

**SUPPORTING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL:
BEST PRACTICES FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

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Abstract

Adolescents experience challenges navigating psychological, physiological, and emotional transformations. This article contributes to research into how middle school and high school environments can reinforce the needs of students through the transition from middle school to high school. In this grounded theory study, we interviewed 11 experienced, successful middle school principals in high-performing schools to explore practices and behaviors in supporting this transition. Participants noted the importance of maintaining high expectations while providing students with continuous nurturing, support, and opportunities to develop into responsible and self-sufficient young adults. These principals built positive school environments by promoting a shared vision based on regular collaboration among all stakeholder groups. Principals affirmed the middle school concept practice of exposing students to (a) rigorous, engaging, academic classes; (b) a variety of career exploration and elective course offerings; and (c) opportunities to teach positive character, soft skills, and self-advocacy. Findings reaffirmed the benefits of student-centered schools with effective administrators and teachers who seek continuous improvement, practice professional collaboration, implement student-centered programs/interventions, and make decisions based on the best interest of the students. The article concludes with implications for practice and further research.

Keywords: school transitions, middle school concept, student-centered activities, interdisciplinary teaming, grounded theory

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Introduction

In this article, we present findings from a grounded theory study conducted to explore best practices employed by middle school principals in support of middle school students transitioning to high school. We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 11 successful, experienced principals of high-performing middle schools to determine what they perceived to be successful supports and interventions in helping middle school students transition to high school. As a result of our findings, we present a theory of best practices that practitioners in middle schools may wish to implement to support student transition to high school. We conclude by reflecting on these findings and how future researchers may wish to extend this research in different settings.

Purpose of the Study

This grounded theory study aimed to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by veteran middle school principals and to create a theoretical model to clarify the process. As a result of this study, school leaders may gain insight into how they can collaboratively work with students, parents, faculty, and colleagues to establish successful transitioning programs at the middle school level that challenge, nurture, and prepare students for the experiences and expectations they will encounter in high school and beyond.

Research Questions

The central research question for the study was as follows: *How do middle school principals in selected schools in Central Alabama describe best practices in implementing transition activities that nurture and acclimatize students while preparing them for the experiences and challenges they will encounter at the high school level?* Sub-questions for the study were as follows:

1. How do middle school principals organize staff members to better transition students from middle school to high school?
2. What types of student-centered activities do principals plan and implement to transition students from middle to high school successfully?
3. What types of school-to-school articulation activities ensure middle school to high school success?
4. How do principals encourage parental involvement while transitioning students from middle school to high school?

Background to the Study

Transitioning from middle school to high school often generates anticipation and excitement but may also present unique and daunting challenges for students. Students must familiarize themselves with new policies and procedures and face the uncertainty of learning their way around a different and often larger facility. Taking new academic subjects, changing curriculum standards, getting accustomed to the methods of six to eight new teachers, attending classes with older students, and possibilities of encountering bullies add to concerns. Students with special needs, learning disabilities, or lack of support from home face additional risk factors that

could contribute to failure at the next level (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Students often experience achievement losses moving from one campus to another (Alspaugh, 2010; Benner, 2011). Alspaugh (2010) acknowledged the relationship between the number of school-to-school transitions and the percentage of students who drop out of high school. Other researchers confirmed that students had an overall decline in grades during the transition from middle school to high school, particularly during the first year (Benner, 2011; Smith, 2005).

Although physical maturation occurs earlier than in previous generations (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003), children continue to experience developmental challenges. Adolescents experience numerous psychological, physiological, cognitive, biological, and emotional changes with the commencement of puberty (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], n.d.; Wingfield et al., 2005). Additionally, the apprehension of changing school environments is further complicated by additional changes such as the emergent significance of peer affiliations and the development of higher order reasoning skills (AMLE, n.d.; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Evidence has shown that the middle school experience is directly correlated with success in high school and beyond (Wormeli, 2011). Therefore, school leaders must remain highly involved in providing a variety of interventions designed to equip students to handle challenges constructively during their middle school and early high school years and be prepared to respond positively to obstacles they encounter later in life.

In addition to encountering the challenges of transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Akos et al., 2015), adolescents generally face two educational transitions—from elementary school to middle school and from middle-school-to-high-school (Goodwin et al., 2011). Because most of the research explores the transition from elementary schools to middle or junior high school settings, there appears to be a gap in the empirical research literature regarding transitioning students from middle schools to high schools (Uvaas & McKeivitt, 2013). Caskey (2011) elaborated that more research is warranted regarding how middle school and high school environments support the needs of students throughout the middle-to-high-school transition. Therefore, examining the best practices middle school leaders utilize to provide successful transitional programming throughout the middle school years can be a key ingredient to helping students achieve academic and social success at the high school level.

Theoretical Frame and Review of the Literature

Adolescence is the transitional time between childhood and adulthood, where numerous developmental changes occur (Goodwin et al., 2011). Along with their specific psychological needs, adolescents possess distinctive, evolving needs that should be addressed in the school environment (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). Despite the numerous resources available to guide parents and educators who regularly interact with young people, adolescents encounter personal and developmental obstacles for which no specific solution exists (Abell et al., 2006). As a result of these changes, secondary school leaders need to look for available methods to promote a more student-friendly, responsive, and nurturing secondary school environment (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). About a hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) said people are inspired to fulfill basic needs before moving to more advanced needs. Defined as the quest of reaching one's full potential and being connected with the world, from the basic to the highest level, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) includes the following: (1) Physiological, (2) Safety/Security, (3) Emotional/Social, (4) Esteem, and (5) Self-Actualization. Maslow (1970a) later extended his original, five-stage model to include both cognitive and aesthetic needs (1970a)

before the level of self-actualization. In addition, beyond self-actualization at the top of the hierarchy, Maslow (1970b) inserted transcendence needs (McLeod, 2007). Researchers adopted Maslow's Theory of a Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding conceptual framework for this study, specifically focusing on the Emotional/Social aspect of the hierarchy related to middle school students transitioning to high school. According to Maslow (1943), being part of a group is an example of fulfilling man's basic desire to belong. As the lower levels of the hierarchy are met, the higher-order needs will take over as motivators. Comparing Maslow's hierarchy to the structure and support system of a middle-level school, especially when effective transitioning practices enhance the students' physiological, safety/security, and emotional/social levels of need, the confidence of the adolescents in the school is increased to the level that higher-order needs take over.

According to the NMSA (2003), successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes the following:

- (1) educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so;
 - (2) courageous, collaborative leadership;
 - (3) a shared vision that guides decisions;
 - (4) an inviting, supportive, and safe environment;
 - (5) high expectations for every member of the learning community;
 - (6) students and teachers engaged in active learning;
 - (7) an adult advocate for every student; and
 - (8) school-initiated family and community partnerships.
- (p. 7)

NMSA (2003) further stated that successful schools provide adolescents with the following opportunities to support students in making the transition from the elementary to secondary levels: (a) a relevant curriculum, (b) a variety of teaching and learning approaches, (c) high-quality assessment and evaluation methods, (d) supportive and significant relationships, (e) promotion of health, wellness, and safety; and (f) comprehensive counseling and support services.

The Rationale for Transitioning Programs

Schools that do not provide supportive transitioning programs may experience a loss in student achievement and lower graduation rates (Akos et al., 2015; Alspaugh, 2010). Alspaugh examined the significance of achievement loss associated with school-to-school transitions. Citing that prior academic achievement is a reliable predictor of future academic success, Smith (2005) affirmed that a student's achievement loss during the middle to high school transition is associated with attrition or lack of success encountered by one during their first year of college. Alspaugh further noted declines in student self-esteem and self-perception associated with moving from one school setting. Other researchers have cautioned that a difficult transition from eighth to ninth grade is associated with increased behavior problems (Smith et al., 2018; Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996).

Achievement Loss and Dropout Rates

The Southern Regional Education Board (2002) stated that the transition from middle school to high school is the most difficult transition students face. Alspaugh (2010) also speculated that the loss of self-esteem and self-perception associated with changing school settings could have been a factor in the increased dropout rates. The study further revealed that students who attended schools with larger student populations were more likely to drop out of school than students enrolled in a smaller school. The results of this study were "consistent with the findings of other

researchers in that the instability and adjustments required of students in school transitions were associated with educational outcomes” (p. 25). Rice (2001) examined how the middle school-to-high school transition negatively affected student performance in math and science classes. Rice stated that administrators and teachers need to provide clear expectations and continuous interventions for transitioning students. Rice further noted the importance of parental involvement and the need to establish a strong sense of community and to belong in the high school setting. Smith (1997) added that incorporating transitional programs builds confidence and boosts student achievement and graduation at the high school level. More recently, Akos et al. (2015) examined the impact of students transitioning from one level to another (i.e., elementary, middle, high) and determined that such transition “has significant consequences for many early adolescents” (p. 170).

Lessard and Juvonen (2022) conducted a study of 3,410 ethnically diverse ninth grade students, focusing particularly on those students who had maintained or carried over friendships from middle school to high school. In their examination of 17,255 friendships, these researchers found that first-year high school students who maintained middle school friendships (as opposed to newly formed friendships) reported higher academic achievement as well as higher levels of emotional support from their friends. Lessard & Juvonen stated, “these findings underscore the academic value of maintaining social ties across the high school transition” (p. 136).

Dialogue among Stakeholders Important

Akos (2016), Akos et al. (2015), and Akos and Galassi (2004) concluded that more discussion is needed with students and parents before a major transition, with specific emphasis on the positive aspects of the school at the next level. Students, parents, and teachers at elementary and secondary levels agreed on the importance of discussing the myths and truths about the middle or high school before the move to the new school (Abell et al., 2006; Akos et al., 2015 Akos & Galassi, 2004; Uvass & McKeivitt, 2013). Mizelle and Irvin (2000) similarly articulated that middle to high school transition programs are most effective when school administrators involve multiple stakeholders. Suggested activities included (1) sharing information with students and parents about the opportunities at the new school, (2) giving students social support before and during the transition, and (3) bringing middle and high school faculties together to discuss curriculum and expectations. Abell et al. (2006) added that middle and high school principals and faculty members need to share consistent messages regarding the similarities and differences in the opportunities at each level to maximize student success.

The Vital Role of the Principal

Onorato (2013) stated that, as the instructional leader, the principal is responsible for all activities occurring in and around the school building. Onorato wrote, “The principal’s leadership sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching and learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become” (p. 35).

Ethical leadership from the principal is a key ingredient to the transitioning process. Ethical leaders seek to provide a fair-minded and virtuous school climate for all stakeholders. In addition to being practical and fair with faculty, staff, and parents, ethical leaders base their decisions on what is in the best interests of students. Sagnak (2010) addressed the relationship between transformational school leadership and an ethical school climate. Because principals play such a critical role in determining the ethical climate of a school, transformational leaders focus attention on ethical values and establish standards that impact the actions of all employees in the school.

Sagnak further asserted that strong principal leadership was positively related to caring for others, consistent policies and procedures, promoting group goals, and establishing an ethical climate in the school. Sagnak concluded that principal leadership has a positive effect on faculty and staff, but it models and inspires a culture that provides a challenging yet safe and supportive environment for the students throughout the transitioning process.

Despite the supportive programs, innovative schedules, or academic and elective opportunities a school offers, school-to-school transitioning cannot be successful without strong visionary, ethical, and character-building leadership from principals (Juvonen et al., 2004; McEwan, 2003;). Characteristics of strong leaders included the ability to admit when they were wrong, trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, generosity, humility, respectfulness, and consistency. Additional traits included (a) recruiting and hiring staff members with character, (b) leading by example, not by appeal, and (c) the ability to develop the character of students. McEwan (2003) further stated that strong school leaders “recognize the power they have to mold and shape young people, encourage and empower teachers, and respect and affirm parents” (p. 149).

Successful Transitioning Involves a Collaborative Approach

Whether the transition involves elementary-school-to-middle-school or middle-school-to-high-school, Mizelle (2005) reasoned that successful programs depend on the administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents coming together to discuss programs, courses, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools. Vertical teaming promotes such sharing and provides a forum for employees at each school to assess and align curriculum and promote consistent expectations across grade levels.

Mizelle (2005) added that bringing educators at all levels together will allow them to structure their curricula and programs to help students make seamless transitions into the next grade level. The results further revealed that school leaders must remain actively involved in working with students, parents, faculty, and staff across grade levels and schools to develop meaningful transitional programming that supports students as they progress from self-contained elementary classrooms to the secondary challenges and opportunities middle and high school.

Ellerbrock and colleagues (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer (2013) maintained that continuing vertical communication among principals, counselors, and teachers at the middle and high school level is important as educators examine ways to assist students through the challenges they face with each new academic year. In addition, students and parents should also be regularly informed and allowed to provide feedback regarding the transition process.

Finally, due to the lack of evidence-based transition programs for school-wide student transitions, schools that seek to address these concerns must plan and implement programs of their own (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). No empirical studies have been conducted to evaluate the impact of one educational transition on a future educational transition (Smith, 2005). A variety of supportive transitional programs should be designed, implemented, and evaluated at each grade level to maximize opportunities for student success at the high school level and beyond. Schools that choose to incorporate model transition programs must consistently assess each activity to determine whether it serves the purpose for which it was intended.

Methods

This research study sought to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by middle school principals. To adequately collect and understand participant viewpoints, philosophies, and best practices of middle school principals, our research team employed a qualitative, grounded theory research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Hatch, 2002). Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is a method used to produce descriptive theories about the specific observed phenomena from the views of participants instead of verifying and testing a priori theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers maintained that theories, or the abstract analytical schema of a process, should be grounded in data from the field, particularly the actions, exchanges, or processes through interrelating categories of information based on data collected (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Sample Selection

Our goal was to identify an information-rich sample of experienced middle school principals. Smith (2005) noted that transitional programs at the middle school level enhance confidence and heighten student achievement at the high school level. Since achievement loss is associated with transitioning students from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 2010; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013), it was important to identify successful schools with the highest student achievement scores.

The research team obtained the most recent (American College Testing) (ACT) Aspire data in reading and math assessed from eighth-grade students in public schools throughout Alabama since the eighth grade is traditionally the highest middle-level grade before the transition to high school. We scrutinized the ACT Aspire data to identify the state's top-performing eighth grade public middle schools. Drawing from the membership roster of the Alabama Association of Middle School Principals (AAMSP), the president of AAMSP, a school leadership expert familiar with middle schools and principals from across the state, then nominated 40 potential candidates to interview, all of whom had at least three years' experience as principals in their schools. We selected the first 11 middle school principals who agreed to participate from this list. These 11 principals represented a cross-section of schools, allowing us to obtain data representing multiple perspectives from diverse middle school populations. The lead author then visited each of the 11 school sites to conduct individual interviews with each participant and collect field notes and related documents.

Data Analysis

Drawing from interview transcripts and document review, the research team employed three sequential phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998, 2008). We organized the textual data by labeling the phenomena and categorized these labels into progressively abstract and collective categories. Once coded data from each principal was complete, we re-analyzed all 11 transcripts and related documents to identify common themes among study participants. To increase the veracity of the data, we utilized a member checking process wherein each study participant reviewed the transcript from their interview before data analysis (Creswell, 2009). After the coding was complete, we also employed

a *peer debriefing* process to garner feedback from appropriately qualified peer researchers relative to themes and codes identified in the analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Results

This section begins with a description of the 11 middle-level principals and information about their schools. Next, we present the development of the major thematic categories using open coding of the interview and document review data. We then turn to the axial coding process applied in grounded theory methodology that breaks the major thematic categories into sections presented in an axial coding model. The last section presents selective coding used to develop a set of propositions and a visual model representing the process associated with principals’ best practices of helping students transition from middle school to high school.

Participants and their Schools

In the tables below, we present data regarding the schools represented by each of the 11 principal participants, as well as selected demographics about the individual principals themselves. As a means of protecting identity, each study participant chose a pseudonym that corresponded with a person from history or pop culture. The first name will relate to the pseudonym of the principal, while the last name will serve as the pseudonym for the school.

The schools ranged in enrollment from about 500 students up to 1,100. Schools reported serving students from grade 6 through grade 9, with all but one school serving a configuration of grades 6-8. Percentages of minority students in these schools ranged from 3% to 70%, respectively. Percentages of students receiving free or reduced meal benefits ranged from 0% up to 68%. These data are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
School Demographics Summary

Participating School	Student Enrollment	Grades Served	% Minority Students*	% Receiving Free/Reduced Meals
Lincoln Middle	1,142	6-8	34	23
Taylor Middle	808	6-8	35	28
Stewart Middle	825	7-8	47	23
Hamilton Middle	1,069	7-9	3	0
Presley Middle	913	6-8	70	68
Douglass Middle	894	6-8	34	29
Camelot Middle	503	6-8	16	8.5
Jefferson Middle	820	7-8	36	19
Kennedy Middle	703	7-8	46	54
Reagan Middle	853	6-8	15	15
Edison Middle	1,002	6-8	21	18

*Minority populations represent American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Hispanic.

Three administrators had earned Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degrees in Educational Leadership. Five participants had Education Specialist (Ed.S.) degrees in Educational Leadership,

while a master’s was the highest degree for three of the principals. Eight participants were male and three were female. Descriptions of study participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Summary Data

Pseudonym	Highest Degree Attained*	Administrative Experience	Years at Current School
Abraham	EdD	11	4
James	Master’s	16	11
Renee	EdD	14	6
Alexander	EdS	5.5	4
Elvis	EdS	15	6
Frederick	EdS	31	4
Guinevere	EdS	15	10
George	EdS	10	5
Jacqueline	EdD	13	7
Ronald	Master’s	12	6
Thomas	Master’s	13	7

Note. *EdD = Educational doctorate; EdS = Educational Specialist; Taken from Haynes, L. P. (2017). *Intervention strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school: A grounded theory study of best practices identified by middle school principals.* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama.

Open Coding and Emergent Themes

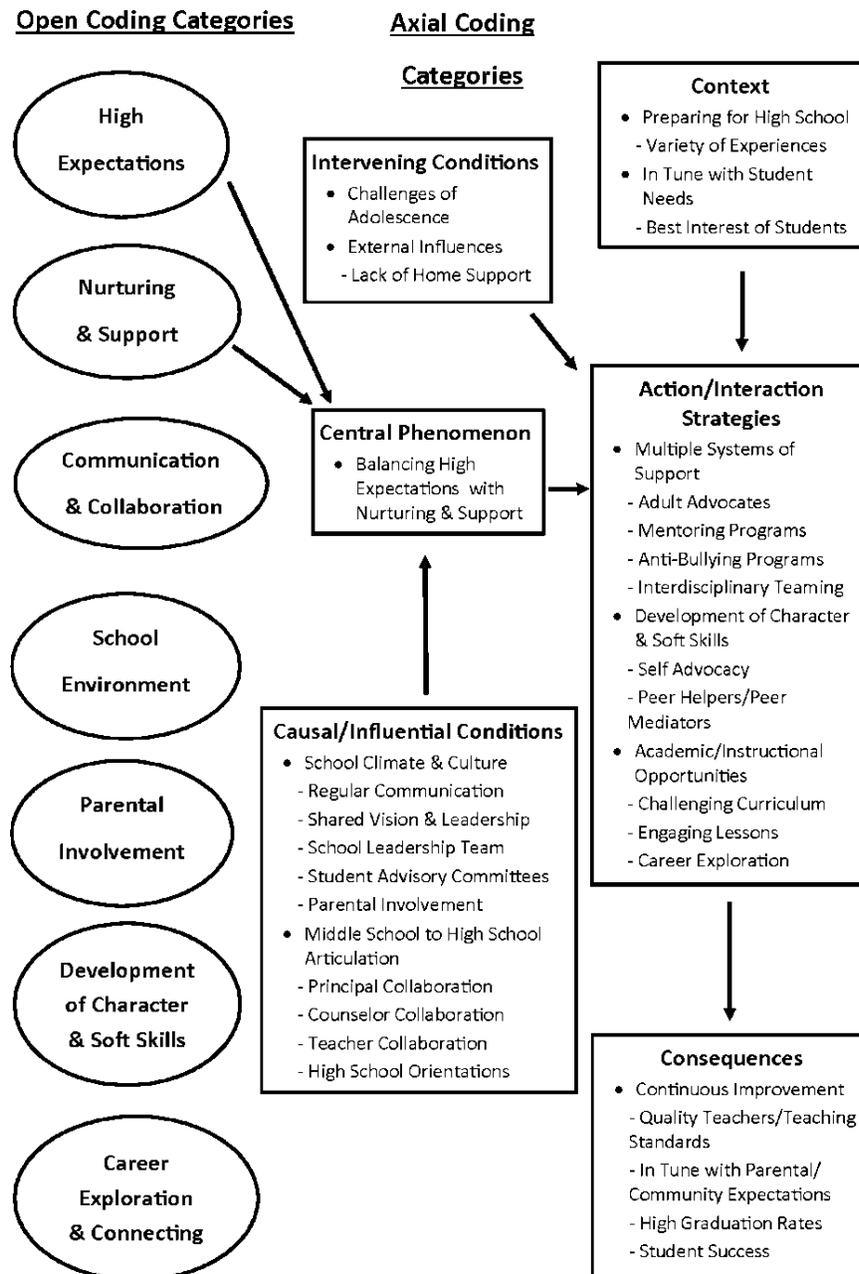
During the first level of data analysis, 92 concepts were coded consistently throughout the interview and document review process (see Haynes, 2017 for a complete listing of constructs identified in the first round of open coding). From these 92 constructs, the following seven categories or themes emerged: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration/Connecting. In this section we briefly illustrate each of these emergent themes in turn (see Figure 1).

Each of the participants commented on the significance of maintaining high expectations among teachers and students as a key factor in successfully preparing middle school students for success at the high school level. One principal, Thomas, stated, “Getting our students ready for high school is a top priority, and I want teachers who will challenge them.” All participants noted the importance of providing classes that focus on higher level learning skills and accelerated opportunities in math and other core academic subjects, in addition to competitive academic teams within their schools.

Offering honors classes in all core subject areas, including virtual classes that students can take from home, were also mentioned by principals, in addition to performing arts classes that require auditions. Jacqueline reported, “We’re preparing our children academically for those

Figure 1

Open Coding Categories with Axial Coding Model



rigorous classes in high school,” Jacqueline also referenced a data notebook system for students called the Kennedy Playbook. Students use the playbook on a weekly basis to chart their individual data and set goals for personal achievement.

Hosting former middle school students who have moved on to high school in order to motivate and enlighten middle school students regarding the challenges and opportunities ahead

was an effective practice James has used at Taylor Middle School. And, Abraham stated, “We help teachers focus on the importance of knowing, teaching, and regularly accessing their own content standards, first and foremost, but then also knowing the progression [of these standards] at the next level.”

Ronald, along with several of the participants, discussed sending teachers to summer training programs that specialize in increasing classroom rigor, enhancing teaching strategies, and promoting hands-on and engaging lessons. Ronald said, “We have advanced classes designed to provide more rigor than the average middle school classes. Teachers are required to attend...training to help them provide more rigorous curriculum for students.” In sum, virtually all participants agreed that maintaining high expectations was the central component to successfully transitioning students from middle school to high school.

All principals discussed the value of nurturing, building relationships, and providing a strong support system for students throughout their middle school years. Participants described numerous methods they used to nurture and support their students. Seven of the 11 participants incorporated the middle school concept of interdisciplinary teaming at their schools. The remaining four principals acknowledged the value of assigning students to interdisciplinary teams. Abraham added that assigning students to teams maintains a supportive environment, assists teachers in building a deeper relationship with the students, and helps prevent students from “falling through the cracks.” Abraham continued, “One of the goals with teaming is to assure that every child has a meaningful relationship with an adult in the school and has a group of adults that are very familiar with that child.”

All participants also acknowledged the value of assuring that their students received continuous support academically and socially before, during, and after the school day. Each participant referred to using peer helpers or peer mediator groups to help other students. Alexander described a 25-minute advisory type class built into the schedule at his school where the teacher’s loop with the same students from sixth through eighth grade. At Hamilton Middle School, this advisory time is called “Academic Opportunities (AO). AO encompasses a lot of different things, but that is a good way for us to find out about what our kids need because we’re making deeper relationships with kids without the constraints of standards and assessments.”

Ronald summed up the significance of nurturing and supporting students throughout their middle school years as they make significant changes emotionally and psychologically. He stated, “One thing that I try to just drive into my teachers is relationships. The students have to know that you care...and it has to be genuine because students can see right through that.” All participants agreed that middle school students require a variety of support systems, encouragement, and caring, compassionate adult advocates who guide them through the challenges presented during the transition from middle school to high school.

Each participant voiced the importance of communication and collaboration. Principals discussed multiple areas where thorough communication practices play a meaningful role in helping students transition from middle school to high school. Communication is not only crucial within the walls of the middle school, but it is also imperative that interaction remains ongoing among the middle school and high school staffs, students, and parents. Furthermore, all participants cited collaboration as an essential part of the communication process. Frederick commented, “The high school principal and I talk all the time making sure that we’re teaching what our young people will need to be able to succeed at the high school.”

A strong consensus emerged among participants regarding the importance of utilizing a variety of methods of communication and collaboration. Email blasts, newsletters, web pages, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, in addition to School Cast, and Blackboard calls to parents were among the communication methods touched on by principals. Abraham stated that he sends out a weekly newsletter as a school in addition to newsletters specific to each interdisciplinary team.

All participants further noted the importance of maintaining a school website and keeping it updated, in addition to requiring each teacher to regularly send out information via websites, blogs, or email blasts. “We work hard to keep our website updated to where parents can go to the website and get the information that they need,” Abraham said. “If parents aren’t sure what the homework is, they can click on it and see it.”

Collaboration among core curricular subject areas, grade levels, the middle school staff, or between professionals at the middle school high schools is another form of communication. Nine of 11 participants discussed how they create common planning times for teachers to collaborate with subject area colleagues and/or interdisciplinary teams as professional learning communities (PLCs).

It was clear that participants recognized the importance of regular communication through a variety of methods, in addition to bringing teachers together in subject areas, departments, among grade levels, and interdisciplinary teams for regular collaborative communication and planning. Furthermore, each principal acknowledged the importance of middle and high school principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teachers working together to assure that middle school students experience a smooth transition to high school.

Study participants recognized that a positive school environment, also referenced as culture, is essential to the transitioning process. All principals noted the importance of maintaining a positive school climate and culture among both students and staff through service on leadership teams or providing a voice through student government associations. Overwhelmingly, principals shared their beliefs in providing leadership opportunities for faculty members and students to create a shared vision and establish annual goals for the school.

Another practice used by principals to enhance school environment was giving voice to the students. Alexander discussed his method of building a positive school environment by involving students on committees and by interacting with them in the hallways. “I have focus groups of kids that I bring in and I walk the hall nonstop and ask them ‘How’s it going? What’s your biggest stress?’, and just network with them consistently.”

Each participant further noted the significance of assuring that parents have a voice. Frederick cited the significance of seeking feedback not just from staff and students, but also with parents. “We have an open-door policy from the standpoint our parents can contact us,” he said. “Positive community relationships are a must if you intend to grow.”

Moreover, each participant mentioned the value of promoting a positive school environment by connecting students through electives such as band, choir, drama, robotics, and broadcasting in addition to athletic teams and clubs. Alexander provided this bit of wisdom:

I don’t believe students, in today’s society, can learn at their best if they don’t feel as if they are a part of a positive community. Years ago, when schools were preparing students for factories, it was likely better for students to be in a rigid system. That just isn’t today’s story. Our students need to feel a part of something bigger, to feel as if their voice matters

as much as the next person, to feel valued in what they do, to feel as if the school is there to support them. I would contend that a school without a positive environment is not well suited for student growth.

In this quote, Alexander articulated the viewpoints of all the participants regarding the significance of creating a positive school environment.

Each participant acknowledged the important role parents play during the middle school to high school transitioning process. Principals revealed several areas where they involved parents, ranging from PTA/PTO groups and advisory committees to securing parent support in a variety of areas throughout the school. Thomas said, “Parents are always encouraged to volunteer. Our volunteers work in the main office or media center.” James also acknowledged enlisting a Dad Brigade each summer to paint around the building, clear brush, and complete other projects. James further shared how he recruited dads to volunteer at the school for supervision. He explained, “We have dads that walk the halls for us in the mornings before school, just as an extra set of eyes in the hallways, making sure everybody is where they are supposed to be.”

Several participants discussed how parent advisory committees provide feedback and brainstorm ideas to help improve the school. Elvis described a similar parent group at his school. “We have a parent advisory committee which meets every month,” Elvis commented. “Parents volunteer to come to the school to do reading, to help with specific events, whether it’s a banquet or an awards ceremony.” Each principal voiced the belief that parents make important contributions that not only positively impact students, but also provide support to the administration and teaching staff.

Each principal asserted that promoting positive character and soft skills was essential in equipping students to make the transition from middle school to high school. Nine of the 11 participants revealed how they emphasized character development, self-advocacy, positive decision-making skills, positive behaviors, anti-drug and alcohol awareness, and soft skills development through their advisory programs.

In spite of their efforts to promote positive character and soft skills, every principal acknowledged that instances of bullying increase during the middle school and early high school years. From encouraging students not to become bullies to taking a stand against bullying, each school had a method to address bullying. Along with having a hotline available to report bullying, Thomas stated how he and his staff address bullying issues before they start. “At the beginning of the year the administration and counselors meet with every student during P.E. (physical education),” he said. “In that meeting every student is required to sign a bullying contract with the consequences laid out.”

Participants shared how they combine building character with the teaching of soft skills, organization skills, study skills, coping skills, building relationships, setting goals, and becoming independent learners during their advisory in addition to bringing in guests for school-wide assemblies. “This past year we did a program called Rachel’s Challenge,” George stated. “It’s an assembly program where they (professional assembly group) come in and talk about being connected, standing up for your friends, and basically being a good peer.” Alexander’s students observe a weekly one-hour advisory time to teach character, soft skills, and self-responsibility. “We use that opportunity to prepare our kids for things that are outside of the curriculum: How to treat one another. What does GPA really mean?” he said. “What we do is we set up a whole lot of activities during that hour-long time to prepare them for those next stages in life.”

In agreement with the other participating principals, Frederick reiterated the need for middle school students to learn positive character traits, soft skills, making good choices, and self-advocacy, in addition to maintaining a balance between their extracurricular activities and their academic needs. “We stress the importance of developing good study habits,” Frederick said. “How do you juggle being at a ball game, staying out a little late, and then being in that chemistry class the next morning and expected to perform to your highest expectation?”

Providing opportunities for students to feel connected within the school and explore career possibilities were vital essentials of helping students maneuver the transition to high school according to all 11 middle school principals. Respondents talked about a variety of extracurricular activities available to help students connect; these included multiple elective classes, band and choir programs, career tech classes, clubs, in addition to introducing students to future career options.

“It is important for me to get each child connected to something at the middle school that they can continue to do at the high school,” Renee said. “We introduce them to the academy, band, choir, cross country, the I-Can Engineering Group for girls, Robotics Club, Science Olympiad, Coding Club, some type of activity.” Offering numerous elective opportunities in addition to bringing in parents and local business professionals to share their knowledge and expertise regarding a specific career, are approaches Frederick underscored. “We also get our counselors involved in connecting students to specialized areas,”

Each participant mentioned how their counselors work with the counselors from their receiving high school in the development of each eighth-grade student’s individualized four-year plan which allows students to prepare for high school by incorporating classes that will lead to a future college major and/or career opportunity. Another portion of connecting students to the high school noted by every principal was having a parents’ night at the receiving high school to highlight programs offered at the high school in addition to taking eighth grade students to the high school for a tour. Prior to those events, participants discussed inviting one of the high school counselors to the middle school during the spring semester to introduce students to the career tech and elective course offerings available at the high school.

The participants all cited the significance of providing opportunities for students to examine career options in addition to offering a plethora of electives and clubs to connect students with peers who share the same interests. Furthermore, helping students familiarize themselves with the expectations, course offerings, and physical layout of the high school further connects them and is vital to assuring a successful transition.

In summary, flowing from interview transcripts and document review, seven groups of responses emerged. After the principals revealed their best practices for transitioning students from middle school to high school, it was apparent the data had reached the saturation point. The seven categories that emerged from the open coding were as follows: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration/Connecting.

Axial Coding

Once the seven major themes were identified through the open coding process, axial coding was conducted to re-assemble the open coding data into a new paradigm model. Axial coding

involves identifying a single category as the central phenomenon and exploring its relationship to the other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Interactions between these categories are displayed in the axial coding diagram shown in Figure 1. Themes discussed in the open coding section were relabeled into new axial coding categories to provide an improved structural illustration of the data in regard to how the various parts correlated with one another in relation to intervention strategies that support middle school transitions to high school. Each of the axial coding categories is presented and briefly described in this section.

In the first portion of this analysis, the subcategory of *Central Phenomenon* was identified in the axial coding to represent the balancing of high expectations with nurturing and support. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the central phenomenon is the central idea, occasion, or occurrence, about which a set of actions/interactions is directed at managing or handling, or to which the set is related. Each participant recognized the importance of maintaining high expectations throughout the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school. However, principals also revealed that the elevated student achievement that results from high academic expectations could not be accomplished without the balance of providing students with constant nurturing and support throughout their middle school years.

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of *causal/influential conditions* is referred to as the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of the phenomenon being studied. The following two categories emerged that correlated with causal/influential conditions: school climate and culture and middle school to high school articulation activities. Establishing a school culture that promotes collaboration among all stakeholders was identified by respondents as a vital ingredient to transitioning students to high school. The axial category of middle school to high school articulation activities included the collaborative communication that takes place between the middle and high school staffs.

The *Action/Interaction Strategies* subcategory included multiple systems of support, development of character and soft skills, and academic/instructional opportunities. The axial subcategory action/interaction strategies consist of things which individuals or groups do or say in response to a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). These actions/interactions are customarily a method of carrying out or responding to a phenomenon and how it exists under a specified set of conditions. Three axial categories of replies which typified particular actions which participants associated with the significance of balancing high expectations with nurturing and support included (a) multiple levels of supports, (b) character development, and (c) academic opportunities.

The axial subcategory of *Context* was represented by preparing for high school and in-tune with student needs. Strauss and Corbin (2008) defined the axial subcategory of context as a specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon. For instance, context can represent the specific conditions in which the action/interaction strategies are taken to manage, handle, carry out, and respond to a specific phenomenon. Two axial categories were identified which impacted the general conditions surrounding the participants' implementation of the action/interaction strategies; these were preparing students for high school and being in-tune with student needs.

The axial category of *Intervening Conditions* included challenges of adolescence and external influences. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of intervening conditions is used to distinguish specific circumstances which serve to either expedite or obstruct the action strategies as those strategies are engaged to accomplish the central phenomenon. Two

axial categories emerged from participant responses that linked to intervening conditions. These categories included challenges of adolescence and external influences.

Finally, the subcategory of *Consequences* was comprised of the single category of continuous improvement, which included four sub-groups: quality teachers/teaching standards, in-tune with parental/community expectations, high graduation rates, and student success. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of consequences includes the responses related to outcomes or results of the managed actions used to address the central phenomenon. While the desired outcome of the best practices implemented to support middle school transitions to high school is associated with managing the phenomenon of balancing high expectations with continuous nurturing and support, producing college-and career-ready students is the ultimate result.

Only one axial category, continuous improvement, was identified as related to consequences. However, the single category included four specific sub-groups which emerged from the responses of the participants. These sub-groups were quality teachers and teaching standards, in-tune with parental/community expectations, high graduation rates, and student success.

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the final step in the grounded theory methodology. Strauss and Corbin (2008) described selective coding as the process of selecting the core category, validating the relationships, and filling in the categories that need further development. The selective coding process, which runs parallel with the axial coding process, is the final phase of data collection and assures that saturation has been achieved.

Identifying the central phenomenon was the first step of the selective coding process. Once the central phenomenon was selected, the other categories that had emerged during the axial coding process were interrelated and analyzed to develop a grounded theory. In every portion of the study, participants described similar experiences in their efforts to support middle school transitions to high school and the challenges they addressed during the transitioning process.

From that point, associations between the central phenomenon and the other categories that emerged during the axial coding process were evaluated. A visual model of the theory is shown in Figure 2. From the correlations developed during the axial coding process, the research team was able to create a relational storyline which was illustrated in the previous axial coding section.

Discussion

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by successful veteran middle school principals in Alabama and to create a theoretical model to clarify the process. The outcomes of the grounded theory study presented the answer to the research questions posed to address strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school and coalesced into a theory of best practice to support middle school student transition. The central element of the theory lies in the importance of approaching middle school students with interventions that strike a balance between maintaining high expectations for students and developing interventions designed to nurture and support the students. The seven categories that

emerged and that comprise theory included (a) high expectations, (b) nurturing and support, (c) communication and collaboration, (d) school environment, (e) parental involvement, (f) development of character and soft skills, and (g) career exploration and connecting (see Figure 2).

Confirmation of Previous Research Findings

Participants were successful middle school principals who acknowledged the importance of equipping their students for the challenges and expectations of high school while navigating the physiological transformation that accompanies adolescence and puberty (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Wingfield et al., 2005). Each principal revealed a commitment to the central phenomenon of balancing the highest of expectations with continuous nurturing and support throughout the middle school years. The allegiance to supporting students through every step of the transition was demonstrated by each principal's belief that the experiences students encounter in middle school correlate with their continued success in high school and beyond (Wormeli, 2011).

Regarding the conceptual framework referenced earlier, Maslow (1943) noted the significance of an individual's desire to belong to or be a part of a group, which is an example of the fulfillment of man's desire to belong. As demonstrated in the literature review and from participant responses, successful middle schools provide a variety of effective interventions that meet the needs of adolescent students and build their sense of confidence to a level that allows higher order needs to take over.

Findings from this study confirmed those of previous researchers regarding the need for middle school leaders and teachers to demonstrate a passion for working with middle school students (NMSA, 2003), to commit to the value of parental involvement (Rice, 2001), and for principals to share leadership of the school (McEwan, 2003; Onorato, 2013). Further research findings were confirmed relative to the establishment of a positive school culture that is challenging yet safe and supportive (Sagnak, 2010; Wormeli, 2011). The findings of Akos and Galassi (2004) and of Uvass and McKeivitt (2013) were also confirmed and consistent with the contextual, causal/influential conditions, and intervening conditions acknowledged in the current study.

Research Question 1: How do middle school principals organize staff members in order to better transition students from middle school to high school?

The first research question was addressed in study findings confirming how to best organize staff members to support middle school to high school transitioning. Study participants demonstrated a commitment to student-centered and developmentally responsive practices (Babbage, 2012; MacIver & Epstein, 1993; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Additional findings of Smyth and McInerney (2007) support the results that principals need to create learning communities that are characterized by their responsive practices and integrated into the lives of middle school students in order to adequately address challenges unique to them.

Research Question 2: What types of student-centered activities do principals plan and implement to successfully transition students from middle school to high school?

This question was addressed regarding the types of student-centered activities preferred to help middle school students transition to high school. Study findings confirm the positions of

Mizelle (2005) and Smith (2005) who called for a variety of transitional programming to maximize student success, including anti-bullying curricula (Farmer et al., 2011).

Research Question 3: What types of school-to-school articulation activities take place to ensure middle school to high school success?

The importance of articulation activities between the sending middle schools and the receiving high schools was also confirmed through study findings. Mizelle (2005) stated that successful transitions rely on administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents at the middle and high school levels coming together to discuss expectations, policies, course, curriculum, and opportunities. Principals in this study described exactly this practice in their own school contexts. The practice of bringing staff members together to organize tour of the receiving high school for middle school students was also confirmed by the findings (Abell et al., 2006; Uvaas & McKeivitt, 2013).

Research Question 4: How do principals encourage parental involvement during the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school?

Participants in the study again expressed consensus regarding the importance of parental involvement. Abell et al. (2006) articulated the importance of getting feedback from both students and parents prior to and following the transition to high school in order to evaluate the consistency, value, and impact of transition programming. Additional findings by Ingels et al. (2002) cited parental involvement among key ingredients to promoting effective transitions.

Limitations and Delimitations

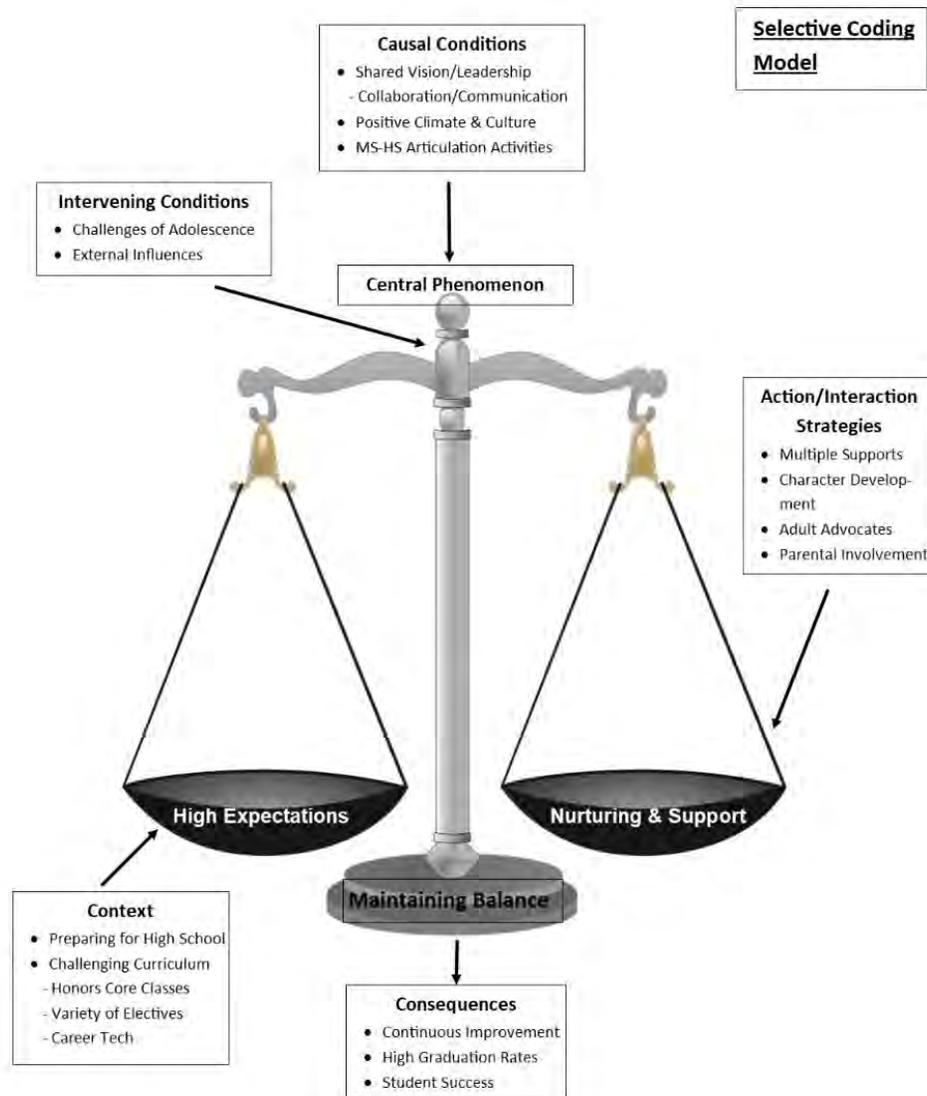
The limitations for the study were inherent in the fact that this was a qualitative study. The lead author of this article was the sole instrument for data collection. Analysis and generalizations to a wider population are not possible. Delimitations included the fact that the study focused only on the best practices of a selected number of successful middle school principals. This study does not include any rural areas, nor does the study include many schools that are not relatively homogeneous in wealth and ethnicity. As a result, data were generalized to the group being studied. Another delimitation existed because the researchers focused only on middle school principals and did not include high school principals in the design. Such research could have provided different results if analyzed from the perspectives of principals at the high school level. The research team acknowledges that by accepting only the first 11 principals who responded to the invitation to participate in the study may also introduce some limitations to the research design, analysis of data, and conclusions drawn from the findings.

Implications for Professional Best Practice

During this grounded theory study, through the stages of open coding, the creation of an axial coding model, selective coding, and theory building, we constructed a theory along with a set of propositions regarding the intervention strategies principals use in helping students make the transition from middle school to high school. The resulting theory and set of propositions regarding the best practices identified by experienced and successful middle school principals and

Figure 2

Theoretical Model for Strategies that Support Middle School Students' Transitions to High School



how they support students throughout the transition process was embedded in the context, the causal conditions, the intervening conditions, the action/interaction strategies, and consequences model.

Findings from this grounded theory study could positively impact the methods principals implement to transition middle school students to high school. Participating principals noted the importance of maintaining high expectations while providing students with continuous nurturing and support. These principals built positive school environments through the promotion of a shared vision based upon regular collaboration among all stakeholders, which included teachers, parents, and students. Participating principals also affirmed the value of exposing students to rigorous academic classes, a variety of career exploration and elective course offerings interwoven with opportunities to teach positive character, soft skills, and self-advocacy.

Superintendents and school district leaders may also profit from the findings of this research study. While the schools represented in the study ranged from financially challenged to affluent, most of the best practices identified in the study could be replicated with little or no cost to the district. Providing academic assistance in addition to assuring every student has an adult advocate are further best practices that could be incorporated without the need for additional funding.

Although incorporating the middle school concept, complete with the inclusion of interdisciplinary teams, would require hiring more teachers at some schools, innovative scheduling practices would permit opportunities for teachers to still maintain common planning times for collaborative planning of lessons, common assessments, reviewing of data, and chances to mentor new teachers. Furthermore, district professional development programs should be implemented to address transitioning students, help teachers to better understand the needs of adolescent students, demonstrate how to incorporate lessons that promote student engagement, and show teachers and administrators how to incorporate lessons that teach character and self-advocacy.

Implications for Future Research

This qualitative grounded theory study examined the intervention strategies and best practices of 11 Alabama middle school principals in helping students transition from middle school to high school. Since findings from this study potentially provide insights for future studies, researchers may wish to expand the scope of participant perspectives and conduct a larger study that includes not only principals, but also teachers, students, and parents. High school principals could also be included in a future study. It would be beneficial to learn what an expanded study with greater diversity would reveal regarding the perceptions and experiences of the additional stakeholders. Another replication of this study could include schools at the lower end of the performance scale, not just the top performing schools.

A final suggestion would be to conduct a study with middle school principals in other states since, as noted during the literature review there is an apparent gap in the empirical research literature regarding the process of supporting students in their transition from middle school to high school (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Further, educational researchers may benefit by examining the impact of the middle school philosophy and/or the benefits of interdisciplinary teaming on the middle school to high school transition.

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