monthly community coffee events and the district invests in a district-level office dedicated to community connection. The Community Education Office provides resources and services for students and their families to impact the larger community. Additionally, the school district houses a volunteer system where volunteers help teachers with everyday tasks including making paper copies, decorating bulletin boards, and organizing holiday parties. There are many volunteers that do not have children in the school system, but instead they are simply members of the community who care about the school system.

Gene School District serves Pre-K through secondary education and covers 68 square miles. It has seven Pre-K-3 elementary schools, two 4-5 elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school that was opened in 2012. The district has one superintendent, two assistant superintendents, a curriculum department, special education department, community education department, maintenance department, and a human resource department, technology department. The district enrolled approximately 8,500 students. Of these students, 71% identified as Caucasian, 12% as Hispanic, and 16% identified as other ethnicities. District-wide, 44% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. The district has seven early childhood centers (Pre-K-3), two elementary schools (4-5), one middle school (6-8), and one high school (9-12).

### **School Context**

This study examines one elementary school within this suburban district, Huntsman Elementary [a pseudonym]. The school's 2019 profile listed the student population of Huntsman at 592 students. Huntsman Elementary is one of only two schools in the district which serves 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students only. The other 4/5 school is

Ketcher Elementary [a pseudonym]. The 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in Huntsman Elementary school come from three smaller feeder schools: Carroll Elementary, Chase Elementary, and Driver Elementary [also pseudonyms].

Huntsman Elementary is located on the east side of town. Although the district serves 68 square miles, Huntsman Elementary and its feeder schools are in close distance to one another. Of the three feeder schools, the largest feeder school, Carroll Elementary, is located behind Huntsman Elementary and within walking distance. Driver Elementary is less than a mile away from Huntsman Elementary, and the final feeder school, Chase Elementary is less than two miles away. The one high school in the district is also located less than a mile from Huntsman Elementary.

Huntsman Elementary has greater than a 95% attendance rate for student daily attendance and 94% parent participation at Parent/Teacher conferences. Approximately 18% of the student population qualify for special education services, and 47% of students qualify for Free/Reduced lunch.

Of the two 4/5 elementary schools, Huntsman Elementary has consistently performed higher on the state assessments than its' sister school, Ketcher Elementary. Huntsman also has a lower number of students qualifying for free/reduced lunches, a lower percentage of students identified as needing special education services, a lower mobility rate, and lower number of suspensions. Compared to its sister school, Ketcher Elementary, the teachers at Huntsman Elementary have a higher average of years worked in education and within the district. Huntsman Elementary has made minimal new teacher hires each year since its opening and has been led by the same principal since its' opening whereas Ketcher has had three different head principals.



The inside of the school, the outdoor areas, and the entrances are in good physical condition and are well-maintained. Huntsman Elementary began as a middle school, so the hallways, gym, and cafeteria are bigger than a typical elementary school. The office is the main entrance to the school and all other doors are locked when school is in session. The class sizes are relatively low with 24-26 students in each classroom. There is student work posted throughout the building, and there is a “pit” or central meeting point just outside of the office where presentations are held. The school is organized into “pods” where four classrooms, lockers, restrooms and water fountains are located. The school is comprised of two main hallways. Outside of each pod area is a bulletin board that is decorated by that pod’s teachers.

There was an appearance of organization to Huntsman Elementary. Many of the teachers have taught at the school since its opening, so it is apparent that processes within the school are clear. Unaccompanied students traveling through the building during the day were walking with purpose, and classes that walked down the hall together did so in an orderly fashion. Students seemed to be comfortable and happy in the school setting with clear understandings of their expectations for behavior and school procedures. A recent addition of security locks requires visitors to be buzzed into the office by office staff. All visitors are required to sign into an electronic scanner that scans drivers’ licenses and conducts a brief background check. Once checked in, visitors receive a badge sticker to wear inside the building notifying all staff that the visitor has indeed checked into the office.

Throughout the visits, it was also apparent that the principal had a good rapport with the students. He was able to make small jokes throughout his presentation and the

student council members in attendance seemed to enjoy his personality. It was obvious that the current students at this school had regular interactions with the building principal.

## Participants

There was a total of eight interviews conducted for this study. Table 1 shows the participants and their years of experience within the district.

*Table 2. Participants Years of Experience in Current School*

Participant	Years in School
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade Teacher 1 Carol	2
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade Teacher 2 Jim	3
4 <sup>th</sup> grade Teacher 3 Angela	8
4 <sup>th</sup> grade Teacher 4 Meredith	8
Principal Michael	8
Assistant Principal Jenny	5
Counselor 1 Jan	2
Counselor 2 Katy	8

### Teacher 1

Carol is a White traditionally certified third-grade teacher at one of the three Pre-K-3 feeder schools. Carol is a young teacher, in her mid-twenties, who exudes a positive

outlook on education and the transition process. She has taught in her current school for two years with a total of two years of experience. Prior to teaching at her current school, she was a teacher intern. Because of her successful performance as an intern teacher, she was hired as a teacher the following year. She is a quiet teacher, and she does not prefer confrontation with peers or with parents. Carol is an active member of a professional learning community at her school. She willingly volunteers to assist in any way her PLC may need. She not only works with the teachers within her school, but she also works with teachers across the district on curriculum pacing and assessments. Her classroom is very organized and has a calm feel to it. She is always striving to perfect her craft. She was eager to participate in the interviews.

### **Teacher 2**

Jim works as a third-grade teacher in one of the feeder schools, which was different than Carol, is in his late fifties. He is a veteran teacher who has worked in this district for less than five years, but prior to coming to this district he worked for several years in a rural school district. He is White and has a total of 26 years in education with a traditional certification. He participates in district professional learning communities as well as the professional learning community within his school. He has a relaxed classroom management system. He is quiet, has a dry sense of humor, and tends to stay on task at all times during school meetings. He is very much “business” oriented. He expresses his opinions only on very controversial topics discussed in PLC. He has an easy-going demeanor.

### **Teacher 3**

Angela is a traditionally certified 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Huntsman Elementary. She has worked at the school since its opening in 2012. She is an experienced teacher who has taught in other schools prior to her time at Huntsman Elementary for a total of 14 years in education. Angela is White and in her late forties. She spoke very highly of her colleagues. She would often refer to decisions and strategies she used collectively, stating that she and her team made decisions and implemented strategies that were discussed together as a team. She is viewed as a lead teacher in her building and has participated on various committees at her school. Her classroom has a welcoming feel with several bright colors and encouraging signs posted throughout. Her teacher desk took up minimal space. This allowed room to put student desks into groups. She also had a “teacher” horseshoe table where she worked with students in small groups.

#### **Teacher 4**

Meredith, a White teacher in her late forties, has been a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Huntsman Elementary since its opening in 2012. She has a total of 16 years of experience in education and is traditionally certified. Meredith had her student desks arranged in groups. She had two large whiteboards in her classroom and a SmartBoard. She also had a “teacher” table where she worked with students in small groups. The small groups were based on the students’ skill level and proficiency on taught skills. Meredith participated in PLC groups at her school and was also on the leadership committee within the building. In her interview, she repeatedly expressed her great love for her students. She was eager to talk positively about the transition process and about her colleagues.

#### **Counselor**

Jan, a White teacher in her mid-fifties, has worked at Huntsman Elementary for two school years. Prior to being employed in the district, she worked at a school district that was similar to this district. She is a very experienced counselor with 30 years of traditionally certified experience in education. Her office was very organized and large. It was large enough to comfortably meet with parents, students, or small groups of students. She was soft-spoken, but clear in her interview answers.

### **Counselor 2**

Katy, a White teacher in her late 30's, has been at Huntsman Elementary since its opening in 2012. She is an experienced counselor who has been able to work in more than one school building in the district during her career for a total of 16 years. She is traditionally certified. Not only has she worked in more than one building, she has had her own children attend different buildings throughout the district, so she is deeply rooted in the town. She was able to talk about the history of the school and how processes have stayed consistent since the opening of the school with only slight changes. She was willing to talk about individual conversations that she has experienced with students which helped showcase the struggles that some transitioning students may face. Katy was soft-spoken and had a sweet demeanor.

### **Assistant Principal**

The assistant principal of Huntsman Elementary, Jenny, was a teacher in a neighboring district before becoming the assistant principal. Overall, she has 17 years of experience in education being traditionally certified. She is in her early forties and is

White. During her interview, she spoke highly of the school, Huntsman Elementary teachers, and the district as a whole. She works well with parents, students, and teachers. She is well regarded by the teachers in the building and among district administration. In fact, her reputation in the district was so strong, that she was hired at the end of the school year in this study as the head principal of one of the lower elementary schools in the district. She was concise in her answers, but she was willing to expand when asked.

### **Principal**

The principal of Huntsman Elementary, Michael, has been at the school since its' opening in 2012 and has spent his entire education career in the building. He was been in education for 21 years, is White, and he is in his mid-forties. When Huntsman was a middle school, Michael was a science teacher and later an assistant principal. Michael is a very dedicated principal who often spends his evenings and weekends working to make sure that he has a clear plan to present to teachers. It was reported that he checks in frequently with colleagues and staff to make sure everyone is doing well. He believes in doing what is good for the district and all students, not solely what is good for his school. To his staff, Michael is known as a team player who likes to collaborate with others. Due to his work ethic, his character, and his time in the district, he is regarded around the district as a great educator and successful principal.

### **Transition Strategies**

The student transition process into Huntsman Elementary from feeder schools was created when the school first opened and has only been minorly adjusted since that time.

This process includes embedded strategies for connecting the schools and staff at all school sites work together to implement the strategies such as specific means of communication between the sending schools and receiving schools. The process begins at the beginning of the second semester for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. This is prior to their transition to Huntsman Elementary beginning just after Winter Break and continuing throughout the spring and summer before school starts.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Visits**

Principal Michael contacts the parents of the feeder schools via e-mail to let them know about the upcoming events that will be hosted at Huntsman Elementary. He explains the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits and parent meetings leading up to the start of the upcoming school year. The goal of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits is to introduce the students to the building, staff, and school procedures. The goal of the parent meeting is to introduce the parents to the school, the staff, and the school procedures. Students are encouraged to attend the meeting with the parents which allows the opportunity for the new students to show their parents around the building sharing what they learned during the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits. The staff are at the school during this meeting to be available to answer questions. The goal of the parent meeting is to lessen the anxiety of the parents and to boost the incoming students' confidence by being able to access the building for a second time.

Each of the feeder schools came to Huntsman Elementary for a "3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit." The three 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits followed the same format with the exception of two schools riding the bus and one school walking to Huntsman Elementary for the tour. I observed

three meetings and will give a description of the meeting format which was consistent for all three meetings. The meeting began with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students being greeted by 5<sup>th</sup> grade student council members as they walked into an area known as “the pit.” The principal began the meeting by introducing himself and other key staff – the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and 5<sup>th</sup> grade counselors and explaining that the assistant principal was out of the building for the day. The 4<sup>th</sup> grade counselor spoke to the students introducing herself and explaining that both counselors are available to help students. She mentioned that they would teach guidance classes one time a month, just as the students were accustomed to at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade school. She said they were both available to meet on a daily basis. She also said they attend the morning assembly each morning, so they are easily accessible. The principal then introduced a WatchDOG dad who attends the school almost daily. The WatchDOG program is a program run by the school to encourage male volunteers to spend time at the school with the students. The principal also introduced the school nurse and pointed out the office where the school secretaries were working. He mentioned that the assistant principal had taken a new job at another school, and he stated that he would announce the new assistant principal as soon as the new appointment was approved by the school board.

The principal continued with information about the school day including when school, breakfast, and the morning assembly begin. He reassured students that they only needed to worry about two things on the first day of school – who their teacher was and where to find the gym. He continued to reassure students about the size of the building. He assured them that they would have the layout of the building memorized within a few days.



The school's building has what they call "CHAMPS posters" hanging throughout the school. These posters explain the procedure for different behaviors throughout the building, including getting a drink at the water fountain, walking in the hallway, getting into lockers, and how to behave in classrooms. He told the students that at this school, "We are CHAMPS in all we do." He also pointed out banners that said, "Ready, Respectful, Responsible." This is a common theme throughout the district and is something that is utilized at the feeder schools. At this time 5<sup>th</sup> grade student council members took students on tours throughout the building that lasted approximately 20 minutes. The students were able to tour classrooms, the playground, the indoor recess area, the cafeteria, the gym, the library and a few of the specials classes. After the tour the students returned to the pit for a question/answer session. After this session, the students were dismissed to go back to their current school building.

### **Parent Meeting**

Mrs. Jan describes the parent meeting at Huntsman Elementary as, a night where parents can come up to the school, tour the building, and get a little bit of information on how fourth grade will be for the students. Parents from all three sending schools attend this one meeting. At this time students can tour again with their parents which is the second time that the students will have been to the school.

The parent meeting took place at the school in the evening. This meeting occurred a week after the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade meetings were complete. As the parents walked into the gym, they walked by a table with a yellow handout with school information available for pick up. The teachers in attendance at the meeting entered the gym and took seats in front of

the parents. Principal Michael started the meeting by introducing himself and stating that he has worked at this particular school for 21 years. He explained that he began as a teacher when the building was a middle school. He then moved into the position of assistant principal when it was a middle school, and finally he served as the principal of the elementary school. Principal Michael then vocalized the goal for the evening by saying,

The goal for today is a second visit for the students, to hit the high points of how Huntsman Elementary is run, and allow you all (the parents) to have a self-guided tour with the assistance of your student.

He then introduced the teachers. In attendance was the librarian, 10 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, an instructional specialist, the Gifted teacher, a counselor, two special education teachers, the PE teacher, the art teacher, the STEM teacher, and the music teacher. All teachers were wearing a school t-shirt allowing them to be easily recognized. Mr. Michael bragged on his teachers stating, “We have an amazing staff at Huntsman Elementary. We are proud to be an ‘A’ school, and our teachers work hard every day to help school be special.”

Mrs. Jenny, the assistant principal, was not present at this meeting, and the principal announced that the new assistant principal would be hired that evening at the school board meeting. He thanked the parents for attending, noting that he understood how busy they were. He then had his volunteer organization leaders introduce themselves and encourage parents to participate. Principal Michael continued with information about a typical school day and more information about the back to school night. He did a brief overview of how the school day begins, where to drop off students, where they eat

breakfast and lunch, lockers and rules, a flipped schedule that happens on Wednesdays, specials classes, and dismissal procedures.

He talked about the various way that the school communicates to parents: Facebook, the Schools App, School Messenger, and text and e-mails sent to parents. Throughout the school, teachers communicate through Monday folders that include newsletters and flyers. Teachers also communicate via e-mail. He covered the dress code policy of the district and very clearly communicated that if parents are coming to the office that they need to have their ID with them. He mentioned the way the school recognizes good behavior, and he finally pointed out the CHAMPS posters listed throughout the schools which list the procedures of various activities. He ended the meeting by reminding parents to make sure that their contact information was updated in the school system and stating the student creed for the school was written by the first group of students to attend the school as an elementary school.

At this time, teachers headed back to their classrooms, and parents were invited to walk through the school building being led by their students. As soon as they were done touring the building, they were all free to leave. The formal meeting in the gym took 33 minutes which allowed the students and parents approximately 30 minutes to roam the building, meet with staff members, and get a better “feel” for the building. Along with the tour, there was also the opportunity for parents to stop by the volunteer table to get more information or visit with volunteer leaders. The principal stayed in the gym and visited with any parents that had questions. He had three sets of parents waiting for him. One had a question about riding the bus, one wanted to “catch up” because a former child had

attended the school, and the final one has some basic questions about the school procedures.

## **Communications**

The final two steps of the transition process include communication over the summer and a back to school event. The goal of the summer communication is to ensure that students and parents feel informed about the coming year and the procedures of the school. The back to school event involves the parents, students, teachers, counselors, and administrators of Huntsman Elementary. The goal of the back to school event is that students meet their classroom teacher and are also able to access the building for a third time before school starts, hopefully decreasing any anxiety students may be feeling and increasing their confidence for the first day of school. The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits, parent meeting, and communication is explained in more detail below.

Principal Michael believes that communication is key to a successful transition. He ensures that communication takes place in several different ways, including formal and informal. Principal Michael communicates with a variety of stakeholders during the process including the teachers, counselors and assistant principal at Huntsman Elementary, the teachers, counselors, and administrators at the three feeder schools, the third grade students that will attend Huntsman Elementary, the student council students at Huntsman Elementary, and the parents of the incoming students. He varies the way that he communicates with each of these stakeholder groups. Some communication is done by email, some in person by conducting meetings, some communication is written in flyers that are sent home or a school newsletter, and some of the communication is done

through social media posts. Principal Michael prioritizes communication during the transition process thus he communicates in several different ways.

**Teacher to Teacher Communication Cards.** After state testing that takes place in April, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers are asked to fill out information cards on each of their students. These cards are to be used by Huntsman Elementary staff to make classroom rosters. The counselors and administrators of Huntsman Elementary meet with the feeder schools' counselors and administrators to talk through any student concerns or pertinent student or family information that needs to be shared. The goal of this meeting is to share information that will aid Huntsman Elementary in class placement of particular students to help ensure a smooth transition. It also informs Huntsman Elementary staff of any specific needs that incoming students or families may have.

**Facebook posts and videos.** Between the middle of July until the start of school year the school posted information nine times on Facebook to families. The beginning of the posts let readers know important dates and volunteer opportunities and indicated that more information would be coming soon. At the beginning of August, the principal posted a video of himself and the new assistant principal saying "hello" to their school family, showing off the new school t-shirts and theme for the year, listing specific information about the back to school night event, and highlighting an attached newsletter that contained specific information about the start of school. They ended the video by stating that they were happy and looking forward to meeting kids and their families at the back to school event.

**School newsletter.** The school newsletter gave specific information about the back to school night event. In order to decrease the crowd, the school held each grade

level meeting at separate times with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade meetings following directly behind the 4<sup>th</sup> grade meetings. The newsletter described the rationale for splitting the two grade levels by stating, “We are trying to tame the crazy atmosphere of Back to School Night. This means more focused time sitting down and hearing from your child’s teacher about the year ahead.” The newsletter was laid out with clear headings: Introducing Back to School Night, Back to School Night Schedule, What to Expect in the Classroom, No Money Needed, Important Information, and Enrollment and Residency Verification. Some of the information included was new to the parents, such as students being able to bring supplies on that night to drop off in the classrooms, and most of the information provided was repeated information such as enrollment and residency verification that had been sent out to parents previously by the district and school.

In the “What to Expect in the Classroom” section of the newsletter it stated the following to describe what to expect during the back to school meeting,

Students and children are welcome in the classroom for this presentation, but please encourage your children to be quiet and good listeners, so that all can hear the important information being presented. After several minutes, homeroom teachers and their partners will switch classrooms so that parents and kids can stay in the same room.

The school newsletter very clearly laid out the expectations for the back to school night.

**Parent meeting flyer.** The flyer that was available for parents to pick up at the parent meeting was a map of the building. The top of the parent meeting flyer was titled, “Huntsman Elementary – Home of the Ready, Respectful, and Responsible Student.” The flyer listed pertinent school information. On the opposite side of the map was important

information such as drop off and pick up times, lunch times, specials availability, and other “miscellaneous” information including bringing IDs to check out children and making sure that the information parents had in the school information system was correct such addresses and phone numbers. It also had a section that informed students of each feeder school about bussing information for those students who had previously walked to school. Now that those students are attending a school that is not as close to home, they are able to ride a bus to school. Most of this information included in the handout was covered in the presentation done by the principal at the parent meeting. Principal Michael did explain that teacher requests were not accepted at the school, and that each student would receive a locker. He also stated that the lockers did not have locks.

## CHAPTER V

### DATA ANALYSIS

#### **Major Themes**

In Chapter 3, a thick, rich description of the data was presented. In this chapter, I present the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. Each of the major themes, easing fears and anxiety, open communication, and team approach, are described in more detail in the sections that follow.

#### **Easing Fears and Anxiety**

One major theme that emerged through data analysis was the use of transition strategies to ease fears and anxieties of incoming students. Huntsman elementary intentionally addressed student fears and anxieties through a focus on procedures, multiple site visits, and facilitation of support for parents.



***Focus on Procedures.*** Procedures were a main focus for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade meeting as well as the parent meeting. The parent meeting began with a 30-minute meeting covering procedures and then 30 minutes to explore the building and ask additional questions to tie it all together. He states,

Parents need to know arrival, dismissal, structure of the school, what it is like for their kid, basic rules that we have, class assignments, things like that. It is a lot of information to take in which is why we offer a 30-minute time at the end of the parent meeting where all fourth-grade teachers go back to their classroom spaces and answer questions for parents. It also allows parents and students to explore the building and put an eye on the locations we talk about when we cover procedures.

Principal Michael notes that a one-time meeting is not enough to help parents feel comfortable with the procedures of the school. In addition to the parent meeting, Principal Michael sends communication to parents in a variety of ways which are all centered around procedures. He explained how he sent out the procedural information. At the beginning of his communication sent to parents via email and social media he provided broad procedural information such as what time school started, what time lunch was, and how to contact the school. As the beginning of the school year neared, the information was more specific. For example, just a few weeks before the start of school he sent out a video of their carline drop-off and pick-up procedures. This process of communication is done intentionally. Principal Michael said he shares the most frequently asked questions at the beginning of the transition process and then gradually shares more specific information about the school's procedures the closer to the

beginning of school because that is when it is more likely for parents and students to remember the procedures. He stated,

The whole goal is when the students come back for back to school night that those kids have already been to the building twice, and that they have a little bit of swagger. They come down the hall, and it is not fearful because it is not the first time they have been there. They feel like 'we've been here' and they know what to do to an extent.

Principal Michael states that is why at the 3rd grade visits he focused on the overall rules of the school, pointing out the CHAMPS procedures posters throughout the building. They act as a visual reminder for students on what the procedures are for certain locations in the building. Again, at the parent meeting the CHAMPS procedures were mentioned as well as daily procedures such as morning drop off and afternoon pick up and teacher communication through Monday folders. When the principal and assistant principal posted a video to Facebook it was to make parents aware of the new procedures for back to school night. The principal noted, "This year we'll do particular higher amounts of communication because back to school night is going to have a different structure than it has had in the past."

The newsletter that was sent out to parents prior to the start of school also covered common procedures that parents needed to be aware of before school started. The principal posted a very informative video about the parking lot procedures with pictures included to make sure parents were prepared for the procedures of the parking lot before the start of school. In the video, he repeated more than once that often times the school staff find themselves reassuring the parents that this is NOT a middle school, but an

elementary school. He also explained that the procedures of the building reflect that. The principal notes,

The parents want to hear it's going to be an elementary school. How is my kid going to be watched over and taken care of? How many adults are going to be supervising them? How do I get them safely here and to home? And so, through the notes home and through the parent orientation, we make sure we provide that information.

Mrs. Meredith, a 4th grade teacher, echoed the need to reassure parents that the transition did not mean that the new school was treated as a middle school. She said, "I know the principals work really hard at communicating exactly what to expect in fourth grade and that it's not a middle school, it's an elementary school and we treat it as such."

***Multiple Site Visits.*** Every staff member that was interviewed mentioned the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits as an integral part of the transition process because it gives the transitioning students an opportunity to learn more about Huntsman Elementary, including procedures and layout. Many comments were made about the parent night meeting and the back to school night event. The number of visits before schools starts appeared to be greatly beneficial to easing the students' and parents' fears and anxieties about the transition. Assistant Principal Jenny stated, "My perception is that because our kids have been exposed to our building two, three, maybe even four times by the time the first day of school rolls around they transition very well." Not only are the students given the opportunity to visit, there is a clear progression of purpose for each visit. Initially, the students are given a guided tour of the building as a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class led by the student council members. According to Principal Michal, this tour allows students to become

familiar with the layout of the school from a peer with the intention of hopefully easing some anxiety.

At the parent night meeting the students are given the ownership of showing their parents around the building, being able to “show off” their knowledge of the building. Principal Michael stated that this step was intentionally planned to give students the opportunity to show their parents their new school. Additionally, he said that the multiple visits to the school before school starts were intentionally created as part of the transition process to ease the fear of students of not knowing their way around the building on the first day of school. The main location they have to find at the beginning of the meeting is the gym, which is also the only location they are expected to know the location on the first day of school. This step was designed so that students come into the meeting the same way that they will start the first day of school with the intent of making sure students know where to locate the gym on the first day of school. According to Principal Michael, the result is a decrease in fear or anxiety of the students on the first day of school.

Finally, at the back to school night meeting the students are expected to find the gym again as well as their homeroom classroom. They are allowed to walk through the building on this night as well although there is not much time allotted to this due to an additional meeting occurring after their meeting for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. Finally, they arrive at the first day of school with the expectation of knowing where to find the gym and knowing who their classroom teachers are. Mrs. Angela, a fourth-grade teacher said

I think the multiple visits to the school sets up third graders nicely to transition into fourth grade with the tour, parent meeting, back to school event. These allow students to come and get to know the environment and the teachers. This is believed by teachers, counselors, and administrators to help alleviate the anxiety of the students.

***Parent Support.*** In addition to the parent meeting where Principal Michael and teachers discuss rules, procedures, and the layout of the school, Principal Michael also communicates, before school begins, via social media and e-mail. Principal Michael released a video via social media with a map of how the morning arrival and afternoon dismissal takes place. This was done in an attempt to make these two times of the day go smoothly with all participants understanding the procedures, thus easing their stress during each of these activities. Instead of simply describing these events at a meeting or sending home a written description of the procedures, Principal Michael created a very clear and descriptive video of how drop-off and dismissal worked utilizing an aerial photo of the school and utilizing arrows and animations during the video.

Huntsman Elementary puts major emphasis on procedures during the transition process. Huntsman Elementary focused on procedures with every interaction with students and parents. The school communicates at every opportunity their procedures. Procedures were the basis of each formal meeting conducted before the beginning of school. It was also the main focus of the communication that was given in written and oral form to parents before the beginning of school.

**Open Communication** A second theme that emerged through analysis of data was open communication. Throughout its transition strategies, Huntsman Elementary staff

facilitated and encouraged open communication with the staff at feeder schools, parents, and students.

***Communication with Feeder Schools.*** Each year, Principal Michael reaches out to the feeder school administrators, counselors and teachers about the upcoming visits. He does this by speaking to the feeder school principals in person and sending electronic communication to the teachers. The principal is not the only one who communicates with the feeder schools about the process. This is also done between the school counselors. At one point in years prior, Principal Michael met with the feeder school principals to explain the transition process and the need for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards that the third-grade teachers fill out on each student. He wanted to clearly communicate the need for the third-grade cards to the principals because the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards do give the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers more work. He explained how Huntsman Elementary used the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards to do class placement as well as to create plans for students who have additional needs beyond the typical student.

As mentioned, the main form of communication between the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers occur through filling out information cards on each individual student. The card is about the size of an index card. Each feeder school had a different color of card which helps the counselors when creating class lists to manage the number of students from each school in each classroom at a quick glance. The card also allows for the sending teacher to rate the students' performance in math and reading by selecting a 1, 2, or 3. A 3 indicates high performance for the grade level; two indicates on level performance, and one indicates below grade level work. The teacher may also indicate whether the student is on a tier for additional remediation support in reading or math.

Additionally, the card includes a spot where the teacher can select whether the student is a male or female. Just as with academic performance, the teacher can select a rating for behavior: a number “1” indicates frequent behavior problems; “2” indicates few issues; and a number “3” indicates no concern. On the right of the card, the teacher can select whether the student receives any of the following services: pullout, collaborative, mild/moderate, severe/profound, speech, 504 and gifted or English language supports. Finally, there is a box where the teacher may add any additional information such as other students that the child should be separated from in class or any family information that may be important.

In addition to the information provided on the 3rd grade cards, the teachers have access through the district student information system to each child’s previous teachers as that student attended the same school district in years’ past. The teachers also have access to all teachers’ phone extensions and e-mails through the district phone system to be able to call any teacher throughout the district if needed. This allows teachers to be able to be in communication in a more direct and personal way than the cards allow. This is not often needed, but certain instances do arise when teachers need more information about students than is provided on the card. Mrs. Meredith, fourth grade teacher at Huntsman Elementary, mentioned a time when she had to reach out to a teacher for additional information. She stated,

One thing I love about this district is that we communicate, I mean our special ed teacher walked over to a feeder school to get more information from that special ed teacher about those two students so that we could better serve them at our school.

The school counselors have a large role in communicating with the feeder schools about individual students with specific needs. Mrs. Jan says that Hunstman Elementary School counselors work closely with the assistant principal to “gather as much information about the students as we can.” She also notes that she travels to the feeder schools with the principal and assistant principal to collect the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards and talk to the feeder schools’ administrator and counselors. She states, “I usually take a big notepad and I write down all of the different things that they say about the students in addition to what is on the cards.” Mrs. Jenny, the assistant principal, says that the communication with the feeder schools at these meetings allow them to know which students may need some additional supports. Mrs. Jenny states,

Meeting with the feeder schools is essential. We learn about kids with additional needs. We do special tours for kids that may have specific needs whether they are on an IEP or have a 504. We can plan ahead and do more for them (the students) if needed. In this way, we make it work for all of our students.

***Communication with Parents and Students.*** Principal Michael also sends notifications to parents about e-mails via social media and e-mail. He shares with the parents at the parent meeting how best for parents to contact the school with any questions. He also lays out who the best person to contact for specific issues. He makes himself, assistant principal, and the counselors available after the meeting to answer any additional questions that the parents or students may have. Furthermore, the assistant principal and counselors set up meetings for parents and students who have needs beyond the typical student to be able to talk together about the student’s particular needs. Once this is communicated, the teachers, counselor, administrator and parents make a plan



together as a team for the student. The plan's intention is to help the child to successfully transition. A check-in meeting is scheduled for a later date, but parents and staff are also able to schedule a meeting at any time they are concerned with the child's success.

Principal Michael also sends out timely communication to parents about the rules and procedures of the school. At the beginning of the transition process he shares broad procedures and hits major points for the parents, such as the school schedule, school communication, and how the school handles bullying. Closer to the start of the school year, he communicates about more specific information about the school such as where are students dropped off and picked up in the morning. This is done virtually with social media and e-mails. During all of these communications it is shared how parents can contact the school with any questions.

The communication does not end once school begins. Ms. Angela, a fourth-grade teacher states

I think Gene School District does a really good job with communicating with parents. I think another key element is teachers communicating with parents initially letting them know how their student is doing on the first couple of days of school. This communication which reassures parents, in conjunction with the before school events, is crucial to setting the climate for the whole year.

**A Team Approach** Each of the participants, teachers, counselors, administrators tended to recognize their role in the transition process as not being the sole part of the process that makes the transition successful. There was an awareness from each participant that there were many other roles that were played to create the entire transition process. It was mentioned several times from each interviewee what their specific role was in the

process, and they were able to list other, not always all, steps in the process. It was recognized by the participants that the process would not work as well as it did without each participant filling their role. Principal Michael notes the importance of not only working together collectively to achieve the best result, but also the importance of communicating that team approach to parents during the parent meeting. When introducing his teachers, he makes a point to tell parents that, “These are people that work well together.” He says that he wants parents to leave the parent meeting with the thought, “my kids are going to be all right at this school. They’re going to be okay and even if I have a problem or a question, it’s going to get handled.” He says his job is “to make sure that parents walk away that night with a feeling that their kids feel like, okay, I might still be nervous, but it was not nearly as bad as I thought.”

Also mentioned was the teamwork between teachers to ensure the success of every student. Teachers are not afraid to ask for help or suggestions from former teachers. Mrs. Angela, 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, recalled a time she reached out for help with a student. “I’ve even contacted the teacher from previous years and said, okay, this is what I’m noticing. What did you do to help work? What helps you?” The fact that the teachers feel comfortable enough to reach out to a student’s previous teachers and that those teachers are willing to share information to help out that student is reflective of teamwork.

The third-grade cards that are filled out by the third-grade teachers and then are given to the third-grade teachers is another example of the teamwork approach. The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers have to take the time to thoughtfully fill out each individual, card and the staff at Huntsman Elementary has to take the time to review each card. Then, the staff utilizes the information that the feeder schools provide to make decisions about class

placement for students. This is an example of the trust between Huntsman Elementary and the staff of the three feeder schools. The importance of these cards is that they allow the staff at Huntsman Elementary the opportunity to plan for students that will be attending their school as 4<sup>th</sup> graders. It gives them the opportunity to set up meetings with families if needed, allows the counselors the opportunity to separate students that have had previous issues with one another, allows class lists to be made from the academic and behavior information provided, and finally gives the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers an idea of their students' needs prior to school starting.

Principal Michael stated,

The transition process is not possible with the multiple working wheels. I can't possibly be a part of every conversation about every student. So, there are processes that I am not directly involved in, but I see the results of those meetings because they come back and let me know the best class placement for specific students. So, that is why I tell my staff that the communication from school to school, teacher to teacher, counselor to counselor, and principal to principal is so important.

### **Summary**

Chapter V provided a narrative presentation of data collected in this study. This chapter described in detail the district and school context, interview participants, and major transition strategies and roles at Huntsman Elementary. Additionally, Chapter V presented the major themes that emerged through analysis of the data presented. Chapter VI will present findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter IV presented data which was gathered through faculty and staff interviews, observations, and an analysis of documents and artifacts through the lens of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. Included was a description of the school and a brief description of each interview participant and their role within the district. The purpose was to allow the leader to have a view into the school where the study took place. Chapter V will present a final summary of the case study. Additionally, it will cover the findings, conclusion, and recommendations for further research that may be conducted as well as implications for practice.

#### **Summary of the Study**

Students are experiencing major transitions between education settings much more frequently and at younger ages than they have in the past. Sometimes students adapt to major transitions well, and other times they do not. Research suggests that several transitions within a student's educational experience can negatively influence students (Alspaugh, 1998, Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin & Vigdor, 2007; Gordon, Peterson, Gdula, & Klingbeil, 2011; Offenber, 2001; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Parker, 2009; Smith, 2006; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991; Wren, 2003). Therefore, this case study was conducted in a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade mid-western state school, Huntsman Elementary, in order to gain a better understating of the transition process for students between buildings at such a young age. The focus was to gather the perceptions of school staff - teachers, administrators, and counselors- about their role in the transition process, what challenges students experience during this transitional time and how staff has addressed these challenges. Additionally, the goal was to gather strategies that are utilized by staff to support students before, during, and after this transition. Interviews were conducted with two 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers from feeder schools into Huntsman Elementary, two Huntsman Elementary 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, two counselors at the Huntsman Elementary, and two administrators at Huntsman Elementary. While significant effort was made to recruit teacher interviewees – meeting with building principals to help inform teachers of my study, informal conversations with teachers at district meetings, and multiple e-mails sent to teachers requesting participation- I was only able to secure four total teacher participants, two from each level, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

Data was collected from individual interviews, observations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student visits and parent meeting, as well as an analysis of documents and artifacts related to the transition. As the researcher, I conducted three separate observations of the

three feeder school 3rd grade visits. I also conducted an observation of the parent meeting which was held in the evening at Huntsman Elementary.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does a select school in one school district implement transitions for students between third and fourth grade?
  - a. What are the strategies used to support students before, during, and after student transitions between third and fourth grade?
  - b. How does school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) perceive their role in student transitions between third and fourth grade?
2. What challenges have school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) experienced in student transitions between third and fourth grade?
  - a. How have school staff addressed these challenges?

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **Research Question 1: How does one school support the transition of students between third and fourth grade?**

The school supports the transition of students through a formalized transition process created by the building principal and involving many key staff such as teachers, counselors and administrators at the feeder schools. This process begins at the beginning of the second semester when Principal Michael contacts the schools to set up the third-grade visits. This transition process is a multiple step plan beginning towards the end of the transitioning students third grade year with third grade visits, a parent meeting, various communication over the summer, and a back to school event before the start of

the school year. One major support provided during the transition process is the open access of the school and the constant, clear communication. Not only does the school communicate with the incoming parents and students, but also with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade schools that are sending students. The communication with the parents and students focuses on procedures with the hope of easing fears and anxiety. At any time if a student needs to visit with a counselor, they are able to do so.

**a. What are the strategies used to support students before, during, and after student transitions between third and fourth grade?**

The transition process from one school to another between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade is a multi-step process with a focus on easing fear and anxiety of students and parents, open access to the building, communication with stakeholders.

**Before transition.** Prior to the transition Principal Michael sends out *communication* to all stakeholders. This informs all stakeholders of the transition process as well as each participants' role in the process. The process begins in early March/April when the initial contact is made from Huntsman Elementary to the feeder schools' 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. Principal Michael initiates *communication* by sending a letter to the students at the school and contacting the parents through e-mail. The letter simply invites the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to the receiving school for a tour and contains an invitation to parents and students to attend a parent meeting a week after the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits. This is the school's first chance to *communicate* with the parents the steps of the transition process. The principal ensures that this communication is clear and friendly by welcoming the students and parents as "school family" and extending the invitation to attend the two upcoming meetings. The principal states this *initial communication* is

essential in creating an environment where kids and students feel comfortable with attending the receiving school the following school year which is intended to help ease any fear and anxiety students or parents may have.

**During transition.** This is the most comprehension part of the transition. Open *access* to the building during this time is an essential component of the transition process. Students are able to access the building a minimum of three times before the start of their 4<sup>th</sup> grade school year.

Initially, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students attend the tours at the receiving school. All three schools attend on the same day with the times staggered. This is the first opportunity for the students to *access* the building. The principal begins with an introductory session that introduces key people in the building, and then continues with an overview of a day in the life of the school. Next, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students attend the tours at the receiving school. All three schools attend on the same day with the times staggered. This is the first opportunity for the students to access the building. The principal begins with an introductory session that introduces key people in the building, and then continues with an overview of a day in the life of the school. He reiterates the importance of encouraging students that they simply need to know where the gym is and who their teacher is on those first few days of school in order to hopefully *ease some anxiety or concern* that the students may be feeling. He tells the students that their teachers pick them up from the gym and takes them everywhere they need to go throughout the day, so there is no need to worry about getting lost as this school is larger than the school, they attend in third grade. He also *reassures* students by telling them that it only takes a typical 4<sup>th</sup> grader a



few days to get the lay of the school. A big portion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade meeting focuses on the *procedures* of the school.

Once the tours are over the group comes back together for a question and answer session. Before the classes leave from the tours Principal Michael offers the students the opportunity to ask their 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers any additional questions they may have, and if the teacher does not know the answer, he encourages them to *contact* Huntsman Elementary for an answer thus leaving them the opportunity to communicate with the school any questions or concerns they may have.

Next, the school hosts a parent meeting which is the second opportunity for students to *access* the building. Principal Michael says the school purposely holds the parent meeting within a week of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tours. He wants the visit to be fresh on the minds of the incoming students, so they will feel *confident* about knowing their way around the building. All 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers are in attendance at this meeting, and he also invites speakers from the available volunteer organizations to come speak to the parents as well. This allows for the school *communication* to come from other staff members. Such as teachers. It also allows the teachers to communicate the same or additional information than the principal has given. The second time that the students have *access* to the building is at this meeting, and this time they have the opportunity to roam the building freely with their parents. He encourages the students to lead their parents on a tour since they have just recently visited the week before. Again, a majority of this meeting focuses on school *procedures* that pertain to not only the students, but mostly the parents.

Principal Michael states that you start to see some confidence in the students by hearing them usher their parents to a particular location. The principal then states that the transition process closes until the summertime when he will begin *communication* about the back to school night that will happen in August and continue *communicating school procedures* and information for those new to the school. He states that the goal of those two meetings is to have kids come to the back to school meeting in August with a little bit of swagger because they have already been to the building twice. Just before the back to school night meeting, parents are sent information on who their child's teacher is. The back to school night meeting is again for parents and students. The meeting begins in the gym with the principal and assistant principal. This is another 30-minute informational meeting with more details than the meeting in April. Principal Michael covers information about parking lot *procedures*, how to put money on lunch accounts, a specific school schedule in addition to other information. Then, the students and parents attend a 30-minute informational meeting in the classrooms with their classroom teacher. The classroom teacher covers rules and *procedures* for their individual classroom and contact information. Once students have left this meeting, they have been to the school three times before school even begins and they have met their teacher. On the first day of school all they have to know is how to find the gym and their teacher's name.

An additional thing that happens during the transition process is the teachers filling out the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards. During the transition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers fill out the cards and return them to Huntsman Elementary. The staff at Huntsman Elementary then takes this information and begins to do class placements and conduct meetings with teachers, students, and parents for those students that need additional support. The

counselors and administration at Huntsman Elementary also meet with the counselors and administrative staff at the three feeder schools to receive additional information on specific students that may not have been communicated on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards. Again, the purpose being to be able to best serve these students once they begin attending Huntsman Elementary. This would not be possible without the *teamwork* of the staff from the three feeder schools and the staff at Huntsman Elementary.

**After transition.** On the first day of school the principal says that he tries to relate to students and tell them that it is okay to be nervous. He tells them that if he was told that he was going to switch schools and be a principal in a brand-new building that he would have those same nervous butterflies. He says that he tells them that they, the teachers and staff, started with the first visit to do things to help the students feel more comfortable. He says that doesn't mean they will feel *totally calm*, but that is the ultimate goal.

Additionally, Huntsman Elementary staff continues to meet with parents as needed. The staff also meets to discuss any students who appear to be struggling with the transition and create an action plan for those students. Every so often, the staff at Huntsman Elementary will reach out to a teacher from the feeder schools to get information or input from the teacher in best serving a particular student. Again, the team approach is evident in this scenario.

**b. How does school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) perceive their role in student transitions between third and fourth grade?**

**Teacher roles.** Some teachers involved in the transition process view their role in the transition as primarily academic. Additionally, they cite relationships, reassurance, and communication as additional roles they fulfill.

***Academic.*** Third-grade teachers focus during the school year on transitioning from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’ and building student stamina in writing longer passages. Mr. Jim, third-grade teacher, says that academics is an integral part of his role in the transition process. He wants his students to be prepared to begin 4<sup>th</sup> grade academics and to do so successfully.

4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers also consider academics to be essential to their roles. Mrs. Meredith, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, stated that academics is a primary responsibility she holds. She likes how Huntsman Elementary meets the needs of individual students by implementing what is called “target time,” a built-in intervention time in their school that allows teachers to work with students in smaller groups and on targeted skills. She mentions that the different cognitive level of students in her class is a challenge, and the “target time” is considered a way to combat that challenge.

***Relationships.*** Some third-grade teachers from the feeder schools also consider their roles to be building relationships with their students and among their students. Mrs. Carol feels it is important for her and her colleagues to facilitate ways that the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in her building can get to know one another. The intent was that when the students transition to the 4/5 building that they know more than just the students in their homeroom classroom in third grade. She said one way they do this is by flexing students amongst teachers. Flexing is a process where teachers share students and work with students from other classes in combination with some students from their own classroom. Mrs. Carol also

noted that 4<sup>th</sup> grade is an age where students really begin to focus on their peer groups and peers' opinions. She feels that some students may struggle with making new friends, so this is one reason that her school focuses on flex grouping students, in part, to give students the opportunity to become acquainted with as many students as possible in a structured setting before the transition.

***Reassurance.*** Additionally, some teachers involved in the transition account that their role requires them to reassure not only students, but parents as well. As one way to reassure her students, Mrs. Carol talks with her students in the spring semester about the upcoming transition. Mrs. Carol states,

I think that it's really important that third grade teachers make it (the transition) important in 3rd grade. You don't have to necessarily talk about it all year in 3rd grade, but it needs to be something you openly discuss with the kids, and they know that the transition is going to be okay.

In addition to prefacing the visit with reassurance and discussion, Mrs. Carol answers any of the questions that the students have after the visit.

Mrs. Carol commented that Huntsman Elementary staff reassure students during their visits that everything will be okay with the transition. She believes that the 4/5 school does a great job of reassuring students that all will go well on the first day of school, and they only have to remember two things for it to be successful. She stated, "I think when we go on the visit and they are told just know that you are supposed to go to the gym and what your teacher's name is. I think that helps."

Mrs. Carol also recognized that the students are not the only ones she reassures. She did state that she has had conversations with parents that were concerned about the

transition and worried that the 4/5 school would no longer feel like an elementary school, but more closely resemble a middle school. She knows some families that have opted to move so that their children could attend a “traditional” elementary school before middle school. She says that she lets the parents know that the Huntsman Elementary School staff does a great job and that their student has the skills to be successful at the new school.

Mrs. Meredith, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, feels that her role in the transition is to reassure the students. She says,

So, my job is to kind of get to know them and get to know a little bit about their background, find out what are their strengths, what they enjoyed about 3rd grade, 2nd grade, and define that a little bit more about them.

She indicated that the transition often seems harder for the parents than it does for the students. She states, “I think it’s even harder for parents because they feel like they’re going from, you know, babies, you know, type of school to, now we’re growing up and we’re in 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> grade.” She also mentioned that in 4<sup>th</sup> grade she will have parents say they are unable help their child with homework because they (the parents) do not know how to do it themselves.

***Procedures.*** Mrs. Angela, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, stated her role in the transition process is to teach procedures and to ease any fears that the students may have. She stated she is a part of the transition process during the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits because she opens her classroom for any of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes that are touring. She also briefly talks with any visitors that come to her classroom. Additionally, she also attends the incoming 4<sup>th</sup> grade parent meeting and visits with any families that come and tour her classroom that evening. She is able to answer any questions that the parents or students have at this time.

She also makes a presentation for all incoming parents of her students at the back to school night.

***Communication.*** Finally, some teachers consider it an important role to communicate between Huntsman Elementary and the feeder schools about the cognitive levels, behavioral levels, and any additional needs of their incoming students. Mr. Jim, a third-grade teacher, stated that while his role in the transition process is primarily academic, communicating his students' needs to Huntsman Elementary is another essential role he plays. Overall, his perception is that transition is going really well for all students. He indicated that he believes that the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards are an important part of the process. He stated, "I think it's a good thing because if I were a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher I would like to flip through them."

Mrs. Meredith mentioned the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards that are filled out by the sending teachers and thinks that is an important communication tool between teachers. She stated that the process is going fine overall, and she believes that the teacher communication is one of the "highlights" of the process. Mrs. Angela said communication between the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers and the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers is really good.

***Successes and Challenges.*** When asked how the transition process was going and if there were any perceived challenges, Mrs. Carol said that overall, she thinks that the transition process is working well. She indicated that students that are economically disadvantaged may struggle more because they do not typically participate in sports outside of school and, therefore, have less exposure to meeting kids outside of their Pre-K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade school. Mrs. Carol believes that the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers attending the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit help with answering questions the students may have afterwards. She also stated that

it may be a good idea if a PLC could be implemented between the 3rd and 4th grade teachers so that they may get to know each other better. She believes information gleaned through PLCs would aid in talking to her third graders about the transition. She even suggested the idea of 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers making a PowerPoint or short videos to show to her students in her classroom after the visit to allow students to become more familiar with Huntsman Elementary staff. Mrs. Angela did note some challenges with the transition. She stated that the size of the building is much larger than the students are accustomed. She also identified the need to debunk some myths from former students about teachers or the school and the need to communicate with parents ensuring them that Huntsman is still an elementary school, even though it is a new building. She stated, “I know the Principal works really hard at communicating exactly what to expect in fourth grade. That it is not a middle school, it is an elementary school, and we treat it as such.” She said that she believes that constant communication helps the students feel more comfortable. She mentioned she also feels that the anxiety of the parents can sometimes be reflected on the students.

Mrs. Angela, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, believes that the transition goes really well with a majority of the students. She stated that the district works as a team to address any struggling students’ needs. Mrs. Angela stated that she experiences two challenges with the transition process. The first one was not having more time at the back to school event to visit with parents. Secondly, she also wishes she could get her class list of students sooner, so that she could reach out to parents early before the back to school meeting to start building relationships. Mrs. Meredith indicated a third challenge. She feels students struggle reading cursive, which is how she writes important information on her board.



Mr. Jim, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, did not perceive any challenges for the transitioning students other than “they might be just a little concerned that they might get separated from their friends, and they know they are going to get mixed up with other students. That’s a big, big thing for sure.”

**Counselors’ Roles.** At Huntsman, counselors play an important role in transition.

Counselors regularly meet with feeder schools to learn more about incoming students and make note of additional information that will be needed for student success. The counselors in the district also attend a district counselor PLC once a month which opens those lines of communication between schools and counselors because they know one another. Additionally, administrators in the district meet once per month not including the end of the year meeting with the administrators and counselors.

*Counselor 1.* Mrs. Jan, counselor, discussed her role in the process primarily revolving around the visits with the feeder schools’ principal and counselor. She stated that her role was to note additional information given by the counselor and principal to use later for class placement decisions. Mrs. Jan indicated that she likes utilizing the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade cards which allow the team to plan ahead as they consider appropriate supports for students. Mrs. Jan states,

The current 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers fill out the information card. That is a lot of good information. Then, the principals and the counselors meet and during that time we jot down specific information from the principals and the counselor.

She mentioned the process of the class placement decisions involved appropriately placing students with 504’s and IEP’s. Counselors also considered the combination of students from each feeder school, and balancing boys and girls. She also believes that the current transition process is going well.

Mrs. Jan indicated that she feels that the multiple visits to the school by the new students before school begins helps ease the stress of the move. As the counselor, she noted that there are a few challenges that she notices with students of this age: organization, maturity level, and social skills when interacting with peers. She mentioned that they do have some students with high needs or those that experience anxiety during the transition. She said that they provide supports for those students by collaborating as a team of teachers, counselors, and administrators. She also mentioned that guidance classes that are taught in school, and the school has added of small group counseling sessions based on students' needs. These two opportunities focus on appropriate peer interaction, coping with stress or anxiety, and any other need they see arise throughout the school year.

**Counselor 2.** Mrs. Katy stated that she believes that the current transition process is going well. She also noted that the multiple visits to the school are helpful for students. Similar to Ms. Angela, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, she indicated that she wishes that there was more time for students and parents to roam the building getting to meet with teachers. She suggested that perhaps the counselors and administrators could visit the 3rd grade students at their school and let them “see our faces” before they come on the 3rd grade visit to the receiving school. She also noted some challenges with the transition including placing students in the correct classes with the correct peers. She suggested that, despite all of the information they receive about individual students, they are not certain about placement decisions because they do not *know* the students yet. She stated, “The hardest thing about placing fourth grades in classes is that we really don’t know those kids.” She noted that it is helpful to have the students for some time like a traditional elementary

school so that school personnel can learn and have a history of the families and students. She said that class placement is much easier to do in 5th grade when the students have attended the school for a year. “When they go to 5th grade sometimes it is easier because we can go, whoa, no, let’s move these kids around.” She mentioned that social interaction among peers at this age can be a challenge.

Mrs. Katy stated that sometimes parents have negative reactions when contacted by the school about social issues their student may have experienced. She attributed the negative parent’s reaction to the recent transition and lack of relationship between the school and parents. She stated that the parents may have a “wall up” because the school had not had adequate time to build trusting relationships or trust with the 4<sup>th</sup> grade parents. In her previous experience teaching at a Pre-K-5<sup>th</sup> grade school she was better able to build parent relationships and therefore had better initial outcomes when dealing with parents and kids during difficult situations. Both counselors said that each year they work with a few students who may have high needs or anxiety after the start of the year, but the majority of students transition well.

**Administrators’ Roles.** The administrators play a key role in the student transition process at Huntsman. The assistant principal presents information to stakeholders and facilitates tours and meetings for incoming students. The principal created the transition process and is in charge of implementing it each year including communicating with stakeholders and assigning roles for participants.

**Assistant Principal.** Mrs. Jenny, the assistant principal at Hunstman Elementary described the details of the transition process. She indicated that these steps involved in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit, the parent meeting, and, finally, the back to school night. She

described her role in the process as presenting information at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit and parent meeting such as medicine check-in, dress code, lockers, and going through the lunch line. She also stated that she leads individual tours for students who are new to the district, and she helps facilitate additional or separate tours for special needs students. “We do special tours for kids that may have specific needs. It might be an IEP or 504 need that we do a special thing for them.” She indicated that, overall, she feels that the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit and incoming 4<sup>th</sup> grades parent meetings are going well and work for a majority of the students. She stated, “I think it works for all students because that main set up where we have the tours and the meeting is going to hit the majority of the students.” She said they provide extra assistance if needed, such as additional or separate tours. She also noted that one of the challenges for the students new to this school is organization. Students switch classes between two teachers and have lockers, which is new to a majority of the students. She said that, to combat these struggles, they implemented a schoolwide “Monday Folder” system where a folder goes home to parents with communication about school events and any completed and graded work from the previous week. Otherwise, the classroom teachers come up with an organization tactic that they want to utilize in their class to help students, and they communicate this method of organization that to both students and parents.

***Principal.*** Mr. Michael, principal, created the transition process “from the ground up” with few changes over the years. He stated that the transition process has naturally improved each year as the school has built a positive reputation and many siblings have attended the school, making parents more comfortable the second and third time in the building. The principal indicated that he feels his job during the transition process is,

“(to) think about the perspective of the parents, teachers, and students and then create a process to meet those needs.” The principal is very “hands on” in the process that he has created over the years. The process typically begins in April with a letter sent home about the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders coming to visit the school and informing the parents that there is incoming 4<sup>th</sup> grade parent meeting at the end of April after testing. Once the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits are completed, the parent meeting happens. The principal said he schedules the parent meeting after 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visits purposely so that the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students have the opportunity to show their parents around the school. The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade meeting consists of information given by the principal, introduction of key staff such as the assistant principal and counselors, and a tour of the building given by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade student council members. The principal stated, “We kind of try to alleviate that worry ‘if I’m going to get lost.’ The parent meeting is a thirty-minute orientation. He stated, “Parents need to know arrival, dismissal, structure of the school, what it’s like for your kid, basic rules that we have, class assignments, things like that.” The meeting ends with the opportunity for parents and students to roam the school and meet teachers. The principal also makes himself available for questions after the initial introduction. After the 4<sup>th</sup> grade parent meeting, the principal sends out communication via social media and e-mails. He stated that parents hear from the school 5-7 times over the summer. Just before school begins, he sends out an automated phone call where he details all needed information before the school year begins such as meetings and enrollment requirements. Finally, parents are notified of their child’s classroom teacher, and they are invited to attend the back to school night.

During the third-grade visits I was able to observe the principals from the feeder schools introduce certain students to Principal Michael and the Huntsman Elementary counselors. Principal Michael said that these students are those who may need a little extra care and attention during the transition process, and the feeder principals want to allow Huntsman Elementary staff to “put a name with a face” of those students.

## **Research Question 2**

### **1. What challenges have school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) experienced in student transitions between third and fourth grade?**

3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers spoke to feedback that they received from parents about the transition process. While the teachers felt that the process was going extremely well, one teacher did say that sometimes the parents’ concerns were so great that the parents decided to move districts in order for their student to avoid the transition to the Huntsman Elementary for 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers noted that sometimes the transitioning students struggled with peer interactions, the transition was hard for parents, and that the increased workload in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade could be a struggle for some students. One teacher did mention that it was a challenge to teach the incoming 4<sup>th</sup> graders because of the varying cognitive levels of the students in her classroom combined with the number of students in her class.

The counselors were the most outspoken about the challenges that the transitioning students face in regard to social interactions and overall maturity level.

Again, the counselors did mention that creating well-blended classrooms is a challenge because they do not yet know the incoming students. Therefore, some conflicts happen between students that require the students to receive extra support or possibly have separate class placements the following year.

Both a counselor and an administrator said that students struggle with organization in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. This was attributed to the increased workload, increased number of teachers the students have, and the increased responsibility of having a locker outside of the classroom. Overall, the administrators feel that the transition process works well for most students. The principal mentioned that there are some students that struggle at the beginning of the year, but the number was few in comparison to how many students do well.

**a. How have school staff addressed these challenges?**

The counselors said that they hold counseling with classes to address concerns with peer social interactions. They form their lessons around the current struggle of the students as a whole grade level. They also identify particular students who may be facing a challenge. This challenge may be peer interactions, home life, organization, or adjusting in general to the new building. The counselors then work with students in small groups the help support them with their challenges. If needed, the counselors will work with students individually to support them. If warranted, the counselors create a written plan of support for students, especially when it involves multiple educators.

Organization was a concern of the administrators and counselors. The school's current strategy is to leave the organization of the classroom and assignments up to individual teachers. As a whole the school sends home a weekly folder with graded work

and communication home to parents. Teachers did not note this as a major concern for them. They do cover procedures for locker use at the beginning of the year, and the students conduct periodic locker clean outs to help with organization.

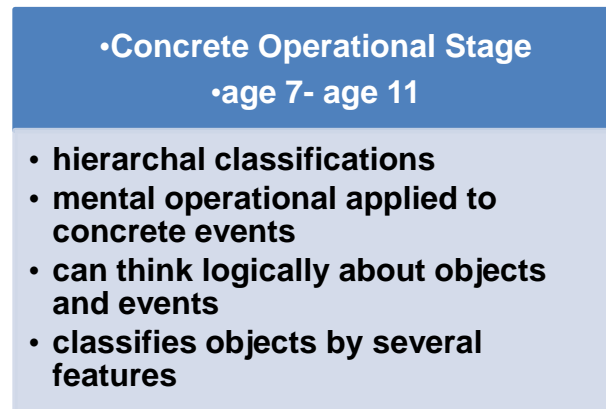
As a whole school, Huntsman Elementary has begun implementing a remediation and enrichment time for their students at varying levels. This is a designated time during the day that teachers can work with students in small groups on skills that may not have mastered when initially taught. This allows for the teachers to stay within the pacing of the curriculum in whole group instruction but carve out a specific time to teach those missing skills to students at a lower level than the class average. This was a move that was supported by the district with the purchase of additional curriculum to help fill gaps. There was no mention on how the school addressed the parent concerns of not understanding the material.

### **Findings of This Study Through the Lens of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development**

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development was the lens in which this study was conducted. Students experiencing the transition between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade fall in the Concrete Operational Stage of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. Students at this age are beginning to understand themselves better. They have the recognition that others' thoughts and feels do not necessarily match their own. This is evidenced in this study by the counselors and teacher stating that the social/emotional interactions with peers is sometimes an obstacle for transitioning students.



Figure 2.



### Concrete Operational

The Concrete Operational stage is often characterized by the ability for a person to have logical thought. Thinking tends to be concrete, and children are often able to become more sophisticated in their thinking during this stage. Children are also able to think more abstractly and hypothetically than before. Therefore, students may begin making hypothesis about the new school. The transition process allows the students to prove or disprove some of their hypothesis they may have created prior to their visits.

Since students are able to understand reversibility, having awareness that actions can be reversed, during this stage they are able to be aware of the specific role of staff members at their current school and how they transfer to the roles of staff members at Huntsman Elementary. For example, students may recognize that counselors are there to support the emotional needs of students, and therefore, the counselor at Huntsman Elementary likely fulfills the same role.

During the concrete operational stage, children are also about to understand that when something changes in shape or appearance that it is still the same. This is a concept

called conservation. Student attending visits at Huntsman Elementary are about to conserve that although Huntsman Elementary is a new building with new teachers, that it is still school. This is reinforced by Huntsman Elementary when the school introduces the school staff and their roles as well as the procedures of the school. The procedures and roles of the staff are related back to the roles of the procedures and roles of staff at the feeder schools, thus intending to make it more concrete.

To take it a step further, the students in the concrete operational stage are able to relate what is similar about the two schools, but also perceive the differences between the schools and therefore predict what the experience at the new school may be. Becoming less egocentric during this concrete operational stage also allows students to consider the thoughts and feelings of other students during this process. Principal Michael often related how he was feeling to how the students may be feeling. Because children are less egocentric during this phase, they are able to empathize with how he is feeling and relate it to their own feelings.

**Research Question 1: How does one school support the transition of students between third and fourth grade?**

Huntsman Elementary supports the transitions of students between third and fourth grade students by implementing a transition plan that recognizes the level of cognitive development of the students transitioning into the school. Huntsman Elementary's transition plan takes into consideration the age of the students, and therefore, the cognitive development of students at this age. The school emphasizes communication and school visits.

**a. What are the strategies used to support students before, during, and after student transitions between third and fourth grade?**

In order to understand how Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development played a role in the transition process for students moving to Huntsman Elementary we must fully understand assimilation, adaptation, and accommodation. Below is a review of how the transition process for Huntsman Elementary interplayed with the cognitive process of assimilation and accommodation, finally leading to adaptation.

**Assimilation**

Assimilation begins with merging current knowledge with new information without changing the existing structures. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit the principal related the new school to the school that the students previously attend. He made a point to talk about what is similar about the schools. Assimilation must occur prior to accommodation being accomplished, therefore, the repetition of visits to the school with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade visit, parent meeting, and back to school night allow students to building their schema. Since assimilation must occur before accommodation it is likely that not much information will be permanently stored in the minds of the transitioning students on the first visit to the school.

In addition to the visits to the schools, the staff at Huntsman Elementary also repeatedly communicates the procedures at the school with increasing detail as the near of school approaches. This allowed the incoming of new information to be limited when possible, and information that was shared at a previous meeting to be referenced again

with the hopes of assimilation taking place. When appropriate, the information was related to the rules and procedures of the feeder schools in hopes of connections being made between the feeder schools and Huntsman Elementary.

### **Accommodation**

During accommodation students are able to accommodate new information by restructuring existing schema based on new information received. This is possible since the students are familiar with the procedures of attending school since a majority of the students have attended a school setting for at least four years prior to the transition meetings. Therefore, they have existing schema in relation to school settings, staff roles, and common procedures in school. The multitude of visits to the school allows the students to accommodate by replacing or restructuring their former schema about school to fit the new school. This allows the students to view and experience school in new terms. In order to accommodate, there must be a combination of maturation and experience. Since the students are likely in the concrete operational stage is possible for students to recognize that while this is a new school setting, it has similarities and differences from their current school.

### **Adaptation**

Piaget believed that adaptation was achieved when beings controlled the schemas, or mental organizations, they use to represent the world while impacting how they respond to their environment and decide to respond to their environment. In order to adapt to an environment both assimilation and accommodation must take place. In this particular situation, students will not begin adapting to their new environment until they attend school on a typical school day. However, the three visits to the school prior to the

school year allows the students to build schemas prior to the school year starting. The 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers noted that it did not take long for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students to adjust to their new environment. While they both noted that there were particular students who struggled, the overall response was that a majority of the students were able to adjust to the new school well after completing the transition process. They also attributed this success to the ability that the students have to visit the school building and hear the procedures prior to school starting.

**b. How does school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) perceive their role in student transitions between third and fourth grade?**

**Teachers**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers perceive their role is to teach the students the prerequisite skills that the students need to be successful academically during 4<sup>th</sup> grade. On some occasions they need to reassure to parents that Huntsman Elementary is a good school and is run like an elementary school as opposed to a middle school.

Prior to the students attending Huntsman Elementary, the 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers have their classrooms available for students to tour during the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tours, the parent meeting, and the back to school meeting. This aids in assimilation and accommodation as it allows the students to create new schema while relating these experiences to experiences from their feeder school. The teachers attend the parent meeting evening and stay in their classrooms in order to answer any questions that students or parents may have when touring the building. 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers feel that is their job to create a

classroom community among their students. They are in charge of communicating the parents and students the rules and procedures for their specific classroom. If additional support is needed for a particular student, it is the role of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom teachers to communicate that need to appropriate staff until adaptation is achieved by all students in their classrooms.

### **Counselors**

The counselors act as the liaison between the sending schoolteachers and Huntsman Elementary School teachers in communicating in specific needs of students. They make themselves available to introduce themselves to the incoming students during the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tours thus aiding in assimilation. Additionally, they take the information provided by the sending schoolteachers to create class lists. Creating class lists from information provided by teachers may aid in students' ability to adapt to the environment. If needed, they help communicate additional needs to the teachers at Huntsman Elementary prior to the start of the school year. Once the school year begins the counselors teach guidance classes to the students and make themselves available for small groups and individual conversations with students as needed.

### **Administrators**

The assistant principal's major role is meeting and reassuring students while also communicating the rules and expectations to the students. She also helps run the token economy system the school uses to help encourage positive behavior.

Finally, the principal oversees the entire transition process. He schedules and runs the initial meetings that the students and parents have with the school. He sends out the primary communication to all parties: the teachers, students, and parents. He initially

created the transition process when the school first began, delegated responsibilities to staff members and ensures the needs of the parents, students, and staff are met. The purpose of the transition process is that students are able to adapt to their new environment successfully. The process created by the administration allows the students to move through the cognitive processes of assimilation and accommodation in order to reach adaptation.

**Research Question 2: What challenges have school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) experienced in student transitions between third and fourth grade?**

While the transition plan is successful for many, it is not always successful for all. Sometimes, the transition process is not comprehensive enough for a few students who do not reach the cognitive process of accommodation, and therefore would be unable to adapt to the new environment. Additional to the students' adaptation, teachers, administrators, and counselors must also consider parent adaptation to the new school environment.

**b. How have school staff addressed these challenges?**

Knowing that some students may be predisposed to need additional supports during the transition process the school staff create plans for students that they know may need additional support. This can sometimes be additional visits to the school or visits to the school with fewer crowds. If needed, school staff teams will meet with parents to create even more specific plans for individual students. When considering the parents' ability to

adapt to the new environment the school staff created a parent meeting and communicate clearly and consistently with parents via e-mails, social media, and flyers.

## **Discussion**

### **Numerous Visits**

The transition at Huntsman Elementary is a success in big part due to the number of visits to the school the students have before school begins. One major finding is that the frequent visits to the school by the students were perceived by the staff to help the students transition successfully. According to Neild (2009) students frequently experience transitions where students transition into a new, larger environment. This is true for the students of Huntsman Elementary. Symonds (2015) suggest hosting parent nights to alleviate fears and anxieties of both students and parents. A study conducted by Moffit (1996) states that narrow grade configurations, such as Hunstman Elementary where only two grade levels attend the school, tend to have a negative impact on family-school relationships. This makes the transition process at Hunstman Elementary all the more important as it is the initial impression that parents and students have of the school. The students are able to access the building multiple times before the first day of school, therefore, appearing to increase their comfort in navigating the larger school they will now be attending. In addition to the multiple student visits, Huntsman Elementary does host a parent meeting to alleviate the fears and anxieties of parents. Asplaugh (2015) conducted abundant amounts of research on school transitions which correlated poor educational outcomes with student learning. Transitions between schools are directly tied to achievement loss. Therefore, as Symonds (2015) and Moffitt (1996) suggest, it is important to not only support the students during the transtions but also help alleviate the



anxieties of the parents. Finally, the multiple visits to the school allow students to build schema which aids in the adaptation to their new environment.

### **Communication**

Communication is crucial in the transition process. Another major finding of this study is that the between the school and the students, the school and the parents, and the school and the feeder schools was essential to the success of this transition. This is not just limited to school officials communicating with incoming students and parents, but also the communication between the sending schools and the receiving school. Symonds (2015) says that schools need to support the well-being of students by bridging the gaps between the sending and receiving schools. When the sending school accurately and wholly communicates the needs or concerns they may have about certain students with the receiving school that allows Huntsman Elementary to make specific plans to best support individual students.

### **Additional Supports**

While a solid transition plan helps support transitioning students, no process is all encompassing for all students. Another major finding of this study is that additional supports may be required by some students to transition successfully. Collaboration and teamwork between the receiving school and sending school is essential. An essential component of the transition process is the communication between the feeder schools and Huntsman Elementary. This communication allows for the staff at Huntsman Elementary school to plan accordingly to for any needs particular students may have. This includes class placements, behavior plans, IEP's or 504's that may require additional planning or meetings before the school year begins. Students enter the school with their individual

constructed schemes which impact their ability to adapt to their new environment (Huitt & Hummell, 2003). As a result, the school must be ready to adapt and change the transition process as needed to support students who require additional support. Transition interventions are essential components of transition plans (Symonds, 2015).

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

The transition plan with a clear progression of events that incorporated several visits to the building in which the students will be attending was essential. Not only was it important for students to access the building, it was important for the school to communicate the rules and procedures of the school to the students and parents prior to the start of the school day. This included in person communication via meetings as well as written communication which allowed parents and students to refer back to the information provided as needed. A good working relationship between the sending and receiving schools was crucial. Clearly communicating with the sending school what information was being requested and how it will be used was necessary and important.

### **Implications for Research**

Additional research should be conducted on a larger scale and in a different setting. If possible, interviewing students and parents would provide critical information about their experience of the transitions and transition plans implemented. Further research should be conducted looking into the social aspects of the transitions.

Additionally, a study could interpret the “trust” that parents feel with the sending school in comparison to the sending school.

### **Implications for Theory**

Piaget described intelligence in terms of adapting to the environment (Reinking, et al., 2000). Piaget theorized that beings adapt to their environment by controlling schemas, or mental organizations, used to represent the world and impact how beings respond to their environment and decide to respond to their environment (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

Assimilation and accommodation define a developmental reality in which individuals conceptualize new information, eventually leading to adaptation. Children at this age begin to understand themselves better and have the realization that their thoughts and feelings are unique and may not necessarily match those of others. During this stage children may not always think rationally. This is a critical time in development to experience a transition. Students are presented with new information with varying abilities to assimilate and accommodate this information.

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development helps explain the ability of students at this age to accommodate to their new environment based on previous knowledge and experiences. Piaget theorized that beings adapt to their environment by controlling their schema which are used to represent the world and impacts the way they respond to their environment (Huitt & Hummell, 2003). Therefore, it is important for school officials to note that not all students come to the school with the same set of experiences nor the same ability to adapt to new surroundings. This should be considered with transition plans are created for students. Difficult transitions from middle school to high school have been linked to an increase in high school dropout rates (Alspaugh, 1998), behavior problems (Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996), a decrease in GPA (Isakson and Jarvis, 1999), and a lowered sense of self-esteem and self-perception (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Therefore, it may be expected that

successful transitions may be linked to fewer behavior problems, higher self-esteem and self-perception of students, and higher academic performance.

### **Summary**

Chapter 5 included an introduction including a summary of Chapter IV. It continued with a summary of findings organized by the research questions of the study. Then, a summary of findings was presented examined by each research question. Conclusions of the study were revealed and implications for research and practice were identified. This study concludes that the numerous student visits to the school prior to the first day of school impact the success of student transitions, communication between the sending schools and receiving schools is essential, and finally, while a solid transition framework will benefit most students, additional supports may be required for individuals.

## REFERENCES

- Akos, P. (2004). Advice and student agency in the transition to middle school. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 27(2), 1–11.
- Allensworth, E.M., Easton, J.Q., & Consortium on Chicago School Research, I. (2007). What matter for staying on track and graduating in Chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in freshman year. Research Report. Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Alsbaugh, J. W. & Harting, R. D. (1995) Transition effects of school grade-level organization of student achievement. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 28 (3), 145-149.

- Alspaugh, John W. (1998, Sept/Oct). Achievement Loss Associated With the Transition to Middle school and High School. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92, 20-25.
- Alspaugh, J. W. (1998). Achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school and high school. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92(1), 20-25.
- Alspaugh, John W. (2000, Fall). The Effect of Transition Grade to High School, Gender, and Grade Level Upon Dropout Rates. *American Secondary Education*, 29, 2-9.
- Anderman, L.H. (1999). Classroom goal orientation, school belonging and social goals as predictors of students' positive and negative affect following the transition to middle school," *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 32 (2), 89-103.
- Anderson, James D. (1988). *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. pp. 158–161. [ISBN 0-8078-1793-7](#).
- Atlas, 2015. <http://atlas.newamerica.org/no-child-left-behind-funding>
- Baker, J.C. (2015). Freshman academies grade point average, graduation, and attendance. Ph.D. dissertation, Tennessee Technological University, United States – Tennessee. Retrieved from [https://iweb/intech.edu/jcbaker/Freshman%20Acadmies.%20Grade%20point%20Average.%20graduation.%20and%29Attendance.pdf](https://iweb.intech.edu/jcbaker/Freshman%20Acadmies.%20Grade%20point%20Average.%20graduation.%20and%29Attendance.pdf)
- Barone, C., Aguirre-Deandreis, A. I., & Trickett, E. J. (1991). Mean-ends problem-solving skills, life stress, and social support as mediators of adjustment in the

- normative transition to high school. U.S. National Library of Medicine, 19(2), 207-225.
- Barton, R. & Klump, J. (2012) Figuring out grade configurations. NASSP, V!&, issue 3, May, 2012. (<http://www.pbsd.k12.pa.us/Downloads/PRR-Figuring-Out-Grade-Configurations.pdf>)
- Benito, R., & Alegre, M. A. (2012). The changing patterns of individual and school effects on educational transitions. Evidence from Catalan data (Spain). Educational Research, 54(1), 65-87.
- Bennett, Christopher L. (2012). The freshman academy impact. A comparison of ninth grade structures through analyses of student perceptions and performance data. (Doctoral dissertation, Appalachian State University, North Carolina). Retrieved from [http://libres.uncg.edu/it/asu/f/Bennett%20Christopher\\_2012\\_Dissertation.pdf](http://libres.uncg.edu/it/asu/f/Bennett%20Christopher_2012_Dissertation.pdf)
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)
- Brown, E. L. (2004). The effect of number of school-to-school transitions on district performance. Dissertation Abstracts International, 65(9), 3224.
- Carnegie Forum To Study Education & the Economy. (1985). School Library Journal, 31(8), 14.
- Carnoy, Martin, and Susanna Loeb. 2002. "Does External Accountability Affect Student Outcomes? A Cross-State Analysis." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 24, no. 4 (Winter): 305–31.

- Chambers, Jay G.; Hartman, William T. (1983). *Special Education Policies: Their History, Implementation, and Finance*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. ISBN 0-87722-280-0.
- Chappell, K. (2012). Money & School. *Ebony*, 67(11), 111. Cherry, Kendra (2015) The Origins of Psychology. Retrieved from <http://psychology.about.com/od/historyofpsychology/a/psychhistory.htm>.
- Clark, Christopher (1998). Mr. Wheelock's Cure. "The New England Historical and Genealogical Register", July 1998, Volume 152.
- Clark, C., & Hunley, A. (2007). Freshman academies on a shoestring. *Principal Leadership (High School Ed.)*, 7(7), 41, 43, 45. Retrieved from Education Full Text database.
- Cohen-Vogel, L. (2011). "Staffing to the Test": Are Today's School Personnel Practices Evidence Based?. *Educational Evaluation And Policy Analysis*, 33(4), 483-505.
- Conniff, R. (2013). Public School Shakedown. *Progressive*, 77(8), 18.
- Cook, P. J., MacCoun, R., Muschkin, D., & Vigdor, J. (2007). Should sixth grade be in elementary or middle school? An analysis of grade configuration and student behavior. Retrieved from <http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/research/papers/SAN07-01.pdf>
- Craig, J. A. (2006). Grade configuration. *School Planning and Management*, 45(3), 42.
- Creswell, J.W. (2009) *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the*



- Research Process*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Douglas, Emily, 2012. Organizational Structures and Organizational Change  
[http://blogs.edweek.org/topschooljobs/k-12\\_talent\\_manager/2012/04/organizational\\_structures\\_and\\_organizational\\_change.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/topschooljobs/k-12_talent_manager/2012/04/organizational_structures_and_organizational_change.html)
- Duncombe, William, Andrew Matthews and John Yinger. (2002). "Revisiting Economies of Size in American Education: Are We Any Closer To Consensus?" *Economics Of Education Review*, 21, 245-262.
- Dove, M. J., Pearson, L. C., & Hooper, H. (2010). Relationship between grade span configuration and academic achievement. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 21, 272–298.
- Edwards, Jason R., 2009. "E.D. Hirsch Jr.: The Twentieth Century's Liberal Conservative Educator," *The Center for Vision & Values*. Retrieved from [http://www.visionandvalues.org/docs/Edwards\\_Hirsch\\_Twentieth\\_Century\\_Liberal\\_Conservative\\_Educator.pdf](http://www.visionandvalues.org/docs/Edwards_Hirsch_Twentieth_Century_Liberal_Conservative_Educator.pdf)
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R.I., and Shaw, L.L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gay, L.R., Mills, G.E. & Airasian, P. (2011). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application*, (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Goldin, Claudia; Katz, Lawrence F. (2009). "[Why the United States Led in Education: Lessons from Secondary School Expansion, 1910 to 1940](#)". *Human Capital and Institutions: A Long-Run View*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 143–178.

- Hall, M. (2007). *Creating successful high school transitions: Making the first year count* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from [www.drmikehall.com](http://www.drmikehall.com)
- Hernandez, J.J. (2012, January 1). Impact of a Freshman Academy on Student Performance at a Comprehensive Public High School. ProQuest LLC
- Hertzog, C., & Morgan, P. (1999). Making the transition from middle school to high school. *High School Magazine*, 6(4), 2-30.
- Howley, Craig. (2000). Research on Smaller Schools: What Education Leaders Need to Know to Make Better Decisions. The Informed Educator Series: Educational Research Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 453 996).
- Howley, Craig. (2002, March). Grade-Span Configuration. *The School Administrator*, 24-9.
- Huberman , A.M., & Miles, M.B. (1994). Data Management and analysis methods. IN N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428-444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Huitt, W., & Hummel, J. (2003). Piaget's theory of cognitive development. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved March 1, 2019 from <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/piaget.html>
- Hunt, Thomas C., ed. (2010). Age Grading. *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent* 2..
- James, Melanie D. (2001). Principals' perceptions of freshman academies. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Southern Mississippi). Retrieved from [http://aquila.usm.edu/theses\\_dissertations/2145/](http://aquila.usm.edu/theses_dissertations/2145/)

- Lashway, L. (2000). Educators reorganize schools to foster a sense of community.  
Retrieved from [http://eric.uoregon.edu/trends\\_issues/organization/index.htm](http://eric.uoregon.edu/trends_issues/organization/index.htm)
- Longmore, Paul K. (2009). "Making Disability an Essential Part of American History". *OAH Magazine of History* 23 (3): 11–15.
- "Looping: Supporting Student Learning through Long-term Relationships." Themes in Education (1997): n. pag. Web.
- Marcon, R. A. (2000). Educational Transitions in Early Childhood, Middle Childhood, and Early Adolescence: Head Start vs. Public School Pre-Kindergarten Graduates.
- Marks, H. M. (2000). Student Engagement in Instructional Activity: Patterns in the Elementary, Middle, and High School Years. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 153-84.
- Martin, D. J., & Loomis, K. S. (2007). Building teachers: A constructivist approach to introducing education. Australia: Thomas Learning, Inc.
- Martin, D. & Loomis, K. (2013). Building Teachers: A Constructivist Approach to Introducing Education. New York, New York: Wadsworth Publishers. Maslow.
- A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Maslow hierarchy. (n.d.) *Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary*. (2012). Retrieved September 18 2016 from <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Maslow+hierarchy>
- McCallumore, K. M., & Sparapani, E. F. (2010). The importance of the ninth grade on high school graduation rates and student success, *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed For Quick Review*, 76(2), 60-64.

McCann, Clare, n.d. Ed Central No Child Left Behind Funding

<http://www.edcentral.org/edcyclopedia/no-child-left-behind-funding/>

McLeod, S.A. (2018) Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. Retrieved from

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html>

McLeod, S. A. (2018). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Retrieved from

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Miles, K.H. (2001). Putting Money Where It Matters. *Educational Leadership*, 59 (1), 53.

Moffitt, T.L.,III. (1996). An Evaluative Study of the Study of the Impact of Elementary Grade Span Structure on Family-School Partnerships. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

"Monitorial System", 2016. *Britannica Encyclopedia (online ed.)* Retrieved from

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/monitorial-system>

Muller, U. (2009). Infancy. In U. Muller, J. I. M. Carpendale, & L. Smith (Eds.). *The Cambridge companion to Piaget*, (pp. 255-269). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Muller, U., Ten Eycke, K., Baker, L. (2015). *Paiget's Theory of Intelligence*. Springer Science+Business Media: New York.

National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2015) About: Who we are and what we do. Retrieved from [www.naesp.org/about](http://www.naesp.org/about)

National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). *In School and district glossary*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/commonfiles/glossary.asp>

National Center for High School. (2007). The First Year of High School; A quick facts sheet. Retrieved from Educational Resources Information Center database.

(ED501080)

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A Nation at risk: The Imperative for educational reform*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>

Neild, R.C. (2009). Falling off track during the transition to high school: What we know and what can be done. *Future of Children*, 19, 53-76.

(Newman) Restructuring website

[http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/archive/cors/issues\\_in\\_restructuring\\_schools/issues\\_no\\_1/Framework\\_4\\_School\\_Restruc.html](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/archive/cors/issues_in_restructuring_schools/issues_no_1/Framework_4_School_Restruc.html)

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319.

Norum, K. E. 2008. "Artifacts," *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods: Vol. 2*. In L. Givens (Eds.).

Offenberg, Robert M. (2001) The Efficacy of Philadelphia's K-to-8 Schools Compared to Middle Grades Schools, *Middle School Journal*, 32:4, 23-29, DOI: [10.1080/00940771.2001.11495283](https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2001.11495283)

Oklahoma School Profiles (2014). *2014 District Profiles Report: Yukon, OK, Canadian County*. Retrieved May 2, 2016, from

<http://schoolreportcard.org/doc/profiles/2014/reports/drc/201409i027.pdf>

Oklahoma School Profiles (2014) *2014 SCHOOL PROFILES Office of Educational Quality and Accountability: Lakeview Elementary*. Retrieved May 2, 2016 from

<http://schoolreportcard.org/doc/profiles/2014/reports/src/201409i027145.pdf>

- O'Neil, J. (1990). Piecing Together the Restructuring Puzzle. *Educational Leadership*, 47(7), 4.
- Parker, A. K. (2009). Elementary Organizational Structures and Young Adolescents' Self-Concept and Classroom Environment Perceptions across the Transition to Middle School. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 23(3), 325.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pelz, B. (n.d.). Developmental Psychology. Retrieved from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-ss-152-1/chapter/cognitive-development-7/>
- Perry, Gene (2014). Oklahoma continues to lead U.S. for deepest cuts to education. Retrieved from <http://okpolicy.org/oklahoma-continues-lead-u-s-deepest-cuts-Education/>
- Pogrow, S. (2006). Restructuring High-Poverty Elementary Schools for Success: A Description of the Hi-Perform School Design. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 88(3), 223-229.
- Psychology [Def. 1]. (n.d.). In Merriam Webster Online, Retrieved March 6, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychology>.
- Reinking, D., Labbo, L. D., & McKenna, M. C. (2000). From assimilation to accommodation: A developmental framework for integrating digital. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 23(2), 2000th ser., 110-122. Retrieved March 04, 2019.
- Renchler, Ron. (2000, Spring). "Grade Span." Research Roundup: The National Association of Elementary School Principles, 16n3, 5-8.

- Resmovits, Joy (July 6, 2012). "No Child Left Behind Waivers Granted To More Than Half Of U.S. States". Huffington Post.
- Rhodes, Jesse (2012). *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*. Cornell U.P. pp. 179–81.
- Robenstine, Clark. "French Colonial Policy and the Education of Women and Minorities: Louisiana in the Early Eighteenth Century," *History of Education Quarterly* (1992) 32#2 pp. 193-211 [in JSTOR](#)
- Ruesch, C. L. (2012, January 1). Examining the Transition Experience of Students from Multiage Elementary Programs to Single-Grade Classrooms at the Middle School.
- Schlossberg, N.K. (1989). *Overwhelmed: Coping with life's ups and downs*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2000). Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics and Social Constructivism. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 189-214). Sage
- Siedman, E., Allen, L., Aber, J., Mitchell, C., & Feinman, J. (1994). The impact of school transitions in early adolescence on the self-system and perceived social context of poor urban youth. *Child Development*, 65, 507-522.
- Slosberg, T. (2010). State Education Finance and Governance Profile: Oklahoma. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 85 (1), 88-92.
- Small, Walter (1902). "The New England Grammar School, 1635-1700" *School Review* 7 (September 1902); 513-31.

- Smith, Joshua S., 2006. Examining the Long-Term Impact of Achievement Loss During the Transition to High School. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*. Vol. XVII, No. 4, Summer 2006, pp. 211-221.
- Stevenson, K. R. (2006). Educational facilities within the context of a changing 21st century America. Retrieved from National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities: [http://www.edfacilities.org/pubs/Ed\\_Facilities\\_in\\_21st\\_Century.pdf](http://www.edfacilities.org/pubs/Ed_Facilities_in_21st_Century.pdf)
- Southern Region Education Board. (2006).
- Symonds, Jennifer. *Understanding School Transition: What Happens to Children and How to Help Them*. London: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- UNC: Research Triangle Schools Partnership. (2002). School Transitions Project.
- United States Census, 2016. *1840 overview*. Retrieved from [https://www.census.gov/history/www/through\\_the\\_decades/overview/1840.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/overview/1840.html)
- United States Department of Education. (2009). Policy Documents: Elementary & Secondary Education. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www2ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/states/index.html>.
- Wasley, Patricia A., and Richard J. Lear. (2001, March) Small Schools, Real Gains. *Educational Leadership*, 58n6, 22-7.
- Wasley, Patricia A. (2002, February). Small classes, small schools: the time is now. *Educational Leadership*, 59n5, 6-10.
- Whelan, R. (2002). Transitions from Primary School. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 20(4), 50.
- Wigfield, A., Eccles, J.S., Mac Iver D., Reuman, D. A., & Midgley, C. (1991). Transitions during early adolescence: Changes in children's domain-specific



- self-perceptions and general self-esteem across the transition to junior high school. *Developmental Psychology*, 27 (4). 552-565
- Wilson, T. D. (2004). *Strangers to ourselves*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Williamson, Ronald (2012). Grade Configuration, Education Partnerships, Inc. Eastern Michigan University (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538738.pdf>)

## APPENDICES

### Interview Questions

Interview questions: Counselor Questions

1. Tell about the transition process for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders moving into 4<sup>th</sup> grade at your building?
2. What feedback have you received from parents about the school's transition process?
3. What do you notice to be the challenges for students who are transitioning to your school in fourth grade in regard to their social development?

4. What do you notice to be challenging for students during the transition with cognitive development?
5. What differences do you notice when students are transitioning into a building versus when you taught in a building where the transition happened in the same building?
6. What challenges do you notice that students encounter a difficult time during the transition period?

Interview questions: Teacher Questions

1. Tell about the transition process for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders moving into 4<sup>th</sup> grade at your building?
2. What feedback have you received from parents about the school's transition process?
3. What do you notice to be the challenges for students who are transitioning to your school in fourth grade in regard to their social development?
4. What do you notice to be challenging for students during the transition with cognitive development?

5. What differences do you notice when students are transitioning into a building versus when you taught in a building where the transition happened in the same building?
6. What challenges do you notice that students encounter a difficult time during the transition period?

Interview questions: Administrator Questions

1. Tell about the transition process for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders moving into 4<sup>th</sup> grade at your building?
2. What feedback have you received from parents about the school's transition process?
3. What do you notice to be the challenges for students who are transitioning to your school in fourth grade in regard to their social development?
4. What do you notice to be challenging for students during the transition with cognitive development?

5. What differences do you notice when students are transitioning into a building versus when you taught in a building where the transition happened in the same building?
6. What challenges do you notice that students encounter a difficult time during the transition period?



## Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 05/07/2019  
Application Number: ED-19-64  
Proposal Title: STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT ADAPTATION AT MAJOR POINTS OF TRANSITION IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY GRADES: A CASE STUDY

Principal Investigator: Roni McKee  
Co-Investigator(s):  
Faculty Adviser: Jackie Mania-Singer  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s):

Processed as: Exempt  
Exempt Category:

### Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

---

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

**This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.**

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,  
Oklahoma State University IRB

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Roni McKee, and I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University. I will be conducting a study to explore the transition process between school buildings between third grade and fourth grade and how that aligns to cognitive and social development. I am looking for fourth grade teachers to interview about the transition process at your school. This would require you to participate in an interview with me that would last approximately 60 minutes with questions being asked that are related to your and your students' experience with your school's transition process for students who are entering fourth grade in a new school building. There is no compensation for participation in this study, there are no anticipated risks, and the benefits of this study include personal reflection of the current practices. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this study. I plan to conduct interviews in the month of June once school is out at a location that you select. Your identity will remain confidential in this process. All will be explained in more detail in a consent form that you will sign once you agree to participate. I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in this study, as this is the final requirement of my dissertation studies. You may contact me at any time at (405) 863-0272 or [Roni.McKee@okstate.edu](mailto:Roni.McKee@okstate.edu). To opt out of future e-mails, please reply STOP to this e-mail.

Roni McKee

OSU Doctoral Student



Approved: 05/07/2019  
Protocol #: ED-19-64

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Roni McKee, and I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University. I will be conducting a study to explore the transition process between school buildings between third grade and fourth grade and how that aligns to cognitive and social development. I am looking for third grade teachers to interview about the transition process at your school. This would require you to participate in an interview with me that would last approximately 60 minutes with questions being asked that are related to your and your students' experience with your school's transition process for students who are entering fourth grade in a new school building. There is no compensation for participation in this study, there are no anticipated risks, and the benefits of this study include personal reflection of the current practices. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this study. I plan to conduct interviews in the month of June once school is out at a location that you select. Your identity will remain confidential in this process. All will be explained in more detail in a consent form that you will sign once you agree to participate. I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in this study, as this is the final requirement of my dissertation studies. You may contact me at anytime at (405) 863-0272 or [Roni.McKee@okstate.edu](mailto:Roni.McKee@okstate.edu). To opt out of future e-mails, please reply STOP to this e-mail.

Roni McKee

OSU Doctoral Student



Approved: 05/07/2019  
Protocol #: ED-19-64

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Roni McKee, and I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University. I will be conducting a study to explore the transition process between school buildings between third grade and fourth grade and how that aligns to cognitive and social development. I am looking for administrators to interview about the transition process at your school. This would require you to participate in an interview with me that would last approximately 60 minutes with questions being asked that are related to your and your students' experience with your school's transition process for students who are entering fourth grade in a new school building. There is no compensation for participation in this study, there are no anticipated risks, and the benefits of this study include personal reflection of the current practices. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this study. I plan to conduct interviews in the month of June once school is out at a location that you select. Your identity will remain confidential in this process. All will be explained in more detail in a consent form that you will sign once you agree to participate. I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in this study, as this is the final requirement of my dissertation studies. You may contact me at any time at (405) 863-0272 or [Roni.McKee@okstate.edu](mailto:Roni.McKee@okstate.edu). To opt out of future e-mails, please reply STOP to this e-mail.

Roni McKee

OSU Doctoral Student



Approved: 05/07/2019  
Protocol #: ED-19-64



Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Roni McKee, and I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University. I will be conducting a study to explore the transition process between school buildings between third grade and fourth grade and how that aligns to cognitive and social development. I am looking for counselors to interview about the transition process at your school. This would require you to participate in an interview with me that would last approximately 60 minutes with questions being asked that are related to your and your students' experience with your school's transition process for students who are entering fourth grade in a new school building. There is no compensation for participation in this study, there are no anticipated risks, and the benefits of this study include personal reflection of the current practices. Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this study. I plan to conduct interviews in the month of June once school is out at a location that you select. Your identity will remain confidential in this process. All will be explained in more detail in a consent form that you will sign once you agree to participate. I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in this study, as this is the final requirement of my dissertation studies. You may contact me at any time at (405) 863-0272 or [Roni.McKee@okstate.edu](mailto:Roni.McKee@okstate.edu). To opt out of future e-mails, please reply STOP to this e-mail.

Roni McKee

OSU Doctoral Student



Approved: 05/07/2019  
Protocol #: ED-19-64

## VITA

Roni Denise McKee

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Dissertation: STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT ADAPTATION AT MAJOR POINTS OF  
TRANSITION IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY GRADES: A CASE STUDY

Major Field: Educational Leadership

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December 2020.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Education University of Central  
Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma in 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education at  
Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Durant, Oklahoma in 2008.

Experience:

Teaching: Edmond Public Schools (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>)  
2008-2012

Building Administrator: Yukon Public Schools  
Assistant Principal Elementary 2012-2013  
Principal Elementary 2013-2019