

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

What Parents Think:

Strategies that Facilitate a Successful Transition to Middle School

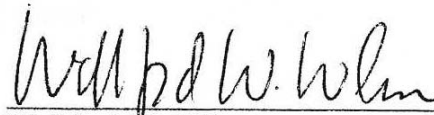
A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree Doctor of Education

by

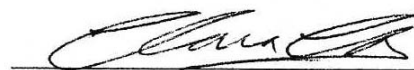
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Dedication Page

To my grandmother, I did it!

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Middle school transitions can cause a decline in academic achievement and motivation in learning for many students. Low income underrepresented students are especially vulnerable to this transition. Parental involvement also tends to decrease during the middle school years. This qualitative study examined the elementary to middle school transition for low income underrepresented students, from the perspectives of parents. The study took place in an inner city middle school and the sample consisted of six parents, a study that cannot be generalized to other middle schools. Each parent was interviewed four times for the duration of four months and in-depth case studies were developed for each parent. The interviews focused on parents' perceptions of their ability

to help their children with the transition, the barriers they faced, and the strategies they used. Parents, especially non-English speaking parents, found that it was more difficult to provide academic support to their children at the middle school level. Whenever parents could not provide assistance to their children, they first relied on their own network of friends and family, then they went to the community for help, and finally they approached the school for support. One practice that parents held in high regard was having consistent communication with teachers and children. Parents wanted a partnership with the school and their own children in order to help their children attain academic success. Parents reported that taking an active interest in their children's lives resulted in higher achievement and less behavior problems in school. Contrary to the assumption that parents withdrew themselves from their children's lives during middle school, this study found that parents actually wanted to remain highly involved in their children's lives. Many parents were willing to volunteer in the classrooms, but the school never asked parents for their help. Two major concerns parents had about the middle school were school violence and the decrease in academic achievement from students during the initial months after the transition. Parents were very appreciative of the strict environment and academically challenging demands of middle school, which they believe thwarted some of the potential school safety concerns.

What Parents Think:
Strategies that Facilitate a Successful Transition to Middle School

Chapter One

Statement of the Problem

“Early adolescence represents the most critical period in the education of students” (Fenwick, 1987 p. 65). Elementary to middle school¹ transitions can cause a decline in academic achievement for many students (Eccles *et al.*, 1993b; Graham & Hill, 2003; Murdock *et al.*, 2000; Queen, 2002). Simmons and Blyth (1987) found that as the number of school transitions increased for adolescents, their grade point average and extra-curricular participation decreased. In another study, researchers followed students as they moved from their last year of elementary school to their first year of junior high school and found evidence of declines in students’ perceptions of their performance, potential, and value in mathematics (Midgley *et al.*, 2002). Low income underrepresented students² are more vulnerable to this change (Seidman *et al.*, 1994), which may result in future school drop out (Alspaugh, 1998b).

School transitions can further exacerbate the underachievement of low income disadvantaged students (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Blyth *et al.*, 1983; Seidman *et al.*, 1994). Many of these students already experience various life challenges such as violence, an

¹ Middle school includes all post-elementary schools, but pre-high schools, such as junior high schools, intermediate schools, and middle schools, typically 6-8, 7-8, or 7-9 grade configurations.

² Low income underrepresented students, or low income disadvantaged students, are those who attend Title I schools (schools that serve primarily low income and disadvantaged students), qualify for free or reduced fee lunches, and come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

inferior education, and one-parent families. An additional life changing experience such as a school transition can cause more distress in the students' lives (Blyth *et al.*, 1983; Gonzales *et al.*, 2004). Low income underrepresented students are two times as likely in reading, and three times in mathematics, to underachieve when compared to their wealthier peers (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005). Researchers have shown that these students' academic achievement in reading and mathematics declined after transitioning to middle school (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Midgley *et al.*, 2002). Ultimately, transitioning from elementary to middle school can result in huge academic and societal ramifications for low income disadvantaged students during and beyond middle school if an intervention is not present to assist them with this life changing event. At the same time, parents are often left out of the transition process and many parents begin to distance themselves from their children's school lives during the middle grades (Epstein, 1995). The need for parental involvement during the transition to middle school appears to be the missing link in helping students achieve academically at such a critical time in their lives.

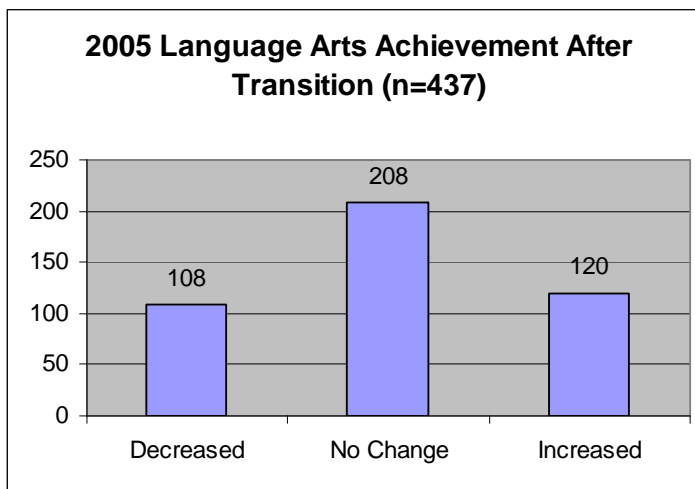
Background

Achievement Loss During Transition

Mirroring this national problem is the South Bay City Elementary School District (SBESD). SBESD is a small urban school district that serves primarily low income underrepresented students. At SBESD, 144 of 447 students (32%) showed a decline in

the 2005 mathematics California Standards Tests (CST)³ at the end of their 7th grade year, their first year in middle school. One hundred eight of 437 students (25%) of the transitioning students showed a decrease in the 2005 language arts CST. For students who were *Proficient*⁴ or *Advanced*⁵ in both language arts and mathematics in the sixth grade, 33% showed a decrease in achievement after they transitioned to middle school ([South Bay City] Elementary School District, 2003-05).

Figure 1.1. Language arts achievement after transition.



³ The California Standards Tests are a set of tests (language arts and mathematics) that are given only to students in California, based solely on the state's standards. The tests help schools see how well their students are mastering the subject matter content and skills set by the State Board of Education.

⁴ Students meet state content standards on their California Standards Tests with a minimum score of 350.

⁵ Students exceed state content standards on their California Standards Tests with minimum scores that vary across all grade levels, but typically a minimum score of 400 is considered *Advanced*.

Figure 1.2. Mathematics achievement after transition.

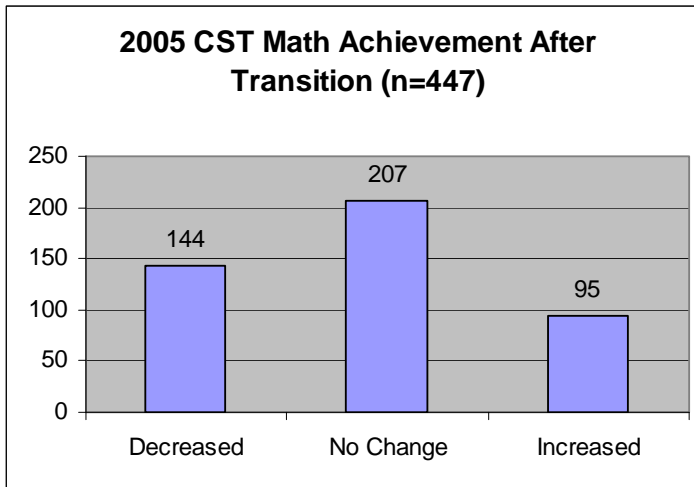
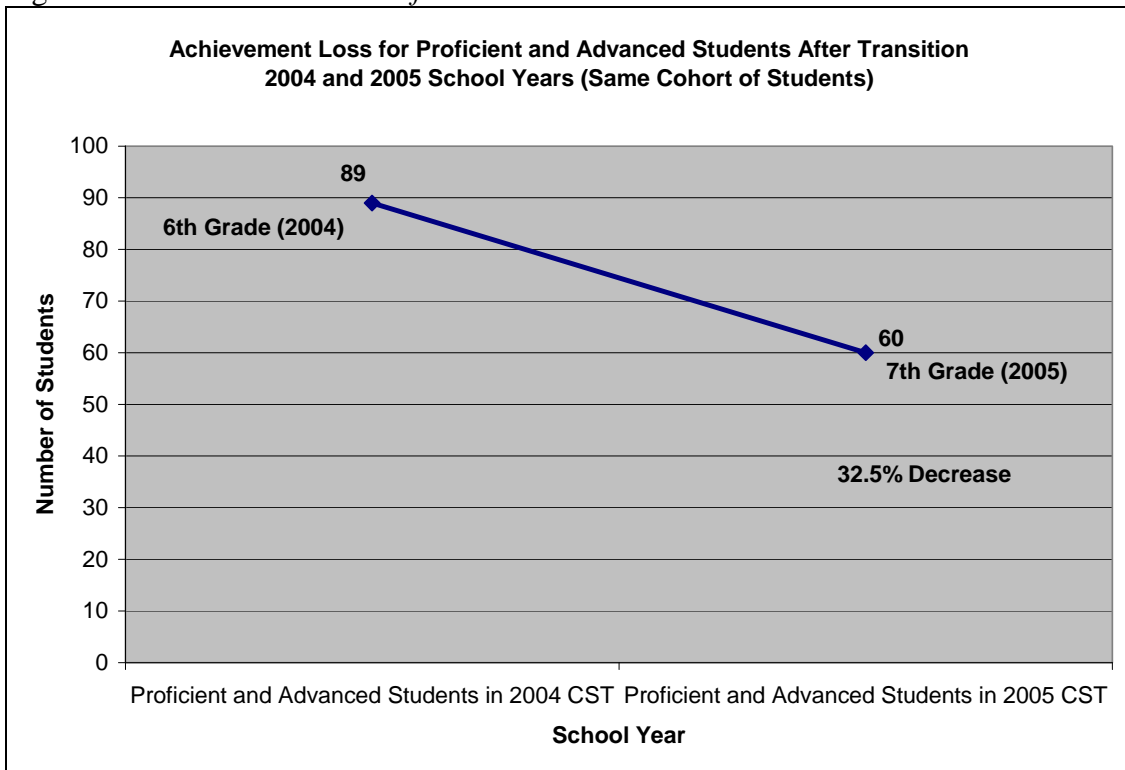


Figure 1.3. Achievement of *Proficient* and *Advanced* students after transition.



Why does Student Achievement Decline after Transitioning to Middle School?

Research associates the decline in achievement with adolescent development, school organization, socio-emotional fears, student-environmental mismatch, and the lack

of parental involvement. Adolescent psychologists assert that the pubertal changes affect students' academic achievement in school (Blyth *et al.*, 1983; Bradley, 2003). Research on school structures found that students involved in a pyramid transition of multiple elementary schools into a single middle school experienced a greater achievement loss than did students in a linear transition of a single elementary school to a single middle school (Alsbaugh, 1998a; Felner *et al.*, 2001).

Some other reasons for the decline in achievement during the transition to middle school may be due to students' socio-emotional fears, such as attending a larger school, getting to class on time, getting on the right bus, and finding lockers, lunchrooms, and bathrooms (Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Schumacher, 1998). Other researchers argue that a mismatch between the environment and the student causes achievement to plummet because the middle school environmental structures are not conducive to the adolescent developmental changes students experience during that time. (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles *et al.*, 1993a; Midgley *et al.*, 2002; Midgley & Urda, 1992). Finally, research confirms that parental involvement declines drastically during the middle grades, which negatively impacts student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Parallel to the problem of achievement loss associated with middle school transitions, research indicates that parents do not participate as much in their children's middle school lives as compared with their participation during their children's elementary school years (Epstein, 1995). Many parents feel intimidated by the unfamiliar location and size of the middle school, the complexity of the subject matters in middle school classes, and desire to promote independence in their children's lives. In addition,

low income disadvantaged families usually do not have access, or do not know how to access, information about the school system (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Camblin, 2003), all resulting in a dramatic decrease in parental involvement during the middle grades (Halsey, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

On the other hand, research suggests that parental involvement is one of the principal contributing factors to student achievement during middle school (Halsey, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Wherry, 2004). There is also documentation that parental involvement increased academic achievement during school transitions (Falbo *et al.*, 2001; Kurita & Janzen, 1996; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003), and for helping students adjust to middle school (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Inviting and eliciting the help of parents to play a vital role in supporting their children's adjustment to the transition from elementary to middle school is one way schools can help support the academic success of their students.

Approaches to Solving the Problem

Studies show that schools attempt to solve the middle school transition problem in many ways, such as creating an environment that fits the needs of adolescents, remediation, interdisciplinary instructional teams, advisories, and transitional programs. Researchers use the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) to explain the academic decline during middle school transitions. This theory suggests that the negative changes in motivation and performance in early adolescence appear to be related to the quality of the learning environment experienced by children at this stage in life (Midgley & Urdan, 1992). The middle school learning environment includes increased class sizes,

whole class tasks, less personal and positive student-teacher relationships, and class work that requires lower levels of cognitive skills, which contribute to a decline in the adolescents' intrinsic motivation and interest in school (Eccles *et al.*, 1993a). In order to create a school environment that is responsive to students' needs, a complete change is needed in the school culture, procedures and policies, pedagogy, curriculum, leadership, and personnel.

Many middle level schools have tried to help transition adolescents by developing remedial academic programs for students who are not performing at grade level in reading and mathematics during their first year in middle school. Remedial programs have not improved the motivation and performance of underachieving students (Midgley & Urdan, 1992; What Works Clearinghouse, 2004). In addition, remedial programs send the message to students that they are not going to become academically successful because they are tracked into non-college preparatory courses, intensifying the rejection and exclusion students experience because of their low achievement (Kuykendall, 2004).

Interdisciplinary instructional teams are other approaches for ameliorating the negative effects of school transitions (Rottier, 2000). However, organizing teachers into interdisciplinary teams does not ensure that they will share ideas, plan together, or teach differently than they did before they were organized into teams. In fact, Hackmann and others (2002) report that 41% of the schools in their study did not schedule both an individual and a team planning period for the team teachers. These efforts in changing the instruction provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment for students,

such as team teaching and block scheduling, but these changes do not guarantee that collaboration will happen.

Another intervention utilized by some middle schools is advisory programs. These programs address the need for special relationships between students and teachers (Darling, 1994). Advisories ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult and that every student has a teacher who serves as an advocate for him/her, communicating on their behalf with other teachers, administrators, and parents. However, more often than not, advisory programs have not been implemented in the way they were conceived and thus have not been particularly successful (Black, 2002). For instance, Black (2002) explains that some schools seldom provide teachers with adequate training to work in an advisory capacity with students, and some advisory programs schedule too little time and place too many students into advisor-advisee groups. Advisory programs have not been broadly implemented as well (Van Hoose, 1991).

Finally, some traditional transition programs acquaint elementary school students with the middle school before and after the transition. The three most common activities are having elementary students visit the middle school, having middle-grades and elementary administrators meet together on articulation and programs, and having middle-grades counselors meet with elementary counselors or staff (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). However, Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) found that only 20 percent or fewer of the principals interviewed in their study indicated the use of transitional activities. These transitional activities included having elementary school students attend regular classes at

the middle grades school, having summer meetings at the middle grades school, and having a buddy program that pairs new students with older ones on entry to the school.

Even with all these interventions to address the needs of incoming middle school students, many students consider their parents as one of their main sources of information and advice in coping with middle school (Akos, 2002; Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992). The literature on elementary to middle school transitions is consistent with this finding, which recommends transitional programs and activities to include a parent component. As the literature suggests, the communication between schools and parents is ineffective during the middle grades (Halsey, 2005). Some examples of increasing parent participation during school transitions include orientations and meetings with parents (Fenwick, 1987; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000), sending correspondences home (Fenwick, 1987; Schumacher, 1998; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000), inviting parents to workshops and conferences (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Wherry, 2004), having parents participate in school committees (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000), and using parent centers to distribute information to parents (Lucas, 1999). Without a doubt, parents are key informants in their children's lives and too often, they are not utilized enough during the middle school transitions, and there is little research conducted in this area (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). As a result, more research needs to be done on the effects of parental involvement in students' first year of middle school.

The Study

Most of the literature reports the typical school transition program where there is an orientation for parents and students, then accompanied by a middle school visitation. This common practice has already shown that it does not work, since students are still achieving at a lower rate than they did before the transition. What makes my study noteworthy is the concept of using parents' perspectives and recommendations to promote academic success in students during the middle school transition. Many schools are moving towards a more parent inclusive style of education in which parents join the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), volunteer in the classrooms, or attend school functions (parent conferences, family nights, or assemblies) (Child Trends Databank, 2003; Hawes & Plourde, 2005). These structured opportunities for parental involvement are great, but they lack continuity and they do not address students' academic decline during a time that they are most vulnerable.

In order to address one of the limitations of many elementary to middle school transition programs, I worked with parents to create a series of case studies. These case studies captured parents' perceptions about their involvement and the strategies they used to assist their children adjust and succeed in middle school, which helped me develop a set of recommendations for establishing successful middle school transitions. My qualitative research study aimed to understand the school involvement structures and practices parents and schools used to support students' first year of middle school. I selected six families who consented to be a part of in depth case studies regarding their involvement during their children's transition from elementary to middle school. After

developing the case studies for each family, I presented my findings to the South Bay City Elementary School District in order to improve its elementary to middle school transition processes and practices.

The purpose of my research was to understand the problem of the academic achievement loss for low income underrepresented students and the effects of parental involvement during the elementary to middle school transition. My study researched the perceptions of parents and the problems they experienced with their children's transition to middle school. This study discovered what parents perceived to be the most effective strategies in helping students adjust and succeed in their first year of middle school. My findings will contribute to the limited research literature on supporting parents in the elementary to middle school transition process.

Research Questions and Dissertation

This study contributes to the limited research literature on the impact of parental involvement during elementary to middle school transitions. The research questions were designed to provide schools and parents with the information they sought to help them understand the value that parental involvement may prevent academic declines during the transitional year. Answering the research questions may not only help schools and their students, but also inform the national debate over this significant issue. The research questions that I answered were:

1. What are parents' perceptions of their ability to assist their children in making the transition from elementary to middle school?

2. From the perspectives of parents, what are the perceived school and family practices that support or impede the elementary to middle school transition?
3. What are the problems and successes that parents are observing in regards to the elementary to middle school transition?
4. Given the findings from interviews, what strategies can parents and schools use to help students make a successful transition to middle school?

Public Persuasion

I plan to engage the public in my research through scholarly and popular publications. Through the journals, there will be three targeted audiences that I will address: parents, teachers, and school administrators. For parents, my research can help promote and sustain parent involvement during and after middle school transitions. For teachers, my research can help encourage teachers to contact parents and use them as allies in raising student achievement. For administrators, my study can help restructure current transition programs to become more parent inclusive. In addition to engaging the public and promoting school change, I want to add to the existing knowledge pool and contribute to the literature since the research in this area is limited.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Problem Revisited

Elementary to middle school⁶ transitions negatively affect many students regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or grade of transition. Low income underrepresented students⁷ are more susceptible to declines in academic achievement during the transition to middle school (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Blyth *et al.*, 1983; Seidman *et al.*, 1994). One of the long term repercussions of such achievement declines for low income disadvantaged students are increased high school drop out rates (Alspaugh, 1998a). According to national data, this population of students is more than two times as likely to achieve at below grade level standards in reading and mathematics when compared to their middle and upper income peers (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005). Many of these low income youths already experience life stressors such as single family households, crime, poverty, and schools with insufficient resources that adversely affect academic achievement (Gonzales *et al.*, 2004). Additional life changing circumstances, such as school transitions, contribute to more developmental stress in adolescents, which negatively affect student achievement and participation in the middle grades (Blyth *et al.*, 1983; Felner & Adan, 1988). As a result, the elementary to middle school transition process poses a greater threat to low income disadvantaged youths than

⁶ Middle school includes all post-elementary schools, but pre-high schools, such as junior high schools, intermediate schools, and middle schools, typically 6-8, 7-8, or 7-9 grade configurations.

⁷ Low income underrepresented students and low income disadvantaged students are those who attend Title I schools (schools that serve primarily low income and disadvantaged students), qualify for free or reduced fee lunches, and come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

wealthier students because it is a time when many middle grade students decide to either go to college or drop out of school (Camblin, 2003; Department of Education, 1997).

In order to ameliorate this retention problem, researchers suggest that middle schools change their learning environment so they can meet the developmental needs of their students. This appropriate matching of the school environment to adolescent developmental needs derives from the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Out of the stage-environment fit theory stems developmentally responsive school transition practices. These include some traditional practices to facilitate the transition from elementary to middle school such as remedial or bridge programs, interdisciplinary teams, and advisories. Traditional transition programs aim to familiarize students to the new middle school (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). Remedial programs, such as extended day programs and summer school provide low achieving middle school students with additional support in reading and mathematics (Mass Insight Education, 2000). Interdisciplinary teams promote collaboration and communication between middle school teachers so that they can best teach their students (George, 2000/2001). Advisories ensure that each student is known well by at least one middle school adult member (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Finally, parents play a key role in their children's academic achievement, and in some instances, help mediate successful middle school transitions for their children when schools offer them opportunities for participation (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

All of the interventions described above have promising goals and intentions, but many have limitations that present difficulties for their successful implementation. This literature review will first examine the stage-environment fit theory and its applications in middle school transitions. Then, I will analyze the four different developmentally responsive school transition practices and address their limitations in raising student achievement during middle school transitions. Finally, I will discuss the effects of parent involvement on student achievement during middle school transitions. Many studies emphasize parental involvement as a strong contributor in increasing student achievement in all grade levels and subjects (Ho & Willms, 1996; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) and in nonacademic areas such as increased attendance and positive student behavior in school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Research also suggests that parents can play a crucial role in helping students adjust in school and sustain high academic achievement during school transitions (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Kurita & Janzen, 1996; Lord *et al.*, 1994). Although limited, there are few studies that formally examine the role of parents in the transition process. This study hopes to contribute to the limited research that examines how parent involvement supports student achievement during the transition from elementary to middle school.

Achievement of Low Income Disadvantaged Students

The academic achievement of low income disadvantaged students continues to be sub par. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2005) reports that 16% of the nation's fourth graders and 15% of the eighth grader who were eligible for

free/reduced fee lunch⁸ scored at or above *Proficient*⁹ in reading. On the other hand, 42% of the wealthier fourth graders and 39% of the eighth graders scored at or above *Proficient* in reading. The achievement gap in math is just as staggering as in the reading scores. Nineteen percent of the nation's fourth graders and 13% of the eighth graders scored at or above *Proficient* in mathematics, as opposed to 49% and 39% of their wealthier fourth and eighth grade peers. In some large central city schools, the achievement gap is even wider. For instance, only nine percent of the fourth grade students in Los Angeles scored at or above *Proficient* in reading, as opposed to 40% for students who were not eligible for free/reduced fee lunches (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005).

Achievement of Low Income Disadvantaged Students During Transitions

For many low income disadvantaged students, middle school transitions go hand in hand with achievement loss in the middle grades. In Missouri, researchers found that there was a drop in reading and math scores after students transitioned into middle school (Alsbaugh & Harting, 1995). Students transitioning from an elementary fifth grade classroom to a middle school sixth grade class showed a seven point loss in the mean

⁸ National School Lunch Program (NSLP). A federally assisted meal program that provides low-cost or free lunches to eligible students. It is sometimes referred to as the free/reduced-price lunch program. Free lunches are offered to those students whose family incomes are at or below 130 percent of the poverty level; reduced-price lunches are offered to those students whose family incomes are between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level. (From the National Assessment of Educational Progress glossary)

⁹ One of the three NAEP achievement levels, representing solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter. (From the National Assessment of Educational Progress glossary)

score on the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests¹⁰ (MMAT). In math, the same students saw a decrease of 14 points after transitioning to middle school. In another research study conducted in Baltimore, Washington, DC, and New York City, poor urban youths showed a drop of 0.24 points in their grade point average (GPA) as well as a decline in their self esteem and class preparation after they transitioned to middle school (Seidman *et al.*, 1994). It also appears that low income African American youths from Milwaukee suffer the most from school transitions (Queen, 2002; Simmons *et al.*, 1991). In a study by Simmons *et al.* (1991), grade point averages for African American students plummeted by 0.44 points after transitioning to middle school.

Addressing the Decline in Student Achievement During Middle School Transitions

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

In order to address this decline in student achievement during middle school transitions, researchers suggest the importance of looking at the fit between the needs of early adolescents and the opportunities afforded to them in the middle school environment. Eccles and Midgley (1989) refer to this fit as the stage-environment fit theory, which draws from the person-environment fit theory (Hunt, 1975; Lewin, 1935). The person-environment fit theory assumes that when the needs and goals of individuals are congruent with the opportunities afforded to them by the environment, then favorable affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes should result for those individuals. People are likely to flourish in an environment that fits with their values and needs (Roberts &

¹⁰ The Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests (MMAT) were used in grades 2-10 in the areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies. These are criterion-referenced and multiple-choice tests which were based on and aligned with the Missouri Core Competencies and Key Skills. Currently, the MMAT has been replaced with the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP).

Robins, 2004). Conversely, when a discrepancy exists between the needs of the individual and the opportunities available in that individual's environment, unfavorable outcomes should result (Hunt, 1975; Lewin, 1935).

Under a similar assumption as the person-environment fit theory, the stage-environment fit theory argues that there will be an increase in students' motivation to learn when there is a fit between their developmental needs and the educational environment. The environment is both responsive to the changing needs of the individual and offers the kinds of stimulation that will propel continued positive growth. However, the mismatch between these two trajectories, adolescent development and school environment could account for declines in student motivation (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Eccles *et al.*, 1993a). The stage-environment fit is based on the assumption that at a certain stage of life, if changes in needs are aligned with changes in opportunities, positive outcomes will result. The concept of stage-environment fit has been applied in particular to early adolescents and middle-level schools and has been used to explain the decline in academic achievement during middle school transitions (Deemer *et al.*, 2003; Eccles *et al.*, 1993b; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Therefore, according to this theory, transition to a facilitative and developmentally appropriate environment, even at a vulnerable age such as adolescence, should have a positive impact on children's self-esteem and academic efficacy.

There is evidence that students' motivation and confidence in academia declines after transitioning to middle school because of a poor fit between the school learning environment and students' needs. Midgley *et al.* (2002) followed over 2000 students as

they moved from their last year of elementary school to their first year of middle school. The researchers found that changes in students' values in mathematics were related to differences in the classroom environment before and after the transition (Midgley *et al.*, 1995; Midgley *et al.*, 1989; Midgley *et al.*, 2002). Their study observed that most students moved to a less facilitative learning environment, one in which they experienced less positive student-teacher relationship, had teachers with a lower sense of efficacy, and fewer opportunities for decision making in math after the transition. Students also suffered declines in their perceptions of their performance and potential in, and valuing of, mathematics.

Some changes in middle school classrooms, as compared to elementary classrooms, include a greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline, and fewer opportunities for student choice and self-management (Eccles *et al.*, 1993b; Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987; Midgley *et al.*, 1988). Students also feel less positive student-teacher relationships, increased whole class tasks, and lower cognitive skilled assignments. For example, Ward and others (1982) found that upper elementary school students were given more opportunities to take responsibility for their schoolwork than seventh grade students in a traditional junior high school. Trebilco, Atkinson, and Atkinson (1977) observed that students reported less favorable interpersonal relations with their teachers after transitioning to secondary school than before.

In addition to greater teacher control and less personal relationships, middle school is associated with an increase in whole class¹¹ tasks and ability grouping. There is evidence that sixth grade teachers in elementary schools mixed whole and small group instruction within and across subject areas (Rounds & Osaki, 1982), whereas in the seventh grade, whole group instruction was the norm, small group instruction was rare, and no individualized instruction was observed (Ward *et al.*, 1982). Finally, research suggests that class work during the first year of middle school, particularly in general math, requires lower level cognitive skills than does class work at the elementary level (Eccles *et al.*, 1993a; Rounds & Osaki, 1982; Stabile, 2001). In an observational study of 11 junior high school sciences classes, only a small proportion of tasks required higher level creative or expressive skills (Mitman *et al.*, 1984). The most frequent activity involved copying answers from the board or textbook onto worksheets. According to the stage-environment fit theory, middle schools without developmentally responsive practices are not conducive for student learning.

The stage-environment fit theory provides much needed information to guide elementary to middle school transitional practices. However, putting the theory into practice is a difficult task to accomplish. Midgely *et al.* (2002) state that, “changing the goal structure involves a change in thinking about the purpose of schooling” (135). At the site level, moving towards more developmentally responsive practices entail changes in teacher pedagogy and beliefs. For instance, classrooms should focus on cooperative learning and heterogeneous groupings, grading for progress as opposed to normative

¹¹ Whole class instruction is a direct instructional strategy where the teacher is providing instruction to the whole class.

grading, and opportunities for choice and student decision making (Midgley *et al.*, 2002). Some teachers may not share the same instructional beliefs about developmentally responsive practices, and the educational system makes it difficult to remove teachers who do not share the same vision. Developmentally responsive practices also call for improved teacher-student relationships. However, many schools may suffer from overcrowded classrooms, which make it extremely difficult for teachers to build personal relations with their students. It takes significant amount of money and resources to create smaller classes and to hire more qualified teachers.

On a broader scale, policy changes are needed in order to develop programs that will alleviate the environmental mismatches for first year middle school students. Teachers and principals need to work within the constraints imposed on them by the state, district, and parents. Some programs that will help create a developmental fit for students, which will be addressed in the next sections are, transitional programs, interdisciplinary teams, remedial programs, and advisory programs.

These four interventions, transitional activities, remediation, interdisciplinary teams, and advisories, help students transition successfully and promote academic achievement in middle school. These developmentally responsive school transition practices aim to create a middle school environment that compliments the developmental needs of adolescents. However, each of these approaches has limitations and may be difficult to implement and sustain in schools.

Transitional Programs

To address the problem of achievement loss associated with middle school transitions, schools have implemented a variety of programs in order to help adolescents ease into the new middle school setting. The goals of these transitional programs are to help students become acquainted with the new middle school before and after the transition. Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) found that over 40 percent of middle school principals (2400 schools surveyed) reported three of the most common different types of school transitions they used at these schools: having elementary school students visit the middle school; having middle and elementary school administrators collaborate on articulation and develop programs between schools; and having middle and elementary school counselors meet and work together (Camoni, 1996; McElroy, 2000).

Some school transition programs that acquaint elementary school students to the new middle school are the Bridges Program at Crabapple Middle School (McElroy, 2000), and the School Transitional Environment Project (STEP) (Felner *et al.*, 2001). The Bridges Program, an integral transitional intervention at Crabapple Middle School, uses sixth grade students to present an overview of Crabapple for matriculating fifth graders. These sixth graders have to apply to be in the Bridges Program and the teachers nominate students to become participants. The sixth grade Bridges members visit classrooms at feeder elementary schools and talk about ways for fifth graders to be successful at Crabapple.

After the presentation by sixth grade Bridges participants, elementary school students also have the opportunity to visit and tour Crabapple Middle School for a

morning. At the middle school, the sixth grade Bridges members conduct a presentation to the fifth graders about the middle school programs and aspects of middle school life. At the end of the presentation, the sixth grade Bridges participants take the fifth graders on a tour of Crabapple classrooms.

Finally, before the first day of school, incoming sixth grade students are invited to a “locker night” at Crabapple Middle School. At this time, students become acquainted with using lockers by obtaining locker numbers and combinations as well as practice using the lockers so that on the first day of school, students will not have difficulties with them.

The Bridges Program reflects a promising attempt at alleviating middle school transitional problems for students because of its student centeredness, outreach for incoming sixth graders, and articulation between the elementary schools and Crabapple. However, McElroy (2000) fails to provide any data or evaluation of the program to gauge its effectiveness on ameliorating achievement loss during the middle school transition. The concept of having student leaders give presentations and lead tours is worth noting because the program bestows ownership of the school to students. However, pulling students out of classes for them to participate in this program can be a problem. In addition, the program brings an element of competition since students have to apply and be nominated by teachers. The Bridges Program at Crabapple is a great attempt at helping elementary school students ease into middle school by using student leaders, but there are limitations to using students as primary brokers of information during transition, such as having enough knowledge to answer questions and being reliable in the program.

Another middle school transition program is the School Transitional Environmental Program (STEP). STEP focuses on helping transitioning elementary school students reduce their adaptational demands. The program attempts to increase coping resources available for students during the transition year by making modifications to the school, such as reorganizing the school environment to reduce the complexity that incoming students confront and restructuring the roles of homeroom teachers and guidance staff so that they may provide greater support for entering students. STEP targets at risk students entering larger middle schools from multiple feeder elementary schools, and facilitates the adaptation of students making normative school transitions (Felner & Adan, 1988). To implement STEP, researchers suggest the need for restructuring the physical school environment by putting STEP classrooms in close physical proximity to each other (Felner *et al.*, 2001). In addition, schools should attempt to create stable and consistent sets of classmates for incoming middle school students. The rationale for such structural changes is to minimize distances between classes, increase familiarity between STEP students and teachers, and build a sense of community within the STEP participants.

In addition to physical environmental school changes and cohort-like student placements, STEP requires a restructuring of homerooms to resemble advisory programs. In the homerooms, teachers serve as an administrative and counseling link for students, parents, and the rest of the school. Teachers help students choose their classes, counsel students who have social or academic problems, and contact families when a student is

absent. Most importantly, STEP homeroom teachers need regular and consistent planning and collaboration time in order for it to work successfully.

The intentions of STEP for helping students adapt to middle school are noteworthy, but according to the founders of STEP, there were problems and shortcomings with the program. In order for STEP to work, three conditions must be present: teachers meet regularly; approximately 60-100 students should be enrolled in STEP and divided into homerooms of 20-25 students; and students must be clustered in physical close proximity in the building. However, researchers found that not all schools complied with these three conditions and some teachers did not even implement such programs at their schools (Felner *et al.*, 2001; Furman *et al.*, 1989; Quint *et al.*, 1999). After evaluating the STEP program, researchers concluded that there were no positive gains in achievement and performance over time by STEP students (Felner *et al.*, 2001). Finally, the researchers suggest the need for “whole school change” (p. 189) as opposed to only using STEP as an intervention for school transitions (Felner *et al.*, 2001). The Bridges Program and STEP assert that parents are a vital component to the transition process, but they involve parents at a minimum level, such as attending orientations and visiting the new school.

Remedial Programs

To promote student achievement during transitions, some middle schools institute remedial mathematics and language arts courses for first year middle school students who perform below grade level in these two areas. Remedial programs appear in different forms such as summer school, extended day (before and after school) classes, and pull

out programs during the school day. In one study, researchers found that over 98% of the principals surveyed (2400 schools) reported having at least one remedial program to help students who were below grade level in reading and/or mathematics (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). In order for remedial programs to work successfully, there needs to be an alignment between the core courses in the school day and the remedial courses, which many programs have difficulty doing (Allington & Johnston, 1989; Mass Insight Education, 2000; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). The intent of remedial programs is positive because they help struggling students make positive gains in school, build confidence in math and language arts, and become able to compete at a middle school level.

However, research indicates that there are severe academic and social repercussions when students participate in remedial programs, such as experiencing isolation and higher retention¹² rates. Some opponents of remediation liken the program to tracking since students are placed into certain classes based on their achievement levels (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). When students take remedial courses, they may experience greater feelings of racial and social isolation. Remedial programs further separate and label students by dividing them into high achieving college preparatory tracks and low achieving non-college preparatory tracks, thus, reducing the number of opportunities lower tracked students can enroll in challenging and college preparatory classes (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Kuykendall, 2004; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). Students receiving remedial instruction

¹² Retention in K-12 schools means repeating a grade because the student(s) did not meet grade level standards.

become public spectacles among their peers because they physically move from one regular classroom to another classroom for remediation.

The concept of remedial programs can easily lead schools to assume students have deficiencies because they are achieving below grade level. This assumption can cause students to feel humiliation when they see many of their peers take regular or advanced level courses. In addition, remediation sends a subliminal message that students taking these courses do not have the intellect to perform at the middle school level and post-secondary education is not for them. Consequently, extensive remedial programs lead to higher rates of retention (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). However, research found that when low achieving students are grouped with higher achieving students, both groups made increased gains in reading comprehension (Mac Iver *et al.*, 1997).

Summer school is another remedial intervention for transitioning students who are not performing at grade level. The goal of summer school is to reduce the summer learning loss and provide additional intensive schooling to help raise the academic levels for students not meeting promotion standards. A review of summer school programs found that the average child who attends summer school will outperform between 55% and 60% of comparable students who did not attend the program (Mass Insight Education, 2000).

However, the positive effects of summer school can only come when taught by high-quality teachers (Boss & Railsback, 2002; Denton, 2003; Mass Insight Education, 2000). Research indicates that administrators have a difficult time hiring the best

teachers to teach summer classes (Boss & Railsback, 2002; Denton, 2003; Mass Insight Education, 2000). Usually, the announcements for summer school teaching positions are posted very late in the school year, the pay for teaching summer school is substantially lower than compensation during the regular school year, and many teachers value their summer break, since many feel they are overworked during the school year. Usually, there are no rigorous selection criteria for hiring summer school teachers because the demand for teachers to teach in the summer exceeds the supply (Denton, 2003). Therefore, the students who are the most in need of acquiring the essential basic skills to succeed in their first year of middle school are often taught by those who are not particularly considered the best.

Interdisciplinary Teams

Interdisciplinary instructional teams are other methods middle schools use to alleviate the problem of achievement loss during school transitions because they help students become familiar with their peers and teachers. These teams are made up of a group of teachers who share the same students, the same space, and the same schedule (George, 1983). Teaming provides an organizational structure through which schools can design and deliver effective learning to every student (Hackmann *et al.*, 2002). About 42% of early adolescent students receive instruction from interdisciplinary teams of teachers sometime between the grades five and nine (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Over 50% of the middle schools in the United States implement teaming into their school structure (Arhar, 1997; Rottier, 2000; Valentine & Whitaker, 1997). The rationale for implementing interdisciplinary teams is threefold: to eliminate the isolation in teaching

by providing a working group of colleagues to conduct activities and solve mutual problems; to deliver effective instruction to students because of the increased integration and coordination across subjects; and to allow teachers to build relationships with students and respond to the needs of their students since they are with the same group of students for the school year (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Fenwick, 1987; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

Because teaching can be a very isolating profession (Bakkenes *et al.*, 1999; Cookson Jr., 2005; Pomson, 2005), one goal of interdisciplinary teams is to eliminate this isolation by providing teachers with a support group. Such a group enables teachers to work together, share ideas, and plan together, all activities that increase job satisfaction, efficacy, and commitment (Arhar, 1997; Erb, 1997; Hackmann *et al.*, 2002). This teaming structure allows teachers to interact frequently because they share common planning time and the same groups of students, which increases and facilitates communication between teachers.

Another goal of interdisciplinary teams is to promote effective teaching and planning across disciplines. Teacher teams may meet more regularly for planning lessons, coordinating homework and assessments, and communicating with parents. These meetings allow teachers to talk more about their students and devise instructional strategies that meet the needs of their students (Erb, 1997). Research confirms that students who received teamed instruction scored higher on standardized tests in both mathematics and reading than those taught in departmentalized settings (Lee & Smith, 1993). Teachers working in teams are able to better support their students, use the

learning time more flexibly, and create opportunities to help students make connections across various subject areas (Clark, 1997).

Effective teaming practices include having two to five teachers on a team and in the same building, with approximately 25 students per teacher, and having sufficient planning time for the team (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989; Fenwick, 1987; Hackmann *et al.*, 2002; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Because of this structure, teachers know their students very well. Teachers work together with students to achieve academic and personal goals. Teachers share responsibility for the same students and can solve problems together. This creates a community of learners that builds trust and relationships between teachers and students because the team becomes a supportive network for students (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

The concept of interdisciplinary teaming is a remarkable attempt to help transition elementary school students to middle school, since it emphasizes student-teacher relationships, cross subject collaborations between teachers in order to provide effective instructional practices to students, and the elimination of teacher isolation. However, the concept of teaming does not ensure that teachers will plan and work together, nor does it guarantee team and individual planning periods built into the school day for teachers. Mac Iver (1990) reports that only 30% of the middle level schools utilizing interdisciplinary teams schedule common planning time for the team members. In support of this evidence, researchers found that 41% of the 1400 principals surveyed did not include both team and individual planning times for teachers (Hackmann *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, many exploratory teachers, such as art, physical education, and music

teachers, do not have common planning time with core subject (language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science) teachers (Peterson, 2001). Successful teaming depends on setting aside meeting times (Erb, 1997; Peterson, 2001). If this planning time is not allotted to teachers during the workday, then teachers have to collaborate before school, during their lunch time, or after school.

In addition to the lack of common planning time, there is no hard evidence that schools implementing interdisciplinary teams reduced drop out rates. In fact, some schools with such teams might even have higher drop out rates (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991); however, an explanation for this attrition suggests that these schools might have implemented interdisciplinary teams to combat their pre-existing problem in student attrition.

Advisory Programs

Teacher advisory programs use many of the practices in transition programs, remediation, and interdisciplinary teams to meet the needs of all students and help students successfully transition to middle school. Research supports the success of teacher advisory programs and their use in school transitions. Advisories are organizational structures in which a small group of students identifies with and belongs to one teacher, who nurtures, advocates, and leads students through the process of schooling (Cole, 1992). Teachers work with a small group of students (approximately 18 or fewer) and use activities, such as solving problem, discussing career choices, and discussing academic issues and problems, to help students reach specific social and developmental goals. The teachers also remain with their students for a large portion of the school day.

These programs make it easier for teachers to build closer relationships with their students, create an environment that is more responsive to students' needs, and increase the sense of belonging in students, all which support student achievement. Advisories were built around the premise that every student needs an adult relationship that is characterized by warmth, concern, openness, and understanding (Alexander & George, 1981; Van Hoose, 1991). As a result of such positive teacher-student relationships, advisories have decreased student dropout rates in some schools (George & Oldaker, 1985; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

However, Mac Iver (1990) found that a school using approximately nine supportive group advisory activities each month, as opposed to never, prevented 2% of its students from dropping out before high school graduation. Mac Iver further warned readers that their data was "significant but modest" (p. 459). In another study, George and Oldaker (1985) suggest that advisories improve student self concept and create a more positive school climate. Then again, their study lacked a control group, and no actual records of suspensions, office referrals, and expulsions were used to make comparisons before and after the transition to middle school (Galassi *et al.*, 1997). There also has not been much published research that evaluates the effectiveness of advisory programs (Galassi *et al.*, 1997). The lack of evaluation in advisories contributes to their spotty implementation. Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) found that advisories were not broadly implemented. Schools in the Midwest used fewer advisory programs than any other region in the nation. Schools may be apprehensive to using advisories because again, there are no published or research based benefits in using these programs.

Parental Involvement

Parent involvement in school transitions underlies all four of these approaches—traditional transitional activities, remediation, interdisciplinary teams, and advisories. Parental involvement may be the most important contributing factor in helping students' raise their academic achievement (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). In the following section, I will first discuss parental involvement and its effects on student achievement, then closely examine the limited amount yet profound literature suggesting that parent participation can reduce the achievement declines during school transitions.

It was commonly thought that the family nurtured the child and laid the foundation for the child's entry to school. Alternatively, the school was seen as the socializing agent that prepared the child for roles in the larger community. Research confirms that from infancy, the home, school, and community simultaneously affect children's growth and development (Wasik & Karweit, 1994). The importance of schools, families, and communities working together to meet the needs of the students is supported by Epstein's (1987b) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence. A central principal of this theory is that certain goals, such as student academic success, are of mutual interest to people from each of these institutions, and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support (Epstein, 1992).

The Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence consists of external and internal structures (Epstein *et al.*, 1997). The external structures can be pulled together or apart by factors such as beliefs, experiences, and practices of families, schools, and

communities, and the age and grade level of students. The internal structure outlines where and how interactions occur within and across school, home, and community contexts. Social capital is acquired and stored when the family, community, and school interact within the internal structure. As a result, social networks are strengthened and social capital is increased when partnership activities are implemented that enable families, educators, and community members to work cooperatively around children's growth and development (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

There are six different research based practices that schools can use to help build partnerships with families: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). When parents are involved, there are positive effects in students' academic achievement. For students, the outcomes include increased attendance rates (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), decreased behavior problems (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), and increased mathematics achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). For parents, the outcomes include increased communication with teachers (Halsey, 2005), increased knowledge of the school system and requirements (Camblin, 2003), more positive attitudes about the school and reinforcement of what their children are learning in school (Becher, 1984), which all result in higher achievement for students. These research studies, as well as others, suggest that there are both academic and non-academic benefits when parents participate in their children's school lives.

For non-academic benefits, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that parental involvement increased student attendance in school. The researchers collected

information from eighteen schools on their average daily attendance rates for 3 years (1995, 1996, and 1997). They found that during each year, attendance rates increased. Before implementing family involvement strategies, the schools reported an average of 0.12% increase in daily average attendance between the 1995 and 1996 school years. After building stronger relationships with families, the daily average attendance increased to 0.71% between the 1996 and 1997 school years. Chronic student absences also decreased from 8% to 6.1%. The researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze school-family practices that helped increase attendance rates. They found that offering rewards for improved attendance, establishing a contact person at school for parents to work with, and assigning a truant officer to students and families with attendance problems all contributed to improved average daily attendance rates.

In addition to helping students attend school so that they can learn everyday, research suggests that parents help keep students safe at school. In a study of 47 schools in 12 different states, Sheldon and Epstein (2002) found that classroom behavior improved or remained the same and only a small percentage of students received disciplinary actions after the schools implemented family partnership activities with parents. The researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze data and found that the implementation of different types of family and community involvement activities was related to decreases in several disciplinary actions. Schools that implemented more opportunities for family and community volunteers reported lower percentages of students sent to the principals' offices or given detention.

There is a plethora of academic benefits when parents get involved in their children's school lives. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) found that when teachers assigned homework that required parent-student interaction, higher student achievement in mathematics resulted, which confirmed previous studies in mathematics achievement (Rice, 2001). Schools that effectively implemented activities that encouraged parents to participate with their children in home learning activities reported improved percentages of students who were proficient in mathematics one year to the next. Some assignments included those that required parents to talk to their children about mathematics and those that provided materials and resources for families to use at home. These findings validated the results of Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) in which they found home discussion to be most strongly related to student academic achievement. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) further indicate that there are implications for using parental involvement activities to raise student achievement in mathematics during the elementary to middle school transition. The positive results of parental involvement on student achievement further reinforce the need to incorporate parents formally in the transition process.

Parental Involvement During School Transitions

In addition to the positive effects of parental involvement in general achievement for students, there is a limited number of studies that document the effects of parent involvement during middle and high school transitions. Kurita and Janzen (1996) surveyed sixth grade students and found that students perceived their parents as important sources of support (Akos, 2002). Parents were rated as providing more tangible support than teachers and friends and more emotional support than teachers. Parents can help

their children adjust to the new school environment, increase student achievement, and increase student academic motivation during school transitions (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Falbo *et al.*, 2001; Ratelle *et al.*, 2004; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). School transitions can be a time of great uncertainty for adolescents and parents can help bring some stability into their children's lives, which can result in positive academic benefits. Thus, parental involvement during the critical time of middle school transition is imperative and necessary for student achievement.

There is documentation that parental involvement during school transitions can help students adjust to the new school environment and demands, increase students' academic motivation, and increase student achievement (Falbo *et al.*, 2001; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Kurita & Janzen, 1996; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Simons-Mortons and Crump (2003) documented that parental involvement was a better predictor of school adjustment and engagement than other measures of parenting behavior, including monitoring and expectations. Parental involvement was associated independently with school adjustment and engagement in cross-sectional and prospective analysis. Lord, Eccles, and McCarthy (1994) found evidence to support their hypothesis that adolescents' perceptions of their family environment also influenced their adjustment to the junior high transition. Adolescents' perceptions of a democratic family environment were associated with increases in self-esteem throughout the seventh grade. The researchers' findings suggest that family environments that support the adolescents' need for autonomy are more facilitative of positive adjustment than family environments in which adolescents' autonomy is suppressed (Eccles & Midgley, 1989).

In addition to school adjustment, parents can ward off the motivational risks associated with school transitions (Ratelle *et al.*, 2004). Students whose parents are not responsive to their psychological needs during transition are put at motivational risk. That is, students from uninvolved and controlling families are more likely to be unmotivated and to become less intrinsically motivated and identified with their school program. The school adjustment and motivation findings support the stage-environment fit theory, in which many school transitional practices derive from. Both studies conclude that parents should be responsive to their children's needs and involve themselves at the school or at home in order to promote student achievement during the transition year.

Parental involvement during school transitions also increases student achievement. In a study of low income African American students transitioning to middle school, researchers found that students with high levels of both family (parent involvement) and school (perceived teacher support and feelings of school belonging) factors had higher grade point averages in the sixth grade when controlling for prior achievement than did their classmates who had high levels of one or none of these factors (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Students who had both high levels of parent involvement and perceived teacher support had a grade point average of 2.50, as compared to a grade point average less than 1.00 when there were low levels of both factors. Similar results occurred when there were high levels of parent involvement and feelings of school belonging (3.50 GPA) as compared to low levels of both these factors (1.00 GPA).

In a study of high school transitions, researchers suggest that parental monitoring of children had a powerful effect on the academic achievement of high school students (Falbo *et al.*, 2001). Monitoring had positive effects on student achievement and well being because parents were able to detect problems earlier and intervene before the problems became serious. Homework support also increased high school grades and standardized test scores. Some examples of homework support include tutoring, overseeing homework completion every night, helping complete projects, and calming students down when they are overwhelmed with the homework. Students who made the transition successfully were more likely to have parents who came to the school from time to time to participate in an activity designed for parents. Although Falbo and others' (2001) research was conducted at the high school level, the findings are relevant to middle school students because the model of parental involvement can be replicated at middle schools, and the research validates previous studies that document the importance of parental involvement during school transitions (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Ho & Willms, 1996; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002, 2005).

Conclusion

Low income disadvantaged students are often most vulnerable to the adverse impact of school transitions (Anderson *et al.*, 2000). Several approaches have been offered to help increase student achievement during school transitions: traditional school transition activities, remediation, interdisciplinary teams, and advisories. Each has merit of increasing familiarity and connectedness to the school, but also has limitations that prevent broad implementation or evaluation. Rice (2001) hypothesized that students

from lower socio-economic status homes often lack the parental support structures that enable them to make successful transitions. One supportive structure includes the ability of parents to sustain the educational experience of their children by creating a fit that aligns the home environment to that of the school. Other structures include the willingness of parents to assist their children outside of school, such as attending school events and helping with homework, the degree to which parents supplement the schooling process with educational activities by going to museums and cultural events, and the degree to which parents talk to their children about school. These parental support structures require some congruency between the school and home environments, otherwise known as the stage-environment fit theory. To create such a fit, parents and schools need to work together.

My study aims to understand the problem of academic achievement loss during the elementary to middle school transition. I achieved my goal by conducting in depth interviews of six families and created case studies for each of the families. Based on the data from the case studies and with the help of parents, I developed a set of recommendations to help prevent this achievement loss and increase parental involvement during this transitional period. This study also contributes to the limited research literature conducted in the area of parental involvement during school transitions.

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

Elementary to middle school transitions can cause a decline in academic achievement for most students (Eccles *et al.*, 1993a; Murdock *et al.*, 2000; Queen, 2002). Low income disadvantaged students are more vulnerable to this transition, which may result in future school drop out (Alspaugh, 1998a; Seidman *et al.*, 1994). Alspaugh (1998b) found that students' reading and mathematics scores declined and their anxiety level increased after transitioning into middle level schools (Akos, 2002). Middle school is also a time in which parental involvement plummets (Epstein, 1995; Halsey, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Through qualitative case study research, my intent was to learn through interviews with parents how low income students could be assisted in making a successful transition from elementary to middle school. The objective of my study was to understand the problem of academic achievement loss during the elementary to middle school transition. In turn, I developed a set of recommendations to help avert this achievement loss and to increase parental involvement during the transitional period. This study contributes to the limited research literature conducted in the area of parental involvement during school transitions.

My research questions were designed to provide parents and schools with the information they sought to help students achieve a successful transition to middle school. Answering these questions will also inform the current research literature and national debate on this significant issue. In my study, I answered the following questions:

1. What are parents' perceptions of their ability to assist their children in making the transition from elementary to middle school?
2. From the perspectives of parents, what are the perceived school and family practices that support or impede the elementary to middle school transition?
3. What are the problems and successes that parents are observing in regards to the elementary to middle school transition?
4. Given the findings from interviews, what strategies can parents and schools use to help students make a successful transition to middle school?

The units of analysis were parents' perceptions and their self-reported behaviors and beliefs about assisting their children in making a successful transition to middle school.

Research Design and Rationale

My study used a qualitative design to investigate the impact of parental involvement during children's transition from elementary to middle school. An abundance of theory on school transitions and parental involvement existed in the literature, but few practices actually combined the two to create an intervention for students, parents, and schools. I used qualitative case studies to examine the effects of parental involvement on student achievement during the middle school transition. I selected and received consent from families to be a part of this study. The case studies provided rich descriptions about the elementary to middle school transition, which can illuminate the reader's understanding of the transition process (Merriam, 1998). The results of the case studies will inform the school and parents about the issues and problems with the existing elementary to middle school transition process (Bassey,

1999). Ultimately, the results will help the elementary and middle schools review their current transition program and reevaluate its effectiveness.

Site Description

My study took place at Bayview Middle School, an inner city school in South Bay City, which had approximately 850 students in grades six to eight. Three different elementary schools matriculate students to Bayview. I used Bayview as the site for my study for three main reasons. First, Bayview served low income underrepresented students. The ethnic makeup of the student population was approximately 66% Latino, 17% African American, 8% Caucasian, and 8% Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Filipino. About 75% of the student population was on free or reduced priced lunch. Second, students transitioning to middle school in South Bay City suffered from academic declines similar to the achievement decline students experience in other U.S. inner city middle schools (Eccles *et al.*, 1993b; Midgley & Urdan, 1992; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). During the 2004-05 school year, about 33% of the district's students showed a decrease of at least one rating¹³ in mathematics and 25% in language arts on the California Standards Tests (CST) after transitioning to middle school ([South Bay City] Elementary School District, 2003-05). Third, the district and site administration supported this study and allowed access to Bayview School.

¹³ Students receive one of the following ratings on the test: Far Below Basic, Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. Students scoring at or above the 50th percentile (the national average) are considered proficient.

Figure 3.1. Language arts achievement after transition.

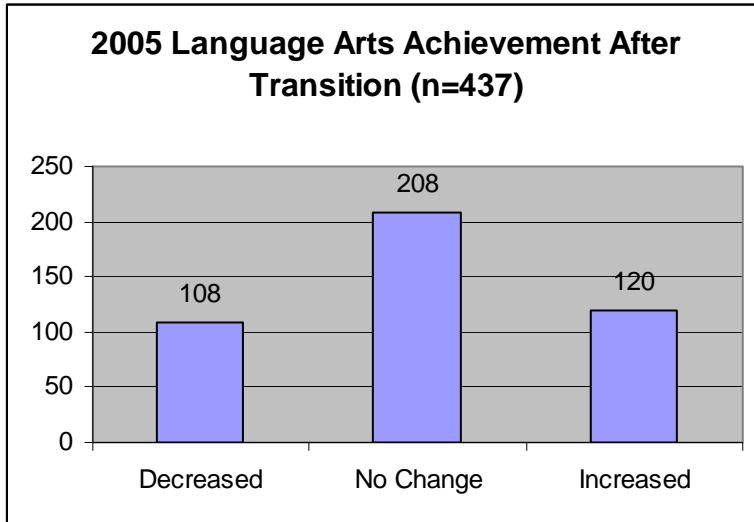
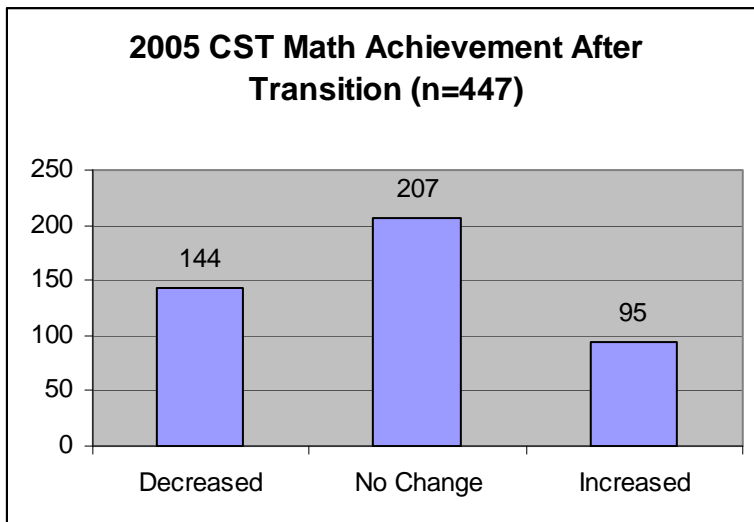


Figure 3.2. Mathematics achievement after transition.



Finally, this study was needed at Bayview because the South Bay City Elementary School District used a transition program that was similar to those reported in the literature: an orientation for students and parents, followed by a middle school visitation for students. According to the literature and district data, this elementary to middle school transition model does not work well and too many students struggle during their first year of middle school (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997).

In addition, Bayview Middle School had a unique situation because it was an elementary school. Bayview underwent a dramatic structural change during the 2006-07 school year, in which it converted into a middle school. Before the conversion, the elementary schools enrolled students from kindergarten to grades six, and all of the elementary schools fed into one middle school that served students in grades seven and eight. However, after the conversion, the elementary schools served students from kindergarten through the fifth grade, and the middle schools included grades six through eight. As a result of this grade configuration change, both the fifth and sixth grade classes transitioned together into the middle schools, which made this a desirable place and time to conduct this study.

As an employee of the district and a teacher in an elementary school that sent students into Bayview, I had access to Bayview as well as support from the district. In March of 2006, I met with the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services and the Principal of Bayview Middle School to discuss my project. Their responses were very positive because the district was taking a more proactive approach to increase parent involvement in schools. In addition, the administrators offered me access to the database system for gathering student information.

As an elementary school teacher working with middle school parents, I carefully balanced my role as the lead researcher and an employee of the district. I approached the parents as a researcher first, someone who advocated for their children's success in middle school. If parents viewed me as superior to them, then reactivity, the tendency to provide the researcher with the desired response or to change their behavior in the

presence of the researcher, might occur and taint my data (Maxwell, 2005). I conducted, transcribed, and analyzed all interviews and developed case studies for each family.

Participants

I selected parents with children who were in their first year at Bayview Middle School and who were former Southland Elementary School students. I chose this population because they resembled the national low income underrepresented population that experienced achievement declines after the transition. I selected six families who consented to be a part of in depth case studies of elementary to middle school transitions. I obtained parents' addresses through the student database system at Bayview. With district and site approval, I sent out flyers and cover letters to all parents who had children in their first year at Bayview and who previously attended Southland Elementary School (See Appendix A). Parents received an incentive to participate in my study; they were given a \$50 gift card to a retail store of their choice upon completion of the interviews. Parents interested in participating in the study were asked to fill out the flyers and return them to their children's homeroom teacher. The selection process for parent participants was purposive. The six parents selected to be a part of the study formed a group that met the following criteria:

- The group reflected the student population, as close as possible;
- The group had at least one male parent;
- The group had at least one Spanish only speaking parent;
- The group had an even distribution of sons and daughters attending middle school;

- The group had parents of children with various achievement levels.

Methodology for Data Collection and Analysis

I used a variety of data sources from the district and parent participants to answer my research questions. They included archival data, semi-structured interviews, my reflection journal, and observations from interviews.

Archival Data

A year prior to the commencement of this study (September 2005 – January 2006), I was a member of the South Bay City Middle School Committee in which teacher representatives from all of the district's schools, middle school administrators, middle school students, and parents of middle school students worked together to identify core beliefs and develop a vision statement for the soon to be converted Bayview Middle School. Through the Middle School Committee, archival data were available, such as the notes from the focus groups with middle school students and middle school parents; notes and presentations from various middle school visitations; notes from numerous committee tasks; and minutes from the committee's presentation to the school board. Because of my previous work with the Middle School Committee, I was aware that my biases and preconceptions about the school transition process could affect the way I analyze the data. As a result, I made a conscious effort to look at these artifacts from an objective standpoint and used peer examination from elementary and middle school administrators to ensure that the data were interpreted accurately.

Interviews

After selecting the six families to participate in this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each parents on a one-on-one basis. I used a protocol of open ended questions to guide the interviews (See Appendix B). I interviewed the parents over the course of four months, one interview with each parent per month. The interviews began in October 2006 and concluded in January 2007. Prior to the first interview, I met with each parent to explain my study and the interview process and ensured their confidentiality. The parents also signed consent forms for participating in my research. The interviews with the participants took place in private and secured rooms at Southland Elementary School, their children's former elementary school. The rationale for this setting was because the research literature suggested using the former elementary school as a place to hold events and conduct meetings, since it was a familiar place for parents and students (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). For one of the parents who had a disability, the interviews took place at her home.

The goal of the interviews with parents was to find more information about the perceived problems and successes that the students were having at the middle school and observed family practices that supported or impeded the elementary to middle school transition. During the interviews, participants may have withheld honest responses in order to provide me with answers that they thought I might find agreeable. My position as a teacher could have increased the potential level of reactivity among the participants which could have corrupted my data. However, prior to each interview session, I encouraged the parents to be honest and candid with their answers. I told the participants

that I was not looking for the “right” responses, but accurate data that would help improve the current middle school transition program, as well as contribute to the development of recommendations that will be submitted to the school district at the end of the study. When interviewing the Spanish only speaking parent, I had a bilingual teacher translate my interview questions and the parents’ responses to me during the interview. The teacher was also a district certified translator.

I tape recorded all the interviews and was the only person who had access to the data. Aliases were used for all students, teachers, parents, schools, and cities named during the interviews in order to protect their identities. I transcribed the recorded interviews within 48 hours so that I would not forget any of the content. When analyzing the transcripts, I first read them to find broad themes and created categories from these themes. Then, I re-read the transcripts to find any quotes that supported the themes or that belonged in a specific category. Finally, I looked for quotes that answered my research questions.

Upon completion of the interviews with the six parents, and after analyzing the data, I presented my findings to the school district (Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services and the middle school Principal) and prepared a list of recommendations for the district. The set of recommendations, based on the findings from the interviews with parents, were used to inform the district about its current transition program and the alternative procedures that the district can use to better prepare students for middle school.

Researcher's Journal

Throughout the entire data collection process, I kept a journal in which I recorded some observations I had about my parent participants. For instance, I recorded that Sheila was very passionate whenever she spoke about her children. She spoke very highly of them and also held them to high expectations. I also used the journal to reflect about each interview session and wrote about the strengths and weaknesses of the interviews. For instance, during many of Abegaila's interviews, she brought along her three-year old daughter. At times, the daughter made noises during our conversation, which made it difficult to understand and transcribe the interviews. The journal was more of a reflective piece for me, in which I freely wrote down my feelings about the interviews, the parents, and my own thoughts.

Limitations

Even though there was a considerable amount of effort taken to ensure the validity of the data taken from the interviews, there were still limitations to this study. One limitation is the generalizability of this study. Since only six families were interviewed, it is very difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population of low income disadvantaged families. In addition, the interviews with the Spanish only speaking parent may not be as authentic because as with all translations, some meaning was lost during translation.

Summary

I used qualitative research methods to understand parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's first year of middle school. The purpose of this study was

to gain additional insight in the school and family practices that supported or impeded students' transition to middle school. I also wanted to produce research based recommendations that would benefit the school district and its future policies on school transitions. It is my goal that this study will help encourage other researchers and practitioners to transform the way they think about school transitions.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

Low income underrepresented students¹⁴ are more likely to show a drop in achievement and motivation during the elementary to middle school transition (Anderson *et al.*, 2000; Midgley *et al.*, 2002; Seidman *et al.*, 1994). At the same time that students are adjusting and coping with this change in the environment and academic demands of middle school, parental involvement begins to wane (Cialdella *et al.*, 2002; Epstein, 1995). To study the problems associated with middle school transitions, I used qualitative data collection methods to gain additional insight about this phenomenon. I used qualitative case studies because I wanted to capture in depth, the experiences my parent participants went through to help their children adjust and succeed in their first year of middle school. Although I am aware that this study cannot be generalized to other middle schools, it does however, offer descriptive insights about parents' strategies to help their children during the transition year. My study also adds to the limited literature on parental involvement during middle school transitions.

Description of the Site

Bayview Middle School is located in an inner city in the south bay of Los Angeles, minutes away from the beach. The city is becoming revitalized and slowly going through a gentrification process where many of the African American and Latino

¹⁴ Low income underrepresented students, or low income disadvantaged students, are those who attend Title I schools (schools that serve primarily low income and disadvantaged students), qualify for free or reduced fee lunches, and come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

populations are moving out of the area to more affordable places. Bayview Middle School is a former kindergarten to sixth grade elementary school that was recently converted into a sixth to eighth grade middle school to alleviate some of the overcrowding at the district's only middle school. As a result of this conversion, many of the elementary schools sent both their fifth and sixth grade students to the middle school. Bayview has recently gone through some remodeling, which gives it a new school look, with two story buildings, a new gymnasium, new classrooms, and a lot of open space for sports and activities. Bayview has an open school policy after hours, in which parents and students can walk in and out of the campus after school without checking in at the front office.

I visited the campus during after school hours and noticed that it had many activities going on. The school had a state funded after school program and teacher led clubs, such as skateboarding, soccer, basketball, and running. The classrooms had student work on the walls and seemed like an inviting place. The front office was staffed by a secretary and a materials clerk, and it housed both the principal's and the assistant principal's offices. Bayview also had a counseling center, in which there were two full-time counselors and one part-time counselor. The counselors spent half of their time on administrative duties (scheduling) and the remaining portion of their time with students. My observations were very similar to the stories and anecdotes that my parent subjects shared with me during the interviews.

Participants

I interviewed six parents with children in their first year at Bayview Middle School. These parents all had children who went to Southland Elementary School, a school that feeds its students to Bayview. Three of the six parents were mothers from Mexico, one who speaks only Spanish. I also had an African American mother, a Polynesian mother, and a Japanese-German father in my study.

Table 4.1. Parents' demographic information.

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Child's Grade
Cecilia	Mexican	F	6 th
Sheila	African American	M, M, F	6 th , 7 th , and 7 th
Derek	Japanese-German	M	6 th
Rosalva	Mexican	M	6 th
Abegaila	Polynesian	F	7 th
Esmeralda	Mexican (Spanish speaking only)	M	7 th

Cecilia

Cecilia is the mother of four children; two are in high school, one is in middle school, and the youngest one is in elementary school. She is originally from Mexico, and moved to South Bay City in 1987. She is married and her children live in a dual parent household. She works in a restaurant near her home. Cecilia's daughter, Leticia, is currently in the sixth grade, her first year at Bayview Middle School. Cecilia has already experienced the elementary to middle school transition process twice with her two high school children. However, Leticia's transition experience this year is different because she entered into Bayview Middle School as a sixth grader, whereas her older brother and sister attended a different middle school as seventh graders.

Cecilia is a parent who was not very involved in her child's school life. During the first interview, Cecilia admitted that she did not spend a lot of time helping Leticia

with her work because of her work schedule; she had a 50 hour work week. Cecilia also did not attend the middle school orientation that occurred prior to the transition nor did she meet any of the teachers. She felt that that she did not have “much effort to go” and that her work schedule only permitted her to pick up her children. In my sample, Cecilia is a good example of a parent who wasn’t really involved in her child’s school life because of work.

Sheila

Sheila is an African American single mother, with nine children in her house; seven of her children were adopted. She had three children going to Bayview Middle School for the first time this year; Daniel is in the sixth grade, and Carrie and Brian are in the seventh grade. Daniel, Carrie, and Brian were all adopted when they were very young and Brian had suffered from physical abuse as a child. She also has four older children who are in high school, and one who is attending a local community college. Sheila has been living in South Bay City for 12 years and has been a nurse for most of her life. After her mother, brothers, and sisters passed away, she decided to become a foster mother for her sibling’s children. Sheila attends church every Sunday with her children; the church is an important resource and network for her and her children.

Sheila reported that she used to be highly involved in her children’s school lives. She would often go to the school and attend all the functions and events. However, last year, Sheila suffered from gangrene, a condition caused by an infection or lack of blood flow that decays body tissues. As a result of her circumstance, she had one of her legs amputated and underwent physical therapy to regain her life during the time of this study.

She relied on her children to take on household responsibilities, such as cleaning the house, washing the clothes, and taking her shopping. She did not go on campus this year to support her middle school children nor has she gone to the school functions and events. She did call the teachers to formally introduce herself. Sheila had a goal of becoming strong enough to walk on her prosthetic leg and once again, return to campus to visit her children and their teachers.

Derek

Derek is of Japanese-German descent and has lived in South Bay City for about 12 years. He recently retired from a large grocery store as the store director after providing 21 years of service for the company. He is an avid sports fan; he has season tickets to the Oakland Raiders football team and travels to northern California to watch them play during the weekends. He is married and his children live in a dual parent household. Derek's wife decided to become a stay at home mom when their son Jon was born. Jon is in the sixth grade at Bayview Middle School and he also has a younger sister in the fourth grade at a feeder elementary school. Jon was in the GATE¹⁵ (Gifted and Talented Education) Program when he was in elementary school. Derek also enjoys electronic gadgets and playing video games with his son.

¹⁵ The Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, authorized by Education Code sections 52200-52212, provides funding for local educational agencies (LEAs) to develop unique education opportunities for high-achieving and underachieving pupils in California public elementary and secondary schools who have been identified as gifted and talented. Special efforts are made to ensure that pupils from economically disadvantaged and varying cultural backgrounds are provided with full participation in these unique opportunities.

Derek reported that he was always involved in his children's school lives, even when he worked full time. He became more involved after retiring and made it a priority to be the person in charge of school related activities in his household. Derek involved himself more at home as opposed to going into the school to volunteer. He frequently provided homework help and took Jon to buy supplies for projects. In addition, Derek chaperoned a dance at the middle school. As the only male in my study, I was able to get a father's perspective about the middle school transition process.

Rosalva

Rosalva is originally from Mexico and came to the United States about 16 years ago. She is married and has three children, one in high school, one in middle school, and one in elementary school. She has been living in South Bay City for the past 12 years. Rosalva works as a maid and helps clean people's houses for a living, a job that offers her flexibility in her schedule. She decided to make herself available to her children by taking a pay cut, yet having the flexibility in her work schedule to be there for her children before and after school. She has offered to provide her presence to any field trips her son Jorge may attend in middle school. The church is also a big part of her family's life and they attend church services every Sunday. Jorge is in the sixth grade at Bayview Middle School and he was in the Gifted and Talented Education program when he was in elementary school.

Abegaila

Abegaila is of Polynesian descent and is originally from Hawaii. She has been living in South Bay City for 22 years. She is currently studying nursing at a local state

university on a part time basis. Abegaila is married and has three children, a daughter in middle school, a son in elementary school, and a younger daughter who is not in school yet. Abegaila's daughter, Leilani, is in the seventh grade and is in her first year at Bayview Middle School. Abegaila also attends church with her family on Sundays and teaches the youth class at her church. In addition to being an avid reader, Abegaila enjoys playing the piano and is passing on that talent to Leilani.

Abegaila was a bit hesitant to have our first interview tape recorded. However, I informed her that everything would be confidential and that only she and I would have access to the tapes. She agreed and gradually became more comfortable with the interviews as time went on. Abegaila is very involved in Leilani's life. She takes Leilani to school, picks her up after school, and communicates with the teachers frequently.

Esmeralda

Esmeralda is the mother of two boys, one is in elementary school and the other, Antonio, is a seventh grade student and in his first year at Bayview Middle School. She is originally from Mexico and has been living in California for 22 years. She moved to South Bay City 13 years ago because of her husband's job. Esmeralda speaks only Spanish; she can understand English, but cannot speak it very well. She is a religious person and attends church on Sundays. Also, her children love to play sports and she enjoys attending their sporting events. Esmeralda was able to give me the perspective of being a Spanish only speaking parent.

Interviews

Over the course of four months, I interviewed six parents who had children attending Bayview Middle School during the transitional year. Each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and had a specific theme. The first interview was on preparing the children for middle school. The topic of the second interview was on student achievement in the middle school. The focus of the third interview was students adjusting to the middle school. The final interview was a reflection of the practices parents used to help their children attain success in middle school. For the interview with Esmeralda, who only speaks Spanish, I had a district approved translator translate my interview questions and her responses for me during the interview. In the next section, I will present my findings from the interviews and use the data to help answer my research questions. I decided to leave the parents' quotes unedited because I wanted them to be as authentic as possible.

Table 4.2. Themes for each interview.

Interview #1	Parents preparing their children for middle school
Interview #2	Parents' perception of student achievement at the middle school
Interview #3	Parents' perception of student adjustment to the middle school
Interview #4	Parents' reflection of the school year and interview process

My four research questions are:

1. What are parents' perceptions of their ability to assist their children in making the transition from elementary to middle school?
2. From the perspectives of parents, what are the perceived school and family practices that support or impede the elementary to middle school transition?

3. What are the problems and successes that parents are observing in regards to the elementary to middle school transition?
4. Given the findings from interviews, what strategies can parents and schools use to help students make a successful transition to middle school?

Research Question #1: What are parents' perceptions of their ability to assist their children in making the transition from elementary to middle school?

I had the opportunity to interview six parents (Cecilia, Sheila, Derek, Rosalva, Abegaila, and Esmeralda) over the course of four months. Through these interviews, I identified two major themes in parents' perceptions of their ability to assist their children in making the transition from elementary to middle school:

- *It became more difficult for parents to provide academic assistance to their children at the middle school level, especially for non-native English speaking parents;*
- *Parents relied on their own networks and resources (family members, internet, friends, and church) when they could not provide academic assistance to their children. The teachers were often their last resort for help;*

Difficulty in Providing Assistance to Children During Middle School

All six parents felt very confident in helping their children make the transition to middle school. Three of the six parents experienced this transition with their older children already, so they were calmer about it. The other three parents were a bit nervous about this new experience, but felt confident enough to maintain their involvement in their children's lives. However, all six parents reported that it became more difficult to

provide help to their children now that they are in middle school. The parents experienced difficulty in helping their children with their homework.

All of the parents stated that they had a hard time remembering some of the content they learned as a child when they help their children with homework. Although Derek felt confident about his ability to provide help to his son, he also said,

It's harder because I have to start remembering what I did back in school. I have to sometimes use references to figure out what he's doing. It's been a long time since I've been in school and the schoolwork is harder and so it's not as easy as you know like helping him when he was [in elementary school].

Derek gave a specific example of the time he had to help Jon on his spelling words for a language arts class. He said:

I have like 20 or 25 vocabulary words and I can see where there could be a little confusion in the definition and sometimes he gets them confused. They're not easy words. I've helped him and some of the them are pretty tough words and I think they're tougher than when I was in his grade back when I was in school.

Sheila had similar views as Derek in regards to her ability to help her children in middle school. When I asked about her confidence level in being able to help her children with their homework, she replied, "I'm very confident. I am." She also mentioned that it takes more time now to help her children with their work. Sheila stated the following:

I'm going through school back again because I have to sit here sometimes with them until 12 o'clock, one o'clock [A.M.]. It keeps my brain sharp when I help my kids because my school was almost 67 years ago. It keeps me in, doing something, my mind working, and it's good.

Sheila provided an example of projects Brian and Carrie had to complete, which was a poster on the topic of fuel and cars. Sheila had to help cut pictures of cars from

magazines and help them write about how cars run on fuel. She stated, “[For] the project, we had to cut out pictures, and some questions that they really don’t understand that you can relate to them and show them how to do it.” She also admitted that sometimes, she didn’t have the answers by saying:

There’s lots of things that I don’t understand but Cheryl, and Keisha, and Tasha, and Jenny (the older sisters) have them in they school and so they teach our kids, they teach they sisters and brothers how to do it.

Abegaila believed that it became more difficult to help Leilani with her middle school work. She said, “Elementary to me, it’s easier. I know as a parent, it’s easier, you can handle it by yourself.” Abegaila gave an example of the increasing difficulty of helping Leilani with her homework. She told the story about Leilani learning algebra at Bayview Middle School. When Leilani came home from school one day, she brought home a math problem. Abegaila continued by saying, “Sometimes I not perfect, even I go to school, sometimes I don’t know or I forgot.” As a result, Leilani went to her father for help and he was able to provide her with some assistance, but it took him several tries before he figured out the answer. Regarding her ability to help her daughter, Abegaila said, “Challenging, yes, let’s put it that way, more challenging to us at home.”

As for the three other Spanish speaking parents (Cecilia, Esmeralda, and Rosalva), they shared very similar views about language inhibiting their ability to help their children with their work. For these parents, not knowing the English language made it difficult for them to help their children. Cecilia stated:

I really don’t help her a lot because sometimes, it’s hard for me because I mostly, I didn’t go to school here, except for English, so it’s hard for me at this point to help her, when I don’t understand a lot of things she’s doing right now.

Cecilia mentioned specifically that “sometimes, I just don’t understand the words and I just can’t help her.” However, she still believes she can help in other ways. For instance, she said, “I know I can help her, it’s just like if I have to, (pause) I can help her on the labor, but I know I can help her.”

Rosalva, who was probably the most articulate in the English language, felt she could help in other areas such as math and science, but just not in language arts or writing in particular. She said the following statement:

I can help my kids with some stuff, not with all stuff. Like language arts because I don’t speak perfect English, things like that. Math, I’m OK with it, it’s the same everywhere, and science too, I have an idea because when I went school but like language arts things like that, when he needs to write things.

Esmeralda, the least competent in the English language, intimated, “I can’t really help with academics.” Since Esmeralda’s education only went to the sixth grade in Mexico, she considered herself “not an educated person.” Furthermore, because of her lack of knowledge of the English language and lack of education, she said “I don’t feel sometimes I’m able to help [Antonio] especially since he can do the work on his own.” She went on by saying, “For language, I have not been able to help him even with math. I know basic math, but the stuff he’s doing now, I can’t help him.” She recalled the time when she felt comfortable volunteering at the school when Antonio was in the primary grades (preschool, kindergarten and first grade). She would help serve food or help the teacher cut and organize learning materials, and she felt very comfortable doing that. “I just don’t know how I can help at this point at the middle school,” Esmeralda stated. For

Esmeralda, helping her middle school child with academics had been a real challenge because she didn't speak the English language and she didn't have a good education.

All of the parents shared similar views about their ability to provide assistance to their children during the middle school transition. They all believed that they were able to help their children with the transition to middle school, but in many different ways, such as checking their homework, helping with the labor parts of projects, and using their own knowledge and experiences to assist their children. Whenever the parents did not have the answers or could not provide any assistance to their children, they did have resources, such as the church, older siblings, and the internet to help them solve the problem.

School Barriers that Impede Parents' Ability to Help Their Children

One barrier that prevented parents from helping their children especially during the middle school transition was that the school did not build parents' content knowledge of the subjects students were taking at school and did not offer workshops on how parents can help their children with homework. My parent participants did not mention any support structures that the school provided to parents who had difficulty in helping their children with homework. Many of the parents in the Bayview community did not speak English as their first language and did not attend or complete college. In the case of the non-English speaking parents, such as Esmeralda, many did not receive sufficient formal education in their native home country.

Table 4.3. Parent Educational Level¹⁶ at Southland Elementary School (Feeder School) for the 2006-2007 school year ([Southland] Elementary School, 2007).

Category	Number	Percentage
Graduate school/post graduate school	7	0.9%
College graduate	80	10.3%
Some college, including AA degree	183	23.55%
High school graduate	306	39.38%
Not a high school graduate	187	24.01%
Declined to state or unknown	14	1.8
Total	777	99.9%

The school failed to recognize that as students move higher up in the grades, the content knowledge becomes more complex and difficult, even for parents. Some parents mentioned that providing workshops would be useful for parents, especially in helping their children with homework.

Rosalva heard of workshops being offered at the elementary school, but not at the middle school. She said:

I heard that here in elementary, they have this I don't know if it's a parent center or something like that, they send a lot of papers home telling you they going to teach how to be a better parent or how to help the kids with the homework like a parent workshop, that's a good idea, that's a very good idea because sometimes parents get stuck in homework. Some parents doesn't even know how to use the Internet. I have friends of mine that don't know how to use the Internet. Things like that to help the parents help the kids.

¹⁶ Parent Education Level: This item is the percentage of responses in the school indicating the education level of the student's most educated parent, taken from the 2006 STAR Program student answer document. The following categories are used: "Not a high school graduate", "High school graduate", "Some college", "College graduate", "Graduate school".

All information was voluntarily reported as part of the STAR collection process and may not accurately reflect the entire school population.

She continued to say, “They can make workshops for parents, activities, probably some kind of activities or workshops with the parents telling them the importance of helping the kids but it’s really up to the parents.”

All of the parents in my study acknowledged that they received letters and fliers about school events, special meetings, and workshops for parents. However, for parents like Cecilia, who spent most of her time working at the restaurant, they had a difficult time making it to those family-school events. Cecilia said:

Well I think that’s hard because the school does that stuff and it’s just that we don’t have time. I don’t have time to come. I receive a lot of letters from the, they going to have coffee time, they going to have reading time and all that stuff and I just don’t have the time to come and they do it, they do it, some of us just don’t have the time to come.

The combination of parents not responding to the fliers and the school not offering workshops contributed to parents’ inability to help their children at home. Parents often relied on themselves and their own network of resources for help whenever they did not understand something. The school was often the last resort for the families. Although Bayview seemed to be an inviting and parent inclusive school, parents felt intimidated to go to school and ask teachers for help. They only did so after they exhausted all possibilities of helping their children.

Unintended Consequence: Parents’ Attitudes and Perceptions About Their Own Practices Changed as a Result of the Interview Process

The parents in the study initially reported having difficulty in helping their children with middle school assignments and not spending a lot of time participating in their children’s school lives. However, after spending time with each parent and talking

to them about the transition process and their parenting practices, parents reported a significant change in the way they perceived parental involvement especially during the middle school years. When I asked Abegaila how the process of being interviewed affected her opinion about being involved in her child's life, she responded:

It's changed to the best. I change because I know it's changed. Leilani's grades going up. I know it's what I said erase and eliminate all the trash that we don't use it not carry on in our family. That pull our family down. And especially the kids work. To me just stay as a family and to work together.

Rosalva reported that being interviewed helped her realize that parental involvement was very important in her child's success in middle school. She stated:

It makes me realize that it's really important to get involved in you kid's life and school and everything that you have to be there. Now that I talk about it, I know the difference with my daughter and my son, and things that I do that I'm doing now it helps me to see the difference and I can probably I'm going to do better with the next one. I'm going to help him more and I'm going to be aware of the changes of them. I don't know how he's going to react.

Although Sheila had undergone surgery to amputate one of her legs, she realized that health was not a legitimate excuse for her lack of involvement in her children's lives. From our conversations in the interviews, Sheila recognized that she needed to be an integral part of her children's lives again, like she once was before her health problems. She said:

I'm going to try to get stronger with this leg because they used to me picking them up. I would like to go more with them, go to school, Daniel had a game the other day, UCLA woman basketball, USC and somebody else, they went to school and I was out of that. You know things like that. Daniel and his class went to the show up here, usually I go, at least once or twice, you have a car you can go along with them. I missed out on that, I don't know when I'll be able.

Both Derek and Esmeralda felt that the interviews helped reinforce their efforts to be a part in their children's academic and social lives during the middle school transition. They expressed that they weren't as involved in their children's lives prior to the study. However, after going through the process and thinking about their own practices, both parents agreed that their level of involvement increased and will continue to increase as their children get older.

The parent with the most prolific change in parental involvement practices as a result of the study was Cecilia. During the first interview, Cecilia admitted that she was not highly involved in her child's school life; she did not know who her child's teachers were, had not gone inside the middle school campus, or knew much about her daughter's school work. However, based on our conversations from the final interview, Cecilia transformed the way she participated in her child's life. When I asked for her opinion about being involved in her child's life, she said:

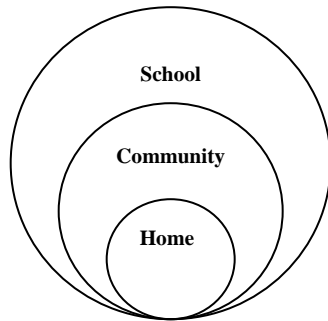
I think it's the most important because we can just leave them alone and do whatever they want and whatever they say. It's a big impact on them if we are beside them to help them to listen to her. It is important for them.

All six parents in the study reported significant changes in their parenting practices during their children's transition to middle school. The parents were less active in the beginning stages of the study and through conversations about their children, and constantly thinking about their own parenting practices, they became aware of their own limitations and began to change for the better.

Parents Relied on Their Own Resources, Teachers Being the Last Resort, When They
Couldn't Provide Academic Help to Their Children

Whenever parents felt that they could not provide any assistance to their children, they tapped into their own support structures for help. Most of the time, parents started with what they knew and the resources they had at home, such as older siblings, the internet, and other family members. If these home resources could not provide any help, then parents would move outside of their home and into the community resources, such as the library, their friends, and the church. Finally, when all resources have been depleted, parents went to the school and asked teachers for help.

Figure 4.1. Parents' circle of resources.



The Home as a Resource

At the home level, parents utilized older siblings, family members, and the internet as resources when they couldn't provide help to their middle school children. In Sheila's household, she emphasized the importance of teamwork in her family when helping her children achieve in middle school. "If they get into a problem they don't understand, we all pitch in and give them a hand." Sheila further stated:

I'm glad my other daughters that's older that went through [middle school] take out the time to help [Jaime, Carrie, and Daniel] when they ask for help. They don't turn them down. Even my son, they can get on the phone and call him and he knows that I'll holler if they get stuck.

Sheila's children also are able to call on her oldest son, Jimmy, and according to her, "It's not a question he can't answer." When Sheila felt she couldn't provide any assistance to her middle school children, she deferred to her older children for guidance.

One example that Sheila spoke about involved using her older children to help prepare her three middle school children. She said:

That's why I'm glad I got older children. We teach, we talk about different things, different classes and what they take. Me in my time, it has changed, so it's good to have older siblings, it's good to have other siblings... If my teenagers be around me, I'm sure they will, because they keep telling them about different things and that's hands on experience, and that's good.

Sheila shared one piece of advice that the older children told their middle school siblings:

Some schools are harder, grades are harder as you go along, and you don't have much time take down like they tell them. When you in lower grades, the teacher come around and take time with you, but as you go on to different grades, they don't take that much time. You got to pay attention.

For Sheila, having children who already experienced the middle school transition proved to be a useful resource for her especially since she has undergone some health problems that limited her participation in her children's school lives.

Cecilia is another parent who utilized her high school children to provide help and guidance for her transitioning middle school child. Prior to the transition, Cecilia sat down with Leticia and her older son, and together, they talked about the middle school expectations, demands, and the environment. As mentioned earlier, Cecilia did not feel

very competent in helping Leticia on her homework, especially in language arts.

Whenever this happened, she had her older son, who is in high school, provide the academic support to Leticia. Cecilia mentioned, “But on other things, I’m not too sure I can help. And that’s when she goes to my son. [Leticia] goes to him when she needs some help with her homework.” She felt that her son’s efforts positively helped Leticia with her academics during her first year in middle school. When I asked her why she thought this way, she stated, “Because she gets the answers she needs from him and most of the time, it’s the correct answers. So it does help.”

Similarly, Rosalva has a daughter in high school and relies on her daughter when she can’t help Jorge on his assignments. Rosalva was able to get information about the teachers and administrator at Bayview because she had many of them as her teacher in the past. She said, “My daughter and all the parents told me that they were good teachers.” Rosalva calls her daughter a “good tutor” who frequently checks Jorge’s work at home. As stated earlier, Rosalva felt that she could not really help Jorge with his writing assignments because English was not her first language. As a result, her daughter helped Jorge with his writing and language arts homework. On one occasion, Rosalva’s daughter shared her middle school experiences with Jorge. Rosalva shared, “Sometimes, she talks to him about what was going on with her, or she knew these teachers. She’s like ‘oh, this teacher is like this, this teacher is like that.’” Her daughter was the one who talked to Jorge about going to middle school and was often the one who Jorge went to when Rosalva could not answer his questions.

In the absence of older siblings, parents used the internet or other family members for help. For instance, Derek said, “I turn on my trusty computer and try to figure it out that way.” Derek had proficient computer literacy skills and was able to help Jon especially on school projects. For example, Jon had to design an irrigation system for a farm in ancient Mesopotamia. At first, Derek thought Jon had made up the name Mesopotamia. He said:

[Jon] was assigned the project for Mesotopia [Mesopotamia]. It’s what used to be Iraq, Iran, somewhere in the Middle East. See, I didn’t know that. Mesotopia [Mesopotamia], I thought he just made it up, but I looked it up and sure enough, he was absolutely right, that’s what it was, just what his teacher told him.

In addition to the internet, Derek also suggested that it was advantageous to have a two parent household. “It helps because I’m married and his mother plays a big part in it too.” The home was the first source of resource for Derek when trying to help his son with his work.

For Esmeralda, she felt that Antonio was capable of completing all his work. She didn’t have the problem of Antonio not knowing how to complete his homework.

However, she mentioned the following:

In the past, every now and then, they would go with their cousins up front, or other relatives, but that was on a rare occasion and that’s after they exhausted every avenue they had on their own of looking at a dictionary, translating words, but it’s on a rare occasion they have to go outside to get help.

Abegaila also viewed family as an important resource in helping Leilani. In her house, everyone took part in the learning process. For example, in math, Abegaila stated:

And then we like parents want to sit down and then make copies and we put it in front of us and we talk about, like the lesson. It’s make sure she

knew it. We sit there as a group and we just try to explain just let them figure out and the other thing like $2x + 4x$ – like that. So she knew how to do it, she showed us the way and I showed the way, you know do her own and we do our own. Then we get together in group and we talk about it. It's like we're teachers to her at home.

It was a family effort when Abegaila helped Leilani with reading. For instance, they encouraged Leilani to read a book. Then, as a family, “We have to read a story and we act it out.” For Abegaila, helping her child meant using her family as a resource, especially when she felt she was incapable of providing help to Leilani.

The Community as a Resource

When the family could not provide any help for the middle school students, the parents sought help from community resources. Sheila, Abegaila, and Rosalva all had the church to help their children with the middle school transition. For Sheila, it was an organization called *One Voice* in her church that supported Sheila when her family could not provide assistance to Jaime, Carrie, and Daniel. Sheila said:

[*One Voice*] is an organization like adopted us as a family. They come and pick my children up not only to go to church, go ice skating, they go to amusement parks, you name it, they do it. They take them even to study to they home, to study they tutor them.

In addition to the church, Sheila relied on her neighbors for help when she couldn't help her children. She explained:

Everybody pull together, we can't do anything, we go next door. We go to this neighbor, everybody will help believe it or not. Everybody will come out and help. And we have a couple of teachers down the street. They teach at UCLA, so we have really smart people that our neighborhood.

Abegaila and Rosalva relied on the church for support when they needed help. But for the two parents, they used some of the church's goal setting strategies to help

their children succeed in middle school. Abegaila and Rosalva both used *Family Home Evening*, a family discussion and goal setting forum that they learned at church. For Abegaila, her family met every Monday evening and they talked about a theme and set goals for the week. After setting their goal, Abegaila and her daughter “worked according to it”. Abegaila felt that these meetings kept Leilani grounded in her religious morals and at the same time, helped her learn to set and achieve personal goals.

In Rosalva’s household, she used *Family Home Evening* as well. For her family, they “talk about goals for the year, and family, and personal and [they] write it down and put it in [our] doors so everybody that goes through there, they know what they have to do.” Rosalva felt that these family meetings helped Jorge “focus on what is important.” For Rosalva and Abegaila, *Family Home Evening* was a way for them to utilize their church as a resource to help their children focus and reach academic and personal goals.

In addition to the church, parents also used the library whenever they didn’t understand something that their children brought home. For instance, Sheila took her children to the library to prepare them for middle school. Rosalva went to the library with Jorge when it was difficult to find specific information on the internet. Abegaila made it a regular practice to take Leilani to the library twice a week. At the library, Abegaila brought Leilani’s high school cousins along and they often shared with Leilani the demands of high school, their experiences in middle school, and future goals. The library, church, friends, and extended family were considered community resources that parents used when they could not provide the help their child needed during middle school.

The School as a Resource

After parents used up all their resources (older siblings, internet, church, friends, and the library), they went to the school as their final source of information when they couldn't provide help to their children. For instance, Abegaila admitted that sometimes, she and her daughter did not understand the homework. "Most of the time, Leilani brings home the homework and she doesn't understand and then we talk about it and said mom, just make sure the teacher knew about it that I didn't know it." In response to the parents and the student not knowing how to complete the assignments, teachers often provided after school help to the students. Abegaila stated:

Don't understand, you know what I mean, I call the teacher again and please, I know it's really hard for my daughter, especially it's little time and don't understand, sometimes it's happen to us too and then the teacher said, OK, that's why I want her to stay after school.

For Abegaila, she called the teacher whenever she didn't feel confident enough to help Leilani on her assignments. She said, "To me, sometimes I don't and I call the teacher about it. Call the teacher, if I not feel confident in it, but most of her homework, she knew it and I knew it too then we study together."

Derek also utilized teachers as the last resort. After using the internet and his friends for help, Derek said, "If it's just flat out comes down to I don't know, I'd say, 'You know what? We need to talk to your teacher about it.'" For Rosalva, she followed the same procedures, going to the internet first for help, then the library, and finally asking the teacher. She said:

Sometimes I feel not much confident. I try to help him if he show me a address in the internet, a page in the internet. We go and look, if not, we go to the library, if not I can send a note back to teacher saying, "You

know what? It's been difficult for us or for Jorge. Can you help us a little bit more?"

Sheila had a similar approach as well. There was one instance in which her child brought home a difficult math problem. Sheila said:

Everybody in the house didn't know it. My neighbors couldn't figure it out, not even my other neighbor over here. We all tried to figure out this one puzzle and we could not figure out this one math problem. We had to take it to school and figure it out.

For a Spanish only speaking parent, Esmeralda was confident that she could count on either [Antonio's] teachers or us (the researcher and the translator) to provide whatever guidance, suggestion, or information on where to get materials. However, she asked during an interview, "Who can [Antonio] ask for help in a certain subject?" Although Esmeralda was confident in her son's teachers, she still wasn't quite sure who he should go to when he needed help.

Research Question #2: From the perspectives of parents, what are the perceived school and family practices that support or impede the elementary to middle school transition?

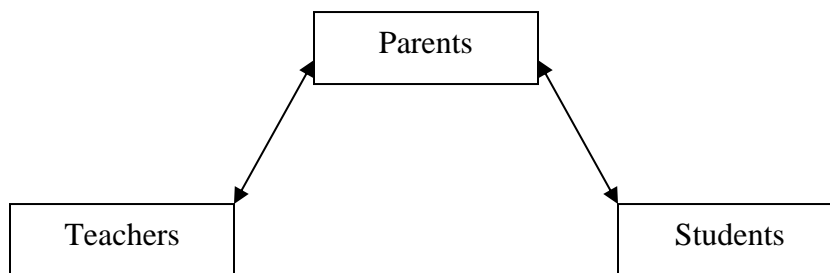
There were certain school and family practices that either supported or impeded the transition from elementary to middle school for students. Parents suggested two major and prominent practices that supported their children's transition to middle school: ongoing and open communication between the parents, school, and the children; and taking an active interest in the children's school lives. On the other hand, there were also school and family practices that impeded the middle school transition. The two most important impediments included non-productive communication between the students

and adults, and the school not asking parents for help. I will first talk about the supportive school and family practices, then move on to discuss the practices that hinder students' transitions to middle school.

Communication: School-Parent-Student

Parents perceived communication to be the most useful and important school and family practice that supported the middle school transition. According to the parents, the most effective form of communication involved three constituents: the school, the parents, and the students. Parents valued the communication that came to them from the school, whether they were in written form, phone calls, or in person. Parents had a desire to sustain the communication they have with their children and learn more about their experiences at school. Oftentimes, parents acted as the middle person in which they brokered the exchange of information between teachers and students. Parents were either in support of the school, or were their children's advocate whenever something occurred at the school.

Figure 4.2. Three Way Communication Flow Chart.



Parent-Teacher Communication

Parents highly valued the communication that teachers used to inform them of their children's academic progress, behavior, and school news. Research confirms that as

students reach the middle grades, parental involvement usually declines as well as the communication between home and school (Halsey, 2005). As a result, the communication that came home to parents from the school was perceived as even more important now than in elementary school. Parents understood that the communication would decrease in middle school simply because there were so many students for each teacher and that it would be very difficult for teachers to call each parent on a consistent basis. The communication that came from the school kept parents informed about the academic and behavior progress of their children at school.

Parents responded that there were more ways to communicate with middle school teachers, such as emails, phone calls, in person appointments, or notes to the teachers. Parents greatly appreciated the progress reports they received from their children's teachers on a frequent basis. Both Derek and Rosalva were appreciative of the letters and notes that were sent home about their children's progress in school. Derek mentioned:

The communication that gets sent home with Jon, as far as the school work, what he needs to do, he's doing well in this area, he needs to maybe concentrate more on this area. I think his teachers they do a good job of communicating that. He gets every week all the comments on what he needs to work on.

More specifically, Derek talked about the notes that he received from Jon's teacher every Friday:

Yes, every week he brings home and the teacher writes comments and Jon actually has to write comments as well, what he did good this week, what he needs to work more on, and then the teacher, she'll write her comments. Like last week's comments were, "Jon is capable of doing better. He needs to focus more and slow down." I forgot the exact wording, but pretty much just take his time and be thorough. But some weeks, it's specific, "Jon has this assignment and he needs to really study his vocabulary," and that helps. Because I can look at a paper and say,

“Oh my God, you got a 2¹⁷. Well, you missed this one, you missed this one.” Well, I can kind of understand why, but the teacher, knowing the curriculum and how all the assignments are, can point it out a little more clearly to the parent where he needs to focus his efforts so he can bring that particular grade up or that particular category up.

Derek also became the mediator between the school and his son when Jon was involved in an incident that led to an in-house suspension. Derek stated:

He, my son, he was involved in an incident on Friday where 2 kids were arguing, him and a friend were also there, so there were 4 of them, so one kid grabbed the other kid around the neck, started choking him. They kicked him. Jon happened to be there and it happened to be friends he was with and so he got in a little bit of trouble himself, even though he hadn't assaulted the other student. Guilt by association, in the wrong place in the wrong time, so he actually served an in-house suspension yesterday.

After this incident, Derek went on campus to talk with the assistant principal in order to get the whole picture because he wasn't sure if Jon was telling the entire truth. After speaking with the assistant principal, and learning what had happened, he agreed with the in-house suspension that the assistant principal had given Jon and further supported the school by grounding Jon for the weekend. In this case, Derek's mediation served as more of a support for the school and its decision to in-house suspend Jon for rough housing.

Rosalva talked about reports being sent home every Friday as well. She said:

They sent a report every Friday saying what Jorge does well during the week and what he needs to improve. So I know what happen that week, if he doesn't do very good in language arts or math or something, I know what's going on every week. And I have to sign, and if I have a comment, I can comment on that. So, even though we don't see face to face, we have communication.

¹⁷ Sixth grade students at Bayview used a standards based grading. A score of 1 meant far below standards, 2 meant approaching standards, 3 meant meets standards, and 4 meant exceeds standards.

In addition to the notes, Rosalva talked to the teachers to learn more about what Jorge needed to improve his grades. She said the following:

They know what Jorge is doing. They tell me what he needs to improve, they tell me what are they doing in the classroom too. To teach him and what I supposed to do at home and what are they expecting from him.

For Sheila, school communication was a vital part in helping her assist her middle school children. During the four months in which I interviewed her, she was recovering from a leg amputation and could not visit the school. She was not really mobile and depended on her older children to take her places. Sheila appreciated the way the school kept her updated on her children's progress. She said:

They will call you and conversation with you. They don't let something happen and let it go and go and then call you when it get bad, they gonna call you right away, let's put a stop, let's do something now, they don't wait. If there's something good, they call you. They don't mind picking up the phone and conversation with you.

For instance, during our third interview, Carrie showed Sheila a postcard from her teacher. The postcard had a positive message from the teacher about Carrie's work in the classroom. These little forms of communication kept Sheila aware of her children's progress in school.

Similarly, Cecilia received notes regarding Leticia's progress in school. Leticia was very talkative in the classroom and the teacher-parent communication kept Cecilia aware of her daughter's behavior in class. One time, Leticia brought home a note to Cecilia that said she was talking too much in class. This gave Cecilia a chance to talk to Leticia about her behavior in class and helped her correct the problem. For Abegaila, teacher-parent communication helped Leilani raise her grades. The language arts teacher

wrote Abegaila a note, informing her about the problems Leilani was having in her language arts class. The teacher also mentioned the opportunity for Leilani to earn extra points by staying after school for tutoring. As a result of this communication, Leilani was able to raise her grade from a B to an A.

As a Spanish only speaker, Esmeralda did not feel that language was a deterrent to effective parent-teacher communication. She felt that because of a language issue, parents should not feel ashamed to go to the school and ask questions or be informed about anything. She mentioned that “language is not a problem actually, there’s so many interpreters and so many people that are bilingual that it is easy to come in and talk to your child or have someone translate.” As an example, she had a good experience from one of the teachers she talked to because he tried to explain things in Spanish and she appreciated that. Esmeralda felt that there were plenty of bilingual teachers and staff at the school and she was comfortable going into the school and talking to the teachers if she had any problems or questions. Parents perceived teacher parent communication to be very important, and because of the communication, parents could help their children with their school work and behavior problems in school.

What Happens When the Communication Breaks?

In one instance, there seemed to be a communication breakdown. Abegaila talked about how it was very difficult for her to gain access, or even talk to her daughter’s teachers. She told me that the middle school offered a variety of ways to contact the teachers, such as by phone, email, in person, or by a note. However, Abegaila had a hard

time getting through to her daughter's teachers. Abegaila said that she emailed the teachers, but none of them responded. She stated"

Most of the time, it's hardly to talk to them. You have to email and most of the time, even if I don't have time to talk to them, I have to call the school and left my message there, see when the teacher will call me stuff like that.

Abegaila also called the teachers and left numerous messages, but none of them returned her call. She said:

I need help from the teachers over there in the middle school, because most of the time, they turn us down, you know when you call and they said, OK, she's not available and I said, we talk and she said just call me anytime you need to.

Abegaila even tried going to school and meeting with the teachers, but most of the time, the teachers were in meetings or busy. She said, "So I walked to, I went two times, this semester, I went two times, they said, they have a meeting, and they teaching the class." She expressed her frustration with trying to get in contact with Leilani's teachers by saying:

To me, the only thing that I'm not, a little concern is about the teachers. We communicate with teachers. Walk in, they busy, you call, you can't, you email, so have to go to principal, said principal, sometime they answer, sometimes they not, they busy. So the only thing I did write down the note, Leilani please give this to your teacher, Leilani brought the note back to me, that's the way I communicate with the teacher now, that's great. Is that great? (She said sarcastically.)

Parent-Student Communication

One very important practice that parents used to support their children's transition to middle school was talking to their children. Parents believed that communication was of extreme importance during middle school because that's when many kids vie for their

independence and many are beginning to go out to places on their own. For parents, communicating with their children kept parents informed about their children's progress in school, let parents know who their friends were, and help parents recognize the problems they faced inside and outside of the school. Derek said:

I think that the number one thing for parents is communicating with their kids. I think by far, that to me is the most important that they know what's going on in their kid's life. You know, you ask them, "Hey, what's going on at school? How's this particular teacher? What are you doing in her class? How did you do on the project? What goes on in campus? What do you do at lunch? After you finish lunch, what do you do? Go play basketball? What do you do? Before you go to class in the morning, what do you do?" You know I usually bring him here 10, 15 minutes before class starts so he's not rushing. And you know I say, "What do you do?" I know most of his friends now, new and old.

Derek also made an effort to communicate with his son everyday after he checked his homework. He said:

At home, I go over his homework with him every night, I ask him about what goes on in his classes, you know, it's different now, whereas when he was here at Southland, he just had one teacher all day, now he has 3 different, sometimes 4 different teachers on any given day. So I like to talk to him about what goes on in each one of those classes and get his feedback on that.

As students moved to the middle school, they intermingled with students from other schools and built new relationships with new students. Sometimes, the parents worried that their children chose the wrong type of friends. Parents believed the conversations they had with their children helped them made good decisions when choosing friends. Rosalva shared:

I teach him that friends are very important part of anybody's life. It's like family that you choose. You actually have to pick that family. I told him you are my son and you stuck with me, that because that the way it is, even if you don't like me, I'm sorry I'm your mom and you can't choose,

but your friends, you actually can choose, you can see the people that can be supportive with you and sometimes they not going to be your best friend one day, because they going to tell you that you wrong, that you doing something wrong, but that doesn't matter. We have a good friends. My husband and I, my family, and we told him it's good to have people close to you to talk, to have fun, it's important.

Rosalva also mediated problems between her child and the teacher. For instance, in the beginning of the school year, Jorge wanted to be in the AVID¹⁸ program. The teacher told Jorge that AVID was for middle achieving students, but Jorge was in the GATE program. As a result, Jorge went home to tell his mother about this. Rosalva then consulted with his daughter, and then asked Jorge if he needed her to talk to his teacher about this. At the end, Jorge decided to re-apply to AVID next year. Rosalva became the middle person in helping her son communicate his needs to his teacher, which was something that the parents often did for their children.

Abegaila used communication with her child to help her make good decisions in school. Prior to the transition, Abegaila explicitly told Leilani that she wanted to have a good mother-daughter relationship in which Leilani could talk to her mother about anything. Abegaila said:

I told Leilani before she came to middle school, "Leilani, I want a relationship. Communicate with me. If there's something your weakness, come and talk to me. Mom is your best friend. If you hide something behind mama's back, you know mama will know it. Don't hide anything,

¹⁸ Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is a college preparatory program for students in the middle who are often economically disadvantaged and underachieving. It enables disadvantaged secondary students to succeed in rigorous curricula, enter mainstream activities in school, and increase their opportunities to enroll in four-year colleges. Developed in 1980 by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID has seen steady growth throughout California, nationally, and internationally in the last 26 years. (California Department of Education Website: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/ps/avidgen.asp>)

just time will reveal it to me. But talk to me, I don't want you to break that relationship. Because once it's broke, it will never together again, like before."

Abegaila frequently monitored her daughter and the friends she made. She would often tell Leilani "I just want you to know who are your friends, and what are their parents, the background, stuff like that. Just let me know, what are your friends and then I will want to know them too." Because of these conversations, Abegaila was pleased with the friends Leilani made in middle school.

Esmeralda often used communication to encourage Antonio to continue his strong study and work habits. When speaking about Antonio's responsibilities, she told him, "To study hard, that his only work to do is his homework and that he has plenty of time to do it." She explained to Antonio:

To try hard, to work hard and to study hard, so he can get a good career, but not just for her, but for themselves, for their family for their home to not struggle the way their parents have struggled.

In addition to informal conversations, Cecilia, Abegaila, and Sheila used more formal and structured approaches to communicate with their children. Cecilia employed a one-on-one approach in which she only took Leticia out and had a one-on-one conversation with her. Cecilia began to do this because Leticia was having problems in the classroom for talking excessively and sometimes even talking back to her teacher. Cecilia believed it was Leticia's way of acting out and seeking attention from her mother. Cecilia said:

Yes, because she needs, sometimes if she doesn't tell me, I still feel like she needs attention and she wants my attention and maybe that's why she does whatever she does because she wants my attention. If I keep asking

her how did her day go, she feels good because I'm paying her attention, I'm with her.

As a result, Cecilia took Leticia to various places such as the mall or the park and spent some special alone time with her. Cecilia stated:

Sometimes she need, she wants like to be with her just us. Sometimes she ask me to go somewhere just with her, no Juan, no Carlos, no nothing, just with her. That's important, to spend time with them, just by themselves. That's the time when you can really talk to them about whatever.

Cecilia believed that the practice of spending alone time with Leticia made her daughter feel special, "Like I'm with her, like I spend time with her and she feels good when I do that."

Abegaila used a practice that was similar to Cecilia's one-on-one conversations. It was called BBI, a conference between the parents and one child. Abegaila met with Leilani twice a month on any day they felt was necessary and appropriate. She called these days, "special days that you can talk to Leilani, only Leilani, just the parents and Leilani." Their conference lasted approximately 30 minutes. They sat down and discussed important issues and concerns, such as what was going on in the world and life teachings. They also discussed their goals in life.

For Sheila, communication with her children was key to their success in middle school, in staying out of trouble, and getting good grades. Sheila communicated with her children at the "Praying Table." The Praying Table was the dining table, which Sheila also used for discussing issues and problems with her children. Sheila explained:

You have to sit down like I call a prayer meeting at this table and we sit down even when my children get in trouble. Sit down. Before you correct them, explain to them and show them what different way could happen and let them explain to you exactly what happen before you go off mad.

You have to talk and listen. If you could conversation, it's the less trouble you going to have. But you have to sit down and talk.

There was one instance near the beginning of the school year in which Sheila's three children were involved in a problem after school. Brian, Carrie, Daniel, and some of their friends were at a local convenient store after school. The children's friends stole some school supplies from the store and they were caught. The principal of Bayview Middle School found out about the incident and the two students who stole from the store were suspended. The principal told Sheila that her children did not take anything, but were at the wrong place at the wrong time. However, Sheila's rule for her children was to always come home, never stop inside a store without telling her first. Her children broke the rules. As a result, she called a meeting at the Praying Table in which they discussed the incident. She was very upset with her children for stopping at the store, when they knew not to. By the end of the meeting, the three children understood their mother and promised never to do that again.

All of the parents placed communication as the number one practice when helping their children adjust and succeed during the middle school transition. The parents believed that the potential for their children to get into trouble became higher when they were growing up, meeting new people at a bigger school, and trying to find their own identities as adolescents. Parents valued the communication that teachers sent home and parents reinforced the teachers' expectations at home. The parents also found it important to talk to their own children in order to help them solve problems and advocate for their children whenever a problem arose.

*Non-Productive Communication: Yelling, No Shared Decision Making, and Not
Negotiating*

One family practice that impeded the students' elementary to middle school transition was yelling and talking at the children, as opposed to talking to them and negotiating with them. Schools could learn from this finding, since it pertained to classroom management and teacher interaction with students. All six parents reported that whenever they yelled at their children, the children became more resistant and rebellious. Instead, students liked being treated as an equal, and being able to provide their input in the decision making process with the family. They didn't like being told what to do, especially in a disrespectful manner. Consistent with this finding are the research on middle school adolescents. Researchers have found that middle school classrooms were characterized by "a greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline" and "fewer opportunities for student decision making, choice, and self management" (Eccles *et al.*, 1993b).

The parents found out from their own experience that their children detested any type of discipline that involved yelling or talking at the children. Through her experience of working with six older children, Sheila learned that adolescents don't respond well to "hard-core punishments." She said, "What really doesn't work is really hardcore punish them. I think if you kind of solve the problem before you do that because you really make it worse than better." Sheila also emphasized the importance of talking and listening to her children. She stated,

You don't really treat them like adults, but you do treat them like grown ups, like they do have knowledge, they know what they talking about. Pay

attention to them because they do know what they speaking of. But don't give them that role that they is a dunce like you but you give them a role that you really understand and they there at that level. You understand them. Don't treat them like they down, treat them like they you really understand. Don't put them down.

Sheila saw that her children often rebelled whenever she became too strict and yelled at her children for disciplinary reasons. She went on to explain:

One reason, they going to rebel, most of the time, 99 to 1 they going to rebel and this going over cycle, cycle, cycle it. Me I like to cut it out right there. Then if it something hardcore come in behind that, then I'm going to give you strict punishment. But if you see something that you can really work out, because they get so much angry in them. You don't need that anyway. You don't need to put it on them. Because they trying to tell you, that if they do something real, real bad, they know because you have taught them that that's a different thing, but just like I said it was something level like I was speaking of see if you can agree and settle with yourself now.

Instead, Sheila encouraged a more productive type of communication. She said:

Let's talk to them instead of me blowing and hollering, and let's see to resolve that way. If I start blowing and hollering, it's going to come up, they hurt, I'm hurt, they do something again and then I'm really hurting, when we could have settled it in a more decent way.

Similarly, Derek believed in "talking to" his son as opposed to "talking at" him.

He said:

I try to encourage my wife because she's, excuse me, a good mother and all, but I said, you know what, you need to talk to him as a person, not as always parent and child and I said just talk to him as a person talk to him about things that go on.

He went on to explain his thoughts by saying:

Not talking at them, but talking to them, especially when he's getting to be his age, he's going to be 12 years old here in July. He's a person that you can carry a conversation on, you can talk about things. I think talking to him rather than talking at them or talking down to them, something that my parents did, they never talked down to me, they never talked at me,

they would get mad, they would raise their voice once in a while, but they would talk to me as a person and we could carry on a conversation and that's something that I really, really strive to make sure I do consistently and he does appreciate that because then he knows that he can talk to me and not in an adversarial position. It's just talking person to person. I think that helps a lot.

Cecilia raised an important point in regards to communicating with her daughter.

Before interjecting her own opinions into the conversation, Cecilia allowed Leticia to always finish her point first. Cecilia said, "I always just let her finish talking and then I just give her my opinion of what's going on. Why she shouldn't done that, what she should have done. Just talk to her." Likewise, Esmeralda commented that Antonio wanted to be treated like a young man. Antonio usually responded to her mother the first time without any sort of yelling. Rosalva also felt the same way as Cecilia and Esmeralda did. Rosalva said:

I know if I get mad and they don't respond very good sometimes. I try not to do it. With my daughter, sometimes I get frustrated, I get mad because I don't know. But if I scream at them and get mad and something like that, they will like, it's like I turn them off so they don't feel like they will keep on doing stuff, so now I know that I don't have to get mad, sometimes if I feel frustrated because they don't get it. I just have to work with them.

Abegaila realized the negative effects of yelling at Leilani when she wasn't completing her homework and chores after school. Abegaila thought that the way she communicated with her children actually might have brought their grades down and made them fearful of approaching her. She said:

The only, this is not supposed to be doing it, most of time I yell. This year, it's different. I talked to my kids said, maybe it's a little different, you know how it's pulling your grades down, and not like checking stuff like that, it's OK, but maybe if you yell a lot, it will scare them. And they will hide stuff behind your back. It's a no, no. I avoid that.

I then asked what made her realize that the yelling had a negative effect on her child, and she responded:

I realize it because I know it's no good. Yelling, it's no good, you're not supposed to do that. Sometimes we did it, but they didn't do it. I make the mistake before, now is this the way that I put their grades down? Is this the problem with Joey? I talk to my husband, "If you was still the mom, you know what to patience sometimes, please just let them do what they want to do, just let them do it." And from there, I learned a lesson, you know to me, I don't like yelling to keep them, said, "Leilani pick up the [inaudible] and to me," small voice like even though you know they're not doing right, they not like to let them perfect all the time, if you know they not doing all the time that if they want to did, "Please look at the schedule and please try to follow schedule." It works.

Taking an Active Interest in Children's Lives

Another important family practice that supported students' transition to the middle school was for parents to take an active interest in their children's school lives. Taking an active interest included the parents attending school events and activities, helping children with their homework, and making their children's learning a priority. All of the parents reported that they kept a close eye on their children and asked them many questions about the school in order to find out what's happening in their classrooms. Derek said:

I just stay involved with what he's doing. Keep track of his assignments to the best of my ability, keep track of them. Just stay interested in his school. I ask him all the time, I ask him a lot of questions, question his work, review it, most of the time, not always.

Sheila believed the most important thing a parent could do was to show that they were interested in their children. She believed that when parents showed genuine interest

in their children's work, then the children will reciprocate by getting good grades in class.

Sheila shared with me:

The best thing is let them know that you are interested in everything they are doing at school and at school. Any programs and anything they have, and if your child wants to do it, be interested with them and they like to do these things. Keep them going like that. You got to be a part, the parents got to care too and that makes them want to do it more. If you care. They love, the kids, if they trust you, they love to share these things with you. You got to be interested with them, with them. If you are interested in something like my kids, they love to please me, I love to please them. This is it.

Abegaila also showed interest in her daughter's school life. She said:

To me, yes it's good to involve especially involve with your kids now, try to ignore you have to be, are you awake? I always say that, are you awake? What is she doing, always ask that in question and then it try to answer and then that impact is still there, what I told you before. The bond between you, the conversation, never end, it's supposed to have that together with your kids, the relationship from your kid not ever end because the impact will be broken too and nothing, no help between you and her.

In addition, Abegaila expressed her concern that parents need to be alert and continue to check on their children just to prevent any negative things that may occur.

She said:

So the only thing I want to Mr. Yuen, that I know of the parents don't you ever sleep, you check before you go to bed, make sure it's OK, like the way you know what I'm thinking of. Talk to her about it, never ever, if she say today, she's OK, don't forget to ask tomorrow too. Everyday you supposed to, especially the mom, that's really important.

Another way that parents showed interest in their children's lives was helping them on assignments. For parents, this included monitoring and checking their children's homework to make sure they were complete, going out to purchase materials for school projects, attending school functions, and helping with assignments. For instance, Rosalva

took Jorge out to the stores to buy supplies for his projects. Rosalva said, “Sometimes he has projects, he comes home with the projects. We have to go with him and buy this stuff or give him ideas.” Sometimes, she even took along his friends to go buy materials for projects. Rosalva stated:

I’m the chauffer, I’m a very intelligent mom, while other mom’s are sitting in their living rooms, watching the novellas, I’m actually driving my kid with the whole bunch of kids around. I like to be around my kid’s friends and I like to talk to them.

In addition to driving Jorge to buy materials, Rosalva and her husband would help Jorge with his homework and projects. For one particular project, Jorge had to design an irrigation system for Mesopotamia, similar to the one Jon and Derek worked on together.

Rosalva said:

Sometimes he has projects, he comes home with the projects. We have to go with him and buy this stuff or give him ideas. Sometimes he’s a little bit frustrated. If he got stuck on some part, my husband or me come up with ideas or something. All the family practically get involved in the project. Painting, taping, or writing, or whatever, and we help him. Rosalva also helped Jorge with his vocabulary words by creating flash cards. So we made the flashcard and I ask him, what is this or what is that, or things like that.

Similarly, Esmeralda took Antonio to the store whenever he needed materials for his projects. Although she did not speak English, she was aware of the work he needed to complete because of their communication at home. Esmeralda said:

He had a project at school in science to make some cells, and she just had to take him to Michael’s to buy what the things he needed and at home he put them together, he used toothpicks to glue them together to pieces, and the whole thing, it dried over night, he put the names on them when it was dry, but at Michael’s she saw an employee she knew and they asked do you have the Styrofoam balls of a certain size that he needed so she went to the back of the store and got them what they needed. But she just had to drive him there and bring him back, he did all the work on his own.

Even with her busy schedule, Cecilia made some time in the day to review Leticia's homework to make sure it was complete. She said, "What I have to do is just review her homework and sign it." When tests were coming up in class, Cecilia made sure Leticia had the proper studying conditions at home. For instance, she stated, "If I know that she has a test, I try not to let her stay a lot on the phone and computer and focus more on the study." As needed, Cecilia also took her daughter and her friends to the store to purchase materials for school projects.

All of the parents in my study placed the onus of being involved in children's lives on parents, not the school. The parents often blamed themselves for not being able to be there for their children. Derek believed that the middle school was already doing as much as it could in getting parents to participate. However, he believed that it was ultimately the parents' decision to be involved, or not, in their children's lives. He said:

Ultimately it is the parents' responsibility, but anything the schools can do to help in the parent taking that responsibility because maybe the parent thinks everything is fine and dandy, and they don't need to do anything. The more information the better and even if you put the information out there and they don't do anything with it, at least you're trying.

In addition, he called for parents to just talk to their children to find out what's going on with them in school. He stated:

Parents just need to ask their kids what's going on and know what's going on at the school. I'll try to find out things, they send literature home on what's going on. Talk to them about those things, things that are going on at the school that you know about that you talk to them so they know you know what's going on at their school. So they're talking to somebody who knows what they're talking about not just making conversation.

Sheila felt that there was no one else to blame but parents when asked about parents' responsibility to participate in their children's lives. She said:

Because it's not to blame anyone. I know the good Lord didn't make us all alike, but who can you blame but yourself? You turn around and blame your child, deep down in your heart you know it's your fault." She further reiterated that there's nothing that the schools can do to promote more parental involvement and the responsibility rested on the parents. Because when they own children can't get their parents lots of time to come, what can the school do? And the school is bending over backwards now, it's so many things the school is doing now, because when they see a lost child, that's why I like these teachers out here, they take them up in they wings, they keep them overtime and teach them and everything because they know they not getting that. Parents are grown now, and lots of them it's just the way the world is going, if you notice, it's not the young mother, it's the grandmothers dragging the school, sometimes go and look around in the crowd, you see most grandmothers that's there instead of young people or they mothers.

Esmeralda felt that it was up to the parents to come to the school and involve themselves in their children's lives. She said:

Parents have to look after the well being of their children. The school offers a lot and people simply need to come in and find out what's going on. People should not be timid or hard headed. They need to visit the school, at both schools, the children come first and a parent need to take that into account and find out what's going on and be involved.

Rosalva made similar statements by saying:

If you're a parent, then you have to try to be there. I know there's a lot of parents that need to go to work, they need to work during those hours, but you have to take the time. I mean, that's the time that your kids are not going to have later. It's the only time, so I think they have to have the time.

All of the parents attended the parent conferences and all of the parents, except Cecilia and Sheila, attended the middle school orientation and Back to School Night events. Sheila did not attend any of the school functions because of her health, while

Cecilia had a busy schedule. Rosalva told Jorge's teacher that she was available to chaperone any field trips and Derek chaperoned a dance in the beginning of the school year.

The parents also believed that their participation produced positive results for their children in school. Derek tried his best to keep track of his son's assignments and help him study for tests by quizzing him. Derek noticed that whenever he was not around or as involved in Jon's school life, Jon tended to perform at a lower level. Derek talked about certain times when he was working and had to go out of town for a few days. He said:

Because if I tend to get side tracked and I do spend time out of time and don't not always right there with him, I can see him kind of drift off and he'll like forget his homework, blow a spelling test, something like that.

The difference in Jon's behavior and grades was a noticeable one for Derek whenever he was not around to help Jon with his homework and test preparation. He stated:

When I'm gone for a week or a week and a half, which I've done like 4, 4 or 5 times over the past year I've been gone a week or more. I noticed he slipped because I get back and he starts bring these things home and he's got a lousy grade on this, I've got detention. I do notice and I think he just, it's not a big difference, but I do notice the difference.

Cecilia had a similar experience to Derek's, in which she said, "If I'm not on top of the homework, sometimes she just doesn't bring it." Cecilia noticed that her daughter would forget her homework, or not even complete them if Cecilia did not sit down and check Leticia's homework every night. Abegaila and Sheila shared the same philosophy about helping there children. The parents believed that showing interest in their

children's lives sent the message that parents cared for their children. In turn, the children will want to perform and achieve good grades to appease their parents. Abegaila said:

It's more important because what I said, without your help, maybe she will low her grades, if your kid sees you and you not care about her, she doesn't care about homework, she doesn't care about school, she will do something else instead of oh, my mom and my dad and I don't care about me. To me, it's really important, it's a must to the parents.

Sheila made a statement that supported Abegaila's belief. She said:

It's very important to be involved all the way through the children's school life. Every time they have a meeting or anything in school, if your children know that you're involved, they going to really do they best. Because they never know when they going to look up and mama's here. But if mama never go to school, they don't feel proud. They be proud to see you come in. This is my mama. Here mama, come and see my work at my desk, this is my desk, this is where I sit, this is what I did. They love to show off. I think all children, that's one thing, I think all children like that, to have love and attention especially at school and around they friends. Someone's coming around to see their things.

The parents felt that their involvement helped pushed their children to turn in higher quality and more accurate work, and helped to maintain high standards of achievement and behavior in the classrooms.

The School Not Asking Parents for Help

Based on their responses, the six parents wanted their children to succeed in middle school and they all wanted to help their children. However, one school practice that impeded parents' involvement during the transitional year was that the school did not ask parents for help, even though parents were willing to help. About three days before the school dance, Derek approached the assistant principal to ask about the time of the dance because he wanted to attend "just the end of it." The assistant principal then

invited Derek to be a chaperone, in which he agreed and attended the last hour of the dance. At the dance, Derek did not see any parents there. He said, "I was a little disappointed not to see any more parents. I was the only parent there." In addition, Derek said, "I haven't been solicited for anything for the school. Maybe if the administration threw out something, like solicitations [that would encourage more parents to volunteer]."

When I asked for Rosalva's opinion about volunteering at the middle school, she responded, "I like to do it, I know the kids get more embarrassed now they older, but I think it's important if you found something, you going feel a lot of embarrass. I think the parents should do it." When I followed up with a question of whether Rosalva would volunteer at the middle school if the teacher asked, she replied, "Yes, sure." Then I asked her if she ever volunteered at the middle school and Rosalva said:

I talk to the teacher and I told her if one of the teachers if she ever needs parent for anything like field trip or I know they do some dances and I don't know if they need chaperones or something or whatever, it's OK, they can call me.

When I asked if the middle school teachers ever took advantage of her offer, she replied, "No." Although Rosalva wanted to help, the teachers and the school never utilized her. I also asked her if she knew what teachers wanted from parents and she responded:

I really don't know the things they need. But I know that sometimes they use parents for like they have a parent center in the middle school and they, I don't really know what the parents do there, but I know that they use the parent center to help.

The parent participants did not mention any active recruitment from the school to get parents involved. Although the parents placed the responsibility of being involved in their children's lives on themselves and not the school, Derek said that it would help if the school sent out information that told parents what to do and expect from the school.

He said:

Ultimately it is the parents' responsibility, but anything the schools can do to help in the parent taking that responsibility because maybe the parent thinks everything is fine and dandy, and they don't need to do anything. The more information, the better and even if you put the information out there and they don't do anything with it, at least you're trying. If I got information from the administration saying, even if it's just suggestions on how to help your kid, I've seen smatterings of pamphlets and I know Lilly (younger daughter) at the beginning of the year, Ms. Hendrick (daughter's elementary school teacher), I don't know if it was Ms. Hendrick specific or the school specific, what's expected of your 4th grader. That was kind of interesting. It kind of outlines it because I think most parents just send their kids to school and they go to school, the teachers teach them, they come home and that's it. That might work for some kids whereas other kids might need the help and I don't think as parents, we're all equipped to help them with their schoolwork or any issues they might have at the school. If we had communication coming from the schools, I think it would help, the parents have something to look at or refer to and say, this is how things should be.

Research Question 3: What were the problems and successes that parents were observing in regards to the elementary to middle school transition?

Appreciation of the Strict and Academically Challenging Demands of Middle School

Parents perceived two areas of success in the elementary to middle school transition. Parents were very happy and appreciative of the strict environment and the academically challenging demands of middle school. However, parents also expressed their concerns of school violence and fights and also reported that their students showed a decline in achievement in the beginning of the school year. Contrary to the research on

middle school transitions, which found that middle schools were characterized by teacher control and greater emphasis on classroom discipline (Eccles *et al.*, 1993b), parents actually liked the classrooms being stricter. Many of the parents felt that middle school was a time in which many students began to experience more freedom in their lives, which can lead them into trouble.

When I asked Derek whether he perceived if the middle school classrooms were stricter than elementary school classrooms, he responded by saying:

It sounds like they are, but I mean, he's never got detention, he's never been late to class, I've read the rules and reg's (regulations) and he's told me that you got to be in class at 8:10 or I forgot exactly how it works, but it sounded like they're really, really strict about being on time.

In terms of student behavior issues, Derek said that the middle school used a preventative approach. He said:

They seem very strict over there, it seems like they're really trying to get out front of any potential issues that are going to come up with students. I absolutely support them disciplining as they did and I'm completely fine with that.

According to Derek, having a strict environment meant keeping the students safe. "His teachers seem kind of strict, which is fine," commented Derek.

Cecilia also experienced the strict environment that Bayview created. Her daughter, Leticia, was talking excessively in the classroom. As a result of her talking, the teacher called Cecilia immediately to inform her of Leticia's classroom behavior. Cecilia gave me Leticia's account about the middle school classrooms. She reported:

[Leticia] mentioned that here (elementary school), they let things go more. They're not as strict as the other teachers because they don't tolerate anything. Like this is school, they just like go like, if nothing happens, a lot of things.

Abegaila also agreed that the middle school teachers seemed very strict, but have the children's best interests in mind. She said, "The teachers over here they're really nice, over there, they're strict, they're nice, but their strict. They're really etiquette teachers, but strict, I like it strict, [Leilani] like it strict too." Abegaila defined strict as:

They're strict by just do it, give it to you and do it right now. But over here (elementary), they give you some time to think about it and just give them the detail and stuff they need. But over there (middle school), it's like just give you some thing to do it, use your head and do it right away.

Sheila felt that the middle school classrooms were more tightly ran than elementary school classrooms. She explained:

They give you so much time in one classroom, you don't have like you sitting there all day, I'm going back to the same classroom, I can pick up. No, you have to do you lesson in the little bit of time because you going to another classroom, another subject all together, we not going to have this in here, you not going back to the same classroom. So you going to be in another classroom, be in another subject, so you have to learn to complete each job for each room, whatever you have. I think that is better.

Along the same lines as the school being a strict environment for students, parents also believed that the classes were very demanding for their children, which was something parents found to be advantageous for their children. Rosalva perceived the huge demands from middle school as a good way to prepare her child for high school and ultimately, college. She said, "Because I don't mind when teachers are demanding because I know when they go to high school and the universities gonna be more demanding, and it's good that they have the good training." Rosalva gave the example of her son's assignments. She said:

In middle school, they are a little bit more demanding with them. They have to have the work well done, my son has a very, very bad writing.

Sometimes you can't understand and the teacher they tell him, he has to improve that and try to write clearly now. More clearly and I like that. I like that they're more tough with them.

Sheila's children also complain to her about the intensity and quantity of work they have to complete each night. She reported:

They always complain about the work, it's too much and too hard. They always complain about work. They always have lots of work and lots of, they have to get they work. They have to and they have lots of assignments. They have to make up a, they send them home to do a lots of assignments, you know to bring in, things that they have to do, so we really have to keep up with they homework.

Concerns About the Decline in Student Achievement and School Violence

Some of the problems associated with the middle school transition were concerns of school violence and decreases in student achievement. The parents expressed that after the middle school transition, students experienced a drop in achievement, a finding that was consistent with the literature. This decline could be attributed to the strict and academically challenging environment of middle school, a claim that much of the literature defends (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Even though Jon was in the GATE program in elementary school, he demonstrated a slight decline in his grades in the beginning of the transitional school year. Derek reported:

I see him being graded down, like I said, he has improved but I think the initial several weeks, I saw him being graded down for things he might not have been graded down for here, whether it be vocabulary, or maybe incomplete sentences, spelling. Those are I think, spelling, I think gets, I think in elementary school, it wasn't that important, the spelling part. That was one thing that really bugged me because misspelled words is just one thing that just drive me crazy and to see my kids come home and they've done an assignment, they've gotten a good grade on it, and I can go through and I can pick out all the misspelled words and they weren't graded down for that and I don't think he's getting away with that. That's one thing that I know he's not getting away with that he is getting graded down for.

The grades Jon was getting were sub par in comparison to the grades he used to receive in elementary school. Derek spoke of the decline as, “Not a drastic decline, you know to go from all 3’s and 4’s to a 2+ here or a 2+ there. Not a major drop. But a visible one.”

Similar to Derek, Rosalva’s son was in the GATE program in elementary school and showed a decline in his grades after the transition to middle school. Rosalva mentioned that Jorge was in the top of his class during elementary school, but was considered average in middle school. She said, “And now, there he’s in the average because he came with the test with 2’s and I never saw that before. Always it was 4’s, 4’s, 4’s, all the time. Perfect. Now I see 2’s.” She continued to say:

For example, the grades, he could of have a 3 in elementary but now he has a 2 because the teachers expect more from him, not just to sit down in the comfort zone and I just write this and whatever. No. They ask them for more, like if they gonna present a paper, it has to be well write and the essays and everything, they ask them for more.

Cecilia noticed a similar dip in achievement for her daughter too. She said, “She used to get better grades then, it’s not like they’re bad, but she’s struggling more.”

Abegaila’s daughter also shared similar experiences in a decline in achievement after transitioning to middle school. Abegaila stated, “Leilani is decrease a little bit, decrease a little bit.” Abegaila talked about Leilani’s language arts grade being lower than elementary school, even though language arts was her strongest subject. According to Abegaila, Leilani experienced a drop in motivation in language arts and reading as well during the middle school transition year. Moreover, although Esmeralda did not see Antonio’s report card during the time I interviewed her, she did talk about Antonio

receiving a grade of F for losing his notebook. As for Sheila, she talked about the decrease in grades in her three middle school children. During one interview, she showed me Carrie's report card, and she received an F and a D in language arts and algebra. Daniel also wasn't doing too well, since he was getting 2's on his report card.

The parents all noticed a slight decrease in their children's achievement at the middle school during the beginning of the school year. Even the GATE students experienced a small dip in their grades. However, many of the parents reported that the grades eventually went up back during the fifth month of school, which showed that it took some time for students to adjust to the new environment and academic demands of the middle school.

In addition to the concern for an academic decline during middle school, parents were very worried for their children's safety at the school. Half of the parents had some concerns prior to the transition, when their children were still in elementary school. These concerns continued to persist in parents' perception of the school and its safety after the transition. Most of the concerns stemmed from information they heard from other parents, events they saw on television, and fights they have seen on the campus. Parents who already experienced the middle school transition had fewer concerns about school violence.

Esmeralda's biggest concern was that her son would get beat up on the way home. She trusted the school and was not afraid of violent events occurring inside the school, but feared more about the events that could happen outside of school. Esmeralda had heard from other parents that students would get beat up, or get hit, after school. She also

was concerned of other students offering Antonio drugs, something she heard from other parents as well. Much of her information was hearsay from other parents.

Abegaila was very concerned about her daughter's safety at the middle school. Abegaila mentioned seeing fights on campus, and having conversations with the campus security in which they informed her about fights that occur on the campus occasionally. She said, "Over here, I like it over here (elementary school), there's no fighting. Over there (middle school), there was shooting." She mentioned that there were some racial tensions between the Polynesians and African American groups. She stated, "The Polynesian people, we from Polynesia, we good people, and some Black people they were fighting, but they're not in the school." As an illustration, Abegaila's daughter would come home and talk about the fights that occurred on campus. Abegaila explained:

So Leilani came last week and said they fight again. They fight again, like against Polynesian people and Black and Mexican. She's kind of scared like concerning for her, like sometimes maybe she's scared of going to school, I don't know. Right now, she's OK, but never know in the next year, 8th grade, it will be tough, especially big kids. That's I think that's concern for her.

Abegaila also talked about an incident in which she saw some boys fighting on campus. She stated:

I saw the two Black boys who were fighting at the back door, the back gate. So that lady standing over there trying to open the door and she said stop, they never stop, they don't listen to adults, teachers, if you not a teacher, if you work in the school, they have to respect you. So they were have a big fight, they were like, the lady said, go to the office, go now to the office, you need to go to the office, you know what the other boy said? Mind your business, you're not a teacher. Oh my goodness, she was like, what? Trying to hold his hand, and take him, doesn't want to, he just said,

gotta go to school. What's your name? Never answered, never mentioned no name.

When I asked Abegaila whether the boys were really punching each other or just playing around, she said, "They really punching each other." Abegaila believed that the elementary school was a safer place than middle school by saying, "I was scared like, I know big school, middle school, they have fighting a lot. I know over here (elementary school), let's say over here is safety, to me, it's to my own opinion."

Derek heard of fights occurring on campus as well. He believed that the elementary school was seemed less likely to have any violence and fights as compared to the middle school. Derek said:

When he was here at Southland (elementary school), it really wasn't a big deal, he just went to class and came home. He never had an incident here that I could ever think of in the 5 years he was here. I know the potential goes up when you're dealing with pre-teens and teenagers, I try to keep a closer eye on what goes on.

For parents who experienced the transition process already, they did not have too many concerns of school violence. Rosalva said that Jorge was a bit afraid of going to school with older students and dealing with bullies. However, that was not Rosalva's primary concern. She told me:

I was more concerned about the academics, not much about the kids and things like that. I was worried about which classes he was going to have, his teachers, he was going to have good teachers, things like that. That was my concern, mostly.

When I asked if she still had some concerns for his safety, Rosalva said:

Well yes, I worry because it happens almost everywhere. I listen to other parents in another schools and I watch television or I read or everything I know it's not just the kids who hit other kids, I mean also the kids who tell them mean things it's more like psychologically too. Things like that. I

was worried about it. I still worry sometimes because we haven't finished with school yet, I think he has to be there.

Rosalva believed that the opportunity and potential for fights to occur was always there, it's something that parents and the school cannot predict. She stated:

I know there is always the opportunity to start something. It's not because it doesn't happen in the beginning of the year, it's never going to happen, so that's why I'm worried, but that's OK, I try not to transmit that to my kids.

Moreover, Rosalva heard stories of fights in the middle school, particularly after school when students walk home. Jorge shared with his mother that students argued and acted as if they were about to engage in fights. She said, "He told me there, sometime they argue and they try to fight and everything, and I ask him if he saw something and he said no, he hasn't see anything like big and just kids arguing things like that."

Cecilia did not have many concerns about school violence in the middle school. Cecilia felt that since she experienced the middle school transition twice already, this being her third time, she was familiar with the process and trusted the safety precautions from the school. However, Cecilia did mention that her daughter talked about her friends being involved in a fight that involved throwing punches at school. Cecilia said, "Well she told me the other day some of her friends got into a fight." Sheila also shared that she did not have any concerns for her children's safety at the middle school. She said, "No, I haven't had concerns really of violence in the schools that my kids going to." She felt that her children were "safe" at school. Since this was Sheila's sixth experience with the middle school transition, it could have been the reason why she felt comfortable with sending her children to the middle school.

Research Question #4: Given the findings from interviews, what strategies can parents and schools use to help students make a successful transition to middle school?

The findings from the interviews suggest that parents and schools can best help students ease the transition from elementary to middle school through these strategies:

- *There should be strong and ongoing communication between the teachers and parents, and parents and students.*

The findings from the interviews with parents showed that parents highly valued ongoing communication from the school. Parents understood that middle school was a time of change, both academically and personally, for their children. Parents knew that in order to keep up with their children's daily school and social lives, they needed more information about the things their children did at school. Parents were very grateful when they received any information about their children, good or bad. When it was something positive, parents rewarded their children and continued their efforts at home. When the news was negative, parents disciplined their children and thanked the school for the information.

Parents also rated daily communications with their children as highly important and critical during the middle school years. There was a dichotomy that parents faced, their children were growing up and they sought to have greater independence. However, Derek said it best when he was talking about his son's strive for more independence. He said:

You don't want him to be so independent that he doesn't need you anymore or breaks away from you. I try to keep it to where he is

independent but he still has boundaries. There's certain things that he still needs his parents for, he needs to understand that he's still a kid and he still got a long ways to go.

Parents felt that middle school was a time in which students began to make new friends at a larger school and the potential for dangers increased during this age. As a result, parents thought it was even more imperative to keep a short leash on their children, and to have the school set strict and clear parameters and expectations for student behavior. Contrary to the perception that middle school children do not talk to their parents or seek advice from their parents, my study found that indeed students talked to their parents daily and asked for help whenever they needed it, a finding that was consistent with the literature (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

- *Middle schools should aggressively encourage parents to maintain active participation in their children's school lives, both at home and at school.*

According to the interviews, all parents were interested in helping out their children and the school in some way. Particularly for parents who did not work or had flexible work schedules, they were able to attend all school functions and expressed interest in helping out at the school. Many parents also offered teachers their time, volunteering at field trips, dances, and in the classrooms. However, the teachers and the school failed to capitalize on these free resources. The parents reported that they communicated with the teachers their availability and what they were willing to do, but teachers never called them back. Also, many of the parents weren't too informed about the school parent center or PTA programs. It seemed as if the school did not deliver and

communicate its school-parent relationship goals well, which left many parents seeking for answers.

- *Parents and teachers should treat middle school students with respect and as responsible people, not dictating decisions for them or talking down at them.*

Parents reported that their children responded better to negotiating, consensus building, and shared decision making. Students felt a sense of ownership and accountability when they were able to provide input in the decision making process. The students were more inclined to listen to what the parents had to say and respect any consequences or suggestions parents gave. On the other hand, whenever parents dictated their decisions for them, students tended to rebel or argue with their parents. The parents reported that whenever they yelled or nagged at their children, they resisted their parents' requests. Instead, the middle school students appreciated when parents sat down with them and talked things out, which often resolved problems amicably. All of the parents agreed that they had better responses when they talked to their children as opposed to being irrational and yelling at them.

According to the parents in my study, the same was true inside the classroom. When teachers did not give students the opportunity to provide input in classroom decisions, they were apt to reject the ideas. This finding was consistent with the literature, since many of the upper grade elementary school students take on leadership roles at their schools (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987). Many students participated in student council, became teacher's aides, cafeteria monitors, or playground mediators.

However, once these same students reached middle school, many of them did not have the same opportunities for school leadership initiatives.

- *Parents and schools should engage students in after school activities.*

All of the parents had their children engaged in some type of after school activity, whether it was through the school, community, or church. Parents thought that the extra-curricular activities were important for social growth and helped students adjust to middle school. The after school activities gave students a sense of belonging and accomplishment. For instance, Rosalva's son was on the school basketball team and Boy Scouts. When he was selected to be on the school basketball team, Jorge came home and said "Mom, I made it, I made it!" He was very excited about that. Near the end of the season, Jorge won the most improvement award on his team, which really boosted his sense of accomplishment and confidence at the middle school.

In addition, Sheila had her three children involved in the school football team, basketball, and gymnastics through the community programs. She felt that these activities gave something the students to look forward to and provided a safe venue for her children to meet new friends and play sports. Cecilia's daughter was on the community soccer team, in which she won the player of the season award and became very popular with her peers, something that increased her self-confidence in meeting new friends at the middle school. Esmeralda's son was also involved in the community sports programs and has aspirations of being a pro-basketball player when he grows up, whereas Derek's son was involved in baseball. All of the parents felt that the school should offer

many clubs and activities for students to explore and learn in a different environment than the traditional classroom setting.

- *Schools should maintain a challenging academic environment for students.*

Parents understood the difficulty of new content and concepts in the middle school curriculum. However, they felt that the challenging environment was needed in order for their children to succeed and progress to the next level: high school and college. The parents were content with the academic demands of middle school such as homework for each class, rigorous grading practices, and higher teacher expectations. There seemed to be a strict focus on academics and that learning must be taken seriously. For instance, Rosalva discussed how Jorge's teacher held high expectations and required him to turn in quality work, as opposed to work that was simply complete. She said, "Well he tries and tries and sometimes he go back to the same paper two or three times at home. He like no, the teacher said it's not good enough." Moreover, Derek believed that the middle school assignments were more detail oriented than elementary school work. He said, "Some of the assignments I think are a little more detailed in-depth, require more time, and effort than when he was in elementary school."

- *Schools should have more security and adults supervising students to maintain campus safety and parents should drop off and pick up their children at school.*

All parents had the safety of their children in mind prior to, during, and after the transition to middle school. Parents suggested that the school should have more security guards and adults supervising the school to prevent any school violence that may occur. The parents stated that the principal and assistant principal were always visible,

conducting morning and after school safety supervision and talking to students. The parents believed that this practice by the school administration quelled off many potential problems at the school. Derek said:

I think just a lot of hands on, I think Mr. Noyes and Mr. Herrera, definitely I see Mr. Herrera on the campus all the time. I think the presence of the administration that goes a long ways. Kids are less likely to act up when there's supervision.

Parents were aware of the fights that occurred on campus, and they suggested having more security walking the hallways and making sure students are in their classrooms. Abegaila said, "Because I know over there, it's not safety to me. I think the principal will look into have some more people, I think he not going to pay them, but like to me they need more security over there."

All of the parents dropped off, and picked up their children at the school. One reason was distance: the distance from their homes to the middle school was quite far. However, parents were more concerned about the things that would have gone on if they allowed their children to walk to school. For example, Esmeralda feared her son would get attacked while walking home. Derek did not really trust the environment and some of the things that occurred there, such as gangs. Parents reported that dropping the students off in the morning before school started ensured that their children made it to the school safely and on time. For instance, Abegaila talked about how some of Leilani's friends would make a stop at the liquor store before school started. Parents also thought picking up their children after school was an important practice to keep them safe as well. For instance, Sheila stated:

A lots of parents should do one thing if they home and doesn't have anything to do, I don't care how old your child is, how big they is, it's good to pick them up, it really is, it's a good thing to pick them up.

Because Sheila had one of her legs amputated, she could not pick up her children.

Instead, she taught her children to come straight home. She said:

When you can't really pick them up, teach them how to come straight home. No stopping at no stores, don't give them extra money, wait until they get home and then let them go out, but know that they get home safe, for them to come, learning to come straight home so you know exactly about what time they should be walking in that door so if they not walking in that door, say 5 or 10 minutes later, you know you got some trouble on your hand, because you haven't had a call.

However, her children were tested one day after school in which they strayed from Sheila's teachings and went inside a local convenient store with their friends who were caught stealing.

Conclusion

The elementary to middle school transition is a time when students experience a new school setting that is larger, more informal, and with high academic demands and expectations. The six parents that I interviewed shared their children's experiences regarding the middle school transition. For some, it was their first time; others had already gone through the process before with older siblings. Nevertheless, the parents had similar concerns, fears, and praise for the middle school and the transition. The parents all agreed that the curriculum was more challenging in middle school, which made it difficult for them to provide help to their children. Parents had numerous resources to go to whenever they needed help for their children, but the school was always the last resort. Communication was placed in high regards for parents. They

believed that it was imperative to have strong home-school-children communication so that all parties knew what was going on and their expectations for each other. Parents also noted ineffective communication techniques that hindered the students' adjustment to the middle school, such as yelling at their children and not allowing their children to have input in the decision making process.

In addition, parents offered their time to the school and found it highly advantageous to take an active interest in their children's lives, such as helping with homework, attending school meetings and functions, and talking to their children. Whenever parents showed their support for their children, oftentimes the children responded by getting good grades and staying out of trouble. Whenever parents became busy with their work and personal lives, and their time spent with their children became limited, the students would show a slight decrease in the quality of their work and homework completion. Parents also noticed a slight dip in achievement after their children transitioned to middle school. The parents believed that the change of environment, higher expectations and demands, and the different schedules all contributed to the decrease in grades. However, the school failed to capitalize on the parents' free time and did not actively recruit and engage parents at the school. Parents reported that they were never asked to help out and they did not feel very confident about going into the classrooms to help, since the content became more complex and difficult.

Finally, parents perceived the middle school environment to be very strict. The classrooms were very teacher centered and students were penalized for tardiness, not turning in homework, and for excessive talking, things that were taken lightly in

elementary school. Parents were concerned with school violence and feared that their children might get beat up after school. They had heard stories from other parents and from the media about school violence, which made them more cautious to allow their children to walk to school.

These findings helped determine some strategies that schools and parents can use to help their children transition successfully to middle school. They are:

- *When given the opportunity to talk to teachers, parents developed new strategies and transformed their thought process about the way they assisted their children in adjusting to the middle school transition.*
- *There should be strong and ongoing communication between the teachers and parents, and parents and students.*
- *Middle schools should aggressively encourage parents to maintain active participation in their children's school lives, both at home and at school.*
- *Parents and teachers should treat middle school students with respect and as responsible people, not dictating decisions for them or talking down at them.*
- *Parents and schools should engage students in after school activities.*
- *Schools should maintain a challenging academic environment for students.*
- *Schools should have more security and adults supervising students to maintain campus safety and parents should drop off and pick up their children at school.*

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction: Origin of the Study

As a former fifth grade teacher who worked with some of the brightest and nicest students in South Bay City, I was disturbed to find that many of my former students became unmotivated and had problems once they transitioned to the middle school. I received anecdotal information from informal conversations with middle school teachers, parents, and students who also observed the same phenomena. They told me stories of students not performing well academically, having disciplinary issues in school, or beginning to hang out with the wrong crowd once they went to middle school. I couldn't help but ask why some students, who did extremely well in elementary school, were struggling in middle school.

During the initial stages of my study, I was a second grade teacher. I had the chance to see the difference in parental involvement between the upper grade and primary grade classrooms. In the upper grades, few parents volunteered in the classrooms or came on campus. They usually came for parent conferences, school events, or for disciplinary reasons. In the primary grades however, parents were more hands on. Many parents picked up their children after school, volunteered in the classrooms, and came to school upon the teachers' requests. Based on a discussion in the South Bay City Middle School Committee on which I served, I learned that parental involvement was even worse at the middle school level. My district's experience with declining parental involvement as students got older and moved up in grades was

consistent with the literature (Amato, 1994; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Halsey, 2005; Hawes & Plourde, 2005).

As a result of what I was seeing and reading, I wanted to study this problem and figure out ways to help students successfully make the transition to middle school and simultaneously, incorporate parents' perspectives in the process. There were few studies done that documented parents' perceptions about the middle school transition process (Akos & Galassi, 2004). I decided to use qualitative case studies to examine this problem in depth. I interviewed six parents who had children in their first year of middle school and captured their experiences with the transition, the strategies they used to help their children, and the perspectives they had about the barriers that made it difficult for them to help their children. Each parent was interviewed four times over the duration of four months. At the last interview, there were reported changes in parents' perspectives about the transition process and their involvement in their children's lives because of the continuous discussions and reflections about their home and school involvement practices.

Key Findings

The findings that proved to be the most important in my study were:

- Parents valued and wanted consistent communication with their children and teachers;
- Parents cared for their children's educational success and offered their time to teachers, but teachers did not accept the offers;

- Parents worried about the school violence as children moved into middle school, and received most of their information about school safety from other parents and the media.

Most of the research suggests that a breakdown of communication between parents and teachers occurs when children attend middle school (Richardson, 2004). One survey of over 100,000 adolescents nationwide indicate that only one out of four adolescents reported that their parents were approachable and available to talk (Benson *et al.*, 1998). However, my findings suggest that parents interviewed made it a priority to talk to their children and wanted to learn more about their children during the middle school years. These parents also knew their children very well too, since they could foresee problems and concerns their children had based on their body language and demeanor. For instance, Sheila mentioned that if her children walked inside the house without giving her the usual kiss on her cheek, then she knew something was wrong. Each parent set aside time during the evening, either formally or informally, to talk to their children about school and non-school related matters.

Another major finding in my study was that parents genuinely cared for their children's success in school and were willing to provide any sort of help, but the school failed to recognize and capitalize on their offers. Many of the research studies attribute the lack of parental involvement during the middle school years to a perceived inability to get help from parents with low socioeconomic backgrounds (Becker & Epstein, 1982). However, after working with my parent participants, socioeconomic status did not appear to be a deterring factor for parents in providing help for their children, a finding that is

congruent to the research conducted by Sui-Chu and Willms (1996). The parents all took ownership of their responsibilities to raise children and to be involved in their children's lives. They all commented that love and affection was the driving force that made them stay actively involved in their children's school lives. At the beginning of the study, Cecilia blamed work for her absence in her daughter's school life. However, at the end of the study, she understood that even after a long work day, there was still time to devote to her daughter. In addition, the parents included in my study were willing to offer their services to the school and teachers, whether it was chaperoning a school event or going into the classrooms to volunteer, but the school never took advantage of the offers, a finding that was consistent to the literature (Becker & Epstein, 1982).

Finally, parents were very concerned about their children's safety at the school. Based on a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), researchers found that middle schools were more likely to report a violent crime than elementary schools. Middle schools were more likely than high schools and primary schools to report that student bullying occurs at least once a week at school (Guerino *et al.*, 2006). Parents often heard about school violence from other parents or from the media such as television news and newspapers. Fights occurred infrequently at Bayview, but parents still valued safety and wanted more security on campus to prevent outsiders from coming into the school and maintaining a peaceful environment. The literature suggests that students were often concerned about bullies before they transitioned into the middle school (Akos, 2002; Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992). However, there is little research conducted on the way parents feel about middle school safety after the transition. As a

result, my study adds to the literature and provides additional insight as to how parents felt when their children transitioned into middle school.

Major Themes

Based on the findings from the data, four major themes emerged:

1. Parents perceived that communication with their children and the school was an important factor for middle school success after the transition.

The literature suggests that parents do play an important role in helping students cope with the middle school transition. A study conducted by Akos (2002) found that out of 331 fifth grade students (before the transition), 22% of the students turned to their parents for help. After the transition, out of 97 sixth graders, 19% of them said their parents helped with their transition to middle school. Research indicates that parent-child communication is important during early adolescence (Richardson, 2004).

Research also recommends strong school to home communication to help students succeed in school. Some of the parents in my study reported receiving weekly progress reports as well as signing off on homework daily for their children and the teachers, a practice that was commonly suggested in the literature (Epstein, 1987a; Epstein & Becker, 1982). Parents appreciated these forms of communication because they kept parents aware of their children's academic and behavioral progress in school. Parents also knew when to help their children study for exams and focus on areas of weaknesses. However, these communication practices from the middle school teachers were voluntary. Administrators should create or support policies to inform parents, students,

and the community about the school, since my findings showed that parents wanted more information about the middle school and the ways they can help their children.

2. Parents perceived that showing interest in their children's school lives resulted in higher achievement in middle school.

There is a myriad of research that documents the effects of parental involvement. Research shows that whenever parents take an active interest and involve themselves in their children's lives, several positive results occur. First, it has been documented that parental involvement increases attendance rates in students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) and decreases behavior problems (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Parental involvement also increases mathematics achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) and reading as well (Hawes & Plourde, 2005). Finally, parents can help with their children's adjustment and engagement in the new middle school environment (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

The parents in my study all described similar results as reported in the literature in regards to their own involvement in their children's lives. Parents noticed that their children's grades and behavior slipped whenever they were not as involved at home, such as not helping with homework and not discussing with their children about appropriate school behavior. Parents talked about the importance of advising and helping their children adjust to the change in environment and select friends at the middle school. Finally, parents were able to prevent negative student behaviors from happening through reinforcing school policies or by talking to their children about appropriate school dress and classroom behaviors.

3. Parents perceived that the strict and academically challenging environment in middle school contributed to a slight decline in achievement and citizenship for their children, but appreciated the school for creating such an environment.

Researchers use the stage-environment fit theory to explain many of the problems students face in middle schools. Eccles and Midgley (1989) used the term “stage-environment fit” to argue that the fit between the developing needs of the adolescent and the educational environment is crucial. When the environment is responsive to the developing needs of the students and stimulates student growth, then positive motivational consequences will occur. Many middle schools are characterized by environments that have less positive teacher-student relationships, stricter assessment measures, more competitive and controlled environments, fewer opportunities for decision making, choice, and self management, and more whole class practices (Eccles *et al.*, 1993a; National Middle School Association, 1996). According to the theory and research, these changes cause students’ achievement and motivation to decline in school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Midgley *et al.*, 1989).

My parent participants similarly reported the differences between the elementary school and the middle school environment. They described the middle school environment as larger, more informal, rigorous, and strict. These characteristics may not be developmentally responsive practices, which could have caused the decline in student achievement during the beginning of the transitional year. However, research suggests that a challenging and supportive middle school experience is crucial in helping students make a smooth transition to high school (Mizelle, 1999, 2005). The long term goal of the

strict and rigorous middle school environment at Bayview (the school where my research took place) is to better prepare students for high school, which may outweigh the short term consequences of slight academic declines during the first four months of middle school. My findings suggest that parents, teachers, and students should to work together to help students adjust to the middle school environment. The elementary school can also improve its instructional rigor to better prepare students for middle school and get students acclimated to a rigorous environment.

4. Parents perceived the middle school to be a potentially dangerous place and had a fear of their children being inflicted by school violence.

Research on students' perceptions suggests that school safety is a concern that many students have when they transition into middle school (Akos, 2002; Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Odegaard & Heath, 1992; Schumacher, 1998). Little research has been conducted on parents' perception about school safety during the middle school transition year. As a result, my study contributes to the limited research conducted in the area of parent perceptions about the middle school transition and school safety.

The parents in my study all had concerns about their children's safety at school. The parents all drove their children to and from school because they feared their children would get attacked after school while walking home. Parents worried about their children attending school with older and bigger students; they feared fights might occur. In addition, the constant hearsay about fights occurring at other middle school campuses, and the news media covering wide-scaled fights and shootings on campuses throughout the nation, terrified parents. The Bayview Middle School administration's "no tolerance"

policy in which teachers and administrators offered severe consequences for activities that endangered people or school property such as fighting, threats, tagging, and stealing helped address parents' safety concerns. Parents appreciated the efforts by the school in keeping the campus safe for all students.

Learning Experiences from the Study

Before and during the data collection process, some problems arose. First, this study took place about one month after the planned starting date. I started the study in November as opposed to October. The delay was due to some problems the district had in retrieving parents' addresses with the computer software that was used. As a result, I decided to ask for permission from the district and the site to obtain the information on my own. I was able to get the addresses on my own through the school computer database system and I mailed my flyers and brochures about the study to parents. As it turned out, the delay did not have a significant impact on my study. I felt that it actually gave parents more experiences to share with me.

In addition to the slight delay, I was aware of my own biases towards certain parents, specifically Cecilia. During the first interview with Cecilia, I was a little surprised to find that she did not know much about her daughter's school life. I had already interviewed my other parent participants and they all had extensive knowledge about the things that what went on with their children. On the other hand, Cecilia could not answer many of my questions. There was not even enough information for me to ask follow up questions because she had no knowledge of the questions I asked her. As a result of this experience, my subsequent interviews with Cecilia were filled with biases

and assumptions. For instance, during the interviews, I didn't provide her with ample wait time when she responded to my questions, because I assumed she did not have an answer. I probably did not do a good job of asking follow up questions because I assumed she would not have an answer for me. Since I was aware of this assumption, I corrected myself during the final two interviews and was able to obtain very useful and important data from Cecilia. It was a learning process for the both of us, since she learned to be more involved in her daughter's life and I learned to control my biases and assumptions.

Another problem that I faced was the translation during Esmeralda's interviews. Although I had a district certified translator translating my interview questions and Esmeralda's responses to me, sometimes the authentic meaning of certain words were lost during the interviews. For example, in one interview, Esmeralda used the word "baptized" to describe her son being initiated into the school. She used this term to illustrate some of the activities older students do to each newcomer when they enter middle school, such as beating up the lower-classmen. Also, the translator and Esmeralda would sometimes have conversations on the side where the translator unknowingly interjected his ideas into the conversation, which could have influenced some of Esmeralda's responses to my questions. But these informal conversations actually proved useful because it helped me to dig deeper into the questions and brought out important data for my study.

Parents' Self Reported Changes

The most prominent lesson learned from this study was a result of an unintended consequence from the interviews with parents. Although my primary goal of my study was to collect data from the parents and use the information to help improve the district's middle school transition practices, it was inevitable for parents to be influenced by our conversations. The participants in my study all reported positive changes in their behavior and perception about their involvement in their children's lives, especially during the middle school transition. In many of the studies conducted on the middle school transition, researchers usually surveyed parents or students and observed the changes they went through during the transitional year. The researchers generally collected the data and there was little interaction between the researcher and parents. The findings from these studies were disseminated to the public and researchers left the responsibility to the schools to make changes. However, my study collected useful information from parents regarding the middle school transition, and at the same time, changed parents' views regarding their role in the transition process.

In a way, I acted like a counselor, inadvertently coaching parents along the transition process during the interview sessions. At the end of each interview, I asked parents if they had anything to add to our conversations. All of the parents responded by telling me that they had already talked too much, and that they had never talked so much about their children with a teacher before. In addition, the parents never had such an honest relationship with a teacher in which they opened up their lives entirely to me. What I found in my study was that I was able to collect useful data from parents that will

help guide schools in changing the way they transition students into middle school. However, as a result of the dialogue I had with the parents in my study, their outlook, attitude, and practices changed for the better. Parents became more involved and took more interest in their children's school lives. This transformation in parents was powerful since these parents will be more likely to stay involved in their children's middle school years and beyond.

The parents in my study all increased their level of participation because they did not want to be hypocrites by telling me something, yet not following through on what they reported to me at home. The parents attributed their change to being a part of the study because they had to reflect about their own practices and whether or not they were doing enough for their children. Had the parents not been involved in my study, they would probably not have become as reflective of their parental involvement practices or see their lack of support in their children's lives. They also saw the importance of their involvement especially during the middle school transition period because they felt their children were more vulnerable to gangs, drugs, and violence as they get older. For parents who were already very active in their children's school lives, participating in this study reinforced and sustained their efforts to stay actively involved. When I asked Derek how the process of being interview changed him, he replied:

I would say it definitely reinforces it. I wasn't involved then as I am now. But I think that's because [Jon's] in a new school, in junior high. I think that going through the interview process makes me think about it, to make sure I stay on it and stay on him, to make sure that I'm not just doing it and then it kinds of tails off, that I stay on him at least when he needs it. In that respect, it's helped because I think about that. I talk about doing all these things, and I have done all these things. But they need to continue,

and I'll continue with Lilly when she goes into junior high as well, but I think she'll have a better time, it'll be easier.

Similarly, Esmeralda felt that her parenting practices and participation in her son's school life were reinforced as a result of the study. When I asked if the interviews changed her way of thinking about being involved in her child's school life, she responded, "I don't think my opinions have changed, but they have been reinforced, for [my children] to do well and to have success and to be successful and to do well."

For Abegaila, the interviews were a learning process for her and helped her reflect about the ways she dealt with her daughter. Abegaila believed that the interviews helped her learn a lot about herself because she had to think about and listen to her own responses during the interviews. She said:

From you, I'm learning from your process. I have to teach my kids too. The way I can be with. To make it can be and I learn from all the experiences, the way you talk and the way that you showed all the information and the way that I talked to you. I hope I can get with me everywhere I go. And so happy all those talking and all those strategies spread it all over to you, it's working. And it will help you, I hope.

Rosalva learned a lot too from these interviews, but more about her son than herself. When I asked her what was the most important thing she learned from the interview process, she stated:

Sometimes I feel more insecure than him. Sometimes I feel that he's not going to respond well to a situation, like this one when the kid called him nerd. Sometimes I'm more like concerned but I'm learning that he knows who he is and that he's learning that there's some important things, and there's some things that you just don't need to pay attention to those things. And I'm learning that too. I'm know this new kid that's growing up. I'm getting to know this kid that's growing up.

She further reflected on her own practices of raising her middle school son and what she learned from her second middle school transition experience. She said:

I learned to be more measure, sometimes I don't have to be there all the time for his homework or the reading in everything. I have to let him do a little bit and if he gets in trouble and comes to me, then I go in and help him. I can't be there for him all the time. I learned that I have to let him grow a little bit by himself. Get in trouble, like mom I can't do that so I can go out and help him.

Sheila confessed that she had never talked so much about her children and found that her children were resilient to life's hardships, especially during a time when her health deteriorated. She stated:

I think my other kids is move the right way. I don't think nothing can pull them away from the tragedy that we have because they could have went the other way without hesitation. And they all together, everybody pitched in and did togetherness like they were taught and therefore, that they have gotten from me and from others they didn't stray from it. If they didn't stray then, there's no reason for them now.

Sheila also found her actions to be contradictory to what she was telling me during the interviews. Sheila spoke about the importance of being involved in her children's lives, but because of her health, she had to stay at home during her children's first year in middle school. She said, "The only excuse, like me, I'm contradicting myself, because I used to be at school all the time, but at the time, I really didn't have a leg, I couldn't stand up." About three months after our last interview, Sheila made her first visit, since losing her leg, to her grandson's elementary school for a parent-teacher conference. She was in good spirits and I believe that she will continue where she left off in terms of her involvement in the schools.

The parent who probably experienced the biggest impact from the study was Cecilia. She came into the interviews not knowing much about her daughter's middle school life, the teachers, and the day-to-day routines at the middle school. At the last interview session, Cecilia talked about her transformation from being a parent who was not involved, to one who was more involved in Leticia's school life. She said, "I think it changed because I learned that I need to be more involved, even if I was, it wasn't as much as I'm doing right now." When I asked Cecilia what made her finally realize this, she responded:

Every time you asked me. Like no, sometimes I don't do that, I don't know this and I know I have to get more involved. And sometimes I can't because of the schedule to be involved at the school but at least I am more involved with her at home.

Cecilia further explained the difference in her involvement before and after the study. She said the following statement:

Before it was just sometimes seeing her homework, I see the homework like every time she comes and I have to sign. But it wasn't everyday, one thing that I was doing everyday, just whenever I needed to sign or something. I look at her homework and stuff. But now, I am more, "What you need? What do you need to do today? or How can I help you?" Stuff like that.

The parents felt that participation in this study helped them think analytically about their involvement in their children's lives. In doing so, parents altered their practices and became more active in their children's school lives.

As a researcher, I learned to become more conscious about my biases and not let my assumptions interfere with my data collection, since it could have tainted my data. I learned that people have different life experiences and that one experience was not better

than another. In Cecilia's case, her experiences in helping her daughter transition to middle school were just as valid as the strategies Derek used with his son. Cecilia's non-proactive approach could have been due to the fact that she had two children already in high school and she was comfortable with the middle school transition. In fact, Cecilia's contributions to my study were very useful because her perspective gave me an additional viewpoint of parents who did not involve themselves in their children's lives. In addition, I learned that a high tolerance for ambiguity was needed for this study, since there were many parents with different perspectives. Sometimes parents had to reschedule their interview appointments or bring their younger children with them to the interviews because they did not have a baby-sitter. As a result, it was best to be prepared for the unexpected. For me, I kept my schedule open so that parents could arrange a meeting with me anytime. I also assembled reading books, drawing paper, and crayons for the little children to keep them busy while I interviewed their parents.

Further Research

For future research, it would be best to get more parents involved and interview them on a wider scale. This study closely examined the perspectives of six parents and captured their experiences during the middle school transition for their children. As a result, this study is not generalizable to Bayview Middle School and all middle schools. A more comprehensive approach to my study would include interviewing a larger sample size of parents and at the same time, incorporating the voices of teachers and students. However, as a graduate student, I did not have enough resources or time to interview

more people, transcribe the recorded interviews, and analyze the data to conduct a more comprehensive study on the elementary to middle school transition.

Another limitation of my study is that although the subjects elected were fairly representative of Bayview Middle School parents, no individuals of Caucasian, Vietnamese, or Middle Eastern descent were included. These three groups were a small, but significant population in the school. Had I included parent representatives from these three groups, the sample in my study would have been more reflective of the parent population in Bayview.

Key Recommendations to Facilitate a Successful Transition from Elementary to Middle School

One major finding from my study concludes that schools can actually train their parents to think differently about the transition. During the transitional year, the literature suggests that many parents are most concerned about the increase in homework for their children, their children's ability to make new friends or feel accepted at school, and peer pressure to do drugs, join gangs, and have sex (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Bastiani, 1986; Bradley, 2003; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). However, my study found that when parents were given the opportunity to talk to a teacher about their concerns and aspirations for their children, they learned how to cope with their concerns and better understand the changes their children went through during middle school. The parents in my study became more cognizant of their involvement in their children's lives and they wanted to increase their level of participation with their children. The reflective and ongoing discussions about the transition process and parental involvement practices

socialized parents and transformed their viewpoints and attitudes about being involved in their children's school lives.

With the insight of parents' perceptions and involvement changing if given the opportunity to discuss with teachers about the transition process, schools should consider these recommendations.

- 1) The school should consider forming an inquiry group of parents in which teachers, other proxies, or informed professionals, counsel and discuss the transition process. Schools can begin by selecting committed and active parents who demonstrate leadership in the school or community for the group. During the summer before the transition, teachers and parents can talk about pre-transitional activities, feelings, and perceptions parents may have about the middle school. As the middle school year begins, teachers and parents can continue discussing ways students and parents adjust to the middle school and bring up any new concerns parents may have. The purpose of these discussions would be to help parents recognize the importance of being involved during the first year of middle school, and at the same time, train parents to become discussion leaders for other parents in regards to the middle school transition. The ultimate goal would be to have parents conduct the monthly discussions, help each other develop new strategies, and voice their concerns about the middle school transition. Hopefully, this process would affect more parents and instill a sense of urgency in parents to be involved in their children's lives. The benefit of using an inquiry group is that parents who care about their children's schooling would volunteer to join these

conversation groups. That way, schools would not have to pay outside consultants to run the discussion groups. Instead, the schools could pay teachers on an additional hourly rate for their initial work in training the parents. The long term benefits of increasing parents' awareness of their own practices and being involved in their children's first year of middle school will outweigh the costs of running the first group sessions. Hopefully, the work of parents would result in higher achievement for students during their first year of middle school.

- 2) The school should consider creating an action research team that studies the effects of the elementary to middle school transition (Fenwick, 1987). The team could consist of teachers, parents, students, and administrators led by a facilitator who has a background in research. Members could work together to assess the needs of parents and students during the transitional year and use data to bring immediate changes to the transitional program. According to the stage-environment fit theory, many of the transitional problems are associated with a mismatch between the school environment and the developmental needs of the students (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles *et al.*, 1993a; Eccles *et al.*, 1993b; Midgley *et al.*, 2002). Middle school classrooms are perceived as having more teacher control, whole class tasks, and less positive student-teacher relationships and interactions (Midgley & Urdan, 1992). By collecting data from parents and students, the team could present immediate feedback to the school site to make the appropriate changes to the transitional program to meet students' needs. This study has found that parents also relied on outside-of-school resources in helping

their children adjust to the middle school transition. As a result, the notion of “environment” should be expanded to include other spaces such as the home, neighborhood, and libraries.

- 3) Another suggestion based on the study’s findings and the literature is to have the school and district to work together with parents to develop a parental involvement policy for middle school, particularly during the transitional year (Fenwick, 1987; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Most of the literature recommends that the schools create and implement programs to help students smoothly transition into middle school. Most of these programs lack a parent component (Deemer *et al.*, 2003; Fenwick *et al.*, 2001; Ferguson & Bulach, 1994; James, 1994; Leland-Jones, 1998; McElroy, 2000). However, the findings from my study suggest that when given the chance, parents will want to help their children excel in school. When schools develop excellent partnership programs, families respond, including those who are typically hard to reach (Epstein & Sanders, 1998). It is important that schools and parents define the roles they expect each other to take when students are in their first year of middle school. The parents in my study often reported that they did not know what the school expected of them in terms of volunteering at the school or involving themselves with their children at home. Parents did not know how much or how little time they needed to put in with their children. In particular, the non-English speaking parents in my study were intimidated by the school and often felt ashamed for not knowing how to speak English or having the formal education to feel like a contributing member of the

school community (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1999). Therefore, it is suggested that the district, school, and parents work together to build the school's capacity for strong parental involvement by setting guidelines and expectations for parents, and the minimal amount of time parents should devote to their children both at home and at the school during the first year of middle school and beyond. The co-creation process will give parents, especially parents who do not speak English, a sense of ownership in their children's school and learning. An annual review of the parental involvement policy with parents is recommended in order to ensure its effectiveness in improving the academic quality of the school during the transitional year.

- 4) The literature suggests that middle schools should work on establishing effective and comprehensive transition programs that involve parents to help build a sense of community in the school and respond to the needs and concerns of the students (Mac Iver, 1990; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Schumacher, 1998; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Many schools do not receive funding strictly for transitional programs. However, the literature and data from the school suggest that students experience a decline in academic achievement when they transition into middle school (Alspaugh, 1998a; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Blyth *et al.*, 1978; Blyth *et al.*, 1983; Finger Jr. & Silverman, 1966). Therefore, schools can tie their middle school transitional program to promote middle school student achievement, which

enables schools to tap into their Title I¹⁹ funds. There is research that suggests that schools with extensive transition programs have significantly lower failure and dropout rates than schools that provided students few articulation activities (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Usually, during the summer time, the students who experience some type of middle school instruction are those who attend summer school for remediation (Boss & Railsback, 2002; Denton, 2003). The remediation process can create a negative experience for students and make them apprehensive to middle school (Kuykendall, 2004; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Conversely, it is recommended that the school and district establish a summer bridge program that is available for all students. The bridge program can focus on showing students the campus, having students experience a typical day in middle school, and inviting parents to join their children in the bridge process. Promoting middle school success through effective transitional programs and encouraging parental involvement will prepare students for, and give students, a positive experience in middle school.

- 5) Based on my findings and the literature, it is recommended that the elementary schools and the middle school create a strong articulation process to better prepare students for the transition (Graham & Hill, 2003; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Schumacher, 1998). My findings suggest that there was a difference between the elementary school and the middle school in terms of

¹⁹ Title I, Part A federal funds help to meet the educational needs of low-achieving students in California's highest-poverty schools. Funds are used to support effective, research-based educational strategies that close the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students and enable the students to meet the state's challenging academic standards. Title I-funded schools are either targeted assistance schools or school wide program schools. (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/titleparta.asp>)

teacher expectations, academic rigor, and stricter grading and discipline policies. Based on the discussions with the parents in my study, there seemed to be discontinuity in instruction between the elementary school and the middle school. For example, middle school teachers focused more on correct spelling, whereas elementary school teachers focused more on content, and less on spelling, on assignments. Also, middle school homework required more details and research, whereas elementary school homework was more repetitive and skills based. To alleviate some of the inconsistencies in expectations, the elementary schools and middle school should develop a common ground in their grading practices, for instance, to focus on spelling or not. The standards for student behavior also should be addressed by both the elementary and middle schools, such as the possibility of having the elementary schools create an environment that is similar to the middle school for students in their final year of elementary school. A discussion between elementary and middle school teachers and administrators should be considered in order to develop common expectations, grading practices, rules for behavior, and parental engagement practices. Parents can also be invited to provide input on the articulation process between the elementary and middle schools. Research confirms that when schools involve parents in their articulation practices, they are much more likely to maintain a strong partnership with parents (Mac Iver, 1990). In addition, Mac Iver's (1990) study found that when parents are taken seriously in a school's articulation activities, the teachers at the school are more likely to continue to involve parents in the education of their children by

frequently sending information and ideas to parents on how to help their children with homework and study skills. If the elementary schools begin promoting the need for parental involvement during the upper grade years, then that would create an expectation that parents are needed during the middle school transition year.

Appendix A

October 2, 2006

Dear Parents of Southland School Community,

I hope you all have had a wonderful summer vacation and I want to welcome you all to the 2006-07 school year. I want to take this time to remind you of the middle school transition project we previewed with you in June.

In collaboration with the South Bay City Elementary School District and working under the discretion of Dr. Robert Cooper and Dr. Eugene Tucker, Mr. Kaivan Yuen (a 2nd grade teacher at Southland School and a doctoral student at UCLA) will be conducting research on the elementary to middle school transition for South Bay City students. Mr. Yuen is looking for six families to participate in the study voluntarily. If you volunteer to participate in the study, we would ask you to do the following:

- **Agree to participate in 4 interviews (once a month: October, November, December, and January). Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.**

Interviews can take place at Southland School, or at your home if that is more convenient for you. For your participation in this study, you will receive a \$50 gift card to a retail store of your choice: Target, Barnes and Nobles, Borders Book Stores, Office Depot, or Staples (others available upon request).

We need six families, so space is limited. Please respond by **October 16, 2006** if you are interested in participating in this study. We hope that you can join us in working together to help our students succeed in school.

Sincerely,

Michael Largent
Principal
Bayview Middle School
South Bay City, CA

Kaivan Yuen
2nd Grade Teacher
Southland Elementary School
South Bay City, CA

Do you want your child to succeed in middle school? Do you want to help improve the elementary to middle school transition?

Inviting all parents of 6th and 7th grade students

South Bay City Elementary School District and Mr. Kaivan Yuen
(a 2nd grade teacher at Southland Elementary School
and a doctoral student at UCLA) are looking for six (6) families
who are interested in helping students succeed in Middle School.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following:

- Agree to participate in 4 interviews (once a month: October, November, December and January). Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

The interviews can be conducted at Southland Elementary School, Bayview Middle School, or at your house if that is more convenient for you.

Parent participants will receive a \$50 gift card to a retail store of their choice.

If you are interested in participating in this study please complete the following information and return it to your child's homeroom teacher by October 16, 2006.

Name: _____ Phone Number: _____

Address: _____ Child's Name: _____

Spanish Translation Needed? ____ Yes ____ No

Appendix B

Parent Interview Protocol 1: Parents preparing their children for middle school

Introduction: Interviewer

- a) My research will be about elementary to middle school transitions and incorporating parents' voices in the process.
 - b) May I tape this interview?
 - c) I tape interviews because it is so much easier than trying to take written notes about our conversation.
 - d) I will not use your name: what name would you like me use when I refer to you in the transcript?
 - e) If at anytime you want to end this interview or stop the recording, you may let me know and I will respect your decision.
- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
 - What do you do for a living
 - How you came to South Bay City
 - How long you have lived in South Bay City
 - How long your child has been attending schools in the South Bay City Elementary School District
 - Can you tell me about your child(ren) and what do you want him/her/them to be when he/she/they grow(s) up?
 - How are you involved in your child's school life? What are some things you do at home and at the school to help your child set the bar "high" in school?
 - What are some things you have done to help prepare your child for middle school? What are some things the school has done to help prepare your child for middle school?
 - a) What seemed to work?
 - b) What did not seem to work?
 - What do you feel is the biggest difference in helping your child now in middle school as opposed to when he/she was in elementary school?
 - a) What are the biggest challenges in helping your child now (in middle school) as opposed to when he/she was in elementary school?
 - b) What has become easier in helping your child now in middle school as opposed to when he/she was in elementary school?

- How is your child handling the new middle school environment?
 - a) What's the biggest difference between elementary school and middle school?
 - b) What are some issues/problems your child face at the middle school that is of concern to you?
 - c) What are some things that your child enjoys at the middle school?

- Can you explain more about the problems/successes your child is experiencing in his/her first year of middle school? What are some issues you are observing/having in regards to this transition?
 - a) What is being done about the problems (home and school)?
 - b) To solve this problem, what would you want the school to do, or what would you do differently now?
 - c) What are some things that the school(s) (either elementary or middle school) could have done that you think would have better prepared your child for middle school?
 - d) What can the middle school do right now to help your child adjust to middle school?

- What could the school(s) (either elementary or middle school) have done to better inform you and/or prepare your child for middle school?

- Do you have any older children who already experienced middle school? If so, how has their experience helped you in preparing (student's name) for middle school?
 - a) Was there anything that you did this time that you didn't do the first time?
 - b) What did you learn from your past experience that helped you this year?
 - c) Was there anything that didn't work the first time, that helped you not make the same mistake this time?

- In what ways have teachers helped your child adjust/prepare for middle school?
 - a) Extra support in the class/outside of the class?
 - b) Ongoing communication with you about the first year of middle school, the expectations, and academic demands?
 - c) Referred your child, or you, to talk to the school counselor about selecting classes, or receiving school services.

- In what ways have your child's principal or assistant principal helped your child adjust/prepare for middle school?

- a) Informed you of the move to middle school?
 - b) Informed you about the services offered to first year students to help them adjust to middle school?
 - c) Informed you about the course selection process and preparing for high school or college?
- What advice would you give to schools, teachers, or other parents about preparing students for middle school?
 - Is there anything you would like to add to this conversation that we didn't talk about?

Parent Interview Protocol 2: Parents' perception of student achievement at the middle school

- How is everything going with you and (student's name) since our last conversation?
- Can you describe a typical day of what happens when your child comes home from school?
 - Homework
 - Family responsibilities
 - Play time/going outside
 - Socializing with friends
 - What he or she says about school – teachers, the schoolwork, friends
 - How he/she feels about going to school
 - Is the typical day similar/different than when your child was in elementary school?
 - How do you think these things affect student achievement?
- How are the middle school classes different from elementary school classes?
 - Teachers and staff
 - Classroom environment
 - Classroom procedures and structures – bathroom, relaxed/tighter, late assignments
 - Expectations – teachers and parents
 - Workload, homework, and demands - challenging
 - Discipline policy/classroom rules
 - Peer pressure
 - Teacher-student relationship/interaction
 - Teacher-parent relationship/interaction
 - Parent involvement – in the school
 - Parent conferences
 - Transportation
 - Do any of the school/home practices support/impede student learning?
- How do you feel about his/her assignments and homework? Are students being challenged in the classroom?
 - Are class assignments at the appropriate level of difficulty for students? Too easy/too hard/ frustrating students?
 - Do assignments encourage parents to work with students?
 - Can you describe the last homework assignment in which you worked together on with you child?
 - Can you share one assignment that you really liked that your child did?

- How confident are you in being able to help your child with his/her assignments?
- Has your child's grades changed since going to middle school?
 - Increase/decrease/the same
 - What do you think has brought about the increase/decrease/no change in grades and why?
 - Strengths/weaknesses in particular subjects and how these were similar/different from elementary school?
 - What help do you provide for the weaknesses and how? How do you encourage your child's strengths?
 - Study habits different in middle school than elementary school? What is student doing differently now than in elementary school?
 - What are you doing to help increase your child's achievement in middle school?
 - Do you feel your participation has an affect on your child's grades/achievement in school? How so?
 - Do you feel the help from the older siblings have an affect on your child's grades/achievement in school? How so?
 - What are some things that prevent you from helping your child?
 - Are there any things that the school and teachers do that prevent you from helping your child?
 - How do you feel about the middle school and what they are doing to provide additional help to your child if he/she needs it? What can they do more of to help your child?
 - How do you help your child study for tests? What do you do? How do you prepare your child for the California Standards Tests? How do you feel about your participation, working/not working?
 - Impact of principal on student achievement
 - Do you find the change in the grading system from numbers (elementary) to letters (middle school) confusing? Do you see consistency in achievement between these two grading systems? How do you feel about this change? Which one is easier to understand?
- How is (student's name)'s motivation in middle school as compared to elementary school?
 - Decrease/increase?
 - What do you think is causing the decrease/increase and why?
 - If decrease/increase, what has been done to try to increase motivation?
 - What are the factors that contributed to the increase/decrease in motivation?
 - What are some things teachers are doing to motivate your child?
 - What are some things the school is doing to motivate your child?

- Is your child involved in any out of school activities (church, sports) that have helped increase his motivation in school and how?
 - How do the older siblings help motivate your middle school child?
 - What kinds of academic goals do you set for you child?
-
- What recommendations would you give to schools and teachers about involving parents in the transition process and helping students get good grades? What advice would you give to other parents about being involved in their child's school life and helping them get good grades?
-
- Are there any things you would like to add to this conversation that we did not talk about?

Parent Interview Protocol 3: Parents' perception of student adjustment to the middle school

We have talked about how parents prepare their children for middle school, student achievement in middle school. Today, we will be talking about how parents help their children adjust to the new middle school environment.

Concerns

- What concerns did/does your child have about middle school?
- Being in a larger school?
- Getting to class on time?
- Getting lost in the school?
- Getting through crowded halls?
- Being with students from other schools?
- Bullying/older students?
- Do you think any of these concerns affect or distract (child's name)'s focus in school?

School Safety

- Before (child's name) transitioned to middle school, what perceptions/assumptions did you have about middle schools? What kinds of things have you heard about Bayview, or middle schools in general, before your child attended the school this year?
- Before (child's name) transitioned to middle school, did you have any concerns about his safety there? Were you concerned about him/her going to school with older and bigger students? Why?
- Did you have concerns of school violence before the transition? Do you still have those concerns? If not concerned, why?
- Now that (child's name) is in middle school, how have your perceptions/assumptions changed about the middle school?
- Has your child experienced any sort of violence while in middle school (bullies, being jumped, being attacked, scrub week, tagging/gangs)? What has the school done to address this issue? What have you done to address this issue?
- What do you tell your children to do to handle violent situations?
- If a violent situation occurred, how would you handle the situation?
- Do any of these school safety concerns distract your child from focusing and doing well in school?
- What suggestions do you have for schools and teachers about keeping the school safe?

Self-Esteem

- Do you feel that your child's self-esteem has increased, decreased, or stayed the same now that she/he's in middle school? Why do you think so?

- How does your child feel about his/her ability to achieve and get good grade in middle school? Has it increased, decreased, or stayed the same now that he/she's in middle school? Why do you think so?
- How do you help your child build self confidence in and outside of school?
- Have teachers helped increase your child's self esteem in his/her achievement in the classroom? Why do you think so?
- Do your child's friends affect his/her self confidence in his/her achievement at school? How so?
- Is your child involved in any outside of school activities that help increase his/her self-confidence level in school?
- Do you think your child's self-confidence level has an impact on his/her achievement in middle school?
- (If any) Do older siblings help increase (child's name) self-confidence in school? How? What are some things they say?
- What suggestions do you have for schools and teachers about helping students build their confidence to achieve in school?

Selecting Friends

- How important are friendships to your child's life?
- How does your child feel about making new friends at a larger school now?
- What do you teach your child about selecting friends? What do you look for?
- How do you monitor the friends that your child makes at the middle school?
- What kinds of things are the school and teachers doing to help your child make new friends in middle school?
- Do you find (child's name)'s friends helping him/her with the adjustment to middle school? For the positive or negative?
- Does (child's name) study with his/her friends? Can you share some things they do when they study together?
- Is there pressure from friends to do well in school? How do you know?
- Have you met your child's friends? Does he/she bring them home? Does he/she go to their houses? What are some things that they do?
- Do you think (child's name)'s friends have an impact on his/her grades in middle school? Why do you think so?

Fitting In with Peers

- What are some things your child is doing (music, TV shows, movies, phone, games, and sports) to fit into the school and with other middle school students?
- Have you noticed any different behaviors displayed by your child now in middle school (changing the way he/she dresses, acts, speaks, to fit in with peers)? Are these behaviors having an impact on his/her achievement? How do you know?
- What do you tell your child about fitting in with their friends/ wanting to be accepted by their peers/ being liked by their peers?

- What do you tell your child about avoiding peer pressure?
- What are you doing to help your child fit into the school/ feel like they are a part of the school community?
- What are the school and teachers doing to help your child fit into the school/ feel like they are a part of the school community?
- (If any) Do the older siblings help (child's name) fit in with his/her peers? How?
- Is your child involved in any school sponsored activities (sports or clubs)? What kinds of activities would you like the school to offer in order to help your child fit in to the school and make new friends?
- What suggestions do you have for schools and teachers about helping students fit in to the school and finding friends?

Closing

- Is there any thing you would like to add to this conversation that we did not talk about?

Parent Interview Protocol 4: Parents' Reflection of the School Year and Interview Process

- Where did you learn the different ways to help your child with his/her school work in middle school? How do you feel about your impact on your child and your ability to help him/her?
- What is your opinion about being involved in your child's school life, especially during the first year of middle school? How important is it to be involved in your child's first year in middle school? What do you think are the things that prevent parents from being able to help their children? What are some things that you think enable parents to help their children?
- What is your opinion about volunteering at the middle school? In the classrooms, parent center, social events? Have you volunteered in the middle school? How does it compare to volunteering in the elementary school?
- Do you feel that the more you are involved, the more your child achieves in middle school? What makes you say that? If you were not as involved, how do you think your child would be doing? Why do you say that?
- How do you manage your own daily routines, such as work, family responsibilities, and still have time for your middle school child? What advice would you give to other parents who are having a difficult time managing their work and their child?
- What actions do you plan to take in your child's school life for the remainder of the school year? How are you going to continue working with your child and helping him/her adjust to middle school? Why? Where did you get these ideas from?
- What would you do differently next time when your younger child goes to middle school? Why would you do this? What did you learn from (child's name)'s experience that will guide you for the (younger sibling's name)'s experience?
- When looking back, what did you do that you felt really worked in helping your child adjust and succeed in middle school? How do you know it worked? Where did you get this idea from?
- When looking back, what did you do that you felt did not work in helping your child adjust and succeed in middle school? How do you know it did not work? What adjustments did you make in order

- When looking back, what did the schools do that you felt really worked in helping your child adjust and succeed in middle school? How do you know it worked?
- When looking back, was there anything the schools did that you felt did not work in helping your child adjust and succeed in middle school? How do you know if did not work? When you look back, what could the schools (elementary or middle school) have done to better prepare your child for middle school? What kind of things would you like the schools to have done?
- What suggestions do you have for schools that would make the transition easier for all children? What are the key elements from the school?
- What can schools do to help parents become more active and involved in their children's lives? What can schools do to support the work of parents at home with their children? What can schools do to encourage parents who may not be as involved in their children's lives?
- What can parents do to make the middle school transition easier for all children? What advice do you have for parents to help them and their children cope with this change? What are the key elements from parents?
- What suggestions do you have for parents about talking with their children and knowing about the things that goes on at school? What strategies work best for you when you talk to your child about school? Is this a practice that started in elementary school? How do you make it easier for your child to feel safe and comfortable to talk to you about school issues?
- Are there any new concerns that you have right now about your child's adjustment and achievement in middle school? Do you still have concerns of violence at the school? What has the school done to help lessen your concerns?
- How do you let your child become a teenager and have more independence, without giving him/her too much? For instance, letting him/her go out, but not losing control of your child to friends or the environment?
- In your opinion, what are the three most important things you have done this year to help your child succeed in middle school? Why do you think they are so important? What have you noticed from doing these things?
- What is the most important thing you have learned this year from your child's transition to middle school? What things have you learned this time as compared to the older children's experience? What's the biggest mistake you've made this

school year, if any? What was the outcome? What did you learn from this experience?

- What has the process of being interviewed done to your opinion/attitude about being involved in your child's middle school life? Has your opinions changed? What have you learned from reflecting on the things you do to help your child adjust and achieve in middle school?

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