

IMPLEMENTATION OF A NINTH-GRADE TRANSITIONAL COURSE CASE STUDY

By

DUDLEY D. DARROW

Bachelor of Science in Education
Northwestern Oklahoma State University
Alva, Oklahoma
2002

Master of Education in Education Administration
University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, Oklahoma
2005

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IMPLEMENTATION OF A NINTH-GRADE
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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Katherine A. Curry

Dissertation Adviser

Member Edward L. Harris

Member Shawna Richardson

Outside Member Tonya R. Hammer

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Name: DUDLEY DWAIN DARROW

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Title of Study: IMPLEMENTATION OF A NINTH-GRADE TRANSITIONAL COURSE
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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transitional course that began during the fall of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school. The high school in which this study was conducted, is referred to as “Midwestern High” (a pseudonym) has traditionally struggled with their incoming ninth-grade students as they transition into high school from middle school. However, since the implementation of this course, student promotion to the tenth-grade has improved. Deci and Ryan’s (1985) “SDT” was utilized as the theoretical framework to provide a lens through which the data was analyzed. This theory has utility for explaining the influence of the transition course on ninth-grade student success because it provides a framework to understand persistence in goal pursuit when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The primary findings of this qualitative case study are that both administration and teachers perceive that the ninth-grade transitional course at Midwestern High School does support the psychological needs of the incoming ninth-grade students. The findings in this qualitative study are consistent with other studies of school transitional programs or small learning communities (Roybal et al., 2014; Cushman, 2006; Butts & Cruzeiro 2005).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For countless students around the United States of America, the transition from middle school into high school is incredibly difficult, and for some it is completely overwhelming (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). A successful transition into high school is essential for student success toward meeting graduation requirements, and its importance is well documented in the literature. For example, McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) describes the ninth-grade year as a “make or break” year for all students, and they found that up to 40% of all students generally suffer or experience some sort of negative transition issues during the ninth-grade school year. In most cases, the transition into high school means adapting to a new school building, new procedures, new classmates, new administrators, a new guidance staff, new teachers and new support staff. The adjustments required to be successful in a new environment can be completely overwhelming for students and can take an emotional, even detrimental, toll on students (Cushman, 2006). Unfortunately, for many students, the transition from middle school to high school is one that they cannot overcome leading to lack of academic progress, and for some, even dropping out of high school.

The factors that compound the difficulty of students transitioning into the high school are numerous. Ninth-grade students are at a tremendously important stage in their lives where traditionally, there is a gradual release of more freedom and additional responsibility from their

parents (Corsello et al., 2015). Many of them are going through adolescence and maturing into young adults at the same time they make the transition from the middle school into the high school. This stage of adolescence is an extremely impressionable and fragile stage in their development that should not be taken lightly or ignored by parents or educators (Corsello et al., 2015). Even though the traditional passage from middle school to high school is an important milestone for many students and their families, unfortunately, the high school transition often leaves students with stress, anxiety, isolation and loneliness (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). For many students, the transition into high school will often have long lasting effects both positive and negative for each individual student. Given this knowledge, the transition from middle school to high school demonstrates that transitioning students deserve great attention by educators regarding social and academic outcomes (Felmlee et al., 2018).

Having a successful ninth-grade year is incredibly important for all students to graduate high school on time with their original cohort and classmates. Mac Iver et al. (2018) indicate that the ninth-grade academic performance is absolutely vital for on-time and college-ready high school graduates. While it seems somewhat obvious that passing ninth-grade level classes is very important for promotion to the tenth-grade, many schools struggle with academic progress of their ninth-grade students, which in turn causes students to repeat ninth-grade classes (Neild, 2009). Furthermore, McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) suggested that when a student successfully completes their ninth-grade year on time without course failures, they are much more likely to successfully graduate high school on time and with their fellow classmates.

Statement of the Problem

Research suggests that the ninth-grade year is a “make or break” school year for high school students in regards to high school graduation or the opposite, becoming a high school dropout (Iachini et al., 2016). Furthermore, Roybal et al. (2014) found that the transition from the middle school to high school is considered to be one of the most difficult educational transitions for students overall. The ninth-grade transition is somewhat incredible considering the changes associated with the students’ environment. Students, at this age, are challenged socially, emotionally and academically with the rigor of high school academics and other variables that the students deal with on a daily basis (Roybal et al., 2014). Furthermore, Smith et al. (2008) found that ninth-grade students traditionally have more discipline issues and attendance problems compared to all other grade levels within the high school. Consequently, many school districts continue to struggle to find solutions for the ninth-grade transitional year, and as a result, many school districts have implemented alternative educational methods for their ninth-grade students (Neild, 2009).

As school districts continually seek to improve their students’ outcomes regarding the ninth-grade transition, many school districts have explored and implemented the small learning community concept (SLC) within their high school. These SLC programs typically structure their transitional efforts into their curricular programs without separating students from the larger high school population. However, research suggests that SLCs are effective in promoting student success in some instances (Roybal et al., 2014) but not in others (Levine, 2010). This understanding is important because research supports the benefits of effective SLCs. For example, Cushman (2006) found that when high schools offer an authentic SLC atmosphere for

their ninth-grade students and staff, the students are much more likely to experience social and academic successes. Patterson et al. (2007) suggests that SLCs have the potential to bring a great benefit to the students, teachers and parents during the transition from middle school to high school. Additionally, Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) found that the SLC programs that promote a “school within a school” have been shown to be very successful for incoming ninth-grade students. Considering the potential and encouraging benefits that a successful SLC can offer a high school, many high school administrators are exploring possible SLC concepts that they could implement within their high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) discovered that “SLC and transitional courses are developmentally responsive organizational structures that foster personalized learning environments where school personnel can promote both the academic and social components of a caring community necessary for success in high school and beyond” (p. 320). However, little is known regarding how SLCs influence student success or the factors that make SLCs effective.

One rural, larger school district referred to as “Midwestern High” has implemented an SLC model by requiring all ninth-grade students to take a ninth-grade transitional course. Midwestern High has traditionally struggled with their incoming ninth-grade students as they transition up from middle school; however, since the implementation of this course, student promotion to the tenth-grade has improved. Students promotion has gone up, student discipline has decreased and the overall school culture has improved as well (Mrs. Appel, Interview 2021). The transitional course is a mandatory, semester long course that all incoming ninth-grade students are required to take in the fall semester of their ninth-grade year. Additionally, this transitional course was designed to promote SLC concepts within their high school and ultimately benefit their incoming ninth-grade students (District Website, n. d.). Although this

class was fully implemented in the fall of 2019, there is little known regarding how this course influences student transition into their ninth-grade year at high school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transition course that began during the fall of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school.

Research Questions

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory will be utilized as the theoretical framework for this study (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Since this transitional program was introduced in fall of 2019, ninth-grade student transition into high school has shown evidence of improvement through enhanced promotion rates of ninth-grade students into the tenth-grade, lower discipline referrals and an improved sense of school culture (Mrs. Appel, Interview 2021). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has utility for explaining findings from this study because, according to SDT, when students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness experience are met, they are likely to experience high-quality motivation (Reeve, 2012) resulting in enhanced school success. SDT has utility for explaining the influence of the transition course on ninth-grade student success because it provides a framework to understand persistence in goal pursuit when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, the following research questions will guide this study.

Overarching Question:

What are teacher and administrator perceptions regarding how this transitional course supports the psychological needs of students as they transition from middle to high school?

Sub-Questions:

1. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for competence?
2. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for autonomy?
3. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for relatedness?
4. How does Self-Determination Theory explain these findings?
5. What other findings emerge that Self-Determination Theory does not explain?

Epistemological Perspective

This case study will be viewed through social constructivism. Social constructivism is a philosophical stance that suggests that both social interaction and individual perception each play a crucial role in “meaning making” (Bozkurt, 2017). Moreover, when viewing a case study through the lens of constructivism, it is a more holistic description and analysis of the phenomenon as a unit (Yazan, 2015). Merriam (1998) views constructivism as a reality that is constructed by individuals interacting within their own social worlds. The optimal learning environment is one where engagement and activity are considered meaningful with individuals who have the ability to express emerging knowledge. Bozhurt's study in (2017) found the following:

Social constructivist, thus considers the process of knowledge as the essence of social interaction that leads to higher levels of reason and learning. In addition, the acquisition of intellectual skills is regarded as an active process involving others. From the social constructivist point of view, culture, context has an essential role in understanding in order to construct knowledge through this understanding. (pg. 211)

Creswell and Clark (2017) define constructivism as an approach seeking to understand a phenomenon through participants views. Moreover, Bryman (2016) found that constructivism “implies that a social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision” (p. 33). Finally, constructivism research should be formed from individual perspectives, broad patterns and ultimately broad understanding (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. Self-Determination Theory, or SDT, places emphasis on three psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Furthermore, Deci and Ryan (2000) found that the three needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are all innate instead of learned. Continuing, SDT assumes that it is human nature for an individual to be curious in their environment and have interest in increasing their knowledge of their current environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Deci and Ryan (1985) explains that autonomy is “the need to self-direct one’s behavior.” Competence is the need to engage effectively in one’s environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Lastly, relatedness is the “need to feel a sense of connectedness to other people” (Ball et al., 2019, p. 1309). Furthermore, according to Ellerbrock and Kieffer (2013), “within the framework of the Self-Determination Theory, care can be understood as the universal characteristic that responds to a set of basic psychological needs” (p. 321). Because this case study will focus on students at the critical ninth-grade level, and the school’s staff involved with transitional program, SDT can provide a framework for understanding how student’s psychological and motivational needs are met through this transitional course.

Self-Determination Theory explains an individual's motivation and categorizes it ranging from the undesirable amotivation to the preferred autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Otundo & Garn, 2020). Furthermore, autonomous motivation behaviors refer to the behaviors that are performed out of enjoyment (Rutten et al., 2015). Miserandino (1996) compares autonomous behavior to when a child takes responsibility for his/her own actions and accepts the desired outcomes. Therefore, when a child freely chooses to engage in an activity, he/she is acting in an autonomous manner. Meanwhile the amotivation is expressed through feelings of incompetence, lacking value for a task, and overall negative experiences (Otundo & Garn, 2020). Vallerand et al., describes "amotivated behaviors are the least self-determined because there is no sense of purpose, and no expectation of reward nor the possibility of changing the course of events" (p. 222). Gagne and Deci (2005) found that a lack of motivation parallels with a lack of self-determination. In reference to this case study, one can compare the autonomous behavior to a student successfully transitioning from middle school to high school, staying on track for graduating high school, and the amotivated behavior to a student falling behind or dropping out of high school. Gagne and Deci (2005) describe autonomous behavior as when people identify the importance of his or her activities and actions. Also, autonomous motivation is controlled and intentional compared to amotivation.

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) suggest that Self-Determination Theory impresses the importance of cultivating a school community where all students have their basic needs met and are able to succeed. Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, this case study will seek to understand relationships developed through the transitional program and specifically identify motivating factors as the ninth-grade students naturally progress from middle school into high school. Additionally, including high school staff in the study who have a history of working with

ninth-grade students will provide important insight into how this transition program influences students' psychological needs.

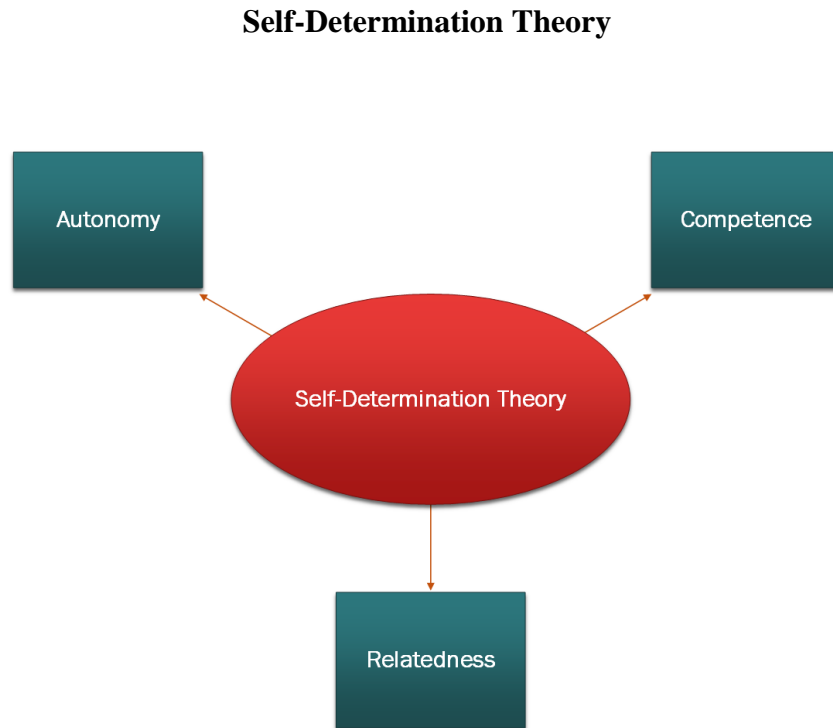
Black and Deci (2000) further support the influence that instructors can have on student psychological needs. They suggest that instructors can have a positive impact on students' motivation, thus positively influencing students' behavior from amotivated up to the autonomous behavior within one semester. Furthermore, SDT emphasizes social environments that meet these three basic needs are critical for intrinsic motivation (Lee & Blanchard 2019).

Additionally, Bartholomew et al. (2011) report that social environments can either facilitate an individual's motivational growth or thwart the process resulting in behaviors that represent the darker side of human existence.

SDT's utilization in education reform is growing. Deci (2009) states that, "Self-Determination Theory has not outlined a specific approach to educational reform, but it does provide a perspective that can speak to the likely effectiveness of reform approaches outlined by others" (p. 2). Through the lens of Self-Determination theory, this study seeks to understand how the transitional program helps support the basic psychological needs of the ninth-grade students involved. Ryan and Deci (2018) found that the Self-Determination Theory conceptualizes how individuals perceive themselves within a social context through the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Furthermore, when these three needs are met, individuals are positioned for optimal psychological growth and flourishing. Iachini et al. (2016) suggest when these three needs are met, students become more motivated and the overall learning experience is enhanced.

Figure

Figure 1. Self Determination Theory



Procedures

Merriam (1998) stated that “the decision to focus on qualitative case studies stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (pg. 28-29). Furthermore, Merriam (1998) described case studies as either particularistic, descriptive or heuristic. Creswell (2014) defined a case study as a qualitative study to understand a program or event that is bound by time using data collection.

This case study will be a particularistic case study researching a mandatory ninth-grade transitional course in Midwestern High School (pseudonym). This case study will provide a

holistic understanding of the influence of a ninth-grade transitional course at Midwestern High School on psychological needs (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Midwestern High School is large high school located in a rural area of America's Midwest.

Methods

The design for this study is case study methodology utilizing Sharon Merriam (1985) as the methodologist with constructivism as the epistemology. The case identified for this study is one ninth-grade SLC transition program in one high school in one Midwestern state.

While completing a detailed qualitative case study, Merriam first recommends a detailed review of existing literature consisting of peer reviewed articles (Merriam, 1985). The extensive literature review should provide a solid foundation to identify and clarify the research problems and questions. Then, Merriam (1998) suggested a focused and purposeful sampling during the data collection process. During this data collection process, the researcher should be mindful of conducting effective interviews as well as a watchful observer of the surroundings and culture (Yazan, 2015). Furthermore, research interviews should be probing for quality information, including good questions but also avoiding insignificant question areas as well. Next, Merriam suggested that data analysis for case study research should follow a constant comparative method, analyzing data as it is collected (Yazan, 2015). After data collection, Merriam (1998) instructed one to validate the data, interpret the meaning of the data and begin the process of making sense of the results.

Data Sources

Population

“Midwestern High” is considered to be a larger high school compared to other high schools in this Midwestern state. Furthermore, Midwestern High is currently the 30th largest high school within the state. Midwestern High has seven principles that they pride themselves upon and have determined these seven principles as their core values going forward. Work ethic, improvement, leadership, discipline, competitiveness, attitude and teamwork are all of the cornerstone values that Midwestern High has set these principles as the framework for the strategic planning going forward (District Website, n. d.).

Moreover, Midwestern High’s ACT scores are always above state and national averages and they consider themselves to be an academic leader within the state. Midwestern High also has an excellent working partnership with the local junior college for students to earn dual credit, college concurrent opportunities while still in still attending high school. Also, Midwestern High has a solid working partnership with the local Career Tech Center where students can again attend both institutes while still attending Midwestern High. Lastly, Midwestern High prides themselves with providing a rigorous education full of remediation opportunities, peer mentoring programs, summer school, alternative school programs as well as leadership opportunities for all students (District Website, n. d.).

The sample for this case study will be selected using a purposeful criterion sampling from Midwestern High School’s certified teaching staff, guidance counseling staff, site level administration and district level administration. Criteria for participation include staff members who are in direct contact with or have oversight responsibility of the ninth-grade transitional course currently being researched. Moreover, participants for the study must be currently certified staff members within Midwestern High or district level administration where this study is taking place.

Data Sources

Interviews of certified staff members within Midwestern High will be the primary source of data during this case study. Interview participants will be certified staff members that are directly involved with this ninth-grade transitional course. Teachers who teach the transitional course, counselors who monitor the ninth-grade students participating within the course, campus level administrators charged with oversight of the transitional course and central district level administration will be the primary source of interviews. Interviews will consist of three teachers, two counselors, two principals and the school district superintendent for a total of eight interviews.

Documents collected will include teachers' lesson plans, high school pacing guides, high school registration guides and other documents that can provide insight regarding the transitional course. All documents will be collected during my visits and observations at Midwestern High while interviewing the identified staff members. All documents will be coded and analyzed to identify developing categories and themes that emerge within the data.

Observations of this case study will be completed during the ninth-grade transitional course being researched and within the classroom setting. Each observation will be completed with a classroom teacher and students actually in attendance taking the ninth-grade transitional course. These observations will provide me a better understanding of how the ninth-grade transitional course meets the students' needs within the SDT principles of autonomy, competence and relatedness. I intend to position myself in the back portion of the classroom while being able to view and hear both the students and the classroom teacher. By optimally positioning myself within the classroom, it will allow for me to observe firsthand when people cannot or will not discuss the research topic (Merriam, 1998).

Potential Significance of the Study

Research suggests that the ninth-grade year is a pivotal year for all high school students. Moreover, if a ninth-grade student has a poor introduction into his or her high school career, then that student may never truly recover academically and may have the potential of becoming a high school drop-out. Conversely, if a ninth-grade student has a successful school year, then that student is much more likely to graduate on time. This study will provide insight into this transitional program regarding how it meets students' psychological needs. While not generalizable, the findings from this study may be transferrable to other school districts with similar demographics who are struggling to facilitate the success of ninth-grade students as they transition into high school.

To Research

Jeno et al. (2019) found that the Self-Determination Theory provides the framework to study people's overall motivation, and furthermore the environment that supports psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Li et al. (2018) referenced the old saying of "students don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care" regarding the role of the overall educational setting as described through the lens of self-determination theory. Specifically, the relatedness factor of SDT aligns with the understanding proposed by Li et al. (2018) that student perception of "care" may be a motivating factor for success.

In summary, this study can add to understandings in the literature regarding how this transition program supports the psychological needs of students as they transition from middle school to high school. Considering the high pressures and stringent accountability system that

high schools are currently facing, supporting student psychological needs may be a factor in helping students persist through this difficult transition period.

To Theory

This study will utilize the Self-Determination Theory to gain a better understanding of how and if this ninth-grade transitional program is designed to meet the needs of its incoming ninth-grade students specifically in the three areas of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Although, SDT is often used to study and understand the motivation of teachers and administrators. This case study will use SDT to study the motivation of students during a very vulnerable time in the educational career. This study expands the use of SDT and explores a more holistic view of the transitional program overall. Because this ninth-grade transitional program has only been offered since the fall of 2019, there should be valuable information available from the initial start of this course. Creswell and Clark (2017) clarified that “research participants should provide their individual subject views that were formed by their own social interactions and experiences” (p. 36).

To Practice

Although not generalizable, the findings from this study may be transferrable to other school districts with similar demographics that are experiencing difficulty with student transition from middle school to high school by providing understandings regarding how this transition course meets student psychological needs. Specifically, findings from this study may help to inform other educational leaders regarding components of this transitional program that support student success through meeting the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. These findings could enhance understandings regarding the implementation of transitional programs into their own high schools or school districts. Findings in the literature suggest that when high

schools provide a SLC atmosphere for students and staff, the students are more likely to become more successful socially and academically (Cushman, 2006). What this study adds to those findings, is an understanding of how this transition course provides support to students through meeting their psychological needs. Additionally, this case study gives an in-depth perspective of a large school district and how it addresses the issues as middle school students transition into the high school. Finally, because the study includes staff who were present in the school before and after the program was implemented, their insight should lend valuable perspective regarding how this course meets student psychological needs.

Definition of Terms

In order for the reader to understand and identify the multiple aspects of this case study, the terms below are identified in this portion.

High School Dropout

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) defines a high school dropout as a student who withdraws from high school and does not meet state, federal and local graduation requirements.

Student Discipline Issues

Discipline issues include, but are not limited to, students not working on assignments or prepared for class, dress code violation, cell phone, violating any school policies and violation of the student handbook (Van Tuyle, 2018).

Chronic Absenteeism

Durham et al. (2019) defines chronic absenteeism as a student who misses a minimum of fifteen days of school per school year.

Retention

Retention is the practice of holding a student back from progressing to the next grade level and or next course level (Bornsheuer et al., 2011).

Adolescence

Obsuth (2018) states that adolescence is a critical developmental period in one's life that is characterized by physical maturity, social development, cognitive development and emotional development. Furthermore, adolescence is the second most important developmental stage only behind infancy.

High School Graduate

When a student completes local and state requirements and is no longer required or encouraged to attend public school any longer (Snyder & Dillow, 2013).

Emotional Maturity

Emotional maturity can be seen as a balance between personal values and social awareness. Furthermore, emotional maturity has several other attributes including trust, self-reflectiveness, empathy and intuition (Liechty, 2018).

School Transitional Program

A successful school transitional program will ultimately improve attendance and academic achievement, but also lower failure rates among all students (DeLamar & Brown, 2016).

Summary of the Study

This case study of a ninth-grade transitional program adopted by a large Midwest high school referred to as "Midwestern High" is intended to research all successful and unsuccessful strategies during the implementation of this program. In the fall of 2019, Midwestern High implemented an SLC model by requiring all ninth-grade students to take a ninth-grade

transitional course. Midwestern High has traditionally struggled with their incoming ninth-grade students as they transition up from middle school; however, since the implementation of this course, student promotion to the tenth-grade has improved. The transitional course is a mandatory, semester long course that all incoming ninth-grade students are required to take in the fall semester of their ninth-grade year. Additionally, this transitional course was designed to promote SLC concepts within their high school and ultimately benefit their incoming ninth-grade students (District Website, n. d.). Although this class was fully implemented in the fall of 2019, there is little known regarding how this course influences student transition into their ninth-grade year at high school.

Chapter I provided a summary of this study including problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical framework and methodology. Chapter II will provide an overview of extant literature related to student transition, student retention and transition programs. Chapter III will provide a detailed explanation of the methodology for this case study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ninth-grade is considered a “make or break” for students’ high school career. Mac Iver et al. (2018) suggest that the ninth-grade year will determine whether a student will graduate high school, become a high school drop-out and/or if they will be ready for college. Corsello et al., (2015) reported that the ninth-grade year is a pivotal year for all students and truly identifies a student’s trajectory throughout their high school career. Additionally, Smith et al. (2008) clarified that statistically speaking, there are more discipline suspensions, expulsions, high school dropouts and attendance issues in the ninth-grade than any other grade levels in high school. A school system’s worst data points are usually found with their ninth-grade students regarding discipline, truancies, course failures and grade level retentions (Habeeb, 2013). To combat these challenges, many school districts and professional educators are placing a large emphasis on students and student programs during the transition from middle school into high school.

When students leave the eight-grade and enter the ninth-grade, they are entering their first year of high school. The ninth-grade year is quite possibly the most important one because a student’s grade point average is based on this foundational year. Findings in the literature suggest that the first two weeks of a student’s ninth-grade year will often predict if that student will complete high school or drop out of high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Therefore, it is

well accepted among educators that when a student enters the ninth-grade year, “It marks the beginning of a new high-stakes period” (Cushman, 2006 p. 47).

Reents (2002) found that the greatest cultural difference within the K-12 educational system is the gap between middle school and high school. Preschool classes feel like kindergarten classes, fifth-grade classes feel like six-grade classes and the senior year in high school feels much like the freshmen year in college. Although, nothing is comparable to the cultural gap in education between the eight-grade and the ninth-grade for students (Reents, 2002). Essentially, the ninth-grade year can be completely overwhelming for many students as they enter high school (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Furthermore, Felmlee et al. (2018) found the following:

The transition to high school also appears to affect adolescents’ social development, leading to elevated levels of loneliness, and lower self-esteem. Taken together, the academic and social setbacks that result from the transition to high school can have long-term negative consequences that increase school dropout rates, lower educational attainment and depress levels of incoming adulthood. (p. 159)

Knowing the short-term and long-term effects of the ninth-grade school year and transition, makes high schools place a tremendous amount of emphasis in the successfulness of the ninth-grade school year.

School Transitions

A transition is a process of moving from the known to the unknown, and the middle school to high school transition can be described in this way (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2013). School districts across the nation are seeking to identify ways to not only increase the academic

achievement level of ninth-graders, but also prevent the failure of their ninth-graders as they transition from middle school up to high school (Fulk, 2003). Anytime there is a student that transitions into a new school, the transitional process has long been identified as vulnerable. Unfortunately, student transitions often lead to students “falling through the cracks” and not becoming successful at the new school (Mac Iver et al., 2018). The transition to ninth-grade includes academic challenges, developmental challenges, structural challenges and much more (Corsello et al., 2015). Even though most professionals agree that the transition into high school is considered a critical one, there are still some high schools that offer their students little to no support (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Bornsheuer et al. (2011) report that if students are going to dropout of school, it is more likely to happen between the eighth and ninth-grade year. Knowing that the ninth-grade year is such a critical one for students, proactive high schools are constantly seeking new and creative strategies to assist their students (Habeeb, 2013).

Research suggests that the transition from the middle school to the high school, is an extremely difficult one for all involved. Suldo and Shaunessy-Dedrick (2013) found “Students transitioning into high school face more difficult coursework, a different organizational structure, new peers, more students and different expectations from teachers and administrators” (p. 196). Smith et al. (2008) suggested that high schools and the feeder middle schools must work collaboratively to identify the distinctions academically, socially, and other offerings such as athletics and or activities. Furthermore, an effective transition from the middle school to the high requires a year-long commitment for many students and simply cannot be a one-day event (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

The transition into ninth-grade requires students to adapt to a new environment and a new set of academic standards (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Too many ninth-grade students do not know

their whereabouts around the high school and oftentimes do not even know where their classes are located. Cushman (2006) reported that a successful transitional program should allow incoming ninth-grade students early access to the high school during the summer break to acclimate themselves. Incoming ninth-grade students are placed in new classrooms with new classmates, in addition to encountering different teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, club sponsors and support staff (Felmlee et al., 2018). Knowing this, high school staff members should not assume that the incoming ninth-grade student would know their way around the building and know where their classrooms are located.

Unfortunately, high schools that do not place a specific emphasis on their ninth-grade transition with students will many times struggle with a higher student failure rate and a higher student dropout rate (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2013). Often, ninth-grade students do not fully understand the complete high school concept of graduation requirements, required and elective classes. For many incoming ninth-grade students, the transition into high school is accompanied by increased choices, changes and responsibilities in the child's academic and social worlds (Newman et al., 2000). Therefore, ninth-grade students do not fully understand the graduation requirements and the ramifications of a course failure (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

As students transition from one school building to another, the transitions are complex academically and socially for all students. Smith et al. (2008) discovered that the fewer transitions a student makes during their academic career, the better the academic outcomes will be. Furthermore, it has been discovered in recent years that students who attend a kindergarten through the eight-grade school and then transition into a ninth – twelfth-grade high school will academically outperform students who attended an elementary, middle school and then a high

school. Again, the fewer amount of school transitions a student can make, the better the student will perform academically (Smith et al., 2008).

Felmlee et al. (2018) also reports that a school transition into a new school environment can actually be beneficial for the student. A fresh start at a new school building allows for the incoming student to have a clean slate and leave behind any previous issues such as discipline or negative pressures. Therefore, school transitions can provide a positive opportunity for students to leave a troublesome circumstance they may currently be in, and have the opportunity to start over again. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that transitioning into a new school can often be considered liberating for students who have previously struggled academically or in other areas. Additionally, Neild (2009) found that the fresh start of a new high school was often advantageous for eight-grade students who were struggling academically.

Knowing that there is such a large jump from the middle school to high school, many school districts have started to implement summer school transitional programs to address this gap. Acclimating the incoming ninth grade students to their future environment has proven to pay dividends going forward. Neild (2009) states that “many school districts also offer summer programs that are intended to increase students’ math or reading comprehension skills, teach study strategies, orient them to the layout of the school and enable them to meet high school teachers and classmates” (p. 70). Furthermore, McCallumore and Sparapni (2010) found other effective transitional strategies to be as simple as providing incoming ninth graders a school map, a copy of their bell schedule, copies of ninth grade tests or homework assignments from previous years.

Successful Ninth-Grade Transitional Programs

Roybal et al. (2014) reported that the transition from middle school into high school can be a perilous one for many students. Although this transition can be considered critical, there are many ways and opportunities for high schools and school districts to provide a successful ninth-grade transitional program. Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) reported that staff development is a critical portion of the equation. Keeping the students engaged and interested during classroom time is one component.

Preparing eighth-grade students for the upcoming transition a year ahead of time is not a bad thing. In fact, Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) reported that current eighth-graders should be exposed to the high school multiple times before it happens. Furthermore, Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that successful ninth-grade transitional programs should be taking place almost a year ahead of time. Not only should the parents be exposed to the high school, but also through open houses for the parents to tour and view the high school as well. The more exposure incoming students have to the high school will only ease the transitional process for the incoming ninth-graders.

One critical factor for ensuring a successful transition, is that students should have a sense of belonging for their school. When students have a strong connection with their school, there is a direct correlation with student academic success including their grade point average (Roybal et al., 2014). Roybal et al. (2014) continued by reporting that when students have a positive connection to a school, the connections can be through other students' friendship and school staff members.

Small Learning Communities

Smaller learning communities (SLC) have long been recognized and appreciated by educators at all levels. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that thousands of large high schools across the United States are converting into SLC's to assist with middle school to high school transition and dropout prevention. Moreover, many high schools have adopted the SLC approach to assist and ease the transition with their incoming ninth-grade students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). Delmar and Brown (2016) reported that the SLC concept is an effective way of breaking down a large high school into smaller groups, thus allowing for ninth-grade students to more comfortable within the smaller learning environment. The remarkable benefits of SLCs have been well established in literature and research with overwhelming examples of their success around and throughout the country. When a true community concept is implemented and adopted, then there can be detailed, targeted attention placed on specific students and their needs (Reents, 2002).

Although many people may mistake the purpose or example of a SLC, as it is not a smaller school building but instead a smaller environment that provides students and staff a much more accepted educational community. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) reported that an effective smaller learning community during the ninth-grade transition will continue to produce dividends for students and foster optimal learning and positive school experiences. Emmett and McGee (2012) reported that SLCs are extremely beneficial to ninth-grade students when the SLCs are able to provide personalized social and emotional support, as well as offer targeted academic remediation.

The relationship between school staff members and students is somewhat critical for the success of the smaller learning community. When a student stays in high school and successfully graduates, many times this accomplishment is because that student has a sense of belonging

within the school community (Knesting, 2008). Additionally, it is reported that SLC staff members appreciate the closeness among fellow staff members, a more intimate relationship with their students and the ability to focus on a smaller piece of specific curriculum (Patterson et al., 2007). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) also found that an effective smaller learning community may be nurtured through high-quality teacher-student relationships and through the promotion of academic and life skills.

Many high schools try to group their ninth-grade students together in one physical area of the school. This specific grouping area described, could be a separate addition and or wing of the current high school. Cushman (2006) claimed that grouping the ninth-graders together allows the students to acclimate socially in developing friendships. Also, a specific ninth-grade area allows the students greater ease in finding their classes. Although, when ninth-grade students are displaced from the older upper-classmen students, this can cause resentment. Royal et al. (2014) claimed that the ninth-grade students in this environment felt isolated and left out from the upper-classmen and lacked the ability to associate with them.

Freshmen Academy

The Freshmen Academy concept is considered a popular one among larger high schools. Reents (2002) reported that a freshmen academy eases the middle school to high school transition for students. Unlike the isolated wing or area previously described, the Freshmen Academy is often recognized as a totally separate building altogether. Roybal et al. (2014) reported significant academic success, including grade point average, of students within the Freshmen Academy. Furthermore, there was a stronger relationship between staff members and students within the Freshmen Academy. Also, parents of students attending the Freshmen

Academy felt that their child was safer and more protected than being placed in the high school with upper-classmen.

Communally organized schools increase the personalization between staff and students and fosters a more positive shared responsibility. Developing a caring, supportive, and mutually respectful relationship between students and staff is not impossible within a large high school, but it is difficult (Knestling, 2008). Although, a high school culture that promotes the more collective approach traditionally produces less high school dropouts (Neil et al., 2008). When high schools offer a smaller learning community atmosphere for students and staff, the students are more likely to become more successful socially and in academics (Cushman, 2006).

Butts and Cruzeiro (2005), stated that high schools should strive to have a “school within a school” environment to promote a positive atmosphere for their incoming ninth-grade students. This ‘school within a school’ approach promotes a closer relationship between staff members and current students. Most successful teachers, at successful schools, strive to create a climate of respect and caring for their students; and furthermore, these same teachers have extremely high academic standards for their students (Knesting, 2008). Therefore, students feel more secure about their current environment and know where to go if and when issues arrive.

Newman et al. (2000) reported that if a high school truly cares about their incoming ninth-grade students, they will focus more on supporting the incoming ninth grade with peer mentoring, assure there is adult support outside of the school day for each student, and have current high school staff members mentor multiple ninth-grade students. DeLamar and Brown (2016) described that the freshman academy allows incoming ninth-grade students the opportunity to have their own smaller community within the large high school.

Although there are many positives about a school district having a ninth-grade academy for their ninth-grade students, but it is not the end all solution. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) reported that the ninth-grade academy essentially provides two ninth-grade experiences; one at the academy and one when the students enter the larger high school.

Ninth Grade Students' Relationship with Others

Relationships with High School Staff Members

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) found that adults in authority at the high school, including principals, counselors, teachers and support staff members, play a huge role in determining the successfulness of a student's transition into high school. When there is a positive relationship between high school students and high school staff members the benefits are abundant. Furthermore, many underperforming high schools start the reformation process by placing a large emphasis on the student and staff relationship piece (Mac Iver et al., 2015). Long lasting, positive relationships between the students and staff are the key to a developmentally responsive learning environment. Furthermore, productive student-staff relationships will continue throughout a student's high school educational career (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

Although, when there is not a positive relationship between students and staff members, unfortunately the students carry the burden of the hardship. Patterson et al. (2007) reported that "many students share the experience of not being able to relate to or be understood by their teachers points to a persistent divide that pits students and teachers against each other (p. 128). From the teachers' perspective, it is sometimes difficult to relate to every student they interact with throughout the school day. High school teachers often do possess the expertise to work with incoming ninth-grade students who are too far behind academically (Neild, 2009).

When a student gets to high school, there are more students, staff members and a larger number of distractions. Many high school students feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of their high school in size and population (Knesting, 2008). Corsello et al. (2015) reported that:

The structure of the high school is typically very different from what students have previously experienced. In high school, the teacher's primary focus is the subject matter and not the student, students have different teachers for each subject, and teachers have little to no opportunity to learn how students are doing in other classes (p. 1).

Many ninth-grade students are unprepared for the rigor and academic standards of the high school. Next, the high school teachers are ill-prepared to teach the fundamental essentials in learning (literature, grammar and numeracy) thus creating an immediate barrier between staff and students (Neild et al., 2008).

Because teacher status systems within schools work to relegate the least desirable teaching assignments to the newest faculty, ninth-grade teachers are more likely to be uncertified, new to teaching, and or new to the school than those teaching upper-grades students. (Neild et al., 2008 p. 547)

Butts and Cruzerio (2005) explained that as students transition into high school, they are oftentimes leaving behind a smaller middle school setting that the students felt more comfortable and accustomed to. Additionally, many of the middle schools or junior highs offer an advisory or a home room setting for students to feel comfortable and lessen the student's anxiety. Many incoming ninth-grade students miss their middle school advisory period within the school day, as many students used their advisory period to catch up on academic assignments and socialize with their friends (Cushman, 2006). Although, once students enter the high school setting, many of these amenities that middle school students have become accustomed to disappear, and students

are required to travel from classroom to classroom with different teachers (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Furthermore, Cushman (2006) reported that, “the busy high school teachers often deal out matter-of-fact consequences for poor behavior, and students may have difficulty adjusting to the harsher regime” (p. 49). Ellerbrock and Kieffer (2010) found the following:

The presence of high-quality teacher-student relationship characterized by trust, care and emotional and cognitive support are critical for the development of students. Thus there is a need to develop and maintain supportive relationships within school and create a caring school community for all students, especially incoming ninth-grade students. (p. 393)

Teachers

For students entering the ninth-grade, they become officially introduced to the complex organization of the high school. Ninth-grade students quickly become formally exposed to multiple teachers with different academic expectations and classroom standards (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2013). According to Tan et al. (2020), “If teachers can identify and support students who struggle with social interactions in the first year of high school, they may be able to prevent more complex problems that adversely influence students’ progress towards graduation” (p. 1).

Therefore, high school teachers that work with the incoming ninth-grade students should be caring, and compassionate about their students to ease this transition.

Emmett and McGee (2012) found success when matching ninth-grade students up with fun, enthusiastic teachers, as both parties were easily able to make connections. A viable school transitional program should provide a supportive environment including staff members. Teachers should be able to explain student expectations and standards, as well as deliver curriculum in a

variety of successful methods (Butts & Cruzerio, 2005). In a recent study, Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) found the following:

Serving as a bridge between the school and the individual student, teachers providing the socioemotional support students need to be successful in school and enhance their feelings of care and belonging. Further, quality teacher-student relationships built on trust, care, and respect as well as emotional and cognitive support help to encourage positive adolescent development. (p. 320)

Emmett and McGee (2012) reported that when a ninth-grade student is struggling academically, it requires a fully committed teacher, that responds to the individual needs of the student to affectively change the trajectory of the student. Although and unfortunately, at the high school level, a teacher is not as readily available for students as middle school and elementary teachers might have been previously (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2013).

High schools that are heavily structured in bureaucracy, have been heavily criticized for not allowing their staff members to form relationships with students. Unfortunately, heavy bureaucracy schools form a culture where the staff is more focused on the content and the bottom, and less focused on the students. This type of culture by the staff “creates a depersonalized, alienating environment that allows struggling students to slip through the cracks” (Neil et al., 2008 p. 546). Due to the workload and the number of students a high school teacher has to teach, there is less time for individual students 1 on 1 compared to middle school teachers. A typical high school teacher teaches at least 120 students and this does not allow for much, if any, individual attention to students’ academic progress (Cushman, 2006).

Counselors

High school counselors play a critical role not only in the day to day functions of a high school but additionally they have a large influence on their students. Cooper and Liou (2007) stated “Traditionally within the high school setting the guidance counselor is one of the adults charged with the responsibility of providing students with the information necessary to more successfully navigate the complex bureaucratic nature of a high school” (p. 46). Patterson et al. (2007) stated that school guidance counselors at the middle school and high school level, play a critical role in the successfulness of a students’ ninth-grade transition (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Educational transitions are a critical time for school employees especially high school administrators and guidance counselors (DeLamar & Brown, 2016).

High school counselors are specifically trained to care for much more than the students’ academics. Cooper and Liou (2007) reported that high school guidance counselors are called to perform services in academics, career and personal social areas. School counselors many times advocate not only for their students, but also the entire family when there are indicators being seen (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). Roybal et al. (2014) found the ninth-grade counselors to have been very active in multiple areas during the ninth-grade transition including collaboration with middle school counselors and monitoring academic achievement for students. Smith et al. (2008) found that at some schools the ninth-grade counselors were very active in reporting and enforcing the attendance policy.

Many times, ninth grade students make the transition into high school and are unaware of the course offerings that the high school may have Furthermore, ninth-grade students may not be prepared for the classes that they are currently taking. DeLamar and Brown (2016) reported that a high school should place a large emphasis on their counseling staff. Continuing, that high school counselors have a large influence on the proper course offerings for ninth-grade students,

and then validating that the ninth-grade students are academically prepared to successfully take the course they are enrolled in (DeLamar & Brown, 2016).

Unfortunately, there are counselors available for ninth-grade students and their families but sometimes the guidance counselors do not have the time or resources to see all of the students. Knesting (2008) found that some schools have guidance counselors who are busy, overloaded and too busy to work with ninth-grade students. Effective high school counselors are extremely important to ensure and maintain not only the culture of the high school, but also all other encompassing transitional elements, as the ninth-grade students enter high school (Cooper & Liou, 2007).

Social Setting

Entering the ninth-grade is often considered to be an emotionally difficult time in a child's life. As ninth-grade students transition into high school, many students often start dealing with loneliness and anxiety (Felmlee et al., 2018). Many times, ninth-grade students are battling through self-esteem issues, developmental changes, and other environmental issues making their ninth-grade year even more difficult (Reents, 2002). Suldo and Shaunessy-Detrick (2013) found that the transition into the high school many times led to academic challenges, stress, psychopathology, depression and even substance abuse. Successful high schools offer ninth-grade students a nurturing and safe environment to combat the social and emotional challenges that their students are currently battling (Habeeb, 2013). In addition, Suldo and Shaunessy-Dedrick (2013) found that school transitions can be a disturbing experience for some adolescents causing a decline in school performance and a decline in mental health for the child.

Ideally, as ninth-grade students transition into the high school, a sense of belonging should occur and should continue to develop over the next four years. Making new friends in a

new school with a new social setting would encourage a positive outlook as students enter the high school (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Although, many incoming ninth-grade students worry about attending the larger high school, with older students, and all of the rumors that they have heard from middle school. Many ninth-grade students struggle with feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, alienation and other emotional struggles as they transition into high school (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Cushman (2006) reported that for years, the incoming ninth-grade students have heard the high school is huge and confusing, the older students will haze and bully you and the academic workload is much harder. Additionally, Ganeson and Ehrich (2013) found that the incoming ninth-grade students were predominately worried and concerned about being bullied by the older students, as well as learning the new school rules and procedures within the high school setting.

Traditionally, a student's engagement at school customarily falls under two categories of academics and socially. Being engaged in both academics and socially is widely viewed as the pillars of a successful student (Neil et al., 2008). Furthermore, Newman et al. (2000) reported that a student's friends and social setting can be just as large of an influence as the student's parents and academic environment. Moreover, since all high school students are regrouped into different subjects and classes within the school day, this scheduling process can often cause many incoming ninth-grade students' anxiety about maintain their peer relationships (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2013).

As ninth-grade students transition into the high school, many times the high school is much larger as multiple middle schools feed into one high school. Cooper and Liou (2007) reported "the large bureaucratic nature of most high schools' challenges students to adjust to new rules and new expectations, while providing them little, if any, adult support and nurturing" (p.

46). Therefore, oftentimes high schools have a much larger student body. Newman et al. (2000) found that making new friends and dealing with peer pressure are real issues for ninth-grade students transitioning into high school.

Unfortunately, as eighth-grade students start preparing for the ninth-grade transition in high school, they start to worry about their social world getting flipped upside down (Cushman, 2006). In the middle school setting, the eighth-graders students are on top of the social platform and have seniority over the underclassmen. Although, once these students transition into high school, the social seniority paradigm starts all over as they become the low ones in the pecking order. Reents (2002) described ninth-graders as being in a very unique timeframe stuck in between adolescence and adulthood, while many of the ninth-graders are still searching for their own identity.

Newman et al. (2000) suggested that there is a direct correlation between a successful transition into high school and the social connection of that student and their school. Therefore, if a student is not socially connected to their school, then the student may not have a successful transition into high school. According to Newman et al. (2000), “students’ feelings of belongingness in their school are positively associated with their motivation toward school, effort, level of participation, and eventual achievement” (p. 389). Additionally, Tan et al. (2020) reported that students’ ability to connect socially through friends and other relationships will impact the students’ school attendance and the potential for disruptive behaviors. Therefore, social connections are critical as students transition from middle school to high school.

According to Cooper and Liou (2007), “The transition into high school has psychological and sociological components that include being socialized into a new school culture with different expectations, stress factors, and support systems” (p. 46). Cohen and Smerdon (2009)

reported that ninth-grade students are often dealing with the developmental stage of puberty, physical development and other hormonal changes. Thus, adding another degree of difficulty as students transition from the middle school to the high school. Additionally, Tan et al. (2020) reported that high school staff members should pay close attention to the social and emotional behaviors of ninth-grade students, as these behaviors are critical during the middle to high school transition.

A ninth-grade student's social settings can also be disturbed by the middle school to high school transition as well. Ganeson and Ehrich (2013), reported that this transition often coincides with adolescent development as well as physical, emotional, and psychological changes. Many times, a student may be losing a close friendship or many friends because of the ninth-grade transition into high school causing social isolation. Social isolation can be associated with a wide range of negative outcomes for students including poor health, suicidal ideation, a lower academic performance and an overall lower self-worth (Felmee et al., 2018). Furthermore, Felmee et al. (2018) explained that harmful effects of a negative social setting can extend for many years after adolescence. Therefore, as ninth-grade students transition into the high school setting, school employees and faculty should always be aware of students' social environment.

Family Engagement

Parental influence can have a significant effect on a students' success at the high school level. Furthermore, effective parental involvement is vital for students to have a successful middle school to high school transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Bornsheuer et al. (2011) found that the attitude of the parents played a significant role in their high school students' school behavior, classroom compliance, and the overall academic success of the child. Unfortunately, there is a large level of family engagement as students transition into kindergarten

and middle, but the level of family engagement tapers off as students transition into the high school. There are multiple studies that have reported the decrease in family engagement as students transition into the higher-grade level, and, regrettably, there is a lack of family engagement at the high school level (Mac Iver et al., 2018). Although the level of parental engagement is less with high school students, parental engagement can be extremely beneficial for ninth-grade students. Newman et al. (2000) found that the ninth-grade transition was less disruptive for students whose parents fostered the developmental needs associated during this time of adolescence.

As ninth-grade students transition into the high school, there appears to be a gradual release of parental control and parental influence on the students. Neild (2009) found that the entrance to ninth-grade often serves as a social marker among parents, identifying that it is time for the young person to develop more independence. Furthermore, during this transition, parents start allowing for their students to have more autonomy, freedom and self-independence of their actions (Corsello et al., 2015). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that ninth-grade students tend to start becoming less dependent on their parents and more independent, requiring less parental involvement within the high school setting.

Additionally, high schools traditionally start releasing more freedom to their students. Although, many times this allowed freedom becomes detrimental to the ninth-grade students (Neil et al., 2008). Smith et al. (2008) found that parents who stayed actively involved with their child during the ninth-grade transition (e.g., school work, peer networks, and direct participation in school) were more likely to have a successful high school career.

As ninth-grade students enter high school there are many more structured policies that often catch families off guard. Mac Iver et al. (2015) reported that “many families are unaware of

the nexus of students' on-time, daily attendance, report card grades, and course credits required for promotion from grade ninth to grade tenth and the path to on-time graduation from high school" (p. 28). The successfulness of a high school is not solely dependent on family engagement, although the family engagement has a large influence academically, socially and politically and should certainly not be ignored. It is crucial for high schools to enlist family support for the successfulness of the students' academic success (Mac Iver et al., 2015).

As ninth-grade students transition into the high school, the long-term ramifications are often not completely understood by the parents. Many families of current ninth-grade students are unaware of the negative significance a course failure can have on their child's chances of graduating on time (Mac Iver et al., 2015).

Peer-Mentor Programs

Another transitional strategy is placing incoming ninth-grade students with an upper-classmen as their mentor. Mentorship programs have long been proven to be successful when assisting ninth-grade students with the transition into high school (Flannery et al., 2020). By design, the mentor will frequently check-in with the ninth-grade student to ensure that their transition into high school is effective. Roybal et al. (2014) reported that such mentoring programs have proven to be successful both socially and academically. Furthermore, peer-mentor programs help ninth-grade students socially acclimate to the high school, support students academically, assist students with homework, promote proper study skills and can overall assist in a students' motivation.

Many times, fellow peers can have the most influential, positive effect on ninth-grade students. Having a positive peer support system has proven to have a significant influence on an adolescents' attitude towards their school (Newman et al., 2000). Johnson et al. (2014) found that

effective and well-designed peer mentoring programs can be very effective with students making the transition into ninth-grade. Furthermore, school administration should be very selective when placing a mentor with a younger mentee student, and allow for proper supervision of the mentors during the school year to assure that the mentors are maintaining high expectations for their mentee.

Peer mentoring programs also provide benefits to the school culture as well. Older peer mentors should reinforce curricular concepts, promote student engagement and maintain a positive relationship with their younger peers (Flannery et al., 2020). Not only do the mentee's benefit for the extra supervision and support, but the mentors do as well.

Oppositional Issues That Challenge the Ninth-Grade Transition

Academically Not Prepared for High School

Unfortunately, students who struggle academically in middle school are underequipped for the rigor of high school academics. Neild (2009) reported that incoming ninth-grade students who are underprepared in math and reading flounder academically at high school, become extremely discouraged, are often truant and are more likely to eventually drop out of high school all together.

One of the root causes that determine if a ninth-grader can have a successful transition into high school is their reading level (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Academics can play a large role in ensuring a successful ninth-grade transition, but it is simply one portion of the puzzle.

Ganeson and Ehrich (2013) found the following:

The lack of skills to complete homework affects students during transition because it is an additional issue that they have to overcome. Besides academic and curriculum

challenges, students during transition have to get used to a new location, new environment and organization. (p. 6)

Course Failures

Unfortunately, ninth-grade students do have the reputation of failing many courses compared to other upperclassmen within the high school. Felmlee et al. (2018) report that approximately 22-40% of high school students have to repeat a course that they took during their ninth-grade year. Mac Iver et al. (2018) continues by describing the unfortunate cycle to unsuccessful course attempts for ninth-grade students:

Even if students were able to recover from multiple failures in ninth grade and graduate from high school, the damage to their high school GPAs due to those failures often had detrimental effects on their ability to enroll in four-year colleges. (p. 38)

When a student fails a class, there are short-term and long-term ramifications. In the short-term the student must retake the class, but in the long-term the student is now more susceptible to dropping out of high school (Neild, 2009). Mac Iver et al. (2015) placed significant importance on course failures during the ninth-grade school year. If a ninth-grade student were to fail simply one core course (Math, Science, History or English), then that student has decreased the probability of them graduating on time by 20 percent. Continuing, if a ninth-grade student were to fail two core classes during the ninth-grade school year, then they have dropped their chances of graduating on time by 50 percent (Mac Iver et al., 2015).

According to Johnson et al. (2014), “more students fail the ninth grade than any other grade level” (p. 186). Additionally, the overall academics at the high school level play a significant role in the successfulness of a ninth-grade student transitioning into high school. When a student has struggled academically in middle school they are often underprepared for

high school academics. Neild (2009) found that ninth-grade students with poor math and reading skills were completely overwhelmed by the academic demands of high school.

Felmlee et al. (2018) found that when ninth-grade students transition into the high school, the rigor of academics increases dramatically. Furthermore, due to the rigor of high school course work, there are many course failures for incoming ninth-graders. For incoming ninth-grade students who are behind academically, or were not previously sufficiently challenged academically, their ninth-grade year is often a struggle. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) observed that incoming ninth-grade students with poor math and reading skills were more overwhelmed by the stronger academic threshold of the high school, and many were unable to overcome such a deficit leading to future drop-outs.

Failing a course at the secondary level can be such a traumatic event for some students. Correspondingly, failing a class may be the beginning of the end for some students. According to Fulk (2003):

Ninth-grade is clearly a make or break year in terms of secondary school success or failure. Students who fail their classes are likely to: (a) begin questioning their ability to make graduation requirements, (b) lose interest in school, and (c) consequently drop out of high school. (p.9)

Attendance Issues

Unfortunately, course failures and attendance issues regrettably have a strong correlation at the ninth-grade level. Mac Iver et al. (2015) found that a student's attendance is the most significant requirement to circumvent course failures. Regrettably, Felmlee et al. (2018) found that in general, ninth-grade students record the lowest GPA, miss the most classes, and have the largest number of course failures compared to any other secondary grade level. Inconveniently,

attendance issues are very common for ninth-grade students as they transition into the high school. Newman et al. (2000) found that incoming ninth-grade students often suffer from poor attendance as they are transitioning into their high school.

Lamentably, if a ninth-grade student is absent too often from class, the absences will then correlate with poor performance scholastically within the classroom. Corsello et al. (2015) states that many ninth-grade students have a reported increase in absences which then has a negative effect on academic performance. To make things worse, as the school year continues, there are many times that a ninth-grade students' attendance worsens throughout the school year. Roybal et al. (2014) report that ninth-grade students start the school year with a good attendance percentage, but after several months the percentage drops. Considering the correlation between attendance and academics; schools, parents and students should never lose emphasis on the student attendance at school.

Missing too much class and or having poor attendance has some significant long-term effects for all ninth-grade students. Mac Iver et al. (2015) found that numerous ninth-grade cohort studies confirm the correlation and probability of student attendance relating to on time graduation and college enrollment four years later.

Freshmen Bulge

The term "freshmen bulge" is used to describe the swelling class sizes of ninth-grade classes due to the course failures or course repeating of ninth-grade classes. According to Johnson et al. (2014) there has been a national increase in students enrolled in the ninth-grade over the last thirty years. Therefore, there has been a large number of ninth-grade students retained causing a phenomenon referred to as the freshmen-bulge (Johnson et al., 2014). When a ninth-grade student has to repeat the same course due to previous failures, this scenario becomes

a holding pattern for both the student and the high school. Unfortunately, this cycle is all too familiar with ninth-grade students (Patterson et al., 2007). Certain courses are required by local and state graduation requirements, thus forcing a student to pass the course before moving to the next course requirement.

DeLamar and Brown (2016) described the “freshman bulge” as a stopping point for many ninth-grade students who simply cannot pass the required classes to graduate. Continuing, that the “freshman bulge” is often the beginning of the end for these described ninth-grade students. Neild et al. (2008) estimate that one out of three ninth-grade students in Philadelphia Public Schools fail too many courses to become tenth-grade students the following year. Instead, the students must repeat the same course that they have previously failed. Furthermore, when a ninth-grade student has to repeat a previously failed course, that student is much more susceptible to eventually dropping out of high school all together (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that since ninth-graders, as a whole, fail more classes than any grade levels causing their student enrollment numbers to always be larger than other grade levels. Therefore, causing a “freshmen bulge” in student enrollment numbers and class sizes (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Discipline Issues

Ninth-grade students have long had the reputation of causing the majority of discipline issues at the high school. Furthermore, Flannery et al. (2020) reports that ninth-grade students have more discipline issues than any other grade level within the high school. Newman et al. (2000) found that ninth-grade students’ discipline issues are many times associated with transitioning into high school. Students are used to being in self-contained classes, but at the high

school, students have to walk the hallways and transition from classroom to classroom (Newman et al., 2000).

Although high schools are usually well versed in battling student discipline issues, there are many times that students have underlying issues that unfortunately result in behavioral troubles at school. Many times, when discipline issues do occur with a ninth-grade student, it is an outcry for help, as the student is truly struggling emotionally (Newman et al., 2000).

High School Dropouts

Although graduation rates have recently improved across the nation, there are still too many students that do not successfully complete high school (Flannery et al., 2020). It has been estimated that 1.3 million students annually, throughout the country, choose to drop out of high school each year (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). Continuing, it is further estimated that these 1.3 million student drop outs could potentially lose up a combined \$355 billion over the course of their lifetimes, utilize more government assistance and spend more time in and out of prison compared to their counterparts who stayed in school and graduated on time (Bornsheuer et al., 2011).

The long-term effect of a student dropping out of school is substantial as well. Fulk (2003) discovered that students who do not complete high school have twice the unemployment rates compared to high school graduates. Furthermore, non-high school graduates will have reduced opportunities going forward (Fulk, 2003). Hickman et al. (2017) found that high school dropouts were less likely to find a job, earn a decent living wage, more likely to live in poverty, suffer from adverse health issues, rely on public assistance, engage in crime, and generate other unnecessary social costs supported by taxpayers (Hickman et al., 2017). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found similar results stating that “high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed,

on public assistance, in prison, or enrolled in adult education and training, thereby putting significant strain on funds earmarked for domestic programs” (p. 178).

Unfortunately, staying in high school is simply hard for some students and not an easy task. According to Knestling (2008), “beyond the academic demands of homework and tests, it takes all of the energy for some students to just go to school each morning” (p. 3). Regrettably, ninth-grade students represent more student drop outs compared to any other class in the high school. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) found that “ninth-graders, more than any other age group, are at an increased risk for high school drop outs” (p. 10). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) found that ninth-graders are dropping out of high school at an alarming rate throughout the United States educational system.

Patterson et al. (2007) found that when a student becomes a high school dropout, that student is much more prone to a life of poverty, crime, unemployment and will earn less money over the course of their lifespan. Continuing, high school dropouts are much more likely to find themselves in prison, needing government assistance to live and will die at a younger average age. Neild et al. (2008) reported that adults without a high school diploma, have severe economic and occupational disadvantages going forward. Hickman et al. (2017) found that high school dropouts face an extremely bleak economic and social outlook compared to age similar high school graduates.

For many high school students their ninth-grade year is often the first time that they have severe academic difficulty unlike any previous years before. Reents (2002) claimed that ninth-graders have the largest failure rate and the highest percentage of dropping out compared to other classes within the high school. Unfortunately, this unprecedented academic difficulty leads students to dropping out of high school and many times an unsuccessful ninth-grade year often

takes the blame (Neild et al., 2008). Newman et. al (2000), reported that when a student makes the decision to drop out of high school, it can many times be linked back to the D's and F's that were recorded back when the student was a ninth-grader. Further evidence indicates that students who fall behind academically during their freshmen year have a very low chance of completing their high school diploma. A recent study and analysis of the progression of students through their high school career suggests that almost one-third of high school students who actually dropout of high school were never even promoted past the ninth grade (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). Thus, proving why, the ninth-grade year is so crucial for high school students.

Reents (2002) identified that ninth-grade is the most critical point in a student's high school career to intervene and prevent students from dropping out of school. Neild et al. (2008) found that 20% of all young adults who dropped out of school actually dropped out of school prior to their tenth-grade school year. Therefore, this large population of dropouts hit a roadblock during their ninth-grade school year and were never able to overcome the obstacles to become successful in high school. Felmeo et al. (2018) reported that lower grades in the early portion of high school (ninth-grade year) have a direct correlation with the same students dropping out of high school all together.

Self-Determination Theory

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) found that because Self-Determination Theory (SDT) studies the basic psychosocial needs of independence, connection and belongingness, it is a great framework to study the overall school community and school culture. Emery et al. (2017) found that:

Self-Determination Theory is a theory of motivation, personality, and development that posits three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as

being fulfilled via the social context and as essential for optimal growth and functioning for all humans throughout the life span. (p. 201)

SDT states that all humans must have these three needs satisfied for optimal performance and function (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Moreover, Ortundo and Garn (2020) stated that “SDT proponents have posited that self-determined motivation is fostered by a social environment that supports a person’s basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness” (p. 576). Deci and Ryan (2012) stated that:

Social-contextual factors that support satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs will promote autonomous functioning, persistence, effective performance and wellness; whereas social-contextual factors that thwart satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs will result in diminished autonomy, poorer performance, less persistence and greater ill-being (p. 3).

Competence refers to one’s basic need to feel effective within their life and social contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Rutten et al. (2015) found that competence involves one’s feelings of achievement and being skilled. Competence can also be described as someone being able to effectively engage within their environment (Ortundo & Garn, 2020). Bartholomew et al. (2011) stated that, “the need for competence concerns the degree to which individuals feel effective in their ongoing interactions with the social environment and experience opportunities in which to express their capabilities” (p. 1459). Therefore, competence describes an individual’s ability to master and become effective within one’s environment.

Relatedness concerns one’s feelings of being socially connected within the social context and social setting (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Jungert et al. (2016) described relatedness as a wish to have caring bonds with others, the desire to feel connected to others, and to love and be cared

for. Relatedness can also be compared to a sense of belongingness (Rutten et al., 2015). Ortundo and Garn (2020) report that relatedness places an emphasis on meaningful and fulfilling relationships. Finally, Bartholomew et al. (2011) compared relatedness as to when individuals feel a secure sense of belongingness and connectedness to others within their social environment. According to Reeve (2012), “students experience relatedness need satisfaction to the extent to which they relate to others in an authentic, caring and reciprocal way” (p. 154).

Autonomy can be described as the need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy and free choice should enhance one’s self-determined extrinsic motivation and also allow one to experience a greater sense of purpose and direction in activities (Vallerand et al., 1995; Van Petegem et al., 2015). Furthermore, autonomy is often related to one possessing job satisfaction (Ball et al., 2019).

Although all three needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important and have received empirical attention, autonomy appears to have the most value. Emery et al. (2017) found that, “when an individual’s need for autonomy is being supported, the needs of competence and relatedness are being fulfilled as well” (p. 201). Also, when an individual believes that their autonomy is satisfied and complete, they are more likely to portray actions of fulfillment in the areas of competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2013). Therefore, many scholars place a larger emphasis on autonomy compared to competence and relatedness. When teachers have autonomy at work, it positively relates back to job satisfaction at their school (Ball et al., 2019)

Autonomy support is a term that describes an environment that allows for individuals to successfully experience a sense of personal autonomy (Bartholomew et al., 2011). Deci and Ryan (2012) described autonomy supports as providing the conditions that support an

individual's initiative, volition and integrity. Essentially, autonomy support facilitates the psychological need of autonomy. Furthermore, researchers often place a larger emphasis on autonomy support, as autonomy support can potentially support competence and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2012) found that "supporting autonomy typically helps others get all their basic psychological needs satisfied" (p. 3). Strandage et al., (2006) suggest that autonomy supportive environments facilitate self-determined motivation, healthy development and optimal psychological functioning.

SDT describes different types of motivational orientation ranging from the highest motivational category of autonomous down to the lowest level of motivation being amotivation. Autonomous motivation reflects one's core values or interests and is considered to be much more persistent than other forms of motivation (Jungert et al., 2016). Rutten et al. (2015) found that autonomously motivated behaviors are performed out of personal enjoyment and personal values. Additionally, Otundo and Garn (2020) reported that, "autonomous motivation does not directly emerge from social factors, but instead is influenced by perceived needs satisfaction of autonomy, competence and relatedness" (p. 577).

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are performed out of one's interest and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2018). A student who participates in basketball for enjoyment, pleasure, fun and or love of the game is demonstrating intrinsic motivation (Standage et al., 2006). Vansteenkiste et al. (2009) stated that "intrinsic motivation represents the most optimal type of motivation, because it is fully autonomous or self-determined" (p. 672). Individuals who are intrinsically motivated for a certain task, such as a teacher who enjoys teaching within a certain method, typically display more interest and confidence compared to others who might be pressured for action (Lee & Blanchard, 2019).

Extrinsically motivated behaviors are guided towards an individual receiving a reward or desired outcome, social approval and or avoiding punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Vallerand et al. (1995) report that extrinsically motivated behaviors are not performed to gain the experience, but instead are acted out to avoid a consequence once the activity is complete. Standage et al. (2006) report that there are several levels of extrinsic motivation, from low to high levels, external regulation (lowest level of extrinsic motivation), introjected regulation, identified regulation and integrated regulation (highest level of extrinsic motivation).

Amotivation is often correlated with a complete lack of motivation, incompetence, a lack of value for a task, previous negative experiences and no reason for engagement (Ortundo & Garn, 2020). Deci and Ryan (2000) found amotivation as people who lack the intention to behave, lack motivation, lack a sense of efficacy and do not have respect for a desired outcome. Vallerand et al. (1995) reported that, “amotivated behaviors are neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated: they are nonmotivated and participation will eventually cease” (p. 223). Because amotivation has no purpose or expectations of rewards, it is the lowest possible form of motivation. Finally, Standage et al. (2006) suggested that amotivation actually represents an absence of motivation, a lack of action altogether, and there are no purposeful intentions made, as people simply act passively.

SDT has also proven to provide guidance regarding teachers and professional educators. According to Reeve (2012), SDT “assumes that all students, no matter their age, gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, or cultural background, possess inherent growth tendencies that provide a motivational foundation for their high-quality classroom engagement and positive school functioning” (p. 152). Through the lens of SDT, Ball et al. (2019) reported that “when teachers work in supportive environments that include the proper curriculum elements, they are

more likely to feel confident and motivated to implement effective courses” (p. 1310). Additionally, when teachers and principals create a school environment satisfying the students’ need for autonomy, competence and relatedness, it will then lead to higher levels of student motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2009). Educators should work towards increasing their autonomy supportive environment, as it will in turn enhance student motivation within their school (Reeve, 2012). Otundo and Garn (2020) discovered that students’ autonomous motivation correlates to when and if students have the opportunity to exercise their own volition are allowed to participate in class activities and receive positive feedback among other levels of relatedness. Therefore, educators and school leaders should always seek to provide a social environment that promotes and allows for students’ personal autonomy. Jang et al. (2010) found the following:

When autonomy-supportive teachers nurture students’ inner motivational resources, they create opportunities for students to take the initiative during learning activities by building instruction around students’ interest, preferences, personal goals, choice making, and sense of challenge and curiosity, rather than relying on external sources of motivation such as incentives, consequences, directives and deadlines. (p. 589)

Summary

In conclusion, the ninth-grade school year is a very critical one for high school students, as the ninth-grade year could ultimately have a significant impact on the remainder of their high school careers (Corsello et al., 2015). Many times, students will transition out of a middle school, or junior high school setting, and into a larger high school causing somewhat of a culture shock to the students (Felmlee et al., 2018). Furthermore, many incoming ninth-grade students have historically had a problem passing enough classes to become sophomores the following school

year. These failed courses cause the ninth-grade students to repeat the ninth-grade course again, which then creates a “freshman bulge” within the high school (DeLamar & Brown, 2016).

Therefore, school districts and high school administrators are constantly in search of new ideas to ensure the ninth-grade school year is successful. Some schools use the Freshmen Academy approach (Roybal et al., 2014) while other schools focus on Smaller Learning Communities to assist incoming ninth-grade students (Delmar & Brown, 2016). Compounding the difficulty of the ninth-grade year is the gradual release of responsibility of the parents towards their child (Mac Iver et al., 2018). Knowing the complexity of these issues, only amplifies the importance of the ninth-grade school year for all high school students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted using the particularistic, qualitative case study method to better gain an understanding of a transitional program implemented by a large high school located in the Midwest (Merriam, 1998). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) stated that case studies allow for a higher and more complex understanding of a specific subject and/or group. Moreover, this case study was viewed through social constructivism, relying heavily on the participant interviews to describe their viewpoints of how this transition program meets student needs (Creswell, 2014). When viewing this particularistic case study through the lens of constructivism, it allowed for a more holistic description and analysis of the ninth-grade transitional course being offered. (Yazan, 2015).

This qualitative case study was designed to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transitional course that began during the fall of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school. The high school in which this study was conducted, referred to as “Midwestern High” (a pseudonym) has traditionally struggled with their incoming ninth-grade students as they transition up from middle school;

however, since the implementation of this course, student promotion to the tenth-grade has improved. Deci and Ryan's (1985) "SDT" was utilized as the theoretical framework to provide a lens through which the data was analyzed. This theory has utility for explaining the influence of the transition course on ninth-grade student success because it provides a framework to understand persistence in goal pursuit when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

This particular case study was designed to gain a better understanding of teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transition course, that began during the fall of 2019, meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school.

Statement of the Problem

Iachini et al. (2016) stated that the ninth-grade year is a "make or break" school year for high school students regarding their high school educational career. Additionally, Roybal et al. (2014) found that the ninth-grade transition is extremely difficult for students not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. Therefore, many school districts continue to struggle to find solutions for the ninth-grade transitional year, and as a result, many school districts have implemented alternative educational methods for their ninth-grade students (Neil et al., 2008).

One of the methods that is frequently implemented is a smaller learning community (SLC) which provides a school-within-a-school atmosphere. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) discovered that "SLC and transitional courses are developmentally responsive organizational structures that foster personalized learning environments where school personnel can promote both the academic and social components of a caring community necessary for success in high school and beyond" (p. 320). Additionally, Patterson et al. (2007) found that SLC's are an

effective way to assist students with the ninth-grade transition. Considering the potential benefits that a successful SLC can offer a high school and its students, many high school administrators are exploring several of the SLC concepts that they could implement within their own high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). However, little is known regarding if a specifically required SLC, for all incoming ninth-grade students, embedded within the school day can have an overall positive effect on students as they transition from the middle school to the high school.

Midwestern High (a pseudonym) is a large high school located in the Midwest that has implemented an SLC model by requiring all ninth-grade students to take a ninth-grade transitional course. The transitional course is a mandatory, semester long course that all incoming ninth-grade students are required to take in the fall semester of their ninth-grade academic year. Additionally, this transitional course was designed to promote SLC concepts within their high school and ultimately benefit their incoming ninth-grade students (District Website, n.d.). Although this mandatory transitional course was fully implemented in the fall of 2019, there is little known regarding how this course influences student transition into their ninth-grade year at high school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transitional course that began during the fall of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school. The high school in which this study will be conducted, referred to as “Midwestern High” (a pseudonym) has traditionally struggled with their incoming ninth-grade students as they transition into high school from middle school; however, since the implementation of this course, student promotion to the tenth-grade has improved. Deci and Ryan’s (1985) “SDT” was utilized as the theoretical framework to

provide a lens through which the data was analyzed. This theory has utility for explaining the influence of the transition course on ninth-grade student success because it provides a framework to understand persistence in goal pursuit when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Research Questions

Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. Because this transitional program was introduced in fall of 2019, ninth-grade student transition into high school has shown evidence of improvement through enhanced promotion rates of ninth-grade students into the tenth-grade. However, because the transition course is in its infancy, little is known regarding how this transitional course actually supports student success. Therefore, the following research questions will guide this study.

Overarching Question:

What are teacher and administrator perceptions regarding how this transitional course supports the psychological needs of students as they transition from middle to high school?

Sub-Questions:

1. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for competence?
2. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for autonomy?
3. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for relatedness?
4. How does Self-Determination Theory explain these findings?
5. What other findings emerge that Self-Determination Theory does not explain?

Researcher's Role

Researcher Bias

I would consider myself very well rounded in terms of working with ninth-grade students. I actually student-taught ninth-grade Algebra I students during my student teaching experience the final semester before graduating from college. Then, my first teaching position was located within a ninth-grade academy, as part of a large suburban school district. Again, I taught Algebra I to ninth-grade students. It was then and there that I became fully aware of the challenges that ninth-grade students endure. Unfortunately, by the end of my third year of teaching Algebra I, I could almost predict within the first two weeks who was not going to pass the class by the end of the semester. Having taught the ninth-grade age group for those three years, it allowed me insight to the challenges that ninth-grade students typically struggle with on a daily basis.

Following, I continued teaching math in another large high school, while the district decided to make the change from a tenth - twelfth-grade high school into a ninth - twelfth-grade high school. Opportunely, I was able to experience that transition as our traditional high school became a ninth - twelfth grade high school for the first time in school history. In hindsight, this was a very volatile evolution that neither the staff, nor the students, were truly prepared for. It was during this timeframe where I can look back and identify many errors that took place during this transition of adding the entire ninth-grade class to an existing high school.

After teaching math to ninth and tenth graders for more than ten years, I then became the high school principal for four years in the same building in which I had previously taught. During this time, I completely changed strategies and overhauled our approach to how we

service and educate our incoming ninth-grade students. First of all, we stopped treating ninth-grade students the same as the upperclassmen within the building. Ninth-graders have their own designated lunch period exclusively for their grade level. We hosted multiple transitional events for them during the school year and summertime as they transitioned out of middle school and into our high school. I then designated two guidance counselors and one principal specifically to monitor and mentor the ninth-grade students' academics and discipline. Lastly, during my tenure as building principal, I truly believe that we positively shifted our school culture to be more accepting and supportive for the incoming ninth-grade students.

Currently, I am the assistant superintendent of secondary education, and a portion of my oversight includes the second high school described where I previously taught and was the building principal for four years. Presently, we continue to struggle with ninth-grade students transitioning from our three middle schools into our high school every school year. Furthermore, and unfortunately, I believe that our high school culture has yet to fully embrace the ninth-grade students in our building. This negative stigma is one that I am not proud of, and I hope that my study of this large high school in the Midwest will, in turn, include findings that can be transferred to similar context and that will positively change our school culture and other high schools across the nation.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative case study design to gain a better understanding of how a ninth-grade transitional program implemented at Midwestern High meets student psychological needs. Furthermore, this case study followed Merriam's particularistic case study model, as this case study was a holistic analysis of the ninth-grade transitional course (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) defines a particularistic case study as one that studies a particular event,

program, situation and or phenomenon. This ninth-grade transitional course would be classified as a particular program seeking to improve the current struggles of students entering the ninth-grade. Furthermore, Merriam (1998) states that the particularistic case study is appropriate for understanding how to address practical problems, and Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) verify that the transition from the middle school setting into the high school atmosphere is often a practical problem for many students.

Merriam (1998) stated that “the process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic” (p. 155). Additionally, Creswell (2014) stated that participant interviews, data collection and data analysis should “proceed hand-in-hand with other parts of developing the qualitative study” (p. 195). Continuing, Merriam (1998) instructed all qualitative researchers to constantly analyze data during all phases of the research process. Therefore, this qualitative case study was a very fluid process with data analysis addressed early and often during participant interviews.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated that information and findings should be first open coded. Following the step of open coding, axial coding and selective coding was utilized to identify categories that emerged. Merriam (1998) defined open coding as identifying and tagging any information that might be relative to this case study. The next phase of coding, axial coding, is defined as the process of relating categories, refining the research process and starting to categorize themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Charmaz (2014) defined axial coding as the process of grouping the open codes sections and thus starting to provide the researcher a data framework. This data framework was utilized to identify categories that emerged. The step of selective coding allowed data to be more specifically categorized (Charmaz, 2014). During the selective coding process, specific themes began to emerge from the research (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015). Because the research questions were developed utilizing Self-Determination Theory, selective coding allowed me to align categories with the factors of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Finally, once the specific themes emerged from data analysis, the themes were then used to answer the research questions.

Population

The population of this study is a large high school located in Oklahoma referred to as Midwestern High. Currently, Midwestern High is the 20th largest high school in the state of Oklahoma with a current enrollment total of 1,436 students. Additionally, the city in which Midwestern High is located currently has a population of 23,660 citizens. This city and this school district have only one high school within their borders. Furthermore, the city described is somewhat of an isolated town and is not considered a suburb of any larger towns. Much like many other areas within the state, the town's local economy is very much driven by the oil and gas industry.

The school district and high school in which this case study takes place have a very diverse student population. The State Department of Education (n.d.) reported that students within this high school are 65% Caucasian, 15% Native American, 8% Hispanic, 7% two or more races, 4% African American and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Additionally, roughly 55% of the student body population is classified as economically disadvantaged. Also, only 3% of the student body are classified as English Learners. Also, roughly 17% of the Midwestern student body receive IDEA services varied from Individualized Educational Plans for educational modifications and 504 for physical adjustments. Finally, 99% of the student body have stable living conditions whereas only 1% of the study body are classified as homeless (State Department of Education, n.d.).

Midwestern High has a long, proud history within the town and community. Midwestern High has been educating and graduating students for over 100 years. Midwestern High contains grade levels 9-12, and has a solid working relationship with a local community college and a local career tech center. More specifically, Midwestern High currently has an overall current rating of a “D” letter grade measured by the State Department of Education (n.d.). Furthermore, Midwestern High has scored a “B” in the sub area of Graduation Rate, a “C” in the sub area of Postsecondary Opportunities, “D’s” in the sub areas of Academic Achievement, English Language Proficiency Progress and finally an “F” in the sub area of Chronic Absenteeism (Oklahoma State Department of Education, n.d.).

Data Sources

Interviews

Merriam (1998) stated that interviews are one of the most valuable ways to receive true, authentic data. Data sources consisted of interviews, document analysis, observations taken during the interview process and formal observations of the actual ninth-grade transitional course with ninth-grade students in classroom attendance and a teacher presenting a lesson. Purposeful criterion sampling was utilized to identify certified staff members that have a direct relationship with or direct oversight of the transitional program including teachers, counselors, high school administration and central office administration. Additionally, all participants within the study are considered fully certified and currently hold a valid teaching license for the state department of education of the state within the study.

Eight interviews with the Midwestern High staff members were conducted by me personally. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and Midwestern’s leaderships’ request, all interviews were conducted through Zoom. All interviews were recorded, with both audio and visual effects,

on the computer through the Zoom application. As a backup, all recordings were also recorded on an audio recorder. Both sources of recording were stored and saved on a secure password protected computer hard drive.

Furthermore, a written account of each interview was completed and saved as “field notes” after each interview (Merriam, 1998 p. 104). Field notes were taken during the course of the interviews. Each interview occurred within the employees’ work area at Midwestern High School, with the exception of one Midwestern counselor, as her interview was completed at a location away from campus. Following Merriam’s (1998) constant comparative method of analysis, all interview data were immediately transcribed after each interview. Finally, all field notes were reviewed multiple times throughout the process to review and identify themes within the research.

Documents

Merriam (1998) stated that “documents are, in fact, a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator” (p. 112). Merriam (1998) stated that relevant and authentic documentation is key, as it must correlate back to the case study. Documents for this case study that were collected include teachers’ lesson plans, high school pacing guides, high school registration guides, state department of education website information, and other pertinent documents that provided insight regarding the transitional course. During the research process, I discovered information easily accessible through the district website and the state department of education’s website. I found this resource extremely beneficial for not only myself as the researcher, but it also appeared to be a helpful resource to all potential Midwestern High School students, parents and staff members.

Other documents were collected during my visits and observations while at Midwestern High School. Registration guides, lesson plans and curriculum pacing guides were some of the documents that were shared by the interviewed staff members. Additional documents were also shared to me during email correspondence with the interview participants before and prior to all interviews and observations. All documents were then coded and analyzed to assist in identifying developing categories and themes that emerged within the study.

Observations

Merriam (1998) stated that observations are effective research tools when they have a formulated purpose, are deliberately planned, systematically recorded, and are reliable and authentic. Additionally, Merriam (1985) claimed that observations, along with interview and document analysis, are one of the three major essential ways of gathering data. Although and most importantly, Merriam (1985) stated that data gathered from observations, documents and interviews can be used to form triangulation and enhance the validity of the case study.

Formal observations were conducted as part of the data collection process of this case study. Observations were completed during the traditional school day while the ninth-grade transitional course was being conducted. More specifically, these observations were completed during the early fall of 2021 while the incoming ninth-grade students are transitioning into high school. The observations were completed within the first quarter of the school year as ninth-graders were still making the initial transition into Midwestern High School. Observations were completed in the classrooms of the teachers who had also participated in interviews. Because these observations were completed with actual students in the classroom, very early within the semester, this experience allowed me to gain a better understanding of the ninth-grade transitional course and have a more holistic view of the course overall.

Merriam (1998) stated that “observations provide a firsthand account of the situation under study, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 111). Therefore, observations for this case study were completed during the ninth-grade transitional course and within the actual classroom setting. Furthermore, these observations were formally completed at Midwestern High School with a classroom teacher and students actually attending the ninth-grade transitional course in a traditional classroom setting.

These observations provided a better understanding of how the ninth-grade transitional course meets the students’ needs within the SDT principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I positioned myself in a removed area of the classroom while being able to view and hear both the students and the classroom teacher. This optimal positioning within the classroom allowed me to observe firsthand the functioning of the transitional course to gain perspective that may not have been included in the interview process (Merriam, 1998).

Sampling

Purposeful criterion sampling was implemented during this case study. Merriam (1998) stated “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight, and therefore, must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.61). The data were collected during the study through qualitative interviews, document analysis and observations. A list of the potential participants who met sampling criteria was provided to me by the superintendent of the school district. I then emailed, called and texted all of the potential participants to set up a specific interview date and time. There were a total of eight interview participants during the study including the following: three classroom teachers who actually teach the ninth-grade transitional course at Midwestern High, two high

school counselors who monitor the ninth-grade students taking the course at Midwestern High, two high school principals (the head principal and an assistant principal) who have direct oversight of the students and teachers involved in the transitional course at Midwestern High and one school district superintendent who directly supervises the entire school district including Midwestern High. I interviewed seven of the participants at their specific work area during a time that was convenient for each participant during their traditional work day. Although, Mrs. Newman was actually interviewed after school hours at an offsite location.

All participants met the following criteria:

- All participants were certified and held a valid teaching license by the state department of education within the state of the study.
- Teacher participants were currently teaching the transitional course within the current school year.
- Counselor participants had direct oversight of the ninth-grade students taking the transitional course.
- Principal and assistant principal participants had direct oversight of the ninth-grade students taking the class, and/or they administratively observed the teachers teaching the transitional course.
- School district superintendent directly supervised the high school.

The number of participants did not exceed the total number of eight. Moreover, the wide variety of participants provided a broad perspective regarding the many aspects of the transitional program. Merriam (1998), states that the selection criteria of choosing and interviewing the correct people is essential for a successful case study. Considering that the sample population is

directly involved in some aspect of the transitional program, all areas of the program were represented.

Data Collection

All data were collected during the late summer and early fall semester of 2021. The timing of this data collection was very important as Midwestern High started the 2021-2022 school year. The ninth-grade transitional course is only offered in the fall semester; therefore, all data collection was completed during the fall semester. Upon agreement with each interview participant, all participants formally and eagerly agreed to fully engage with this case study. Interviews were then held at the participant's work setting and recorded through Zoom. Although, Mrs. Newman's interview had to be conducted after school hours and at an offsite location.

Considering that the high school that I was studying is a significant distance from where I currently reside, I was very fortunate to schedule multiple observations within a one-day timeframe. Interviews were also scheduled for a 60-90-minute timeframe, which allowed each interview an additional time allotment if necessary. Scheduling interviews during the traditional workday was not a problem for participants, and arrangements were made to meet during everyone's planning period or downtime. The only exception was Mrs. Newman, as I interviewed her after her workday ended.

Interviews

Merriam, (1998) stated that interviews are very important sources of data when conducting case studies. Moreover, I was able to interview each participant through a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam, 1998). All interviews were conducted in a collaborative environment and I felt that the participants were open and transparent with their answers and

responses to me. Following a semi-structured interview protocol, all questions were asked to all participants. However, flexibility was allowed for follow up questions or further clarification. Additionally, interview questions were designed to allow participants multiple opportunities to provide their perspectives regarding how the transition program meets student needs during their transition into high school. Since all interviews were completed through Zoom, I was able to audio/video record and save each interview onto my computer hard drive. Additionally, I also audio recorded each interview on a separate device and then downloaded each interview onto my computer hard drive.

Merriam (1998) stated that many investigators like to record notes even though the interview is being audio recorded. Therefore, during the interview, I took diligent, handwritten field notes of each interview to capture their responses (both verbal and nonverbal) and the overall setting and environment of the interview. Although each interview was recorded by two devices, the recorded notes were very useful when following up on previous statements from the interviewee.

Finally, in qualitative research, documents and artifacts provide a rich source of data that can be creatively mined by researchers (Merriam, 2015). All recorded audio files, documents and other information retrieved from each interview has been kept and stored in my personal office in my house. Documents include teacher lesson plans, curriculum pathways, graduation requirements and other significant information. Access to all physically recorded materials is locked and secured in my personal office within a locking filing cabinet. Additionally, all digital audio files were stored within my personal computer hard drive requiring my multiple character, case sensitive personal password.

Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher is the data collection instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, Merriam (2002) acknowledged that the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative interviews. Interview questions followed a semi-structured interview protocol. The list of interview questions is attached as Appendix A and Appendix B. Each set of interview questions was designed to enable open-ended responses and allowed each participant an opportunity to elaborate on his/her view of the transitional program. Additionally, after each question, there was an opportunity for the participant to expand on any of his or her previous answers and to clarify any responses. I also audio recorded and transcribed all questions and specific responses. Extensive field notes, or written accounts of all observations, were taken during all participant interviews as well (Merriam, 1998).

Data Storage and Security

All interview audio recordings and physical materials are securely stored in password protected computer in a locked file cabinet in a locked office. Documents collected from the participant interviews were first digitally scanned, then stored to my password-protected computer hard drive and then finally destroyed. Physical materials included field notes from all interviews, curriculum pathways of the transitional course, lesson plans and accreditation reporting information. Moreover, all digital information is stored on my personal laptop, further protected though my case-sensitive password.

Data Analysis Strategies

Merriam (1998) states the data should continually be analyzed, following a constant comparative method of analysis. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) stated the following:

Data analysis requires the researcher to be open to discovery, with data analysis and collection proceeding almost simultaneously. Interpretation of the data requires

sensitivity on the part of the researcher to the variety of multiple meanings in the setting and an awareness of their own positionality. (p. 222)

Data analysis can be described as the management, analysis and interpretation of the received information from the interview transcripts (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, Marshall and Rossman (2011) contend that data collection and analysis is a nonstop simultaneous process. Finally, Creswell and Creswell (2017) claimed that data analysis should be organized, categorized chronologically, repeatedly reviewed and continually coded.

Merriam (1985) emphasized that data collection and data analysis should be continual and simultaneous, following a constant comparative form of data analysis. Consequently, as the data analysis was occurring, I continued to collect data through interviews, observations and document analysis. Data analysis first included open coding, then axial coding to identify categories that emerged from the codes. Data analysis was a very diligent process where all information was heavily investigated to identify data into groups. Although, since all materials were stored digitally, it allowed for data to quickly be accessible. Lastly, groups of data were then merged and placed into themes. Finally, all additional data that was collected were analyzed to assess how this data aligned with emerging themes.

This data analysis process continued until saturation was reached and no new information was discovered. Merriam (1998) stated that data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data involving consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read, it is the process of making meaning” (p. 178). Specific steps in the data analysis process are described in the following sections.

Organize, Prepare, and Read Data

All physical and digital materials were organized, filed and systematically organized by participant name. I assigned each participant with a physical file folder for interview field notes and a digital folder to record and store all documentation from their interview. Additionally, the Zoom audio/video recording and hand-held recordings from their interview are stored with each participant's digital folder. Finally, all physical notes and documents were digitally scanned and stored inside each participant's digital folder located within my personal computer hard drive.

As mentioned previously, Merriam (1985) stated the importance of analyzing the data while it is being collected to help guide the researcher in further data analysis. According to Merriam (1998), data should not be kept and analyzed after the research is complete, as that is considered a missed research opportunity. By analyzing the data during the collection process, adjustments can be made during the process to test emerging concepts (Merriam, 1998). Data was first open coded, then axial coded and finally selective coding was utilized following Merriam's methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Specifically, I followed Merriam's guidance for coding the data by first open coding and then axial coding to identify categories. Finally, selective coding was utilized to identify themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Open coding occurred at the beginning of the data analysis process. Merriam (1998) defined open coding as identifying and tagging any information that might be relative to this case study. Next, I used the process of axial coding to begin to group data into categories. Following development of categories, themes began to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Next, selective coding was utilized to more specifically categorize the data and to identify themes that specifically aligned with the theoretical framework for this study (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used selective coding to identify themes within the data (Merriam,

1998). Next, specific themes emerged from the extensive research process. Lastly, I finally applied the theoretical framework (Self-Determination Theory) to explain the answers to the research questions. It should be mentioned, that the theoretical framework (Self-Determination Theory) was set aside during the data analysis process, but used as a lens to answer the research questions in Chapter VI.

Limitations

Within this specific case study, there are several potential limitations. The fact that the transitional program has only been in existence for two school years prohibits a long-term perspective regarding the influence of the program on student psychological needs. This program seems to influence student transitions from ninth-grade to tenth-grade; however, it has not been in existence long enough to know whether it has any influence on student graduation.

Additionally, because this is a qualitative study, and not a quantitative study, it does not include analysis of specific numerical data that could provide information regarding student success such as dropout rate, attendance percentages, number of suspensions and academic achievement.

However, it is likely that teacher and administrator perspectives will address these important success factors. Finally, since this case study is limited to one specific high school in a Midwestern state, the findings from this study are not transferable to other school districts or high schools with differing cultures and contexts.

An additional limitation is that the participants being interviewed could potentially have an inaccurate perception of the influence that the transitional course has had on students' transition. Although interviewing eight applicants is very appropriate for case study research (Merriam, 1998), the limited number of staff members involved in the transitional course could influence the findings of this study. Moreover, if participants were involved in the initial

planning of this course, their perceptions may be biased regarding the influence of this course on student transition. This limitation has been addressed by including a diverse set of participants with varied background knowledge of the transitional program.

Yazam, (2015) encouraged novice researchers to use Merriam's methodology because she suggests scripted and well-designed steps throughout the process. As a novice researcher, I carefully followed Merriam's methodology with fidelity. I am a very well-educated doctoral student, and my coursework has prepared me for this important study. I feel very confident in my qualitative case study research abilities, and my extensive background in secondary education will provide a platform for interpreting the findings for this study.

Trustworthiness

During the research process, I triangulated data from the interviews, observations and documents received. There was also the process of member checking throughout the research process as well, including formal and informal data verification by stakeholders. Additionally, I had constant assistance and references from my advisor during every step of the research process. Table 1 below offers an outline of the trustworthiness criteria that I implemented.

Table 1. Trustworthiness

Technique	Results	Examples
Prolonged engagement (Placeholder1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built trust • Rapport developed • Relationships built 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the field fall of 2021; established relationships follow-up communication via email and telephone
Persistent observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtained in-depth data • Direct observation • Used pertinent documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations of participants and school culture during data collection
Triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data verified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data was obtained via interviews, observations, documents, websites and emails
Peer assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impartial perspectives from colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal interviews then informal feedback and follow-up on interview questions
Purposeful criteria sampling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful criteria sampling was implemented to locate information-rich data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection of staff members in direct contact or oversight with the transitional program
Thick description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided data for transfer ability judgement • Provided a vicarious experience for the reader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive, relevant data
Access to audit trail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed auditor to determine trustworthiness of study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation of actual interview, artifacts, field notes, e-mail exchanges between participants are readily available of review

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transitional course that began during the fall of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school. Chapter III provided a

detailed explanation of the methodology that will be followed for this qualitative case study. Merriam (1998) has served as the guiding methodologist. Details have been provided in this chapter regarding the population and sample for this study and data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter IV will provide a presentation of the data, and Chapter V will discuss themes that emerged and answers the research questions. Chapter VI will then provide conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research. Next, Chapter VI will explain these findings through the lens of Self-Determination Theory and will include implications for research, theory and practice.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Chapter IV presents the data collected throughout the course of this case study. The information presented is from analysis of data including the viewpoint of the participants who volunteered to provide me with their professional and personal insight into the ninth-grade transitional program. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transition course that began during the fall of 2019 meets students' needs during the transition from middle to high school.

Midwestern High School

School Profile

Midwestern High School is considered to be a larger high school, as it currently is the 30th largest High School within the state with 1268 students in grades nine through twelve. For many previous years, Midwestern High School served grades tenth through twelfth, with the ninth-grade students attending a lower level middle school. However, in 1999 during a district level transition, the ninth-grade students were restructured and positioned to attend Midwestern High. There were multiple reasons for this grade level shift, but largely this move was made to open up more student capacity at the elementary levels for Pre-K students.

Midwestern High School has been an operational high school for well over 100 years and has a very traditional atmosphere. Although the foundations and location of Midwestern High School have not changed, there have been several upgrades to the three-story facility including: air-conditioning, lowered ceilings, energy efficient lighting, internet and Wi-Fi throughout the building, and many other utility upgrades. As I walked through the hallways and sat in the classrooms, I could easily see the recent upgrades (digital Smartboards for teachers) but also the more traditional, and aging, black boards that are only accessible with chalk. It is apparent that the flooring has had several renovations including tile replacement throughout parts of the school, and new concrete walkways have been installed throughout the exterior. The building still retains the traditional hardwood flooring within the classrooms.

Midwestern High School has one tributary middle school, an 8th grade center, that feeds students directly into Midwestern High. Prior to the 8th grade center, students attend a middle school for 6th and 7th grades. Before middle school, students attend one of the eight elementary schools for grades Pre-K – 5th.

District Profile

Midwestern High School is the only high school in what many would consider a fair-sized community located in the midwestern portion of the United States. The population of this town was reported at 25,387 people during the 2010 census. Additionally, the population of the town and the local economy is primarily influenced by a large petroleum refinery located close to the city limits. It is fair to say that when the oil and gas economy is doing well in this part of the world, the population of the town, the employment of the citizens and the overall local economy are also thriving.

Midwestern High School has a traditional seven period/day bell schedule that collaborates well with a local Junior College and a local Technical Center. Midwestern High School eleventh and twelfth grade students are able to take concurrent classes at the local Junior College and/or the classes at the Technical Center while still remaining high school students at Midwestern High School. The sharing of eleventh and twelfth grade students among the three educational institutions is extremely beneficial for not only the three school sites but, more importantly, the Midwestern High School students. Since Midwestern High School collaborates with these other educational entities, students do not have to choose exclusively one school site or the other. Instead, students have the ability to attend a portion of their school day at Midwestern High School and the other portion at a separate post-secondary school site.

Table 2, describes Midwestern High School's bell schedule. This bell schedule is a traditional seven-hour school day with lunch being served within the school day. The seven-hour school day is comparable to most secondary schools' bell schedules.

Table 2. Midwestern Bell Schedule

Midwestern High School

Monday – Friday Bell Schedule

Periods	Times	Other Details
1 st Hour	8:00 – 8:56 (56 minutes)	4-minute passing periods 6 minutes added to 1 st period for pledge and announcements
2 nd Hour	9:00 – 9:50 (50 minutes)	
3 rd Hour	9:54 – 10:44 (50 minutes)	
4 th Hour 1 st Lunch	Lunch 10:48 – 11:18 Class 11:18 – 12:28	Lunchroom sanitize from 11:18- 11:23 No Early Release
4 th Hour 2 nd Lunch	Class 10:48 – 11:23 Lunch 11:23 – 11:53 Class 11:53 – 12:28	Lunchroom sanitize from 11:53 - 11:58 No Early Release
4 th Hour 3 rd Lunch	Class 10:48 – 11:58 Lunch 11:58 – 12:28	
5 th Hour	12:32 – 1:22 (50 minutes)	
6 th Hour	1:26 – 2:16 (50 minutes)	
7 th Hour	2:20 – 3:10 (50 minutes)	Monday/Wednesday/Friday 11 th and 12 th grade release at 3:08 9 th and 10 th grade release at 3:10 Tuesday/Thursday 9 th and 10 th grade release at 3:08 11 th and 12 th grade release at 3:10

District Mission and District Philosophy

Although Midwestern High School’s district does not have an established mission or vision statement, they do have a set of seven principles that are posted throughout Midwestern High School and throughout the district’s website. To protect the anonymity of the subject school district, I have reordered the seven principles and redistributed the acronyms to ensure discretion and privacy.

- Teamwork – Team first/Unselfish

- Work Ethic – Great effort/Your very best every time
- Attitude – You can always control your attitude and effort/enthusiasm
- Improve – Get better every day as a player, student and person
- Compete – Expect to win/Don’t accept losing
- Leadership – Everyone can set a good example: administration, coaches, parents and athletes
- Discipline – On the field of play, in the classroom and in your personal life

Altogether, these seven principles of teamwork, work ethic, attitude, improve, leadership, compete and discipline make up the framework for the district’s mission and overall philosophy (District Website, n.d.).

Participant Profile Summary

Participants were selected through purposeful criterion sampling, and their direct involvement with the ninth-grade transitional program (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, all selected participants displayed a willingness to actively participate within this study at Midwestern High School. Due to recent staff turnover at Midwestern High School, I did have assistance from the Midwestern superintendent of schools while selecting the interview participants. Table 3 provides an overview of participant demographics.

Table 3. Participant Profile

Participant Profile Summary

Name	Position	Total years in education	Total years at Midwestern
Mrs. Apple	Superintendent	38	27
Mr. Butler	Principal	23	1
Mr. Crawford	Assistant Principal	7	3
Mrs. Newman	Counselor	17	3
Mrs. Matthews	Counselor	19	7

Mr. Patterson	Teacher	2	2
Mr. Washington	Teacher	3	2
Mr. Rodriquez	Teacher	1	1

Midwestern High School Staff

Leadership

Midwestern High School has a highly qualified and very experienced school superintendent (Mrs. Apple) who has many years of experience within her educational career and twenty-seven years working for the Midwestern school district. Midwestern High School does have some recent turnover at the building leadership level with a new building principal this year, Mr. Butler. Furthermore, this school year (2021-2022) will be the third principal in three years at Midwestern High School. Although Mr. Butler has had many years of experience in education, and as a building principal, in another school district, the 2021-2022 school year is his first year leading Midwestern High School. Midwestern High School is a much larger school than the school where he previously served as building principal. Therefore, even though there is steady and consistent leadership at the district leadership level, there has been some turnover in the building principal position.

In contrast, there appears to be some experience and tenure within one specific assistant principal at Midwestern High School. Mr. Crawford serves as an assistant principal at Midwestern High and he also serves as the administration over the ninth-grade transitional program. Additionally, Mr. Crawford leads a weekly PLC (professional learning community) with the three teachers of the ninth-grade transitional course. Considering the fact that the three teachers of the ninth-grade transitional course are very new to the education profession, Mr. Crawford's experience is extremely valuable within the PLC meetings. During the weekly PLC

meetings, the team meets to discuss current lesson plans, pacing guides for the school year and other pertinent information to the class. The year of this study is Mr. Crawford's third year at Midwestern High and his seventh year in the field of education.

District Superintendent: Mrs. Apple

Mrs. Apple is currently the superintendent of Midwestern Public Schools and is starting her fifth school year in the district superintendent position. Although this is her fifth year in the superintendent position, this will be her twenty-seventh year at Midwestern school district. Also, this is her thirty-eighth year in public school education. Mrs. Apple is very passionate about her school, her students, and the ninth-grade transitional course. Mrs. Apple wants every student to know the school fight song and to set a positive school culture throughout Midwestern school district. She believes strongly in the ninth-grade transitional course. She feels that the course "sets the stage" for a successful transition from middle school to high school. Mrs. Apple additionally believes that implementing the ICAP, Financial Literacy, and Habitudes into the course allows students to be successful for the remainder of their high school career (Interview, 2021).

Building Principal: Mr. Butler

Mr. Butler is the current principal at Midwestern High School and this is his first year at Midwestern High School. Although this is his first year at Midwestern High School, this is his twenty-third year in public education. He is very optimistic about the transitional course and believes that this course provides the opportunity for students to "invest in themselves." Additionally, Mr. Butler has worked with staff members to make this course applicable to the incoming ninth-grade students to meet their transitional needs (Interview, 2021).

Assistant Principal: Mr. Crawford

Mr. Crawford is starting his first year as an assistant principal at Midwestern High School and entering his seventh year in public education. Mr. Crawford is still learning about the details of the transitional course but is very optimistic about the course's benefits. Also, Mr. Crawford is coming to Midwestern from previously being a science teacher at a middle school setting. He feels that his time teaching eight-grade students will assist him when dealing with ninth-grade students. Also, he compares the ninth-grade transitional course to a freshmen orientation class in college. Whereas the freshmen orientation class is designed to introduce the college culture to the incoming college freshmen students, similarly, this transitional course offered exclusively in the fall semester addresses rules and expectations at Midwestern High School, communication skills, self-discipline and other academic strategies to ensure success in high school (Interview, 2021).

Counselors

Midwestern High School is staffed with an accomplished guidance department and counseling staff servicing all of their students. The four guidance counselors at Midwestern High School have divided the student case load. One counselor oversees the entire senior level, twelfth-grade, graduating class. Meanwhile, the other three counselors divide the ninth through eleventh-grade student caseload alphabetically by the students' last names. One counselor works with students with the last names of A-Go. A second counselor works with students with the last names of Gr-O. The third counselor works with students with the last names of P-Z. This practice is how the guidance department and counselors have divided the student body caseload for the past several years.

The two counselors that I interviewed have both been in education for multiple years and are both starting their third year at Midwestern High School as coworkers. Mrs. Matthews is

starting her nineteenth school year, while Mrs. Newman is starting her seventeenth school year. The one uniqueness that I discovered was that both Mrs. Matthews and Mrs. Newman are starting their third year at Midwestern High which is, coincidentally, the year that the ninth-grade transitional course was implemented. Therefore, Mrs. Matthews and Mrs. Newman have both been at Midwestern High since the inception of the transitional course to present.

Counselor: Mrs. Newman

Mrs. Newman has been at Midwestern High School for the past three years and is entering her seventeenth year in public education. Mrs. Newman is a counselor at Midwestern High and witnessed the ninth-grade transitional course from its beginning. She appreciates the course as it addresses many graduation requirements such as the ICAP component, Personal Financial Literacy and the CPR trainings. Mrs. Newman reports that the transitional course not only assists with the Midwestern eighth-grade students coming to high school, but also with the many local private school students that make the transition to Midwestern High School their ninth-grade year as well (Interview, 2021).

Counselor: Mrs. Matthews

Mrs. Matthews is a counselor at Midwestern High School and is entering her seventh year at Midwestern High School and her seventeenth year in public education. Consequently, Mrs. Matthews is the longest tenured employee at Midwestern High School that I interviewed. She has worked for multiple principals at Midwestern High during her tenure. She also appreciates the fact that the transitional course allows the students to meet the many graduation requirements expected of them. She is hopeful that the transitional course will be more successful this school year, as COVID-19 and employee turnover have restricted its success (Interview, 2021).

Teachers

The ninth-grade transitional course currently has three teachers who teach the course throughout the traditional school day. Mr. Patterson teaches the class six times a day with a planning period, while Mr. Washington and Mr. Rodriguez both teach the class five times a day, with a planning period and coaching responsibilities during the seventh hour of the school day. Combined these three teachers teach the course for sixteen section offerings during the fall/first semester. Furthermore, the transitional course is not offered in the spring/second semester for any students.

Weekly, the three teachers work collaboratively during a PLC that is tentatively scheduled for every Thursday. This common planning time allows the teachers to share best practices within their classrooms as they diligently work toward staying on the same pacing guide by teaching the same content within the same timeframe. In my findings, the three teachers truly valued this PLC time and association among the staff members. Moreover, even though the actual formal PLC is only scheduled once a week, there are many other times for the teachers to collaborate, as all three classrooms are located in close proximity along the southeast portion of the first floor. The close proximity of their classrooms allows for many casual conversations and informal collaborative opportunities among the teaching team before and after the regular school day hours. During my formal observations, I was able to observe small talk, hand signals (waving) and other nonverbal communication among the three teachers in the hallway during the students passing periods.

Considering the lack of teaching experience among the three teachers, and their lack of teaching experience at Midwestern High School overall, the weekly PLC is incredibly important. Among the three teachers, there are only six cumulative years of teaching experience and only

five years at Midwestern High School. Moreover, the recent years of experience include teaching through the Covid-19 pandemic of the 2020-2021 school year. Because there is such a lack of experience among the teachers, I discovered a significant lack of confidence within the transitional course. All three of the teacher participants are still trying to gain self-assurance within their professional careers as educators, with that goal being their top priority.

Teacher: Mr. Patterson

Mr. Patterson is a teacher at Midwestern High entering his second year in public school education with both years being at Midwestern High School. Mr. Patterson did teach the ninth-grade transitional course last year and is very optimistic about the transitional course this year. Mr. Patterson reports that COVID-19 and the school district's decision to go to remote/virtual learning truly restricted the productivity of the course. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, guest speakers and other activities were extremely limited during the 2020-2021 school year. However, he is very hopeful about recent changes to the curriculum content and grading practices within the transitional course. He feels that this course allows for the students to invest in their futures (Interview, 2021).

Teacher: Mr. Washington

Mr. Washington is a teacher and coach at Midwestern High School entering his third year in public school education and his second year at Midwestern High School. This is his second year of teaching the ninth-grade transitional course, and he reports that the "future is bright for the course." Mr. Washington is very positive about this 2021-2022 school year. He also compares the transitional course to a freshmen orientation class in college. He appreciates the freedom and flexibility within the class compared to a traditional core class. He also values the

PLC planning process among the three other teachers and Mr. Crawford, the assistant principal (Interview, 2021).

Teacher: Mr. Rodriguez

Lastly, Mr. Rodriguez is a teacher and coach at Midwestern High School entering his first year of teaching in public education and his first year at Midwestern High School. Mr. Rodriguez reports that the ninth-grade transitional course is extremely beneficial to the students, and he could not compare it to anything he has previously witnessed. He reported that the content being taught within the course provides life-long benefits to the students. Unlike some math or science classes in high school, this transitional course has lessons that will benefit the students for the remainder of their lives. Effective lessons thus far in the 2021-2022 school year are lessons over confidence, study skills, building relationships, and career and academic planning (Interview, 2021).

Ninth-Grade Transitional Course

I discovered early in the research process that participants compare the ninth-grade transitional course to a Freshmen Orientation course in college. Almost all participants made this reference and/or comparison at some point during the interviews. All parties interviewed indicated that they want the Midwestern High School students to have a successful start to their high school career. One of the major purposes and goals of this program is to ensure that every incoming ninth-grade student has a successful start to their high school career and to provide an opportunity for students to build upon the successes and knowledge gained in this transitional course.

Additionally, this class allows the opportunity for every student to not only pass the class, but hopefully, earn the grade of an A in the class. This ninth-grade transitional course is not

designed to have the rigor that an enriched core area class contains. Instead, this course is designed not to include excessive homework. It is purposefully designed to prepare students for future challenges within their personal lives. Long-term goal setting and overcoming adversity are examples of topics addressed within the course curriculum. Also, this course is designed to instill within the ninth-grade students the required academic/study skills to be successful when taking the more rigorous academic challenges that lie ahead of them within their high school careers.

Currently, Midwestern High School has sixteen sections of the ninth-grade transitional course offered throughout the seven period school day. Each section of the transitional course was designed and created to have twenty-five students in each class. The class size in each class period does vary, as some classes have below twenty-five students while other classes have class sizes closer to thirty. Both the high school administrators and guidance staff verify that the number of classes offered each school year is simply based on projected student pre-enrollment numbers. However, students request schedule changes throughout the course of a school year and students do move to different schools within a school year as well.

The course includes a semester-long pacing guide that addresses several key components. One day of each week, teachers present a lesson over ICAP (individual career and academic planning), Personal Financial Literacy, Habitudes, a word from the district's vision statement, and a recap day on the fifth day. Both ICAP and Personal Financial Literacy are a graduation prerequisite that the State Department of Education requires for each student prior to graduating high school. Although having students study the Habitudes and district vision once a week is not a State Department of Education requirement, both topics have been deemed essential by the school district's administration and the teachers of the course.

Furthermore, the ninth-grade transitional course is listed as a required elective regarding credit towards OKSDE graduation requirements. Because the course is only offered to incoming ninth-grade students in the fall semester, there are no prerequisites listed within Midwestern's registration guide. Also, within the registration guide the course description includes components of the ICAP, Personal Financial Literacy and CPR awareness. These components are listed as required through the Ace Graduation Requirements on the Midwestern High School website (District Website, n.d.)

Due to the fact that this transitional course is considered an elective credit towards graduation requirements, it does not count toward the Oklahoma's Promise. Oklahoma's Promise is often referred to as the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP) and was first established in 1992. The OHLAP is a program designed to assist high school students who currently reside within the state in pursuit of a college degree at a state funded college. Furthermore, the OHLAP only applies to public two-year or four-year universities that adhere to the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education guidelines, or it can apply to a portion of tuition at a private state college or approved public technology center. Other variables for students to qualify for OHLAP are the following: reside within the state, enroll during their 8-11th grade, household income of less than \$60,000.00 a year, a minimum 2.50 GPA, US citizenship and no substantial discipline problems.

This Midwestern High School ninth-grade transitional course has a traditional, (4.0 for an A , 3.0 for a B, 2.0 for a C, 1.0 for a D, 0.0 for an F) grade point average and is not a weighted grade point average. Meanwhile all Advance Placement (AP) courses have a 4.3 weighted grade point average. Next, all advanced, honors and Pre-Advanced Placement courses have a 4.25 weighted grade point average. Therefore, this transitional course cannot rise above or heighten a

student's grade point average above the 4.0 threshold. Because it is considered a traditional course on a student's high school transcript, a student can only record a 4.0 for an A in the class and nothing higher as opposed to a 4.3 for an A in an AP course or a 4.25 for an honors or advanced course. Lastly, there are no advanced or honors options for this ninth-grade traditional course.

Another interesting fact regarding the ninth-grade course is course scheduling within the school year. The transitional course is only offered during the fall semester and it backs up to an Oklahoma History class in the spring semester. Oklahoma History is a course that all students are required to take and successfully complete to meet state graduation requirements, but the ninth-grade transitional course is not a requirement. What makes this scheduling scenario quite interesting is that the ninth-grade students will actually have the same teacher for both classes. This type of scheduling offers stability for the incoming ninth-grade students, and it allows them to have a familiar teacher and classroom for both classes. Additionally, participants expressed that this is a very strategic and effective method that will ultimately benefit students and their needs as they transition into a new school.

ICAP

ICAP is an acronym that stands for an Individual Career and Academic Plan for students. Furthermore, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OKSDE) requires that all students must have a completed ICAP prior to graduating high school. The ICAP is often referenced as a process and should not be considered a task for students to complete. Instead, the state department's vision of the ideal student ICAP is that it connects career and/or college readiness for all students and essentially assists students with their post-graduation plans. Also, the state department of education would like for this process to be a navigational tool for all secondary

students grades six through twelve. By making all of these changes and implementations, the state department of education desires the ICAP to be a holistic and student-centered approach (Oklahoma State Department of Education website, n.d.).

Introducing the ICAP process within the ninth-grade transitional course is a very effective method by the Midwestern School district. Actually, designating one day a week for the duration of the first semester for all ninth-grade students to engage in the ICAP process displays great commitment from Midwestern High School and aligns effectively with the State Department of Education's approach for the ICAP process during the ninth-grade school year. The fall semester of 2021 is eighteen weeks long, and eighteen ICAP lessons will suffice as full implementation for most students.

Personal Financial Literacy

Personal Financial Literacy is another large portion of the ninth-grade transition that administration, and staff members feel is important for high school students. Additionally, Personal Financial Literacy is another required graduation component that all students must complete before graduating high school, as required by the OKSDE (Oklahoma State Department of Education website, n.d.). Similar to the previously mentioned ICAP, Personal Financial Literacy is designed for all secondary students, grades seventh through twelfth, and students are to required to demonstrate satisfactory knowledge in the designated fourteen component areas.

Much like the ICAP, the transitional course takes one day of each school week to address a specific component of Personal Financial Literacy. These fourteen areas of instruction are;

1. Understanding interest, credit card debt, and online commerce;
2. Rights and responsibilities of renting or buying a home;

3. Savings and investing;
4. Planning for retirement;
5. Bankruptcy;
6. Banking and financial services;
7. Balancing a check book;
8. Understanding loans and borrowing money, including predatory lending and payday loans;
9. Understanding insurance;
10. Identifying fraud and theft;
11. Charitable giving;
12. Understanding the financial impact and consequences of gambling;
13. Earning an income; and
14. Understanding state and federal taxes;

The 2021 fall semester consists of eighteen weeks, which provides an opportunity for addressing a component of Personal Financial Literacy one day, per school week, with an additional four days. The additional four days allow for other activities that come with a large high school such as: pep rallies, guest speakers, fire drills, reviewing previously covered materials and other organizational pieces.

Habitudes

Another day each school week, students partake in a Habitudes lesson during the ninth-grade transitional course. Habitudes is a leadership curriculum designed to teach young adults critical thinking skills. These skills include capitalizing on personal strengths, overcoming complex issues, developing a perseverance attitude, and taking initiative within their lives.

Habitudes was researched and purchased at the district level in efforts to add social and emotional support for students dealing with residual effects of distance learning, quarantining at home, and other social and emotional learning gaps caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. These current ninth-grade students have dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic during the end of their seventh-grade year, the entirety of their eighth-grade year and currently their ninth-grade school year. Both district and site level administrators believe that the ninth-grade transitional course needs to have a strong component of social and emotional learning embedded within the course. Furthermore, the administration is optimistic that the Habitudes curriculum will address any residual effect of the long-lasting Covid-19 pandemic and pay dividends for the students moving forward throughout their high school career.

The Habitude curriculum platform addresses each lesson with the D.I.C.E. model (dilemmas, images, conversations and experiences). Each lesson introduces a current dilemma, or teachable moment, to the students. Then, each dilemma leads toward specific memorable images (real life scenarios) for the students. The conversational aspect of the D.I.C.E. model is for the classroom discussion among students and/or small group discussions within the classroom. Finally, the lesson addresses the overall experience of the message. The experience is designed to hopefully resonate with each student and have a positive impact going forward. Each lesson is designed to cultivate leadership qualities within each student and enhance their overall life skills.

Each lesson covers a specific topic that would be categorized under habits or attitudes. Habit lessons include critical thinking, discipline, encouragement, confrontation, teamwork, responsibility, problem solving communication and time management. The attitudes lessons include empathy, respect, integrity, commitment, adaptability, trust, humility, character and self-

motivation. Considering that there are eighteen weeks during the fall school semester, and there are eighteen lessons of Habitudes, this schedule allows for a natural balance of covering one topic per school week throughout the fall semester.

District Vision

The Midwestern School District does not have a traditional mission or vision statement that is publicly displayed throughout the school hallways, social media or even on the school website. Instead, the Midwestern School District has seven principles that have created the school district's identity. Collectively, the seven values of teamwork, work ethic, attitude, improve, leadership, compete and discipline make up the framework for the district's mission and overall philosophy. Furthermore, these seven values are implemented into the ninth-grade transitional course.

Much like the ICAP, Personal Financial Literacy and Habitudes, the seven principle values are implemented into a lesson one day within each school week. Because there is not a designated curriculum to implement into the school day, these lessons are created during the teachers' weekly PLC meetings. Each week, one of the three teachers creates a lesson over the designated principle and shares the lesson with the other two teachers. Then the three teachers teach and implement the lesson into their classes.

Summary

Midwestern High School appeared to be a very well-organized high school for students and employees. Midwestern High employees expressed that they truly care about their students and that they are making every attempt possible to set their students up for success. The ninth-grade transitional course is an example of the Midwestern school district's leadership

commitment of devoting their time, effort, finances, staff members, and other available resources to the students.

This transitional course is not mandatory for state graduation requirements (Oklahoma State Department of Education website, n.d.). Instead, this is a required elective course that is designed solely for their current ninth-grade students transitioning into Midwestern High School. Findings in the literature research confirm that many ninth-grade students are at risk for a trajectory that does not lead to graduation. However, Midwestern High School has demonstrated a willingness to invest in the success of their students through the implementation of this transitional course. Additional details will be provided in the Findings and Discussion sections of this study.

The timing of implementing the course has not been optimal with the COVID-19 pandemic wreaking havoc on Midwestern High School. The pandemic has actually forced the school to work remotely, through digital distance learning, off and on, for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Moreover, there appears to be a steady stream of staff turnover at Midwestern High School. However, the district and site leadership have displayed a commitment to keeping the transitional course. Midwestern High School believes in the ninth-grade transitional course, and additional explanations in the Findings and Discussion sections provide deeper understanding of participant perspectives of the influence of this course on student transition in this school.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS FROM DATA ANALYSIS

Purpose

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources including interviews observations, documents and websites including the school and state department of education. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transitional course at Midwestern High School that began in the fall semester of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle school to high school. The theoretical framework selected for this study draws from the self-determination theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2012). Furthermore, findings are explained through the three foundational pillars of self-determination theory: autonomy, relatedness and competence. Chapter V will present findings that emerge through analysis of the data discovered at Midwestern High School through the lens of autonomy, relatedness, and competency. In this chapter, the reader is first reminded of research questions guiding this study. Next, themes that emerged are presented with examples of data that supported those themes. Answers to research questions are in Chapter VI followed by a discussion through the lens of the theoretical framework, Self-Determination Theory.

Research Questions

Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. Because this transitional program was introduced in fall of 2019, ninth-grade student transition into high school has shown evidence of improvement through enhanced promotion rates of ninth-grade students into the tenth-grade, lower discipline referrals and an improved sense of school culture (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has utility for explaining findings from this study because, according to SDT, when students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness experience are met, they are more likely to experience high-quality motivation (Reeve, 2012) resulting in enhanced school success. SDT has utility for explaining the influence of the transition course on ninth-grade student success because it provides a framework to understand persistence in goal pursuit when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, the following research questions guided this study.

Overarching Question:

What are teacher and administrator perceptions regarding how this transitional course supports the psychological needs of students as they transition from middle to high school?

Sub-Questions:

1. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for competence?
2. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for autonomy?
3. From the participants' perspective, what influence does this transitional course have on students' need for relatedness?

4. How does Self-Determination Theory explain these findings?
5. What other findings emerge that Self-Determination Theory does not explain?

Summary of Themes

In this qualitative case study, six themes emerged through data analysis. Following a constant comparative method of analysis (Merriam, 1998), these themes became evident within and throughout the research process. Themes were identified through triangulation of interviews of staff members, observations of the classes and studying documents pertaining to the mandatory ninth-grade transitional course offered at Midwestern High School. Since all interviews were easily accessible through the use of technology, it was much easier to analyze and break down each question and answer. Furthermore, the majority of documents received from Midwestern High School were also available on their district website and easily accessible. A more detailed explanation of each theme follows.

Theme 1:

Ensuring a Successful Transition

The first theme that was identified was a motivation to ensure a successful transition for students into high school. Each of the participants mentioned this motivation during interview sessions. For example, Mr. Rodriguez stated that this transitional course “has done nothing but benefit the students, and it’s a really good starting point” (Mr. Rodriguez, Interview 2021). Ensuring that incoming ninth-grade students successfully make the transition from middle school into high school is the top priority for the transitional course at Midwestern High School. Mrs. Newman stated that this course is designed to make the students feel more comfortable at Midwestern High School as they are coming from a building exclusively of eight-grade students

(Interview, 2021). The class is only offered in the fall semester each school year and is solely designed for incoming ninth-grade students.

The transitional course also offers many other positive attributes that ensure students have a smooth transition into high school. This smooth transition can help to support their success for the remainder of their academic careers. Topics that are addressed within the class include time management, study skills, understanding a high school transcript and other academic assistances (Mrs. Matthew, 2021). Mr. Crawford stated that there are specific skills that all ninth-grade students will learn during this semester long transitional course. These skills include notetaking, time-management, communication skills, social skills, as well as self-discipline. Furthermore, these skills are embedded throughout the course to ensure that students integrate into the high school successfully (Mr. Crawford, Interview 2021). Mr. Rodriguez (2021) stated that all of the skills embedded within the course will not only assist students with their future academics, but that they also immediately increase their confidence for the challenges they face as they transition (Mr. Rodriguez, Interview 2021). The challenges include: discipline problems, attendance issues, or the social and emotional effects of learning the systems of a new school. This class provides an avenue for students to learn the skills that they need to become successful adults (Mr. Washington, Interview 2021).

The ninth-grade transitional course also allows for students to meet multiple graduation requirements early in their high school career (Mrs. Newman, Interview 2021). This opportunity supports student transition into high school by meeting these requirements early. For example, the ICAP, Personal Financial Literacy and CPR training are three mandatory OKSDE graduation requirements items that are embedded within the ninth-grade transitional course. Before this class started, the school was scrambling to find a way to implement these various graduation

requirements (Mrs. Burch, Interview 2021). However, this transitional course allows for ninth-grade students to obtain these three requirements within their first semester in high school, and therefore, they do not have to concern themselves with these requirements for the remainder of their high school careers. In the instance that a student would move to Midwestern High School after their first semester of their ninth-grade year, arrangements could be made to allow the student to meet the graduation requirements through other alternatively planned resources (Mrs. Newman, Interview 2021).

Although this ninth-grade transitional course is not required by state standards to graduate from high school, it is considered mandatory by local policy and expectations, as there are multiple graduation requirements embedded within the class. Furthermore, the curriculum content taught during the course fulfills the mandatory requirements set forth by the state department of education. Therefore, this ninth-grade transitional course has truly laid a solid foundation for students to have a successful high school career (Mr. Crawford, Interview 2021), consequently, easing their transition into high school.

Theme 2:

Students Investing in Themselves

The second theme identified in data analysis is the idea of students investing in themselves. For example, “invest in yourself” is a phrase that I consistently heard during my interviews and witnessed during classroom observations. It appears that this term of “investing in yourself” was brought to Midwestern High School by the incoming head principal Mr. Butler. Current assistant principal, Mr. Crawford, credits first-year head principal Mr. Butler for implementing the investment concept into Midwestern High School, and believes that the ninth-grade transitional course is the place where the concept is initially entrenched (Interview, 2021).

Continuing, Mr. Patterson stated that the top priority for his students in the transitional course is to “invest in yourself, because I feel that is the most important thing that they can do” (Interview, 2021).

The concept of investing in yourself is intended to correlate with the students’ high school education and future careers. Investment is a word that is regularly entrenched within the class, as students are investing in not only themselves, but also their high school careers (Mr. Crawford, Interview 2021). The goal is for students to make deposits into their future, their education, and their post-secondary opportunities after high school (Mr. Butler, Interview 2021). Midwestern school superintendent Mrs. Apple further appreciated the concept of “yourself having a piggy bank and investing within yourself”, as the connection between the students and their educational opportunities (Interview, 2021).

Theme 3:

Promoting School Culture

One of the themes that was discovered during the interview process was that the Midwestern administration would like to use the ninth-grade transitional course as an opportunity to promote a positive school culture at Midwestern High School. Mr. Crawford (Interview, 2021) reported that one of the main objectives of this transitional course is for ninth-grade students to learn “what Midwestern High School is all about.” He explained that students need to learn about the student handbook, the different course offerings and the social norms of Midwestern High School (Mr. Crawford, Interview 2021). Moreover, Mr. Washington (Interview, 2021) reported that this class also has the goal of trying to build future leaders for Midwestern High School.

Early in Mrs. Apple's tenure as superintendent, Midwestern Public Schools took on a rebranding initiative across the entire school district. Mrs. Apple explained that she feels passionate about having a positive school culture across the school district, and having an enthusiastic school spirit is one of her major goals as the superintendent of Midwestern Public Schools. "Our incoming ninth graders don't know about our culture and they don't know about our traditions" (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). To Mrs. Apple, the transitional course provides a platform to integrate ninth-grade students into the culture of Midwestern High School.

In addition, Mrs. Apple (Interview, 2021) explained that she wants every student, from kindergarten up to seniors in high school, to know the Midwestern fight song. Therefore, this ninth-grade transitional course is designed to assist with Mrs. Apple's vision of maintaining a positive school culture and promoting school spirit within Midwestern High School. Both counselors, Mrs. Newman and Mrs. Matthews, described how the incoming ninth-grade students were required to learn the school fight song at some point during the semester while taking the transitional course (Interview, 2021).

Midwestern's leadership explained that, ideally, they want their students feeling confident in their school and comfortable with their staff. "Those kids aren't going to learn a thing until they have that positive relationship" stated Mrs. Apple (Interview, 2021). Through this transitional course, these incoming ninth-grade students will become acclimated to their high school as their educational home for the next four years. Mrs. Apple explained the following:

I want these kids to have a sense of belonging at Midwestern High School. By offering this class, these kids need to know who their principal is and who their counselor is; and if the students don't know them, we have a problem (Interview, 2021).

Theme 4:

Overall Inconsistency

Another theme that was identified through data analysis was the idea of overall consistency in establishing, implementing, and maintaining success with the transitional course. Since fully implementing the ninth-grade transitional course in the fall of 2019, there have been many obstacles that have hindered the successful implementation of the program. The two main obstacles include inconsistent staffing and the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges have limited the steadiness in the delivery of the overall program.

An example aligned with this theme is that there has been a “revolving door” of teachers who actually teach the course. Retaining staff members involved in the transitional course has been a challenge for Midwestern High School leaders the past three school years (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). Mrs. Matthews (2021) reported that the transitional course has had new teachers every year, making success hard to obtain. However, Mr. Washington (2021) was somewhat optimistic about the 2021-2022 school year as it has been the first time since the class’ inception that two of the teachers have actually taught the class the previous school year. Furthermore, participants explained that retaining consistency with staff members will produce a better product in the classroom.

Continuing with staff turnover, Midwestern High School will have its third head principal in three years, and this change has brought about some challenges as well. Mrs. Apple explained, “having three head principals at Midwestern High School in the past three school years has definitely presented some issues” (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). Without consistent principal leadership at Midwestern High School, the ninth-grade transitional course has somewhat struggled and has lacked the attention that it needs to be successful (Mrs. Newman, Interview

2021). Having a new principal each of the last three school years has been tough on the students and staff members of Midwestern High School (Mrs. Matthews, 2021).

The fall of 2021 was the third time that the ninth-grade transitional course has been offered at Midwestern High School and regrettably, there is not one teacher still teaching the course from the initial year of 2019. Unfortunately, Midwestern High School principal, Mr. Butler (2021) reports that over half of the Midwestern High School staff members have been at Midwestern high school for three years or less. Continuing, he indicated that the three current teachers were not employed at Midwestern High School during the initial inception of the course. Mrs. Newman indicated that these teachers “were not here in 2019-2020 to know what did, or did not work back when we started the program” (Mrs. Newman, Interview 2021). When referring to the turnover rate at Midwestern, Mrs. Newman stated that Midwestern High School “just has a high turnover rate” (Mrs. Matthews, Interview 2021). However, Mr. Patterson explained that he is somewhat optimistic that the retention of teachers teaching the transitional course will correlate to more consistency in effectiveness for the overall program (Interview, 2021).

Due to the COVID Pandemic, Midwestern High School often transitioned between traditional in-person schooling and virtual at-home schooling during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Mr. Washington stated, “during the 2020-2021 school year, COVID wreaked havoc on us, and we were unable to track any of the information and skills that we taught the students” (Interview 2021). Even from the district level leadership, Mrs. Apple reports that Midwestern High School has simply not been able to track students’ performance data the way she would prefer. Student performance data would include attendance rates, retention percentage, academic performances as well as other indicators. Also, the inability to track the data is

primarily due to COVID-19 pandemic (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). This lack of information and consistency in the transition course has not impeded enthusiasm or belief in the value of the course. All participants expressed that they believe that the course has value for easing student transition into high school.

Theme 5:

PLC and Staff Collaboration

A fifth theme that emerged from data analysis was the importance of teachers meeting together in their professional learning community (PLC) for the success of the ninth-grade transitional course (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). Mr. Washington (2021) claimed that the weekly PLC, and the proximal location of the other teachers' classrooms, provides important opportunities regarding teacher collaboration. Mr. Rodriguez stated that "our PLC allows me to pick up as much advice as possible from the other two teachers" (Interview, 2021). Mr. Washington concurred when he stated, "the PLC has greatly assisted me as the teacher of the class and keeps me organized and on schedule with the other teachers" (Mr. Washington, Interview 2021).

Continuing, Mr. Patterson (Interview, 2021) reported that this school year has a very cohesive PLC team that works well together, and he is very hopeful that the steadiness from the PLC will pay dividends towards the success of the transitional course. Mr. Washington (2021) explained, "there are many times during a school day that one of us will stop by another teacher's classroom, during our planning period, just to check on each other and the transitional class overall" (Mr. Washington, Interview 2021).

Additionally, Mr. Rodriguez, a novice teacher, started his teaching career this year at Midwestern High School and teaches five sections of the transitional course during the school

day. Mr. Rodriguez was hired just before the start of this school year and was somewhat “caught off guard” when Midwestern High School administration informed him that he would be teaching the transitional course. Mr. Rodriguez credits the designed PLC and collaboration among fellow teachers when describing his classes. Mr. Rodriguez claims that the PLC allows him to “piggy back off” of other teachers’ lesson plans and “pick each other’s brains” about curriculum issues within the class (Mr. Rodriguez, Interview 2021).

Theme 6:

Success is Truly Unknown

The final theme that emerged from data analysis is the understanding that the true influence of the ninth-grade transitional course on student success at Midwestern High School still remains unknown. Although teachers and administrators at Midwestern High School have evidenced stronger student transition from ninth to tenth grade, reflecting potential success of the class, several variables have influenced the implementation of the course.

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted complete implementation of the course the first two school years of its existence. Mrs. Newman (Interview 2021) states that the ninth-grade transitional course started out very successful, but the side effects of COVID-19 have limited sustainable success of this program since then. As stated previously, the school shut downs and corresponding adjustments made it somewhat difficult to track progress and/or success of students within the transitional course. Mrs. Matthews stated, “I think it is a good concept, but I do not feel that we have been able to do with it what we need to do with it, and that is mainly due to COVID” (Interview, 2021). Similarly, Mr. Washington (2021) reported that COVID has caused a new set of challenges to the ninth-grade students and their transition into high school.

However, Midwestern High School teachers, counselors and administrators battled through those challenges, and the transitional course allowed teachers to connect with ninth-grade students during those problematic times. According to Mrs. Washington (2021), the transitional program overall is getting better and the future is bright (Interview 2021).

Mrs. Apple (2021) admits that COVID-19 has caused some challenges but also reports that the transitional course has improved every year. Continuing, she feels that Midwestern High School is becoming better at offering the program (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). Although it was early in the fall semester at the time, Mr. Rodriguez felt that the students in his transitional course were off to a great start; and the course has assisted his current students with the transitional progress (Interview 2021).

Relationships and the sense of belonging has increased for the incoming ninth-grade students. Mrs. Apple (2021) states that our students need to know their principals and counselors' name or we will have problems. This course allows for our students and staff the opportunity to get to know each other better (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021). Mr. Washington (2021) states the following about the transitional course:

I am excited, I think it has all of the right tools to be something successful a little bit down the road. You know, maybe with a little better structure and a couple of years under our belt. We should know now what works and what does not work.

Lastly, Mr. Butler (2021) claims that Midwestern High School has had some limited success in the short term measured by shared experiences and the overall outlook of staff, students and parents (Interview, 2021).

Summary

Chapter V presented themes that emerged from analysis data collected through interviews, observations, field notes and document reviews. The collected information was triangulated and analyzed through the lens of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory.

Chapter VI will present findings of this qualitative study through answering the study's research questions. Also, implications for research, theory and practice are addressed as well as recommendations for future research is offered.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand teacher and administrator perspectives regarding how a ninth-grade transition course that began during the fall of 2019 meets student needs during the transition from middle to high school. Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory was applied as the theoretical framework to provide a lens through which the data was analyzed. This theory has utility for explaining the influence of the transition course on ninth-grade student success because it provides a framework to understand persistence toward goal pursuit when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Specifically, as ninth-grade students enter high school they face many challenges. When their psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met, it is likely they will persist in their educational efforts and overcome those challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

During the research process, data was collected through multiple sources including: observations, interviews, field notes, as well as documents provided by Midwestern High School and the State Department of Education (OKSDE). Furthermore, triangulation of the data was accomplished through multiple stages of coding and analysis of data (Merriam, 1998).

Chapter VI will present the findings of this qualitative study through answering the research questions. Conclusions were drawn from the findings; implications for research, theory, and practice are addressed. Additionally, recommendations for future research are offered, followed by a summary of the study.

Findings

The primary findings of this qualitative case study are that both administration and teachers perceive that the ninth-grade transitional course at Midwestern High School is designed to support the psychological needs of the incoming ninth-grade students. The findings in this qualitative study are consistent with other studies of school transitional programs or small learning communities (Butts & Cruzeiro 2005; Cushman, 2006; Roybal et al., 2014). Based on the information presented in Chapter IV and the data analyzed in Chapter V, the research questions are answered below.

Research Question One: What influence does this transitional course have on students' need for competence?

The psychological need for competence is best explained through the theme of promoting a successful transition in high school. The fact that the ninth-grade students meet multiple high school graduation requirements within this ninth-grade transitional course has a direct influence on student perceptions that they are effective and competent in pursuing their high school diploma. Also, meeting these requirements during the first semester of their high school career further supports student success in that all students will have every opportunity to complete important graduation requirements at Midwestern High School.

More specifically, all ninth-grade students are required to master CPR training, complete the Individual Career and Academic Planning process, and learn the sixteen components of

Personal Financial Literacy within the semester-long course. The CPR, ICAP, and Personal Financial Literacy are all required competencies for students to graduate from high school. By embedding these three curriculum components together within the ninth-grade transitional course, it aligns perfectly into meeting the students' needs of competence.

Additionally, knowing that the teachers of the transitional course dedicate a large portion of class time to address the Midwestern High School student handbook, information regarding student transcripts and other school policies, displays a large commitment to providing competence opportunities for these incoming ninth-grade students. These students are new to Midwestern High School and potentially do not fully comprehend all of the rules and procedures within the school. Again, dedicating the time and having staff members address this potential obstacle displays a deep commitment from the Midwestern administration and teachers to enhance student perceptions of competence.

Self-Determination Theory describes competence as one's ability to master and become effective within a current situation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Continuing, Ortundo and Garn (2020) described competence as people being able to engage effectively within their environment. The definition of competence can explain the first finding of this study: that the transitional course supports the success of all incoming ninth-grade students by promoting a successful start to their high school career.

Research Question Two: What influence does this transitional course have on students' need for autonomy?

The psychological need for autonomy is best explained through the theme of students investing in themselves. Because all incoming ninth-grade students are required to take this transitional course within their initial fall semester, it would first appear that students' autonomy

is incredibly limited. However, if the transitional course is implemented correctly, students will learn about future opportunities from which they can choose while attending Midwestern High School over the course of the next three and half school years. Potential options include students taking dual credit concurrent courses from a local Junior-College, Career-Tech courses, and other elective courses available at Midwestern High School. Therefore, these current ninth grade students' autonomy might be limited initially as they are ninth and tenth graders. However, as these students progress through high school, the potential to exercise autonomous choice is extremely promising with the multiple opportunities available to them during their later years at Midwestern High School.

Autonomy can also be described as the ability to self-regulate one's experiences and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The Individual Career and Academic Pathway (ICAP) is designed to identify what career and academic pathway a student is interested in. Meanwhile, the Personal Financial Literacy curriculum is designed to teach students how to develop a financial budget, and to live within their means as an adult. The skills in each of these programs, when combined, should promote student success as students develop their ideas about what career path to pursue and feel confident in their ability to live within their estimated income. Therefore, by combining the two components of ICAP and Financial Literacy within this course, the psychological need for autonomy is supported as these students continue through high school.

Another aspect that was discovered within the research was the attempt to bring in guest speakers from the community to speak to the ninth-grade students. This opportunity has been challenged due to limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the past two school years, Midwestern Public Schools has limited outside visitors into the building due to school district policies and local health department guidelines. Participants in this study stated that they

believe that having local guest speakers come into the high school and speak to the ninth-grade students could have potentially expanded the students' mindset by exposing them to other resources that are available in the community. The opportunity to engage with community members could potentially have had a significant impact on their autonomy. One participant explained that continuing and expanding these opportunities will hopefully support student success by introducing students to community leaders (Mrs. Newman, Interview 2021). Inopportunately, having guest speakers come speak to Midwestern High School was not an option at the time of the study due to district policies designed to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19 (Mrs. Matthews, Interview 2021).

Deci and Ryan (2017) found that “the hallmark of autonomy is instead that one’s behaviors are self-endorsed, or congruent with one’s authentic interests and values” (p. 10). Because this transitional course introduces students to options and choices they will make later in high school, this course provides the students a platform to self-regulate their own personal interests and individual values as they continue through their high school career. Continuing Deci and Ryan (1985) reported that when someone acts with autonomy, they are acting wholeheartedly and without animosity. As the Midwestern High School students experience this transitional course, they will have the ability to learn more about their post-secondary opportunities once they leave Midwestern High School.

Research Question Three: What influence does this transitional course have on students' need for relatedness?

Deci and Ryan (1985) compared relatedness to be being socially connected and cared for by others. Relatedness can be explained through the theme of promoting a positive school culture. Administrators and teachers in this study explain that the purpose of this course was to

introduce students to the procedures and culture of the high school. By effectively integrating ninth-grade students into the high school, students begin to feel connected as they find “their place” in this new environment. For example, students learned early about course and graduation requirements. Additionally, they learned the vision and mission of the school and were quickly introduced to administrators, counselors and teachers.

Relatedness aligns with Midwestern High School’s effort to promote a positive school culture. School superintendent, Mrs. Apple (2021), reported that the transitional program is needed because Midwestern High School has incoming ninth-graders that are fourteen and fifteen years old trying to fit in with the seventeen and eighteen-year-old students in a huge building that they know nothing about. This course helps all incoming ninth-grade students fit in well with the large Midwestern High School (Mrs. Newman, Interview 2021).

Building off of Mrs. Apple’s passion for embedding school spirit throughout the Midwestern School District, the transitional course dedicates one lesson per week towards the seven principles of the district’s mission. Teamwork, work ethic, attitude, improve, leadership, compete and discipline are posted throughout Midwestern High School and within the students’ classrooms. These seven principals are a top priority within the ninth-grade transitional course as well. Students are taught one lesson each week focusing on one of the seven principles in hopes that the students will understand and incorporate these seven principles within their own academic and personal life. By adopting and implementing these seven principles into their lives, the students will all have an instant connection to Midwestern High School and its core values. Ryan and Deci (2013) stated that people feel relatedness when they feel cared for by others and have a sense of being integral to the social organizations beyond one’s self.

Additionally, this transitional course was designed to support the students' need for relatedness by creating a cohort for their ninth-grade class. Also, the ninth-grade transitional course in the fall semester, is connected to an Oklahoma History class in the spring semester with the same students and teachers in both classes. Therefore, having two classes with the same teacher, and the same classmates allows students to have instant connections and a safe place at Midwestern High School throughout their first year in high school.

The three teachers of the transitional course at Midwestern High School purposefully align their assigned curriculum and topics to the students' current and future lives. Embedding the Habitudes curriculum, and the D.I.C.E model by which it is presented, provides opportunity to enhance student perceptions of relatedness. Specifically, having the ninth-grade students engage in difficult conversations about real life scenarios, among other ninth-grade students has built a strong bond among their classmates. Implementing the Habitudes curriculum, and navigating through the difficult topics and conversations has "brought this class closer to each other" (Mr. Patterson, Interview 2021).

Research Question Four: How does Self-Determination Theory explain these findings?

The potential for this transitional course to fulfill the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness were evidenced throughout the data collected in this study. Because the theoretical framework was integrated in the research questions, the questions were partially answered above. Deci and Ryan (2000) report the following:

If people did not experience satisfaction from learning for its own sake, they would be less likely to engage the domain-specific skills and capacities they inherited, to develop new potentialities for adaptive employment or both. They would thus be ill prepared for new situations and demands in the physical world, and moreover, they would be less

adaptable to the extremely varied cultural niches into which a given individual might be born or adopted. (p. 252)

Findings from this study suggest that this course was designed to promote a successful transition into high school (competence) by helping students understand the choices they will have (autonomy) and connecting students with personnel and the mission/vision of the school district (relatedness). Administrator and teacher perceptions of the influence of this course on student success made it almost appear that the course was specifically designed to meet these needs, as there was a clear alignment between the course objectives and fulfillment of student psychological needs. Additional explanation about this finding is provided in the discussion section below.

Research Question Five: What other findings emerge that Self-Determination Theory does not explain?

Considering that the ninth-grade transitional course has been offered in the fall of 2019, 2020 and 2021, one would be remiss to not acknowledge the effect that COVID-19 has had on the overall program. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on public education in general which has encompassed the first three years of the transitional course being offered.

The tremendous amount of staff turnover at Midwestern High School is also a factor likely influencing the findings in this study. Since the purpose of the transitional course is to integrate students into the culture of the school and prepare them for future success, it would logically follow that excessive staff turnover cannot be beneficial in starting a transitional course. Additionally, having a different principal in each of the first three years of the course being offered likely influenced the implementation of this course. Staff turnover at the school is high; it was reported that over half of the Midwestern High School staff has been on staff for less than

three years. Furthermore, during the last three school years, there has been extensive turnover of the teachers who teach the transitional course.

Discussion

Because this qualitative case study was completed during the COVID-19 global pandemic, findings from this study likely do not completely identify all of the possibilities of the ninth-grade transitional course at Midwestern High School. Furthermore, since this transitional program was only implemented three school years ago, additional data will be needed to understand the true effectiveness of the program in promoting student success at Midwestern High School.

However, findings suggest that the transitional course does meet the psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness of the incoming ninth-grade students. The fulfillment of these psychological needs may help to explain the success, though limited by COVID-19, of this transitional course. Deci and Ryan (2000) state the following:

According to SDT, these three needs can be satisfied while engaging in a wide variety of behaviors that may differ among individuals and be differentially manifest in different cultures, but in any case, their satisfaction is essential for healthy development and well-being of all individuals regardless of culture. (p. 231)

Continuing, because the three needs of SDT transfer to different cultures and context, and the application of SDT to the findings of this study provides an effective lens to explain the effectiveness of this ninth-grade transitional course. This ninth-grade course has been very strategic within its design and implementation to meet the psychological needs of the incoming ninth-grade students. Supporting the incoming ninth-grade students and ensuring a successful transition into high school certainly addresses the area of competence. Also, early into their high

school career, ninth-grade students are quickly connected with other students and appropriate staff members to meet the psychological need of relatedness. Furthermore, by dedicating time within the course to prepare the ninth-grade students for future academic pathway decisions certainly addresses the psychological needs of autonomy. Therefore, evidence suggests that the ninth-grade transitional course does meet the SDT needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence.

Data analysis suggested that this course provided a positive ninth-grade transitional model that does meet the psychological needs of the ninth-grade students. Specifically, Bartholomew et al. (2011) found that, “social environments can either facilitate the growth and integration propensities with which the human psyche is endowed or thwart these processes, resulting in behaviors and inner experiences that represent the dark sides of human existence” (p. 1459). Evidence from this study suggests that this course does, indeed, have potential to support student success through psychological need fulfillment. Even though the school experienced challenges with the implementation of the course.

Evidence from this study suggests that the ninth-grade transitional course is trending in the positive direction, and ultimately supporting the students’ needs as they enter high school. Furthermore, when analyzed collectively, district level administration, site level administration, and classroom teachers all strongly believe that the transitional program is greatly assisting the ninth-graders as they transition into high school.

Regrettably, the two counselor participants interviewed are not quite as involved with the ninth-grade transitional course compared to the other six interview participants. Although, their lack of involvement with the transitional course could be explained for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, they did not know the pacing guide or the actual curriculum that was being taught

within the transitional course. Unfortunately, this finding is somewhat undesirable, as both counselors have a much longer tenure at Midwestern High School compared to the principals and teachers involved with the program. Considering their tenure at Midwestern High School, I was hopeful that they both could provide a deeper understanding of the ninth-grade transitional course.

Implications

The findings from this qualitative study have implications for research, theory and practice. The remainder of this chapter addresses the significance of these implications.

Implications for Research

The ninth-grade year is often referred to as a “make or break” year regarding one’s high school academic career (Iachini et al., 2016). Additionally, many high schools are still struggling to meet the needs of their incoming ninth-grade students. The findings of this study aligned with findings of previous studies which indicate the necessity of assisting incoming ninth-grade students’ transition into high school. Findings in the literature further suggest that earning lower grades in the early portion of high school (ninth-grade year) has a direct correlation with the same students dropping out of high school all together (Felmee et al., 2018). This study adds to the body of research by explaining the influence of incoming graduation requirements in the transition course, thereby supporting student success.

Because this study, and the implementation of the course, took place during the pandemic, findings from this study likely do not entirely capture the true influence of this course. Further research is needed to understand the influence of this course on student success as these students advance through high school.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly influenced all staff and programs at Midwestern High School. It is also unknown whether the pandemic influenced turnover at Midwestern High during this time period. Additional research is needed to understand the influence of these factors on this transitional course.

Implications for Theory

This study utilized Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985) to explain how the transitional program was designed to meet the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness in ninth-grade students as they transition into the high school setting. The application of SDT to understand student transition into high school is an expansion of the utilization of this theory. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) found that since the Self-Determination Theory studies the basic psychological needs of independence, connection and belongingness, it is a useful framework to study the overall school community and school culture. This study adds to that understanding by suggesting SDT can help to explain how specific courses might meet student needs. Because students enter high school with basic psychological needs, this study added to understanding how this course was structured to advance need fulfillment.

Implications for Practice

There are multiple implications for practice for Midwestern Public Schools administration and fellow peer districts with similar demographics. First, these findings suggest that even though this ninth-grade transitional course is not considered mandatory by state requirements for students to graduate, offering this planned transition for ninth-grade into high school seems to be a worthwhile investment of the school district's time and financial resources. Lastly, both school district level leadership and school site level leadership felt that staff turnover influenced the implementation of this course. This finding is especially important given the

current teacher shortage that the state is experiencing. Findings from this study suggest that consistency is a needed factor for successful implementation of this course in this district, and further research is needed to more fully understand how staff turnover influenced the success of this course.

Surprisingly, there was a significant lack of presence from the Midwestern High School counselors interviewed regarding their involvement with the ninth-grade transitional course. I assumed that the counselors would be heavily involved within the transitional course, considered the importance of the ninth-grade year for all students. Regrettably, both counselors that I interviewed did not appear invested or attached to the transitional course as I had assumed they would have been. Although the counselors were optimistic about the course and its purpose at Midwestern High School, but there was little evidence attributing them directly to the course. Lastly, It would have been interesting to see an increased involvement from the counseling staff considering they have a longer tenure at Midwestern High School compared to the teachers teaching the course and the current principal leadership within the building.

Considering the high turnover rate with teachers teaching the transitional course, I was surprised to see that the teachers of the transitional course were new to Midwestern High School. Between the three teachers of the course, there was a combined total of three years of teaching experience and two years at Midwestern High School. I do find this connection interesting, considering that a portion of this course is to teach the history of Midwestern High School, school policies, the school fight song and its school culture. I feel that this course might have required a more seasoned, veteran teacher to teach about these topics. Instead, research revealed that these three teachers were hired as coaches and Oklahoma History teachers and placed into teaching the transitional course.

Although not generalizable, findings from this study may provide insight for school leaders who are searching for solutions to combat the challenges that their ninth-grade students are experiencing. One challenge may be the understanding of the value of offering opportunity to fulfill graduation requirements, such as Financial Literacy and ICAP, early in the students' high school career. Additionally, the finding in this study that highlighted the importance of PLC time for the teachers of this course is important. Schools with similar contexts who seek to implement a transitional course may consider allowing time for teachers to work collaboratively to enhance course effectiveness. Knowing that there are many potential factors that can influence implementing such transitional courses, this study adds to understanding for other school leaders addressing similar scenarios at their own school sites.

Recommendations for Future Research

One idea that kept “popping up” during my research was the possibility of expanding the ninth-grade transitional course. Expansion possibilities include having a year-round ninth-grade course instead of it only being only one semester long, as it currently is. Participants suggested that, to ensure the successfulness of the transitional program, could it possibly be a full year ninth-grade course (Mrs. Newman, 2021; Mr. Patterson, 2021). Continuing, both principals interviewed had the same idea. Mr. Crawford (2021) believed this course could benefit from being a year-long class and is optimistic about what the class could look like. Additionally, Mr. Butler (2021) stated that there is never enough classroom time and this class could benefit if it was further extended or expanded into a second semester (Interview, 2021). Additional research is needed to gain a better understanding of the length of the course and how it actually meets student needs.

Next, the possibility of expanding the transitional course to other grade levels including tenth-grade, eleventh-grade and possibly twelfth-grade students as well was mentioned by participants. Additional research is needed to understand whether or not goals of this program could be implemented in other courses and not simply limited to just ninth-grade students (Mrs. Newman, Interview 2021). This research would be especially important if student perceptions of competence, autonomy and relatedness would dwindle throughout a student's high school experience.

Also, during my research I did not identify what part of the ICAP process had been started for Midwestern High School students within the middle schools and what follow up is done with the ICAP after the transitional course. One immediate concern is the implementation and follow through at Midwestern High School regarding the ICAP process. It appears that the ninth-grade transitional course is tasked with completing the ICAP graduation requirement during the one semester class. However, the OKSDE requires a more extensive process starting in the sixth grade which finalizes upon graduation from high school. Therefore, additional investigation of the complete implementation of the ICAP in this district is needed to understand how the district is meeting this particular mandate.

Lastly, due to the design of this case study, the actual ninth-grade students' outlook and opinions were never considered during the research. Even though the data collected represented the perspectives of teachers who taught the class, school counselors, school principals and district level administration, it would still be informative and interesting to identify the students' feedback of this transitional class that they were required to take during their first semester of high school.

Researcher Reflections

As a current assistant superintendent that supervises secondary administration, I commend Midwestern High School for all of their detailed efforts regarding the ninth-grade transitional course. Entering this case study, I could not have comprehended the many details that the transitional course requires to become effective. Furthermore, I did not completely understand the level of commitment that was required from the district level administration. Mrs. Apple stated it best when she said that Midwestern Public Schools has been “good stewards of their money, and that this class and these students are worth investing in” (Mrs. Apple, Interview 2021).

“This class is built strictly to help the students and nothing else” (Mr. Rodriquez, Interview, 2021). I do believe that this declaration is an extremely accurate statement and is a true reflection of the Midwestern School district and Midwestern High School’s leadership team. Although, and unfortunately, the true effectiveness of the ninth-grade transitional course, and the overall program is still undetermined. Mr. Butler (2021) reports that Midwestern High School’s administration has really not had the opportunity to evaluate the successfulness of the program (Mr. Butler, Interview 2021). Meanwhile, Mrs. Matthews (2021) stated, “I have not seen a dramatic impact yet” (Interview, 2021). Therefore, it is safe to assume that long-term success is still undetermined.

While the current transitional program is not perfect, it is not due to a lack of effort on the part of Midwestern Public Schools. Leadership at the district level, leadership at the site level and the teachers in the classroom have proven to be committed to the process.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has distracted many efforts to accurately track student data, and academic progress. Therefore, future research studies are truly needed to validate students’

progress and report a more detailed statistical analysis of the transitional course. Moreover, there certainly is a need for a quantitative research study to accurately dig into the statistics more than this qualitative case study was able to perform.

Summary

Participants in this study believe that Midwestern High School has a very effective ninth-grade transitional course. District leadership and site administration have created a transitional program that allows all incoming ninth-grade students an opportunity to be successful during their next four years at Midwestern High School.

Chapter II reviewed literature on ninth-grade students and how challenging this particular school year can be for many of them. This transitional year into high school can be difficult for a variety of reasons; therefore, school leaders are continually searching for solutions to improve the ninth-grade year for their students. Unfortunately for some students, if the ninth-grade year is not a successful one, it could lead down an unwanted pathway towards becoming a high school dropout. Additionally, Chapter II includes a literature review of Self-Determination Theory, as SDT is the theoretical framework selected for this qualitative study.

Chapter III described the qualitative case study methodology selected for this study. Midwestern High School was selected for this study based on their recent implementation of a ninth-grade transitional course in the fall of 2019. The data collection occurred during the summer of 2021 and within the first nine weeks of the 2021 fall semester. Data included formal interviews, observations, field notes, document review and website information. There was a total of eight interviews completed. Interview participants included district level superintendent, high school principal, assistant principal, three classroom teachers and two school counselors. All interview participants had a direct connection with or oversight of the transitional course being

researched. Documentation was collected from the teachers of the transitional course. Also, the school district's website provided a plethora of valuable information as well. Lastly, the epistemological perspective chosen was constructivism, as it allowed for analysis of the interview applicants and the Midwestern High School environment.

Chapter IV offered a picture of Midwestern High School using a thick, rich description of the school district, as well as, the town in which Midwestern High resides. In addition, Chapter V analyzed these interactions through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). More specifically, Deci and Ryan (1985) identify the pillars of SDT as autonomy, relatedness and competency.

Findings suggest that all three areas of need (autonomy, relatedness and competency) for the incoming ninth-grade students were supported within the transitional course. Although some areas of need were targeted more sufficiently than others; all three areas of need were met throughout the course. Findings reveal that all three areas of need were focused on during the everyday coursework and daily curriculum pathway of the transitional course.

Findings also reveal that the driving force of this ninth-grade transitional course is from the district level leadership, school superintendent Mrs. Apple. Mrs. Apple has been the constant supporter of this transitional class since its inception. She then supported the class the initial school year of 2019-2020. Next, she chose to stay with the class during the 2020-2021 school year during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic while having a new principal at Midwestern High School. Again, she chose to stay with the class during the 2021-2022 school year, after the peak of the pandemic and with yet another new building principal at Midwestern High School. There were ample reasons for Mrs. Apple to choose to discontinue the ninth-grade transitional

course during the past three school years, but she firmly believes in the course and has decided to stay with it for the foreseeable future.

Next, Chapter VI was then concluded with other concepts including implications for research, theory, and recommendations for future research.

Overall, findings from this study align with findings in the literature of ninth-grade students struggling as they transition into high school. Additionally, the trials of the ninth-grade students at Midwestern High School are actually what introduced the thought of creating the course several years ago.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Teacher and Counselor Interview Questions

1. Please describe your overall experience with the ninth-grade transitional program?
2. How did you become involved with the ninth-grade transitional program?
3. What are the purposes and goals of the program?
4. What is your perception about the effectiveness of the transition program in meeting these goals?
5. What needs of ninth grade students does this transition program address?
6. How does it meet those student needs?
7. Please explain any student needs of ninth grade students that are not addressed through this program.
8. What challenges have you experienced with the transitional program?

9. How have you mitigated these challenges?

10. From your perspective, what influence has this transition program had on the success of ninth grade students in this school?

11. Do you have any suggestions for improvement? Changes that you would like to see?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

Principal and Administrator Interview Questions

1. Please describe your overall experience with the ninth-grade transitional program?
2. How did you become involved with the ninth-grade transitional program?
3. What are the purposes and goals of the program?
4. What is your perception about the effectiveness of the transition program in meeting these goals?
5. What needs of ninth grade students does this transition program address?
6. How does it meet those student needs?
7. Please explain any student needs of ninth grade students that are not addressed through this program.
8. What challenges have you experienced with the transition program?
9. How have you mitigated these challenges?

10. From your perspective, what influence has this transition program had on the success of ninth grade students in this school?

11. Do you have any suggestions for improvement? Changes that you would like to see?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX C



Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 08/11/2021
Application Number: IRB-21-325
Proposal Title: Ninth-Grade Transitional Course; Influence on student retention

Principal Investigator: Dudley Darrow
Co-Investigator(s):
Faculty Adviser: Kathy Curry
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.

Sincerely,
Oklahoma State University IRB

VITA

Dudley Dwain Darrow

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Dissertation: IMPLEMENTATION OF A NINTH-GRADE TRANSITIONAL
COURSE CASE STUDY

Major Field: School Administration

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in School Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2022.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Education in Education Administration at University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma in 2005.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Education at Northwestern Oklahoma State University, Alva, Oklahoma in 2002.

Experience:

Mustang Public Schools, August 2002 – May 2005

Enid Public Schools, August of 2005 – May 2022