Developmentally Responsive Teacher Practices Across the Middle-to-High-School Transition

Cheryl R. Ellerbrock
Bridget Abbas
Michael DiCicco
University of South Florida

Abstract
In this yearlong qualitative multi-site case study, researchers identified how eighth and ninth-grade teacher practices may support students' basic and developmental needs across the middle-to-high-school transition. Data were collected throughout 2009, including individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and artifact data of 23 participants. Findings suggest relational and academic teacher practices may help to meet students' needs across the transition but these practices were not consistent from one school site to the other and the responsiveness of these practices also varied across sites. Practices consistent with the warm demanding teaching stance may have promise for supporting students' needs during this period of schooling.

The middle-to-high-school-transition is classified as "the most difficult transition point in education" (Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2002, p. 24). Many students experience difficulty during this transition as they attempt to adjust to their new school environment (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cushman, 2006; Mizelle, 2005; Queen, 2002). The nature of school transitions, including the responsiveness of the sending and receiving school environments and teachers in these environments, play a pivotal role in supporting students' needs during this time (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993). Responsive teacher practices of eighth and ninth-grade teachers may help to support students during this tumultuous period of schooling.

The middle-to-high-school transition is understudied (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Wilcock, 2007) and is typically examined at the middle or high school level only rather than in tandem or over time (e.g., Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Butts & Cruziero, 2005; Langenkamp, 2010). Over the last decade this transition has been receiving increased attention due to reform efforts aimed at improving secondary education (Felner, Favazza, Shim, Brand, Gu, & Noonan, 2001). Hertzog, Morgan, and Borland (2009) assert the middle-to-high-school transition is an ongoing process, not a single event, unfolding over time and across school sites. This perspective suggests transition research should be longitudinal and span across school sites, yet little research of this type is available. Further, few studies focus on educator and student perceptions of the middle-to-high-school transition and how educators can best support students' needs as they make the move to high school (see Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006, for exceptions). The current study responds to Hertzog and colleagues' (2009) claim that the transition is a process unfolding over time. Further, this study addresses the aforementioned gaps in the literature by investigating eighth and ninth-grade

teacher practices that may support young adolescents' basic and developmental needs across the middle-to-high-school transition through the perspectives of educators and students.

The Need for a Developmentally Responsive Transition
Three conceptual frameworks undergird this study: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), Noddings' (2005) and others conceptualization of care in school, and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993). Self-determination theory advocates the need to support students' basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy in order to promote psychological growth, well-being, and motivation. Relatedness is defined as developing a sense of security and connection within a larger social network (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Feeling cared for by those within the school environment, including teachers, is critical to supporting student personal and academic growth (Noddings, 2005). Competence involves feeling able to successfully interact in one's social world (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy is the ability to self-regulate and the perception of being in control of one's actions and achievements (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Satisfying these needs is crucial to understanding students' goal pursuits and attainment, including academic achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination theory highlights the need for teachers to support students in their schooling by meeting these basic psychological needs.

Noddings' (2005) conceptualization of care in school suggests care is a fundamental need and feeling cared for by those within the school environment, including teachers, is necessary to support students' personal and academic growth. While difficult to define, care involves more than "a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likable" (Noddings, 1995, p. 676) and "is a much more involved concept that cannot be defined solely by the presence of cordiality" (Schussler & Collins, 2006, p. 1465). It involves a sense of connection and support, is an important part of any relationship, and may not be accomplished without action (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995; Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994). Care can be both relational and academic. Relational care is comprised of supporting students' cognitive and social-emotional development, motivation, and learning (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Wentzel, 1997) and enhancing students' sense of connection and belonging to their school (Noddings, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Roeser et al., 1996; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Teachers who foster relational care and connect with students may foster high-quality teacher-student relationships that meet student needs for relatedness (Davis, 2006; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Schmakel, 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Academically, care involves an ongoing quest for competence (Noddings, 1995) and involves "having high expectations and rigorous standards, pushing students further than they might believe they can go, and supporting them as they try to accomplish their goals" (Nieto, 2010, p. 264). The insistence on academic excellence from all students is identified in the literature as a caring, responsive teaching practice (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002, 2005; Nieto, 2010; Ross, Bondy, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2008) and one that may promote a successful middle-to-high-school transition (Queen, 2002; SREB, 2002).

Recently Eccles and Roeser (2011) along with other scholars (see Ellerbrock 2012; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Barber & Olsen, 2004) have applied stage-environment fit theory to the middle-to-high-school transition and students' first year in high school. Stage-environment fit theory suggests a mismatch between students' developmental needs and school and classroom

environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). This mismatch may result in negative outcomes such as, declines in motivation and engagement and dropping out of school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Research suggests motivation and academic achievement increase when school personnel place a strong emphasis on supporting the needs of adolescent learners during school transitions (Butts & Cruziero, 2005; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; NASSP, 2006). Together stage-environment fit theory, Noddings' (2005) conceptualization of care in school, and self-determination theory provide a strong and interrelated theoretical base that guides the present investigation.

Responsive Teacher Practices

Teachers who meet students' needs, including the need to be cared for, are particularly important to adolescents during school transitions (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Teacher practices such as holding high expectations, challenging students academically, and insisting students engage in classroom activities that foster a positive learning environment promote students' feelings of competence (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Whitlock, 2006; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Student-centered practices such as making learning relevant to life outside of school, establishing flexible deadlines, and providing specific feedback on academic tasks may help foster a learning environment that meets student needs for competence and autonomy (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Garza, 2007; Schmakel, 2008, Wentzel, 1997). Providing opportunities for students to interact and connect positively with peers may support students' need for relatedness and belongingness in the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Juvonen, 2006). Additionally, believing in students' academic potential, getting to know students personally, listening to students, showing a genuine interest in students' academic and social lives, modeling caring behavior, teaching to understanding, being available and willing to help, and providing constructive feedback and academic support are teacher actions that address students' need for care (Garza, 2007; Weinstein, 1998; Wentzel, 1997). The warm demanding teaching stance combines teacher practices that focus on caring relationships and academic success to support students (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006). By focusing on the relational and academic needs of students, teachers can foster a climate of care in the classroom that supports student academic motivation and success (Wentzel, 1997).

Method

The aim of this yearlong qualitative multi-site case study was to gain a detailed understanding of how eighth and ninth-grade teacher practices may support young adolescents' basic and developmental needs across the middle-to-high-school transition. This study was part of a larger qualitative study that investigated the developmentally responsive nature of the transition from middle school (eighth grade) to high school (ninth grade). The following research question guided our investigation, "In what ways may eighth and ninth-grade teacher practices meet students' needs across the middle-to- high-school transition?" As a result, this case study features the perspectives of core subject teachers, students, and site-based principals regarding the ways teacher practices may support students' needs across the transition.

Context

Ford Middle School and Westshore High School are located in one of the 10 largest districts in the United States servicing a diverse ethnic and socio-economic student population. Ford's student enrollment during 2008-2009 was approximately 1559 students, including 480 eighth-grade students. Minority students made up 60% percent of Ford's population and 53% of students received free/reduced lunch. During the 2009-2010 school year, Westshore had 557 ninth-grade students and a total enrollment of approximately 1957 students. Fifty-four percent of Westshore's population was minority and 42% of students received free/reduced lunch. The demographics of these schools are representative of the school district (56.5% minority and 54% free/reduced lunch). Approximately 95% of Ford's 480 eighth-grade students matriculate to Westshore for high school.

Identification of Participants

A total of 23 people participated in this investigation: four students, four middle school teachers, 13 high school teachers, one middle school principal, and one high school principal (Table 1). Using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), the middle school principal selected one eighth-grade team to be part of this study based on a set of predetermined criteria (i.e., an interdisciplinary eighth-grade team, student population of the team represented the overall school demographics, and all team teachers were willing to participate). All 56 eighth-grade students on the team were invited to participate in order to capture "thick descriptions" (Ryle, 1949) from students and their eighth and ninth-grade teachers. A target sample of four students representative of the overall school demographics was selected. The student sample size is appropriate given the nature of the extensive, year-long longitudinal design, including shadowing each student throughout his or her day on multiple occasions. All four middle school team teachers who taught students' core subjects (math, science, language arts, and social studies) and 13 high school teachers who taught students' core subjects (math, science, English, social studies, reading, and freshman focus) participated. The larger number of high school teachers involved in the study is due to the lack of teaming at the high school level and the decision to include all students' core ninth-grade teachers. Years of teaching experience at the middle level varied from two years (Ms. Hamilton) to nine years (Mrs. Copeland) and one year (Mr. Oscar) to 33 years (Mrs. Peters) at the high school level. Mrs. Cramer, in her third year as the principal of Ford, and Mrs. Mauch, a 27-year veteran at Westshore, both participated. All adult participants and parents/guardians of student participants signed informed consent forms. Students were asked to provide written consent and verbal assent at the beginning of each semester.

Data Collection

This study utilized Stake's (2006) qualitative multi-site case study methodology. A multi-site case study approach is noted to be particularly appropriate when the intent is to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived realities across multiple bounded systems, such as the two schools highlighted in the current investigation (Stake, 2006). Data

collection occurred throughout 2009 during the last semester of eighth-grade, summertime, and first semester of ninth-grade. Multiple data collection sources were utilized, including individual and focus group interviews, observations, and the collection of artifact data (Table 2).

A total of 23 individual and focus group interviews took place, including two teacher focus group interviews, two student focus group interviews, nine individual teacher interviews, eight individual student interviews, one middle school principal individual interview, and one high school principal individual interview. One student focus group interview was conducted in the spring semester of eighth grade and another in the fall semester of ninth grade. Individual student interviews took place toward the end of each semester after the focus group interview to extend on insights shared. Ninth-grade student individual interviews spanned across two days as a result of school-related events that shortened the duration of each class period. Students' core middle school and high school teachers were either individually interviewed or interviewed as a group, depending on their schedules. Middle school teachers (Mrs. Copeland, Ms. Mirabelle, Ms. Hamilton, and Ms. O'Connell) engaged in one focus group interview during their common planning period. Two dates were selected for high school teachers to participate in a focus group interview before school. Three teachers (Mr. Manns, Ms. Peters, and Mrs. Walters) participated in one high school teacher focus group interview. Due to a multitude of schedule conflicts that limited teachers' ability to participate in a focus group interview before school (e.g., tutoring, other meetings, child care issues), individual interviews were scheduled with nine teachers during the school day (Mrs. Matingly, Mr. Oscar, Mr. George, Mr. Leonard, Ms. Hines, Mrs. Cartright, Mr. Crespo, Mr. Roberts, and Mr. Simms). One high school teacher, Mrs. Erickson, was not interviewed due to multiple scheduling conflicts; however, she was included in observational and artifact data collection. Both the middle and high school principal participated in one individual interview. Semi-structured interview protocols were utilized. A student sample interview question was, "Describe how your teachers helped you with the transition into high school." A teacher and principal sample question was, "What are your expectations for academic excellence?" All interviews were audiorecorded and completely transcribed (141 single-spaced pages).

A total of 74 hours of observations took place (24 hours at the middle level and 50 hours at the high school level) where a researcher shadowed each student throughout his/her day at least twice at both levels. In eighth grade, students' team classes and other aspects of the school day (e.g., lunch, in-school activities) were observed. One event was observed over the summer (i.e., high school parent open house). In ninth grade, students' core classes along with other parts of the school day (e.g., team activities) were observed. Artifact evidence (e.g., students' schedules, syllabi, classroom rules, class assignments) were collected and used to help triangulate data. Multiple methods were utilized to ensure confidentiality and limit the effects of subjectivity, including the use of pseudonyms for participant and school names and member checks through which participants confirmed their perceptions were accurately represented.

Data Analysis

The present study utilized Hatch's (2002) inductive approach to data analysis. Most qualitative research is analyzed inductively for multiple reasons, including its ability to work flexibly within numerous qualitative paradigms and its ability to allow participant stories to surface by centering deeply on a particular entity (Hatch, 2002; Mayan, 2009). Like other inductive models, Hatch's version involves looking for patterns in data in an effort to generate general statements regarding the phenomena. After multiple reads of the complete dataset, researchers separated the data into analyzable parts, referred to by Hatch (2002) as frames of analysis, and compared frames to collaboratively form a consensus on which parts of the data require further analysis. These frames were then further analyzed to uncover domains that reflected semantic relationships (e.g., means-end semantic relationship such as X is a way to do Y; Figure 1). Emerging as the theme, relational and academic teacher practices may help to meet students' needs across the transition but these practices were not consistent from one school site to the other and the responsiveness of these practices also varied across sites. Teacher practices consistent with the warm demanding teaching stance may have promise for supporting students' needs during this period of schooling.

Results

Promoting Caring Teacher-student Relationships

Findings indicate eighth and ninth-grade teachers who engaged students in conversations personal in nature and who used team activities and in-class activities to connect with students helped to set the foundation for meeting students' needs and fostered teacher-student relationships grounded in care. While all middle school teachers used team activities and in-class activities to connect with students, only one high school teacher engaged in these practices. Fostering a sense of relatedness between teachers and adolescents is an essential element in nurturing a caring school environment and may help aid a responsive transition from one school to the next (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Conversations personal in nature. All eighth-grade teachers and 11 ninth-grade teachers in this investigation engaged in conversations personal in nature with their students. Such conversations were not directly related to academics and occurred in one-on-one, group, and whole class settings. Eighth-grade teachers attested to engaging in conversations personal in nature with individual students as well as with their entire class on a regular basis. They perceived such conversations allowed them to connect with their students and learn more about them. According to Mrs. Copeland, these conversations didn't have to be lengthy to be effective and could serve as a starting place for developing a deeper relationship with students:

> I think that just by the smallest contact too, they [eighth-grade students] want to build relationships with teachers. Even the smallest comment opens the door. You can be like, "Hey, I love your shoes" and they will be like, "Yeah, my mom bought them for me and then we went to the mall." And it's like a deluge and it's just the little comment that opens them up. They are like "Oh my gosh, she cares," and then they open up and talk.

Ms. Hamilton explained an instance when she purposefully made an attempt to connect with the entire class by asking about their time outside of school, "Guys, it's so great to see you back from spring break. So, for today's activity I want you to write about your spring break and then we are going to share it because they want to talk about it." She elaborated on the importance of such conversations, "It shows them that you want to know about their lives, what they do for fun, and their spare time." Ms. Mirabelle attested to the reciprocal nature of developing connections with students during such conversations, "They like talking. So, when you ask them a question, they open up and then they want to know something about you."

At the middle school level, eighth-grade teachers met as a team on a daily basis during a 90-minute common planning and lunch period to talk about students and their needs. These conversations often prompted personal exchanges with students. Ms. O'Connell explained, "Because we meet every day at lunch, we know that so-and-so was having a bad day this morning." She further described how she used the information acquired from her colleagues to express care toward her students, "They see you and you say, 'I heard that you were having a bad day this morning.' 'How did you know that?' …[S]o the students realize that we are working as a team to try and help them."

Students recognized their teachers had conversations about them. When reflecting back on her middle school experience, Lauren stated:

> I liked it better at Ford, because you felt more of a team. If you were having trouble in science, the teachers could talk because they all know you. The teachers could talk because they all know how you are doing in their classes.

During eighth grade, all four students reported their teachers knew them well and made efforts to engage them in whole class and one-on-one conversations personal in nature. For example, Katelyn recalled how one of her eighth-grade teachers engaged her in conversations revolving around her personal interests, "She [Ms. Hamilton] talks to me a lot…She knows that I like sports and I'm athletic." Lauren described how personal conversations with one of her eighth-grade teachers centered on a mutual experience, "Ms. O'Connell, the social studies teacher, is actually from Texas too. So a lot of the restaurants that we went to we can talk about and she knows where everything is." During classroom observations, all students were observed engaging in such conversations with all eighth-grade teachers on multiple occasions. For example, Jimmy talked with Ms. Copeland about her trip to the Grand Canyon. She shared with him her experience white water rafting on the Colorado River. He expressed excitement and asked for specific details about the event.

At the high school level, 11 teachers were observed engaging in conversations personal in nature with students and four of these teachers attested to participating in such conversations as a way to foster caring teacher-student relationships. On the first day of high school, Ms. Hines was observed asking students to fill out cards with information about their hobbies and lives outside of school. She explained how this information helped her initiate conversations with students, "I was able to say, 'Oh hey, I saw that you do this [on the information card]. That's pretty cool.'"

Additionally, Mr. George described how he utilized personal conversations with incoming ninth-grade students:

> In some of them I see fear, but I try to bring them out of their shells by talking to them. That's the only way. As soon as you do that, they relax. They relax. Then you can start talking to them and they begin to talk back.

Mr. Leonard stressed the importance of building relationships with students, "I make a connection and I do really well with rapport. If they understand your personality first, you build that trust by speaking, by not letting them fail, and expecting them to do work." In an attempt to help students foster positive relationships with their teachers, Mr. Matingly utilized class time to disclose his personal experiences as a secondary student:

> I thought that I was cool when I was in high school and that I would tell the teacher off. I would cuss teachers out and get suspended. I thought I was cool but I wasn't. It ruins your reputation.

During their ninth-grade year, all students referenced engaging in personal conversations with at least one of their ninth-grade teachers. Students used these conversations to inform their perceptions of teachers, including whether or not they like the teacher, could connect and relate with them, and approach them in time of need. As Jimmy stated, "Some teachers are really nice and some are really mean. The mean teachers just stay out and do their own thing and the nice teachers talk to the students and try to relate with the students." Similarly, on the second day of high school, Lauren claimed she already liked two of her teachers because they "seemed like they would be easy to talk to." Katelyn cited Ms. Walters as a teacher she connected with through talking about a mutual interest in sports, "She is interested in sports and reminds me of Ms. Hamilton [eighth-grade teacher] a bit." Jimmy reported connecting with his ROTC Sergeant, "…he's not like other teachers. If we do something bad, he doesn't make us stop. He talks to us like one of his friends."

Team activities and in-class activities. All eighth-grade teachers and one ninth-grade teacher in this investigation utilized team activities and in-class activities to connect and foster caring relationships with students. At the middle school level, two eighth-grade team activities, a time capsule and luau, fostered a sense of community and connection, demonstrating to students their eighth-grade teachers cared about them. For example, Lauren shared:

> I really liked the time capsule because we all got to put something in it, all the eighth graders on our team… Mrs. Copeland brought a rose bush, bought a gate to put around it, and brought a stone. I got to hold the stone and put it on the ground. So we all took a class picture of that. I think that by her taking the time to make all that stuff and get all that stuff for us was really special.

Near the end of students' eighth-grade year, the four eighth-grade teachers held a team luau to celebrate the conclusion of middle school. Students recognized the efforts teachers made to plan the luau (i.e., extra time, energy, and resources) remarking that such efforts were ways their teachers demonstrated care. Troy stated, "We had a party, a Hawaiian party, and the teachers

spent their own money to buy us hot dogs, watermelons, stuff like that." When asked how such efforts were perceived, he stated, "That they [teachers] care about us."

At the high school level, only one ninth-grade teacher was observed engaging in any sort of in-class activity with students purposefully designed to get to know students. This teacher, Mrs. Walters, spoke to students about the importance of knowing all classmates' names and working together as a cohesive group. She spent the first two days of the school year engaging in a class activity through which students got to know one another. Students were asked to come up with an adjective describing who they are that started with the same letter as their first name. At the start of the activity, she vowed to know all student names by the end of the second day of class, which she was able to accomplish. She told her students, "I will know your names by tomorrow, I promise." Classroom observations confirm that she knew all students' names by the second day of school. No other ninth-grade teachers were observed utilizing team activities and in-class activities nor did any other teachers describe using such experiences with their students. Similarly, no students in this investigation made reference to any additional ninth-grade teachers besides Mrs. Walters with whom they reported feeling a sense of connection.

Assuming Academic Responsibilities

During students' eighth-grade year at Ford and ninth-grade year at Westshore, teachers utilized numerous practices to assume academic responsibility as a way to prepare students for future responsibilities. Holding high academic expectations for students on both sides of the transition is noted as a transition best practice (SREB, 2002) and as an essential element in expressing care toward students (Bondy & Ross, 2008). Findings indicate middle and high school teachers assume academic responsibility differently. At the middle school level, teachers took ownership of academic responsibility for students, but high school teachers had the opposite view, insisting students take on all academic responsibility.

Teacher Responsibility. At the middle level, eighth-grade teachers insisted all students pay attention in class and complete all coursework to a quality level. Ms. Hamilton explained the eighth-grade teachers' attitude towards coursework, "It's not an option to put your head down and stare into space. It's not." She elaborated:

> For me, it goes with the high expectations thing. Zero is not an option in my class…I give them a 100 at the beginning of the semester and it's their job to keep it. I don't accept zeros. You have to do the work.

In addition to insisting students complete all coursework, three of the four eighth-grade teachers expected all students to complete coursework to quality. For example, on several occasions Katelyn and Jimmy were observed being told by Ms. Mirabelle to redo and resubmit their math homework because it was either not complete or not completed to quality. For these teachers, work not completed to quality was returned for revision and resubmission. Ms. Mirabelle explained, "With homework assignments that I collect and grade, if I don't think it's quality work, I don't grade it. I put a note on it that they have to redo it."

All eighth-grade teachers attested to and were observed being constantly "on" their students (i.e., constantly reminding students of what they need to do, insisting students pay attention in class, making directions overly explicit, providing multiple supports). Ms. Copeland stated, "You have to stay on them because they don't see the relevance [of the assignments]." Eighth-grade teachers expressed concerns that their practices were overly supportive, providing numerous academic supports that may not exist at the high school level. Ms. Hamilton stated, "I feel like we give them an abundance of safety nets and then they go next door [to Westshore High School] and they yank them." Although their intentions were to teach students' academic responsibility, eighth-grade teachers worried they may be overly involved and too supportive. Ms. O'Connell was concerned they may be hindering students' ability to fulfill the academic demands of high school, "I feel like it's [constantly being on them] babying them." It was her belief that high school students would not have "teachers that are really watching over them." She recounted telling her eighth-grade classes:

You are so lucky that someone is spelling it out for you, like 'Put your heading on your paper' because next year a teacher might get that [student paper] and put it in the garbage because there is no name on it.

One eighth-grade teacher, Ms. O'Connell, was observed vacillating between being constantly "on" her students like the other eighth-grade teachers and refusing to "baby" students like her high school counterparts. She explained, "I hold very high expectations in my classroom. If they are not prepared, I kick them out. …[T]o me it's important to teach them because in the workforce they are not going to get handouts."

Student Responsibility. At the high school level, ninth grade teachers emphasized the importance of meeting deadlines and actively resisted coddling students in an effort to prepare them for life after high school. All ninth grade teachers reported expecting students to complete coursework by the due date and would not accept late work. Their focus was on timely completion. Mrs. Cartright's policy regarding incomplete work was typical of the policies held by the ninth-grade teachers at the school, "Complete all assignments. Let me get serious here. If you have ten questions and you complete ten, you get 100%. If you have nine done and you give an excuse, you will get a zero." Mr. Oscar's policy was similar, "Late work, it is not going to fly. If you have late work and you turn it in, it is probably going to be a zero."

Students corroborated ninth-grade teachers' explanations of their strict classwork and homework policies. Troy described one such homework policy:

Yeah, one of my teachers, as soon as the bell rings, if you don't have your book open and homework out, it's considered late. And if you don't turn in your homework on that day, the next day it's 50% off.

Similarly, Lauren stated:

Some teachers are more strict or more lenient, but you have a certain time period where you have to get work done or you either get a zero or deducted points.

At the high school level, all ninth-grade teachers believed eighth-grade teachers shouldered too much student academic responsibilities. Ninth-grade teachers such as Ms. Hines spoke to the lack of "babying" in high school, "They [students] don't understand that they are now in high school and you are not going to get babied as much as you would in another place." Ms. Hines referenced the need to prepare students for a future in which they no longer have teachers to help them along:

> I think at the high school level there has to be a certain level of expectation and responsibility. I prod here and there. But if we are babying them throughout the whole high school then what skills are they going to have when they graduate?

Discussion

This study examined how eighth and ninth-grade teacher practices may help support students' needs across the middle-to-high-school transition. Three major conclusions were drawn. First, both eighth and ninth-grade teachers promoted caring teacher-student relationships as a way to meet students' needs across the transition. At both levels, teachers utilized informal conversations to promote a sense of relatedness and bolster connections with students. Eighth-grade teachers utilized team activities and in-class activities whereas only one such experience occurred at the high school level. Second, both eighth and ninth-grade teachers assumed academic responsibilities as a way to prepare students for future responsibilities; however, how eighth and ninth-grade teachers prepared students for future responsibilities were different. Third, teacher practices consistent with the warm demanding teaching stance may have promise for supporting students' needs during this period of schooling.

Although this study produced informative conclusions, it is not without limitations. While efforts were taken to aid in generalizability of the findings, due to this study's yearlong qualitative case study methodology including the voices of 23 participants, four of which were students, the ability to generalize the findings of this study is limited. More student participants might have yielded further insight into students' perceptions. Additionally, it is important to note data were collected during the second semester of students' eighth-grade year while data at the high school level were collected during the first semester of ninth-grade. Since data were collected at the end of the eighth-grade year, those teachers spent more time with students than ninth-grade teachers and, therefore, had increased opportunities to foster caring relationships and facilitate academic expectations that express care. Despite these limitations, this study provides a rich understanding of how eighth and ninth-grade teachers can support students' needs across the transition.

Literature on teacher care suggests caring teacher practices that promote a sense of connection and relatedness include: listening to students, showing a genuine interest in students and their academic and social lives, talking personally to students, and giving students a chance to talk (Garza, 2007; Hayes et al., 1994; Weinstein, 1998). These practices are echoed in the findings of this study. Middle school teachers fostered caring teacher-student relationships through the use of team activities and in-class activities. With the exception of Mrs. Walters's first day activity, such experiences were nonexistent at the high school level. Team activities at the middle school level, such as the luau and time capsule, fostered a sense of relatedness through deliberately promoting caring connections within the school setting that help to fulfill students' basic

psychological (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) and developmental needs (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993). Findings indicate caring teacher practices, including conversations, events, and in-class activities, may support students' needs, especially their need for relatedness, across the transition (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Bosworth, 1995; Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002, 2005; Garza, 2007; Nieto, 2010; Noddings, 2005).

Assuming academic responsibilities as a way to prepare students for future responsibilities may also be a way to support students across the transition. At the middle level, teachers assumed the responsibility for student learning, constantly pushing students to meet their level of expectation, even if it takes multiple attempts. With one exception, eighth-grade teachers exhibited the mindset advocated by Corbett et al. (2002), "If a task was worth giving, then it was worth doing: and if it was worth doing, then it was worth doing well" (p. 83). While eighth-grade teachers believed this mindset was necessary to academically support students, they were concerned that such a mindset may not adequately prepare students for high school. Eighth-grade teachers struggled with doing what they perceived was right for their students and doing what was needed to prepare students for high school teachers' academic expectations.

Academic expectations held by ninth-grade teachers centered on completion and timeliness. They adhered to a "real-world" mentality that centered on students' taking on complete academic responsibility and neither accepting late work nor offering second chances. Additionally, ninth-grade teachers did not discuss their expectations regarding the quality of completed assignments, just that all assignments needed to be complete on time. Additionally, they generally perceived eighth-grade teachers as taking on too much responsibility for students' academic success. Corbett et al. (2002) addresses the question of who is responsible for academics, students or teachers, and asserted until students value their education, adults are the responsible party. These discrepancies in the ways eighth and ninth-grade teachers facilitated academic expectations may not meet students' needs as they move from one school setting to another (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993).

Findings also suggest teacher practices consistent with those of warm demanding teachers may meet students' academic and relational needs. This teaching stance, in which teacher practices foster a responsive and caring teacher-student relationship and facilitate academic expectations, is important in promoting a responsive classroom environment (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Corbett et al., 2002, 2005; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006), especially as students make the move from one school context to the next (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993). Findings indicate teachers on both sides of the transition have the potential to meet students' needs through the implementation of warm demander teacher practices; however, the warm demanding stance was not employed consistently across both levels. At the middle school level, three of the four teachers exhibited the warm demanding teaching stance by both promoting caring teacher-student relationships and assuming academic responsibilities. At the high school level, teachers exhibited warm demanding practices by promoting caring teacher-student relationships. Warm demanding academic teaching practices were not exhibited by any of the high school teachers.

This study highlights the importance of viewing the middle-to-high-school transition as a process spanning two time points, eighth and ninth grade, not a single event (Hertzog et al., 2009). While this yearlong longitudinal study underscores the need for examining how teacher practices on both sides of the transition support students' needs, attention must be paid to eighth and ninth-grade relational and academic practices in order to best meet students' needs across the transition. Additional research is needed to further investigate how teachers' use relational and academic practices to support students' needs and aid a responsive transition over a longer period of time. The exact role of care and how it may support students during this period of school merits increased attention. Future research on how the warm demanding teaching stance may help support a responsive transition is warranted. There is also a need to continue to listen to student voices in order to be responsive to their needs (Caskey, 2011) and uncover ways teachers may help support students' needs during the eighth and ninth-grade years as they make the transition from one school to the next.

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Table 1.
List of Participants

Student Participants

Pseudonym	Demographics
Troy	Black male; eligible for free/reduced lunch
Jimmy	White male
Katelyn	White female; eligible for free/reduced lunch
Lauren	Hispanic female

Teacher and Administrator Participants

Pseudonym	Position	Demographics
Mrs. Copeland	Eighth grade science	White female
Ms. Hamilton	Eighth grade language arts	White female
Ms. Mirabelle	Eighth grade math	White female
Ms. O'Connell	Eighth grade social studies	White female
Mrs. Walters	Ninth grade English	White female
Mrs. Erickson	Ninth grade reading	White female
Mrs. Peters	Ninth grade reading	White female
Mr. Manns	Ninth grade math	White male
Mr. George	Ninth grade math	White male
Mr. Leonard	Ninth grade math	White male
Mr. Crespo	Ninth grade math	Hispanic male
Mr. Simms	Ninth grade math	White male
Ms. Hines	Ninth grade science	White female
Mr. Oscar	Ninth grade science	White male
Mrs. Cartright	Ninth grade social studies & freshman focus	White female
Mr. Roberts	Ninth grade social studies & freshman focus	White male
Mr. Matingly	Ninth grade freshman focus	White male
Mrs. Cramer	Middle school principal	White female
Mrs. Mauch	High school principal	White female

Table 2.
Data Collection Information

	Middle School **Spring of eighth grade**	**High School** **Fall of ninth grade**	**Total**
Focus Group Interviews	• 1 student focus group interview (*N*=4 students) • 1 core teacher focus group interview (*N*=4 teachers)	• 1 student focus group interview (*N*=4 students) • 1 core teacher focus group interview (*N*=3 teachers)	• 2 student focus group interviews (*N*=4 students) • 2 core teacher focus group interviews (*N*=7 teachers)
Individual Interviews	• 4 individual student interviews • 1 individual principal interview	• 4 individual student interviews • 9 individual core teacher interviews • 1 individual principal interview	• 8 individual student interviews • 9 individual core teacher interviews • 2 principal interviews
Observations	• 24 hours of student observations (*N*=4 students, each shadowed at least twice) • Team classrooms • In-school activities and events	• 50 hours of student observations (*N*=4 students, each shadowed at least twice) • Core classrooms • In-school activities and events	• 74 hours of student observations
Artifact Data	• Students' schedule • Syllabi • Classroom rules • Class assignments	• Students' schedule • Syllabi • Classroom rules • Class assignments	• Students' schedule • Syllabi • Classroom rules • Class assignments

Figure 1. Master Outline

    Relational Domain
       – Promoting teacher-student relationships at the eighth and ninth-grade level is a way to meet students' needs across the transition
           • Conversations personal in nature
           • Team activities and in-class activities
    Academic Domain
       – Assuming academic responsibility at the middle and high school levels is a way to meet students needs' across the transition
           • Teachers' responsibility
           • Students' responsibility

Figure 1. Master outline of relational and academic teacher practices that may help to meet students' basic and developmental needs across the transition.