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## Middle School Transition: The Influence of an Academy Approach and the Role of Leadership

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MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITION: THE INFLUENCE OF AN ACADEMY APPROACH  
AND THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

by

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate my dissertation to my family who have consistently supported me in all of my endeavors. My husband, Aaron, my children, Andrew and Kendall, my parents, Rev. Dr. James and Rubye Calhoun, my brother, Dr. James Kevin Calhoun, and my grandparents and great grandparents who are in sainted memory, specifically my great grandmother, Annie Mae Jones. I also dedicate my work to Ruth Henderson, another grandmother who cared for me and my family. Additionally, I dedicate this work to the educators, colleagues and students who made me the educator I am today. To the close friends who supported me throughout this process, I am grateful to you for being a shoulder to lean on. Finally, to Dr. Rose Ylimaki who believed in me and who remained committed to me moving forward when I did not think I could, I am indebted to her for believing in me.

## **Abstract**

Students entering middle school frequently encounter challenges in their transition as they leave the comforts of elementary school. Traditionally, fifth grade students experience their last year in elementary school in a similar fashion to the previous five years of elementary school. They are in self-contained classrooms with one teacher for the majority of their school day. This study's objective is to determine best practices and strategies that support fifth grade students in transitioning to the rigors of middle school. More specifically, the research focuses on the impact of an Academy structure in the elementary setting that models the transitions of middle school, including a strong social-emotional curriculum, opportunities to cultivate leadership, confidence, and self-advocacy skills in students as well as experiences to build a sense of belonging among students.

To research the effectiveness of the Academy model, a qualitative research approach was utilized, examining practices in three elementary schools and a middle school. Interviews were conducted with students, parents, elementary school principals and middle school staff members. While the study is not a mixed methods study, attendance and reading data was included to provide additional context.

The results of the study indicated that the structure provided by the academy served as an asset to those transitioning to middle school. The expectations and rules for organization along with the leadership opportunities and social emotional learning emphasis served the Academy students well as they moved into their new environment.

The qualitative interviews illustrated how the students' abilities to adjust to the physical or organizational environment was supported by the structures in place at School C in the academy. Furthermore, intentionality on the behalf of the school leadership team mitigated problematic behaviors and academic regression in middle school.

Findings from this study also suggest that Bolman and Deal's leadership theory that focuses on the four frames, provide an analytical tool to help school leaders navigate organizational changes of the middle school transition.

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## **Chapter 1: Foreword**

“Middle grade schools—junior high, intermediate, or middle schools—are potentially society’s most powerful force to recapture millions of youths adrift. Yet too often they exacerbate the problems the youth face. A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grades schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 32). These words, along with my experiences as a new principal, have shaped my beliefs surrounding the middle school transition.

### **1.1 Personal Narrative – Fifth Grade Academy**

In 2011, I was named the principal of G.R. Elementary School. The school was two years old and had a solid foundation due to the leadership that the previous administration had provided. G.R. Elementary is located in North Carolina and is part of the School District A. The school is located in a large progressive city under the leadership of a Democratic governor and mayor. School District A is a large urban district and is comprised of over 170 schools. The district offers families a variety of school experiences to choose from including magnet programs like language immersion, IB or international baccalaureate, STEM, Early College, etc. G.R. Elementary was a traditional school in the South Learning Community within the district. It is located in the southwest part of the city, which is considered a suburban area. The school’s enrollment was growing while I was the principal. It typically hovered around 750 to 800 students.

The student population and the staff make up was diverse with varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds represented.

As a novice principal, I recognized that I did not need to come into the school and disrupt what had been established. It was important for me to celebrate the school's past, learn the culture of the school, and gradually make changes that I believed would enhance what was already established.

Over the course of my first and second years as principal, I began to have concerns about the behaviors of my fifth-grade students. Administration and teachers alike considered the majority of the fifth-grade students to be well-mannered and compliant. However, there were students observed that had to be addressed regularly by teachers or referred to the office for disciplinary infractions. The repetitiveness of the offenses was concerning and became an ongoing conversation.

During my second year as principal, I led my teacher leaders in a book study of *The End of Molasses Classes* by Ron Clark. At the conclusion of the book study, my PTA funded a learning opportunity for the teachers. We traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, and visited the Ron Clark Academy.

This experience was life-changing for most of the teachers who attended. The Ron Clark experience opened our eyes to the possibilities of what our students could do with the right frameworks and expectations. We observed articulate young people greeting and having conversations with adults they had never met. We sat in classrooms and watched these bright young people stand and answer questions that challenged their thinking with confidence. We saw teachers hold students accountable and engage all of their students in the learning process.

As a school team, we returned to G.R. Elementary motivated to use our experience as a springboard for change in ourselves and in our school. As I reflected with fifth-grade teachers, we discussed how the structure we observed at the Ron Clark Academy and many of the principles discussed in his book could benefit our fifth-grade students.

In the midst of this experience, I had the opportunity to speak with a former fifth-grade student. She was in her first year at our feeder middle school. I asked her if she felt prepared going into middle school. She explained that middle school was a rude awakening for her. This let me know that I had not done an adequate job preparing one of my best and brightest students for the next phase of her educational career. If one of my best felt ill-prepared, I assumed that the majority of the others were floundering as well.

This conversation prompted me to contact the principal of the feeder middle school. I decided to take the fifth-grade team leader with me to meet with the middle school principal. We had a long conversation about his expectations for his sixth-grade students. I realized that there was a tremendous gap between what I was providing for fifth-grade students and what they needed to be prepared and confident as sixth-grade students.

I started the process of planning for the restructuring of fifth grade. After creating a proposal, I met with my supervisor to get feedback and approval to begin the process. Once I received clearance from her, she recommended that I share the information with the School Leadership Team, which is composed of parents and school staff members. They met monthly to discuss the School Improvement Plan and how the school community can address the needs of the school as outlined in the plan. They were also

accustomed to providing feedback on issues and concerns that are not outlined in the plan but affect the greater good of the school.

When sharing the plan for implementation, I received an overwhelming response in support of the changes. Parents commented on their personal experiences with transitioning their children to middle school. They shared how their students struggled because of the significant differences in expectations and structure between fifth and sixth grades. This was additional confirmation that this was a need and that our school needed to execute this plan to ensure success for our students.

To give the fifth-grade team the premise behind the vision, I sent them to the Ron Clark Academy. Upon their return, we finalized plans for G.R.'s Fifth Grade Academy. All the teachers bought into the vision for the Academy. In the fall of 2013, the Academy moved from plan to practice.

The Academy was well-received by parents and students. Parents appreciated that their children would leave elementary school ready for middle school. Students felt special and set apart. Teachers had taken time over the summer to paint the walls of the fifth-grade wing of the school. A college corner was created where pennants from colleges around the country were hung to foster an environment that supported the school's kindergarten-to-college message. Special activities were planned for students to counter the sense of entitlement that we had observed among students. Activities such as their 9-11 service projects and team building at a local camp built character and comradery among the students. These rich experiences provided to my students led to my curiosity around the middle school transition and the impact of social-emotional-centered

events that were organized for my students to help foster community and soft skills that would assist them at this critical time.

In the summer of 2017, I transitioned to a new district and school. The district and school were both the complete opposite of my previous experience. The district, located approximately 30 miles south of the previous district, is located in a conservative area of South Carolina. The district is small in size with only 24 schools. The district has School of Choice offerings for families to consider with themes such as the arts, language and STEM, to support the interests and gifts of learners. Leadership at the district level has been inconsistent, as the district has had four superintendents at the helm in five years.

The school is considered rural and has received Title I designation due to the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. The school is now a Leader in Me School and implements the 7 Habits of Happy Kids (Covey, 2008 )as the social emotional learning curriculum of choice. Upon my arrival, the staff was not diverse. There were four professional staff members of color. The school, established in 1977, had not had an African American female principal before my arrival. The culture and mindset were noticeably resistant to change. From my vantage point, while the two schools were two extremes, what remained consistent between the school settings was the observed behavior of students and the need for structures that would support the students in their transition to middle school.

At the semester break during my first year, the fifth-grade team was at a crossroad. Behavior and academics were declining significantly. I introduced the fifth-grade team to the idea of departmentalization similar to the middle school concept. We also discussed opportunities for students to earn rewards by demonstrating leadership



throughout the school day. Full implementation of an academy was not feasible for that year. The next year was when the fifth-grade team's make up changed and we began to incrementally implement concepts (vertical planning/conversations with middle school staff, leadership development, teaming/departmentalization) that were designed to support our students in their middle school transition. That was also the year that we started our Leader in Me journey.

## **1.2 The Academy- G.R. Elementary School**

As mentioned, G.R. Elementary is located within a large urban district. The mindset was to perform. How the growth of students took place was not generally called into question. The district leadership was concerned with results. Therefore, freedom and flexibility were given to school leadership to lead their schools. Micromanagement of school leaders was rare. While there were several schools in School District A that reconfigured their fifth grade to include aspects of middle school for students, there has not been a study conducted to determine the effectiveness of the model. The innovation and thinking about how to do things differently was encouraged.

Therefore, with great enthusiasm, the Fifth Grade Academy was launched in the fall of 2012. The synergy among the team of teachers was evident and it was part of the reason that the Academy was successful. The fifth-grade team was comprised of six teachers. There was one teacher who taught Science, one who taught Social Studies, two teachers taught English/Language Arts and two teachers taught Math. The set up for classes mirrored what fifth grade students would see the next year as they would have one teacher per subject. All fifth-grade students participated in the Academy. There was not an opt out option. A schedule was developed, with the support of the school

administration, to provide each class with the appropriate amount of time to teach the content as well as class transition time for students. While the Academy did not have lockers, students were required to purchase a binder with a strap that could hold notebooks for all four classes. Students were not allowed to return to their previous class to pick up items. This was instituted as middle school had a rule in place that they were not allowed to return to previous classes if they forgot to bring an item with them. This was done in an effort to encourage responsibility and accountability.

To build a sense of family and support for the fifth-grade students, teachers and counselors were intentional about having fifth grade meetings throughout the year, beginning the year with a ropes course field trip at a local camp, and providing students with lessons on character development. Trips were paid for by parents and scholarships that the school was able to secure through partnerships. A set curriculum was not purchased. The counselor had access to a myriad of resources that she utilized to teach important concepts that would be relevant to their middle transition. Manners and service to the school were also emphasized.

### **1.3. The Academy- School C Elementary School**

School C's Academy structure differed from G.R. Elementary, but still infused many of the basic tenets around structure and social emotional learning. School C's fifth grade staff was comprised of 4 teachers, and unlike the fifth-grade team at G.R. Elementary, the team was newly formed and therefore did not have the same level of connectedness. Two teachers teamed and taught two subjects. One teacher would teach Science and Math while the other taught Social Studies and English/Language Arts. Expectations such as not returning to classes for missing items and manners were in

place. Fifth grade trips were planned and provided, however, a beginning of year outing for team building purposes was not. Social Emotional learning, through the Leader in Me program, as well as community service was implemented. The Leader in Me was funded by the school as well as the school district. A significant part of the experience at School C was centered on leadership due to The Leader in Me. Through various leadership opportunities, such as Girls on the Run, Student Council, Step Team, Bowties and Basketball, etc., the students were able to develop qualities that would allow them to manage their time, resources, emotions, etc. and be successful middle school students.

As a school leader, it was clear that the lack of structure had significant impact on the students and their middle school experience as well as the classroom teachers who struggled to find ways to build leadership and study skills in the students. Furthermore, parents felt the impact of the lack of structure as they were left to figure out how to prepare their children for the new setting independent of the school and deal with the consequences of minimal preparation once their children made the transition. Additionally, as the school leader, my experiences in elementary and middle school and creativity were required in order to address the needs of the aforementioned groups.

Initiating the change in the structure of the fifth-grade traditional model, presented a myriad of factors to be considered. First, ensuring that the right group of teachers were on board from a personnel perspective was important in setting the direction of the academy. Careful consideration of the staff that would be instrumental in creating the change was critical to the success of the academy. There was a level of guidance and support that had to be provided as they embarked on this new and unfamiliar way of engaging with and leading their students. Therefore, the Ron Clark Academy experience,

book studies, and intentional planning time were all necessary for teachers to feel equipped to follow the plan for change.

Throughout my experiences with leading a middle school transition academy, then, I thought about how to change the structure, culture with its ethos and symbols, human resources and people development, and the politics of change in an organization. I did not have the terminology for these ways of looking at organizational change, but I considered these areas deliberately. In both elementary settings, there were minimal structures in place to address intentional preparation for sixth grade students progressing through school. After months of observations, discipline matters, and dialogue with stakeholders, it was apparent that structure was needed for this group of students.

## **Chapter 2: Statement of the Problem**

The transition from elementary school to middle school can be one of the most difficult during the K-12 experience. On the surface, the most apparent challenges are leaving the comforts of a smaller school with smaller classes and one teacher and moving to a larger school with multiple teachers and more students. There are many more challenges beneath the surface including the social challenges with peers, adjusting to new cultural norms and school structure, and a decline in student achievement. According to Lauren Guarino (n.d.) personal factors and institutional infrastructure and values were cited as barriers in successful transitions of students into middle school. Specifically, these obstacles include “(a) motivational and developmental differences; (b) enhanced anxiety about the degree of changes in school structure, academic demands, and interpersonal relationships; (c) reduction in the amount of support and guidance experienced by students; and (d) diminished parental involvement. Furthermore, the problem of an ever-increasing achievement gap continues to plague middle schools when structures are not put in place in the elementary setting (NMSA, 2010) and when leadership is not effectively developing and implementing research-based organizational structures” (2016). Gilewski and Nunn (2016) wrote:

*This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) states that effective transition programs help students move to a new school, become a part of the new school, and maintain their social and academic status. However, many transition programs fail because they ignore social concerns (Akos, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). With the

implementation of transition programs and support of parents, teachers, and administrators, the transition can become more effective and less intimidating than some students might expect (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Shoshani & Slone, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Watson, 2004). Understanding why a transition program is necessary and implementing an effective transition program are important tasks for middle school faculty. (p. 1).

The social concerns referenced above are extremely important considerations when creating plans for successful transitions. Peer relationships and connections are significant to the middle school student. Connections with trusting adults in the new environment are key as well. Overlooking and failing to be intentional with structures to support these connections can leave the new student feeling isolated and unmotivated.

The literature (e.g., McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001) has identified a number of challenges that students face as they transition to middle school, including academic challenges with a new curriculum and transitions between academic classes, social influences, development, declining parental involvement, and peer pressures. While immensely important, much of the literature (McElroy, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schumacher, 1998; Wormeli, 2011) that identified these factors has focused on perceptions of teachers and administrators, excluding parents' perceptions. Input from parents and students is needed in understanding the complexity of this transition (Akos, 2002; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Schumacher, 1998). This is problematic because it does not include student perspectives on a complete, holistic, and intentional plan for middle school transition. Moreover, the literature offers initiatives or programs to solve the problem but does not explore middle school transition problems (e.g., social, motivation,

peer pressures, academic, declining parent support) or the nuances of the middle school transition challenges from multiple perspectives. This study will examine the relationships among the structure of a fifth-grade academy, the academic and social influences that impact the middle school transition, as well as the principal's contribution to the process by analyzing assessment data and understanding the perspectives of students and adults.

## **2.1 Foundations of Middle School Approaches and Structures: An Historical Perspective**

“Middle schools are distinct educational settings which educate young adolescent learners” (Olofson & Knight, 2018, p. 160). Most educational systems in the United States involve students attending a middle school between elementary and high school. Although grade configurations vary, most middle schools serve students from sixth to eighth grades. Like elementary schools, middle schools continue to provide all students with general education in core subjects while preparing them for more specialized learning in high school. They typically offer new subjects like elective courses, different levels of a subject within the same grade, and teachers with specialized certifications in academic subjects. Thus, unlike elementary school students, middle school students have several instructors throughout the day (Anderman et al., 1998).

The roots of middle school education can be traced to an education conference at Cornell University in 1963. M. Lee Manning, in “A Brief History of Middle Schools,” gives a road map of middle school's evolution. He describes how the traditional framework for schools was initially an eight-to-four model (eight years for elementary school and four years for high school). All grades up to eighth were grouped together,

and grades 9 to 12 were grouped together. This structure did not adequately support students' educational and developmental needs, which led educational reformers to examine issues with students in the "middle." Thus, junior high schools were introduced. Organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) were proponents of changing the structure of grouping eight grades together to better meet students' needs. In 1909, the first seventh-through-ninth junior high school was established in Columbus, Ohio (Manning, 2000).

The 1950s and 1960s brought about additional questions and concerns about the junior high school's ability to address the challenges that young adolescents experienced. The concerns led to the middle school concept. The first middle school was established in Bay City, Michigan, in 1950. William Alexander, considered the father of the middle school movement, criticized the junior high school format as being merely a junior version of high school, which did not meet the unique needs of the early adolescent. He, along with fellow professor Emmett Williams, advocated for middle school education to incorporate some of the positive attributes of the traditional junior high schools, such as implementing a core curriculum, a school guidance or counseling program, and vocational education, while eliminating some components that resembled high school. Alexander and Williams also proposed the incorporation of team teaching and interdisciplinary studies (Armstrong, 2006; Manning, 2000).

There was a call for reform in the 1980s and 1990s. Leaders in education did not believe that junior high schools were meeting students' needs. Turning Points, from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, initiated advocacy. The National Middle School Association (1981) advocated as well. These organizations raised concerns and



provided suggestions for improvement. As early as the 1960s, reformers such as School Superintendent Donald Eichorn advocated for smaller learning environments, more challenging curricula, common core classes, and teacher preparation targeted for middle grades (Eichorn,1968). Initial changes from junior high school to middle school were only seen in name changes to established schools. The research continued to indicate the following:

Students perceived their middle-grade teachers as more remote and impersonal than their elementary teachers, and [...] they were less certain that their middle-grades teachers cared about them or knew them well. Furthermore, student work completed in the first year of the middle grades was often less demanding than in the last year of elementary school, academic expectations in middle-grades schools were generally low, and students had few opportunities to learn important new concepts and apply them to real-world problems.

Eichorn's (1968) study was one of a few that focused on the student. While the recommendations were not adopted consistently, students reported that their attitudes toward middle school had improved. Relationships between teachers and students improved, and school culture was more positive. However, student achievement did not improve (Armstrong, 2006).

To understand the complexity of this issue of middle school transition and make informed decisions on how best to support fifth graders as they transition to middle school, a clear understanding of the transition as it relates to the inner workings of the school organization (e.g. culture, human relations, social and academic dimensions) must be realized by the school leader. Elementary school offers students a more structured and

nurturing environment. When students transition to middle school, they go from a small school to a large, more departmentalized, and sometimes impersonal school. There are many differences in grading of assignments, expectations for student work, and expectations for student behavior (p. 182). Feldlaufer et al. (1988) researched perceptions of classroom environments with relation to the transition to the middle grades. They noted that middle school teachers are more than likely subject matter specialists, and unlike elementary school teachers, they have several classes of students each day. This makes it challenging for teachers to get to know their students on a personal level. Classrooms at the middle school level are generally characterized by teacher control and discipline, less personal student/teacher relationships, and limited opportunities for student choice. Additionally, researchers such as Feldlaufer et al. (1988) found that teachers at this level feel that they are to be serious with their students regarding instruction and evaluation. Traditionally, middle grades have a greater emphasis on competition and social comparison. During this time, achievement attitudes and beliefs become more negative, and students experience a significant decline in their perceptions of support from their teachers. Since teachers interact with so many students, it is highly likely that issues that emerge for many of these students go unnoticed (Feldlaufer et al., 1988). As such, the school leader is responsible for developing and leading the implementation of strategies that can create a network of support and care as students approach their middle school years. This support can assist students with the various social changes they will encounter in their transitions.

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

Based on research on this topic, studies and theories on a fifth-grade academy model in elementary schools are limited. The body of work (e.g., Alspaugh, 1998; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010) around the challenges experienced by students during this period of their academic journey is present and the research on transitions for this targeted group is developing. There is literature that looks at K-8 models or other aspects of middle school in isolation. There are gaps in the literature around fifth grade academy implementation: the challenges and rewards/gains. My study drew primarily on Bolman and Deal's (2017) four frames that provide a framework for understanding organizational change and the leader's contribution to that change and also considered literature on middle school transitions. Further, I utilized qualitative methods that allowed voices of multiple participants to speak to the effects of the fifth-grade academy structure on a middle school transition.

The desired outcome of this research was to understand how the academy organizational structure and related elements help to transition fifth grade students to their new educational setting while mitigating the challenges associated with the change. Further, the research sought to understand the principal's leadership contribution to the academy, related elements, and students' middle school transition. I used Bolman and Deal's (2017) framework and literature on middle school transitions to guide my analysis and yet I allowed multiple participant voices to provide first-hand accounts of their experience with the academy and the impact.

### **2.3 Research Questions**

Drawing on my professional experiences with the Fifth Grade Academy model, my review of the literature in Chapter 3, and the Bolman and Deal (2013) framework, I will answer the following questions:

1. How, if at all, does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' ability to perform well academically in middle school?
2. In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' behaviors in middle school?
3. How does the elementary principal's leadership contribute to an effective fifth grade academy structure for academics and student behavior?

### **2.4 Purpose of the Study**

The study's purpose is to determine how, and in what ways, a Fifth Grade Academy structure and the principal's leadership in that structure supports students' transition from fifth grade to middle school in terms of academics and social factors. There have been studies of

the elementary-to-middle-school transition (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; West & Schwerdt, 2012); however, the component that has not been examined is the influence of an organizational structure (academy) in the elementary setting in assisting in a smooth transition for students. The study explored how the academy influenced the performance as current middle school students. In this study, the research determined how, if at all, the Fifth Grade Academy's structure assisted in the fifth-grade students' transitions to middle

school and ultimately indicate the effectiveness of the current structure. Further, the study will consider the role of leadership in effective middle school structure. This study is not intended to find causation for transitional practices nor to argue for the implementation of them, rather it is intended to identify influences that contribute to the fifth-grade academy's success.

## 2.5 Operational Definitions

Several terms will assist in providing clarification to the study, including the following:

Middle schools are organizational groupings, generally containing grades 6, 7 and 8.

Academy is defined as a school that provides training in special subjects or skills, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary. *The Glossary of Education Reform* (2013) describes a theme-based academy by calling it “a stand-alone school or a distinct academic program housed within a larger school that emphasizes and builds its academic program around specific academic disciplines, professional fields, or a career paths.” In this instance, academy was selected because it had a narrow focus on skill development in fifth-grade students.

Transition is referred to in *The Glossary of Education Reform* (2013) as follows: “In education, the term **transition** typically refers to the three major transitional points in the public-education system: when students move from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to college. While students experience other ‘transitions’ during their educational journey—such as advancing from one grade level to the next—the three ‘major’ transition points are a

particular focus of educators and school reformers because transitioning students often experience significant academic, social, emotional, physical, or developmental changes that may adversely affect their educational performance.”

Academic factors are some of the factors that affect an individual’s academic performance. According to Womble (2003), these include academic competence, self-efficacy, motivation, students’ attitudes and behaviors, time management, and engagement in class activities.

Social factors are described in the December 2019 article “Personal, Social, and Cultural Factors Influencing Learners” as follows: “Social factors such as peer pressure affect learning in many ways. The type of company that a learner keeps influences their behavior including the attitude towards learning (Schmeck et al., 2013). If the learners are influenced to indulge in drugs and skip classes, it affects their learning abilities because drugs affect their mental health. If the learners are influenced to indulge in early sexual relationships, it is likely to interfere with their concentration during learning. The educational background of the learners affects their learning abilities either positively or negatively. A learner with a good educational background and foundation is likely to find all learning activities easy, but a learner with a poor educational background will have challenges along their learning journey and will need a lot of help to tackle the challenges. The financial situation of a learner’s family can influence learning abilities in a number of ways. Learners from financially well-off families are likely to have a good educational background and receive good support, while those from poor backgrounds may lack such support, negatively affecting their learning abilities. Delivering lessons to learners with similar ethnic backgrounds is not likely to pose challenges compared to

delivering lessons to learners with different ethnic backgrounds. Consider these examples: an English-born, nature-and-nurtured teacher to learners with multicultural settings or, conversely, a bunch of English-born learners to Asian-born, nature and nurtured in Asian. In these scenarios, teachers have to adapt the teaching approaches to suit the learning styles of the learners. One of the ways of achieving this is keeping abreast of current trends through reading newspapers and local newsletters and linking up through social media and blogging to keep well informed, which could be used as one of the ice breakers prior to commencement of the lesson. All in all, society is about building up relationships and learning responsibility by helping others (<https://ukdiss.com/examples/factors-influencing-learners.php>).

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Tests are defined by the NWEA website as “the most trusted and innovative assessment for measuring achievement and growth in K–12 math, reading, language usage, and science.” According to the website, Map Testing Growth “provides teachers with accurate, and actionable evidence to help target instruction for each student or groups of students regardless of how far above or below they are from their grade level. It also connects to the largest set of instructional content providers, giving educators flexibility in curriculum choices.”

## **2.6 Assumptions**

It is assumed that race and gender will not affect the results of the study. The participants for the study were selected by the researcher due to the leadership and academic fortitude they demonstrated as fifth grade leaders. The students are members of the same cohort of fifth grade students who participated in the school’s first academy model. It is also assumed that the MAP Test will be administered in the same manner for

all participants. The testing environment and monitoring of the test session will be similar for all students to minimize opportunities for skewed results.

## **2.7 Limitations**

Possible limitations in conducting this research are associated with the variance in the feeder schools, the sample size, and the context of Covid-19. The focus is on middle school students and their fifth-grade experiences that prepared them for sixth grade. While the schools share similarities, they also vary according to socioeconomics, years of experience of the fifth-grade staff members, and the background and experiences of the school leader in each building. When administering any study, the researcher hopes for accurate accounts from participants. A student's preparedness for middle school could be influenced by the aforementioned and thus not provide the data needed to determine whether a Fifth Grade Academy structure is effective. All schools are located within the same state and within the same school district, thus diversity among the participants was limited.

The COVID-19 global pandemic was an additional limitation. The pandemic closed the doors of the school district in March of 2022. As a result of the district shutdown, students were provided instruction remotely using Zoom as the preferred online platform. Assessments, such as MAP, or Measures of Academic Progress, were not administered as schools were not able to provide a consistent testing environment for all students. The shutdown took place during the students' sixth grade year; therefore, their transition year was not complete in the traditional school setting.



## **2.8 Scope and Delimitations**

This study will focus only on student performance and academic and social factors. The adults who interact with these students, such as parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators, offer great perspective on this subject, as they are the observers and evaluators of the work the students produce. However, to keep the research focused and the study from becoming too broad, only sixth-grade students will be studied.

Additionally, there is a large body of research on Ninth Grade Academies, as they have been instituted at many high schools for years. There are similarities between the two transitional academies; however, to keep the focus narrow, Ninth Grade Academies will only be referenced, not included in the research.

## **2.9 Significance of the Study**

Given the research regarding students' challenges with academic and social dimensions (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016) and the need for school structures that support and mitigate these challenges with effective transitions, research is needed. Additionally, given the gap in research on school structures that support transition and the role of leadership in these effective structures for school transition, particularly in middle school, research is needed. It is imperative that educators have a deeper understanding about school structures that reduce anxiety and support social-emotional wellness as well as academic success for middle school students. This study will be indicative of whether and how these structures make a difference for sixth-grade students as well as how the principal's leadership contributes to the academy structure.

## **2.10 Summary and Transition**

My observations as an elementary and middle school leader have led me to question the practices of elementary schools in preparing students for what an overwhelming experience can be. Additionally, as a former school counselor, I recognized that the academic performance of our students often hinges on the social and emotional support provided. The limitations in current literature regarding middle school transitions and the aforementioned challenges that accompany this critical period have led to the need to explore the topic further. The NMSA (2010) was clear in their assertion that transitional plans are needed, but often miss the mark of addressing the whole child. Education researchers are clear about the problems students encounter from peer pressures to transitioning to multiple classrooms during the course of their day, but again they have neglected the next steps for educators in the elementary setting to take in closing transitional gaps specifically related to an academy framework. My analysis of the literature indicated gaps that may explain these questions (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Questions regarding best practices for elementary schools in their work to prepare students for the middle school transition persist. Acknowledging that the transition year and subsequent years have impact that go beyond eighth grade requires education leaders' attention. In the next chapter, I present my analysis of this literature as well as my theoretical framework.

### **Chapter 3: Review of the Literature**

Traditional middle schools are structured to resemble high schools more than traditional elementary schools (Tamer, 2012). Middle schools offer multiple teachers, typically one per subject, while elementary schools typically offer one classroom teacher for the entire instructional day. According to Baltes and Nesselroade (1973), as cited by Crocket et al. (1989, p. 181), the transition from elementary to middle school is the most dramatic “normative age-graded” change that many American children face. Students transitioning to middle school experience various changes and are therefore at greater risk of being impacted negatively during this period of transition (Eccles et al., 1991).

Another study indicates that the transition from elementary to middle school is congruent with declines in academic achievement, self-esteem, interest in school, and level of motivation among students in this demographic (Eccles et al., 1991). Many scholars also suggest that declines in motivation among adolescents are the effect of two critical changes in their lives: puberty and school transitions (Alspaugh, 1998; Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996; Fenzel, 2000; McDougall & Hyrnel, 1998; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Transitions, or moving from one stage to another, are anticipated aspects of life development (Gniewosz & Gniewosz, 2019). One will experience several transitions throughout one’s lifetime and must effectively mitigate challenges that arise during these transitions to positively move from one stage to the next (Gniewosz & Gniewosz, 2019). Lifespan developmental theorists such as Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg all discuss stages from birth through adulthood. These developmental transitions often coincide with major

life changes like entering school, college graduation, marriage, and even death. When examining transitions within the K–12 context, one must also examine school matriculation’s relationship with lifespan development. According to Gniewosz and Gniewosz (2019), “Transitions typically affect children’s and adolescents’ psychological functioning negatively and call for resources to support post-transition adaptation” (p. 2). School structures and resources must be provided to help students transition into, within, and out of the public school system.

School leaders are challenged with determining how best to structure this final year in the life of the elementary student, given the many traditional occurrences they know to anticipate. Much of the mainstream literature on middle school leadership highlights the importance of understanding the history of middle-level education, the vast differences between middle school and elementary school settings, the developmental levels of the students impacted, and the social and academic ramifications of the current structure. This chapter reviews the literature on social influences and constraints (including developmental levels of students impacted), academic influences and challenges (including differences between middle school and elementary school settings), and structures school systems currently employ. The chapter concludes with a summary of the strengths and limitations of this literature and Bolman and Deal’s (2017) four frames for organizational change and leadership as the theoretical framework that informed the study.

### **3.1 Social Influences**

A keen awareness of the profile of a middle school student is essential in planning transitional practices. Researchers and theorists have sought to learn more about the

uniqueness of the various stages of life and development. Jean Piaget developed the four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. The sensorimotor stage is described as the time from birth to age 2 when infants discover the world through their senses. The preoperational stage, from age 2 to 7, is when children begin to experience language acquisition and abstract thought. The concrete operational stage focuses on the ages 7 to 11, when children learn more concrete concepts and rules about objects. The final stage, or formal operational stage, identifies those ages 11 and older as they learn logical rules to understand the abstract and how to solve problems (McLeod, 2010).

Fifth-grade and sixth-grade students typically fall into the concrete operational and formal operational stages. In the concrete operational stage, children become less egocentric and have a greater awareness of the world around them and the events taking place therein (McLeod, 2010). The formal operational stage, as aforementioned, begins at approximately age 12 and lasts into adulthood. As adolescents enter this stage, they acquire the ability to think in an abstract way (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Given the development stages of children during this period and their inability to think concretely through tasks and challenges, it can be argued that fifth-grade students may not be cognitively ready for such a transition.

According to Peter Lorain (2013), this period of transition is also critical because of the physiological changes these students are experiencing. During early adolescence, the body experiences more physical changes than it has since infancy and as rapidly as in infancy. These changes manifest themselves in behaviors that are often difficult for adults to understand (even though they all experienced them) and that are usually bewildering

for the adolescents. To cope with the challenges of these new behaviors, it is useful for both adolescents and the adults in their lives to understand the changes and the resulting behaviors. Lorain (2013) goes on to identify the major changes, such as skeletal structure, bone growth, and the stomach growing longer and increasing in activity.

Powell (2014) explored 10 physical development issues in middle school students. Three are important to be aware of when exploring how physical changes impact the transition to middle school. Powell explains that physical changes affect student behavior because biological facets related to puberty exacerbate and influence their behavioral choices. Second, many middle-school-aged girls experience their menstrual period for the first time in middle school. This leads to feelings of discomfort, tardiness, absenteeism, and extreme self-consciousness. Finally, along the same vein, students' glands become overactive, which could lead to personal hygiene concerns.

Because students are more aware of themselves and are more concerned about how others perceive them, the physical changes can not only cause physical discomfort but also become an opportunity for their peers to tease or bully them about their hygiene issues. Adolescents experience a dramatic growth spurt, with significant gains in height and weight, development of secondary sexual characteristics, and changes in fat and muscle distribution. Sexual interest also develops. Adolescents often appear awkward with their bodies because of their rapid and irregular growth. Pubertal timing relative to peers is related to adolescents' body image and satisfaction with their appearance; late-developing females and early-developing males hold the most positive perceptions (Anderman, 1999). These physical changes have a significant influence on how middle school students experience the academic and social components of these critical years.

The transition to middle school includes changes to not only the physical structure of school for students but also social roles (Crocket, 182). Dr. Peter Lorain (2002) cited several concerns that rising middle school students have based on stories they have been told, such as “Will I be able to open my locker?”, “Do the big kids beat you up?”, and “What if I can’t find the bathroom in that big school?” From an adult’s perspective, these thoughts may seem farfetched; however, to a 12-year-old entering this new phase, this is reality. Parents have little influence on their children during this period. According to Dr. Sharon Sevier (2014), middle schoolers believe their parents are “dumb,” are “overprotective,” and “don’t know anything.” These perceptions of parents are further complicated by the natural adolescent changes that are inevitable. Individuals experience many changes during early adolescence. Around ages 9 to 13, a child usually starts separating from childhood into early adolescence. By middle school, most students are being transformed and destabilized by this first adolescent stage. They start pulling away, pushing against, and getting around adult authority to create more freedom to grow and to live on more independent terms. Complaints, arguments, delays, disobedience, and testing limits become part of the young person’s repertoire at home and at school as both parents and teachers find themselves contending with more active and passive resistance (Pickhardt, 2017).

Peer relationships are significant during the middle school years. Wormeli (2011) suggests that belonging is a crucial concern for students. If addressed, it can lead to a positive transition. Schumacher (2008) explored students’ concerns surrounding this time in their educational careers. They cited several challenges with middle school. When surveyed, the Gwinnett County students stated the following concerns: (1) getting to class

on time, (2) finding lockers, (3) keeping up with “materials,” (4) finding lunchrooms and bathrooms, (5) getting on the right bus to go home, (6) getting through the crowded halls, and (7) remembering which class to go to next (Weldy, 1991). In addition to these concerns, other studies include personal safety (aggressive and violent behaviors of other students) as a prominent concern of students (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Odegaard & Heath, 1992).

Equally important in this study was the point of view of the educator. Teachers were also surveyed. They listed the following concerns:

(1) Changing classes; (2) reduced parent involvement; (3) more teachers; (4) no recess; no free time; (5) new grading standards and procedures; (6) more peer pressure; (7) developmental differences between boys and girls; (8) cliquishness; (9) fear of new, larger, more impersonal school; (10) accepting more responsibility for their own actions; (11) dealing with older children; (12) merging with students from five elementary schools; (13) unrealistic parental expectations; (14) lack of experience in dealing with extracurricular activities; (15) unfamiliarity with student lockers; (16) following the school schedule; (17) longer-range assignments; (18) coping with adolescent physical development; and, for some, (19) social immaturity; and (20) a lack of basic skills.

(Schumacher, 2008)

Psychiatrist Sidney Berman (1965) suggests that the transition to middle school is “poorly timed.” Berman (1965) states that, “in the midst of deciding who they are, they should not have to waste any energy deciding where they are.” He believes that between the ages of 11 and 13, adolescents need a “familiar and secure background in which to



operate” (Berman, 1965). Graham (2013) stated that “the transition to middle school comes at a time when children are starting to form personal identities, and the need to fit in plays a large role in how students will develop emotionally. Now at the bottom of the school’s social pyramid after being the top dogs in elementary school, students are forced to adapt to the social norms of middle school before the process begins anew in high school. He further explains that in an effort to fit in, students often succumb to this pressure. This falls at the same time that many have their first introduction to substances such as drugs and alcohol and to other mature behaviors (Graham, 2013).

In “The Misunderstood Middle Schooler,” the reader is given insight into the reason for some of the misbehaviors demonstrated by middle school students:

Once they reach middle school age, however, they become less bound by societal conventions. This means that when their moral decisions have only indirect effects on other people, they become less likely to do the right thing. For example, even though they would not actually pick someone else’s pocket, they are less inclined than younger kids to return money they find on the street. In that case, the indirect nature of the dilemma doesn’t stimulate their moral instincts, and we can’t count on them to adhere to societal conventions like they did when they were younger. (Zakrzewski, 2012)

In addition to experiencing evolving student–parent relationships, students are expected to adjust to a new class schedule and system of norms. If they are not properly prepared, they can flounder. In Pickhardt’s (2017) study on middle school transition, he addresses what he calls “social system skills.” He also maintains that a young person should learn and exercise adequate self-management in middle school. This will ease his

transition into high school, which is larger and more impersonal, and the adults have less tolerance of unwanted behaviors (Pickhardt, 2011). These social ramifications can be considered issues of safety for the school leader to consider. If students do not feel safe, they will not be able to perform well academically.

Those who are accustomed to experiencing success academically are those identified as academically gifted. Another consideration in the shift to middle school are those who are academically gifted, yet but struggle due to the social adjustment that comes with their new setting. In an article on gifted education, Vialle and Rogers (2009) describe gifted learners:

Gifted students not only think differently than the average person, but also feel differently: their advanced cognitive development is connected with a high level of emotion. This is because an outcome of rapid cognitive development is the ability to think about abstract issues quite early. Consequently, gifted students have a much greater range of emotional experiences, characterized by uneven or irregular development (where chronological, emotional and mental ages are different). (p.172)

These findings align with my years of experience working with this group of students. I was able to see firsthand how these students traditionally put extra stress on themselves to perform or felt stress from their parents (whether real or perceived) to meet certain expectations.

Pepperell and Rubel's (2009) qualitative study investigated the experience of sixth and seventh grade for girls. The emphasis was on the transition of gifted girls into middle school. The focus was on how a strong sense of identity informs giftedness and a

sense of connectedness with others. This study included seven female students over a four-month period. It was determined that strong relationships supported their ability to be successful in sixth and seventh grades. The research participants indicated that “being successful in sixth and seventh grade was dependent on fitting in, and they often had to make choices to regulate their giftedness in order to fit in. This regulating was for them a way to protect friendships, to be courteous to others, and to keep from standing out” (Pepperell & Rubel, 2009, p. 357). This study concluded that the girls had little difficulty transitioning because they had a strong sense of identity. The limitations of this study were that only gifted girls were considered instead of girls who were not identified as gifted and that male students were excluded. The study also focused on students in relation to developmental stages and social factors but did not explicitly consider students’ development in relation to a specific school structure.

Social Emotional Learning or SEL contributes to the work of preparing students at all levels, but it is critically important during this transition given the body of research previously outlined. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines SEL as “an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2022, para. 1). The Leader in Me- 7 Habits of Happy Kids is the SEL program employed by the school implementing the academy approach in this study. The Leader in Me is based on The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People created

by Franklin Covey (2020year). The school is the only Leader in Me School in the district. Students are daily being taught how to implement the 7 Habits in their academic and personal lives. They set goals for themselves and work with their teachers and accountability partners in order to meet or surpass their WIGs or wildly important goals. The habits include: Be proactive, Begin with the End in Mind, Put First Things First, Think Win-Win, Seek First to Understand, then to be understood, Synergize, and Sharpen the Saw. Schools that transition from traditional to Leader in Me schools learn quickly that the change in the school begins with the change in the educator. The staff cannot impart these tenants unless they embody them first. The goal for the school's leadership was to make the 7 Habits an integral part of the school's culture. Through morning meetings, programming, leadership opportunities, etc., leadership would be cultivated in all students and become a natural part of their daily lives, attitude and actions.

Nichole Fynn (2021) argued that SEL begins with the teacher, stating, A more intrinsic way to improve class behavior is to use social and emotional learning (SEL) to help students strengthen their relationships with teachers and peers. SEL skills are also essential for student self-motivation. Although there was some resistance from students to do their schoolwork before the pandemic, COVID exposed more of that resistance. It stripped away the extrinsic factors that were in place in school systems, leaving students to motivate themselves. Teachers hadn't taught executive function skills, however, and students were accustomed to being told what to do and how to do it. Students didn't know how to manage time, so how could they motivate themselves and finish their assignments? (Fynn, 2021, para.1)

The social emotional learning emphasis would minimize what Fynn has brought attention to- relationships and self-motivation. These are two components of middle school that effect the social aspect and success of the students' experience.

### **3.2 Academic Influences**

While social issues are significant at this time of transition, academic challenges are also critical. Researchers have noted a remarkable achievement drop after the transition to middle school (e.g. Pickhardt, 2017). For example, Pickhardt (2017) highlighted the relationship between social and academic issues in middle school, referencing social media and technology and their impact and noting that there is an achievement drop after the transition to middle school.

Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) explored student achievement among students tracked from grades 3 through 8, beginning during the 1998–1999 school year and lasting through the 2007–2008 school year. Rockoff and Lockwood (2010, p. 71) noted that in New York City, there is a “middle school disadvantage,” wherein students who enter public middle schools will not achieve at the same rate as their peers in K–8 schools. In addition to providing a review of standardized math and reading scores, other data points explored information about how each grade level was configured, characteristics of the schools, and characteristics of the students in the cohorts. The researchers determined that students who enter middle school in either sixth or seventh grade experience an initial drop in their assessment results. While a decline in test scores was observed among those entering middle school, continued improvement was observed among those in K–8 schools. A six-year longitudinal study (2010) that examined data points such as characteristics of the school, student achievement, and personal characteristics such as

gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, special education, and language followed the same children and concluded the following: (a) In the year that students enrolled in middle school, their test results dropped significantly in English and math. (b) Achievement continued to decline through their eighth-grade year. (c) Student absences increased in middle school and were the highest in eighth grade, with students missing approximately two additional days compared to those in K–8 schools. (d) The size of the cohort of students influences achievement.

In the quantitative study “The Middle School Plunge” (West & Schwerdt, 2012), student achievement among middle school students in the state of Florida was dissected. The focus was on the grade span of third to tenth grades from 2000 to 2009 and looked at the middle school and high school transition. This work was an extension of research conducted by Jonah Rockoff and Benjamin Lockwood in 2010 that focused on New York City schools. West and Schwerdt (2012) begin by explaining how several large urban districts had abandoned the middle school model for several of their schools and converted them into K–8 schools, then state the following:

Our results cast serious doubt on the wisdom of the middle-school experiment that has become such a prominent feature of American education. We find that moving to a middle school causes a substantial drop in student test scores (relative to that of students who remain in K–8 schools) the first year in which the transition takes place, not just in New York City but also in the big cities, suburbs, and small-town and rural areas of Florida. Further, we find that the relative achievement of middle-school students continues to decline in the subsequent years they spend in such schools. Nor do we find any sign that the middle-school

students catch up with those who remained in the K–8 environment once all of them have entered high school. On the contrary, students entering a middle school in grade 6 are more likely not to be enrolled in any Florida public school as 10th graders (despite having been enrolled in grade 9), a strong indication that they have dropped out of school by that time. (pp. 62–68)

The researchers in this study utilized data from the Florida Department of Education's Data Warehouse. Math and reading scores for those in grades 3 through 10 between the years 2000 to 2009 were disaggregated. Similar to previous studies referenced in this work, demographics such as race, gender, socioeconomics, and special services were points of data as well. Students who entered third grade and were administered the state assessments for the following consecutive grades for five years were used to determine the effect of the middle school transition on student achievement. As a result of their research, West and Schwerdt (2012) concluded the following: (a) Math achievement falls by .12 standard deviations and reaches .09 standard deviations during the sixth-grade transition. (b) A review of student academic growth over the three-year middle school experience indicated that students who enter in sixth grade score .23 standard deviations worse in math and .14 standard deviations worse in reading than would be anticipated if they were in a K–8 setting.

The study further explored the effect of an urban setting on this transition to other areas by reviewing Census Bureau data. They were able to determine that the effects are more prominent in larger cities, but it still has an impact in rural areas. When examining the various subgroups and the effect of the middle school transition, some concerning patterns were noticed. Students who were below the state median in math experienced

significant declines in their math achievement as a result of the transition. The same was true for Black students. Prior to entering middle school, they were observed experiencing gains in math; however, dropped considerably after the students entered middle school. Their research further concluded that there was little regression in reading among subgroups and minor differences when comparing boys to girls.

To delve more deeply into root causes for the drop in achievement, a qualitative study via principal surveys on the accountability system was done to evaluate educational practices, school policies, and school climate in Florida's middle schools and K-8 schools (West & Schwerdt, 2012). West and Schwerdt found that middle schools had more policies aimed at improving student academic achievement, that middle school principals' responses to school climate suggested that they were more concerned with school safety compared to their counterparts, and that many of their teachers were not equipped to handle challenges students presented in an appropriate manner.

West and Schwerdt's "The Impact of Alternate Grade Configurations on Student Outcomes Through Middle and High School" (2012) involved a quantitative study on this issue of middle school transition and how it can impede students' academic growth. The 2011 study, part of the Program on Education Policy and Governance Working Papers Series at Harvard University, determined that students moving into middle school demonstrate what the researchers call a "sharp drop" in both math and language arts in the transition year that can have long-lasting effects and affect their ability to graduate from high school and go to college. The researchers found trends in absenteeism during the transition into sixth grade that exceed absences observed among those who are



enrolled in K–8 schools. They also found that the students are more likely to drop out of school by 10th grade (Sparks, 2016).

Gordon et al. (2011) highlighted that in their review of research on school transitions and grade configurations “the majority of research found that students transitioning to another school experience a significant drop in achievement related outcomes. Gutman and Midgely (2000) found that when African-American students transitioned to a new school from fifth to sixth grade, their grade point average significantly declined. In addition, Seidman et al. (1994) found that transitions at any age had an impact on student grade point average, whether it was middle or junior high school” (p.5).

Robert Balfanz (2009) presents compelling evidence that the middle school experience has a direct correlation with graduation rates, particularly in high-poverty environments. His study that focused on middle grades in Philadelphia indicated the following:

The research demonstrates that the middle grades matter—tremendously. During the middle grades, students in high-poverty environments are either launched on the path to high school graduation or knocked off-track. It is a time when they can close achievement gaps and enter high school ready or at least close to ready for standards based instruction that leads to college readiness. Alternatively, it is a time when students’ achievement gaps widen, forcing them to enter high school still in need of a good middle grades education.

This underscores the importance of direct connection of middle school on graduation rates. What takes place in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade impacts a student’s ability to

be able to matriculate successfully through high school and obtain a high school diploma- the ultimate goal of k-12 education. The impact of elementary education and middle grades education should never be minimized. While high school courses, grade point averages, transcripts, etc. are all part of the formula for getting students to their post-graduation plans, the foundational skills, those academic and social, are provided and cemented during the middle grades.

“The Transition to Middle School Is Associated with Changes in the Developmental Trajectory of ADHD Symptomatology in Young Adolescents with ADHD” gives further insight into how this transition can have significant effects on students physically (Langberg et.al., 2008). In this study, rating scales were completed on the 7- to 9-year-old participants who were the subject of the research. The objective was to look at the intensity of ADHD symptoms before, during and after middle school. The researchers concluded the following:

Given the increased environmental and contextual demands in middle school, this transition can be a particularly difficult period of time for some students.

Significant decreases in Grade Point Average (GPA) and confidence in academic abilities have been documented with the transition to middle school in children without ADHD ([Alspaugh & Harting, 1995](#); [Gutman & Midgley, 2000](#); [Midgley & Urdan, 1992](#)). With the increased demand for independent functioning, higher levels of organization, and management of deadlines, behaviors such as procrastination can become particularly problematic ([DuPaul & Stoner, 2003](#)).

This transition period has the potential to alter the developmental course of ADHD symptoms (p. 652).

In sum, they found that just as structured environments led to behavior improvement, less structured complex environments exacerbate ADHD symptoms. With increased demands for independence, organizational skills, and meeting deadlines, students often procrastinate more. While the K–12 school leader has many goals for the students they serve, the ultimate goal is to see all students graduate with high school diplomas. The dropout rate can be curtailed if we figure out how to avoid losing them in the middle school transition.

### **3.3 Organization Influences**

To close the gaps between elementary and middle school, school leaders often implement structures to allow students to feel more comfortable once they make the transition. In their research on middle school transitions, Hill and Mobley (2016) argue that incorporating a comprehensive transitional program is valuable due to environmental adjustments, psychological distress, and developmental changes. They refer to Cauly and Joanovich's (2006, p. 18) definition of effective transitional programs: "ones that improve student attendance, achievement and retention." They suggest that the approach to the transition should be long-term and provide activities prior to entering middle school. In their study, they sought to determine whether their recommendation of a basic, rather than minimal, transitional program would assist in student performance during their sixth-grade year of middle school by reviewing reading and math scores, attendance, and discipline referrals among sixth graders. Their sample included two comparable Title I middle schools of approximately 800 students in Georgia. Both sixth-grade classes contained approximately 300 students. The schools' adequate yearly progress and economically-disadvantaged populations were also very similar. Both schools featured in

the study hosted what they called “Smooth Move.” This included students and parents visiting the feeder middle school, taking a tour, meeting with counselors, and engaging in other activities to give the incoming students a glimpse of what they could anticipate in the fall. Each school also provided sixth-grade students with a Saturday Mock School Day. This opportunity allowed students and parents to review a PowerPoint presentation about aspects of sixth grade, such as expectations, curriculum, and lunch. Students were also given the chance to practice opening their lockers and eat lunch in their cafeteria. The results of the study indicated that the transitional activities had no impact on academic performance in the area of reading; however, math scores were higher when a basic, rather than a minimal, transition program was in place. Hill and Mobley (2016) indicated that the pass rate at both schools was high, which would make it difficult to improve, and one school could have emphasized math instruction more than the other. Attendance and behavior displayed no impact as a result of the basic transition program. They noted that one school may emphasize referrals for documentation more than the other school included in the study.

Yet the Hill and Mobley (2016) study had several limitations. The sample size was the greatest limitation. The schools were similar; however, factors like parental involvement varied. The priorities of each school were also limitations, as one school’s administration may have made transitional practices a priority while the other did not make it an area of focus. Attendance was the final limitation, as the researchers examined the entire school’s attendance instead of sixth grade exclusively.

Other studies (Waggoner, 1994) focus on students who move into middle-level schools from elementary schools that rotate students between classes at least part of the

day and their perceptions of their preparation to enter a middle-level school. For example, Waggoner's (1994) qualitative study, which included student behaviors and responses, investigated the transition concerns and self-esteem of 171 sixth graders. Students from teamed settings in elementary schools demonstrated a stronger affiliation in school activities and fewer concerns about the transition to junior high school than students in self-contained sixth-grade classrooms. Teachers in teamed settings felt their students exhibited fewer indicators of stress related to progressing to junior high school than teachers of students in self-contained sixth-grade classrooms. Sixty-six percent of all students surveyed believed they would be better prepared for seventh grade if they had more than one sixth-grade teacher (Waggoner, 1994).

Several studies (2008) previously referenced, such as Rockoff and Lockwood's research in "Stuck in the Middle," compared traditional middle schools to K-8 schools. The researchers followed cohorts of students from grades three through eight in the New York City Schools from the fall of 1997 through the spring of 2008. They analyzed standardized scores in math and reading as well as personal characteristics. It is important to address the impact of K-8 schools, as they are the most widespread alternative to middle schools. Many districts have shifted to a K-8 approach to address these social and academic gaps in middle-level education. K-8 schools are an alternative to the middle school transition, as they present students with only one K-12 transition. Therefore, students avoid such a transition until high school, minimizing the aforementioned problematic challenges. Improvements in academic achievement and school culture have been observed in K-8 settings. Byrnes and Ruby (2007), in their study "Comparing

Achievement between K–8 and Middle Schools: A Large-Scale Empirical Study,” shared the following findings:

First and foremost, some research has shown that students at K–8 schools have higher levels of academic achievement, both in mathematics and reading (Coladarci et al., 2002; Offenber, 2001; Yakimowski & Connolly, 2001). Over 40,000 eighth grade students from 95 different schools in the Philadelphia School District were included in this research on K–8 schools. The study was prompted by data that suggests that middle school students’ academic achievement has declined, especially in areas where there is extreme poverty and a high minority population. The researchers used the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, or the PSSA, to analyze student performance. This assessment was used because it is considered high stakes and is used to evaluate the effectiveness of schools across the state. (p.103-104)

The researchers addressed nonacademic concerns, such as attendance, as well. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) found the following when examining the impact on student attendance. In addition, however, students attending K–8 schools have also been found to have higher rates of attendance (Pardini, 2002; Coladarci et al., 2002) and better performance in terms of emotional and social outcomes such as self-esteem, leadership, and attitudes towards school based on district and student data (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). These social engagement and attitudinal outcomes, such as students experiencing poor self-esteem, increased rates of bullying and victimization, and feeling less safe, are extremely important, not only as outcomes themselves, but because they in turn then have effects on student achievement (p. 104).

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) further explain social factors related to the climate of the school. Their research that compared student achievement results among K-8 schools and middle schools suggested the following, with additional support from other research cited within their conclusions:

Student outcomes though, are not the only validation for conversion efforts.

Among the parents surveyed, the research determined that they often praise the greater sense of community that they feel exists in K–8 schools, and several studies have noted the stronger relationships that seem to exist between students, between teachers, between students and teachers, and between parents and teachers in K–8 schools (p. 104).

### **3.4 High School Transition Academies**

High schools have implemented transitional academies for many years by ushering in ninth grade students at a different pace and in some cases, different locations to get them acclimated to their new environment. *Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, or MDRC, in their publication on the “Evaluation of Ninth Grade Academies” took a deep dive into the effectiveness of the Ninth Grade Academy model in Broward County, Florida. There is significant alignment with the causation and implementation to middle school transition. The researchers’ background on the genesis for Ninth Grade Academies described the transition as “a volatile time for adolescents and a precarious point in the educational pipeline. Evidence shows ninth grade to be one of the leakiest junctures in this pipeline. MDRC’s research in urban districts suggests that as many as 40 percent of students fail to get promoted from ninth to tenth grade on time, and fewer than 20 percent of those students recover from failure and go on to graduate”*

(Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2021. p.1). MDRC describe the structure of the Ninth Grade Academies as “self-contained units located in a designated area of the school. Each academy has its own dedicated teaching faculty, guidance staff, and social services, creating a complete community for this transition year. These NGAs are organized around interdisciplinary teacher teams that have students and planning times in common. NGAs support personal relationships among students, among teachers, and between students and teachers. The teaming of teachers and students supports more consistent classroom composition and student peer groups while decreasing anonymity and increasing students’ sense of community. Students have a consistent group of teachers who are accountable for their success, and teachers have a chance to coordinate their course work to better meet the needs of their students” (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2021. p.1). Based on the description provided, high schools that have chosen to implement similar models are attempting to ensure a sense of connection and belonging for students. They highlight “personal relationships” as an area of emphasis for the academy.

Styron and Peasant (2010) explored the impact of Ninth Grade Academies on academics using a quantitative study that analyzed standardized test scores in among students enrolled in ninth grade academies. They found that students enrolled in NGAs did outperform those in traditional high school settings. In particular, their research substantiated the impact of the academy model on closing the achievement gap between black and white students. The intentionality behind the structures for Ninth Grade Academies is likewise needed for rising 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. There is a strong likelihood that similar outcomes could be observed in the middle school setting as well.



While there is a solid research base on the middle school transition and a growing body of research on middle-high school transitions that suggests organizational change and the leadership contribution, there is a limited research base on the structure and related dimensions as they apply to an elementary-middle school transition. Additionally, there is limited research on the principal's leadership contribution to the academy and its influence on transitions. In the next two main sections, I present a theoretical framework on organizational change (Bolman & Deal, 2017) and literature on leadership influence on organizational change from the international successful school principalship project and related research.

### **3.5 Framework: Bolman and Deal's Four Frames for Organizational Change and Leadership**

While research and theories on a fifth-grade academy model in elementary schools are limited, there is a body of work around how school leaders can mitigate a myriad of challenges in the school setting including those experienced by students during this period of their academic journey and their transition to middle school (e.g., Hill & Mobley, 2016; Olofson & Knight, 2018; Wigfield et al., 1991). This study takes a deep dive into the structures that can influence middle school transition, including dimensions that influence change of these structures and the leadership contribution to these changes. "The demands on managers' wisdom, imagination and agility have never been greater and the impact of organizations on people's well-being and happiness has never been more consequential" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.7). As such, the theory that lends itself best to this study is the Four Frames by Bolman and Deal (2013).

Bolman and Deal (2017) present frames for organizational leaders to consider as they lead change, such as a transition from one structure to another. “The four frames are the windows or mental models from which leaders view their organization and how the organization should be led” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 11). The four frames provide direction on how to navigate through circumstances effectively. The frames are structural, human resource, political and symbolic. Bolman and Deal (2017) explain how a lack of understanding and knowledge of the organization among leaders can be destructive as a full view of the company or organization, the good things, and the company’s shortcomings is essential to the leader’s ability to lead effectively (p. 8). Careful examination of an organization from all four frames would allow an organization’s leadership to have a full view when making critical decisions.

### **3.6 Structural Frame**

Bolman and Deal liken the structural frame to the makeup of a machine (p 19). The concepts that embody the structural frame are “rules, roles, goals, policies, technology and environment” (p. 19). The structural changes to School C’s fifth grade had a significant emphasis on rules, goals and environment. With the goal in mind of preparing the fifth-grade students for their transition to middle school, the rules and environment were restructured to resemble aspects of the middle school. Social emotional learning curriculum that emphasized leadership and rules that encouraged accountability and personal responsibility were created and enforced to support the goal. “The main leadership tasks within the structural frame include ensuring that goals are reached, results are obtained and that the organizational structure is attuned to accomplishing tasks. Moreover, a leader with this frame focuses on efficiency, planning, control and

decision-making (Bolman & Deal, p. 19).” Relating this direction to the academy in this study, the school leader, would need to make certain that the goals were clear to stakeholders to garner support. Additionally, stakeholders would need a clear understanding of the path forward toward the goal. Therefore, intentional but flexible planning would be required if amendments were needed to the established academy structure during implementation. Here an academy structure and planning for the structure would need to address rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, and the environment.

### **3.7 Human Resources Frame**

The Human Resources Frame is described as family by Bolman and Deal (2017). “Needs, skills and relationships” are the drivers of the human resources frame (p. 19). One of the tenets of this frame is that the organization exist to serve the needs of the humans instead of the humans serving the organization (Bolman and Deal, 2017 p. 118). From a leadership perspective, in order to have an effective academy model, positive school culture would have to be fostered. For example, intentionality around team building exercises and the social emotional curriculum could facilitate a family atmosphere. The needs of the students as human beings instead of the needs of the school would be the priority in the Bolman and Deal framework (2017). Ensuring that fifth grade students had experiences that were aligned to what they would experience as sixth graders, for example, would be an important consideration.

### **3.8 Political Frame**

The political frame is described as a jungle with central themes of “power, conflict, and competition, and organizational politics” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 19). “A

leader within this frame tries to advance her or his own agenda by building constantly changing coalitions” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 242). In the implementation of an academy structure, the leader would need to manage power conflicts and personal agendas and keep the direction of helping students get ready for an upcoming middle school transition as the primary and common goal. The Leader takes on the role of advocate in this frame and works to ensure that what is just and fair is carried out in the organization.

### **3.9 Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame is described as a carnival with “culture, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories and heroes are key concepts” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 19). “The leader within this frame tries to direct the proceedings on a path that leads to the organizational vision” (p.19). When establishing an academy from a symbolic frame, stakeholders look to the leader for inspiration. The leader may share personal experiences including their middle school challenges or offer stories about they have seen academies make a difference in the lives of students to underscore its relevance and importance.

### **3.10 Leadership Influence**

Creating a culture and establishing expectations to address the challenges of middle school transitions start with effective school leadership. Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal. (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 2)

The Wallace Foundation synthesizes existing research on leadership and funds original research. As the Wallace Foundation Report (2011, p. 2) indicated, in the school setting, the principal is charged with reviewing with landscape of the school- the successes, challenges, needs, data, etc.- and utilizing resources or securing the resources that will allow the school to move towards continuous improvement. When evaluating middle school transition and supporting students, the principal needs to survey students to determine the stressors, review data to see how they perform once they transition, connect with parents and other stakeholders to gain insight on their experiences with their students during the transition, and then developing a plan of action to mitigate the concerns.

National (Jacobson et al., 2012; Ylimaki et al., 2021) and international research studies (Day, 2005; Gurr, 2017; Leithwood, 2012; Pashiardis, 2011) also indicate that effective leaders focus on a common set of actions across contexts and situations, including setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. School leadership and vision can help support successful middle school transitions . The principal is responsible for hiring staff and ensuring the professional growth of those under their leadership. Therefore, selecting the right fifth-grade and sixth-grade teachers who support this work and providing them with the resources to facilitate the work are imperative in the process of planning and executing transitional practices. Leaders redesign the organization to allow for dialogue with elementary and middle school educators, focusing on issues, such as best instructional practices and scheduling since this group is set apart from their kindergarten through fourth grade colleagues.

### ***Setting Directions***

In *Setting the Direction: The Role of the Principal in Developing an Effective, Inclusive School*, Waldron, McLeskey, and Redd speak to the critical role of the principal in charting the course for positive student outcomes. Referencing Fullan's (2007) work, they highlight the principal's role in school activities such as developing and creating a culture that is supportive of the instructional staff, create opportunities for teacher leadership growth and development, facilitate opportunities for teachers' professional learning, and support teachers in their development of professional learning communities (p.1).

### ***Human Relations and Developing People***

Drawing on findings from the International Successful School Principalship Project or ISSPP, David Gurr (2017) further emphasizes the leadership attribute of a strong focus on the needs of the people being served in his assessment of successful leadership, concluding,

It seems that successful leadership arises not from the use of unidimensional strategies but instead from a multi-dimensional, dynamic combination of the aforementioned leadership aspects that were identified in these case studies. People-centered leadership and clearly communicated values and visions combined with a strong emphasis on the promotion of learning, the use of networked leadership as well as the creative management of competing values outline the elements of a comprehensive and indeed, successful kind of leadership. (Gurr, 2011, p. 551).

The ISSPP Project focuses on school success defined by student academic and wellness outcomes as well as the school reputation. This project is aligned with the

human resources frame from Bolman and Deal as it emphasizes relationships and human needs. Twenty-seven countries participate in the study which includes 165 qualitative case studies. An intentional focus on the people—the students who need to be supported in the transition and the teachers who need the resources, tools, and training to execute the work effectively—is critical in leading successful change in schools (Gurr, 2017).

In an earlier study focused on ‘outlier’ schools or schools where students performed beyond expectations from socioeconomic prerequisites., Ronald Edmonds (1979), in his seminal research on effective schools, found consistencies among high-performing schools that served poor and urban communities. His work is significant because it highlights how students can achieve in public school settings despite lower socioeconomic demographics and adverse childhood experiences represented within the student population. When examining findings from effective low-SES schools as well as the four schools in a previous study conducted by Weber (1971), Edmonds (1979, p. 2) states, “All four schools had strong leadership in that their principal was instrumental in setting the tone of the school; helping decide on instructional strategies; and organizing and distributing the school’s resources.” Across the research, findings indicate that the school principal plays an integral role in all aspects of the school and determines the level of success that the school will experience. The research also suggests that in order to implement any significant and sustainable school change, the leader has to lead with a love for those he/she serves, demonstrate a desire for continuous improvement, provide research and clear steps for strategic planning and implementation, have the ability to be flexible and pivot when needed, and the ability to build capacity in the those serving alongside the leader. Regardless of the school setting or the initiative being considered,

these are key components to the success of the implementation. The role of leadership drives the success of the work.

### ***Redesigning the Organization***

Redesigning the organization, or school turnaround, is powerful work that is changing the landscape of public education. Leithwood et al. (2004) addresses redesigning the organization in his executive summary on the impact of leadership on student learning. He states,

Successful educational leaders develop their districts and schools as effective organizations that support and sustain the performance of administrators and teachers, as well as students. Specific practices typically associated with this set of basics include strengthening district and school cultures, modifying organizational structures and building collaborative processes (p.7).

In the planning and development of an academy, these practices contribute to successful outcomes. Culture building and modifying the structure can be instrumental in shifting a fifth grade traditional, self-contained model to the academy that in many instances resembles a middle school.

From a leadership perspective, “School turnaround principals identify the academic areas, school conditions, and instructional practices that need improvement. They review data about teachers’ strengths and weaknesses that affect instruction and school culture. They analyze data personally, so they really know what needs to change for students, and their teachers, to achieve greater success (Public Impact, 2016, p. 6).” Data from discipline records and feedback from stakeholders indicated that change was needed for fifth grade students. Galvanizing a group of teachers who had the capacity to



influence and implement change was needed in order to see the academy come to fruition. The work is hard, but necessary given what is at stake.

### ***Managing the Instructional Program***

Matthew Lynch (2015year) gives insight on the importance of the principal managing the instructional program for the school. He writes, “Managing the instructional program requires the principal’s active participation in stimulating, supervising, guiding, and monitoring teaching and learning in the school. The principal must possess expertise as well as commitment, getting “neck-deep” in the school’s instruction and curriculum (Lynch, 2015, para. 8).” Kenneth Leighwood provides education leadership with insight on transformational leadership K-12 settings. In his article, “The Move Toward Transformational Leadership,” He begins by addressing instructional leadership’s place in the school leadership in the 80’s and 90’s. In his research, he concludes that instructional leadership is important, but only part of transformational leadership. He stated, “Instructional leadership no longer appears to capture the heart of what school administration will have to become. Transformational leadership involves a more appropriate range of practice” (p. 8). Emphasis on making certain that students were prepared for their middle school transition was part of the administration’s layers of support for teachers to ensure that the level of rigor was appropriate for middle school preparation. Vertical articulation planning was organized with the middle school teachers and administrators to close gaps in the perceptions and realities of what sixth grade students are exposed to in their core content classes.

Leadership in the organization is key. Sammons and Day (2014) summarized successful school leadership research findings and identified the following as the “key dimensions” of successful school leadership:

- defining the vision, values and direction
- improving conditions for teaching and learning
- redesigning the organization: aligning roles and responsibilities
- enhancing teaching and learning
- redesigning and enriching the curriculum
- enhancing teacher quality (including succession planning)
- building relationships inside the school community
- building relationships outside the school community
- placing an emphasis on common values

### **3.11 Summary**

Numerous studies have been conducted and referenced in this chapter that highlight the benefits of K–8 settings and the impact of this transition on middle school students. The work is critical to educators as they seek to determine how best to provide a high quality, holistic education to meet the needs of whole students, with organizational and leadership influences supporting academics with social and emotional needs, and ultimately improving student achievement. Yet, I noted gaps in the literature. Waggoner-Weir’s (1991) work that focused on self-esteem in adolescents, while closely related to the topic, focused on sixth-grade students instead of those in fifth grade. Other studies focused on strategies that can mitigate social and academic challenges, such as Hill and Mobley’s (2016) study but came short of supporting an elementary structure that was

closely aligned to the middle school model. It is essential to give careful consideration to how best to minimize potential middle school hardships prior to the transition. A proactive approach can be vital to students' ability to succeed in their new and very different environments.

A review of the current literature indicates that there is not an overwhelming amount of research that speaks to school structures and models that support smooth middle school transitions, particularly in terms of the academic and social factors that have been identified as important to student success. The literature focuses on school structures, related dimensions, and leadership influence of middle school transitions is limited. Specifically, the research is lacking in the area of determining how a fifth-grade academy model would support these middle school students academically and socially. Hill and Mobley's (2016) work highlighted various strategies employed by systems in Georgia to facilitate smoother transitions for rising middle school students. Unfortunately, with the various limitations, such as the sample size, it fell short of addressing the impact of targeted fifth-grade processes and procedures that could cultivate the skills students need to thrive in the new setting. Therefore, additional research is needed to understand how and in what ways structures support students in transitioning, specifically academic components coupled with various social emotional components during the fifth-grade year of elementary school. Additionally, there is a dearth of literature on leadership influences on an effective middle school transition, particularly organizational structures aimed at fifth-grade.

With research on the fifth-grade academy model limited, this study seeks to determine the effectiveness of its implementation in terms of structural, human resource,

political, and symbolic as well as any additional dimensions of effective change and leadership contributions raised by participants in my study. The study will draw upon the strengths of the literature and Bolman and Deal's (2017) framework to examine data from students from three similar elementary schools within the same school district. Two schools utilized a traditional fifth-grade model, and one used the academy model. Achievement and attendance data will be disaggregated to determine the effectiveness of the implementation of the academy model. In addition, this study will examine the principal's leadership contributions to the academy model structure. In Chapter 4, I provide an explanation of my qualitative methodology used to answer my research questions.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

This study was designed to examine the impact of an academy approach on sixth-grade students in their transition to middle school. I asked three primary research questions:

1. How, if at all, does the structure (classes/subject areas, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' ability to perform well academically in middle school?
2. In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' behaviors in middle school?
3. How does the principal's leadership contribute to an effective middle school academy structure for academic and student behavior?

To answer these questions, the study used a qualitative research method and design to examine the effectiveness of the academy model in one South Carolina elementary school in comparison to the two neighboring feeder schools that transition students into Middle School A and the leader's contributions to the transition. As noted in Chapter 3, the extant literature on organizational structures that support transitions to middle school and leaders' contributions to this transition is limited. This study utilized the strengths and limitations of the literature to understand the relationship between the Fifth Grade Academy structure and a smoother transition to middle school for rising sixth-grade students with regard to student achievement and their social and emotional

wellbeing. In addition, this study drew on the strengths and limitations of leadership literature as it contributes to effective school structures. Limited research is available that focuses on an academy model in elementary schools. This research examined a practice in an elementary school and compared it to neighboring schools with similar demographics.

#### **4.1 Qualitative Case Study Research Methods**

I selected a qualitative case study approach to explore the various perspectives on the impact of a middle school academy on student transition and the leaders' influence on this impact. In their explanation of qualitative research, Berkwits and Inui (1998) described it as follows:

A form of inquiry that analyzes information conveyed through language and behavior in natural settings. It is used to capture expressive information not conveyed in quantitative data about beliefs, values, feelings, and motivations that underlie behaviors. Qualitative methods derive from a variety of disciplines and traditions. They are used to learn directly from patients and others what is important to them, to provide the context necessary to understand quantitative findings, and to identify variables important for future clinical studies. (p. 195)

According to Shidur Rhaman (2017), qualitative research offers several benefits, including providing significant descriptions of the thoughts and feelings of participants and interpretation of the meaning behind their behaviors (Denzin, 1989). Furthermore, this research approach allowed the researchers to discern the participants' inner experiences and determine how culture and experiences influenced the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The most commonly used sources of data collection for

qualitative research are participant observation, unstructured interviews, and direct observation; descriptive records are most commonly used for collecting data (Cohen et al., 2011). Given these various methods and the question being explored, qualitative research was warranted to achieve the outcome being sought.

#### **4.2 Qualitative Case Study Methods**

This study utilized qualitative case study methods designed to explore and understand the thoughts and feelings of those who were directly impacted by the Fifth Grade Academy and the leader's contribution to the academy. It is imperative to have an understanding of the perceptions of those involved in and affected by the academy and of leaders regarding how they believe the academy minimized or exacerbated undesirable behaviors in their sixth-grade cohort. Their perceptions provided context from varying perspectives and thus assisted in the evaluation of effective and ineffective strategies. It was beneficial to conduct this study as a case study for a variety of reasons. In "Using Case Studies in Research," Jennifer Rowley (2002) shared the following regarding case studies:

Case study as a research strategy often emerges as an obvious option for students and other new researchers who are seeking to undertake a modest scale research project based on their workplace or the comparison of a limited number of organizations. The most challenging aspect of the application of case study research in this context is to lift the investigation from a descriptive account of "what happens" to a piece of research that can lay claim to being a worthwhile, if modest addition to knowledge. (p. 16)

Merriam (1991) provided details on case studies to provide clarity on when they are appropriate in research. He noted that in the field of education, case studies are customary. There are several definitions. Yin (2014) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 19). Merriam (1991) went on to give attributes of a case study and to note what a case study is not. For example, if the number of potential participants could be limitless, the research would not qualify as a case study (Merriam, 1991).

Case studies are not bound to one form of research and data collection. A myriad of methods can be included in a case study. Various researchers have defined case studies in different ways. Yin (2014) stated that a case study is a design that is “suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon variables from their context (p. 3)”. Wilson (1979) defined a case study by stating that it “tries to describe and analyze some entity in qualitative complex and comprehensive terms not infrequently as it unfolds over a period of time” (p.448).

### **4.3 Qualitative Interview Data Collection**

The qualitative research conducted was important in understanding the impact of the academy approach because it provided the researcher with the firsthand experiences of those who either participated in or were connected in some way to the Fifth Grade Academy. Interviews were conducted via Zoom as a result of COVID-19 restrictions in schools. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. All interviews were deleted at the conclusion of the research.



### ***Sample***

The participants in this study were selected based on their affiliation with the academy approach. Sampling as defined by Anol Bhattacharjee (2012) is “a process that allows us to study a small group of people from the large group to derive inferences that are likely to be applicable to all the people of the large group (p. 65).” He goes on to explain the rationale for sampling:

Why we should study a sample? The rationale is, the results obtained from a sample are more precise and correct than the results from the study of the whole group. Costs involved in studying all units of a large group is yet another factor which suggests us to study a small group of people instead. Associated with cost, there are certain other factors such as time available for the study and accessibility of the units of study. Above all, the point to be kept in mind is, if we can get almost same results by studying a carefully selected small group of people why should we study the large group at all. (p. 65)

### ***School Leaders***

The four school administrators are principals who have only worked in the state of South Carolina. Three out of the four have only worked in this school district. Two administrators are elementary principals who have previous middle school experience. One administrator is a middle-aged Caucasian female, and the other is a middle-aged African-American male. Two administrators are middle school administrators who worked with the students who attended the three feeder elementary schools. One middle school administrator is a middle-aged African-American female, and the other is a middle-aged Caucasian female. All of the administrators have at least 20 years of

experience in the public school setting. The administrators were specifically selected because of their affiliation with School C and Middle School A. The elementary principals lead two of the schools that are feeders for Middle School A. The other two administrators are members of the staff of Middle School A.

### ***Students***

Three students were selected to give insight into their experiences as first-year middle school students. The students were selected to capture the impact on the sixth-grade experience despite background. More specifically, the students were selected based on their history of school leadership and school leaders' and teachers' perceptions of them as students who were diligent in their studies and maintained a balance of leadership, academics, and other extracurricular activities in the elementary setting.

### ***Parents***

Two parents were selected to give their observations of their students during the transition and first year in middle school. One parent was also the parent of a student included in the study. The parents selected, one African American and two Caucasian, were heavily involved in their children's education during their elementary experience and were active participants in either the school's School Improvement Council or the Parent Teacher Association.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom with all adult study participants. Participants were asked for their consent and then gave consent formally by signing and returning a consent form. Dates and times were scheduled, and Zoom links were provided to all adult participants. The interviews were recorded and sent to a company to be transcribed. The

researcher kept a journal to document significant points shared during the interviews or reoccurring themes that were heard throughout the interviews.

After the interviews were transcribed, the information was coded to look for trends in the data. Each group interviewed was asked similar questions; however, the questions were tailored according to the participant's role in the study. Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes. Student interviews were completed anonymously to ensure the student participants communicated their true thoughts and feelings. This would allow the researcher to have data that was not skewed due to the relationship between the researcher and the students. Questions were provided to the parents, who were asked to return typed answers to the school without names attached. The questions selected were adapted from a Stanford University interview protocol (2003) and were selected to gain insight into the academic and behavioral changes and challenges experienced and observed as well as leadership provided in the elementary and middle school setting. The questions used can be found in Appendix A.

The interviews with participants served as one source of data for answering the aforementioned research questions. Data were also gathered from district assessments that the students participated in during their seventh-grade experience at Middle School A. The results of Measures of Academic Progress (MAPs) were used to determine if the academy structure and expectations helped students transition and thrive in their new setting.

#### **4.4 Population and Sample or Participants and Sampling Criteria**

The population represented in this study consisted of sixth-grade students who transitioned to Middle School A from three feeder elementary schools. The feeder

elementary schools were School A, School B, and School C. In the following sections, I describe the schools and their structures as well as academic student outcomes for each.

### ***Schools***

The schools selected for this study were chosen based upon several criteria. First, they were neighboring schools that fed into the same middle school. The schools have had Title I federal funding or have been close to receiving federal funds due to the number of students categorized as being economically disadvantaged. The demographics of the students and staff populations and the size of each school were comparable. All schools had school leaders who had five or more years of experience as principals in an elementary setting. Additionally, the school leaders had secondary experiences. Because the schools were within the same school district, the students participated in the same assessments required for elementary school students. The structure of kindergarten to fourth grade was identical in the schools. One school was selected because there was a clear plan for an academy approach, and the other two schools were selected because there was a clear plan to use the traditional self-contained model. South Carolina's Department of Education published report cards for every public school in the state. These report cards gave a holistic view of the school, from assessment data to programs and afterschool activities to staffing. This resource was utilized to provide context for their significance in the study, as it demonstrated the similarities among the three elementary schools.

**School A Elementary School.** School A Elementary was a school with Title I designation based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students attending. They had approximately 420 students and 39 staff members. Over 50 percent of the

student population was African American and over 75 percent of the population was considered economically disadvantaged. The school's leader had been in place for approximately five years, however, the assistant principal was serving her first year in that capacity. Both administrators were African American. 2020-2021 state assessment results indicated the 31.7 percent of third through fifth grade students were proficient in reading and 37.3 percent were proficient in math. According to the school's narrative provided on its South Carolina School Report Card, the principal noted the following:

To meet the Profile of a South Carolina Graduate, School A is developing world class skills and life and career characteristics for our students by providing each student an opportunity to master the essential learning and life skills that will make him or her successful at all levels. Our Vision Statement – Enriching and Empowering all Learners to be Successful Global Citizens is the focal point of every decision we make for the School A Community. Through our work as a Professional Learning Community, we use formative assessments to tailor our instruction to meet the needs of our students. This allows us to address learning gaps along with enriching and extending others.

School A had been considered a school that was challenging to manage. Several neighborhoods that were served by School A were perceived as having a higher rate of unlawful behaviors. Parents were often considered more difficult to address.

School A	
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DATA	
Reading	31.7
Math	37.3
WELLNESS DATA	
Out of School Suspensions	11
In School Suspensions	4
Incidents of Bullying	4
Percentage of Teacher who felt safe at school	100
Percentage of Teachers who believed rules were enforced	86.6
Percentage of Parents whose students reported feeling safe at school	100
Percentage of Parents who believed school staff stopped or prevented bullying	87.5

Figure 4.1 School A Data

**School B Elementary School.** School B Elementary was a school of approximately 320 students. It was the smallest elementary of the three included in the study. The school served many Native American students. The school leader had just completed her second year at the school. School B Elementary served students in kindergarten through fifth grade. 2020-2021 state assessment results indicated the 46.3 percent of third through fifth grade students were proficient in reading and 48.8 percent were proficient in math.

School B's school report card stated the following:

School B Elementary School is helping all students develop the World Class Skills of the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate* by improving student achievement in math, literacy, science, social sciences and arts. Within our core instruction, our students learn critical thinking and communication skills by working in collaborative groups and pairs. Our educators allow student choice to creatively express their learning. Additionally, our instructional plans incorporate technology as a tool for research, use of applications, and presentations to

enhance learning. Our related arts programs allow our students to express themselves creatively through art, music, media and technology with all teachers working collaboratively together to make connections between their content areas. To meet our school improvement goals, we analyze MAP, SCReady, SCPASS, Fountas and Pinnell, and benchmark assessment data to make instructional decisions for our students. Reading and Writing workshop models, using Lucy Calkins units, were used to guide our literacy instruction. Math workshop provided structure for our math instruction. Hands-on inquiry-based science activities are at the core of our science instruction. Our teachers use multiple interventions to ensure that students reach mastery of their grade level standards, using data to guide them as they work with each student.

Unlike School A, the neighborhoods served at School B were located in rural areas. Due to the lack of resources in those areas, in particular on the Indian Reservation, there were many poor families and often young people involved in unproductive activities. The Reservation offered various forms of aid, however, many families failed to take advantage. Additionally, the majority of the student population at School B was Caucasian. The school principal is Caucasian and the assistant principal is African American.

<b>School B</b>	
<b>ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DATA</b>	
Reading	46.3
Math	48.8
<b>WELLNESS DATA</b>	
Out of School Suspensions	13
In School Suspensions	4
Incidents of Bullying	0
Percentage of Teacher who felt safe at school	100
Percentage of Teachers who believed rules were enforced	93.3
Percentage of Parents whose students reported feeling safe at school	90.5
Percentage of Parents who believed school staff stopped or prevented bullying	69.3

Figure 4.2 School B Data

**School C Elementary School.** School C Elementary School was the largest of the three schools, with 530 students. The student population was very diverse. While the school had received Title I federal funding for many years, the school lost the designation for the 2019–2020 school year. 2020-2021 state assessment results indicated the 45.7 percent of third through fifth grade students were proficient in reading and 43.8 percent were proficient in math. The school report card stated the following:

We strive to make the learning experiences at School C fun and engaging while holding everyone accountable for reaching his or her highest potential. During the 2018–2019 school year our students were able to experience a myriad of new and exciting learning opportunities. For example, a successful Publix Math Night was provided to engage families in real life application of math skills. Additionally, a week-long celebration of reading during Read Across America Week as well as STEM during our STEM Week provided students with opportunities to explore the world around them with hands on activities, speakers, parades and assemblies. To support student achievement,



we added Interventionists to our staff. Additionally, we invested in programs such as RAZ Kids, provided PD opportunities, such as Teach your Heart Out, Notice to Note, and Reading Recovery Training.

Students are offered many opportunities to hone their leadership skills. They are provided with clubs and organizations to participate in throughout the year. These clubs include Patriots Council, Beta Club, Girls on the Run, Let Me Run, Chess Club, Recycling Club and Safety Patrol. Additionally, students participated in competitive teams such as Battle of the Books, Vocabulary Bowl, and the Science Bowl.

School C has been described as a great ‘melting pot.’ School C served students in the county, several families of which were from the Indian Reservation. Families who lived in the city in many of the low income apartments were also zoned for School C. Finally, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the city was also served by School C. The school was very diverse. The principal was African American and the assistant principal was Caucasian. Both had previous experiences in elementary and middle school settings.

<b>School C</b>	
<b>ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DATA</b>	
Reading	45.7
Math	43.8
<b>WELLNESS DATA</b>	
Out of School Suspensions	0
In School Suspensions	5
Incidents of Bullying	0
Percentage of Teacher who felt safe at school	100
Percentage of Teachers who believed rules were enforced	81.4
Percentage of Parents whose students reported feeling safe at school	97.6
Percentage of Parents who believed school staff stopped or prevented bullying	75

Figure 4.3 School C Data

**Middle School A.** The feeder middle school for the elementary schools is Middle School A. With a population of 752 and staff of 55, this feeder middle school does not have a School of Choice theme as others in the district do, however, they have received various designations for their commitment to academic excellence, such as being named a Middle School to Watch. Their school's performance in math is same percentage of proficiency as that of the state of South Carolina. They are behind the state's average in Math. The principal's summation in the school report card provided additional details about the school's features.

At Castle Heights, we are striving to create, design, and collaborate in a safe and secure learning environment where all students and staff reach their highest potential. One way in which we strive to achieve this goal is using the Workshop model in Language Arts, Math and Science classrooms. This model assists our teachers in providing students with a quality mini lesson, followed by scaffolded independent work time, and then, ending with a time for reflection. Another way in which we are striving to help our students in reaching their highest potential is through accelerated programs such as Advanced Core classes in all grade levels, English I, Algebra I, Spanish I and Geometry. In addition, all students identified as Gifted and Talented are receiving specialized instruction in their Language Arts and Math classes.

Other areas in which we are working to help our students reach their highest potential is in their elective classes. In Careers and Technology course, students work together to sample a variety of jobs through projects. One such project is the

Knowledge Park Entrepreneurial Program where students create a business plan that will solve a real-world problem. They present their plan to business professionals in our city. Their presentation is judged on their business readiness, background research, customer need, competitive advantage and quality work.

Middle School A works well with the feeder elementary schools in an effort to assist with this middle school transition. Middle School A and School C are closer in proximity in comparison to the other two schools in the district referenced in this study. That proximity has supported the relationship with School C and the efforts that School C has put in place for fifth grade students.

Middle School A	
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DATA	
Reading	33.8
Math	30
WELLNESS DATA	
Out of School Suspensions	49
In School Suspensions	108
Incidents of Bullying	3
Percentage of Teacher who felt safe at school	100
Percentage of Teachers who believed rules were enforced	76.5
Percentage of Parents whose students reported feeling safe at school	80.95
Percentage of Parents who believed school staff stopped or prevented bullying	49.1

Figure 4.4 Middle School A Data

**School Staff Members.** In a 2015 article from the National Center for Biotechnology Information, researchers outlined what purposeful sampling is and its alignment with mixed-methods research and participant selection:

Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest.

Although there are several different purposeful sampling strategies, criterion sampling appears to be used most commonly in implementation research.

However, combining sampling strategies may be more appropriate to the aims of implementation research and more consistent with recent developments in quantitative methods. (p. 1)

Purposeful sampling was needed to glean the benefits and challenges of the academy approach from the perspective of those who experienced it firsthand. To further understand the impact of this transitional approach, various staff members from the feeder elementary schools and Middle School A were interviewed. These staff members included the school counselor, school principals and a grade-level administrator.

#### **4.5 Data Sources: Interviews**

School leaders from the middle school who worked directly with my students and the students from the other two elementary schools involved in the study were able to provide insight into their experiences with the students and the behavioral trends that they noticed. These school leaders have only had secondary experiences in their careers and have only worked for their current school district. Although their experiences are limited to this age group, it has allowed them to become well versed in the middle school concept and has provided them with extensive experiences, from teaching, coaching and leading, in the middle school setting. These experiences provide them with a perspective that is valuable to understanding middle school transitions. The middle school counselor could provide information on her observations and interactions with students. The counselor

supported students with a myriad of items, such as course selection, peer issues, loss, grief, and other matters that may affect a student's social and emotional wellbeing. They could provide insight through their perceptions of the confidence levels of students and their involvement in extracurricular activities. Finally, parental input was important in this work. Parents knew firsthand how their children's personalities evolved during this transition. They experienced in real time the social and emotional changes and frustrations that their students may not have been able to express in the school setting without consequence. Information gathered provided a more in-depth review of the academy and its effectiveness.

Parents were asked about their observations of their students' behavior once in middle school, such positive or negative changes in behavior, changes in mood, or noticeable shifts in their attitude toward authority. Staff members were asked about their observations of students in the school and classroom, such as whether they noticed leadership skills being demonstrated, whether organizational skills were present, or whether students were timely with assignments. Students were asked about their thoughts and feelings toward middle school. Questions regarding their preparedness for the academic rigor of middle school and the social aspects of middle school were presented. Importantly, questions focused on academy structure and its dimensions as well as the principal's contribution to the academy effectiveness. Due to COVID-19, interviews were conducted via email or written responses, and making my own observations was not possible. If participants preferred to be interviewed via Zoom, those accommodations were made. Prior to conducting interviews, I worked with District B's Chief Academic

Officer to complete the necessary documents to proceed with the research. Parent permission was also needed and acquired in writing.

The perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the academy were key in understanding whether the academy had value and merit. The input of teachers, school counselors, administrators, and students allowed the researcher to analyze the advantages and the disadvantages from varying points of view. The various perspectives will provide guidance for administrators in their future planning and preparation for fifth grade students. Additionally, the information will give parents sound advice from those who have experienced the transition with their children. Ultimately, recommendations for a smooth transition are offered to practitioners that will support the social emotional and academic needs of students as they matriculate to the middle school setting.

In order to begin research, approval from the Institutional Review Board was requested from the University of South Carolina. Once the research was approved, staff and parents of students were contacted via email and phone to gauge initial interest in participation. Four administrators (two middle school and two elementary), one middle school counselor, three students and two parents were interviewed. Once the participants gave consent, interviews were scheduled. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants to review for accuracy. Stakeholders, rational, and their descriptions are summarized below.

Table 4.1 Stakeholder Selection

Stakeholder	Rationale for selection	Description
Student A	Fifth Grade Student Leader at the Fifth Grade Academy- Honor roll student- Identified as Gifted and Talented	Student A is a tall, blonde Caucasian female who attended School C from kindergarten to fifth grade. She was an active student leader while attending school C. She also participated in leadership opportunities in the community. Student A is an extremely talented teen. She enjoys singing and performing in local stage plays. She has a positive circle of friends and a positive, confident disposition when interacting with peers and adults. She resides with both of her parents who own a local business and are active in the community.
Student B	Fifth Grade Student Leader at the Fifth Grade Academy- Honor roll student	Student B is a tall African American female who attended School C from kindergarten to fifth grade. She was an active student leader while attending school C. She also participated in leadership opportunities in the community. Student B stands out because she is athletically gifted. She could be observed playing football outside with only male students during recess and was observed as one of the better players. She resides in her home with both of her parents. She has a quiet disposition, but is not timid or shy.
Student C	Fifth Grade Student Leader at the Fifth Grade Academy- Honor roll student	Student C is an African American male who attended School C from kindergarten to fifth grade. He was an active student leader while attending school C. He also participated in leadership opportunities in the community. He has a fun personality. He easily made friends and was well liked by his peers. He enjoys sports and participated in community athletics through the local Parks and Recreation Center. He lives in a two parent household.
Counselor	Experienced Middle School Counselor at the Feeder Middle School	She is an African American female who has been a school counselor for over ten years. She has served in the elementary and middle school setting. She is a middle-aged mother of two young boys and is married to a school counselor. She has partnered with School C regularly in past years especially when she rotates to serving sixth grade students. She has a doctorate degree in counseling and is seen as a leader among the district counseling cohort.
Administrator A	Principal of the neighboring elementary school that feeds into the same middle school as Fifth Grade Academy students of School C. The school utilizes traditional self-contained model.	He is an African American male with mixed grey hair and glasses who is often seen in his school's polo shirt and khakis. He is a seasoned administrator and often leads with a nurturing fatherhood approach with his students. He is a husband and father of three children who matriculated through the schools of the district wherein he serves. He

Stakeholder	Rationale for selection	Description
Administrator B	Principal of the neighboring elementary school that feeds into the same middle school as Fifth Grade Academy students of School C. The school utilizes traditional self-contained model.	has worked in District B and one other district in the state of SC. He has middle and elementary school experience over his over 25 years. She is a middle aged, Caucasian female who is close to retirement, but demonstrates great energy and enthusiasm and desires to stay in the profession. She often shares updates about her children who are now married and having children. She is a proud grandmother. She worked as a middle school teacher, assistant principal, and principal the majority of her career. She transitioned to the elementary setting within the past five years.
Administrator C	Principal of Feeder Middle School	She is a middle aged, African American female who has served at the middle school as an assistant principal and principal. She is very committed to wellness and balance. She exercises regularly and encourages those in her circle to join her. The balance that she strives for is evident in her leadership. She typically has a very calm demeanor. She is not easily excitable, but handles matters with a clear head and is intentional and deliberate in her decision making. She has worked at the high school and middle school levels in the district.
Administrator D	Assistant Principal of Feeder Middle School	She is a tall middle aged, Caucasian female who has served as an assistant principal at two schools in the School District B. She has worked at the middle school level only. Prior to her career in administration, she served as a middle school math teacher. In recent years, she married and started a family. She is the mother of twin toddlers.
Parent A	Parent of two students who matriculated through School C from kindergarten to fifth grade under multiple administrations	She is a middle aged, African American female. She is an active member of the local community and she was an active parent while her children were students at School C. She grew up in the city and now works for the city. She has family members who serve on the local school board. She contributes service in the city through her sorority affiliation and her church.
Parent B	Parent of three students who matriculated through School C from kindergarten to fifth grade under multiple administrations	She is a middle aged, Caucasian female. She is an active member of the local community and she was an active parent while her children were students at School C. She was once employed by School District B. She left the district to support her husband's business. She is the mother of three children. While her children were students at School C, she served as a volunteer and would also serve as a substitute teacher as well.



### **Research Question1- Focus on Academics**

To capture the effectiveness of the Fifth Grade Academy, I examined MAP and attendance data were all used to measure the program's effectiveness. Using the Friedman test, I compared the MAP reading data of the 2019–2020 sixth-grade cohort from School C to the MAP reading data of their peers from School A and School B to determine if their academy experience enabled a smooth transition to support them academically. Reading data was specifically chosen as the students' literacy skills are the foundation for their success in other subject areas. Lockwood and Rockoff (2010) provided research on how significant declines in student achievement take place during this transition. A decline in their reading skills can lead to a decline in other content areas. To understand Math word problems and to comprehend Science and Social Studies concepts, reading is essential. The Friedman test, according to, is a “non-parametric hypothesis test [...] to test for differences between groups (three or more paired groups) when the dependent variable is at least ordinal. [The] Friedman test [is] to be preferred when compared to other non-parametric test[s] in a situation where [the] same parameter has been measured under different conditions on the same subject” (<https://statistics.laerd.com/spss-tutorials/friedman-test-using-spss-statistics.php>). Furthermore, the attendance rate of these students were explored, as absences can be indicative of a myriad of challenges and feelings that students experience during this transition.

#### **4.6 MAP Data**

MAP data were utilized to examine how the students performed after their transition from middle school. According to the NWEA website, MAP is “the most

trusted and innovative assessment for measuring achievement and growth in K–12 math, reading, language usage, and science. It provides teachers with accurate, and actionable evidence to help target instruction for each student or groups of students regardless of how far above or below they are from their grade level. It also connects to the largest set of instructional content providers, giving educators flexibility in curriculum choices” (<https://www.nwea.org/map-growth/>).

MAP was used district-wide for all students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Students in most grade levels took this assessment three times a year to allow educators to determine growth, plan small group interventions, and differentiate lesson plans. This school district also used MAP data results to place Academic Interventionists, who supported students working below grade level.

#### **4.7 Attendance Data**

Attendance was recorded daily in a system called PowerSchool. State law required that a school year include 180 days. Students were allowed up to 10 unexcused absences. When students had excessive absences, the district required that an attendance plan be created to develop strategies that would support the student and family in improving attendance. Assessment data were collected to determine how students who were members of the academy cohort performed in comparison to their peers who experienced a traditional fifth-grade elementary structure.

#### **4.8 Social Influence**

The data below show the average number of days absent for the students in the three cohorts during their first year of middle school. The district’s Research Specialist provided the following note regarding attendance data: “Absence counts include all

categories that prevented students from attending school, whether excused or unexcused. Absence types include: Bereavement/Death in Family, Excused Flu-Influenza, Medical, OSS, Parent Note, Religious, Unexcused Parent Note, Unexcused/Unverified.”

Table 4.2 Average Number of Absences for Face-to-Face Students by Elementary Feeder School

Elementary feeder school	Average number of days absent	Total # of students
School A	11	21
School B	14	32
School C	9	32
Grand total	11.3	85

Based on the data, the students in the cohort had a lower average number of days absent compared to the students in the other cohorts. Attendance data provided context on the effectiveness of the academy. The social-emotional learning provided in the academy was facilitated with the intent of supporting good decision-making skills and confidence in navigating the new experience. This aspect of the academy was reflected in the cohort’s behaviors and attitudes toward school. Recognizing that there are a variety of factors that can cause truancy concerns, the researcher believes that the data affirms that if students felt good about school and their new surroundings, they would be more likely to attend regularly.

#### 4.9 Data Analysis

Qualitative data gathered from the interviews was analyzed with a constant comparative method (Stough & Lee, 2001). More specifically, I transcribed interview data and utilized an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding processes (Stough & Lee, 2001). To begin, I utilized inductive processes with open coding, allowing the data to speak to me, and generated codes from common patterns in the interviews. I then

used deductive coding with codes from the literature on middle school structures and transitions, including social and academic success factors. Further, I used deductive coding from the literature on effective organizational structures, the role of leadership in school success (e.g. relationships, direction, professional development, instructional leadership), and middle school transitions. Previous studies on middle school transitions have included feedback from stakeholders, but few have been specific to a child's experience in transitioning from an academy structure in elementary school. In this study, parent, student, and selected staff responses were triangulated to determine if there were themes that supported the Fifth Grade Academy model as implemented at School C Elementary.

The MAP data allowed the researcher to make inferences regarding the impact of the academy on sixth-grade students' academic performance. It also provided insight on personnel decisions i.e. the strengths and weaknesses of those expected to teach and support students in their preparation for middle school. MAP growth, in particular, provided leadership with information on who was most effective in teaching content and those who may not yet have had the capacity or command of the standards.

The district's Research Specialist provided the following notes and charts for the purpose of the study:

The data below are based on 6<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled at [Middle School A] in Spring 2021. Data are reported for these students based on the elementary school they attended during the 2019–2020 school year. The data only include students who were attending school face-to-face at the end of the 2020–2021 school year.

Table 4.3 2021 NWEA MAP Reading Number and Percent of Face-to-Face Students by Elementary Feeder School and Typical Growth Status

Elementary feeder school	Yes		No		Total # of students
	% of students	# of students	% of students	# of students	
School A	47.62%	10	52.38%	11	21
School B	56.25%	18	43.75%	14	32
School C	34.38%	11	65.63%	21	32
Grand total	46.08%	39	53.92%	46	85

The preceding table provides data regarding the growth demonstrated by the fifth-grade cohorts at the conclusion of the seventh-grade school year. The percentage in the “yes” column demonstrated growth. The percentage in the “no” column did not. Students whose family opted for virtual learning were not included in the data. The chart shows that the students who were participants in the academy cohort demonstrated the least amount of growth during their seventh-grade school year.

Table 4.4 NWEA MAP Reading RIT Score for Face-to-Face Students by Elementary Feeder School

Elementary feeder school	Average spring 2021 RIT score	Total # of students
School A	218	21
School B	219	32
School C	214	32
Grand total	217	85

The preceding chart provides data regarding the RIT scores of the fifth-grade cohorts. According to the data, the academy participants had the lowest average RIT scores at the conclusion of their seventh-grade school year.

Table 4.5 Spring 2021 NWEA MAP Reading Number and Percent of Face-to-Face Students by Elementary Feeder School and Achievement Quintile

Elem. feeder	Low		Average		High		Total # of students
	% of students	# of students	% of students	# of students	% of students	# of students	
School A	9.52	2	19.05	4	23.81	5	
School B	9.38	3	34.38	11	15.63	5	
School C	15.63	5	18.75	6	6.25	2	

Table 4.5 indicates the percentage and number of students who fell into the low, average and high quintiles. These three categories were selected to narrow the focus. In comparison to the other two cohorts, a higher percentage of students from the academy cohort fell into the low quintiles. It is important to note that low-average and high-average are excluded from the table.

Based on the results of the spring 2021 reading MAP assessments, one data point of many, the data do not reflect the fact that an academy approach provides students with any academic advantages in the middle school setting. Students attending the feeder middle school from School A and School B outperformed academy students in growth and achievement. It is important to note that School C had many high-performing gifted and talented students who opted to attend a middle school that is part of the School of Choice program. School of Choice is similar to a district magnet program. One student in particular scored a perfect score on their state assessment as a fourth-grade student. The higher-performing students from the academy were not included in the data, as they did not opt to attend their traditional feeder school. The majority of the students from School A and School B attend the traditional feeder, largely due to location and school makeup.

#### 4.10 Summary of Results

The data provided are the spring scores for students at the conclusion of their seventh-grade school year. Due to the COVID-19 school closure and the altered schedule

for students in the fall of their seventh-grade year, the end of year data for their seventh-grade year was selected for the study. Based on the results, the students in the academy did not perform as well as those in the other two elementary cohorts. The academy students were well below the average number of students who demonstrated growth. The chart shows that School B had the highest percentage of students who demonstrated growth.

According to NWEA (2021),

MAP Growth uses a scale called RIT to measure student achievement and growth. RIT stands for **Rasch UnIT** and is a measurement scale developed to simplify the interpretation of test scores. It is an equal-interval scale, like feet and inches on a ruler, so scores can be added together to calculate accurate class or school averages. The RIT scale ranges from 100–350. RIT scores make it possible to follow a student’s educational growth from year to year. Again, the RIT score shows the academy students falling behind their peers from School A and B.

### **Research Question 2- Focus on Behavior**

The second research question—In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students’ behaviors in middle school?—has been addressed through interviews and the themes that emerged. However, the attendance records will be explored as well to see if truancy among the cohorts was a concern. In a National Association of Elementary School Principal’s article (2016), six causes were cited as top reasons for absenteeism: bad grades, bullying, illness, caring for family members, mental or emotional health issues, and difficulties with housing and food. Additionally, the information from the charts that provided

descriptions about each school. The wellness data speaks to the behaviors observed at the schools as well.

#### **4.11 Researcher Identity**

The researcher has been a public school educator for 20 years. She has earned degrees from Winthrop University, South Carolina State University, and the University of South Carolina. A cohort of participants is connected to the researcher, as they were fifth-grade students under her leadership. With a background in counseling and school leadership, the researcher is trained in best practices for communicating with participants and conducting such research. The researcher's experiences are not exclusive to leadership. Middle school classroom experience shaped the ethos of the researcher around the academy model. A parental perspective was also key. Parenting a struggling middle school student and ultimately removing him from one school because of the extreme pressure he encountered gave the researcher additional confirmation that well-thought-out transition plans are important. From urban, high poverty schools to suburban, affluent school communities, the dynamics of each provided context for understanding this age group and the structures necessary to support children in this transition, regardless of socioeconomics, race, or family structure. As an African American female public school administrator in the south, the researcher has experienced added pressure to perform and to perform well. It has been my experience that working in a large urban district (School District A), supervisors were most concerned about outcomes and results rather than the strategies implemented. Transitioning to a small, rural district, I found that was no longer the objective. Doing things the way they had always been done was



encouraged. New ideas were rarely accepted. I was able to facilitate transitioning activities with greater ease in my previous school district.

Embarking on this research generated a myriad of thoughts and emotions. As a school leader, the findings would either affirm the work that I have invested time and effort in for many years or determine that the work was counter to the objective. The process of collecting and analyzing data, allowed for a reflexive response and for the data to speak as the research instrument. The study also allowed me to build rapport with the study participants.

#### **4.12 Summary**

Chapter 4 provided an outline of the participants and data collected and analyzed and an explanation of their significance to the study. A mixed-methods research approach was used to answer the research questions provided in Chapter 2. More specifically, this chapter provided a description of the sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures that were used in the study. The objective of the work completed in Chapter 5 was to determine findings, including trends in qualitative data regarding the academy structure, related dimensions, and the role of the principal in the academy implementation and effectiveness. Chapter 5 provides the results of the research that has been described. A thorough analysis of the interviews with key stakeholders are provided to allow the reader to draw conclusions about the transitional strategies presented in the study. This work adds to the research on academies and will hopefully provide perspective on additional factors for school leaders to consider when seeking strategies and creating plans for implementing successful transition practices.

## **Chapter 5: Results of Study**

Chapter 5 provides the results of the study on middle school transitional practices.

The three questions explored were as follows:

1. How, if at all, does the structure (classes/subject areas, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' ability to perform well academically in middle school?
2. In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' behaviors in middle school?
3. How does the principal's leadership contribute to an effective middle school academy structure for academic and student behavior?

To answer these three questions, I used qualitative methods for research with interviews as a primary source of data. Further, I considered qualitative interview responses in relation to the descriptive data about student outcomes and absence rates for additional context. The interviews were conducted with representatives from the academy cohort and district administrators who worked with all three cohorts as middle school students and the principals of the other two elementary cohorts represented in the study.

### **5.1 Findings**

Drawing on the qualitative research conducted, there were several themes that emerged with regards to how the academy structure influenced student academics and behavior in their transitions to middle school as well as the leadership contribution to

these. Themes emerging from the contribution of the academy structure to student academics and behavior included organization influence, social influences, and academic influences. Moreover, qualitative findings highlighted the principal's leadership influence on the academy. Bolman and Deal's four frames provide a theoretical context for understanding these themes within the academy approach and the leadership contribution. The structural frame gives an underpinning for understanding the social structure and expectations for the academy. The human resource frame provides a lens for understanding the needs of the students in the academy, in particular as it relates to preparing them for being new in a middle school setting. The political frame provides background for understanding the leaders' role and impact on setting the course for success. The symbolic frame gives a foundation for understanding some of the tangible and intangible rituals that set the students apart and creates the culture for the organization.

## **5.2 Structural Influences**

### ***School A and B with Traditional Structures***

School A and B's fifth grade structures were traditional models that consisted of three classes (School B) or four classes (School A). Students were heterogeneously grouped into classes with the assistance of input from fourth grade teachers. The students were assigned to one of the four fifth grade teachers. The class remained with the assigned teacher for the entire school day with the exception of special area classes (music, art, physical education, media), special education instruction for identified students, gifted and talented instruction for identified students, and scheduled guidance lessons with the school counselor. Students were given opportunities to lead through

various clubs and organizations such as the Safety Patrol who assisted with car riders and hallway traffic in the schools and Student Council. Opportunities to serve the community were school-wide efforts. The fifth grade students were not set apart from the rest of the school in regards to location and special leadership opportunities. Teachers at both schools had a common planning time to focus on standards, assessment results, and observed challenging behaviors of students. While Administrator A did not amend the structure for the fifth grade at School A, he acknowledged the importance of the structural influence on students' transitions between classes, stating, "Having a middle school and elementary background, kids need a good transition coming from the fifth grade going to the sixth grade. The same way kids need a transition, I think, going from eighth grade to ninth grade, because those are big steps. When it comes to kids moving to middle school, as they leave the elementary setting, in many cases, they are with one teacher all day long, they're self-contained. When they get to the middle school, they then have, at a minimum, most kids have four teachers, but then when you include their electives, they have six teachers in one day. So that is a big adjustment for kids."

Likewise, Administrator B spoke to the structural influence when they stated, "I feel like, and I know we've had conversations at the elementary level since I've moved into elementary about having maybe departmentalized fifth grade teams to kind of get the kids accustomed, to having more than one teacher and moving. Because right now they just move like once a day to specials and that's about it. So I do think... I do know, it's a huge transition".

### ***School C with Academy Model Structure***

Counter to School A and School B wherein a self-contained classroom model and only social emotional learning and middle school preparation was limited to what was provided by the school counselor, the structure of the academy model in School C provided unique features that were designed to give students an introduction to middle school. There was an emphasis on organizational skills employed by having students rotate do different classrooms instead of remaining with one teacher for the entire school day. The rules that were implemented, such as not being allowed to return to classrooms if students left an item behind, were included to cultivate responsible behaviors. Leadership opportunities, afforded only to fifth grade students, further nurtured a sense of responsibility in students. They took ownership of various aspects of the school which supported the development of several leadership skills i.e. advocacy, public speaking, concern for the greater good. For example, students would daily provide the morning announcements to the student body over the intercom. Fifth grade students were often leading tours around the school for distinguished guests. Virtual and in-person assemblies were led by fifth graders, for example, they would welcome everyone and lead the Pledge of Allegiance and introduce guest speakers. Community service activities through the Beta Club and Student Council were initiated, advertised and executed by the students in the academy. This work had to be orchestrated with the guidance of the fifth-grade team and administrators. Therefore, the team regularly planned and coordinated lessons, field trips and on campus activities focused on leadership and cooperative learning. The leadership opportunities provided coupled with a strong social emotional curriculum

component, the level of confidence among the cohort increased. This confidence could easily be transferred to different settings and situations.

The students saw the benefit of the structures that were implemented. When asked about what helped prepare the students for the academic rigors of middle school, Student C responded by saying, “I think switching classes in 5th grade helped me understand what was going on when I first went to middle school. Also, the teachers tried to make me more independent which helped me understand my priorities.” Student A shared their thoughts on how they were able to thrive academically by sharing,

Studying with my sister and brother, taking my time with my work and being a part of academic groups, like Beta Club, in 5th grade helped. Changing classes and not being in class with the same teachers and students was a big help.

They went on to share structures initiated by the middle school that supported their transition:

Sixth Grade Orientation gave me a chance to see what the school was like. I also met some new people and got to catch up with old friends. I asked older neighborhood friends and family what it would be like. Knowing I had friends that would be there made me feel better.

The student responses indicate that structure provided by the academy approach through the class rotations as well as leadership opportunities through clubs and activities allowed them to be able to adjust to the expectations and structure of their middle school. This structure that Bolman and Deal (2017) refer to as rules, goals, environment, etc. offer an atmosphere wherein the students can thrive. The order precedes the learning. Additionally, the middle school’s efforts to introduce students to the physical

environment and daily schedule through an orientation session assisted in minimizing anxiety and worry in the students.

Similarly, staff members noted the importance of the structure to support students' development of organizational skills. To understand the attributes of those sixth-grade students who experienced minimal challenges transitioning to their new environment, middle school staff members offered their observations. Study participants shared in great detail how organizational skills are an essential attribute of sixth-grade students. When the middle school principal was interviewed, she stated the following concerning the need for organizational skills, particularly those related to time management:

I would say students with minimal challenges, organization would be one of the main concerns. Now juggling their resources for six different classes, and it may be minimal, but I'm trying to juggle their resources, their planning. When I have a project in this class, but then I have a test in this class, so how do I plan my time? So time management would be one of their challenges. And I would say academically those would be the major challenges.

I think because their time is so unstructured now that, "I'm getting behind in subjects," and then there's anxiety that comes with, "Oh, I have so much now to do; I don't do anything. I feel hopeless; I don't do anything." So even though I talked about time management before, I think a lot of it because there are more distractions and there's more accountability for you to do what you're supposed to do. Because their teacher may have four classes of ... Let's just say a math teacher has four classes of 25, so she sees 100 students that day. So she's going to check

in on you, and she's going to encourage you, and she can make parent phone calls, but she can't necessarily sit by you and say, "Okay, I'm going to sit by you, make sure you get that done."

The school counselor made similar observations. She stated:

Keeping up with work is a huge challenge for our sixth graders. Understanding the amount of work that sixth grade entails, understanding that every teacher gives assignments and all of those assignments are equally important. So a lot of our students have trouble keeping up with work, and they don't know what to do when they miss an assignment. So it becomes, "I missed that assignment, and I've missed these others, so now my grade is bad, so it doesn't matter what I do. I'm just not going to do anything else." So they dig a grave; they dig a hole that's really hard to get out of. And then when we talk to them about making up assignments, now you have eight assignments that need to be made up rather than one assignment because you've just kind of thrown your hands up, and you're having to try to make all of these things up at the end of the quarter, and then they're overwhelmed. So you wind up with kids who say, "Well, I'm overwhelmed. So I'm just not going to do any of it, and I'm going to take this 50."

As Bolman and Deal argue, leaders can approach organizational issues through the structural frame which provides a way to focus on strategy, setting goals, clarifying tasks, and creating systems and procedures in an environment. The establishment of a positive and supportive environment The structure of the Academy in School C provided a clear goal and the environment was established to give students a sense of what the



encounter in middle school from a structural (routines, rotations, organization, etc.) perspective.

### **5.3 Human Relations and Social Influence**

Findings from all three schools indicated the importance of students' and other school members' needs. Students who were in transition to middle school shared that how they felt about themselves colored their experiences. For example, a student's confidence and positive self-concept impacted how students navigated through all aspects of the academy and self-contained structures within the other two schools. Interviewees indicated a relationship between students' self-concepts and their confidence to advocate for themselves with teachers and even with their peers.

#### ***School A and School B***

Undoubtedly, the principals at School A and School B are concerned about the well-being of their students. They both talked at length about the importance of creating schools where all feel welcome. The intentionality with regards to how they execute plans to make stakeholders feel like they are a part of the school family may differ. For example, when you enter School B, the entrance is warm and inviting. You will see curb appeal and bright curtains and pictures upon entering. School A provides a warm feeling but is not as aesthetically appealing upon entering. This initial feeling translates to the relationships within the building. School B is slightly smaller than School A. The principal of School B emphasized the importance of "a welcoming school culture aligns with an emphasis on positive relationships among staff and students in School B. We incorporate special days like Wednesday Workout where staff members can wear workout gear. We periodically have food trucks visit the school or work with the PTA to

get special treats for the staff.” School A’s leadership is not as intentional about creating this type of atmosphere in the school with activities for staff and student cohesion.

Among the fifth-grade students in both schools A and B, their school counselors provided classroom guidance lessons focused on peer relationships and other human relations topics. The counselor lessons extend regular classroom teacher integration of social emotional learning (SEL) through literacy lessons. While students and parents reported that these lessons were beneficial, given their next transition, several parents and students shared that they needed “more support for dealing with the emotional challenges” and that “more social support would have been helpful” at this critical time. The human resource frame focuses on relationships. This feedback is indicative of the need for there to be a more concerted effort placed on establishing and maintaining positive relationships.

The principal of Middle School A shared perspectives on peer interactions and how they work to mitigate those social emotion, human challenges, stating,

When you get to middle school, it’s not just your one elementary school that’s feeding into that school. You may have four or five schools that feed into one middle school. So you’re going to run into people who you may have never known and who may try to lead you down the wrong path, or you’re going to run into some who will say, “No, that’s not the right thing to do. Let’s go study, and let’s do that.” So you want kids to follow that “let’s go study” path rather than on down that wrong path.

Middle schools make efforts to encourage comradery among their sixth graders so that they do not feel isolated. The principal from Middle School A shared,

Because we do teams and they work with four teachers, I think that helps them with that transition because they get to know things as a family. That first week of school, we spend time doing team-building activities and “get to know you” activities, so that way they get to kind of know their team and their family. And then of course, we [the grade level administrator] stay with these kids. So I’m with them sixth, seventh, and eighth, and

The elementary feeder principal of School B shared her conversation with a fifth grader:

It’s a huge transition. I was just having a conversation with one of our fifth graders the other day who was not on his best behavior, and I said, “When you get to middle school, regardless of which one you go to, you’re going to be mixing in with a lot of other children from a lot of other elementary schools. You’ve been with the same kids here at [School B] since kindergarten, but now you’re going to be meeting some new friends. This conversation further underscores how many rising fifth-grade students are challenged by the experience of being thrust in a new school with new, unfamiliar faces. In the next section, I present findings from School C with the Academy.

### ***School with Academy C***

In School C with the Academy , a student shared how they were able to develop self-advocacy skills. Her experience demonstrates how the skills honed in the Academy are transferable to a variety of situations. They are further developed oftentimes in other extracurricular activities. She said,

Attending church, sorority, and fraternity events like: Back to School & Clothing Giveaways, singing carols and playing games with nursing home residents helped me to spend time with different age students and adults that I would not see every day at my school.

Staff members also observed how students who possess these skills of self-efficacy and self-advocacy are able to better manage the rigors of middle school during their transitional year of sixth grade. These skills are developed in a variety of ways. For some, the confidence comes from the experiences shared with them from those around them.

The students who have trusted adults or relatives who have familiarity with the new environment can hear and see the realities of middle school firsthand and discern what the myths or untruths are. While everyone's experience is different, they can enter the new environment knowing that either their siblings went through the same experience and survived and thus they can too or they are equipped with knowledge and tools that those with firsthand experience have provided to make them feel confident in their new surroundings. Additionally, the Social-Emotional Learning curriculum through the Leader in Me program encouraged students to find their voices, which supported the importance of advocacy.

One way the academy tried to build the confidence of the students was through the opportunity to rotate from one class to another and learn how to adapt to different teachers, requirements, personalities, etc. I quote a parent of multiple academy students at length as shared perspectives on different students as they experienced the Academy,

So with my oldest, he had the true model, his entire fifth-grade year where he transitioned to science, social studies, English, or math, all in different classrooms. And I would say definitely, he had the easiest time of all of them transitioning to middle school, just because he was already used to that, different teachers. I believe they traveled with the same friends at that point. So the friend group didn't change in middle school, but he certainly was more used to having all his stuff going with him and dealing with the different personalities of teachers. And he actually liked that when that was a change for him in fifth grade and then was used to it by sixth grade. So that transition was minimal for him.

I think with my oldest daughter, you had that part of the year and then part of the year didn't. So I think her biggest challenges in the transition were technology challenges and the need to just really work more independently as a middle schooler and to have assignments on that platform that probably weren't expressed explicitly to start with. So that was a big challenge for her academically. I think socio-emotionally, I think my kids were prepared because they're social kids to go to middle school, but I do think A.D. having the Leader in Me leadership emphasis this last few years of elementary school really helped her confidence going to middle school. And this is not a great, great story, but it's a story I tell often about her transition. So the very first day of middle school in the classroom, they were lining up for something, and a little girl just kind of pushed her out of line and kicked her, and A.D. turned around and kicked her back.

She continued and connected the academy practices of team building, leadership development, and a strong SEL curriculum to human relations and socio-emotional health.

Okay. So normally, that would not be okay and I would not be happy about that, but the first day of middle school, she had the confidence to stand up for herself and to establish her character of, you're not going to mess with me. Even though she didn't necessarily take care of that in the most appropriate way, she took care of it in a middle school way that didn't cause a huge problem for anybody. I told her, "You know what, I'm proud of you."

I do think the confidence that leadership instilled in her in that fifth-grade, fourth-grade year, I think that helped her to transition to middle school and to make new friends and to know what she's doing in the classroom and to speak to her teachers. And I can actually go down to A.V., who got more of that Leader in Me, instilled in her in elementary school, and she is emailing her teachers and emailing her guidance counselor when she ... So story about A.V., she was going to take strings this year. She got in the strings classroom, and she realized that that didn't mean guitar. And so she was assigned the viola and decided she was not playing the Viola. And so I said, "Well, I'm not changing your class for you." And she said, "Well, then I'm going to email my guidance counselor and ask her if I can change classes." And so she did. And the next day the guidance counselor calls me. And she's like, "I got an email from your account, but it says from A.V." And I'm like, "Yes, ma'am." And I told her, "This is A.V.'s desire. And so I need you to work this out with A.V. Whatever you guys decide is fine with me."

So, doggonit, if she wasn't in chorus by the next day ... But to me, I think learning that communication piece, learning to advocate for herself, I think that has translated to middle school in a great way.

The Leader in Me's eighth habit is Find Your Voice. When giving students an understanding of this habit, teachers emphasize the importance of self advocacy. They provide a model for students and help them understand how this skill of using their voice has impact in their lives and the lives of those around them.

Other parents in Academy C shared similar experiences with observing changes in their child's confidence as a result of academy processes like Leader in Me. For example, from one parent's comments, the confidence that she observed in her children was nurtured through leadership opportunities supported by the Social-Emotional Learning curriculum employed at the elementary school and through the opportunity for students to change classes. While she acknowledged that there were challenges, overall, she indicated that her children experienced minimal challenges with this transition due to the structures that the academy had in place.

More pronounced in the student responses was an emphasis on friends and peer support. The adults interviewed shared the topic of friendships as a concern. Among the students interviewed, friendship was elevated to the most concerning element of their middle school transition. Student responses indicated that this was an area that caused great angst and concern. The issue of peer relationships is not unique to those in the Academy. Student responses affirmed this. For example, one student reported,

Honestly, I was not really prepared for the social aspect of middle school. I thought I would be friends with everyone. But that is not what happened. The

only reason I had any friends is because I went to elementary school with a few people that went to the same school now. I was not ready for the mean words, gossiping, and random people talking about you.”

The student went on to emphasize the concerns with peers, saying, “Finding kind friends was a real struggle. All the new people I encountered made it hard to find good friends. Most of the people I became friends with were bad examples and talked bad about everyone behind their backs.” Another student shared, “Making new friends from different schools was a little hard at first. Being at home for a long time and not being able to do sports because of COVID was hard.”

The experiences of these students emphasized the influence of friends during this transition. While the students were able to maintain friendships with peers from their cohort, there was added stress from the now larger and more diverse class of sixth grade students. The struggle was with making friends with peers who were likeminded and who had similar interests and behavior patterns. It is a conflict between what they have known and grown comfortable with over the course of six years to now being immersed into an environment with peers who in many cases are counter to what they have known and what they represent.

The Covid 19 situation added to this stressor of friendships with the shutdown of schools; students lost their connectivity with their peer support. They transitioned from daily interactions with classmates to being isolated and relying on virtual means in order to connect. The shutdown limited their ability to participate in spring sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities that provided outlets and opportunities for them to experience middle school outside of the classroom. At the same time, the structure and



activities to develop relationships among peers in the online setting “helped to sustain the support for students to thrive with peer interactions.”

The middle school counselor gave her observations of students who thrive with peer interactions, stating,

They were not, I would say, “popular” kids. But they were confident enough to choose friends who matched the qualities that they felt were important to them, and they just kind of stuck with that group of friends. They remained the people that they were, didn’t feel that they had to change a whole lot about themselves to fit in with other people. They found the group of people that they fit in with rather than changing themselves to fit in with someone else. This kind of support and interaction continued to some degree in the online setting.

The counselor also noted the ways in which peer support for transition varied according to gender which could provide implications for exploring the Academy from the lens of the experiences of male students versus female students and the impact on their relationships with others. As she put it,

I can more readily think of groups of girls who have transitioned successfully than boys. We do have some boys who have those qualities and are able to make that smooth transition, but even a lot of those boys who come in with those qualities kind of wind up having hiccups along the way. And most of it is social, trying to figure out who they are, trying to fit in with people. And so they’ll kind of do things that are out of their character occasionally. Or they lose that value of education, of understanding that, “This is my responsibility, and this is important. So I still need to be focused.” They kind of start focusing on other things. So we

do have some males who kind of stay the path, but it is more so girls who come in ready and kind of remain that way throughout their middle school career.

As aforementioned, while peer issues are not unique, the strategies to mitigate the concerns are unique to the Academy. The Leader in Me curriculum supported students in building their confidence in approaching new relationships. Also unique to the Academy were the beginning of year activities and those throughout the year to encourage team building and cooperative learning. Trips to Camp Thunderbird wherein students engaged in physical activities that required them to talk to each other and compromise lead to students' building communication skills and confidence in working in unfamiliar circumstances with diverse students.

The school counselor also noted what successful sixth graders possess across gender differences: confidence. Students who have this attribute are able to successfully manage the stressors of middle school. They tend not to be consumed with the many distractions that come with middle school but are more focused on what matters. They were comfortable with who they are and were observed not being occupied with making new friends or change into some who they were not.

Another middle school administrator from Middle School A shared their perspective on how they encourage a sense of belonging:

As well as with the teaming, we do team-building activities with them. Once again, I have to do a little disclaimer for COVID because we didn't do anything last year, but [we] try to do as many teaming things to get them that sense of belonging in the sixth grade because once again, I don't want anybody to feel like they don't belong here or this isn't for them. So we want everybody to feel like

this is their school. You may not like everything about school, but this is your school and finding where you fit in the building. Sixth graders don't do competitive sports, and that's a High School League rule, but making sure that we have times where they can do a volleyball team or a kickball team because I know that competition, that teaming is real important for them.

And so, anything that I can do to promote that sense of belongingness, that's what I want them to feel, this is their school. So if this is your school, you're not going to mess up the bathrooms, you're not going to ... Because we have our custodians, you don't want to give them more work. We're in the cafeteria, you make sure you're cleaning up well. So instilling that sense of, "This is your school and everybody belongs, everybody has their place here."

Parents talked at length about the social emotional effect of middle school on their children. The impact of peer issues and feeling disconnected can be observed by parents outside of the classroom as these concerns effect the student's disposition and mood in many cases. One parent's thoughts on how middle schools can support a sense of belonging among sixth graders included the following:

I think that middle school has to remember that these are still young kids. I mean, they're 11, 12, 13-year-olds, and that fun is still important. And so to them, a spirit week is just so exciting. For them, going out to plant the garden is the highlight of their day. And that social time in middle school is so important to socio-emotional development. And yes, sometimes middle schoolers are crazy and bad and make bad choices, but that walking them through those decisions and walking them to appropriate activities and appropriate actions and appropriate

words is so much more powerful than punishment at that age. And so I know PBIS has been a big thing at Middle School B and in a lot of ways can be ineffective, but I think providing those opportunities and providing buffers for them to act appropriately and to still be kids is so important to them.

I mean, in my opinion, high school kids are still kids. They're not 18 until they're seniors. And they want to play. They want to be outside, and they want to move. And when we expect them to sit in the classroom room and be bored with what they're doing, they're not going to learn.

The sense of belonging, regardless of a student's level of confidence, can make the difference in whether a student has a smooth transition or one that is uncomfortable and stressful. Even adults in new situations or organizations can feel disconnected and devalued if they do not believe that they are a part of the group. The team building exercises employed and the teaming philosophy can support these separate cohorts' ability to have a sense of unity and connectedness. This connection allows students to see their similarities, despite their differences and coming from different schools and communities. Pride in the school and the comradery that is developed provides the students with the sense of belonging that supports positive feelings about their school and themselves.

The school counselor was able to summarize how important this transitional period is and why school leaders must give it careful consideration when planning for the future:

I do think it's one of the more important transitions that students can make because it's so different socially, it's so different academically, and the

expectations have changed so much. I think it's important to provide students with the skills to be successful in middle school and to support that transition in elementary school, and when they've arrived in the middle school setting to put supports in place for them so that they have the opportunities to be successful. It's a difficult year. Middle school is a difficult time, and I think that we build students. We build people in middle school, the people who are going to be the pillars of our community are built in middle school. It definitely starts in elementary school, but they make so many vital decisions in middle school about what path they're going to take and who they're going to be. So it's a really important time, and anything that we can do to support them and help them to be successful and help them to get on a positive path.

The school counselor's perspective gives credence to why it is imperative to provide tools for young people to thrive during their middle school experience. As she stated, they make so many important decisions during this critical time. They need support and guidance that will allow them to get on and remain on the positive path that she referenced. Summer opportunities referenced that the school district once regularly sponsored, social emotional learning curriculum, teaming approach for middle school, intentional planning for the middle school orientations and school visits, coupled with the preparation in fifth grade with academy concepts all provide a foundation for students to be able to be successful sixth grade students. These structures are as important as the students' ability to have access to peer support and positive connections with their classmates. This aids in the ability for a student to feel that they are valued and cared for

in their new environment- a factor that is important to students at this stage in their development.

The words of the students, staff and parents indicate how extremely important the human relations aspect of middle school is important. How they feel about themselves and how they interact with their peers and the adults around them will oft times determine how they perform academically. Providing students with the tools to be able to advocate for themselves as well as providing them with opportunities to build their confidence through a myriad of leadership opportunities allows students to develop a positive mindset towards their school experience. Their self-efficacy is developed through these opportunities. Carey & Forsyth (2009, p. 1) explored the concept of self-efficacy and defined it as follows, “an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments” (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behavior, and social environment. These cognitive self-evaluations influence all manner of human experience, including the goals for which people strive, the amount of energy expended toward goal achievement, and likelihood of attaining particular levels of behavioral performance. Unlike traditional psychological constructs, self-efficacy beliefs are hypothesized to vary depending on the domain of functioning and circumstances surrounding the occurrence of behavior.

Bolman and Deal’s (1979) human resource frame explains the needs of those who make up the organization. High priority is given to the needs of the team and making certain that they feel empowered to perform their job tasks well. While this frame is applicable to the staff members involved in the academy, it is equally appropriate to point

out how the students' needs were considered and were the catalyst for the academy. A central theme in the human resource frame is human needs. "Needs are a central element in everyday psychology. Parents worry about the needs of their children, politicians promise to meet the needs of constituents, and managers make an effort to understand the needs of workers (p.122)." In the establishment of the academy and in the self-contained transition work in the other schools, it was imperative to determine the essential needs of the students to determine outcomes and to determine the support and resources needed for staff members in order to successfully reach those outcomes.

Focusing on teaching self-advocacy skills to children with learning disabilities, Land and Duquette (2014, p. 1) described self-advocacy by saying, Although self-advocacy is a related term and is often used interchangeably with self-determination (Field, 1996); it is generally considered to be a key component of self-determination (Mishna et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Berkoben, 1991). Self-advocacy is defined by Kotzer and Margalit (2007) as the ability to speak on one's behalf and represent personal needs and interests. It involves understanding one's learning strengths and developing the ability to communicate learning needs and required accommodations (Merchant & Gajar, 1997). According to Mishna et al. (2011), self-advocacy is especially important for students with LDs, and is necessary to achieve maturity, confidence, and a sense of identity (Phillips, 2001).

As many interviewees commented, academy practices like the Leader and Me helped students build confidence, and confidence helped them build relationships and accomplish academic tasks. Providing students with the necessary tools and allowing

them to hone the skills through varied experiences supported their ability to make connections with others- a skill that would help them in middle school and beyond.

#### **5.4 Political**

Bolman and Deal (1979) discuss political skills that leaders who are politicians have. They are agenda setting, mapping the political terrain, networking, and forming coalitions and bargaining and negotiating. While there is not an overwhelming political component involved in the academy and implementation of transitional practices, it is present. To provide a clear objective and path forward for the academy, agenda setting was critically important. Given the audience of classroom teachers and parents who would be directly impacted by the changes, it was important for them to understand the purpose for the changes, the goals, and the strategies in order to experience any level of support and success with the academy. Laying the groundwork by setting and clearly communicating the agenda allowed everyone to move forward with clarity of purpose and expectations.

#### ***School A and School B***

Both School A and School B's principals were middle school administrators. School A's principal was a middle school assistant principal at Middle School A and School B's principal was the principal of another middle school in the district. With both having extensive experience in the middle school setting, they were both clear on what sixth grade students experienced during the transition, some of their challenges and the many myths that they would often have to dispel. However, neither school outlined an agenda for middle school transition for fifth grade students. They both shared strategies employed in past years at the middle school that the district would require of middle



school staffs, but as elementary principals, they continued to subscribe to what the school had always established as their model- self-contained classes all day and all year. So while they were in a position, based on their previous experience in middle school, to politically set their agenda and give the facts for changing the structure, they believed it was best to keep the structure the same.

***School C with Academy Model.***

A parent was able to experience both elementary and middle school with leadership that effectively provided clear goals, objectives, and follow through and leadership that unfortunately was not able to do so. She speaks to how the level of intentionality in addressing the goals and objectives and the level of commitment to the process is significant in this work.

Well, we had different principals at the middle school at this point, but speaking of the fabulous principal of School C, when my daughter transitioned to middle school, the principal actually came over there and visited with her and a friend, and there was some difficulty going on at that point with some friends and some things there. So I think my daughter, knowing that the principal was still there as a mentor, even if she didn't access it, when she could have, just knowing that the principal didn't just leave her and push her on and be finished with her, just knowing that the principal actually cared about her was impactful for her.

Essentially, the political aspects of organizational change occurred in School C. In School A and School B, the principals dedicated their efforts to maintaining the traditional model that was already established.

## **5.5 Symbolic**

“Symbols take many forms in organization. Myth, vision, and values imbue an organization with purpose and resolve. Heroes and heroines, through words and deeds, serve as living logos. Fairy talks and stories tender explanations, reconcile contradictions and resolve dilemmas. Rituals and ceremonies offer direction, faith, and hope (Bolman & Deal, 1979, p. 254).

### ***School A and School B***

School A and School B both have mascots and mottos. This is common among all of the elementary schools in the district. For the fifth grade classes at both schools based on interviews with their school’s leadership, there was not a concerted effort to provide any special symbols or special greetings or sayings to unite the group of fifth graders. What was the norm in previous grades was the continued norm in the fifth grade.

### ***School C***

The academy did not have one specific symbol for the academy, however, there were various opportunities and ideals that set them apart. The fifth-grade students are located in their own wing. The “College Corner”, which consisted of pennants and special seating for the fifth graders was created for the academy. It was painted in school colors by the teachers. A beginning of the year team building field trip was planned for students to build a sense of community. End of year activities, such as an overnight trip to Atlanta, Georgia or Washington, DC was planned for the academy as well. Leadership opportunities, such as the executive board of the Student Council, Safety Patrol, and the Morning News Crew were all reserved for fifth grade students only.

Administrator C shared how symbolism drives a sense of belonging in the middle school setting. In her words,

So there were some things that, of course we couldn't put in place (due to Covid), but one of the things that we want to instill in our sixth graders is that team concept. And so they have that need to belong. So our teams have names. The teachers actually choose the names for the students, so it's not a student choice type of thing, but the names have a meaning. For example, if they are Falcons, or they could be Dragons, or they could be whatever the team, they're characteristics that come behind that. So they have that team name, that team identity. Dragons don't behave like this, these are the characteristics. Now in putting that in place, also we have our armor. Armor is our PBIS code of conduct as far as our citizenship. So we're always instilling knight pride.

In a like manner, the academy, being set apart from the other grade levels, had activities and rituals that students knew were reserved for academy participants. These special privileges created a similar sense of belonging among the students.

## **5.6 Leadership Contribution to the Academy and Middle School Transitions**

The vision and example set by the principal provides direction and focus for the work of the organization. Responses from all participant groups gave insight regarding leadership contributions to the academy. One parent spoke of Parents, staff, and students seemed to appreciate the structures and programs that the leadership in the academy provided. As one parent noted, “various experiences that were provided to their children equipped them with attributes and characteristics that would allow them to complete middle school successfully”. Further, all participant groups stated that the principal’s

recognition of students' social and emotional needs at a critical time made a huge difference in the transition. One student in School B put it well when she indicated that the principal "sees me for who I am and helps me make it through times when I feel afraid and question myself." In School A, the comments focused more on the counselor's leadership for social and emotional learning.

As previously mentioned, the elementary principals interviewed have previous middle school experience. It was clear that they understood what was required of sixth-grade students; however, they believed that it was best to lead their elementary schools in a traditional fashion. They acknowledged that they had considered providing their fifth-grade cohort with the opportunity to change classes but chose not to do so. At the same time, the principals looked at the middle school transition through a structural frame, considering the importance of helping students change classes and organize their own time between classes.

#### ***Administrator A***

The level of responsibility and expectations for middle school preparation is subjective, as it is not clearly defined. The principal of School A stated the following:

Well, my role should have been number one, just being that positive role model.

Number two, telling them what to expect in middle school. Because having been in middle school for six years, although it may have been 10 years ago, 10 plus years ago, still that experience in middle school is still useful to today's fifth graders going into middle school. Just tell them about the pitfalls that might happen if you fall in with the wrong crew because that can happen.

***Administrator B***

The principal of School B highlighted pre-COVID activities that they implemented along with their staff and their recollection of middle school transition in the secondary setting:

One of the greatest things that we did, I feel like, in this district was that transition day. Now, that just wasn't but a day, but it was still something where the students got to come a day early, the rising sixth graders. They had the whole building to themselves and then they got out like a day early at Thanksgiving. I think we gave them that day back, but they got to come in and spend the whole day and run a whole day schedule with just themselves in the building. And what we used to do too prior to a lot of this, and that's basically when we just had a couple of feeder schools. I think it was School D and maybe one other and they would come over and spend the day. We would have, I don't even know what we called it back then, but it was in a day where they would come in and kind of spend the day touring the school, eating in the cafeteria. We kind [of] had them on separate schedule. Of course yeah, they would go back a little bit early because their hours were different, but just kind of getting them over into the building, meeting the teachers and seeing how things go. That was something that we did as well.

She also emphasized the importance of structure in activities like departmentalized teacher teams. The practice resembles the middle school setting and thus, she could see the value in considering the same structure in elementary schools.

I feel like, and I know we've had conversations at the elementary level since I've moved into elementary about having maybe departmentalized fifth-grade teams to

kind of get the kids accustomed to having more than one teacher and moving. Because right now they just move like once a day to specials, and that's about it. But so I do think ... I do know, like you spoke to, it's a huge transition. I was just having a conversation with one of our fifth graders the other day who was not on his best behavior, and I said, "When you get to middle school, regardless of which one you go to, you're going to be mixing in with a lot of other children from a lot of other elementary schools. You've been with the same kids here at [School B] since kindergarten, but now you're going to be meeting some new friends." And so I think it's a tough transition, and I don't have the best answer for how to make it easier for the kids other than to at least take away the fear of this big, huge new building and lockers.

Further, the principal talked about the importance of meeting student needs in terms of social and emotional issues in relation to academic concerns. In her words,

I remember the rising sixth graders were always so afraid of lockers, and they'd heard all these horror stories about getting stuffed in a locker and being late to class and getting lost. And I think a big key for that is with your sixth-grade teachers, and I know ours did at [Middle School B] for the most part, they still kind of had that elementary mindset and having a little bit of patience and grace with them. And as a gradual release of responsibility, just don't throw them into the fire. They kind of, for lack of a better word, baby them along the way initially.

While both Administrator A and B had similar professional experiences in the elementary and middle school setting, what they communicated regarding their approach to this transition was different. Administrator B reflected and saw the value in some of

the experiences that the district and school provided in the past. In her responses, she frequently identified concrete ideas and plans that she knew to be effective from her previous work. Administrator A identified the importance of a more personal approach. Administrator A saw the elementary principal's role in preparing students for middle school as a priority for leadership.

My son had some transition in principals. So he didn't have that similar feeling because he had principals that left and came and whatever, but the principal of School C supporting my daughter was pivotal for her, I think. As far as going to middle school, we have never really had a middle school principal who was hands-on with any of our kids in middle school. And so I know it's hard at a much larger student body, but I think the support from the principal level at our middle school is very much lacking.

Across these comments, the principals and others in the school recognized that the principals' backgrounds and practices to support a middle school transition made a difference for students. In the case of the Academy, the structure, human relations, symbols and support contributed to the success of the model. Staff, parents, and, to some degree, students recognized the role of the principal as an advocate and a leader of a welcoming school culture where students felt part of the community. The principal in School C with the academy was credited with a full range of leadership support for the model, including the structural supports, social emotional supports, curriculum and instruction specific to the transition, and the overall welcoming environment.

## 5.7 Summary

Chapter 5 provided the results of the research conducted through interviews. An analysis of the data relevant to the research questions is also explained in detail. Eight adults and three minor students participated in this study. The questions posed were developed and presented in an effort to understand if an academy approach in elementary schools had impact. The adult participants had only had experience with the same school district their entire careers as educators or parents; the children of the parents interviewed had only attended school in the same district. Three research questions were explored through the interviews and MAP data:

1. How, if at all, does the structure (classes/subject areas, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' ability to perform well academically in middle school?
2. In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' behaviors in middle school?
3. How does the principal's leadership contribute to an effective middle school academy structure for academic and student behavior?

In previous chapters, the structure of the academy has been described in detail, including class changes, multiple teachers teaching content, and social-emotional learning. Interviews with parents, staff members, and students indicated that there were social benefits to the structure of the academy that allowed students to acclimate to their new environment. Students explained how the class changes assisted them in their transition. Staff members also commented on how this provided their students with a



level of confidence as new students adjusting to a very different school structure. The middle school staff believe that the social-emotional learning provided at School C makes a difference and desire to expand their program and align it with the curriculum that is in place at School C. Other behaviors administrators referenced were related to immaturity, social media/devices, peer interactions, and organizational skills that are often lacking among sixth-grade students. Peer interactions surfaced as the most problematic behavioral concern among the students interviewed.

The overarching challenges and themes that emerged through interviews and the coding process included organizational influences and social influences. Bolman and Deal's structure and human resources frames are aligned with the organizational influences as they capture the social structure of the organization, such as the rules and expectations for the students, as well as the basic human needs of the students, such as feeling accepted by their peers, in the new environment.

### **5.8 Organizational Influences**

Parents and staff members observed students being overwhelmed by fewer adult parameters, more freedom, and greater expectations. The delay in completing quality assignments affects final grades and attitudes towards school. The changing of classes, multiple teacher assignments, and vertical articulation with middle school staff members allow School C to provide lessons and opportunities for fifth graders to further develop this skill in preparation for sixth grade.

Parents and staff members shared how students who are able to adjust to multiple teacher personalities and those who feel confident advocating for themselves by asking questions when they are unclear on assignments or expectations have a greater likelihood

of thriving in middle school. These skills are nurtured in School C through the social-emotional curriculum the school community adopted.

### **5.9 Social Influence**

Friendships and the social aspect of the middle school are areas of great concern that impact the middle school transition and overall middle school experience. Going to school with the same group of children for six years then being introduced to two unfamiliar groups of students can be challenging for children who have more or less lived in their elementary “bubbles.” This became a greater challenge with the shutdown of schools during the spring of 2021.

All themes feature interrelated influences of academic, social, organizational, and leadership on student transitions to middle school. At any stage of development, but in particular at this critical stage, it is imperative for school leaders to consider the needs of the whole child. Ignoring any of these influences would neglect some key component that could lead to an optimal level of success for the student. Therefore, all four should be intentionally considered when approaching the transition to middle school. In the next section, I provide a summary, discussion of the findings in relation to the literature, implications and conclusions.

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

Recognizing the importance of the middle school transition with multiple influences (academic, social, organizational, and leadership), this study provides insight on the perspectives of students, parents and staff members who are a part of this process as they connect to Bolman and Deal’s (1979) four frames: structure, human resource, political, and symbolic . The purpose of this study was to determine if an academy

approach had impact on sixth-grade students in their transition to middle school. The three primary research questions were:

1. How, if at all, does the structure (classes/subject areas, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' ability to perform well academically in middle school?
2. In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' behaviors in middle school?
3. How does the principal's leadership contribute to an effective middle school academy structure for academic and student behavior?

Research question 1 provided clarity around the Fifth Grade Academy structure and related dimensions that were used within the district feeder pattern selected. The social emotional learning curriculum (The Leader in Me), the leadership component infused within the model, the structure for class change that resembled the feeder middle school, were all examined to determine, from multiple perspectives, how the academy structure and related dimensions contributed to effective student transitions in the academy and effectiveness in relation to their academic performance in middle school. More specifically, the various roles and responsibilities within the school afforded to fifth graders coupled with the expectations that paralleled the middle school's routines were the main foci. Research question 2 reviewed the same factors, however, the focus was on student behavior and social interactions. Research question 3 focused primarily on the leadership of the school and how the principal's vision for this group of students' success influences this transition.

### **5.11 Summary of Main Points / Findings**

This study was conducted to examine how, if at all, the academy structure and related elements (e.g., academic, human relations, social) and leadership in a Fifth Grade Academy supported students in having a smooth transition to their new environment as sixth grade students in a middle school. The literature review focused on the developmental, physical, and social changes that students encounter during this time in their lives and the traditional profile of the middle school student as well as a framework of organizational change related to the academy and leadership influence on the organizational change. Clarity was provided around the traditional fifth grade experience in comparison to an academy approach that included students having more than one classroom teacher, emphasis on social emotional learning, and various experiences that would allow them to experience a similar structure to the traditional middle school day. Additionally, an historical perspective was given to allow the reader to understand the middle school concept's foundation and those who developed middle schools into what they have become today. Other areas addressed were the perspectives of teachers, the timing of the transition, and how well different groups such as gifted students and students with disabilities are able to adjust to their new normal. In the following sections, I examine the main findings for each research question in relation to the extant literature reviewed in Chapter 3 and present implications for future research and practice.

The qualitative data collected indicated that the structure provided by the academy served as an asset to those transitioning to middle school. The expectations and rules for organization along with the leadership opportunities and social emotional learning emphasis served the Academy students well as they moved into their new

environment. The social aspect of the middle school, i.e. peer interactions and making new friends, was highlighted as an area of difficulty based on feedback from students and the middle school staff. However, this challenge would have been compounded if the elements aforementioned, such as leadership opportunities and team building activities that supported their opportunities to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds, had not been part of their Academy experience.

While this is not a mixed methods or qualitative study, there are some academic data points that provided another lens for understanding the impact, significant or minimal, of an academy approach prior to middle school. Based on the MAP data reviewed, the students who were not members of the elementary feeder school that employed an academy approach performed better than the students who were members of the academy. Data revealed that the reading scores of the academy students from the end of their year during their second year in middle school were lower than their peers. Due to COVID-19, data from their sixth-grade year was not available. In March of 2020, in person learning shifted to virtual learning because of the global pandemic. Most assessments given to students for the remainder of the school year were local summative assessments through a district purchased platform, Mastery Connect. Due to the inability to provide an appropriate testing environment, district and state testing was halted. The following serve as possible explanations for the findings related to research question 1:

The data from MAP assessments could have reflected poorly on the Academy cohort for several reasons. One overarching reason is the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic and subsequent school shutdown that the students experienced during their first

year in middle school. Nationally, educators have recognized the learning loss experienced by students. Furthermore, the instructional practices of middle teachers are out of the scope of control for the researcher. The researcher has limited knowledge of the middle school's direct instructional practices, curriculum utilized, etc. Additionally, the researcher has limited knowledge of School A and School B's fifth grade reading approach. Both schools fifth grade reading teachers could have exemplary records of providing students with solid tier I instruction, more years of instruction, additional reading endorsements, etc. that would provide the students with well planned and executed reading instruction.

Bolman and Deal's Four Frames provided a framework in understanding the academy's impact as well as how Schools A and B could grow in their efforts to support fifth grade students. The structure of the academy provided parameters for supporting the leadership development and middle school preparation. The human relations fostered a culture wherein everyone was able to work well together as they had the belief system and skill set to support the growth of the vision. The politics involved in implementing the academy provided the stakeholders with the road map for the plan forward to produce confident middle school students. With an overarching theme of leadership, as a Leader in Me school, leadership was symbolic for the academy and was demonstrated with the activities and roles students were given.

The findings from the interviews with multiple stakeholders indicated the importance of strong leadership to the success of the academy and ultimately the success of the rising sixth grade students. However, from this study, it is clear that previous experience in the middle school setting does not lead to efforts to support middle school

transitions. The principals of Schools A, B, and C all had previous experience in the middle school setting. Only School C had strategies in place for fifth grade students. Additionally, their responses suggested that the structure put in place, i.e. rules, expectations, social emotional curriculum, class rotations, supported the students in experiencing a smooth transition into middle school. The recognized, as Wormeli (2011) affirms, that this period is difficult, and thus these structures are needed. Research question 2 asked, In what ways does the structure (classes/subject area, expectations, experiences, etc.) of a Fifth Grade Academy affect students' behaviors in middle school? While Hill and Mobley (2016) noted a drop in self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy, lower achievement and academic competence, and increases in anxiety symptoms and absenteeism following the transition to middle school. Likewise, Choi (2012) identified how transitioning students are often fearful of being bullied, anxious about getting lost in a larger and unfamiliar environment and concerned about the new demands academically and behaviorally.

The attendance trends continued throughout the return to school with A and B days implemented by the district for in person learning students. The A and B day schedule divided the student body in half. Half of the students attended school on Monday and Wednesday and every other Friday. The other half attended school Tuesday and Thursday and every other Friday. Despite strong attendance and school efforts to address social emotional health, students were concerned about friendships and peer relationships. Edward Graham (2013) discusses the how this change in school settings is poorly aligned with the timing of when students are developing their personal identities. This impacts them socially. Students indicated that peer interactions were challenging. It

was difficult for them to make new friends who had goals and behaviors that were aligned to their own. One student stated, “The only reason I had any friends is because I went to elementary school people that attend the same school now. I was not ready for the mean words, gossiping, and random people talking about you.” This caused stress that some were not anticipating, thus making their middle school experience challenging. Students who were leaders among their peers in the academy were challenged by this new reality. With regards to feeling more confident with navigating the physical environment of middle school, students, parents and staff believed that providing them with an opportunity to change classes and get accustomed to interacting with more than one content area teacher supported them in their adjustment.

The article “Making the Change from Elementary to Middle School (Williams, 2014) aligns with my findings about how this class change requirement can support sixth grade students by stating how this middle school norm impacts their experience.

The new environmental factors students contend with when transitioning from elementary to middle school are difficult for some sixth-grade students. Andrews and Bishop (2012) discussed the changes in expectations and surroundings rising sixth-grade students encounter. The curriculum becomes more difficult and students have to manage multiple classes and teachers (Choi, 2012). The increased difficulty level of assignments and number of teachers leads to the need for sixth-grade students to learn organizational and time management skills (Williams, 2014). Additionally, the responsibility of lockers, gym uniforms, and alternating schedules can create stress (pp. 2-3).



The following serve as possible explanations for the findings related to research question 2.

Students who were perceived by leadership as confident fifth grade students were selected for the qualitative study. For the most part, they had not had the experience of having to get acclimated to students who were from backgrounds that were unfamiliar. They had been members of school clubs, athletic teams, and gifted and talented groups for six years. Their experiences had been limited which could have made their poor peer interactions so pronounced in their responses. One of the more profound responses highlighted previously in this study that speaks to this was from a student when she stated, “Honestly, I was not really prepared for the social aspect of middle school. I thought I would be friends with everyone. But, that is not what happened, the only reason I had any friends is because I went to elementary school with a few people that went to the same school now. I was not ready for the mean words, gossiping, and random people talking about you”.

Research question 3’s findings about the contribution of the principal’s leadership to the academy indicated that leadership matters. Specifically, the principal set the vision for the school, developed staff, parents and students around the academy structure and middle school transitions, constructed decision-making structures for teachers and the Leader in Me program for students, and provided coaching around classroom practices that support a middle school transition. Practices included peer support for wellness and belonging groupwork in instruction, and organizational strategies to aid academic performance. Despite the fact that all three elementary principals had prior experience in middle school, only one (principal of School C with the academy) demonstrated

intentionality around middle school transition. One parent shared the following concerning school leadership:

We had different principals at the middle school at this point, but speaking of the fabulous principal of School C, when my middle child transitioned to middle school, she actually came over there and visited with my child and a friend, and there was some difficulty going on at that point with some friends and some things there. So I think my child knowing that she was still there as a mentor, even if she didn't access it, when she could have, just knowing that she didn't just leave her and push her on and be finished with her, just knowing that she actually cared about her was impactful for her.

My son had some transition in principals. So he didn't have that similar feeling because he had principals that left and came and whatever, but the principal of School C did in supporting my middle child was pivotal for her, I think. As far as going to middle school, we have never really had a middle school principal who was hands-on with any of our kids in middle school. And so I know it's hard as a much larger student body, but I think the support from the principal level at our middle school is very much lacking.

She went on to say,

My kids have all had times where they've had administrators and teachers that they... We have one that we called the ghost principal because she would appear, and then she would leave. We had one that we called the inchworm principal because they were supposed to wave to each other like this in the hallway, but the ones that they remember are the ones that got on the roof of the school building

and wore Captain America suits or did cheerleader stuff in the hallway, or sang songs with them or... Those are the ones that they wanted to succeed for.

The leadership at the middle school, administrator, and counselor, is focused on making students feel like they belong and that they are part of a family. Middle school staff, students and parents from the academy indicated that the structures implemented at School C were welcomed approaches that allowed students to be able to readily adjust to the new environment and the expectations that followed. This is in large part due to the fact that they have similar structures in place. The principal of School C with the academy explained, “So we do our SEL every Monday, which is a set time, weekly time, and we have enrichment. It is a 40-minute amount of time that's in that schedule”. The alignment between School C and the feeder middle school supports the transition of these students.

The parents interviewed were highly engaged parents. The parents were invested in their children and in School C. While the researcher believes that the parents were transparent in their answers, they may have been biased in their responses due to their prior connection to School C. With their involvement in the school, they worked closely with the researcher. They were selected because of their engagement and keen awareness of the academy experience. While the researcher wanted to interview them due to their knowledge and close experiences, they could have chosen to not fully answer questions because of their association to the researcher. The researcher believes that both would not allow that to interfere as they are both considered to be honest people who would ultimately want the research to help other children transitioning to middle school.

### **5.12 Limitations of the Study**

While the research conducted was thorough, there are factors that limited the study. Some factors were beyond the control of the researcher. The factors mentioned should be taken into consideration by those seeking to further this study.

While the Academy has been in place for many years, this study took place in 2020. The cohort of students tracked in the study were sixth grade students in the spring of 2020 and thus finished their sixth-grade year virtually. The students were unable to participate in spring MAP testing as a result of the school closing. The data from the end of their first year in middle school would have been the most ideal in determining the effectiveness of the Academy in comparison to the traditional cohorts.

The sample profile was limited to students from the feeder elementary schools who transitioned to the sample middle school. In future studies, all students remaining in the district could be tracked to determine their level of confidence and comfort with their transition. Students who transition to Schools of Choice were not considered in the data nor were the students who moved or whose address was an outlier and they were assigned to another middle school. Additionally, the size of the sample could be enlarged in order to encompass a more diverse group of students. This could include subsequent cohorts over a period of time

While it is important to remain unbiased during any study, the reality is there are times when it occurs unconsciously. The researcher personally interviewed the adults who were a part of the study. As a researcher, I tried to be reflexive and conscious of my own experiences as they might influence the findings. I kept a journal of notes about my own experiences as they occurred to me during data analysis. I also was careful to

triangulate findings with multiple participant groups, including teachers, parents, and students as well as parents. The interview questions were consistent in each interview as well as the order of the questions, however, nonverbal could influence responses given. Additionally, personal ties to the researcher could influence the types of responses provided.

### **5.13 Conclusions**

The qualitative interviews illustrated how students' ability to adjust to the physical or organizational environment was supported by the structures in place at School C in the academy. Furthermore, intentionality on the behalf of the school leadership team contributed to and mitigated problematic behaviors and academic regression in middle school.

Findings from this study suggest that Bolman and Deal's leadership theory that focuses on the four frames provide an analytical tool to help school leaders navigate organizational changes of the middle school transition. First, while interviews in all three schools pointed to the importance of activities related to student organizational skills in their transition, interviewees in School C with the Academy pointed toward the importance of how an academy organization as the means to help students learn how to organize their work. The academy was embedded throughout the school rather than in a self-contained structure. Specifically, in Academy C, a successful middle school transition required the integration of all of the elements highlighted: Structure, Human Resource, Political and Symbolic. Successful middle school transitions were supported by a structure that provided engaging curriculum and instruction with transitional guidance lessons organized in an academy that had transitional support embedded

throughout the school. For example, ongoing lessons on topics such as organizational skills, peer relationships, how to use a locker supported the student in all classes as well as in informal settings. The role of leadership centered on setting an agenda and cultivating a shared vision and commitment to supporting the particular needs of middle school students by integrating social, academic, and organizational elements that support successful transitions. The leader provided clarity around the purpose for the academy and developed staff, parents, and students in how to support students with structures that help them through the transition. From a Human Relations perspective, the principal of School C with the Academy worked to ensure that teachers and all others in the academy had positive relationships so that they could help all students work through challenging social and academic transitions. Principals of all three schools had experiences with middle school; however, the qualitative interviews indicated that the academy structure embedded throughout the school organization helped students make the transition more than self-contained structures where counselors provided students with guidance. In other words, leadership in the full academy structure made a difference to students' academic and behavioral transitions. Finally, to build a culture of family in a middle school academy, symbols and inspiration were key. Symbols helped encourage a feeling of belonging and connectedness and included special mascots, mantras, or mottos to set the group apart.

#### **5.14 Implications of Findings**

Given the nature of integrated middle school transitions from my study, I suggest a coherent set of implications for elementary and middle school educators with a holistic view toward student success.

### *Elementary Educators*

This study has given credence to implementing structures for fifth grade students as they approach the change to a very different school setting, and these structures are informed by academic and social influences. Leaders can create a vision and culture of belonging that supports student transitions, taking into account social and academic influences with supporting evidence from the literature. As in the literature on middle school students, interviewees indicated that middle school is a difficult time in the life of students wherein physically and emotionally, they are experiencing many changes. There was evidence from the interviews as well indicating how students experienced unanticipated challenges that were socially difficult to navigate. Students, parents and school staff all indicated how structures in elementary school supported their transition. As such, anything that an elementary school community can do to prepare them for this significant change would be advantageous for the student and their families. Supportive practices can include transitions within the student's instructional day outside of special area classes and lunch, vertical planning with the middle school sixth grade team to learn more about their norms and practices, guidance lessons focused on the themes identified by middle school students as 'what they wish they knew before middle school' to prepare students, and even opportunities for fifth grade students to engage with middle school students for a question and answer session. The role of the principal was also an element that parents indicated was important. The vision from the principal determines the priorities of the school. The elementary principal has to find merit in transitional programming in order to move towards implementation and execution.

### ***Middle School Educators***

The study has shown how middle school educators implementing structures such as teaming/ class rotation and summer orientations allow for students to feel like they are a part of their new school. While making new friends has been identified as a challenge, giving students the opportunity to meet prior to the start of the new year to make connections as well as having them assigned to a homeroom and team that would resemble their grade level model in elementary school supports their transition. Middle school staff members were able to share pre-COVID 19 measures that they executed with the rising 6<sup>th</sup> graders' needs in mind.

### ***Parents***

Qualitative data outlined how students' parents encouraging them and putting them in activities outside of school helped them thrive in middle school. Parent interactions with their children are important during this period of transition and before. The expectations given by parents as well as their support of their child's interest in extracurricular activities helps students experience balance and learn the importance of prioritizing. The data from the student interviews indicated how important the influence of the parent can be during this time. Students shared how parental support through exposure to programming outside of school and guidance was important in their middle school transition. The data from the parent interviews indicated the same. Parents shared how they maintained active roles in their children's lives in the school setting and in their personal time. They believed that this contributed to their ability to navigate their new environment with success.



### **5.15 Implications for Future Research**

Future research could feature a longitudinal study following cohorts of students from elementary through middle school. Additionally, the study took a deeper dive into social emotional factors but did not specifically review student discipline. With the variance in middle school and elementary expectations and historic trends with middle school behaviors being more severe in nature, it is recommended that researchers look at the impact of the components of fifth grade academy on middle school behavior.

A new study could be constructed through a full mixed methods study to include interviews with additional stakeholders such as district personnel and classroom teachers along with a review of student achievement data in areas other than reading. For example, a better understanding of the structures of the Academy can be determined when reviewing additional data from the sixth-grade academic year. The second year in middle school's data could be influenced by many more factors outside of the elementary school's influence. A review of student achievement and growth in reading and math can also provide a deeper understanding of the influence structures have on sixth grade student achievement. While student attendance data and perspectives from teachers, parents, and students provided understandings about how middle school transitions in structures and human relations focused on student behavior is helpful, disciplinary records can speak to how well students acclimated themselves to the rules and expectations of the new setting as well as how they were able to adjust to a new group of students and teachers.

A thorough description of the three schools included in the study was provided in previous chapters. To determine the validity of recommendations for middle school

transition, future research could be conducted on schools with different populations, including schools in more affluent communities. To include a more affluent school population that includes similar practices in their fifth-grade transitions would give a clear idea about the effectiveness of the structures as they would substantiate effectiveness or not despite demographics.

### **5.16 Implications for Practice**

Findings about the impact of social emotional learning is important in this work because it can provide insight on whether or not the structure of changing classes and being held to middle school classroom expectations was the factor that supported the students' transition compared to equipping students with habits and skills that would assist them in middle school and beyond. For example, students in the Academy were provided with the social emotion learning curriculum through Leader in Me that taught the Seven Habits of Happy Kids based on the Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. These skills are important for the students throughout their lives. The Academy structure addresses the immediate challenges of changing classes, adapting to multiple teacher expectations at one time, lockers, etc. as well as social emotional learning. Through a myriad of activities, leadership development tasks, high expectations and a focus on character, fifth grade students are set up for a successful transition.

The findings of this study also suggest that elementary school leaders should consider the implementation of structures to assist with middle school transition. The specific structures can vary, but the intentionality behind creating an environment with consideration of academic and social influences that would mitigate challenges in their next school setting is critical. The major themes of organizational skills, peer interactions

and self-efficacy can all be addressed prior to students entering middle school. Middle school leaders seem to anticipate challenges and have a variety of activities and events to support new students and their families. To minimize the social and academic challenges typically observed, elementary schools can begin implementation of practices in fifth grade. Such implications for practice will require planning and professional development for leaders and teachers in the future.

### **5.17 Implications for Local Schools and Districts**

Given the feedback from students and parents, it is recommended that the current principles of the academy continue with a plan to monitor sustainability and effectiveness over time with more qualitative interviews from multiple stakeholders as well as academic achievement data and attendance data . Elementary School principals in School District B meet monthly as a cohort, however, the conversation around middle school preparation is focused on tasks such as course selection for fifth grade students and planning of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade orientation night. Ongoing dialogue around best practices for middle school transition, strategic planning around vertical articulation conversations with feeder middle schools district-wide, investment in social-emotional curriculum, alignment in elementary practices around class changes and expectations would all serve the district well in this work.

### **5.18 Implications for Leadership Preparation**

Colleges and universities are encouraged to consider the topic of middle school transitions given the research on the potential academic and social impact on students and graduation rates. Most programs are geared toward K-12 preparation with an expectation that students spend parts of their internships in elementary, middle, and high school. The

list of required internship activities should include tasks that will provide a level of understanding around this important transition. These activities could include having dialogue with key stakeholders who take part in the transition, evaluating the current practices and offering recommendations for improvement.

Middle School preparation and transitions are challenging for many students. Transitions have many aspects and moving parts, including structures human relations, and symbols. Leadership is essential to lead structures like the academy that support middle school transitions. Yet middle school transitions are critical for student academic and behavioral success in school and in the long-term. The long-term effects of a poor middle school experience can have long-term negative effects on students' educational experiences. Educational leaders can draw on Bolman and Deal's (1979) four frames and empirical examples from this study to move towards an academy to support students' transition.

### **5.19 Post-Study Reflections**

After reflecting on the results of the study I came to understand the following insights that extended my thinking about middle school transitions in the academy and leadership. To begin, prior middle school experience does not have any bearing on the elementary practices focusing on middle school transition. The principals of the three elementary schools included in this study were all former middle school administrators. As aforementioned in the findings, only one school had strategies in place around middle school transition outside of what was required by the district.

I have found that in some instances, this is the case due to the culture of the district. If the district's leadership has a focus on test scores improving my any means, it

can discourage some school leaders from thinking about giving emphasis to supporting students in the next school as they are hyper focused on ensuring that their end of year test results show significant improvement. Additionally, if the culture of the district does not encourage innovation, but rather sticking with the status quo, principals who have been accustomed to being “rule followers” and not questioning authority and traditional practices will not feel comfortable approaching and implementing new ideas.

Additionally, I found that the common practice where teachers were assigned to one content area to teach students all day did not necessarily improve student achievement. Some of the mainstream literature has suggested that having teachers teach one content area allows them to be able to know the discipline in and out and, therefore, provide deeper understandings for students and focus on interventions in only that content area only. They would be experts in that content area. All of their time would be devoted to that one subject instead of having to divide their time among four or more subjects. While MAP data was only one data point reviewed, it did show that the Academy students were behind their peers from the other two cohorts. Other assessments, such as SC Ready or SC Pass could have indicated different results. At the same time, interviews noted the importance of the academy structure that included a holistic curriculum and leadership development (e.g., Leader in Me).

My study reinforced the importance of leadership intentionality and vision for a middle school transition, structures, and curriculum. I am hopeful that, as a result of this study, more intentionality will be given to the topic of transitional practices. The interviews prompted forward thinking about options for the other two schools. Both principals seemed to have experienced “Aha” moments during the interviews. These

experiences suggest the importance of vertical dialogue among leaders in elementary, middle, and high school settings. District leadership at this juncture is also interested in moving forward with developing common language around the social emotional curriculum that was implemented at School C. I am slated to serve as a coach for six elementary and middle school principals. Through this role, given the audience, I hope to encourage the leaders to look at not only Leader in Me principles, but how they can incorporate the curriculum into their transitional practices holistically.

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