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Middle school plunge: a mixed-methods study exploring 6th grade students' perceptions of their transition to middle school experiences and its influences on school achievement and performance for urban youth

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MIDDLE SCHOOL PLUNGE: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY EXPLORING 6TH GRADE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND ITS INFLUENCES ON SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE FOR URBAN YOUTH

by
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for believing in me and recognizing my leadership abilities. Your love and encouragement was the driving force to motivate me to finish.

I dedicate this dissertation to my role model, my rock, and inspiration, my mother, Juanita Hyman. Through her example, she taught me the value of hard work, dedication, and to believe in myself. I watched my mother strive for excellence as she completed nursing school and achieved advanced degrees despite the barriers that she faced as a young mother. She encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree and reassured me of my inner strength and resilience through the most difficult and challenging time in my life when I just wanted to give up. Mommy, I appreciate your guidance and support. I truly hope that I made you proud of me. I love you dearly.

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Abstract

LaKecia C. Hyman
MIDDLE SCHOOL PLUNGE: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY EXPLORING 6TH GRADE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR TRANSITON TO MIDDLE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND ITS INFLUENCES ON SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE FOR URBAN YOUTH
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Minority students from inner cities care greatly about their education and want to be successful in school (Corbett & Wilson, 2002). This mixed-methods study sought to explore the correlation between urban students' perceptions of their middle school transitional experiences and "The Middle School Plunge" academic decline phenomenon that impacts minority youth once they move into 6th grade (West & Schwerdt, 2012). Some researchers on the topic assert that middle school grade configurations influence student achievement outcomes and that students who remain in K-8 settings outperform their peers who attend stand-alone 6th-8th grade middle schools (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2009; Jacobs, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). However, other theorists contend that grade span has no substantial bearing on student learning (Erb, 2006; Viadero, 2008; Whitley, Lupart, & Beran, 2007). Therefore, this research further strives to discover which middle school type urban students prefer to attend from their perspectives. Ultimately, this study was designed to provide disenfranchised learners a voice in revealing factors that affect school performance during this important developmental phase in their lives and what students determine as "anti-plunge" strategies that educators should implement to support them.

Participants were selected from two middle school grade configuration types: two K-8 elementary schools and one 6-8 middle school from two adjacent urban school districts with similar demographics. A total of 136 students participated in the on-line Paired-Validity Analysis (PVA) student perception survey and 22 youth volunteered during three focus group sessions. Data were collected through a two-phased, sequential explanatory sequence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). Results reveal that urban students' perceptions of their transition to middle school encounters have a critical influence on educational outcomes. Findings from quantitative survey data uncover five perception themes associated with student academic performance. Findings from qualitative focus group interviews uncover three transitional factor adjustment shifts that students undergo in middle school. Information from mixed results indicates that students from both school types prefer to attend a separate 6^{th}-8^{th}-grade middle school program. Relevant data from both phases identify a list of specific educational practices that under-schooled students from high poverty schools value as effective methods necessary to achieve academic success.

Overall, this study concludes that teachers and other adults have an obligation to support and encourage urban youth through crucial transitional phases in their lives and help them to plan future aspirations that have an influence on the future economic stability of impoverished families (Schultz & Hanushek, 2012; Tienken, 2012). Implications for urban education policy and practice are discussed. Recommendations for future research direction are proposed that can further help students from at-risk school systems combat the academic plunge experience. In addition, information from this study contributes prevalent knowledge to the field of education.

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Chapter I

Introduction

According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics 2014 report, minority student high school drop out rates continue to be one of the most influential and alarming factors affecting our national economic and deficit crisis (Kena et al., 2014). Several billion dollars a year are allocated to funding welfare programs, unemployment benefits, and financing correctional facilities for non-graduating high school adults (Friedman et al., 2014; Stoltzfus, 2014; Sargent, 2015). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) national high school report card data revealed an educational catastrophe, which disclosed that more than one million students failed to graduate (Burris & Roberts, 2012). Consequently, more than one-third being urban, minority students, who tend to drop out of school as early as the ninth grade. Aud et al. (2010) report that according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, less than 56% of all minority subgroups of students' actually complete high school, which is 20% less compared to their more affluent counterparts. Layton (2012) contends that national economists stipulate that more than 20 million new college graduates will be needed by the year 2020 to enter the workforce and stimulate our United States economy. However, it is anticipated that our country will fail to meet this goal by millions of educated and skilled workers (Hunt & Tierney, 2006; The White House, 2014). Further reports from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) emphasize that high school drop-outs will lack eligibility for more than 90% of the employment opportunities. The current state of the nation's educational structure leaves the county vulnerable and insecure about

the economic future and stability of American families (Acs & Nichols, 2010; Kena et al., 2014).

The federal government enacted the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 due to the concern over the conditions of the United States education system based on yearly student assessment performance results (Guisbond, Neill, & Schaehher, 2012; Mathis, 2003; Sadovnik, O'Day, Bohrnstedt, & Borman, 2013; Wright, Wright, & Heath, 2006). This educational reform mandated that students demonstrate adequate yearly academic progress through measureable target assessment goals that would ensure that all students show proficiency on standardized tests by the year 2014 (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Dietz, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006). Schools that failed to meet the requirement would face tough federal sanctions, including possible loss or reduction of federal funding. Hence, years after the enactment of the law, schools in many states have unsuccessfully exhibited the academic growth necessary to reach the educational goal (Davidson, Reback, Rockoff, & Schwartz, 2013; Frey, Mandlawitz, & Alvarez, 2012; Gamoran, 2013; McNeil, 2011; Ravitch & Chubb, 2009). As a result, in 2011 the federal government granted target waivers to states with tougher corrective measures to allow more time for school districts to attain assessment goals (McNeil, 2011; Polikoff, McEachin, Wrabel, & Duque, 2014). Most recently, in efforts to improve the state of American schools, states have adopted new national educational common core learning standards to create uniformity in the United States educational system so that students will be able to compete with their peers across the county (Chingos, 2013; Eitel & Talbert, 2012; Guisbond et al., 2012; Kober & Retner, 2011; Lewin, 2010; Polikoff, 2014). Also, the federal government has imposed the 2015 Partnership for the

Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) K-12 national test designed to monitor student readiness for the workforce (www.parcconline.org; Ravitch, 2015).

Schools across the nation indicate that elementary students experience a decline in school achievement once they transition into middle school (Anderman, 2012; Hursh, 2007; Schwerdt & West, 2013). Student perception of their middle school experience and relationships with teachers is directly related to their academic achievement and success in school (Brown, 2010; Murray & Zvoch; 2011). The problem of disengagement, low motivation, and apathy are major issues for students, especially after the 5th grade (Eccles & Roeser, 2010; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Research suggests that students transitioning into middle school become less motivated by schooling and its processes (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). West and Schwerdt (2012) highlight that there is a divergence between the achievements of students enrolled in a kindergarten through eighth grade program versus a separate sixth through eighth grade middle school system, which they consider "The Middle School Plunge." Ultimately, the continuous academic failure of middle school students moving into high school often triggers high levels of students who give up and quit, causing graduation rates to plummet, especially in poorer districts (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Thus, urban schools are failing to produce students ready to productively enter the workforce (Day & Newburger, 2002; Layton, 2012; McKinsey and Company, 2009; Yee, 2012). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) considers failed public school institutions as "drop-out factories."

The United States education system has been a major governmental reform focus (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Schultz & Hanushek, 2012). As federal

and state educational mandates and assessments plague the school system, more and more emphasis on student achievement rates sets the tone in the classroom. The transition of students from elementary to middle school has been of particular focus due to the regression of student achievement trends across the nation for students in that age group. There is a dire need for educational transformation shifts relative to student achievement, especially for those schools in high poverty communities. According to West, Schwerdt, and Riddle (2012), "The Middle School Plunge" notion is the discrepant gap in student academic growth that broadens once they transition into 6th grade.

Implications of the phenomenon reveal that students often continue to flunk in school leading to eventual and inevitable school abandonment (Carolan, Weiss, & Matthews, 2013; Yee, 2012). Steinberg and McCray (2012) assert that student disengagement in school has a profound impact on their future ability to take care of themselves and earn a living. Educators must a take a close look at what, how, and why they teach and think deeply about their belief system relative to their perceptions of the students that they serve. It is crucial to listen to students and provide them opportunities to express their feelings openly in order to unveil the underlying reasons for the profound disconnect with school once they transition into middle school.

Statement of the Problem

Our educational system is in dire need of progressive reform measures based on the academic denigration of student achievement in middle school exposed through achievement results by the U.S. Department of Education (Prickhardt, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2014). That problem is the spiraling academic decline of urban, minority students, shown on standardized test scores once they enter the 6th grade. The constant

academic, social, behavioral, and motivational regression that urban students experience from sixth through eighth grades is defined by West (2012) as "The Middle School Plunge" phenomenon. Previous studies reveal that student academic relapse in middle school relates back to learning slumps encountered during the primary years (Chall, Jacobs, Baldwin, & Chall, 2009; Stockard; 2010). Consequently, if this gap is not identified, often times many students continue to plummet academically throughout middle school and face on-going failure, which can lead to a negative transition to high school experience (Benner & Graham, 2009; Holas & Huston; 2012; Steinberg & McCray, 2012; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Subsequently, these youth tend to have poor attendance and eventually withdraw emotionally, academically, and socially from school. Research suggests that students are turned off by negative classroom experiences and often feel disconnected from the school environment (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Theoharis, 2009; Watkins, 2005; Wigfield, Eccles, Roeser, & Schiefele, 2006). What students are exposed to outside of school often conflicts with what is expected in school. These opposing views have severe consequential implications for society as a whole (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014; Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Splitter, 2008). Most alarming is the achievement and graduation gaps that exist between White, Black, and Hispanic middle and high school students (Barton & Coley, 2010; Bowers, 2011; Carpenter & Ramierz, 2007). Urban students from low socio-economic backgrounds underperform at much higher rates than those of other subgroup populations (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Harris, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Inner-city youth face increased failure and decline in school (Yee, 2012), and the academic collapse of impoverished adolescents becomes even more profound once they

reach middle school (Madyun, 2011; West, 2012). This issue has a greater impact on minority youth, causing immense harm to our society when these students fail to improve academically (Shultz & Hanushek, 2012). Another possible factor contributing to this problem may be a student's ability to adapt to the academic demands of school due to poor psychological maturation (Blake & Pope, 2008; Born, Shea, & Steiner, 2002; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Piaget, 1972). Also, Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) assert that minority students face stress from peer pressure, pubescent issues such as changes in appearance, poor relationships with teachers, and academic frustration due to high curricular demands.

This study aimed to explore "The Middle School Plunge" educational phenomenon in depth. According to Akos, Rose, and Orthner (2015) and Corolan et al. (2013), the implications of this learning trend have a more profound impact on students who move to a separate middle school once they enter 6th grade, versus remaining in a K-8 educational environment. Research further contends that adolescent youth, especially those from urban settings, suffer a more drastic academic decline in mathematics and language arts assessment results as a result of the transitional experience (Holas & Huston, 2012; West, 2012). Statistics on the topic indicate that most students lose up to seven months of learning, causing them to plummet throughout their middle school years, and often leading to high school drop-out, especially for students from poorer areas (West et al., 2012).

Background of the Study

Researching and exploring student perceptions of their experiences shifting from elementary school into middle school are important to determine how to help students

navigate their educational process (Eccles, 2008; Mitchell, 1992). Not many studies compare what students actually believe or perceive about their movement into middle school and whether grade configuration has an influence on their performance (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010; Erb, 2006; Lorain, 2013; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Educational policy makers and leaders are focusing a significant amount of attention on the achievement results of middle school students. As a result, researchers are attempting to identify the variables or reasons for achievement declines for middle school students.

An important justification for this study sought to understand why minority youth choose to attend school and what happens to student participation and motivation after they transition into middle school (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011; Van Ryzin, 2011). Theorists explain the shift in student engagement and decreased desire for school as being dissatisfied with the overall learning experiences (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Ellerbrook et al., 2014; Tyson, 2002; Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). The constructivist paradigm contends that urban students relate personal beliefs about education to their surroundings and environment based on experiences in school, the community, and value system from home (Dillon, 2003; Glaserfeld, 1989). Further, students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are reluctant to participate in class if they do not trust their teachers or feel comfortable in school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mitchell, 1992; Ruddick, 2007; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Consequently, it is important to grasp a better understanding of what students interpret as their purpose for attending school and how their encounters affect their performance.

Current research focuses on the assessment data and achievement patterns of students once they moved from 5th grade into 6th grade and whether grade

configurations factored into their academic outcomes in middle school (Akos et al., 2015; Froiland & Oros, 2014). Other research states that the issue of the "plunge" for students is a result of failed educational programming, not the students themselves (Bowie, 2012). However, both West (2012) and Bowie (2012) assert that K-8 grade spans are best for middle school students based on achievement trends. Therefore, studying student perception of their middle school experiences has a connection to student learning, academic performance, and whether school type matters (Beane & Lipka, 2006; Dove et al., 2010).

Impetus of the Study

The intent of this research is to examine the influence of student attitude, actions, and perceptions of experiences encountered in school relative to their achievement and performance, and how these variables contribute to a decline in test scores once they become middle school students (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Research from this study took a close look at the New Jersey State Assessment scores of three different urban school settings: two kindergarten through eighth grade traditional school settings, and a sixth through eighth grade configuration middle school from two different school districts in New Jersey. Both school districts have similar demographics and socio-economic statuses. According to the New Jersey State School Report Card, calculations show that schools with predominately African American populations were between 60% and 70% partially-proficient in the 5th grade and continued to decline moving into 6th grade, with disturbing failing rates up to 75% percent in reading and writing (Rowan, Hall, & Haycock, 2010; Mooney, 2012). In contrast, students in other schools within different

areas of the same districts showed higher proficiency scores on the state assessment. Accordingly, surrounding suburban school districts indicate a slight disparity in scores after students enter middle school, according to state assessment reports on individual schools (Dietz, 2010; Usher, 2011).

This research study focused on what factors contributed to achievement declines in urban school districts (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Periera, 2011) and examined student perceptions of how their schools contributed to continued academic deterioration, which provided a viable basis for an educational and societal problem worth studying (Libbey, 2007). As a result of the study, the information discovered provided educators and school leaders with insight on how they can positively influence student learning and understand what is actually happening with adolescent youth in the urban classrooms. This research contributed to the body of knowledge needed to address the "The Middle School Plunge" by focusing on the relationship or connection between student perceptions of school, their relationships with teachers, and how these experiences impact their performance and success in middle school. The overall purpose of this study revealed how capturing students' views of their own learning are necessary to educating the urban child (Delpit, 2006). This study further intended to challenge West and Schwerdt's (2012) definition of "The Middle School Plunge," which states that academic declines for students after the 5th grade are a result of middle school grade configurations.

Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1. RQ 1 (Overarching Question): What do middle school students describe as factors or variables contributing to the academic decline, known as "The Middle School Plunge" for urban students from the perspective of the students?
2. RQ 2 (Quantitative): To what extent does student perception of their middle school experience correlate to the difficulty of student success when transitioning to middle school?

    RQ 2a: Why should urban school districts consider a K-8 setting or separate 6^{th}-8^{th} grade program for students once they enter middle school from 5^{th} grade? What do the students feel about their experiences in middle school?

3. RQ 3 (Qualitative): What do urban youth feel about interactions with their 6^{th} grade teachers and how student-teacher relationships influence learning performance for them once they enter middle school? What do the students say are the issues?

    RQ 3a: What do students share are practices that they feel will help them to be successful as a middle school student?

Significance of the Study

The implications of this research project brought awareness to the education community about the lived transitional experiences of urban youth and identified practices that educators can embrace to assist inner-city students once they move into middle school. Research suggested a fundamental rationale for the "plunge" experience

once children move from 5th into 6th grade that can be directly linked to student encounters and circumstances in middle school that influence their performance (Harvey & Weary, 1985; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Further, information acquired will equip educators with information directly from the perspective of students as to what factors contributed to achievement trends throughout their middle school education.

Consequently, based on results and findings of the study, recommendations for teachers and school administrators to assist with combating the "plunge" for students are essential in order to prevent them from further spiraling downward off the "eighth grade cliff." Also, research results will inform government officials, superintendents, and school boards in forming decisions about whether a kindergarten through eighth grade environment or separate middle school program best serves urban students' educational needs. Subsequently, the information can help prepare students plan future goals and contribute productively to the betterment of society.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on why there is a need to study the perspectives of minority, disenfranchised youth, and the importance of providing them with a opportunity to voice their lived middle school experiences (Fox, Bedford, & Connelly, 2013). Specifically, this study delved into the reasons urban children become detached from the learning process and what can be done, from the students' perspective, to motivate them. To better understand the variables that played a role in learning results for urban schoolchildren, this study examined the relationship between student perceptions of their transitional experiences and performance in middle school (Coles, 2007; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). The research questions explored how inner city students truly felt about middle

school and uncovered whether personal views concerning their academic, social, emotional preparation contributed to disengagement and learning declines (Coles, 2007). As a result, best ways to improve achievement outcomes and success in school for low-income youth was identified in order to foster an "anti-plunge."

Chapter I provided a deeper meaning of "The Middle School Plunge" concept and how student experiences affect their progress in school. Chapter II will also reveal and associate the "plunge" with two other educational phenomena: a pre-experienced academic decline, the "Fourth Grade Slump" (Coles, 2007; Stockard, 2010), and a post-plunge learning collapse that occur with students, considered as the "Eighth Grade Cliff" (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008). Research suggests that the decline becomes evident during and after the fourth grade (McNamara, Ozuru, & Floyd, 2011), in which standardized achievement results begin to show regression; by middle school, students spiral downward academically (Smith, 2013). These learning "slumps" can consistently lead to on-going educational failure, especially for urban schoolchildren (Chall et al., 2009; Tyler, 2012).

Chapter II

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Student achievement has been studied widely throughout the United States. Research emphasizes that student transition to middle school can be quite challenging and stressful, more specifically for minority youth from at-risk environments (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999). Student relationships with their teachers, adults, and peers have also been directly related to student learning outcomes (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007). The drastic emotional, social, physical, and academic changes make it difficult for urban adolescents to adjust to the expectations of middle school, which often leaves students questioning their ability and competence to sustain during this developmental phase (Mackenzie, McMaugh, & O'Sullivan, 2012; Midgley et al., 2008; Ryan, Shim, & Makura, 2013). In reviewing the literature, several theories explain how urban student perceptions of their transitional experiences after 5th grade has a correlation to "The Middle School Plunge" (Gordan, Peterson, Gdula, & Klingbeil, 2011; Schwerdt & West, 2013). This review focuses on the following: (a) Definition of Urban Schools, (b) Suburban versus Urban Student Achievement Disparity in New Jersey Schools, (c) "The Middle School Plunge" phenomenon, (d) the significance of the pre and post plunge experiences: "Fourth Grade Slump," "Eighth Grade Cliff," and "Economic Slump," (e) Middle School Transition Change Factors: Physiological and Biological, Cognitive Learning Development, Middle School Environment and Conditions, (f) Student Perception, (g) Creating Successful Urban Classrooms, and (h) Theoretical Frameworks and Philosophies that uncover the role of student perceptions on personal learning outcomes.

Definition of Urban Schools

The schools in this study are classified as urban due to the demographic and structural characteristics that differ between rural and suburban areas. Urban schools are located in inner cities classified by high crime rates and poverty with a leading minority enrollment of African American and Hispanic children from low-income households (Tienken, 2012). Borg, Borg, and Stranahan (2012) reveal that school districts with 75% or more students who receive free and reduced lunch and eligible for Federal Title I services are considered as economically disadvantaged. Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, and Wyckoff (2007) state that urban school districts suffer from overcrowded classrooms, de facto segregation, high student mobility, shortage of quality educators, and are inundated with novice, inexperienced teachers who often struggle (Goldhaber, 2007; Grace, 2014). Duncan-Andrade (2007) and Jacob (2007) contend that schoolteachers have the most profound impact on student learning and those from urban schools often become disgruntled and unhappy with their jobs, which impacts achievement outcomes for impoverished schoolchildren. Low-income housing projects that are heavily occupied and populated with minority and immigrant families who receive financial assistance programs signify urban communities (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Urban educational systems are overrepresented and overwhelmed by a vast number of students classified in special education programs that demonstrate low achievement proficiency and exhibit behavior problems in school (Theoharis, 2009; Yell et al., 2006). Educational programming and resources in urban schools are insufficient and fragmented, thus students become disengaged and marked by underperformance (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2013). Urban districts are stricken by low student performance as

identified by state achievement data, high school drop out, and low graduation rates due to harmful living conditions and negative school experiences that affect inner city youth (Kincheloe, 2010; Orfield, 2004; Yee, 2012). Minority students from urban areas do not have access to equal resources, opportunities, or the social and cultural capital to which their suburban peers are privy (Kim & Kim, 2009).

Suburban Versus Urban Student Achievement Disparity in New Jersey Schools

Rothstein (2014) asserts that the 2014 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) state results revealed an alarming academic achievement disparity that remains to exist between African-American and Hispanic minority youth in low-income urban districts, and White students from economically advantaged suburban schools. Tractenberg's (2013) article, "A Tale of Two Deeply Divided New Jersey Public School Systems," disclosed that two types of educational structures classify the current state of New Jersey public schools. One type was labeled as high-income suburban districts with predominantly White student populations, who demonstrate high levels of achievement. The second system was categorized as economically disadvantaged districts with majority minority subgroups of children, who struggle to achieve. The discrepancy in student achievement outcomes between the district groups, considered as the "Racial Achievement Gap," describes the current conditions of American Public Schools (Kena et al., 2014). Sharkey (2013) uncovered that African American students are 10 times more likely than their White peers to continuously domicile in severely impoverished areas and attend intensely segregated schools for generations (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Research on inadequate and inequitable education between racial and social classes of students highlights that minority students are isolated from access to high-

performing schools due to residential segregation (Flaxman, Kuscera, Orfield, Ayscue, & Siegel-Hawley, 2013). The persistent education gap between the demographic groups has widened, which is a major cause for concern, and the reason urban students are the intended aim of this study (Cerf, 2012). Tables 1 and 2 show NJASK statewide student assessment results of suburban and urban districts in New Jersey.

Table 1

2014 NJASK Statewide 5th and 6th Grade Language Arts Literacy Results

Demographic Group	Total Enrolled	Partially Proficient		Proficient		Advanced Proficient	
5th Grade							
White	50,318	13,104	26.5%	31,388	63.4%	5,037	10.2
Black	16,226	9,490	59.6%	6,088	38.2%	342	2.1%
Hispanic	24,418	13,452	55.9%	10,069	41.8%	559	2.3%
6th Grade							
White	50,956	10,768	21.5%	34,016	67.8%	5,357	10.7%
Black	16,290	8,823	55.4%	6,762	42.4%	355	2.2%
Hispanic	23,811	11,936	50.8%	11,010	46.8%	561	2.4%

Notes. A score of 200 is considered passing
Partially Proficient (PP) below 200 denotes a failed score, Proficient (P) 200 or more denotes a passing score, Advanced Proficient (AP) 250 or more denotes advanced achievement

Source: New Jersey State Department of Education

Table 2

2014 Statewide 5th and 6th Grade Mathematics Results

Demographic Group	Total Enrolled	Partially Proficient		Proficient		Advanced Proficient	
5th Grade							
White	50,318	6,001	12.1%	20,698	41.7%	22,947	46.2%
Black	16,226	6,369	39.9%	6,891	43.2%	2,700	16.9%
Hispanic	24,418	7,262	30.1%	11,620	48.2%	5,233	21.7%
6th Grade							
White	50,956	6,100	12.1%	22,735	45.3%	21,399	42.6%
Black	16,290	6,609	41.3%	7,111	44.5%	2,273	14.2%
Hispanic	23,811	7,302	31.0%	11,622	49.4%	4,599	19.6%

Notes. A score of 200 is considered passing
Partially Proficient (PP) below 200 denotes a failed score, Proficient (P) 200 or more denotes a passing score, Advanced Proficient (AP) 250 or more denotes advanced achievement
Source: New Jersey State Department of Education

Table 1 displays the LAL scores of White, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino students in the state of New Jersey from 5th and 6th grade. The results confirm a drastic contrast between the achievement results of suburban and urban students. The percentage of Black and Hispanic students who scored partially proficient reveal a huge disproportion compared to White children. Table 2 also shows that minority students underperform in math in comparison to their more affluent peers in 5th and 6th grade. The performance data on both tables show that suburban students increase from year to year in both reading and math, which indicates that White students did not experience a learning "plunge." This continuous achievement inequity between the subgroups generates a sense of urgency for school leaders and educational policy-makers

to implement effective reform efforts that enhance the quality of education for low-income, under-schooled urban youth, especially as they transition into middle school (Carolan & Chesky, 2012).

The Middle School Plunge

The Middle School Plunge phenomenon describes the academic decline in language arts and mathematics when students transition from a kindergarten through 5th grade elementary school environment to a sixth through eighth grade middle school building in a new setting (Kim, Schwartz, Cappella, & Seidman, 2014; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Research suggests that students from low socio-economic school districts often fail to make the shift from being the leaders of the school to becoming underclassmen, impacting their self-esteem (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Lee & Smith, 1993). Literature reveals variables that contribute to student academic decline once they enter middle school (Akos et al., 2015; Carolan, 2013, Kieffer, 2013; Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, & Zabel, 2011). Students experience a difficult time adjusting to a learning environment that requires them to be more independent from their teachers and the expectation to mature in a short amount of time. According to Clark, Slate, Combs, and Moore (2014), this academic and social burden often leads students to rely more on their teachers for acceptance. Kim et al. (2014) further assert that data from public schools in the United States have found that students moving into middle school display a drop in assessment scores, especially minority students from poor school districts. Pickhardt (2011) shares that students within the middle school age group begin to resist school and become apathetic by choosing to focus more on their social life than academics. As a result,

students entering the 6th grade tend to have a decreased level of motivation to succeed in school and become more of a behavior problem for teachers (Klem & Connell, 2004).

West and Schwerdt (2012) conducted a study involving urban middle school students in several districts in Florida that exposed a drop in student standardized test scores once they changed from elementary to middle school. The study concluded that students, primarily those from poorer backgrounds, suffered a learning loss of three months up to a full school year in both math and language arts in districts that house separate middle schools, versus students who remain in the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade. Jacobs (2012) states that although middle schools were originally designed to provide a path for students to prepare for high school, lodging a vast number of pubescent students in one building poses problems for an advantageous learning environment. Carrell and Hoekstra (2009) agree and further declare that a "domino effect" occurs when forcing students out of their comfort zone to a new environment. Many urban students who come from problematic homes tend to influence their peers into exhibiting undesirable behavior in school in order to "fit in." Students have to redefine and rediscover themselves into a new environment with which they are unfamiliar (Jacobs, 2012; Ryan et al., 2013).

In contrast, Lee and Smith (1993) conducted one of the original studies on the connection between the middle school concept and student achievement, which disclosed that students indeed increase academically and socially in a structured setting (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011). Erb (2006) contends that a middle school decline exists, however, the separation of grade levels has no impact on issue. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) also found no substantial correlation between student assessment results and grade span.

Erb (2006) states that blaming the movement between separate school environments is an untruth:

> The understanding that middle schools don't work is a myth. Grade configuration is a weak factor to rely on to determine whether middle schools really work. The myth of middle school failure has gotten much currency in the popular press (Wallis, 2005) and from the statements of big-city administrators busy shifting thousands of 11 to 14 year olds from school to school. However, a critical look at the evidence from a number of sources does not support belief in this myth. (p. 4)

The author further asserts that the type of teaching practices, programs, and preparation affect student success and learning outcomes in middle school, not the transition itself. Markslag, Badiuk, and Sheridan (2014) agree, and share that students actually have meaningful learning experiences in middle school settings. Evidence on school achievement in math and reading have not been substantially linked to any middle school grade configuration (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). These researchers further emphasize that stand-alone 6-8 grade programs create a stronger sense of academia and high expectations for student learning than K-8 schools. Howley (2002) states that middle schools in urban areas often fail because initiatives are not properly implemented and conducted with fidelity; therefore, educational leaders deem them unsuccessful instead of identifying an effective model and properly executing it. Further, although K-8 'elemiddle' structures are popular in low-income neighborhoods, separate 6-8 middle schools are more prevalent in high-performing suburban districts (Barton & Klump, 2012; Hough, 2009). Therefore, instead of abandoning middle schools in urban districts, educators should focus on resolving the issues that impede positive student learning outcomes, especially for students during their transition year (Beane & Lipka, 2006; Jacobs & Rockoff, 2012).

Pre and Post Educational Plunge Experiences

"Fourth grade slump" phenomenon. Studies that analyzed changes in student learning outcomes, particularly in reading, disclose that achievement as measured by standardized tests, reveal that assessment scores of low-income youth decelerate before and during their middle school years (Best, Floyd, & McNamara, 2004; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The decline is related to two profound educational concerns. The first developmental issue is that most fourth grade students cannot make the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" and have difficulties understanding more complex vocabulary words other than everyday language (LeSaux, Crosson, Kieffer, & Pierce, 2010; Samuels, 2007). Second, a major student access to digital media gap (Gee, 2008) exists, especially between disenfranchised and middle class students. Furthermore, Weston and Bain (2010) disclose that a technological disparity also occurs between the teachers and the students, thus lessening student access to computer-based learning opportunities. Studies suggest that the decline becomes more evident during and after the fourth grade. The "fourth grade slump" exposes an achievement inequality that exists between low-income students and their more privileged peers, especially during the elementary years and beyond (McNamara et al., 2011). Research unveils that after the fourth grade, urban students' standardized test scores begin to regress; by middle school assessment, results plunge, and thereafter face the eighth-grade learning slump (Stockard, 2010). This continuous academic pattern of regression can consistently lead to on-going educational failure for students from at-risk schools (Brozo, 2010). The technology gap often indicates that students from

disadvantaged backgrounds will lack the 21st century digital skills necessary to be successful in the future (Suhr, Hernandez, Grimes, & Warschauer, 2010).

Sanacore and Palumbo (2008) define the "fourth grade slump" as a critical learning period by which students are expected to make a developmental change from concrete learning to more abstract understanding of vocabulary, develop problem-solving strategies, and acquire the skills to comprehend and analyze informational text (Rupley & Slough, 2010). Chall (1983) describes six stages of reading development that pinpoint students' difficulty in reading beginning between stages two and three. Students acquire successful reading patterns between stages one and two as they develop the ability to decode words and establish fluency with identifying familiar words used in their everyday conversations. The learning delay occurs at stages three to six, when learners have to understand and comprehend reading requirements that involve intricate vocabulary and unfamiliar words that tend to be content-specific and not a part of their general conversations at home, with peers and quite often at school (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007). The lapse in learning occurs when students transition from narrative text shown in storybooks to informational text in the form of textbooks or factual-based resources. Students struggle with the challenging reading material presented in grade-level text or books that tend to be above their word knowledge and comprehension understanding (Best at al., 2004). Coles (2007) contends that students from poor families usually show levels of underachievement by fourth grade and if the students do not demonstrate a shift in learning, they will fall behind even more in middle school. Early language learners and struggling students benefit from technology programs that assess their reading levels and create individual learning programs that

target specific literacy skills necessary to attain and retrieve grade-level vocabulary (Suhr et al., 2010). Therefore, schools that fail to integrate technology literacy programs into the classroom deprive students of the benefit of effective learning opportunities. Ultimately, the lack of both a shift in effective teaching practices and student-learning developments, paired with low exposure to technological literacy interventions, create the path of the "fourth grade slump."

Other factors that affect the "slump," which continues after the fourth grade into middle school, are the social pressures students encounter as they deal with the realities of peer pressure and they have a hard time focusing in school (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008). As a result, students become less engaged in school and learning. Unfortunately, students who do not overcome this learning regression continue on a spiral academic downfall as they enter the middle school grades. Middle school teachers tend not to expose students to a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts at different reading and interest levels. Furthermore, content area teachers provide fewer opportunities for students to engage in daily independent and guided reading practices, as they expect students to come to them prepared with the proper reading skills necessary to perform on grade level (Rupley & Slough, 2010; Samuels, 2007). Consequently, middle school teachers typically fail to teach struggling students how to read and have not been trained in the practice of teaching students to read, thus causing the eighth-grade learning cliff (Coles, 2007). Middle school teachers often rely on anthologies to teach students content, denying them of supplemental learning resources and instructional technology software that will allow the application of reading strategies in different reading settings and content areas (Alvermann, Phelps, & Ridgeway, 2007, p. 308). According to Jeong,

Gaffney, & Choi (2010), this disparity between students' word knowledge and the actual intricacy of the text causes students' inability to comprehend the information; thus, the reason many students continue to become weak in reading and grade levels behind their peers as they move into middle school, often fall into the middle school plunge. Unfortunately, the implications for the "fourth grade slump" lead to high school drop out for impoverished youth (Hernandez, 2011).

"Eighth grade cliff" phenomenon. Academic achievement plummets in middle school, especially once children move into 6th grade (West, 2012). Often, students from low-income environments never recover from the "middle school plunge" and continue to fail academically, which leads to a spiraling learning slump known as the "Eighth Grade Cliff" (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008). This post-plunge notion reveals that student assessment scores take a dive during students' eighth grade year in school (Yecke, 2006). Research unveils many issues that cause inner city children to decline academically as they end their middle school years, such as: increased levels of anxiety, fear, disengagement, increase in schoolwork, and lack of support from the adults in their lives, which cause them to lose interest in school and stop attending (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Cook, MacCoun, Mushkin, and Vigdom (2008) concur with West (2012) in that students who attend K-8 schools tend to have higher performance rates than those who move to a different middle school setting. However, research also states that middle schools become high performing programs if structured properly (Ali & Heck, 2012). Consequently, students who remain in K-8 settings have less exposure to advanced academic programs and extracurricular opportunities (Steinberg & McCray, 2012).

Research stresses that middle school aged students want to have input in their educational experiences and failure to involve them generates a disconnection and a lack of desire to go to school (Delpit, 2006). Luke, Dooley, and Woods (2011) declare that adolescents begin to rebel against adults, become disengaged from learning, and exhibit negative behavior if they feel detached from school. Often, urban youth have a hard time keeping up the pace academically, causing achievement rates to fall. These students lack the conceptual knowledge and vocabulary acquisition essential to flourish and sustain in middle school (Wanzek et al., 2013). Thus, students struggle and underperform below academic expectations leading to learning disabilities (Sinatra, 2008). As a result, urban students experience a negative emotional reaction to school and lose the motivation to learn, which has critical implications towards high school drop-out circumstances for disenfranchised children (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Kelly & Decker, 2009).

"Economic slump" phenomenon. The issue of the on-going learning gap, technological divide, and socio-economic disproportion that exist between low-income, minority youth and suburban students set the course towards an economic crisis for inner city families (Howard, 2010; Lipman, 2004). Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses the underachievement of students in United States schools and how the achievement disparity transcends to an educational deficit, which is associated with the country's economic debt issue. Consequences for these discrepancies impact the financial well being of impoverished families, considered the "economic slump" (Davis, 2003). Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) stress that 6th grade is a crucial developmental phase for adolescents, which also marks a time when students begin to lose interest in school and suffer academic declines. Minority male youth are amongst the lowest

performing student subgroups, exhibiting a substantial educational gap in comparison to their peers. Therefore, it is vital that educators understand the importance of early detection of student failure and identify effective strategies in a timely manner in order to circumvent a detrimental path to school drop out, which perpetuates an unremitting poverty cycle for urban youth (Anyon, 2014; Balnfanz et al., 2007). Darling-Hammond (2007) argues that de facto segregation, inequitable access to quality schooling, and failed educational polices have lead to an imbalanced education system and a national deficit crisis that impacts the future economic stability of urban households (Anyon, 2014). Darling-Hammond (2010) declares that if America commits to reform efforts that bring about educational equality for all students, they will in turn equip disenfranchised youth with the skills and competencies required to compete for the same jobs as their more affluent counterparts.

Middle School Transition Change Factors

Biological and physiological changes. Middle school years mark the time of physical, social, emotional, and developmental changes in adolescents as they experience puberty (Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Physically, students experience outward changes in appearance as their bodies rapidly grow and mature. During this phase, children have to learn to adjust to the onset of strange and weird mood swings and feelings of awkwardness. Sisk and Foster (2004) discuss the implications of hormone production in both male and female pre-teens that often create fear and depression in middle school learners. As a result, children become withdrawn from the pressures of school or overcompensate by trying hard to fit in with peers. DeRose and Brooks-Gunn (2009) assert that the fluctuation of adolescents' socio-emotional well-being affect

students' self-identify and self-worth linked to intellectual and educational insecurities. Eccles and Roeser (2011) emphasize that schools must play a meaningful role in gratifying students' basic psychological needs, which drives their motivation and readiness to learn.

Cognitive learning development. Adolescence is a period of traumatic and stressful transformation for children. Born et al. (2002) denote a correlation between the phases of puberty and the characteristics of Piaget's (1972) pre-operational thinking stage, which occurs simultaneously as students become apprehensive about their competence and ability to perform in school. Blakemore, Burnett, and Dahl (2010) stress that adolescent youth experience hormonal imbalances that impact their mental ability to store and retain information and absorb new knowledge (Eidelman, 2014). Research reveals a correlation between puberty and brain function, which determine when children are cognitively ready to make the intellectual shift to adjust academically in school (Goddings et al., 2014). Often times, the student's psychological development is incompatible to the structure, dynamics, and set-up of middle school configurations and programs, especially for minority youth (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, & Rowley, 2008; Eccles & Roeser, 2009). The anticipation of unfamiliar academic expectations trigger students' anxiety levels during the transition from elementary school to middle school, which decreases their motivation to learn. Minority youth from poorer school districts struggle with their educational values, which often conflict with school principles (Anderman & Mueller, 2010). However, these researchers stress that middle schools can serve as a positive experience for adolescents if the learning environment is conducive and the proper supports are put in place (Willms et al., 2009).

Middle school environment and conditions. Clark et al. (2014) discuss the influence of middle school configurations and expectations on student transition and learning conditions. Both K-8 and 6-8 grade programs fail to address the basic needs of early adolescent students just entering 6th grade from elementary school (Wigfield et al., 2008). Research on school organization reveals that relocating students to a separate middle school environment, or K-8 schools operating as 'elemiddles,' may be too soon for this age group (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Hough, 2009). Middle schools often operate as mini-high schools with strict rules and stringent expectations that adolescent children have a difficult time meeting, therefore students become apathetic and begin to resist school (Schafer, 2010).

The influence of educational laws and policies cause anxiety for middle school students because learning conditions and academic demands intensify after 5th grade. Stress from accountability factors produces a domino effect from teachers to their students, which creates pressure for them to show improvement and progress on high stakes standardized achievement assessments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Thus, schoolchildren experience a shift in their desire to learn, because their perception of school changes and schoolwork becomes either too hard or very boring (Eidelman, 2014). Middle school conditions coupled with student-teacher and peer-peer relationships strongly influence achievement outcomes for urban learners and the trajectory for student failure or success (National Middle School Association, 2010).

The issue of negative student behavior and poor learning performance are prevalent in impoverished, inner city schools. The change in academic enthusiasm for these youth can be attributed to the engagement gap that exists amongst students in urban

middle schools (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Research indicates that children are stimulated when they are made to feel connected to their learning environment (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Roeser, 2009). However, if students feel out of place they become disinterested in school, become discipline problems, and ultimately make the decision to check out of school altogether (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Neison and Wise (2004) stress the importance for urban schools to address the barriers that present challenges for students as they transition into middle school.

Middle school facilities and structure. Wang and Holcombe (2010) discuss the influences of students' perceived middle school environmental and structural changes on their ability to navigate in a new learning facility or section of the building. Adolescent students have a difficult time finding their way from class to class through crowded hallways in unfamiliar departmentalized learning environments (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Evans and Kim (2013) assert that impoverished schools are often untidy and poorly maintained, which has a profound influence on student attitude and achievement. Uline and Tschannen-Moran (2008) contend that clean bathrooms, cafeterias, and well maintained instructional areas motivate urban youth, support student learning, and instill a sense of pride (National Middle School Association, 2010).

Student-teacher relationships. The National Middle School Association conducted research on student achievement and the implementation of the middle school model in 2006. Stemming from this study, specific elements have been prescribed to create a productive middle school. According to the research, teaching practices, competence, and beliefs were paramount in student achievement outcomes for middle school students (Hughes, 2011). Murray and Zvoch (2011) share that minority youth have

difficulty establishing trusting relationships with their teachers. Kavenagh, Freeman, and Ainley (2012) further assert that emotional detachment with their teachers and other school educators have an impact on the social, emotional, and academic well being of urban children, especially male students. Brown (2010) introduced seven positive student-teacher relationship approaches to assist students with coping and sustaining in middle school. Within these strategies, it was determined that students in this age group are discovering themselves and fighting for independence. Positive interactions with teachers are crucial because such relationships provide students with a support system as they explore independence (Gregory et al., 2010; Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012).

A survey conducted in several schools within an urban school district on the association between teacher support and student achievement revealed that middle school students who experienced a nurturing relationship with teachers are 50% more likely to demonstrate high levels of engagement in the classroom versus disengaged students who felt disconnected (Klem & Connell, 2004; Newberry, 2010). This research suggests that meaningful and personalized teacher-student relationships enhance student performance and desire to master subject matter in school. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) examined the self-determination theory by Marks (2000) in that all subgroups of people possess the desire to have their needs fulfilled. Marks explain this framework as a psychological process to encourage disengaged students to make psychological investments to learning and performing in school. This method inspires students to internalize expectations for improvement through positive relationships with their teachers (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). The findings of this study clarify that teacher-student relationships do matter and are directly correlated to student learning outcomes.

Peer interactions. Research states that student relationships with their schoolmates have a direct correlation to their motivation to achieve (MacCoun, Cook, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008). When students feel accepted and valued by their friends and classmates they tend to demonstrate high achievement, however, negative relationships with peers showed negative academic motivation and resistance amongst urban children (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008). Jacobson and Burdsal (2012) conducted a Peer Performance Relationship (P/PRS) study, which examined peer-peer relationships and discovered that supportive adolescent friendships lead to positive academic performance. Hence, undesirable student-peer friendships have harmful school outcomes for students who often become behavior problems and experience school failure for minority youth. Carrell and Hoekstra (2010) agree, and state that peer relationships have a profound impact on student self-esteem and self-identification, and they often become scared to learn and excel in middle school. MacCoun et al. (2008) argue that 6th graders who move to a separate middle school experience increased disciplinary troubles and increased peer pressure, more than students who remain in K-8 settings due to the negative exposure to the behavior of older students in the building (Pickhardt, 2011). Burke and Sass (2013) contend that adolescent students desire acceptance from their friends, which has strong implications on academic outcomes for students from urban school districts. Hamblen and Barnett (2009) highlight for educators that youth from the most needy schools seek connections with their friends in school, and these relationships help them cope in and out of school. Researchers further reveal that students from urban environments understand one another's external living experiences and negative neighborhood

encounters that impede their ability to focus and achieve in school (Kinderman & Skinner, 2012).

Student Perception

Research on student perception reveals the importance of considering what factors urban adolescent learners believe have a bearing on their educational outcomes, especially during one of the most critical developmental turning points in their lives (Gallant & Zhao, 2011; Skinner, Furrer, Marchland, & Kindermann, 2008). Students desire to be heard, and when they feel that no one is listening, they lose their sense of belongingness to school and willingness to learn (Juvonen, 2007). Gaining an understanding of students' perceived barriers to school success and lack of support is important for teachers and educators to realize how environmental learning conditions influence children's intrinsic motivation to achieve (McCaslin & Burross, 2008; Thuneberg, 2007). Both Bennett (2008) and Delpit (2006) strongly suggest that teachers listen to their students and acquire a cultural understanding of the youth that they serve to best identify how to impact their learning. Thus, the purpose of this study focused on students' perceptions of their middle school transitional experiences and highlights what they value about their own learning. Bandura (2012) declares that students' perceived self-efficacy of their personal ability for self-regulated achievement has a profound impact on their learning development. Doll and Brehm (2014) stress that underprivileged students can be successful in school despite the barriers they face through building internal resiliency, stamina, and intrinsic motivation. When teachers encourage student input into the decision-making process in the classroom, students develop the self-determination to achieve (Hammond III, 2006; Perry, 2004).

Creating Successful Urban Classrooms

Duncan-Andrade (2007) contributes a detailed prescription to transform urban classrooms into positive, successful learning environments for low-income students in inequitable, inner city schools, based on a three-year research project conducted in Los Angeles that focused on transformative educational practices for teachers in high-risk districts. He describes effective teaching through the 3 Ps: purpose, process, and pedagogy (p. 621) and unveils five core instructional principles that generate high-performing urban middle schools. The researcher further asserts that in order to produce resilient, high achieving disenfranchised students, educators must know what they are doing and have a plan to carry it through. Weiner (2014) follows this sentiment and stresses the importance of motivating students to set goals and to dedicate themselves to achieve the desired goal. Doll and Brehm (2014) argue that teachers must focus on modifying the structure and dynamics of their classrooms and not seek to change their students. In order to assist impoverished children to overcome obstacles, schools must become a nurturing, academic, social, and emotional supportive place for students to grow (Patrick et al., 2011).

Theoretical Frameworks and Philosophies

Social learning theory. Bandura's (2012) Social Learning Theory suggests that student learning is influenced by what they interpret and observe from their teachers. The Middle School Plunge within this particular framework is grounded in what Bandura calls, "reciprocal determinism," imparting that teacher's actions and interactions can cause student actions and behavior. Lave and Wenger's (1990) Situated Learning Theory confirms Bandura's ideals that certain conditions must be in place to secure an optimal

learning environment for schoolchildren, and the importance that teachers must demonstrate desired behaviors for students to emulate (Korthagen, 2010). Another influential educational pioneer to education is Jean Piaget. In his Social Learning Theory (1972), he stresses that students have not reached a certain level of maturity to be developmentally independent to understand certain aspects of learning on their own without guidance from adults. According to Piaget, this time period usually lasts up to 12 years of age, which begins the middle school phase for students (Omrod, 2004). Within this stage of development, students are expected by teachers to automatically learn and adjust independently. Many youth at this age neglect to make the shift in maturation necessary to sustain without proper nurturing and supervision from adults (Atherton, 2011; Wigfield et al., 2008). This philosophy plays an essential role in understanding why urban middle school students experience difficulty in sustaining learning expectations in school. Piaget's cognitive stages of development describe the process by which students process information. This theory explains when and how students are able to take in new information. The sensorimotor stage begins at birth and continues to right before pre-school. Developmentally, children are exploring their surroundings and discovering their abilities. The preoperational stage is the time when children connect objects to pictures and words and benefit from touching objects in a concrete sense (Rogoff, 2003). Students at this point are in pre-k and kindergarten and are exposed to narrative text and stories that show a pattern or story sequence that involve characters, settings, and events. Students are able to recall information in a basic sense. According to the dynamics of the "fourth grade slump," students at this juncture should be introduced to informational text and content-based vocabulary so that they can make a more gradual

learning shift once they move into the third and fourth grades (McNamara et al., 2011). Next, the concrete stage begins about first to second grade, when students move from concrete thinking to more abstract learning and understanding. This is a crucial time for student reading development and discourse. Chall and Jacobs (2003) assert that during this time, learners are expected to begin to make the shift in their thinking so that a lapse in learning does not occur. Students must become more familiar with trade books, historical fiction, and non-fiction text, and be provided opportunities to share their knowledge in their every-day conversations and writing (Alvermann et al., 2007). The formal operational final stage of development is when learners are ready to come up with their own perspectives and viewpoints, think critically, and make their decisions based on reasoning (Coles, 2007; Gallant & Zhao, 2011). During this time of abstract thinking, students have to be reflective about their learning, thereby moving them towards the ability to utilize metacognition so that they can begin to think about their thinking (McLeod, 2009; Piaget, 1972). According to Chall (1983), at this point students are mastering concepts and higher levels of comprehension and analysis. Vocabulary acquisition and building is especially crucial at this stage, so that students can read and interpret difficult text and apply their new knowledge affectively. Students from low-income backgrounds struggle at both the concrete and formal operational stages, and tend to continue to plummet academically (Gee, 2008; Kim et al., 2014). Thus, teachers have a major role in exhibiting the proper examples that encourage students to tap into their inherent desire to progress in school, manifested through the Self-Determination Theory.

Self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2011) define Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as students' intrinsic motivation and desire to achieve and ability to foster

personal learning investments into their own education (Marks, 2000). Usher and Pajares (2006) state that when students develop confidence in school, it nurtures their self-efficacy and persistence to succeed and achieve future goals. Self-determination is a strong innate trait that cannot be taught; yet minority youth from high-risk environments tend to have a natural internal resilience that must be cultivated by teachers, educators, and the adults in their lives. Once marginalized students realize their inner motivational strength, they can succeed despite the odds against them (Schiffbauer, 2013).

Attribution theory. Of the many educational learning theories associated with the topic, Bernard Weiner's Attribution Theory relates specifically to student perception and achievement, and ties directly to the self-determination theory. This theoretical framework explains why students act the way they do and decodes causes for their behavior in school. Weiner (2012) refers attributed learning to self-esteem and pride. His conceptual view puts into perspective the understanding that student achievement in school is accredited to personal ability and self-worth. Low achievers who often experience failure believe that they are incompetent, and thus become apathetic to school and the learning process as a whole. Weiner (2014) emphasizes that student perception about self-ability is attributed to how they perceive teachers view their level of competence to learn, which influences their motivation to achieve and willingness to try in school. The researcher further contends that student motivation is inspired by what their teachers expect of them. For this reason, it is crucial that urban educators set high learning standards for students to aspire to and instill a sense of self-pride and value in accomplishing personal academic achievement expectations (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008).

Summary

The research discussed in Chapter II sought to identify reasons, programming, and strategies that play a vital role in the achievement of minority youth in urban settings. Middle school transition factors were highlighted and dissected to gain a clear understanding of the variables that influence and impede school achievement and performance for inner city students. In summary, a review of literature supported the phenomenon, or claim, that students become disengaged in school and in turn suffer an academic plunge (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). However, professional practices that effectively promote authentic and nurturing educational experiences for minority students whereby teachers are culturally conscious (Duncan-Andrade, 2007) can have a positive impact on the future success of disenfranchised youth (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to identify factors that contributed to the "The Middle School Plunge" learning decline that occurs in the 5th grade from the perspective of the students (Wang & Eccles, 2012; West et al., 2012). This phenomenon suggests that students who attend a new school upon entering the 6th grade, versus remaining in the same educational environment for middle school, suffer from a drastic academic decline in mathematics and language arts (Jacobs, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). This research explored the relationship between students' perception of their transitional experiences (Bandura, 2012) into middle school and school achievement for urban youth (Libbey, 2004; Thuneberg, 2007). This study determined what variables influence student achievement and success for inner city children when they move into middle school (Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007). Further, the research focused on urban students' feelings about their academic preparation and experiences in a separate middle school setting versus remaining in a K-8 school, as well as practices that students suggested would assist them to perform better (Anderman & Mueller, 2010; Blank, 2004; Juvonen, 2007). Statistics on this topic indicated that students often lose up to seven months of learning once they transition to 6th grade, especially those from poorer areas (West et al., 2012).

Research Design

A sequential-explanatory method of inquiry focused on the connection between urban students' feelings and attitudes of their middle school experience and how their perceptions lead to failure in school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2010; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). The information gathered involved participant

responses analyzed from qualitative data collected during focus group interviews to help explain the quantitative data results uncovered from the paired-validity analysis (PVA) student perception survey tool. This process of gathering and examining data was the optimum choice to make meaning of information and evidence obtained from urban students in both traditional K-8 'elemiddle' settings (Hough, 2005) and a stand-alone middle school (Blaikie, 2003; Creswell, 2008). The data collection approach was conducted, analyzed, and interpreted separately in two phases and then mixed together: first quantitatively using an on-line survey tool, followed qualitatively through retrieved student answers to focus group questions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Phase I survey questionnaire produced trends in a quantitative form; Phase II focus groups qualitatively revealed whether a co relational relationship occurred between the variables (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2010). Overall, the intent of this study examined how students' perceptions (Klem & Connell, 2004) relative to achievement and performance after the 5th grade contributed to the academic drop in test scores once they transition into middle school (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Ryan et al., 2013; Schwerdt & West, 2013).

Research Questions

This study sought to explore and understand the educational phenomenon known as "The Middle School Plunge" that plagues urban students (Akos et al., 2015; Holas & Huston, 2012; Lippold, Powers, Syvertsen, Feinberg, & Greenberg, 2013; West & Schwerdt, 2012). To define the nature of the study, research questions are essential to discover why the study is being conducted on a particular topic and best method research design approach to find viable answers (Blaikie, 2003; Creswell, 2013). For the purpose of this study, four questions were asked:

1. RQ 1 (Overarching Question): What do middle school students describe as factors or variables contributing to the academic decline, known as "The Middle School Plunge" for urban students from the perspective of the students?
2. RQ 2 (Quantitative): To what extent does student perception of their middle school experience correlate to the difficulty of student success when transitioning to middle school?

    RQ 2a: Why should urban school districts consider a K-8 setting or separate 6^{th}-8^{th} grade program for students once they enter middle school from 5^{th} grade? What do the students feel about their experiences in middle school?
3. RQ 3 (Qualitative): What do urban youth feel about interactions with their 6^{th} grade teachers and how student-teacher relationships influence learning performance for them once they enter middle school? What do the students say are the issues?

    RQ 3a: What do students share are practices that they feel will help them to be successful as a middle school student?

Phase I Quantitative

The first phase of the study was an exploration of the Middle School Plunge through the administration of an on-line survey tool that was distributed to a large sample of 6th grade students at three different schools from adjacent urban school districts. This stage of the research included the collection of survey data, student assessment data, and demographic information of the participants to better understand the feelings and experiences of students once they move into middle school (Carolan et al., 2013; Gordan

et al., 2011; Yecke, 2006). The intention of this study was to identify the factors that contributed to a decline in achievement results for inner city school children once they enter 6th grade from their perspectives (Appleton et al., 2008). A series of 40 paired analysis questions was created to extract perception data from students. Each question has an opposite pairing designed for students to answer with reliability in order to provide consistent information (Midgley et al., 2008). During this phase, a descriptive, cross-sectional data collection method was used to measure the relationship between the variables to describe "The Middle School Plunge" phenomenon (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2010). Results from the study describe the role that the factors played in relationship to one another (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). According to Decker et al. (2007), a conclusion may indicate that students who have positive perspectives or perceptions (independent variable) about their middle school experiences tend to achieve more (dependent variable). Students with negative perceptions (independent variable) about school and their relationships and experiences will experience a plunge (dependent variable) academically and achieve less (Akos, 2002; Anderman, 2012; Carrell & Hoeksta, 2010; Sanchez, Colón, & Esparza, 2005).

Paired validity analysis (PVA): Inverse pairing question survey. Survey questions were designed to gain participants' perspectives about their lived middle school transitional experiences (Booker, 2006; Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Opposite paired questions are incompatible in a binary relationship; for example, a negative inferential answer for one inquiry should show an opposing response for the other, which is predicative of the truth between each relational pair (Murphy, 2003; Schang, 2012) Each of the 40 perception survey questions has an assigned opposite match for students to

determine the extent to which they agree or disagree about their feelings or encounters in school using a 5-point Likert scale (Eidelman, 2014; Midgely et al., 2008; Tuckman & Harper, 2012). The questions were loaded into the online survey program designed to quantify and measure participant responses. Student answer choices were then analyzed to identify (a) what students felt contributed to the middle school plunge, (b) what feelings and experiences they encountered during and after their move into middle school, and (c) whether the participants answered each paired question with an inverse score which described the same meaning (Anderman & Mueller, 2010; Murphy, 2003; West, 2012). Each survey question contains a value number with a frequency table that revealed the results of the relationship between the questions and the variables. The paired questions were phrased in reverse to compare each answer choice to the target measures for internal reliability response consistency rate (Schang, 2012). The inquiries on the online survey were randomized to scatter the assigned paired validity analysis (PVA) questions so that participants would be unaware that each question had a matching opposite. Student survey results calculations produced PVA questions response frequencies and measured average rating scores of paired opposites (Blaikie, 2003; Fink, 2012). The Likert questions can offer a feel for the direction of the average answers (Creswell, 2008; Cruse, 2004). The PVA perception survey was administered during the first two weeks of May, 2014 to allow students time to experience the transition from 5th grade into 6th grade and to allow participants the opportunity to receive school assessment and report card grades so they could better self-evaluate their academic progression or decline.

Phase II Qualitative

Findings from the quantitative phase were used to design focus group questions to gather perception information from inner city youth about their middle school encounters and support factors that they feel would counter the academic plunge experience for them. During this second phase, students were arranged in small groups and asked questions about their transitional experience based on the results of the quantitative survey in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the data (Creswell, 2013). These short response focus group questions were designed to describe the quantitative results more effectively (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Classroom teachers classified each participant as either a low achiever or high achiever based on state assessment data and school report grade averages. Students were also identified as either having behavior problems or positive interactions with their teachers (Murray & Murray, 2004; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005; Gregory et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The purpose of interviewing students who exhibit opposite ends of the spectrum was to determine what intrinsic characteristics and perspectives about learning they possess that affect achievement (McCaslin & Burross, 2008).

Focus Group Questions

During this qualitative method of inquiry, six structured, open-ended focus questions were created to provide a deeper meaning to the results of the quantitative PVA survey. The focus group questions captured the true essence of the students' experiences by allowing them to provide meaning to the quantitative data and add their underlying attitudes and beliefs that contributed to "The Middle School Plunge." Three focus groups of up to 12 students from each research site were identified based on participant

representation from factor groups and teacher recommendations. The focus group interviews transpired during the first week of June 2014.

Setting

The research was conducted in three urban schools, from two different school districts in New Jersey with like demographics, low-income status, and student achievement ranking. The schools were classified as two traditional K-8 elementary schools and one 6th -8th grade middle school grade configuration. The principal from each school was contacted to schedule a time conducive to meet to be briefly informed about the research and its relevance to education. The superintendent of each school district was presented with a sample of the interview questions (Appendix A) for approval. After receiving final approvals, including Institutional Review Board Approval (Appendix B) the first phase of the study was conducted. Copies of the Student Informed Consent (Appendix C) and Parent Consent Forms (Appendix D) were given to each administering teacher and distributed to students who volunteered to take survey so that their parents were fully aware of the research's intent, safety, lack of risks to the students, and full confidentiality.

Participant Target Population Demographics

The participant sample selection was comprised of 6th grade students from urban school districts. It was not feasible to conduct the survey with every middle school student in the country; therefore selected students represented their peers (Creswell, 2008; Delpit, 2006; Tyson, 2003). The participants in this study were demographically considered 85% low-income based on free and reduced lunch statuses and located geographically from adjacent urban school districts. The study included 136 participants

who volunteered to complete the student perception survey (Appendix E). The ethnic population breakdown was comprised of 35% Hispanic, 56% African-American, 1.0% Asian, and 8.0% Other. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and American Indian or Alaska Native ethnicities were not identified by any of the students in the study. About 45% of the students reported being males and 55% identified themselves as females. Approximately, 57% of the participants attended a 6th-8th grade middle school and 43% were from the two K-8 elementary schools (Table 3).

Table 3

Participant Participation and Demographic Characteristics

	Participants		Ethnic Breakdown					Gender	
School Type	Total 6th Grade Student Population	Actual 6th Grade Participants in the Study	Hispanic	African American	Asian	White	Other	Male	Female
School A (K-8)	66	28	6	21	1	0	0	10	18
School B (K-8)	64	33	5	22	0	0	6	19	14
School C (6-8)	259	75	36	33	1	0	5	32	43
Total	389	136	47	76	2	0	11	61	75

Notes. Numbers on this table represent actual student counts
Source: New Jersey Department of Education, Survey Monkey On-line Participant Results

Quantitatively, a purposeful sampling method best accommodated this study as all 6th grade students from each research site was given the opportunity to participate (Bernard, 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). The participant population was pre-

selected as the target sample of study based on criteria set, which provided internal validity to rule out possible bias (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2014). Qualitatively, the maximum variant sampling method was used to select students who offered the most valuable information to answer the research questions (Barbour, 2013; Johnson & Christenson, 2008). The snowball effect was also conducted to capture information from specific participants, pinpointed to represent each type of learner characterized. Teachers were asked to identify specific students to interview from those surveyed to create student focus groups (Goering & Streiner, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The purpose of obtaining data from students who have completed the 5th grade was to determine whether there was an immediate change in their academics and attitude once they became 6th graders in a middle school environment (Appleton et al., 2008; Blank, 2004; Clark et al., 2014; Cushman & Rogers, 2008).

A questionnaire is one of the best tools to use to capture and collect individuals' knowledge, understanding, and feelings on a topic that affects them the most (Creswell, 2013; Groves et al., 2011). The survey design was a Likert-scale approach that assessed students' perceptions as a way to portray students' true feelings on causes of academic decline once they enter into middle school (Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015; Erb, 2006; Fink, 2012; Jacobs, 2012; Lippold et al., 2013). Klem and Connell (2004) use this methodological strategy as a confidential way to collect data from students by focusing survey questions based on students' perspectives of their feelings and level of agreement on each question.

Participant Criteria Selection

A request was sent out to urban schools in the area with similar characteristics and demographic make-up. The three schools included in the study responded and as a result were selected to participate in the research. Sixth grade student populations from participating schools were chosen according to learning levels: low-achiever, middle-achiever, and high-achiever. Participants were also classified by gender and ethnicity. Levels of participant perception was measured between high-always, medium/sometimes, to low-never levels of intensity that transition to middle school encounters influenced their achievement and performance (Fink, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2011). One hundred and thirty-six total students from all three schools completed the quantitative survey. Twenty-two students were selected as a subset from the survey population to participate in the focus group sessions.

Procedure

Quantitative. The PVA survey was administered to those 6th grade middle school students who returned the consent forms and volunteered to complete the computer based on-line tool (see Appendix E). In order to ensure data credibility and avoid bias, the researcher assumed an indirect role with the dissemination and monitoring the survey. Classroom teachers moderated the process and read a researcher disclaimer statement that introduced and explained the purpose of the questionnaire to the students so that they felt comfortable to disclose anonymously what they thought, believed, and felt about what they experienced in school, relationship with teachers, and how such encounters and perceptions influenced their academic achievement and success. The participants took the survey either in their own classrooms or in each school's computer

lab during non-academic periods that were assigned by the building principal. The questions were randomized so that each participant's screen viewed a different arrangement of inquiries to ensure valid individualized responses.

Qualitative. The researcher met with each focus group of students in a private setting identified by the building principal of each school to answer a series of questions created from survey results in order to provide a clearer perspective of their feelings and experiences (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Each participant was given a copy of the focus group questions (Appendix A) and provided a writing utensil to score the last item. The handouts were collected and participant answer choices were averaged to identify the order of importance. Student responses to each focus group question was recorded in a journal during each session and later transcribed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Phase I. The PVA student perception questionnaire was collected electronically, weighted, and sorted using an on-line measurement tool. Trends were identified and coded according to perception types. Measures of participants' perceptions and perspectives of their transitional experience as well as student motivation and self-determination were analyzed. Each question was calculated and compared to determine perception intensity, frequency, and validity. Data were examined for patterns and compiled. PVA inverse-paired question match student perception charts were created and included as figures in the Results Chapter (see also Appendix F).

Phase II. Focus group questions were developed based on student perception findings captured from the survey. Student transcribed response data from focus group interviews were coded, analyzed, and arranged by common themes and phrases and

compared to survey outcomes. The frequency of words and terms were calculated using the on-line ATLASti word cruncher program. Qualitative trends were identified, analyzed, and interpreted to better explain survey results.

Phase III. Results from both data sources were mixed, analyed, and measured against common trends derived to answer the research questions. Mixed-methods comparison charts were created to corroborate the findings. Conclusions were drawn based on the interpretation of the data. The goal was to link the themes to either confirm or contradict the research. Students' standardized state assessment scores were also collected and then measured to student agreement levels to determine any correlation between the variables (Creswell, 2013). Data were mixed together to map out the experiences of the students as representative of the relationship between their perceptions of the transitional process and the middle school plunge that made middle school so unwelcoming (Louis, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Tyson, 2003; West, 2012).

New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) Data Trends

According to the New Jersey State School Report Card, state assessment results display individual school's reading and mathematics scores throughout the state (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013). Table 4 demonstrates annual student proficiency data during the 2009-2013 school years for the total population of 6th grade students from each school. The chart represents the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) Assessment Language Arts Literacy (LAL) and Mathematics (Math) scores for students in this study who attended School A, School B, and School C, and highlights the percentage who took the test and earned a passing proficiency score of 200 or better. School A and School B represent the two traditional K-8 environments and

School C is a 6-8 middle school. Middle School C's yearly NJ ASK scores were calculated between the four elementary schools in the district that house 5th grade students and a joint score average was generated. The scores on the graph below denote actual score outcomes of the same group of students as they transition into middle school from 5th grade over a three-year span to identify whether a plunge occurred.

Three-year trend results on Table 4 show a total academic plunge at School A and School C during each year noted on the chart in both subjects. School B reveals a learning decline in LAL in 2011 and drop in Math during the 2012-testing year. However, School B shows improvement during subsequent and preceding school years in both LAL and Math. Consequently, student achievement patterns are consistent with "The Middle School Plunge" concept in that student test scores show a substantial decline in the middle school grades (Dee & Jacob, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). However, results from K-8 School A contradict West and Schwerdt's (2012) theory that students from K-8 schools outperform children who attend stand-alone 6-8 middle schools. Therefore the data support the argument that the issue of "The Middle School Plunge" is not a result of grade configuration or school type, but in the adverse transitional experience, failed preparation, and lack of pre-exposure to middle school expectations prior to students entering the 6th grade.

Table 4

NJ ASK 5th Into 6th Grade Three-Year State Proficiency/Advanced Proficiency Passing Assessment Scores Trend Data in Language Arts Literacy (LAL) and Math for the Years 2009-2013

School Type	School Year	School Year	School Year	School Year
School A (K-8)	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
LAL 5th Grade	27.0%	39.0%	33.0%	-
LAL 6th Grade	-	20%	35%	33%
Math 5th Grade	62%	79%	56%	-
Math 6th Grade	-	55%	62%	45%
School B (K-8)	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
LAL 5th Grade	23%	23%	30%	-
LAL 6th Grade	-	21%	32%	33%
Math 5th Grade	41%	54%	42%	-
Math 6th Grade	-	61%	41%	52%
School C (6-8)	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
LAL 5th Grade District Average	44%	29%	40%	-
LAL 6th Grade	-	37%	23%	32%
Math 5th Grade District Average	71%	67%	72%	-
Math 6th Grade	-	65%	54%	56%

Notes: *According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education Annual School Report Card, Retrieved from http://www.state.nj.us/education/pr/1213/01/014180055.pdf*

**Scores represent passing scores of the same students traveling to each grade from year to year*

Reliability, Credibility, and Trustworthiness

Threats to reliable data collection may stem from the readability of the questions and participants' understanding of each item to give a proper perception rating (Creswell, 2013; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010). Also, the quality of data collected from the sample may not be rich. Students' response rates may cause a problem with the validity of the data that informs the study and may not answer or match the research questions. Validity was established by examining patterns between qualitative and quantitative surveys responses from the students (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2013). Data transformation is an iterative process that merges qualitative and quantitative data in order to contribute information obtained from one phase to the next phase (Onwuegbuzie, Bustamante & Nelson, 2010).

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) describe mixed methods as one of the best forms of research credibility. Risks to the validity of student perception data were minimized by surveying a large population sample during the quantitative phase of the research process. The reliability of the survey instrument was tested to measure the consistency of the items on the tool to ensure that if the same participants were surveyed again, their answers would be the same (Fink, 2012). A pairing analysis approach determined whether the questions were credible based on opposite responses to the matching, opposing questions. The survey tool was piloted in a classroom of former 6th grade students to identify whether certain questions should be discarded, reworded, or additional ones were needed. Finally, participants' names were anonymous and not disclosed in order to obtain the most vivid and candid information as possible, and thus

ensure that the questions answer the research questions and measure what the research intended (Blaikie, 2003).

Instrumentation

Paired-validity analysis (PVA) student perception survey. For the survey (quantitative), the unit of analysis was 6th grade students from two different urban districts who either attended a kindergarten through eighth grade school or a separate sixth through eighth grade middle school learning environment. The design of the instrument was stimulated by the patterns of adaptive learner's survey by Midgley et al. (2008). The PVA survey was designed to measure students' perceptions of their middle school experiences and transitional occurrences that had an influence on academic achievement, progress, and performance in 6th grade (West & Schwerdt, 2012). The tool was first piloted with former 6th graders and was revised according to the suggestions on understandability, wording, and readability from the students and teachers (Fraser, 2012). The question types were devised to describe student interactions in middle school through the lenses of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Learning Theory, and Attribution Theory (Atherton, 2011; Bandura, 2012; Deci & Ryan, 2011; Eidelman, 2014; Graham, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1990; Marks, 2000; Midgley et al., 2008; Omrod, 2004; Piaget, 1972; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010; Weiner, 2014; Usher & Pajares, 2006; Weiner, 1974, 1986, 2012; Wigfield et al., 2008). The 40 paired-question items were organized into the following five categories: Perception of Student-Teacher Relationships, Perception of Ability and Academic Preparation, Perception of Middle School Conditions, and Perception of Student Peer Relations. Participant responses to the questions in the PVA survey used a 5-point Likert Scale, which described the intensity of

their feelings about their middle school experiences. The scale values ranged from (0) very true/always feel this way to (4) not true at all/never feel this way. The score calculations created a scale rate for each question answered. The higher the percentage score, then students' perceptions were considered positive and lower ratings denoted an unfavorable or negative transitional experience. An opposite rating score to each paired questions provided validity to student responses, whereas middle percentage ratings revealed that participants felt equally about each experience.

Focus-group questions. The procedure for the focus group interviews (qualitative) involved meeting and talking with students about their transitional experiences in order to gain a better understanding of their middle school encounters (Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Students who exhibited high levels of self-determination as well as students who demonstrated low self-efficacy in school (Eccles & Roser, 2009, 2011) were targeted based on recommendations from teachers to obtain traits or characteristics that might affect student achievement (Bandura, 2012). Six open-ended questions were asked of the participants. The questions were created to further explain the outcomes from the PVA survey. The last question was constructed to address specific transitional practices and support factors that the participants chose and identified would best help them to sustain and succeed in middle school.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were collected by counting the frequency of participant answers on short-response questions as well as phrases or terms stated on the survey (Creswell, 2013). The data were charted and measured against the participant categories.

Differences and similarities between the variables were explored to determine whether a relationship existed between them (Blair, Czaja, & Blair, 2013; Fowler, 2008). Responses were coded using an on-line analysis system for managing and controlling data (Yin, 2013; SurveyMonkey, 2009). Quantitative results were generated based on the pattern of chosen responses from a Likert-scale questionnaire. The program disaggregated the data based on a scale of always (very true), often (most of the time), sometimes, not really (rarely), never (not true), type of middle school attended, gender, and race. Fink (2012) describes a plan for analyzing data through averaging response rates in the form of percentages.

Qualitatively, student responses from focus group interviews were transcribed and coded by three transitional factor category perception themes and eight adjustment shifts. Repetitive statements and phrases were organized and recurring words and terms were calculated and charted using the on-line ATLAS.ti word cruncher program. Results were analyzed to provide a clearer understanding of "The Middle School Plunge" phenomenon and the complexities of the transitional experience for urban youth.

Data from both quantitative and qualitative results were mixed together to uncover common themes and outcomes that reflected the beliefs, feelings, and perspectives of inner city school children as they transition into 6th grade. Mixed categories were produced, connected, and linked to participant perception outcomes that provided a middle school "anti-plunge" checklist to counter the academic decline of minority, disenfranchised, urban students.

Summary

Chapter III expands on the purpose of the research and the procedures used to guide the study. The literature review suggests the need to conduct research that explores "The Middle School Plunge" from the viewpoint and perspective of the students in relation to the factors that lead to their academic downfall (Anderman, 2012; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; West et al., 2012). This chapter prepared a justification for the research methodology. It explained the methods of data collection and examined assessment trends of urban students in low-income school districts, which is a factor in the basis of this study. Student academic performance and students' perceptions of their middle school encounters were compared. The comparisons led to the purpose of this study, which is to identify professional practices that can be integrated and contribute to the field of education. The suggestions provide ways teachers and educators can combat the academic deprivation of students once they enter middle school (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Brown, 2010; McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013).

Chapter IV

Results

This chapter presents results of data and information analyzed quantitatively from an on-line survey and qualitatively from focus groups conducted. The survey was comprised of 40 questions using a 5-point Likert-scale and 6 short-response, open-ended focus group questions. There was one overarching research question, two quantitative questions, and two qualitative questions targeted to provide a detailed examination of student response rates, findings, and interpretation of whether or not student perceptions of their experiences in middle school affect academic achievement. Results from this study are conveyed in correlation to the following research questions:

1. RQ 1 (Overarching Question): What do middle school students describe as factors or variables contributing to the academic decline, known as "The Middle School Plunge" for urban students from the perspective of the students?
2. RQ 2 (Quantitative): To what extent does student perception of their middle school experience correlate to the difficulty of student success when transitioning to middle school?

    RQ 2a: Why should urban school districts consider a K-8 setting or separate 6^{th}-8^{th} grade program for students once they enter middle school from 5^{th} grade? What do the students feel about their experiences in middle school?
3. RQ 3 (Qualitative): What do urban youth feel about interactions with their 6^{th} grade teachers and how student-teacher relationships influence learning performance for them once they enter middle school? What do the students say are the issues?

RQ 3a: What do students share are practices that they feel will help them to be successful as a middle school student?

The purpose of this study was to discover and explore student perceptions of how the transition to middle school experience contributed to achievement and success in school. The investigation of student perceptions of what they felt or believed influenced their academic progress was the basis of this research. This mixed-methods study was designed to capture the feelings of 6th grade students and the challenges they faced as middle school students. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006), using a mixed-methods approach to understanding the phenomenon better was most appropriate to provide validity to the findings. The overall intent of this research was to provide educators with a sense of what students really feel about their middle school experience from their own feelings and perceptions. Additionally, the intent of the study was to provide strategies from the student's perspective for educators to employ in order to enhance the middle school transition, which should ultimately increase student academic performance. The goal of this research was to examine and describe how student-teacher interactions, peer relations, and student overall educational experiences influence their academic performance in middle school. This chapter is organized into three phases. First, the findings of the quantitative phase are depicted. Then, outcomes of themes emerged from the qualitative phase are presented. Finally, the mixed results from both phases are integrated to provide a comprehensive discussion of the lived experiences from urban middle school students.

Data Collection

Originally, all 6th grade students at each of the three schools included were targeted for this study. At K-8 School A, 28 out of 66 total 6th grade students who turned in a consent and assent form were surveyed. At K-8 School B, 33 out of 64 total 6th grade students completed the on-line tool. At 6-8 School C, 75 out of 259 total 6th grade students took the survey. According to the New Jersey Department of Education enrollment data for the 2013-14 school year, the student totals represented all registered and on-roll 6th grade students at each district school. The survey was administered electronically using a purchased on-line survey tool called Survey Monkey, which disaggregated the data demographically and by each of the 40 questions by percentages. Participants in the study included a total of 136 6th grade students from both K-8 and 6-8 middle school program types. Of the 136 students, 44.85% were of the male gender and 55.15% female gender (see Figure 1). The ethnicity breakdown was 34.56% Hispanic/Latino, 55.88% Black/African American, 1.47% Asian, and 8.09% classified themselves as other as presented in Figure 2.

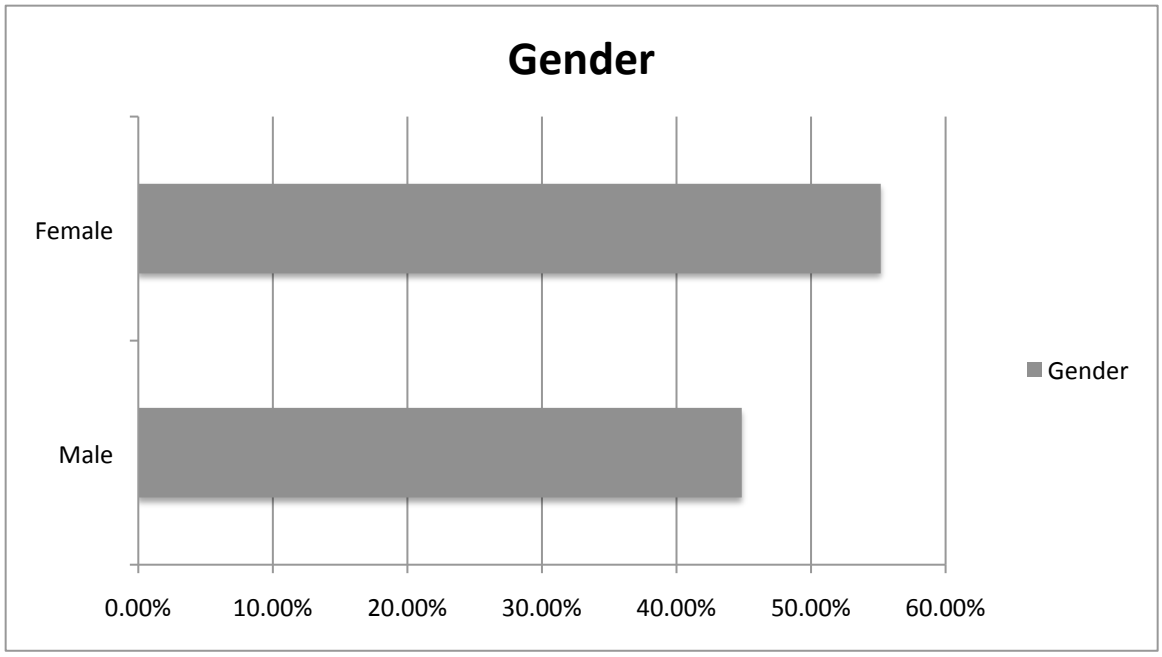

Figure 1. Percentages of student participant comparison by gender.

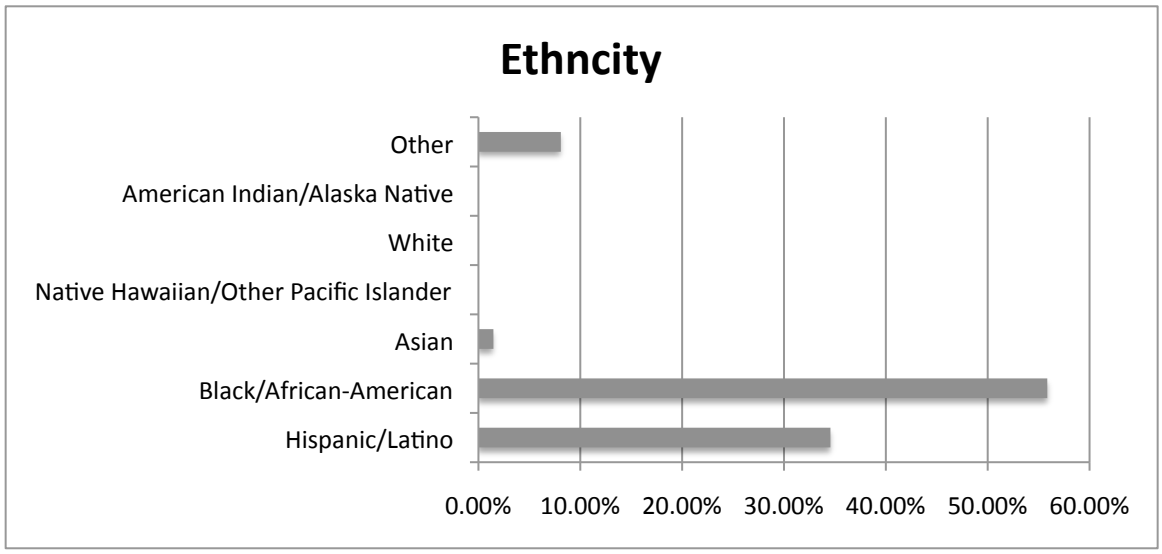

Figure 2. Percentages of student participant comparison by ethnicity.

Figure 1 indicates that of the 136 students, 61 were males and 75 were females. The data show an almost even number of students representing both genders. Figure 2

percentages show that 47 students who responded were Hispanic/Latino, 76 students were Black/African American, only 2 students were Asian, 11 of the students were other. The data reveal that none of the students who participated in the survey were representative of White, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, or American Indian/Alaska Native.

Response Rate

Both Watt, Simpson, McKillop, and Nunn (2002) and Hamilton (2004) contend that response rates assist with identifying the quality of data received through surveys based on a percentage of students who completed the survey. In this study, the survey provided an idea of what students revealed is going on in middle school to help assist with school improvement efforts. Response rates were calculated by dividing the total number of participants, in this case 6th grade students, who completed the survey by the total number targeted or 6th grade student enrolled at each research site (Ogier, 2005; Survey Monkey, 2009). Although high survey response rates help to ensure validity of survey results, the purpose of the research can determine an acceptable response rate (Cook, Heath & Thompson, 2000). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, according to Hamilton (2004), an average acceptable response rate for the on-line survey is 30% (Coates, 2006; Watt et al., 2002).

At School A, 66 total 6th grade students were enrolled and were given both a student assent and consent form to return in order to participate in the on-line survey. Approximately 28 students responded and completed the survey. Once these numbers were divided, a response rate of 42% was determined, and based on Coates (2006), deemed an acceptable representative sample of the total population at the school (Teddlie

& Tashakkori, 2009). At School B, 33 total students were eligible to take the survey from a total 6th grade enrollment of 64 students. The response rate at this school was 52% based on those students who completed the survey in comparison to the total eligible 6th grade student body. Both School A and School B are kindergarten through 8th grade middle school configurations. School C, which is a 6-8 middle school program was comprised of a total 259 6th grade students, of which 75 responded and completed the survey. The response rate was 29%, about one-percent less than the average acceptable response rate (Blaikie, 2003; Watt et al., 2002). The response rate percentages in this study are adequate to summarize or compare events between the populations of students and middle school types according to Blaikie (2003). Hence, giving validity to survey data and results in this study.

Phase I Quantitative Results

The first phase incorporated a Paired Validity Analysis Survey (PVA) questionnaire in order to associate the relationship between student perceptions of their middle school transitional experience and student achievement performance after the 5th grade (Midgley et al., 2008; West, 2012). Midgley et al. (2008) indicate that the factors that relate to the relationship between student perceptions of their middle school learning environment and student academic success can be best examined through patterns of student responses. The PVA survey was designed to analyze student perception as connected to student academic outcomes in middle school. In other words, to determine whether urban students' feelings and beliefs relative to middle school were factors in how well they performed. The PVA paired 40-question survey was administered as an on-line tool. The survey question arrangement through Survey Monkey was randomized,

therefore the arrangement of questions on the computer screen viewed differently for each student in order to minimize deceit and increase validity (Hamilton, 2004; SurveyMonkey, 2009). Each question item was paired with an inverse or opposite inquiry to determine the validity of student responses (Midgley et al., 2000). Thus, if a student answers favorable on a question then the response to the paired inverse question should be the opposite and vice-versa (Midgley et al., 2008; Ryan & Patrick, 2000).

The PVA survey scored the relationship between student perceptions of their middle school experiences to the Middle School Plunge (West, 2012). The survey data analyzed the factors that influenced student perception through percentage rates using a Likert-scale of 1-5. The numerical values in Figure 3 correspond to the feelings of the students.

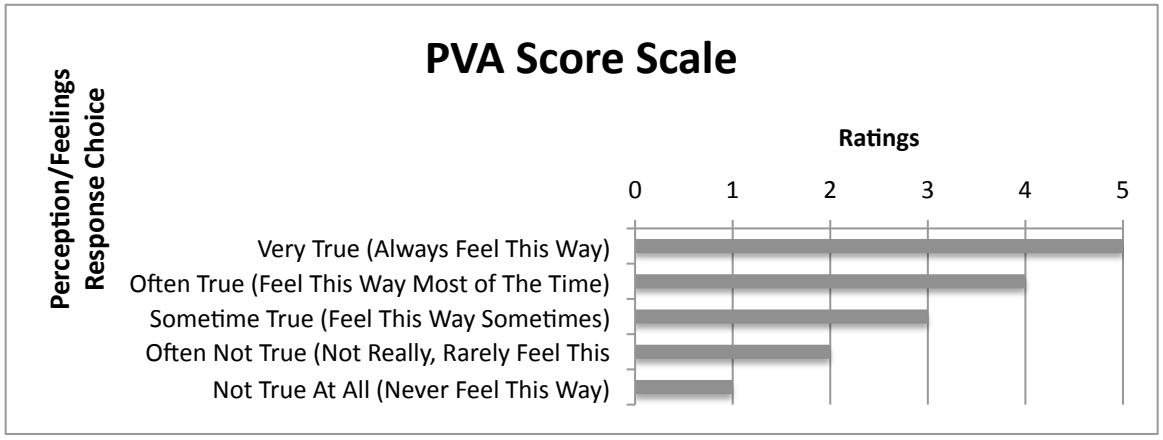

Figure 3. Paired-validity analysis survey Likert-scale value ratings.

The questions were scored based on each student's response choice that described individual feelings about experiences in percentage form. The validity of each question pair in relation to its inverse was calculated by the average rating score value.

Average Rating Score

The calculation of the average of each question is determined by the value of each answer choice over the weight of the total response count for each answer choice (SurveyMonkey, 2009). The Average Rating Score (ARS) measures positive and negative responses of the feelings of the participants. The correlation worth or assessment is the ARS percentage based on each participant's feelings or perception response to each factor question on the PVA. The Average Rating Score describes the outcome, impact, or influence that each PVA category had on the student's experiences, performance, and achievement in middle school (Midgley et al., 2008). The ARS perception correlation designated the value of the participant's average feelings and showed whether the responses to the paired-inverse questions were valid. The paired-questions were considered conclusive if the ARS of one of the matching inverse questions showed an opposite or higher rating than the other. Conversely, the paired-validity analysis questions were reflected as invalid or the students felt equally if the ARS revealed an equal perception measure.

The following five categories were determined as factors that influenced the academic performance of urban students during their middle school transition according to the survey results.

Perception of Student-Teacher Relationships

Decker et al. (2007) reveal that the relationship between teachers and students are linked to student performance in school (Pianta et al., 2012). Participants were asked questions about their interactions with teachers before and during middle school. The results of this study exposed the results of the Paired-Validity Analysis (PVA) between

the three schools and each school separately, and the validity of student responses with the inverse paired question simultaneously. It is remarkable to note that Schools A, B, and C showed an overall PVA score of 36.76%, or 50 out of 136 students, that always felt that their 6th grade teachers actually do like them, which motivated them to try hard to do their work in class. More students in the K-8 (School A, B) setting felt that their teachers cared about them compared to students who attended a 6-8 middle school (School C). The average rating score for paired question 5 was 1.88% and inverse question 25 showed a 3.80% out of a possible 5.00% on the Likert-scale. Thus, showing an opposite average rating, which verified the feelings of the students (Figure 4).

PVQ5: I don't feel that my teacher(s) like me, so I don't do my work in class							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	3.57% 1	3.57% 1	10.71% 3	21.43% 6	60.71% 17	28	1.68
School B K-8	9.09% 3	12.12% 4	9.09% 3	21.21% 7	48.48% 16	33	2.12
School C 6-8	0.00% 0	12.00% 9	16.00% 12	17.33% 13	54.67% 41	75	1.85
All 3 schools A,B,C	2.94% 4	10.29% 14	13.24% 18	19.12% 26	54.41% 74	136	1.88

PVQ25: I feel that my teacher(s) like me so I try hard to do my work in class							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	53.57% 15	25.00% 7	17.86% 5	0.00% 0	3.57% 1	28	4.25
School B K-8	45.45% 15	12.12% 4	27.27% 9	3.03% 1	12.12% 4	33	3.76
School C 6-8	26.67% 20	36.00% 27	21.33% 16	8.00% 6	8.00% 6	75	3.65
All 3 schools A,B,C	36.76% 50	27.94% 38	22.06% 30	5.15% 7	8.09% 11	136	3.80
*Note. Percentages refer to students survey response comparison scores by school type, grade configuration, and all 3 integrated score ratings							

Figure 4. Paired-question items (5,25) student-teacher relationship factor report ratings.

PVA inverse questions 16 and18 addressed how much student's 5th and 6th grade teachers actually listened to them (Figure 5). The data showed a close percentage rate (30.88%, 27.94%) in that most of the students from both school types (K-8 and 6-8) felt that it is sometimes true that their teachers from both grade levels provided them with the attention they needed. Based on the data, more students (17.65%) felt that is very true that their 5th grade teachers listened to them slightly more than their 6th grade teachers (7.35%). Consequently, 33.09% of the students felt that their 6th grade teachers never listen to them. One-third (25/75) of middle school participants sensed a considerable attentiveness in the relationship they shared with their 5th grade teachers.

PVQ16: My 6th grade teacher(s) listen to me less than my 5th grade teacher(s)							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	10.71% 3	7.14% 2	35.71% 10	17.86% 5	28.57% 8	28	2.54
School B K-8	9.09% 3	18.18% 6	18.18% 6	18.18% 6	36.36% 12	33	2.45
School C 6-8	5.33% 4	13.33% 10	34.67% 26	13.33% 10	33.33% 25	75	2.44
All 3 schools A,B,C	7.35% 10	13.24% 18	30.88% 42	15.44% 21	33.09% 45	136	2.46

PVQ18: My 5th grade teacher(s) listened to me more than my 6th grade teachers							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	17.86% 5	10.71% 3	28.57% 8	10.71% 3	32.14% 9	28	2.71
School B K-8	18.18% 6	9.09% 3	30.30% 10	6.06% 2	36.36% 12	33	2.67
School C 6-8	17.33% 13	25.33% 19	26.67% 20	16.00% 12	14.67% 11	75	3.15
All 3 schools A,B,C	17.65% 24	18.38% 25	27.94% 38	12.50% 17	23.53% 32	136	2.94

Figure 5. Paired-question items (16,18) student perception of teacher interaction factor report ratings.

The following paired questions 7 and 39 revealed almost half (46.12% or 60/136) of the students were always and often confident that their 6th grade teachers helped them to learn more than when they were in 5th grade. Based on the perception of 6th graders, these data contradict the notion that middle school teachers do not provide students with education support once they leave 5th grade. Figure 6 further shows that only 27.2% of the students surveyed from the three schools always or often felt that their 5th grade teachers helped them to learn more with 29.41% or 40/136 sharing that they never felt that this way.

PVQ7: My 6th grade teacher(s) helped me learn more than my 5th grade teacher(s)							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	21.43% 6	25.00% 7	35.71% 10	10.71% 3	7.14% 2	28	3.43
School B K-8	30.30% 10	12.12% 4	33.33% 11	18.18% 6	6.06% 2	33	3.42
School C 6-8	21.33% 16	22.67% 17	32.00% 24	17.33% 13	6.67% 5	75	3.35
All 3 schools A,B,C	23.53% 32	20.59% 28	33.09% 45	16.18% 22	6.62% 9	136	3.38

PVQ39: My 5th grade teacher(s) helped me learn more than my 6th grade teacher(s)							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	17.86% 5	7.14% 2	17.86% 5	25.00% 7	32.14% 9	28	2.54
School B K-8	15.15% 5	9.09% 3	24.24% 8	15.15% 5	36.36% 12	33	2.52
School C 6-8	14.67% 11	14.67% 11	24.00% 18	21.33% 16	25.33% 19	75	2.72
All 3 schools A,B,C	15.44% 21	11.76% 16	22.79% 31	20.59% 28	29.41% 40	136	2.63

Figure 6. Paired-question items (7,39) student perception of academic preparation by grade.

Perception of Ability and Academic Preparation

Students' perception of their own ability to perform academically in middle school is linked to achievement failure and decline (Schunk et al., 2008). The following set of paired-validity perception questions (Figure 7) recognized the underlying factors that contribute to unsuccessful performance and decreased motivation in urban students once they move into middle school (West, 2012). About 72.06% of student participants from all three schools disclosed that they always or often felt that their test scores mattered to them more in 6th grade than when they were in 5th grade. Less than 30% of the students felt the opposite, divulging that they cared more about their test scores in 5th grade. The average rating inverse score 4.04/2.68 confirms that the students do place more emphasis on 6th grade assessments.

PVQ6: My grades and test scores matter to me more in 6th grade than when I was in elementary school							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	57.14% 16	25.00% 7	14.29% 4	3.57% 1	0.00% 0	28	4.36
School B K-8	36.36% 12	27.27% 9	18.18% 6	9.09% 3	9.09% 3	33	3.73
School C 6-8	44.00% 33	28.00% 21	21.33% 16	2.67% 2	4.00% 3	75	4.05
All 3 schools A,B,C	44.85% 61	27.21% 37	19.12% 26	4.41% 6	4.41% 6	136	4.04

PVQ36: My grades and test scores were more important to me in 5th grade than in middle school							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	17.86 5	14.29% 4	25.00% 7	14.29% 4	28.57% 8	28	2.79
School B K-8	24.24% 8	9.09% 3	24.24% 8	6.06% 2	36.36% 12	33	2.79
School C 6-8	14.67% 11	13.33% 10	21.33% 16	17.33% 13	33.33% 25	75	2.59
All 3 schools A,B,C	17.65% 24	12.50% 17	22.79% 31	13.97% 19	33.09% 45	136	2.68

Figure 7. Paired-question items (6,36) student perception percentage ratings of academic importance by grade.

Questions 2 and 13 on Figure 8 exposed the students' true beliefs about the complexity of their 6th grade experience. Akos et al. (2015) emphasize that students feel overwhelmed in middle school and often view the experience as academically challenging. However, the data show that 15.44% of students surveyed feel that 6th grade is hard and 27.94% of them share that being a middle school student is much easier than they actually expected. Most students were in the "middle" with both questions, revealing 31.62% who felt that being a 6th grade student was sometimes hard and 30.88% revealing that it was easier than they thought it would be.

PVQ2: Being a 6th grade middle school student is hard							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	21.43% 6	17.86% 5	25.00% 7	21.43% 6	14.29% 4	28	3.11
School B K-8	15.15% 5	18.18% 6	33.33% 11	15.15% 5	18.18% 6	33	2.97
School C 6-8	13.33% 10	18.67% 14	33.33% 25	21.33% 16	13.33% 10	75	2.97
All 3 schools A,B,C	15.44% 21	18.38% 25	31.62% 43	19.85% 27	14.71% 20	136	3.00

PVQ13: Being a middle school student is easier than I expected							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	28.57% 8	21.43% 6	28.57% 8	7.14% 2	14.29% 4	28	3.43
School B K-8	36.36% 12	9.09% 3	33.33% 11	12.12% 4	9.09% 3	33	3.52
School C 6-8	24.00% 18	17.33% 13	30.67% 23	14.67% 11	13.33% 10	75	3.24
All 3 schools A,B,C	27.94% 38	16.18% 22	30.88% 42	12.50% 17	12.50% 17	136	3.35

Figure 8. Paired-question items (2,13) student perception of their middle school experience.

Paired questions 35 and 21 (Figure 9) focused on students' beliefs about how well their 6th grade teachers prepared them for the state assessment. More than 63.24% of the students felt that their teachers equipped them with the necessary tools to pass the state test. The inverse question coincided with these results in that more than 61.03% of the students never believed that their teachers did not prepared them to do well. These results contradict overall state assessment trend scores for each urban school which show declining test scores overtime (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013).

PVQ35: I believe that my teacher(s) didn't prepare me to do well on the state test							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	7.14% 2	0.00% 0	3.57% 1	14.29% 4	75.00% 21	28	1.50
School B K-8	3.03% 1	3.03% 1	15.15% 5	6.06% 2	72.73% 24	33	1.58
School C 6-8	2.67% 2	12.00% 9	13.33% 10	21.33% 10	50.67% 38	75	1.95
All 3 schools A,B,C	3.68% 5	7.35% 10	11.76% 16	16.18% 22	61.03% 83	136	1.76

PVQ21: I feel that my teacher(s) prepared me to do well on the state test							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	78.57% 22	14.29% 4	3.57% 1	0.00% 0	3.57% 1	28	4.64
School B K-8	72.73% 24	18.18% 6	3.03% 1	3.03% 1	3.03% 1	33	4.55
School C 6-8	53.33% 40	16.00% 12	22.67% 17	4.00% 3	4.00% 3	75	4.11
All 3 schools A,B,C	63.24% 86	16.18% 22	13.97% 19	2.94% 4	3.68% 5	136	4.32

Figure 9. Paired-question items (35,21) student perception of how well their teachers prepared them to pass the NJASK state assessment by grade.

The following questions unveil students' perception of their own capacity to perform academically in middle school (Figure 10). The data indicated that 40.44% of the students surveyed from all three schools have the impression that they always understood their schoolwork and therefore did well in class. In addition, 32.35% of the participants often feel that they comprehend their assignments. On the other hand, only 8.82% of the students stated that they do not understand the work and fail to do well in school. Interestingly, more K-8 middle school students never felt that they did not understand the work as opposed to those who attend a 6-8 middle school.

PVQ 26: I understand the work so I do well in class							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	53.57% 15	32.14% 9	10.71% 3	0.00% 0	3.57% 1	28	4.32
School B K-8	66.67% 22	12.12% 4	18.18% 6	3.03% 1	0.00% 0	33	4.42
School C 6-8	24.00% 18	41.33% 31	24.00% 18	10.67% 8	0.00% 0	75	3.79
All 3 schools A,B,C	40.44% 55	32.35% 44	19.85% 27	6.62% 9	0.74% 1	136	4.05

PVQ 15: I don't understand the work so I don't do well in class							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	17.86% 5	3.57% 1	10.71% 3	17.86% 5	50.00% 14	28	2.21
School B K-8	15.15% 5	12.12% 4	9.09% 3	18.18% 6	45.45% 15	33	2.33
School C 6-8	2.67% 2	13.33% 10	25.33% 19	28.00% 21	30.67% 23	75	2.29
All 3 schools A,B,C	8.82% 12	11.03% 15	18.38% 25	23.53% 32	38.24% 52	136	2.29

Figure 10. Paired-question items (26,15) student perception of their own learning ability as 6th grade middle school students at both school types.

The following paired-inverse questions 22 and 9 described how students felt their test scores changed once they entered the 6th grade (Figure 11). Almost half of the students surveyed (48.53% or 66/136) rarely or never felt that it was true that their test scores and grades declined once they became a 6th grade student. About 44.11% or 60/136 students further agreed and conveyed that it was either true or often true that test scores and grades actually improved as a middle school student. These data indicate that students' perceptions of their middle school experience are that they did not suffer an academic plunge.

PVQ 22: My test scores and grades went down once I became a 6th grade middle school student							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	10.71% 3	17.86% 5	14.29% 4	17.86% 5	39.29% 11	28	2.43
School B K-8	21.21% 7	18.18% 6	21.21% 7	15.15% 5	24.24% 8	33	2.97
School C 6-8	18.67% 14	14.67% 11	17.33% 13	24.00% 18	25.33% 19	75	2.77
All 3 schools A,B,C	17.65% 24	16.18% 22	17.65% 24	20.59% 28	27.94% 38	136	2.75

PVQ 9: My test scores and grades improved once I became a middle school student							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	25.00% 7	14.29% 4	32.14% 9	10.71% 3	17.86% 5	28	3.18
School B K-8	45.45% 15	15.15% 5	27.27% 9	12.12% 4	0.00% 0	33	3.94
School C 6-8	14.67% 11	24.00% 18	17.33% 13	17.33% 13	17.33% 13	75	3.01
All 3 schools A,B,C	24.26% 33	19.85% 27	27.94% 38	14.71% 20	13.24% 18	136	3.27

Figure 11. Paired-question items (22,9) student perception ratings on academic outcomes as a 6th grade middle school student from both grade configurations.

The following questions 1 and 14 pinpointed student perception beliefs about how they performed academically on their report card (Figure 12) and related to paired questions 22 and 9 (Figure 11). The data revealed that a combined 45.38% of the students felt that it was always true or often true that their grades were better in 6th grade than in 5th grade, with 38.23% feeling the opposite. Interestingly, about 25% of the students surveyed shared that it was sometimes true that they either received better grades in 5th grade or 6th grade. However, more students reported that they performed better as a middle school student.

PVQ1: My grades in 6th grade are better than they were in 5th grade							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	28.57% 8	14.29% 4	35.71 10	7.14 2	14.29 4	28	3.36
School B K-8	33.33% 11	18.18% 6	21.21% 7	9.09% 3	18.18% 6	33	3.39
School C 6-8	17.33% 13	22.67% 17	22.67% 17	20.00% 15	17.33% 13	75	3.03
All 3 schools A,B,C	25.53% 32	19.85% 27	25.00% 34	14.71% 20	16.91% 23	136	3.18

PVQ14: I received better grades in 5th grade than I did in middle school							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	25.00% 7	10.71% 3	17.86% 5	17.86% 5	28.57% 8	28	2.86
School B K-8	18.18% 6	18.18% 6	30.30% 10	9.09% 3	24.24% 8	33	2.97
School C 6-8	21.33% 16	18.67% 14	28.00% 21	14.67% 11	17.33% 13	75	3.12
All 3 schools A,B,C	21.32% 29	16.91% 23	26.47% 36	13.97% 19	21.32% 29	136	3.03

Figure 12. Paired-question items (1,14) student perception comparison of academic success per grade level.

Paired questions 38 and 34 (Figure 13) focused on how students perceive smart students versus struggling learners, and whether the two groups should be educated together in the same classroom. Of the students who participated in the study, 29.41% indicated that they have always felt that smart students should be separated from students who struggle academically, with 21.32% conveying that they never felt this way. However, a collective 52.2% believed that students should be divided by learning levels and placed in different classrooms. This perception is supported by the results of the inverse or opposing question, which revealed that a combined 47.79% of the participants

either never or rarely felt that students from mixed-abilities should be placed in the same classroom.

PVQ38: I feel that the smart students should be placed in a separate class than the struggling learners							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	21.43% 6	10.71% 3	10.71% 3	21.43% 6	35.71% 10	28	2.61
School B K-8	33.33% 11	15.15% 5	18.18% 6	9.09% 3	24.24% 8	33	3.24
School C 6-8	30.67% 23	30.67% 23	16.00% 12	8.00% 6	14.67% 11	75	3.55
All 3 schools A,B,C	29.41% 31	22.79% 31	15.44% 21	11.03% 15	21.32% 29	136	3.28

PVQ34: I feel that all students from different learning levels should be placed in the same class together							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	25.00% 7	14.29% 4	21.43% 6	14.29% 4	25.00% 7	28	3.00
School B K-8	15.15% 5	12.12% 4	27.27% 9	18.18% 6	27.27% 9	33	2.70
School C 6-8	14.67% 11	9.33% 7	24.00% 18	25.33% 19	26.67% 20	75	2.60
All 3 schools A,B,C	16.91% 23	11.03% 15	24.26% 33	21.32% 29	26.47% 36	136	2.71

Figure 13. Paired-question items (38,34) student perception of peer classroom interaction based on academic levels.

Perception of Middle School Conditions

Students' engagement in middle school has been centered on their perception of their role and relevance in the learning process (Ellerbrook et al., 2014; Watkins, 2005). Further, as students leave elementary school and move into higher grades, they become

disengaged (Balfanz et al., 2007) and develop a change in attitude towards schools (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). This category expounded on students' feelings about the conditions or characteristics of middle school relative to arrangement, set-up, and process, and how their experience affected their learning (Anderman, 2012; Pickhardt, 2011). Paired-questions 30 and 12 (Figure 14) describe how students felt about switching classes and having to deal with multiple teachers instead of remaining in one class all day with only one teacher. The majority of the students surveyed or 61.77% expressed that changing classes and dealing with multiple teachers was always or often better than sitting in one classroom with one teacher. The data are confirmed by the results of the inverse questions that showed that 52.94% of the participants never or rarely believed that it was true that they did not like switching classes and dealing with different teachers. Only 16.91% of the students strongly felt that they did not or would not enjoy switching classes and having more than one teacher. Although the K-8 middle school 6th grade students do not switch classes, they expressed a greater desire to experience classroom movement than 6-8 middle school students who actually change classes every period.

PVQ 30: I don't like switching classes and dealing with different teachers							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	7.14% 2	14.29% 4	17.86% 5	14.29% 4	46.43% 13	28	2.21
School B K-8	30.30% 10	9.09% 3	18.18% 6	15.15% 5	27.27% 9	33	3.00
School C 6-8	14.67% 11	9.33% 7	21.33% 16	16.00% 12	38.67% 29	75	2.45
All 3 schools A,B,C	16.91% 23	10.29% 14	19.85% 27	15.44% 21	37.50% 51	136	2.54

PVQ 12: Changing classes and having multiple teachers is better than just having one teacher all day							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	39.29% 11	14.29% 4	28.57% 8	0.00% 0	17.86% 5	28	3.57
School B K-8	54.55% 18	9.09% 3	24.24% 8	9.09% 3	3.03% 1	33	4.03
School C 6-8	41.33% 31	22.67% 17	17.33% 13	9.33% 7	9.33% 7	75	3.77
All 3 schools A,B,C	44.12% 60	17.65% 24	21.32% 29	7.35% 10	9.56% 13	136	3.79

Figure 14. Paired-question items (30,12) student perception of schedule adjustment changes as middle school students.

The following paired-questions (31, 27) emphasized whether students felt comfortable participating in class (Figure 15). About 29.41% of the students uncovered that it was very true that they were comfortable participating in class. Also, 21.32% of the students often felt that they were made to feel smart in class. A communal 50.73% or 69 of 136 total participants had no problem contributing to the learning environment. Conversely, students were asked whether they felt uncomfortable participating in class because they were laughed at or made to feel stupid. The data exhibited 36.76% of the

students never felt that way and 19.85% rarely considered it to be true. By the same token, many students also reported in the middle of the scale with 27.94% of them who stated that it was sometimes true that they felt secure participating in class, and 24.26% participants disparately affirmed that they did not participate in front of classmates because they sometimes felt uncomfortable.

PVQ31: I participate in class because my classmates and my teacher(s) make me feel that I am smart							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	35.71% 10	25.00% 7	25.00% 7	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	28	3.75
School B K-8	51.52% 17	12.12% 4	27.27% 9	6.06% 2	3.03% 1	33	4.03
School C 6-8	17.33% 13	24.00% 18	29.33% 22	17.33% 13	12.00% 9	75	3.17
All 3 schools A,B,C	29.41% 40	21.32% 29	27.94% 38	12.50% 17	8.82% 12	136	3.50

PVQ27: I avoid participating in class because my classmates may laugh or my answer may be stupid or incorrect.							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	14.29% 4	10.71% 3	21.43% 6	17.86% 5	35.71% 10	28	2.50
School B K-8	15.15% 5	9.09% 3	15.15% 5	24.24% 8	36.36% 12	33	2.42
School C 6-8	2.67% 2	12.00% 9	29.33% 22	18.67% 14	37.33% 28	75	2.24
All 3 schools A,B,C	8.09% 11	11.03% 15	24.26% 33	19.85% 27	36.76% 50	136	2.34

Figure 15. Paired-question items (31,27) student perception ratings of personal academic confidence and security levels in the classroom as 6th graders.

The subsequent questions (29, 24) presented students' feelings about whether or not school was a stimulating or dreadful experience for them (Figure 16). Remarkably, a combined 83 out of 136 (61.03%) of the students always or often agreed that middle school was enjoyable and that they were motivated to learn. Similarly, a conjoined 76 of 136 (55.88%) of the students who participated in the study either often or always disagreed that school was boring and discouraging.

PVQ 29: School is enjoyable and I am motivated to learn							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	35.71% 10	25.00% 7	35.71% 10	0.00% 0	3.57% 1	28	2.89
School B K-8	48.48% 16	30.30% 10	12.12% 4	9.09% 3	0.00% 0	33	3.18
School C 6-8	22.67% 17	30.67% 23	24.00% 18	16.00% 12	6.67% 5	75	2.47
All 3 schools A,B,C	31.62% 43	29.41% 40	23.53% 32	11.03% 15	4.41% 6	136	2.73

PVQ 24: School is boring and not enjoyable so I am not motivated to learn							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	10.71% 3	10.71% 3	28.57% 8	17.86% 5	32.14% 9	28	1.50
School B K-8	3.03% 1	9.09% 3	18.18% 6	18.18% 6	51.52% 17	33	0.94
School C 6-8	5.33% 4	13.33% 10	29.33% 22	21.33% 16	30.67% 23	75	1.41
All 3 schools A,B,C	5.88% 8	11.76% 16	26.47% 36	19.85% 27	36.03% 49	136	1.32

Figure 16. Paired-question items (29,24) student engagement perception as 6th grade middle school learners.

Gutman and Midgley (2000) revealed that one of the factors that students stated was an issue in middle school was the number of disruptions in the classroom. The following paired-inverse questions (4, 20 and 32, 11) examined how students perceived the climate of their middle school classrooms (Figures 17 & 18). The results showed that 62.50% of the students always or often agreed that their teacher had control over the classroom, thus were able to focus on what they were learning. On the contrary, 42.64% of the students surveyed disagreed and felt that there were too many distractions during class, which made it very difficult to pay attention on what was being taught. More K-8 middle school students either always or often felt it was true that their learning was disrupted than those who attended a 6-8 middle school setting.

PVQ4: There are so many distractions in my class; it is hard for me to focus and understand what is being taught							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	35.71% 10	21.43% 6	25.00% 7	14.29% 4	3.57% 1	28	2.71
School B K-8	21.21% 7	30.30% 10	27.27% 9	9.09% 3	12.12% 4	33	2.39
School C 6-8	13.33% 10	20.00% 15	37.33% 28	18.67% 14	10.67% 8	75	2.07
All 3 schools A,B,C	19.85% 27	22.79% 31	32.35% 44	15.44% 21	9.56% 13	136	2.28

PVQ20: My teacher has control over the class; therefore I can focus and understand what I am taught							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	32.14% 9	39.29% 11	17.86% 5	3.57% 1	7.14% 2	28	2.86
School B K-8	45.45% 15	30.30% 10	15.15% 5	9.09% 3	0.00% 0	33	3.12
School C 6-8	26.67% 20	26.67% 20	33.33% 25	10.67% 8	2.67% 2	75	2.64
All 3 schools A,B,C	32.35% 44	30.15% 41	25.74% 35	8.82% 12	2.94% 4	136	2.80

Figure 17. Paired-question items (4,20) student perception of middle school classroom learning conditions.

Students were asked to identify how they perceived their own behavior and how their actions affected their learning. Less than 4.0% of the students emphasized that they do neglect to follow the teacher's direction and disrupt the lesson, with 36.76% who revealed that they never disturb the teacher and pay attention in class. This information was corroborated based on the results of the inverse question. The data showed that 48.53% of the participants disclosed that they followed the teacher's directions and focused on the lesson with only 0.74% or one student who never paid attention and distracted the class. It was interesting to note that 26.74% of the students shared that they

sometimes do not follow the teacher's instruction and caused trouble in class. Also, most of the students who stated that they were respectful and engaged were K-8 middle school students. Further, the data recognized that although 42.64% of the participants from paired-questions 4 and 20 felt that there were too many classroom disruptions, not many perceive themselves to be the students who are unruly (Figure 18).

PVQ32: I sometimes don't follow my teacher's directions during class and I disrupt the lesson that is being taught.							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	3.57% 1	14.29% 4	28.57% 8	7.14% 2	46.43% 13	28	1.21
School B K-8	9.09% 3	6.06% 2	27.27% 9	27.27% 9	30.30% 10	33	1.36
School C 6-8	1.33% 1	12.00% 9	25.33% 19	25.33% 19	36.00% 27	75	1.17
All 3 schools A,B,C	3.68% 5	11.03% 15	26.47% 36	22.06% 30	36.76% 50	136	1.23

PVQ11: I follow my teacher's directions during class and focus on the lesson that is being taught							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	60.71% 17	28.57% 8	7.14% 2	3.57% 1	0.00% 0	28	3.46
School B K-8	60.61% 20	12.12% 4	21.21% 7	6.06% 2	0.00% 0	33	3.27
School C 6-8	38.67% 29	30.67% 23	25.33% 19	4.00% 3	1.33% 1	75	3.01
All 3 schools A,B,C	48.53% 66	25.74% 35	20.59% 28	4.41% 6	0.74% 1	136	3.17

Figure 18. Paired-question items (32,11) student perception of their classroom behavior and participation as 6th grade students.

Perception of Student-Peer Relations

The data obtained from the Paired-Validity Analysis (PVA) Survey revealed information about how students perceive their relationship with similar-aged peers and the influence such feelings had on their adjustment and performance in middle school. Grills-Taquechel, Norton, and Ollendick (2010) share that students suffer adjustment anxiety because they have a difficult time "fitting in" with their fellow peers. Research states that in order for students to experience successful development during adolescent or middle school years, they must be in a supported and trusting learning environment in which student-student interactions are positive (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; Pickhardt, 2011). The following set of paired-questions examined how students view their dealings with their counterparts and how it affects their progress in school. Questions 37 and 40 (Figure 19) revealed that 30.88% of the participants felt that they were always or often bullied or intimidated by their peers, which made it challenging to concentrate in class. An additional 16.91% reported that they sometimes experienced problems with classmates and it was hard to focus on schoolwork. In contrast, 52.20% of the students surveyed did not view themselves as being intimidated or mistreated by their peers. However, 25.74% perceived interactions with classmates as only sometimes positive. Therefore, it was evident that peer relationships actually do have an influence on student progress in school.

PVQ37: It is hard to focus in class when I am being bullied or intimidated by a classmate							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	14.29% 4	14.29% 4	10.71% 3	14.29% 4	46.43% 13	28	1.36
School B K-8	30.30% 10	9.09% 3	12.12% 4	12.12% 4	36.36% 12	33	1.85
School C 6-8	12.00% 9	16.00% 12	21.33% 16	20.00% 15	30.67% 23	75	1.59
All 3 schools A,B,C	16.91% 23	13.97% 19	16.91% 23	16.91% 23	35.29% 48	136	1.60

PVQ40: I do not feel bullied or intimidated in school which makes it easy for me to focus in class							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	42.86% 12	10.71% 3	21.43% 6	10.71% 3	14.29% 4	28	2.57
School B K-8	39.39% 13	18.18% 6	24.24% 8	9.09% 3	9.09% 3	33	2.70
School C 6-8	30.67% 23	18.67% 14	28.00% 21	13.33% 10	9.33% 7	75	2.48
All 3 schools A,B,C	35.29% 48	16.91% 23	25.74% 35	11.76% 16	10.29% 14	136	2.55

Figure 19. Paired-question items (37,40) student perception of peer interaction influence on academic learning.

Although 50.74% of the students reported that they never care more about what their classmates think than getting good grades, 15.44% either always or often value how their peers view them than academic achievement. The inverse question validated that more students desire to attain good grades than peer acceptance by 60.29%, however 18.38% conveyed it as sometimes true (Figure 20).

PVQ8: I care more about what my classmates think about me than getting good grades							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	25.00% 7	53.57% 15	28	0.89
School B K-8	6.06% 2	9.09% 3	12.12% 4	9.09% 3	63.64% 21	33	0.85
School C 6-8	6.67% 5	9.33% 7	20.00% 15	20.00% 15	44.00% 33	75	1.15
All 3 schools A,B,C	6.62% 9	8.82% 12	15.44% 21	18.38% 25	50.74% 69	136	1.02

PVQ33: It is more important to me that I get good grades than what my classmates think about me							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	71.43% 20	7.14% 2	21.43% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	28	3.50
School B K-8	66.67% 22	9.09% 3	18.18% 6	0.00% 0	6.06% 2	33	3.30
School C 6-8	53.33% 40	24.00% 18	17.33% 13	2.67% 2	2.67% 2	75	3.23
All 3 schools A,B,C	60.29% 82	16.91% 23	18.38% 25	1.47% 2	2.94% 4	136	3.30

Figure 20. Paired-question items (8,33) student perception ratings on peer relationship influence on academic learning outcomes.

Students were questioned about whether they felt comfortable answering questions in front of their peers. The data indicated that 37.50% or 51 out of 136 students felt secure enough to answer questions in front of fellow learners. Dissimilarly, 13.24% or 18 of out 136 participants made it known that they were very uncomfortable participating in class. Interestingly, more than 22% of the students reported that it was sometimes true that they either felt comfortable or uncomfortable responding to questions in front of classmates (Figure 21).

PVQ 28: I feel comfortable answering questions in front of my classmates							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	50.00% 14	17.86% 5	14.29% 4	10.71% 3	7.14% 2	28	2.93
School B K-8	45.45% 15	15.15% 5	24.24% 8	12.12% 4	3.03% 1	33	2.88
School C 6-8	29.33% 22	21.33% 16	25.33% 19	20.00% 15	4.00% 3	75	2.52
All 3 schools A,B,C	37.50% 51	19.12% 26	22.79% 31	16.18% 22	4.41% 6	136	2.69

PVQ 23: I don't feel comfortable answering questions in front of my classmates							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	25.00% 7	10.71% 3	17.86% 5	17.86% 5	28.57% 8	28	1.86
School B K-8	12.12% 4	12.12% 7	21.21% 7	6.06% 2	48.48% 16	33	1.33
School C 6-8	9.33% 7	22.67% 17	33.33% 25	9.33% 7	25.33% 19	75	1.81
All 3 schools A,B,C	13.24% 18	17.65% 24	27.21% 37	10.29% 14	31.62% 43	136	1.71

Figure 21. Paired-question items (28,23) on student comfort levels interacting academic with peer in the middle school classroom.

Perception of Middle School Environment and Safety: K-8 versus 6-8

The final group of paired-validity analysis survey questions scrutinized how students viewed the climate and safety in middle school and how their perceptions influenced academic achievement. Additionally, results from data uncovered the type of middle school that students believed was the best program for their academic benefit. Question 19 exposed that 48.53% of the students believed that attending a 6-8 program was better than remaining in a K-8 environment for middle school. Correspondingly,

25.53% of the participants shared that they felt moving to a separate middle school for 6th grade would have a greater impact on their learning than staying in elementary school. On the other hand, 27.94% disagreed and rarely or never felt that going to a 6-8 middle school was better than staying at their K-8 neighborhood school. Inverse question 10 confirmed the perception of the majority of the surveyed 6th grade students in that 51.47% rarely or never believed that they would learn more in a K-8 school than moving to a separate 6-8 middle school. Conversely, 25.73% of the students felt that it was very true or often true that remaining in a K-8 school for middle school had a better learning environment than leaving their neighborhood to attend a different 6-8 program. Similarly, 22.79% of the students shared that they sometimes feel that it is true to remain in a familiar K-8 learning environment for school. Hence, more than half of the participants surveyed believed that they would have a greater educational advantage by attending a separate 6-8 middle school (Figure 22).

PVQ 19: I feel attending a 6-8 grade middle school is better for my learning than remaining at my neighborhood K-8 elementary school							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	25.00% 7	10.71% 3	28.57% 8	14.29% 4	21.43% 6	28	2.04
School B K-8	33.33% 11	9.09% 3	27.27% 9	9.09% 3	21.21% 7	33	2.24
School C 6-8	33.33% 25	22.67% 17	20.00% 15	16.00% 12	8.00% 6	75	2.57
All 3 schools A,B,C	31.62% 43	16.91% 23	25.53% 32	13.97% 19	13.97% 19	136	2.38

PVQ 10: I believe that I would learn more in a K-8 neighborhood school than attending a separate 6-8 grade middle school							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	17.86% 5	21.43% 6	21.43% 6	17.86% 5	21.43% 6	28	1.96
School B K-8	24.24% 8	21.21% 7	24.24% 8	9.09% 3	21.21% 7	33	2.18
School C 6-8	8.00% 6	4.00% 3	22.67% 17	25.33% 19	40.00% 30	75	1.15
All 3 schools A,B,C	13.97% 19	11.76% 16	22.79% 31	19.85% 27	31.62% 43	136	1.57

Figure 22. Paired-question items (19,10) on student choice of middle school grade configuration type (K-8 versus 6-8).

The data showed that 16.91% or 23 out of 136 students always felt more comfortable and safe remaining at their neighborhood K-8 school for middle school. Likewise, 13.97% or 19 out of 136 participants shared that they believed a K-8 school was often a safer environment for them to learn than moving to a different 6-8 program for 6th grade. Then again, 38.97% or 53 out of 136 students rarely or never did not feel more secure at a K-8 school than leaving to attend a separate 6-8 school, nor did they feel it provided a better learning program. However, it appeared that many students, 30.15%

or 41 out of 136 surveyed, felt more comfortable continuing their middle school years at their K-8 neighborhood school. Opposing question 17 showed that 26.68% or 39 out of 136 students actually do feel at ease moving to a new building for middle school. Also, 18.38% or 25 out of 136 students were often comfortable attending a separate 6-8 school and felt that it offered a better learning experience. In spite of this, 29.41% or 40 out of 136 students conjointly admitted that they rarely or never felt safe attending a different 6-8 program for middle school (Figure 23).

PVQ3: I would feel more comfortable and safe remaining in my K-8 neighborhood school for middle school							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	28.57% 8	25.00% 7	32.14% 9	3.57% 1	10.71% 3	28	2.57
School B K-8	33.33% 11	12.12% 4	27.27% 9	15.15% 5	12.12% 4	33	2.39
School C 6-8	5.33% 4	10.67% 8	30.67% 23	17.33% 13	36.00% 27	75	1.32
All 3 schools A,B,C	16.91% 23	13.97% 19	30.15% 41	13.97% 19	25.00% 34	136	1.84

PVQ17: I feel safe leaving my neighborhood school and going to a new building for middle school after 5th grade							
	Very True/ Always Feel this way	Often True/ Feel this way most of the time	Sometimes true/ Feel this way sometimes	Often not true/ Not really, Rarely Feel this way	Not true at all/ Never feel this way	Total Students	Average Rating
School A K-8	28.57% 8	28.57% 8	14.29% 4	3.57% 1	25.00% 7	28	2.32
School B K-8	33.33% 11	6.06% 2	27.27% 9	3.03% 1	30.30% 10	33	2.09
School C 6-8	26.67% 20	20.00% 19	25.33% 19	20.00% 15	8.00% 6	75	2.37
All 3 schools A,B,C	28.68% 39	18.38% 25	25.53% 32	12.50% 17	16.91% 23	136	2.29

Figure 23. Paired-question items (3,17) student perception of middle school safety/security by school type.

Conclusion

In summary, 136 6th grade students from both K-8 and 6-8 urban middle school programs were surveyed in this study. A series of 40 paired-validity analysis, Likert-scaled questions were analyzed to answer quantitative research questions 2 and 2a. The results from this study revealed how students perceived their middle school experience and the influence that these viewpoints had on student achievement.

For research question 2, the results showed that students described that they experienced a positive relationship with their teachers overall. Hence, this category, although a factor in whether students are successful in middle school, has not shown to be a strong indicator of student academic failure. Data showed that 54.41% (74/136) of the students reported that they never felt that their teachers did not like them and 36.76% (50/136) shared that they always believed it was true that their teachers actually cared about them, which was motivation for them to work hard in class. Additionally, 7.35% (10/136) of the participants expressed that they felt that their 6th grade teachers always listened to them more than their 5th grade teachers, and 17.65% (24/136) felt it was true that their 5th grade teachers were more considerate than their middle school teachers. Therefore, slightly more students believed that they received more attention in elementary school as a 5th grade student than in middle school. Also, more students, 25.53% (32/136) revealed that their 6th grade teachers helped them to improve their learning more than their 5th grade teachers; conversely, 15.44% (21/136) reported that they always felt that their 5th grade teachers taught them better than when they were in 6th grade.

Correspondingly, more students disclosed a positive outlook on their academic preparation and personal ability to do well in middle school. However, the data divulged that most students only sometimes felt optimistic about their 6th grade achievement. Therefore, this category is a variable to focus on as a factor in students' academic decline once they enter middle school. Results affirmed that 44.85% (61/136) of the students strongly believed that their grades and test scores mattered more in 6th grade than 5th grade, with 17.65% (24/136) who always felt that their assessment scores were more important to them when they were 5th graders. In addition, 15.44% (21/136) of the participants conveyed that it was very true that being a 6th grade student was very difficult and in contrast, 27.94% (38/136) shared that being a middle school student was easier than expected. Respectively, 24.26% (33/136) of the students also shared that their test scores and grades improved once they became a middle school students and 17.65% (24/136) revealed that their report card marks significantly declined once they became a 6th grader. Interestingly, many students from both school types and all three schools measured their feelings on the "sometimes" level. Data showed that 31.62% (43/136) of the students sometimes felt it was hard as a 6th grader and 30.88% (42/136) who stated it was sometimes true that being a middle school student was actually easier than expected. Results concluded that 63.24% (86/136) believed or strongly believed that their teachers academically prepared them to do well on the state test, with 3.68% (5/136) of the students who felt fervently differently in that their teachers did not provide them with the tools to pass the state assessment. Further, 40.44% (55/136) of the surveyed youth felt that they always understood their schoolwork, therefore did well in class, with 8.82% (12/136) of the students who admitted that they never comprehended what they were

taught and did not do well in school. In the same way, 25.53% (32/136) of the students stated that their grades were much better in 6th grade and 21.32% (29/136) shared that they received better grades in 5th grade. It is interesting to note that students paid attention to the learning levels of their peers in the classroom; 29.41% (31/136) strongly agreed that smart students should be placed in separate classes from struggling learners, and 16.91% (23/136) always felt that students from all levels should learn together.

Survey data indicated that students' perceptions of their interactions with their peers had a noteworthy impact on their academic progress and development in school. This category is a strong variable to consider for transformation in order to assist students with preventing the middle school plunge experience. Data showed that 37.50% (51/136) of the students always felt comfortable answering questions in front of their classmates, however, 13.24% (18/136) always felt insecure participating in class around their peers. Results also uncovered that 16.91% (23/136) of the participants stated that it was very true that they felt intimidated or bullied by their classmates, which made it very difficult to focus on schoolwork. In contrast, 35.29% (48/136) were always comfortable in class and did not feel bullied by their peers. Although, 60.29% (82/136) of the students always focused more on getting good grades in school than on what their peers thought about them, 15.44% (21/136) conveyed that it is very true that they cared more about what their classmates felt about them in order to "fit in" than concentrating on improving their grades.

Research question 2a findings showed that participants' perceptions concerning conditions of their middle school environment and sense of safety had a profound influence on their determination to strive for excellence and academic achievement

efforts. Based on information from the survey, urban school districts should consider creating or maintaining an effective separate 6-8 middle school program for students once they complete the 5th grade. Perception data indicated that students felt that moving into a separate 6-8 middle school could offer them a better learning experience in which they believed they would experience higher academic achievement rates. An analysis of student perception revealed that 31.62% (43/136) convincingly felt that attending a separate 6-8 middle school was much better than remaining in a K-8 elementary school. However, 13.97% (19/136) of the participants strongly believed that they would learn more in a K-8 grade neighborhood setting than moving to a 6-8 grade middle school. In addition, 16.91% (23/136) of the students reported feeling much safer staying in a K-8 learning environment for middle school versus the 28.68% (39/136) of the participants who indicated that they felt very confident moving to a new building with only 6-8 grade middle school students.

Students conveyed the conditions of their middle school experiences in a somewhat desirable manner. Survey data revealed that 44.12% (60/136) of the participants strongly felt that changing classes with multiple teachers was better than remaining in one 6th grade classroom all day. However, 16.91% (23/136) of the students stated that it was very true that they do not like the idea of switching classes and dealing with different teachers. Further, 29.41% (40/136) of the students surveyed felt that their classmates and teachers always made them feel smart with 8.09% (11/136) admitting that they always avoided participating in class for fear of being ridiculed and made to feel stupid by their peers. Also, 31.62% (43/136) of the students always felt that school was enjoyable and were motivated to learn, in contrast 17.64% (24/136) always or often

perceived school as boring and they felt apathetic. Students reported that there were disruptions to their learning in middle school with 19.85% (27/136) of them sharing that there were always distractions in class, which made it difficult to focus and understand what was being taught. However, 32.35% (44/136) of the students disclosed that it was very true that their teacher had control over the class, therefore they were able to concentrate and understand the lesson. Additionally, 14.71% (20/136) of the participants stated that it was always or often true that they sometimes do not follow their teacher's directions and disrupted the lesson, with 48.53% (66/136) who believed that they always followed the teacher's expectations and focused on what was being taught.

Phase II Qualitative Results

The second phase explored student perceptions of their transitional experiences in middle school and how those encounters shaped their learning outcomes. To access urban middle school students' views of their 6th grade experiences, a maximum variant method as well as a snowball approach to identify students representative of the participant groups were conducted. Twelve students from each school site were targeted to participate. There were 22 participants who actually returned both the consent and assent permission forms and partook in the sessions; 12 students from 6-8 Middle School C, 5 students from K-8 Middle School B, and 5 students from K-8 Middle School A. The focus group protocol consisted of six structured, open-ended questions designed to capture the lived experiences of the participants by giving them a platform to voice their true feelings about the variables that contributed academic achievement for them once they became a middle school student. Student responses to each focus group question were recorded through hand-written notes in a journal in order to encapsulate phrases

representative of their perspective and repetitive terms that were common between the students from each of the three schools. According to Creswell (2007), conducting focus groups is the most useful qualitative research method to obtain data on participant perceptions and beliefs when there is a large population who experienced the phenomenon.

In this section qualitative data was summarized in order to answer research question 3 and 3a:

RQ 3 (Qualitative): What do urban youth feel about interactions with their 6th grade teachers and how student-teacher relationships influence learning performance for them once they enter middle school? What do the students say are the issues?

RQ 3a: What do students share are practices that they feel will help them to be successful as a middle school student?

Data were categorized according to the six focus group questions, which were designed to answer the research questions. Focus group information was analyzed using a narrative content analysis qualitative approach to interpret meaning from transcribed notes of students' brief responses to focus group questions that were written recorded during each of the three small group discussions (Creswell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For exploratory and verification purposes, two systematic methods were used to compare and summarize the response data. First, the researcher read through the transcribed notes and looked for patterns, emergent themes, and relationships sorted from quotes, comments, and phrases expressed frequently from the voices of the participants. Second, identified and coded common repetitive key terms were highlighted to describe perceptions, feelings, and beliefs of the students. The response data were arranged by

focus group question and school type, and organized on a chart table and using Microsoft Word. An ATLAS.ti software word cruncher program was used to confirm the frequency of terms identified throughout the text.

The answers to each focus group question were examined to detect consistencies and commonalities to determine the relationship and connections within and between inquiries. Recurring themes were highlighted and categorized by descriptive codes that summarized the meaning of the data (Krueger, 2009). Then, the analysis of the themes was synthesized to interpret and explain the significance of the findings (Barbour, 2007; Krueger, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The results of the findings were used to answer the research questions originally set out to be investigated. There are many dynamics that affect a successful transition to middle school for students in urban environments. Focus group discussions revealed that students experience adaption and adjustment issues as major developmental transition shifts for them when moving into middle school. Eight themes related to the three key category transitional adjustment shift factors of academic rigor, new learning conditions based on middle school type (K-8 versus 6-8), and "anti-plunge" practices and strategies emerged: *(a) learning shift from elementary to middle school, (b) academic preparation, (c) student engagement, (d) navigating and adapting to a new learning environment, (e) peer interactions, and (f) new rules, procedures, and routines*. The third category, "anti-plunge" practices and strategies, offered suggestions from the students' perspective on what educators can implement to ensure a successful transitional experience for middle schoolers and unveiled the following themes: *(g) what students say help them transition successfully into middle school, and (h) supports to prevent the middle school plunge*.

Transitional Factor Category I: Academic Rigor Adjustment Shift

School transition occurs when students leave one learning environment or grade level to enter another one, which presents major changes for children (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Students suffer academic challenges, performance deficiencies, and become less motivated once they move from elementary school into middle school, especially those from low-income areas (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Wilms et al., 2009; Yee, 2012). Students are instantly expected to think on complex levels, become more independent, and experience changes in what they learn and how they are taught in middle school. Hence, students have to adjust to adults expecting more from them.

Students have a difficult time adjusting to the learning shift. From 5th to 6th grade, students have a difficult time adjusting to the learning shift, which leads to the Middle School Plunge (West, 2012). Students who participated in this study were asked about their educational experiences once they moved from 5th grade into middle school. Overall, the participant responses suggest that students considered the work in middle school as "difficult" and "hard." Participant 10, a 6-8 middle school student, indicated that the transition to 6th grade was overwhelming by stating, "It was kind of nerve racking, I could tell this school was harder than 5th grade and it was difficult for me to understand what some of the teachers were saying, like different math skills." Participant 13, a 6th grade student at a K-8 elementary school, revealed an academic decline experience by saying, "My move was my grades got lower and it was very difficult for me to understand it and I did better in 5th grade." Another example of a response that exposed the middle school learning transition in an adverse way was revealed by Participant 15 (a student from K-8 elementary school B): "My experience moving from

5th to 6th grade was my grades got low, but I don't know why." Similarly, a student from K-8 elementary school A also did not know why or what happened to her achievement scores after 5th grade. Participant 22 stated:

> Umm, I think it is a little hard in 6th grade because in 5th grade, I almost had As and Bs and only once C in the 4th marking period…and like in the 6th grade…last marking period, I had like three Cs and I think that was bad for me. I got a C in social studies and I never get a C in social studies. I don't know what happened.

As a student who transferred from an elementary school to a separate middle school building, Participant 3 considered 6th grade as intense and lonely by sharing:

> My move to 6th grade was kind of difficult. There were so many students that I did not know. So many classes, so many projects due. Like…one class does this and another class does that. It was a struggle for me.

Quite a few students who attended both K-8 elementary schools A and B emphasized how competent they were in 5th grade in comparison to 6th grade when their grades declined. Participant 19 affirmed this viewpoint and asserted, "My experience in 5th grade was easier than when I was in 6th grade…like when I went into 6th grade my grades in math went down a whole lot." Moreover, Participant 21 pointed out how problematic it was to comprehend what he was taught in 6th grade and stated:

> Uh, I did better in 5th grade than I was in 6th grade, because I had way better grades in 5th grade than 6th. The teachers in 6th grade made it like hard to understand; but in 5th grade it was easier to understand the work and how they taught it to you. It was hard for me to go to 6th grade.

As expressed by Bandura's (2012) self-efficacy theory, middle school aged adolescents have a difficult time believing in their own ability to achieve and learn. As a result, students at this concrete development stage often experience decreased motivation in school (McLeod, 2009; Schunk et al., 2008). Consequently, adolescent students doubt their capabilities and develop academic insecurities. However, students who have a high

sense of self-competence often do well in school, because they believe that they can be successful (Bandura, 2012). The following students articulated examples of both perspectives. Participant 18 declared frustration with the 6th grade experience and shared the following:

> I thought the transition from 5th grade to 6th grade was a little bit more harder, because I was kind of disappointed in myself in 6th grade, cause in 5th grade I got all As in all marking periods and when I went to 6th grade I went back to not doing well like before 5th grade. So, I kinda felt disappointed in myself, because I wouldn't really think.

A few students proclaimed that their middle school experience from 5th grade was both easy and hard, therefore acknowledged that they actually did well in 6th grade. Participant 19 said, "It wasn't hard, it was easier for me, because it was reviewing what we were dong in 5th grade, but as we started mixing it with 6th grade stuff it started getting harder, but it wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be," while Participant 18 exclaimed, "Moving to 6th grade…it was hard, but it was easy, but hard at the same time, cause we learned the same stuff we learned in 5th grade, but a little bit more, but it was a lot more difficult than I thought. I thought I was just supposed to get it." The subsequent students conveyed that middle school was not hard for them at all and stressed high levels of confidence. Participant 20 asserted, "It wasn't hard for me to move to 6th grade, because I always try to improve the best in me and try to go higher, so I put my best in there." Similarly, Participant 16 expressed, "From 5th to 6th grade, my grades increased. I learned a lot and my move was good, I got lots of help and went to after school programs."

Academic preparation. Another theme that became evident was students' thoughts on how well their teachers prepared them academically to be successful in

middle school. There were mixed perceptions from the students on their opinions about their readiness levels after the 5th grade. Students in this study reported teacher competence and effectiveness concerns, while others felt that their teachers equipped them with the knowledge needed to do well in middle school. Research stated that teachers have the most profound impact on student achievement and 6th grade is a crucial year in their education (Balfanz, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Loeb, Kalogrides, & Be'teille, 2012). Further research reveals that elementary school teachers inconsistently groom students to endure rigorous academic expectations in middle school, therefore causing a disparity among adolescent learning development and the instructional program (Born et al., 2002; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008). Most students expressed that their teachers failed to explain lessons and neglected to provide them with the support they needed to conceptualize the content in 6th grade, especially for those who moved to a separate middle school. For example Participant 6 said, "I think that middle school work is harder than 5th grade, because umm when I used to be in 5th grade, well it used to be easier and funner…In middle school, a teacher, they try to help you, but sometimes they just don't know how to." Participant 22 added, "Only one thing was hard in 6th grade than 5th grade and that was math, because the procedures were hard, the steps… and they weren't explaining it good." In addition, students stressed how some 6th grade teachers simply did not support their learning needs and did not plan sufficient time to prepare them to pass assessments. Participant 21 concluded:

> I don't think I did well on the test cause I missed some days, because I was sick and when I came back I didn't understand the work and I asked the teacher to teach me how to do it and he said, "ask somebody else." I didn't understand the work so I wasn't ready for the state test.

A few other students provided similar interpretations of teacher's actions:

> I think they prepared us good in 5th grade, but 6th grade like umm they prepared us extra hard, but I thought they should have prepared us more in the middle of the year, so we would have been ready at the end of the year. (Participant 19)

Participant 19 also shared the following:

> My 6th grade teachers prepared us, but it wasn't enough for us to do the test, because they just put it down hard when it was right before the test. They didn't prepare us early enough. They waited until right before the test when they should have been preparing us earlier in the year. My 5th grade teacher prepared us more. I think 5th grade teachers were more strict than 6th grade teachers, because they were more focused into getting us prepared for middle school.

Participant 18 agreed and noted:

> I think my 5th grade teachers prepared me better than my 6th grade teachers. The 6th grade teachers did not prepare us early enough like the other student said. But our 5th grade teachers prepared us right away. My teacher in 5th grade really did push me to do what I was supposed to do. She was more strict and more into learning. Then I felt like my 6th grade teacher wasn't' really into pushing education.

Further, students were asked how well they believed that their teachers prepared them to pass the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), the performance-based, high-stakes state test that measures student proficiency levels in their mastery of core knowledge and skills. Reponses from the students were puzzling and somewhat contradictory in that the participants, in general, emphasized the difficult transition into middle school. However, many students stated they felt well prepared to pass the state test. In fact, students indicated that their 6th grade teachers taught them more strategies than their 5th grade teachers. Participant 5 voiced, "I feel that our teachers prepared us really well, because questions were like easy this year (referring to 6th grade) and they taught us everything that would be on the test and taught us different skills." In addition, Participant 4 said, "I think our teachers prepared us well too, they ran through every question they thought we needed to know for the NJASK and once we did

it, we were like WOW, I learned this in this class, so it was easy." Several additional students repeatedly shared that their 6th grade teachers either prepared them well or prepared them good to take and pass the NJASK. Participant 13, a 6th grade student in a K-8 school, passionately proclaimed, "I think our 6th grade teachers prepared us more than our 5th grade teachers, because 6th grade pushed us even hard…our 5th grade teachers just said, 'just do it, try your best,' but 6th grade pushed us more and encouraged us." Two students in particular strongly expressed the level of preparation that they received from their 6th grade teachers. Participant 12 asserted:

> The teachers I think prepared us really well, because like my teacher, she's a math Teacher, she's like really great and I kinda call her mom and every single time she would say, "pay attention to this question, because it will be on your test," so you will learn it. so, I try to learn it and if I don't understand, I'll just tell my teacher and she'll always break it down for me.

Participant 3 concurred, "I think I was more prepared in 6th grade, because when I got the state test, I usually pass and most of the questions I know. I'm usually one of the first ones to finish and I think I did fairly well." One student summarized, "Umm, I think our teachers prepared us well for the test, because like once we got into the test, you see, Oh…like it's really easy and the easier it is, the more better you do…I was more prepared in 6th grade than 5th grade." Another participant agreed, "Well, I felt more prepared this year, in 6th grade, because they made it a little more fun to help you learn strategies and new things to pass the NJASK."

Conversely, it was interesting to uncover that all of the 6th grade students who responded from K-8 School A favored the NJASK preparation experience that they received from their 5th grade teachers. This group of students described their 5th grade teachers as more instructionally supportive. Participant 20 revealed, "I think my 5th grade

teacher really prepared me for the test, but my 6th grade teachers only helped us study some steps…I had to study more at home so I could do my best just like I did in 5th grade." One student irrefutably stated, "Yes! My 5th grade teachers prepared me better for the state test."

Student engagement. The third theme that emerged from the focus group discussions concentrated on whether students considered themselves as more or less engaged as middle school students. Research states that middle school is more cognitively and socially complex than elementary school and many students lack the skills necessary to sustain faster learning rates, especially for children from low-income, high-poverty communities (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Kahler & Valentine, 2010). Therefore, as the schoolwork gets harder, students often lose faith in their ability to perform, become less motivated and disengaged in middle school, thus suffer academic and emotional plunges (Eccles, 1999; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, and Zabell (2011) and Carolan and Chesky (2012) assert students in K-8 schools are more focused, engaged, and achieve better than students who transition to a 6-8 grade configuration (Eccles & Roeser, 2009), because they are not burdened with adjusting to a new, unfamiliar learning environment. Even so, student involvement and participation in school is strongly linked to academic achievement, because engaged learners perform better and do well on assessments (Balfantz et al., 2007; Marks, 2000; Watkins, 2005; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

In this study, focus group discussion data revealed that students who attended Middle School C (6-8) were slightly more engaged in school than students from both K-8 School A and K-8 School B. Interestingly, all of the students who answered focus group

question 4b stated that they became less engaged in school once they became a 6th grader. Participant 13, a 6th grade student from K-8 School B, reported:

> I feel like I am less engaged in my schoolwork in middle school, because things are harder and sometimes I want to be lazy and don't want to do it. So, I think I'm not engaged.

Student 15 experienced the same and said, "I am less engaged, because the work is harder and I just don't want to do it." Student 16 stated that in addition to experiencing academic struggles, peer distractions in class also affected her ability to stay on task and shared the following:

> I think I'm less engaged, because I am not used to the work that we have in 6th grade. But, I thought I wasn't going to get used to it, and now that it's kids in the class that like play around, I think I can just do the work later and play around with them and then by grades dropped.

During the focus group sessions, students from both middle school types shared that overall they felt more comfortable and engaged in 5th grade because they were allowed to move about the classroom and interact more with classmates. Further, students revealed that 6th grade teachers were stricter than their 5th grade teachers. Cushman and Rogers (2008) contend that adolescent students perceive structured, demanding, and strict middle school classrooms as punishment and become apathetic and disengaged. Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, and Hambacher (2007) agree and share that teachers at high-poverty schools have a difficult time establishing positive classroom management and often enforce harsh rules in which students rebel and become motivationally detached from learning. One student passionately exclaimed, "I think I was less engaged, because in 6th grade, I never thought 6th grade teachers it would be like the teachers were so strict, I thought it would be like 5th grade, but I thought wrong." Student 14 concurred and disclosed:

> I think I am less engaged in school since I'm in middle school cause like they give you strict rules. They don't let you do things like use the bathroom certain time and if you have to go, you can't go and you can't get out of your seat.

Student 18, also 6th grader from a K-8 school, exclaimed:

> I was less engaged, because I feel that school was my main priority in 5th grade and I loved it. I really wanted to go to school everyday. But when I got into 6th I realized how much struggles I have and how different things started happening. I started realizing that I don't really need to go to school. School is boring and I didn't like the way I felt that way, so I kinda felt less engaged.

Participant 10, a student who attended a 6-8 middle school, described being engaged at times and disengaged at other times, "It's like either or, because sometimes you get in a class with friends and you get less engaged, but sometimes you really want to focus, cause it's gonna raise your grade, so you are like more engaged, but it depends."

While most students in this study shared less desirable classroom engagement experiences, other students stated they did. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) indicate that actively engaged and focused students retain and process information, therefore perform well in school. Participant 7, from 6-8 Middle School C, affirmed, "I feel that this year I am more engaged in my school work." Another student concurred, "I think we are more engaged in school now, because we are more independent and able to show our creativity, cause our teachers are not behind us every time then when we were in elementary school." One student shared that 6th grade was a very important year to get better grades to make mom proud. Participant 19 acknowledged knowing that 6th grade was going to be hard, which was encouragement to work harder, "I think I was more engaged, because I knew that it was going to be harder, so I had to focus on it more." Lastly, Participant 20 who shared experiencing academic success in 6th grade unveiled,

"I felt that I was more engaged, because I never had an A in language word study, so I was trying to be more into school so that I can get As."

Transitional Factor Category II: New Learning Conditions Adjustment Shift

Whether students remain in the same educational environment or move to a different building for middle school, they undergo a new learning experience (Kim et al., 2014). Of the different middle school grade configurations, the most common types are the K-8 middle school within an elementary school, or as Hough (2005) coined 'elemiddle,' and the stand-alone 6-8 middle school structure, in which students leave the familiarity of their childhood school after 5th grade. Either way, students endure major adjustment to new learning conditions and intricate academic learning shifts with greater negative implications for students in urban school districts (Kim et al., 2014; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Furthermore, the transitional barriers differ between the two school types and students' perceptions of how their middle school environment influences their academic and social-emotional outcomes (Jia et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2014). Regressive grade level changes affect students differently (Yecke, 2006), however the stress of learning to navigate through large and unfamiliar environments, peer interactions, and adjusting to new rules, procedures, and routines play a role in how students cope and perform in middle school (Akos, 2002, Eidelman, 2014; Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

Navigating and adapting to a new learning environment. This theme uncovered a pattern of difficulty that the 6th graders encountered when they tried to find their way through the physical structure of middle school, especially for the first time. Students who attended the 6-8 middle school configuration reported greater navigational

struggles than their peers who remained in K-8 programs. In this study, size and conditions of the school served as stressors for students during the middle school transitional process. Student 12 commented first and said, "When I walked through the door, I was like this school is big…it was crowded and I was trying to look for my homeroom teacher and I was lost." Participant 2 agreed, "When I first came here I was nervous, it was crowded and I was confused, because I didn't know where to go." Similarly, participant 7 divulged, "It was kind of difficult, like student's learning stuff, you are always crowded; you gotta like squirm your way through the hallways." The common terms shared by the students were how "difficult" and "hard" it was for them to shift from depending on their teachers for guidance to being self-sufficient. Word cruncher results from Atlas.ti revealed that during the focus group discussions, those two expressions in particular was used 28-52 times to emphasize the intricacy of their experience. Participant 3 exclaimed, "I think it was quite difficult, because you have to go really far to get from place to place which was kind of hard for me." Participant 11 shared, "I wouldn't say it was very difficult, but it wasn't easy. You have to adapt to like being crowded all the time and being squished and being independent most of the time."

Current research on middle schools reveals that students undergo drastic academic declines if they leave the K-8 setting to attend a stand-alone 6-8 program (Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwerdt & West, 2013). As a result, many large urban school districts are abandoning middle school programs to transition students back to K-8 school settings. Students were asked if they agreed with the research and whether they believed it was better for them to attend a separate 6-8 middle school versus a K-8 elementary school. Out of the 22 total respondents, 16 of them shared their point of

view. Interestingly, only one-fourth of the students who answered felt that a 6-8 middle school program would be best for them. Participant 10, a 6-8 middle school student, anxiously divulged:

> I say there's really a lot of truth behind what the researchers have said. I'm not saying student's scores are solely based on a school; but sometimes it's just easier to be around people you've known for a long time. It's a comfortable environment where you can feel better in a K-8 school, because they are in a more comfortable environment than moving new place.

According to Participant 21, from K-8 School A, "It is better to stay at the same school, cause you more used to the school and won't feel bad or uncomfortable and you will probably do better." Similarly, Participant 19 (6th grader from a K-8 school) declared:

> Well, I think it's better to stay at the same school and I think you feel more comfortable staying at the same school. It's not a lot of pressure than moving to a different school, cause you have your same friends so you can stay confident and plus, you know what to expect, because you been at the same school for a long time so you get used to it.

Participant 3, a 6-8 Middle School C, offered advice to her fellow counterparts who attend K-8 elementary schools,

> For those students that go to K-8, umm which like elementary through middle…I'm saying when they get to high school, they won't have much of an experience with switching classes, so it's better to be in like a 6th-8th, because they have a better knowing on how to survive in environments in such schools.

Dissimilarly, the students who perceived moving to a new school for middle school did not feel that grade configuration or type of school really mattered. Dove et al. (2010) reveal no sound evidence that grade configuration or school attachment syndrome cause academic deprivation (Kieffer, 2013) for students in either middle school type. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) uncovered the same revelation and stress that districts should consider maintaining stand-alone middle school programs. In fact, Participant 13 affirmed, "I think my grades will go up if I went to a 6-8 school, because they are mature

people in 6-8 schools and even though it's strict, I think I would do better there," along with Participant 5 who shared,

> I feel like it's not really true what the researchers said, cause if you move to a new school, your grades like it's not the school that depends on your grades, it's what you do so it wouldn't make a difference what school you go to.

Peer interactions. Another aspect that has an impression on middle school transition is how important students view their peer friendships as a mechanism to help them cope during this crucial period of change in their lives. Research suggests that middle school adjustment is greatly influenced by peer connectedness and has an impact on academic success for adolescent children (Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005; Kinderman & Skinner, 2012; Ryan & Ladd, 2012). To some students, gaining acceptance by fellow students and belonging to peer social groups undermines academics (Akos, et al., 2015; Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). Further, adolescents tend to depend on friends for emotional support and comfort, safety and encouragement; which is disrupted during the middle school transition (Eccles & Midgley 1989; Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Kingery & Erdley, 2007; Ladd & Ettekal, 2013). During focus group discussions, students fervently stressed how "knowing and not knowing the same students" (as stated by Participant 3) was a concern for them as middle school students. Participant 5 (a 6th grade student from 6-8 Middle School C) struggled with this issue and said, "At first I was scared cause I thought that none of my friends would be in my class and that I wouldn't now anybody." Participant 1 faced the same lonely feeling and expressed the following, "I was nervous that I wouldn't know anybody…it was difficult, because you wouldn't see your same friends that you were with before and I wouldn't have no one there to talk to." Participant 20 (6th grade student from a K-8 school)

described an isolating experience after transferring from one school to another, as a result expressed strongly about remaining in the same school throughout middle school by revealing:

> I think it is better to stay at the same school, because when I was at another school and I moved to this school it was a lot different. I had to make new friends. I was new and everyone was making fun of me.

A few students shared actually looking forward to a change from elementary school as well as meeting new friends and believed that it was a person's choice to fail or succeed. Participant 10 commented, "It could be harder, but it depends on how much you focus, because if you study it's not going to as hard, but some people decide to stay with their friends and just be a jokester in the hallways." Participant 7 believed, "Learning is learning and it's on them if they want to fail." Participant 5 shared feeling excited about attending a new school or middle school and conveyed, "Umm, moving from 5th to 6th grade was actually fun, because you get older and you get to meet more friends and new people." Likewise, Participant 8 articulated, "Moving from 5th grade to middle school was normal, you weren't stuck with the same people."

New rules, procedures, and routines. Children have a difficult time making the shift from being in a student-centered, nurturing, elementary classroom to a more teacher-focused, strict, and less comforting learning environment in middle school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Hines, 2012). Students expressed the fear of not knowing what to expect in an unfamiliar or new setting and dealing with the uncertainty of daily systemic middle school operations. Students have a pre-conceived perception that middle school is overwhelming and intimidating, thus endure a tough time adjusting during this educational stage (Hines, 2012; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2013). Students move from

occupying one classroom for most of the school day with one teacher and one set of rules to the demands of switching classes on time, keeping up with daily learning schedules, increased responsibility, and tolerating different teachers, all with different requirements in middle school (Anderman & Kimwell, 1997; Freschi, 2011; Maclin & Monteiro-Leitner, 2004). According to Woolfolk and Margetts (2013), students from low-income environments have a more difficult time adhering to rules and procedures, especially black males due to family dynamics and negative social influences. Consequently, these subgroups have absenteeism, become behavior problems, and suffer an academic plunge (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Schwerdt & West, 2013). Students in this study were asked to explain their middle school experience and the barriers faced during this transitional phase. Participant 9 talked about the problematic routine of adjusting to a stressful middle school schedule by stating, "Now you move around a lot and it's really hard, the hardest part is staying 84 or 81 minutes in the same class and then have two minutes to walk to the next class."

Participant 4 dealt with the intensity of independency as a 6th grader and imparted,

> In 5th grade you weren't like independent and we went to the bathroom as a class, but 6th grade was difficult, you are like independent…like when it's time to go to your next class and the bell rings, you have to go by yourself.

Similarly, Participant 4 shared, "It kinda was difficult, because you have to take on new responsibility, like maturing to your age and you have to take responsibility for your own actions." Two more students revealed heightened change responsibility required to sustain in 6th grade. Likewise, Participant 14 disclosed that,

> The move was difficult because you have to like have to learn to be more mature and you don't get second chances and you have to learn to grow up, plus you have to be more responsible for yourself and your belongings.

Further, Participant 15 stressed,

> Yes it was a bit difficult, because you have to be more responsible, cause in 6th grade we only had two times to go to the bathroom in the morning and when it's our last class, so we had to wait for that long, but in 5th grade the teacher let us go anytime we wanted to.

Other students stressed how hard it was to focus in middle school and keeping up with teacher expectations. Participant 14 stated, "Like moving to a different school, you not used to people teaching you the way you were taught before." Participant 8 agreed and shared:

> If you remain at a K-8 school, like it's going to be the same. Going to a middle school, Yes…it will get harder, because you now have more teachers and it's hard to focus, because you are thinking that you only have one day to finish this project. So it's hard to focus.

Two students agreed that the transition to middle school was tough, however acknowledged how moving to a new building for 6th grade can force students to become more focused. Participant 17 revealed, "6-8 school has some hard work to do and you can't have write ups and you can't be suspended from school, because then you are not going to know what they taught during that week." In addition, Participant 18 disclosed:

> I think going to a separate middle school is better, because a K-8 school you already know the same teachers. You already know how they act; you already know that you can kind of get over with a few problems or things that you are not supposed to do. If you go to just a regular middle school then you don't know the teachers. You don't know what their expectations are so you won't do something that is not right, because you don't know how they will handle it and on top of that they will push you even harder, because it's not a bunch of little kids in the building.

Transitional Factor Category III: "Anti-Plunge" Strategies and Practices

What urban students say can help them transition successfully into middle school. The purpose of this study was to uncover the barriers that urban elementary youth expressed that they experienced when they transitioned into middle school from the students' perspective. Students from two K-8 schools and one 6th-8th grade configuration shared their encounters from the different middle school types, and how their perceptions of these encounters influenced their academic outcomes as 6th graders. The intention of this research was to give students a voice and hear what they truly felt in order to best assist them through this major change in their lives. Once the issues were identified, next it was important to find out what students pinpointed as practices that educators should employ to support them through their transitional experience. Students were asked what teachers and principals could do to reduce or eliminate things that made it difficult for them, and what systems could be put into practice to help prevent an academic decline for students once they leave 5th grade into middle school. Maclin and Monteiro-Leitner (2004) emphasize the importance of a structured and planned transitional process for students to address and cushion transitional barriers. During focus group discussions, students from both middle school types candidly shared their viewpoints of preparation approaches to best support their transitional experience.

To better address students to make the learning shift and adjust to the rigorous academic demands of middle school, students strongly desired time and exposure to the type of work that they will be required to do. Student 19, a 6th grader from a K-8 elementary school said,

> I think what they should do is give us some work that we are going to be doing in the next grade, so we can sort of have the gist of what we are going to be doing, so they should send us home with some stuff.

Another K-8 6th grade participant shared, "I think principals or teachers can teach us strategies to make us understand it better so we can get better grades." Participant 10, a 6th grade student from Middle School C divulged, "We could like instead of having really long work, getting us to what we are used to…and then step by step taking us up a level instead of bam!!...here's a paragraph and questions right in your face." Participant 18 proposed that educators should consider sending students packets of work during the summer that mimic what they will be required to understand in middle school, stating:

> I think they should send home during the summer a little bit of work that they know will be in 6th grade, so the students will know it, like, this is what I am supposed to be doing, let me get this done and bring it to school on the first day.

Participant 19, from K-8 Elementary School A agreed and said,

> Give us the gist of what we are going to go over, because you know how some students don't actually know what they are learning, cause it's like they get confused and stuff and I think they should explain the work a little bit more.

Students who attended a stand-alone 6-8 middle school communicated the importance of 6th grade teachers breaking down the work for them in the beginning and focus more on students who show signs of failing early on. Participant 5 implied,

> If they see like a student's grades are dropping from the year before, they can help them see what they are having trouble with and also introduce all the teachers first before just letting them go and find their own teachers.

Participant 11 delved deeper into the level of competence that 5th graders have to understand when they move up to middle school by stating and proposing the following:

> Well sometimes you get really big questions that have really high vocabulary and students won't understand that. So, like what the teachers could do is put it as in a

> 5th grade question and then gradually make it harder and harder. The work was broken down more in 5th grade than 6th grade.

Participant 12 concurred and mentioned,

> Split students by how well their grades are, from advancement to no so advanced, because some are not advanced as others and are put at a disadvantage, because you know…it takes time for some, because some people learn faster than others and it's just not fair.

To better tackle the plunge experience for students and help them adjust to new learning conditions and enhanced expectations of middle school, students in this study proposed that educators pay attention to the procedures and distractions that transpire there. Student 20 declared,

> I think they should explain to us how it's going to be in 6th grade and teach us the rules and how we have to improve and they should do this at the end of 5th grade, because a lot of people change in 6th grade and they turn bad and they aren't really engaged in school.

Student 21 felt that the teachers' rules are too harsh in 6th grade and imparted, "The teachers can lighten up a little bit, cause they are too strict in 6th grade and man like you get in trouble for anything, cause you get in trouble for just laughing." The student further stated, "They can tell us what to expect and how to behave and how to work."

Students from both middle school types disclosed how agitated they were with the commotion and class disruptions that they encountered in middle school. They insinuated that teachers and principals should take a look at how some students behave in class and make adjustments to scheduling. Student 15 uttered, "I think they can make it easier by putting all of the kids who are distractions in one class and put the more advanced in one class who want to learn." Participant 16 exclaimed,

> Take the kids that play too much out of the class and keep the ones who want to work in the class, then have separate classes from each other and I think we would get more work done without the playing kids in the class.

Participant 17 revealed, “I think the people who are mean and fighting and don’t want to do any work should be in a separate class, because if they keep doing that they will distract the ones who are working.” It was interesting to hear a student discuss how school administrators also create distractions for them. A few students from Middle School C stressed how hard it was to move from class to class and prefer to remain in once classroom. Student 14 indicated, “Just to have like…have everything in one class instead of switching classes back to back, because all of your stuff will get lost and work that you did…like everything.” Participant 14 also brought to light the following, “I think our principal can have assemblies more organized, because every time we have assemblies we are in the middle of doing work or activities.”

Supports to prevent the middle school plunge. The PVA survey responses indicated some of the challenges and pressures that students faced and rated how these obstacles affected their ability to do well in middle school. During focus group interviews, students were solicited to choose and score a list of support factors that they believed would promote an effective middle school transition and help to prevent an academic decline. The list of support factors for focus group question 6 was extracted from conversations with students during the survey pilot activity with former 6th grade students and from what the literature reveals are essential factors for urban student success in school: incentives, one-on-one meetings with the teacher, time to talk out problems and issues, celebrate when students are doing well, provide a mentor, push me to do well, have active involvement/hands on learning experiences, motivational youth speakers, security presence in the school, help me to plan out my future. Students were able to add support items that were not listed on the “other” line (Becker & Luthar; 2002;

Elias, 2001; Freschi, 2011; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Maclin & Monteiro-Leithner, 2004; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2013).

Each of the 22 respondents chose their top 5 "anti-plunge" support practices listed and ordered them from 1-5, according to the most significant support (1) and least important (5). Results were counted and categorized by school type and level of importance. The highest or leading support practices that students reported was most important for them to be successful in middle school was "helping them to plan out their future" and "teachers pushing them to do well." Data indicated that 7 out of 22 respondents indicated that "helping them to plan out their future" was the number one most important element to their success. Equally, 7 out of 22 students felt that they needed their teachers to really push them to focus on school as a primary strategy to combat the "plunge" experience for them. The second most important tactic chosen was for teachers and principals to "celebrate when students are doing well" and "allowing them active involvement in their own learning through hands on learning experience." A combined 8/22 students pinpointed such practices as their number two. Six participants listed "time to talk out problems and issues" as their number three or median choice. Providing students with a mentor ranked in the top five important strategies for educators to employ for adolescence with 5/22 students selecting it as number four. Finally, 8/22 students included "security presence" and "incentives" as their least important support factors, however listed them both in the top 5 necessary practices. It is relevant to note that more K-8 "elemiddle" students chose incentives as their 5th most important "anti-plunge" prevention methods. Eight of the 12 6th graders from Middle School C deemed "security presence" as the 5th important measure. One student chose other and wrote

"more educational trips." This particular student also stated during the focus group session, "They should have more educational trips as an incentive for students." Each of the 10 "anti-plunge" support practices was chosen by at least one of the respondents. The strategy least preferred was "motivational youth speakers."

Conclusion

This phase concludes with summarizing the information to answer the qualitative research question and sub-question. Based on what the student participants revealed in this study, teacher-student interaction played a vital role in their ability to adjust to the learning shift and academic hardship experienced as 6th grade students, whether they remained in K-8 schools or moved to a 6-8 middle school configuration. Students reported that their 6th grade teachers were too strict, demanding, and failed to explain the schoolwork on levels that they could grasp and understand. As a result, the transition and sustainability in middle school was very difficult and often hard for the students to keep up academically, especially for students who moved to stand-alone middle schools. Hence, participants conveyed that their grades and assessment scores declined. More students revealed that it was better to remain in K-8 settings for middle school. However, many students also felt that it would be a better opportunity for them to move to a separate middle school environment even though it was harder and their grades suffered. Some students shared that their 6th grade teachers had difficulties managing the students in the class, which caused distractions to their learning. Consequently students' relationships with their middle school teachers were described as less caring and disconnected on a whole.

The major issues that the students divulged as transitional hindrances were

portrayed through the themes discussed in the qualitative phase. Participant responses in this study are quite correlated to the literature on middle school transition experiences for adolescents. As presented earlier, students reported having a very difficult time adjusting to the emotional, social, academic, and physiological change factors that occur during this transitional stage in an adolescent's life. The perceived anxiety of moving to a new learning environment for those students who leave the familiarity of their childhood school and friends for middle school is also a factor. It appears that students in this study view stand-alone middle schools more academically and procedurally advanced than K-8 elementary schools. Therefore, it is evident that student perception of the issues that affect their middle school transitional experience had a great influence on how well they performed.

The "anti-plunge antidote" according to the students in this study from their perspective is focused around providing them time to get used to the middle school process, while providing them with the resources necessary to do well prior to the transition and on-going. Students discussed during focus group sessions and during the pilot study that they would like for teachers and principals to organize and plan a "middle school transition week" during the last two weeks of 5th grade. During this time each student would be allowed to visit their upcoming teachers to get to know them and their new classrooms before the next school year begins. During the first few weeks of 6th grade, students requested time to get used to their new schedule, time to learn how to navigate through the building to get to each class, time to understand new rules and procedures, and time to become accustomed to the school work. Further, students strongly petition teachers to identify when students need help before they start to fail

academically and emotionally. Also, students have indicated how boring 6th grade is in comparison to 5th grade. Therefore, students deemed it important that teachers plan fun and enjoyable project-based lessons in middle school. In addition, students required that they be afforded a distraction free learning environment, so that other students are not allowed to disrupt their education. Finally, students strongly solicit educators to provide them with the top support practices and methods revealed in this study that make them feel comfortable, safe, secure, supported, and competent to successfully transition into middle school.

The focus group sessions allowed students to delve into their feelings and views concerning the middle school transition process. I felt the students finished each session with a better understanding of what is expected of them as they continue their education as middle school children. At the end of focus group interview at K-8 School A, I asked the students whether they had anything else they wanted to add or share about their experience moving from 5th grade into 6th grade. One student commented,

> I think this was a really good way to chose and see how the student's point of view of how school really is. Most of the time not many people care about what students say, but I think this was a good way to understand what we think.

Phase III Mixing Quantitative and Qualitative Results

A mixed-methods design was chosen for this study to explore the middle school transition experiences of urban youth from both K-8 and 6-8 configuration school types. In this study, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately. In this phase, results from both inquiries were then integrated and produced some interesting findings. The mixing of quantitative results from the Paired Validity Analysis Survey (PVA) and

qualitative results in the form of student responses from focus group questions proved suitable to answer the overarching mixed-methods research question:

RQ 1 (Overarching Question): What do middle school students describe as factors or variables contributing to the academic decline, known as "The Middle School Plunge" for urban students from the perspective of the students?

Focus group questions were designed to provide students the opportunity to elaborate and embellish upon the survey data results. A synthesis of the two data types showed some parallels as well as contradictions. Quantitatively, more students viewed their relationship with their 6th grade teachers in a positive way, which is quite different from what students actually stated during the focus group interviews. Almost 65% or 88/136 students felt strongly that their teachers always or often liked them, which motivated them to work hard in school. While, one student described his 6th grade teacher as non-supportive, failed to provide academic assistance, and even stated, "I asked the teacher to teach me how to do it and he said to ask someone else." Another student explained that middle school work was very difficult to grasp and even harder to understand what the teachers were teaching, especially with math. Student perception data were consistent when students reported that they actually learned more in 6th grade than 5th grade. More than half of the students surveyed scored that they were always or often confident that their 6th grade teachers helped them to learn more than when they were in 5th grade. Qualitatively, student response patterns showed that overall they believed that their 6th grade teachers instructionally prepared them really well. One student even stated the 6th grade math teacher was like a mother figure and would break down the work to make it easier to understand. Similarly, another student enjoyed the

new independence as a 6th grader and stressed that in middle school they were allowed to show their creativity and further stated, “Cause our teachers are not behind us every time like when were in elementary school.” Only a few participants disagreed and felt that their 5th grade teachers were more caring and felt that middle school teachers should “lighten up a little bit.”

When discussing students’ perceptions of their academic ability and preparation relative to academic accomplishments in middle school, the majority believed that their teachers in 6th grade equipped them better to succeed. About 45% of the participants agreed that their test scores mattered to them more in 6th grade than 5th grade, versus the less than 18% who felt the opposite. In addition, significantly more students reported that their 6th grade teachers prepared them to do well on the NJASK with only 5 out 136 students who felt ill prepared. Roughly 10 students voiced that the questions on the state assessment were easier than expected, because their 6th grade teachers provided them with the necessary skills to answer the different questions. One student passionately stated, “Our 6th grade teachers pushed us to the limit so that we could be prepared for everything.” About four students revealed that their 5th grade teachers prepared them much earlier in the year to be ready to pass the state test and three participants even stated, “The 6th grade teachers did not prepare us early enough, but our 5th grade teachers prepared us right away” and “I thought they should have prepared us more in the middle of the year, so we would be ready at the end of the year.” One student continued to say, “My 6th grade teachers did prepare us, but it wasn’t in enough time for us to do the test.”

The quantitative and qualitative findings for students' perceptions of whether or not they did better academically in 5th versus 6th grade were quite different. Slightly more students, about 26% or 32 out of 136 of them, strongly declared that they actually improved in 6th grade. While 29 out of 136 students felt that they were academically stronger in 5th grade. On the contrary, data from focus group conversations exposed that only three students believed that they performed better in 6th grade versus the 17 participants who announced that their grades dropped drastically after 5th grade, and two students reported feeling both ways. It was interesting to discover that information from both data sets was synonymous in that more than 50% of students surveyed and more than half of the students expressed during focus groups sessions that they felt it was better for high achieving students to be in separate classes from students who struggle academically. Generally the students' impressions were that academic mainstreaming created a learning disadvantage for both groups of students. One participant stated that educators should, "Split students by how well their grade are, because some students are put at a disadvantage…it takes time for some, because some people learn faster than others and it's just not fair!"

As it relates to participants' perceptions of their relationship with their peers, less than 7% (9 out of 136) of urban students admitted to always caring more about what classmates think of them than getting good grades in school. Another 8.82% (12 out of 136) often focused more on their friends than academics, and 15.44% (21 out of 136) sometimes felt this way. However, students who reported that it was more important to get good grades than what their classmates thought of them was significantly higher. More than 60% of students surveyed shared that they always focused more on academic

achievement than fraternizing. During focus group interviews most students from all three schools discussed feeling nervous about 6th grade or middle school, because they thought that they would be estranged from their friends. One student revealed, “It could be harder, but it depends on how much you focus, because if you study it’s not going to be as hard, but some people decide to stay with their friends and just be a jokester,” while another student stated that often times students can get off task when in the same class with friends, but those who are engaged will receive good grades. However, the term “nervous” about not knowing anybody was a pattern throughout each of the sessions, and it was evident that students relied on one another for support during their middle school transition.

Remarkably, only one student admitted to being bullied in school during focus group sessions. Many students stressed feeling aggravated about classroom distractions, but overall, the students did not report feeling intimidated by their peers as much. However, quantitatively more than 30% of the participants did convey always or often experiencing bullying in school and that it was hard to focus on what was being taught. Data also indicated that more than 50% of the students surveyed disclosed that they always or often were not harassed by their peers, with 35.29% who revealed never being bullied as a 6th grader. Hence, although students were affected by peer torment, many urban students did not consider themselves as victims of any harassment, according to PVA survey results. Therefore, data from both inquiries appear consistent with one another in that some students stressed feeling uncomfortable showing how smart they were in front of their peers, however more participants reported feeling absolutely secure.

Analysis of student responses to their perception of middle school conditions and its influence on academic achievement showed key differences and similarities between results from the methodologies. Similarities included participants from both grade configurations who revealed that it was difficult to navigate and adapt to the middle school learning environment as well as new rules and procedures for 6th grade students. Furthermore, many students stressed that there were too many distractions in class and divulged concerns with middle school teachers' classroom management skills. Hence, information from the survey and focus group responses exposed that it was quite hard for students to focus and do well under such circumstances. Major differences involved how much more of an influence peer and teacher interactions had on students who attended a stand-alone middle school versus those who remained in an 'elemiddle' environment. More than 35% of students from K-8 School A and 51.52% from K-8 School B felt very comfortable participating in class and their teachers and peers made them feel smart doing so. However, only 17.33% of the students who attended the 6-8 Middle School C disclosed feeling safe interacting and sharing in class. Results were also conflicting in that most students verbally expressed that navigating middle school, surviving academically, and engagement was very hard. Student responses included, "I wouldn't say it was hard, but it wasn't easy," "it was crowded, I was lost," "you have to adapt to being squished and crowded all of the time," "you have to get used to more responsibility." On the contrary, survey data showed that overall, most students always or often liked switching classes, felt school was enjoyable, and admitted to following the teachers' directions and remaining focused on the lessons taught.

Lastly, the quantitative and qualitative data were aligned in regards to student perception of middle school environment as safety between both school types. When students were asked whether they felt attending a separate 6-8 middle school or remaining in their K-8 neighborhood school was better for their learning, survey results were almost congruent. Quantitatively, 32 out of 132 students sometimes felt that moving on to a new school was better, while 31 out of 132 participants believed that they would learn more remaining in the same school for 6th grade. Similarly, about 10 out of 22 students articulated during focus interviews that they would feel more comfortable staying in their same school for middle school and 7 students thought they would do better and become more responsible moving to a stand-alone middle school for 6th grade. Five students stated or gestured that it did not matter to them which middle school grade configuration to attend. Ironically, none of the students who participated in the focus group sessions from any of the three schools revealed feeling unsafe or voiced any safety concerns at school. As a matter of fact, survey results revealed that more students felt safer leaving their neighborhood school for 6th grade than remaining, which could mean that they did not consider this variable as a major issue. Additionally, focus group participants ranked safety officer presence in the school building as one of the least recommended support strategies for success.

Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative phases of this study as well as mixing of the data sources show a strong correlation to one another with a few alignment exceptions. Nevertheless, according to the students who participated in this study, the results suggest their perception of their middle school transitional experiences does influence their

academic outcomes. Consequently, themes that manifested as a result of the information gathered from both the PVA survey as well as focus group interviews are considered the factors or variables which contribute to the academic decline phenomenon known as, "The Middle School Plunge" for urban youth from both K-8 and 6-8 middle school grade configuration types. The results of the survey data confirmed that student perceptions based on their interaction with teachers, peers, personal ability, academic preparation, and middle school environment had an impact on their transition and success in middle school. Further, results showed that there is a relationship between how students viewed their transitional experience and their ability to make the academic learning shifts as well as adjustment to new learning conditions as middle school students. The qualitative data provided rich, thick descriptions of how students truly felt, which expanded upon the survey findings. However, student response data negated the survey results at times.

Chapter V

Discussion, Findings, and Implications

Introduction

This final chapter presents an overview of the study and focuses on discussing the findings that emerged as a result of the quantitative and qualitative data. This mixed-methods study sought to provide an in-depth understanding of the overarching and supporting questions that guided the research. Thus, the study explored urban students' perceptions of how their move to middle school influenced academic outcomes, described in this research as "The Middle School Plunge" (West & Schwerdt, 2012). The examination of the research findings was grounded in the Social Learning, Attribution/Self-Determination, and Situated Learning theoretical frameworks as the lenses through which the data were analyzed (Bandura, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1990; Marks, 2000; Piaget, 1972; Weiner, 2014). These approaches were interrelated to provide a conceptual explanation for findings. The researcher coined the transition to middle school experience and the three major change factors that adolescent students undergo during this developmental phase as the 'Trin'sition period. Consequently, the information gathered from the results provided suggestions and practices for educators to assist students, especially those from economically challenged environments, to navigate the middle school learning systems. The following sections include a description of the study's purpose, brief review of the study, and a discussion of the interpretation of the significant findings. Then, the limitations of the study will be reviewed. Next, the implications of the results will be provided followed by recommendations for educational practitioners and leaders to put into action to improve middle school programs. The

chapter closes with final thoughts, potential future research suggestions, and conclusion of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The United States educational system has undergone great scrutiny, thus under monitoring by the federal government as a result of the findings in the, *A Nation at Risk Report* which highlighted educational issues in America's schools and recommendations to enhance the quality of student learning (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This concern became a major focus in American high schools due to inadequate minority graduation rates and promoting students with poor school performance (Yecke, 2006). Special interest groups were particularly interested in the implications that the achievement gaps have on the future of the United States economy (Layton, 2012; McKinsey & Company, 2009; Schultz & Hanusek, 2012). Middle schools were to blame for the student academic declines resulting in elevated high school drop out rates, especially in urban districts (Hursh, 2007; West et al., 2012). National assessment trends revealed middle schools as the problem grades, whereby math scores also began to plunge (McKenzie, Ogle, Stegman, & Mulvenon, 2006; NAEP, 2005). Research states that the increased student failure during 6-8 grade configurations can be contributed to the middle school concept, which focused more on socialization than academics (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Yecke, 2006; West, 2012). The No Child Left Behind 2001 initiative placed considerable pressure on schools, especially urban districts, to target middle school grade levels as an improvement focus (Mathis, 2003; United States Department of Education, 2001). The mandate imposed high stakes assessments, which showed middle schools at the top of the schools in need of improvement list (Mathis,

2003; McNeil, 2011). Consequently, the trend in low-income school districts was to revert back to K-8 models (Baltimore City Schools, Division of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability, 2001; Chaker, 2005; Offenberg, 2001). However, research presents no substantial evidence or findings to prove that middle school grade level configurations create academic deprivations for students (Clark & Clark, 1990; Erb, 2006; Grant, 2009; Harding, 2003; Sharkey & Elwert, 2011). Yet, it is conclusive that there are variables that indeed affect and influence middle school performance, whether students remain in K-8 neighborhood settings, or move to separate 6-8 programs, and it is imperative that educators pinpoint these barriers and figure out how to combat the plunge experience, especially for urban students (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Bedard & Do, 2005; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Coles, 2007; Cook et al., 2008; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Consequently, there is a sense of urgency for educational leaders and policy makers to reform, rethink, and provide urban students with the necessary resources and support to make the middle school adjustment.

As a result, the purpose of this study was to discover the association between students' perception of their middle school encounters and the Middle School Plunge experience for urban students, to explain the disparity in academic achievement results after the 5th grade. Further, the research identified and revealed those variables that influence performance and learning outcomes for urban students based on their perception (Bowie, 2012; Kim et al., 2014). The research also brought to light what urban students truly felt about their middle school transitional experiences. In addition, this study offered an analysis of the themes that emerged from the survey and focus group interviews and how the different variables play a role in student educational progress and

success. The results revealed that the way students view or perceive their middle school learning experience and relationships with teachers and peers have an influence on their overall achievement and performance. Furthermore, the study included strategies from the students' perspective that educational practitioners and leaders can incorporate as standard practices into middle school programs to help combat the Middle School Plunge experience for urban youth.

Review of the Study

This study used a sequential-explanatory method to first collect quantitative data using the Paired-Validity Analysis on-line survey followed by six qualitative focus group questions for participants to score and answer. It was relevant to the study to collect both forms of data in order to capture the true essence of urban students' lived middle school experiences and provide them a platform to voice their viewpoints. As stated in this study, West and Schwerdt (2012) explain that students who attend separate 6-8 middle schools suffer greater academic declines in math and language than those who remain in K-8 schools. Therefore, students who attended both K-8 schools and 6-8 middle school programs were selected to participate in this research to uncover whether they viewed grade configurations as a catalyst to academic achievement outcomes. A total of 136 students completed the survey and 22 participated in the focus group sessions. Participants were targeted from two different K-8 schools and one 6-8 middle school from adjacent urban districts with similar demographics.

Data from both quantitative and qualitative phases were scored, analyzed, and arranged by emergent themes that were developed from the research. Results were reported separately and then merged to identify common themes and patterns of

information. Survey results were calculated using the Survey Monkey on-line data analysis tool and broken down by individual schools and also combined. Student responses to the focus group questions were recorded verbatim in a journal during each interview session and were organized by phrases, comments, and repetitive descriptive words. Student perception results from the survey were dissected to answer quantitative research question 2 and 2a. Student response patterns from focus group interviews were examined to provide rich, thick descriptive answers to research questions 3 and 3a. Once the quantitative and qualitative data were mixed together, significant findings were extracted to answer the main overarching research question. The study's research questions were used as a guideline for the investigation of student perception.

Discussion and Interpretation of Significant Findings

This section highlights the findings that materialized from this mixed-methods study. Student perception in relation to the Middle School Plunge experience for urban adolescents revealed several conclusions. To fully understand the outcomes of this study, an explanation of the findings are presented. Five categories supported the results from the quantitative data through the Paired-Validity Analysis Survey calculated through the Survey Monkey on-line measurement tool. Data collected from student responses through focus group interviews unveiled eight themes under three key transitional shift factor categories from six open-ended questions. Overall, conclusions from the patterns and categories that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that student perception of their middle school transitional encounters had a strong connection to "The Middle School Plunge" experience for urban students. Also, there was a strong relationship between student-teacher interactions and achievement outcomes for this

population. The ‘Trin’sition concept emerged to describe the connection between the changes that students endure during and throughout middle school and their academic achievement. Findings also showed that many students from both middle school types stressed that K-8 settings are more comfortable for them, while other students believed that attending a separate 6-8 middle school pushes them to mature and provides a more academically challenging experience.

Interpretation of the Quantitative Phase

In this first phase of the study, data were examined to determine students’ perception of their middle school transitional experience. Students were asked to provide a perception value to each of the 40 paired-validity analysis survey questions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very true/always feel this way to not true/never feel this way. The information discovered also adds to the current body of knowledge in the field of education on urban students’ perception of learning experiences encountered in middle school and the influence that grade configuration and relationships with teachers and peers have on their academic performance and outcomes. An analysis of research question 2 unveiled similar student perspectives between the school types as well as different transitional viewpoints of The Middle School Plunge experience.

The participants in this study placed a major emphasis on how well their teachers prepared them to pass the New Jersey state assessment. Of their top ratings, students felt strongly about the importance of working hard in class to receive good grades more than focusing on friendships. In addition, students ranked their relationship with their teachers with high regard, and more than 60% of the participants revealed that they always follow their teacher’s directions and focus on the lesson being taught. The results were

substantiated by relevant and current research, but also contradict the findings of West and Schwerdt (2012) in that the effects of The Middle School Plunge is due to grade configuration, and students perform better if they remain in a K-8 setting. In fact, more than 61% of the participants always or often felt that changing classes and having multiple teachers is better than being self-contained in one room with one teacher all day. Participants targeted variables or barriers that have some negative bearing on their middle school transitional experiences, which was apparent through the PVA scoring on the low end of the Likert scale.

Findings further revealed that students had classroom management concerns and anxiety about middle school conditions. Fifty-five out of 136 students always and often expressed a strong correlation between numerous classroom distractions and their inability to focus on what they were being taught, with an additional 44 participants who sometimes felt this way. Almost 20% of the participants admitted to disrupting the teacher's lesson and fail to follow class rules, while another 27% sometimes cause a disturbance to the learning environment. As a result, many students confessed that they avoid participating in class in front of their peers, because they did not feel comfortable.

The purpose of using this study as a platform for urban students' voices was for school districts to listen to which middle school program the youth deemed was beneficial for their learning. Findings in this study revealed that overall, participants from both school configuration types strongly believed that moving to a separate 6-8 middle school was slightly better than remaining in K-8 settings. About 25% of all participants reported that attending a 6-8 grade middle school was always better for their learning, while 17.86% strongly believed that they would learn more in a K-8 neighborhood

school. On the same note, an equal 21.43% of all students shared that they never felt that either grade configuration was actually academically better. However, data showed significantly less students from Middle School C conveyed that remaining at their K-8 neighborhood school was better for them. Interestingly, survey results showed that students from each school similarly reported that a separate 6-8 program was their choice.

Interpretation of the Qualitative Phase

In order to obtain the most detailed, rich, and informative descriptions of urban students' lived educational middle school experiences; both maximum variant sampling and snowball effect methods were used to select participants to provide data for this study. Participant responses from focus group questions were coded by themes and common repetitive terms and phrases derived were counted using the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis system. Several tables and charts were created and organized to best present and examine results to answer the third research question. Similar student-teacher relationship perceptions were discovered from the majority of the participants. Student interactions with their middle school teachers from both school types were described as, "difficult" and "hard to understand." Participants stressed that they had a hard time adjusting to their 6th grade teachers' new style of instruction and teaching methods, which were quite different from what they experienced in 5th grade. Students further expressed that the increased academic workload and expectations were overwhelming, and in fact came as a surprise to them. Students from each school revealed that they suffered academic declines once they became middle school students, especially in math due to the difficult way their 6th grade teachers explained mathematical skills and steps. As a result, participants attributed their middle school plunge experience to the

complicated disconnection between the unfamiliarity with their middle school teachers and difficulty adjusting to academic expectations. Students reported that they suffered a decrease in report card grades in middle school and stressed disappointment with their lack of ability to maintain positive academic performances achieved in 5th grade. Even the participants who described their middle school transition as "fun" or "better," admitted that the shift was a bit difficult.

Transitional issues that arose from the data were labeled and sorted according to major qualitative perception factors and themes that influence them. An analysis of student responses provided meaningful suggestions for educators to gain a strong understanding of why children from urban areas suffer academically in middle school. Based on the results, the Middle School Plunge barriers for this population of students were categorized by three major transitional factors: academic rigor adjustment shift, new learning conditions adjust shift, and "anti-plunge" strategies that the students themselves value as practices that support a successful middle school learning experience for them. The eight themes under each category derived from the data are the focus variables that students believe influenced their achievement outcomes.

Theme one suggests that urban students experienced a difficult time making the learning shift from 5th grade to middle school. Students were asked whether they felt that the schoolwork in middle school was difficult. Findings from each of the three groups were different. Participants who attended the stand-alone 6-8 Middle School C shared that the school work was hard or can at times be hard, however, if students focus and study then the academic shift could be a bit easier than expected. Students from K-8 Middle School B stated that their academic transition was very difficult and one

participant confessed that in 5th grade everything was explained and told to students by the teacher. Ironically, all of the participants from K-8 Middle School A did not feel that 6th grade work was hard at all, and even shared that assignments were basically the same as 5th grade.

Theme two emerged as a result of participants' perception on whether they felt their teachers academically prepared them to pass the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge yearly state test. Students from both 6-8 Middle School C and K-8 School B strongly agreed that their 6th grade teachers prepared them very well and even better than their 5th grade teachers. Mutual terms and phrases that arose to describe their preparation was, "my 6th grade teachers prepared us very well" and "they prepared us good." However, these findings contradict NJASK data trend assessment outcomes. The level of preparation confidence that the students reported was not indicative on their 5th grade state test scores. Students from K-8 School A did not express the same self-confidence as their fellow peers. In fact, this group indicated that their 6th grade teachers could have prepared them a lot better and much earlier in the school year.

Theme three highlighted another "plunge" issue that influenced the students' middle school adjustment process. Participant responses on whether or not they felt more or less engaged in middle school revealed dissimilar results. The students who left their elementary school to attend a new building for 6th though 8th grade stressed becoming much more engaged as a result of gaining a desired independence. However, the majority of the K-8 students from both schools acknowledged that they became less engaged and lacked motivation in 6th grade. These findings can be interpreted to suggest that urban

students who share the same beliefs or experiences as the students in this study prefer moving on to a separate 6-8 middle school after 5th grade.

Numerous research and studies indicate that the move to middle school is difficult and adolescent aged students undergo many changes as a result of the learning, social, and emotional shifts that occur during this phase in their lives (Akos et al., 2015; Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman et al., 1999; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Blake & Pope, 2008; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Kim et al., 2014; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; West et al., 2012).

Theme four developed as participants described their troubling experiences navigating and adapting to a new learning environment after the 5th grade. Students from each middle school type revealed that they perceived the work and conditions in 6th grade as difficult, somewhat hard, or both easy and hard. Separate middle school participants focused on the school structure as the most intricate part of the transition process. These students stated that the move to middle school was "nerve racking," "weird," and that the building was always "crowded." Their K-8 middle school counterparts stated that overall, their grades decreased in 6th grade, however they felt that in was more structured and easier in 5th grade to navigate the learning process. Ironically, this outlook strongly contradicts how the students feel from K-8 School A in that they felt that 6th grade was not hard, but their grades dropped. Therefore, there is a disconnect between student perceptions of their feelings about 6th grade schoolwork and what they reported about their academic decline experience in middle school. Students from both 6-8 Middle School C and K-8 School B indicated that it was difficult to adapt to their new learning experience and programming, because they had to learn more on their own

without a lot of help from the teachers. Hence, they were forced to "mature," "focus," and "grow up" as 6th graders.

The role that participants' classmates and friends played in their middle school transition and adaption process labeled theme five. The students did not go in depth about peer influences, however findings showed that participants expressed anxiety and pressure on entering a new building or class without their same friends. Many of the students shared that they traveled to each grade level since kindergarten with the same classmates. Participants who moved to a new building for middle school stated that "there were so many students that they did not know," "it was difficult not having anyone to talk to," and "it is just easer to be around people you have known for a long time." However, other students felt that "it was fun to get to meet new friends." Students who remained in K-8 environments for middle school revealed that they felt more confident staying with their same friends, but they were "tired of being in the same building with little kids." Another students even said that the "kids in the class play around a lot, so I play around." These findings indicate that although students feel more comfortable with the familiarity of remaining in classes with the same classmates, it is better for them to attend a separate middle school so they can mature, begin to grow up, and learn to socialize better by meeting new people.

Theme six derived as a result of participants revealing that they experienced a difficult time coping with and adjusting to new rules, procedures, and routines that seemed automatic as they entered middle school, whether they remained in K-8 environments or moved to a separate middle school. Students were asked whether attending a new school for 6th grade or remaining in a K-8 building for middle school

was better for them. The data revealed that half of the students from both middle school grade configurations felt that remaining in their neighborhood school was ideal for them to focus better and because the work was easier. On the other hand, the other half of the students believed that moving to a separate middle school was much better so they would learn more and being around mature students would help them to grow. A few students strongly felt that the type of school was not a factor at all and that it is what the students do that really makes the difference. These findings are compelling in that based on what the participants perceive, believe, and feel about middle school, grade configuration may or may not be the culprit in academic deprivations for urban students.

Findings from the final two themes in category three indicate what the target population of students revealed are practices that can lessen the academic plunge experience for them as they make the transition into middle school. This information is important for educators to take into account as they plan for the school year. Listening to students unveil what they feel are support factors relevant to their academic success in middle school is worth focusing on. Students from Middle School C strongly suggested that teachers should model for them step by step what their expectations are academically and procedurally. These students also expressed that school becomes very boring for middle school children and it is important for engagement when they are allowed to "do more creative projects" and for teachers "to make learning fun and interesting." Students from both K-8 schools candidly shared that they would learn better if they were separated from students who are disruptive and placed in separate learning programs from struggling learners. Participants from all three schools strongly stated that educators should prepare them at the end of 5th grade and during the summer by explaining 6th

grade rules and expectations, introduce them to their new teachers prior to the new school year, and expose them to middle school work by sending home assignment packets that they will be required to do in middle school. These findings implied that students could make the adjustment shifts necessary to sustain in middle school to combat the Middle School Plunge if provided with these supports.

Mixed Methods Findings

Academic performance. An understanding of the overarching research question, *What do middle school students describe as factors or variables contributing to the academic decline, known as The Middle School Plunge for urban students from the perspective of the students?* was answered through the results from both the quantitative and qualitative findings merged. Data connections linking the phases provided an analysis of the feelings and perceptions of urban students and the association to "The Middle School Plunge." Data were blended from common transitional perception factors between the quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Interpretations of the findings include academic preparation, middle school conditions, teacher and peer influence, and "anti-plunge" support factors. Participants in this study placed a high degree of confidence in their 6th grade teachers in that more than 63% agreed that they were well prepared to pass the NJASK. These data were verified by responses from the focus group interviews, which revealed that most of the students believed that their middle school teachers prepared them very well and taught them more than their 5th grade teachers. Another 45% always and often felt they received better grades in 6th grade. It is important to note that student perception of their academic preparation and learning abilities does not reflect score outcomes on the NJASK. Table 5 shows the assessment scores of the

students reflected in this study based on score reports published on the 2014 New Jersey Department of Education school report card website.

Table 5

New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) 2 Year Scores for Mathematics and English Language Arts

	5th Grade 2012-2013						6th Grade 2013-2014					
K-8	Math			ELA			Math			ELA		
School A	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP
	4%	58%	38%	0%	43%	57%	2%	43%	56%	0%	46%	54%
K-8	Math			ELA			Math			ELA		
School B	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP
	3%	24%	74%	0%	34%	66%	2%	23%	75%	2%	40%	58%
6-8 Middle	Math			ELA			Math			ELA		
School C	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP	AP	P	PP
	25%	45%	30%	1%	37%	62%	10%	37%	53%	0%	34%	66%

Note. AP (Advanced Proficiency), P (Proficient), PP (Partially Proficient)
ELA (English Language Arts-Reading Scores)

This demonstration of assessment data highlights the academic performance of urban students from the two districts in this study. Results in Table 5 show participants' actual 5th and 6th grade state test scores during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years. Students from 6-8 Middle School C declined in both math and English language arts from 5th grade to 6th grade. These score reports confirmed the research of West and Schwerdt (2012), which states that students suffer significant achievement drops in both

math and reading, which equates to losing 3-7 months of learning for those pupils who attended stand-alone middle schools as opposed to remaining in their K-8 neighborhood building for 6th grade. Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) contend that these students often fail to recover academically, more considerably affecting urban students. Although, students in this study who remained in their K-8 schools slightly increased in ELA scores, School A decreased in math and School B showed no substantial improvement. It is important to emphasize that many of the students in this study admitted that their grades lowered once they became a middle school student from both school types.

It is evident that student perception of their academic preparation, beliefs about their learning abilities to do well in 6th grade, and actual state assessment results are conflicted. During focus groups sessions, participants shared that math became very difficult in middle school and their grades went down in this subject. According to the students in this study, their 6th grade teachers made it difficult to understand, failed to break the material down for them step by step, and often times did not know how to explain or teach them effectively. Unfortunately, too often urban school districts are frequently bombarded with numerous daunting educational reform initiatives and programs with which teachers are unable to fully comply, which leads to failed implementation (Ahram et al., 2013). Hence, teachers are often confused and inundated with unattainable instructional tasks that leave students just as bewildered in class.

Teacher and peer influence. Another major common factor that arose from the participant data was the influence of teacher and peer relationships in student academic growth and performance in middle school. PVA quantitative survey results and student answers from qualitative focus group questions revealed that the majority of the

participants felt that their 5th grade teachers listened to them more in school. Students from both K-8 Schools shared that they got in trouble often with their 6th grade teachers and that they were mean and strict. On the other hand more than half of these students strongly felt that their teachers liked them, which pushed them to work hard in class. Qualitative results confirmed the high PVA ratings more from the 6-8 Middle School participants, who responded more positively about their relationship with their 6th grade teachers. However, the question does not specify which grade level teacher they believed liked them more, so the results are unclear about whether students were referring to their 5th or 6th grade teachers. Based on the data, findings can be interpreted that the K-8 middle school students most likely perceived that their 5th grade teachers liked them more. On the same note, participants from all three schools scored about the same when describing that their 6th grade teachers sometimes helped them to learn better. Responses from focus groups were consistent, with students from each school pinpointing that their 6th grade teachers prepared them better to pass the NJASK. Findings indicated that students felt this way because it was perceived that middle school work was harder, so they had to learn more. On the contrary, participants agreed that their grades lowered in 6th grade and that it was quite difficult to adapt or adjust to the way their teachers delivered instruction.

Findings did not show a strong correlation between urban student perceptions of peer relationships and academic achievement. However, results did reveal that students overall felt more confident having friends or familiar classmates to talk to, which makes the transition less stressful. Participant data showed that less than half of the students felt intimidated or bullied by their peers, more than 50% always or often felt comfortable

answering questions in class, and more than 75% of them confidently reported that their grades mean more to them than being accepted by their peers. An interesting finding revealed that more students who remained in K-8 settings for 6th grade felt more secure interacting with classmates in these capacities than their peers who attended a separate middle school. It is evident that the students in this study viewed the transition as a difficult one and supportive peer interactions are a support factor for them as they move into middle school. However, quantitative or qualitative data did not show that peer relationships have a bearing on academic declines for urban middle school youth.

Middle school conditions. Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) contend that children lose their drive to learn and become less motivated in school due to a change in educational environments that often fail to meet their needs. Further, Eidelman (2014) and Grills-Taquechel et al. (2010) state that middle school youth experience anxiety when trying to navigate their way during the school day, and become even more frustrated with new rules and procedures that are unfamiliar and that they do not understand. Hence, the objective of this study was to discover from the students themselves what issues or barriers they feel created learning roadblocks for them as middle school students from their perspective. Delpit (2006), Lee (2003), and Oldfather (1995) stress that the youth themselves are the most valuable experts to identify the true transitional views and middle school encounters that influence their educational outcomes (Fraser, 2012). McHugh et al. (2013) emphasize some considerable perspectives with regard to the connection that student perception of middle school conditions had on their academic achievement and transitional experience as 6th graders.

Findings from participant data on the challenges that middle school environmental conditions posed for urban students were substantiated by the research. Mixed results from both phases showed that student perception of their middle school transitional experiences had a strong connection to their academic progress in 6th grade. Wang and Holcombe (2010) conducted extensive research on urban adolescent perceptions of academic achievement in middle school and found a direct influence of student perceptions of their learning environment to academic success, engagement, and participation. An important finding recognized from this research on middle school conditions showed that although the participants expressed anxiety with switching classes, navigating a new stand-alone 6-8 middle school building, or adapting to a new section allocated for middle school students in a K-8 setting, more than 60% of urban students desire to be independent. Overall, more students would rather change classes and have multiple teachers than just sitting in one class all day, compared to the 27% who expressed fear about moving from class to class. Urban students in this study are seeking a positive and orderly learning environment. About 75% or 102/136 participants shared that they always, often, or sometimes experienced too many distractions in class that it was extremely difficult to understand and focus on what they were being taught. Student responses from focus groups showed that they felt strongly that teachers and principals should "remove the students who are mean, fight, and play too much out of class and keep the ones who actually want to learn." Theoharis (2009) reported that urban schools fail to properly address habitual and toxic disruptive student behavior that impedes learning. The findings indicated that urban students desire structure, a stable classroom environment, and clear expectations (Delpit, 2006; Wilson & Corbett, 2001).

Another finding indicated that more than 50% of the participants from all three schools indicated that they always or often had an enjoyable 6th grade middle school experience and another 50% also revealed that they felt comfortable participating in class. However, almost 20% of the students always or often admitted that school was boring and felt unmotivated to learn, with another 26% who sometimes felt this way, while close to 20% of the participants reported that they avoided participating in front of their classmates. More students who attended a 6-8 middle school stated that they felt more engaged in their new setting, yet conveyed that schoolwork was boring, not fun, and often difficult. Slightly more students who remained in K-8 settings disclosed feeling very comfortable answering questions and participating during class in front of their peers, but believed that they would be more mature and engaged in a separate middle school. When synthesized, these findings suggests that grade configuration or school type was not predicative of student performance for these urban youth, but classroom conditions and instructional practices were the focus of participant complaints.

The 'trin'sition. The process that links three major transitional change factors that students experience during their move to middle school is considered "The 'Trin'sition." The term was created to describe the connection between the learning phase students experience after 5th grade and the developmental transformation that adolescents encounter at the same time (Born et al., 2002). The word part, 'trin,' was derived from the Greek and Latin root word, tri, meaning of three, and the understanding of the ancient religious word, *trinity*, which described how the three facets operate inseparably as one process. The second half, 'istion,' resembles the word, transition, or the shift that students experience when they move from elementary to middle school (Akos et al., 2015). The

connotation of both word parts combined joins the three transitional variables directly to the transition process itself, thus inception of "The 'Trin'sition." Using a three-dimensional construct to examine and explain students' perception outcomes amid the three developmental change factors and student transition experiences to school achievement and performance increased the validity of the research findings in this study. Figure 24 displays a visual representation of The 'Trin'sition Concept.

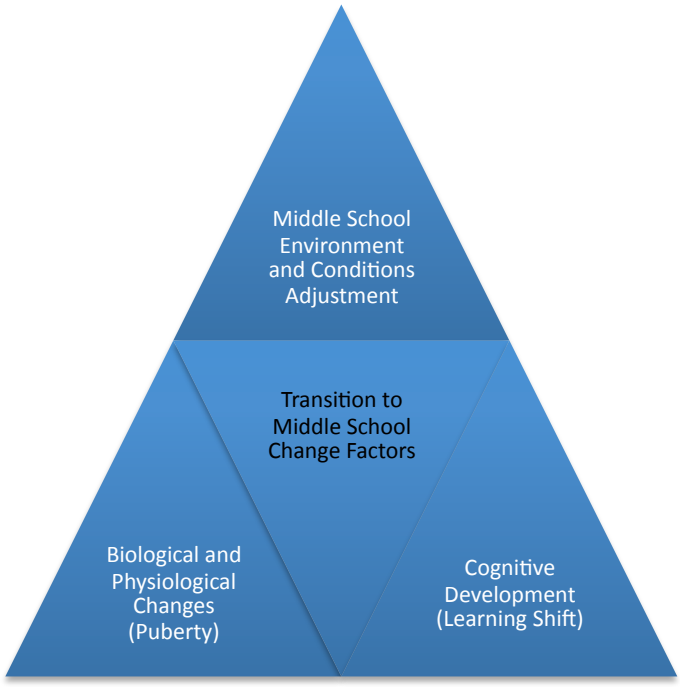

Figure 24. Visual representation of "The 'Trin'sition" concept.

School type: K-8 versus 6-8. According to the quantitative and qualitative data, urban participants in this study prefer attending a separate 6-8 educational setting slightly more than remaining in their K-8 neighborhood school for middle school. A strong correlation was found between students' perceptions of school safety between the school types. Almost 50% of the students from all three schools equally felt safe leaving their

neighborhood school to a new building for 6th grade. Interestingly, an equivalent percentage of students from both K-8 Schools A and B also reported that they felt safer remaining in the same building for 6th grade than they did moving to a stand-alone middle school. Significantly fewer students (5.33% or 4/136) from 6-8 Middle School C would rather remain in a K-8 environment, while almost 30% (39/136) always desired a separate middle school. Overall, urban youth reported that they felt more comfortable in a K-8 setting, however, they scored security and safety as a low support factor and did not indicate school danger as an issue for them. Ultimately, these findings indicated that participants perceived and believed that a 6-8 middle school was better for their learning, safety, and wellbeing.

Limitations of the Study

This section identifies the issues that may arise for those who intend to replicate this study. There are several limitations for which readers should be cognizant as related to participants, survey tool, focus group data, timing, and role of the researcher.

Participants. One limitation was the lack of ability to generalize findings to all urban students and districts. However, Creswell (2009) states that the purpose of research is not to generalize to a particular group, but to gain a true understanding of the research problem. Therefore, sample selection is crucial in order to properly and accurately represent or capture the participants' true feelings and perceptions. Another concern relative to subject samples was obtaining the proper participation response rate. It was difficult to retrieve the consent forms in a timely manner, which lowered the return rate from student volunteers (SurveyMonkey, 2009). Students in urban districts may need incentives in order to convince their parents to complete the consent forms.

Survey tool. The Paired-Validity Analysis (PVA) Survey tool used in this study included 40 questions using a 1-5 Likert rating scale to measure student perception. This may pose a problem with the instrument in that students may experience survey fatigue due to the length. The attention span of the youth at this age may vary and it is possible that the participants may simply randomly answer the questions just to complete and get through the survey. However, quantitative and qualitative data in this study showed correlational relationships. Further, the clarity of the questions may create a conceptual misrepresentation of student scoring or responses to the questions (Eccles, 1999; Fatima, 2008). Therefore, it may be good practice to allow the students an opportunity to ask for clarification. However, the survey tool was piloted by former 6th grade students and checked for student understanding and suggestions from them to make the questions clearer.

Focus group data. Another limitation presented a concern was the validity of student responses during group focus group interviews. At times participants would answer questions the same way as their fellow peers. Therefore, data could show redundancy and lack rich, thick, and accurate descriptions of student perceptions. If this occurs it is important to reiterate to students that their individual voice matters and for them to share their true experiences and beliefs as detailed as possible. Also, it was beneficial to give the students a copy of the questions so that they may reference them when responding.

Timing. One of the most critical limitations of the study was timing. Since students take the state assessment in late April to the end of May, surveys were administered during the last week of May into June, and focus group interviews were

conducted during the last week of school. Waiting until the end of the school year to conduct the study made it more difficult to collect the data in a timely manner and limited the window of time allocated for students to complete the survey. It was also more difficult to locate the students to participate in the focus groups, because during this time of the school year, many students stopped attending school, end of the year activities impeded the continuity of the interviews, and teachers were packing up their classrooms. If the focus group questions appeared rushed to the participants, it could have influenced the depth of their responses. With this understanding, it is important to allow sufficient time for students to return the consent forms and allow the survey window to be open and available earlier and extended to provide more students the opportunity to participate.

Role of the researcher. A legitimate limitation involved the researcher's dual role as the primary researcher and as an administrator at one of the schools studied in this research. This raised the vulnerability of bias with regard to the responses from participants in that they may answer questions that they think are desired by the researcher. Also, the explanation and interpretation of the data results and outcomes may be influenced by false or erroneous student answers. In this case, the researcher must present herself to the participants as a student herself, and that the study is a graduation requirement for college, and that their explicit and accurate feedback is crucial to the completion of the project.

Implications and Recommendations for Educational Practice

This section indicates noteworthy implications for educational and school policy, practice, teachers, guidance counselors, child study teams, educational leaders, parents, and students. The purpose of gaining a more in-depth understanding of what urban

students' perceptions of their middle school transitional experience is to inform educational practitioners, and to determine how such beliefs influence academic performance, so better practices and strategies can be implemented to combat the Middle School Plunge issue that has plagued poverty-stricken school districts. Therefore, the results and findings from this research can help re-shape and change the way educators transition, support, and help urban students adjust to their new learning experience during this crucial phase of their academic, social, emotional, and developmental time of their lives (Elias, O'Brien, & Weissberg, 2006; Schumacher, 2008). The following implications also include those "anti-plunge" strategies that the students in this study consider necessary practices for implementation to support urban students' middle school success.

For federal department of education. Federal educational reform measures and standards-based assessments have evolved since the failure of school districts to meet the 2014 No Child Left Behind deadline, which required all students countrywide to score proficient in both reading and math. Currently, most states have adopted the universal Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and in the spring 2015 all students in 3rd through 8th grades across the country will be required to take the national PARCC assessment (Guisbond et al., 2012). The United States education system bears substantial implications on the nation's economy and presents a harsher impact on the economic failure for impoverished families (Acs & Nichols, 2010). Hence, this national test allows the federal government to monitor student progress for college and career readiness, which is needed to stimulate the United States economy (Layton, 2012).

In order for the United States to meet the year 2020 goal to ensure that more than 20 million students graduate from college and enter into the workforce, it is necessary for the federal government to address the minority achievement crisis and disparity in a different manner, as urban students must make up a large portion of the expected future graduates (Layton, 2012). Too often, state and federal assessments are designed to measure how well students master basic common skills that have been identified by grade level. It is expected that these youth take the same test, however urban youth are not exposed to the same quality instruction and resources as their suburban peers. It is critical that the federal government take a closer look at the curriculums in urban districts to ensure that the PARCC assessments matche what is actually being taught (Eitel & Talbert, 2012). Consequently, federal educational lawmakers may find it necessary to identify the role that state education departments play in aiding and monitoring local school districts now that they are no longer responsible for establishing learning standards (Scott, 2013).

Further, it is critical to identify and address why it is harder for poor students to make the necessary adjustments to middle school. It is important to meet the needs of urban learners if they are expected to perform and show sufficient academic improvement. Students from urban districts tend to lose interest in school once they become 6th graders and fall into the "Middle School Syndrome" in which they make the decision to drop out of school (Balfanz, 2009). According to the participants in this study, the contradiction is not middle school grade configurations or school types, but in the preparation and transitional process that imposes an academic hardship on urban youth. Therefore, it is critical that federal education officials redefine middle schools and

policies that govern processes, procedures, and structures that best accommodate urban students so that they can become more engaged and invest in their own learning in order to enhance economic opportunities for themselves (Appleton et al., 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Marks, 2000; Schultz & Hanushek, 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Often times, teachers and students in urban districts are overwhelmed with too many reform initiatives that make it difficult for any one program to be mastered, often do not work, and change frequently. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to minimize the mandates and reform models that the federal government imposes on low-income districts to meet unrealistic requirements in order to receive federal funding.

For district and school administration. District and school leaders should support, develop, implement, and facilitate a middle school transition plan that will improve learning conditions and enhance educational experiences to promote academic achievement for urban students (Herlithy, 2007). As stated in previous chapters, Neison and Wise (2004) and Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) contend that poorer school districts must do a better job to plan to prepare students for the challenges of middle school. Principals must set clear principles about student expectations and set the tone for a collective school vision that involves both teachers and students in the process (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cushman, 2006; Delpit, 2006). Educators should be aware that inner-city students care a great deal about their education and desire to be cared about by school personnel (Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Theoharis, 2009).

Students in this study provided a list of "anti-plunge" support practices and strategies for educational leaders to ease their transition to middle school (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Elias, 2001; Maclin & Monteiro-Leitner, 2004). It is recommended that

school leaders survey urban students using the PVA Student Perception Survey or other questionnaire that would help to identify barriers, issues, and concerns directly from the students themselves. It is important to understand the perspectives and perceptions of urban learners in order to best serve them. Often times school leaders design self-created plans without student input due to time constraints and the pressure from educational government to mimic only research-based practices, therefore leaving no opportunities for school level creative intervention measures to pilot. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) empower school leaders to take the risk to challenge those prescribed strategies by identifying practices that will best influence teacher effectiveness and student performance in inner-city districts. Therefore, based on research findings from this study it is recommended that educational leaders consider the following five Ps: preparation, procedures, process, programming, and provide to assist in the design of a successful middle school transition blueprint for urban students.

Preparation. Urban students in this study stressed the importance of being exposed to the middle school process prior to moving into 6th grade. The participants would like to meet their new teachers and be familiarized with their new schedule and learning expectations. The students suggested that principals and teachers organize a middle school "transition week" in which they are bused to their new school during the last week of their 5th grade school year to be introduced to their 6th grade teachers and tour the building to prepare them to shift and adjust to upcoming educational changes (Juvonen, 2007). Educational leaders should consider revamping traditional summer school programs for incoming 6th graders and formulate middle school camps in which the students attend their new school during the summer and have upper class middle

school students and personnel show them how to switch classes, where their homeroom will be, and give them their new schedule to practice moving from class to class as well as expose them to the type of schoolwork that they will be required to do (Neison & Wise, 2004). These opportunities will change students' perceptions of middle school, give them confidence, and ease the fear of their middle school transitional experience (Marks, 2000; Neison & Wise, 2004; Weiner, 1986).

Procedures. Students revealed that they desire to do well in school and communicated that they are eager for their middle school teachers to clearly explain the exact rules and procedures that they will be required to follow (Elias, 2001; Freschi, 2011). It is necessary for school leaders to plan teacher-student and parent-teacher articulation meetings to discuss middle school behavioral and learning demands as well as steps to school success, which will provide them with the coping skills necessary to conform to their teachers' expectations and help them to adjust and reduce transitional anxiety (Eccles & Roser, 2009; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2013). These sessions should take place during the last month of 5th grade and also during the month prior to students starting the new school year.

Process. Educational leaders, especially school principals, have the power to empower both students and staff. Students expressed that middle school can be boring, stressful, and they often feel disconnected. In order to make middle school pleasurable for urban students, leaders must express and expect teachers to plan innovative lessons and opportunities for students to experience project-based learning tasks that will motivate them to value school and make them feel determined to excel (Appleton et al., 2008; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Participants in this study shared the top five support

practices that would make them feel determined to excel (Marks, 2000) in middle school. Students passionately aspire for teachers to help them to plan out their future goals, which would promote a positive educational environment crucial for inner-city youth who suffer from negative out of school living conditions (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Schoon, Jones, Chang, & Maughan, 2011; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). It may benefit urban students for school principals to meet with guidance counselors to work with middle school teachers to integrate a learning goal and future-planning portfolio as an instructional process that would provide low-income youth with a purpose to learn and a guide to shape their educational outcomes.

Programming. District administrators should schedule articulation sessions with school level principals to discuss the effectiveness between stand-alone 6-8 middle schools and K-8 'elemiddle' (Hough, 2005) learning environments to decide which grade configuration best influences and supports urban students (McKenzie et al., 2006). As revealed earlier in this study, participants viewed middle school programming and failed transitional preparation as the culprits for academic declines, not school type. Urban districts with K-8 middle school configurations often operate as modified versions of 6-8 programs. Students in K-8 settings are secluded in a separate section of the building and departmentalized for middle school (Hough, 2005). Students expressed the importance of moving on to a new building for 6th grade so that they can grow, mature, and become exposed to a challenging curriculum that would prepare them for high school. Middle school is a stressful time for adolescent learners, especially those from poorer districts (Anderman, 2012), however, students' ability to make transitional adjustments enhances resiliency and builds a strong capacity to adjust to different life changes (Maclin &

Monteiro-Leitner, 2004). Educational leaders in K-8 urban districts should consider or reconsider implementing a separate 6-8 middle school program for students with the proper transitional "anti-plunge" supports in place, and avoid forcing too many unattainable instructional initiatives that often conflict one another (Bedard & Do, 2005; Erb, 2006; Reents, 2002).

Provide. The importance of school leaders to provide a positive learning environment for inner-city youth who experience negative, poor living conditions has become an increasing necessary practice to reduce the risk of school failure due to chaotic home environments (Boyd, 1991; Evans & Kim, 2013; Ryan & Patrick, 2000; Wang et al., 1993) in order for them to alleviate stress, overcome depression, reduce fear, and build motivation (Crook, 2006; LaGuardian & Ryan, 2002; Schunk, 1991; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). The outcomes of this research should open dialogue for educators to discuss the problem of urban student failure, school practices, and strategies that would best serve this population. The correlation between urban student perceptions of their middle school transitional experience and their academic decline after 5th grade forces educators to address the following questions, "How can educators combat the plunge epidemic for inner-city youth and ultimately increase academic achievement, competence, and confidence for them?" and most critical, "What can teachers do to better support struggling learners before they continuously fail, fall of the 8th Grade Cliff, and check out of school for good?" Therefore, it is essential for district and school administrators to provide effective, on-going, professional development workshops and trainings geared for teachers to develop methods for student improvement and

opportunities for teachers to attend conferences related to their training needs (National Middle School Association, 2010).

For educators. Findings revealed that participants' prior experiences in elementary school influenced expectations of their middle school teachers to provide them with the same loving and caring student-teacher relationships (Brown, 2010Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Overall, more students in this study rated their teachers in a positive regard than those who felt otherwise. Research states that the most important link to student achievement for urban students are positive and nurturing interactions with teachers (Bandura, 1978; Brown, 2010; Corbett & Wilson, 2002). Classroom teachers can use this research to reflect on their personal beliefs about students and to inform teaching practices to better meet the basic emotional and academic needs of urban learners (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Eccles, 2004; Fatima, 2008). Teachers need to be aware that inner-city students strongly desire for teachers to take the time to personally get to know them, identify with their circumstances, and actually listen to what they have to say (Appleton et al., 2008; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Students from impoverished homes bring their issues and problems to school and often take their hurt and anger out on their teachers, therefore, it is critical that teachers refrain from taking students' actions personally and allow them time to work out their problems (Balfanz et al., 2007; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010).

Teachers need to recognize the significant transitional changes that impact middle school children, especially those from urban areas, and understand their responsibility to provide the supports necessary to help students overcome barriers that may cause them to plunge (Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Pickhardt, 2011). In this study, participants were clear

when they stated that middle school was very difficult for them and their grades suffered significantly. Hence, teachers need to recognize the developmental ability levels of urban children as they undergo these critical changes that influence their learning and provide them with the tools to navigate their middle school process. Students have indicated specific strategies that they feel school principals and teachers should provide for them (Corbett & Wilson, 2002). The top five practices pinpointed were: help with planning out their future goals, push them to do well in school, allow time for them to discuss and solve personal and school issues, celebrate their successes and efforts, and provide incentives to motivate them.

In addition to those student suggested supports, research on urban student achievement stresses that teachers must prepare an effective middle school student transition process, set high expectations and learning standards, maintain a positive classroom learning environment, create engaging lessons, allow sufficient adjustment time for students to adapt to the new changes in their lives, provide individual time with students to map out their future and set achievement goals, continuously monitor student growth and quickly detect and provide interventions for those underprepared students who show immediate signs of struggle (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hearne, 2003; McHugh et al., 2013; Neison & Wise, 2004; Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, 2001). Self-determination theory describes the importance that such teaching practices, support, and fulfillments of needs have on minority students' self-perception and self-competence, which imparts to them the intrinsic motivation to push forward (Bandura, 1978; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Marks, 2000; Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Weiner, 1986).

It is an essential practice for teachers to meet together during cross grade level vertical and horizontal articulation meetings to discuss, share knowledge, and expertise to prepare a successful transitional plan for urban youth. These professional conversations will bring awareness to the need and importance for teachers to utilize the intervention to help students successfully adapt to their new learning environment. Part of this plan includes a teacher created *road to middle school success* student handbook with expectations, procedures, grading rubric, code of conduct, and learning goals to provide learners with a clear understanding of what will be required of them (Cauley & Javanovich, 2007; Delpit, 2006). In urban districts, teachers often complain that they do not receive enough support or quality professional development to improve teaching practices, which has implications on student performance outcomes (Calabrese, 2006; Mizell, 2010). Therefore, teachers must research those best practices and attend professional workshops, district in-services, and trainings that focus on specific instructional needs for them to provide students with effective instruction (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Suggestions for Further Educational Research

There are other factors and variables to be explored that influence student perceptions of their lived transitional experiences that ought to be researched and addressed that were not focused on in this study. Based on the research findings and implications, the following recommendations for further educational study are suggested for possible future consideration:

Suggestion 1. One area of study should take into account urban students' parents' perspective on their children's middle school experience, which has been understudied,

however quite critical to students' belief system about school that stems from what is valued at home. The PVA survey tool utilized in this study could be re-vamped to apply to parents in order to measure their perceived value regarding student achievement outcomes in middle school. Further, analyzing parent viewpoints can increase parental involvement and create teacher-parent dialogue and relationship building to identify collective strategies that both stakeholders can jointly practice to best serve and support impoverished youth who are at-risk of failure during this transitional phase.

Suggestion 2. More examination is needed to further explore and explain the mismatch between student perception beliefs of their academic preparation to actual standardized assessment results, which reveals a clear learning plunge. In this study, students strongly felt their teachers did prepare them well to pass the state test; however test results show that they failed to meet adequate yearly progress, nor did they show significant improvement. Therefore, inquiries on the PVA perception survey may need to be refined and clearer for students to better interpret. A revised version of the focus group questions could also be updated with specific questions about student-teacher relationships and academic readiness that could provide a better understanding of the reliability of students' perception to reality. Using a revised version of both the qualitative and quantitative research tools may provide more reliable detailed information that may not have been originally mentioned by the participants regarding urban student perceptional influences on their learning outcomes in order to unveil more distinct "anti-plunge" strategies and interventions that support impoverished middle school children.

Suggestion 3. An in-depth examination into the educational status and alarming high school drop out rates of African-American and minority male students needs to be

investigated. Subgroup data results from standardized student performance reports display a disproportional failure rate of black males compared to any other peer group, and unveil a dangerous disparity when measured against white males. The consequences that negative achievement trend factors of minority males have on the United States education system and economy are dire (Morgan & Herzog, 2001). Minority males are considered the highest risk for failure due to damaging exposure to poor, dangerous, neglected, chaotic, abusive, unsupportive, dysfunctional, and sometimes life-threatening living conditions that cause stress, depression, anger, and distrust. These students experience post-traumatic stress syndrome similar to the psychological trauma that veterans experience after war (Hamblem & Barnett, 2009). These barriers and conditions are carried into their school life, where African-American and Hispanic boys are often misunderstood, stereotyped, and overrepresented in special education classrooms as early as their middle school years. Thus, minority males exhibit undesirable behavior in school and are often suspended and absconded from school into the juvenile justice system (Elias, 2013). This "pipeline to prison" experience is perpetuated in public schools at alarming rates. Minority students, especially males, are often harshly mishandled by school security and community police officers who interrogate and arrest students on school grounds instead of them being disciplined by the principal or sent to the guidance department for counseling for petty infractions (Elias, 2013; Parker, 2014). The suspension and incarceration rate for African-American males is considerably higher than the percentage of those who actually graduate from high school (Holzman, 2006). Moreover, more minority males receive their G.E.D while incarcerated than complete the 12th grade (Sturgeon, 2005). The idea of re-purposing school for minority males and

identifying those buffers that counteract the criminalization of impoverished males to encourage, empower, and nurture their social and educational potentials is in order (Bailey & Paisely, 2004; Chiariello, 2013; Wyatt, 2009).

Suggestion 4. Further research should also include the differences between the transitional perception values amid urban and suburban students. The PVA tool could be applied to compare and contrast data results between the opposing peer groups. It would be valuable to research and analyze the transition phases between both district types to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of those middle school programs. Would the same themes emerge from suburban student perspectives? Are suburban grade configurations different from urban districts? What implications do transitional experiences have on students in affluent districts compared to their peers from low-income schools? Are urban students afforded the same middle school programming as their suburban counterparts?

Suggestion 5. It would be valuable to turn this mixed-methods study into an action research project by following the same 6th grade students throughout the remainder of their middle school years to determine whether the identified "anti-plunge" practices and supports are truly reliable. Also to uncover additional factors that may contribute to a positive middle school experience that was not evident from the current study. Did the strategies improve student performance? Does the 8th grade cliff exist? Did the same "anti-plunge" tactics assist urban students to successfully transition into high school? These questions can be answered through further research.

Final Reflections and Conclusions

At the end of this study, the research concluded exactly what it was designed to explore and determine regarding whether urban student perceptions of their middle school transitional experiences influenced learning outcomes. Data results revealed that student beliefs and views on their educational, social, and emotional encounters indeed correlated to different aspects of their academic performances after 5th grade. Findings verified that there was merit for this study and the implications and impact that achievement scores of underprepared, low-income, urban students have on the United States economy are severe. As a result, urban districts have a lot of pressure to find innovative ways to enhance minority student achievement and performance. Now that the federal department of education has implemented the PARCC national assessment, they will monitor student yearly progress to determine and identify schools that demonstrate effectiveness and those who fail to improve. Educators will be held accountable for continuous academic failure of the students they serve. This has urged impoverished districts to begin to look deeper into the lives of their students to determine what barriers greatly impact their learning and find effective strategies for school improvement, as there is much more at stake if urban youth continue to plunge academically.

In closing, this study raises awareness with regard to what educational policymakers, district and school leaders, teachers and other educators must do to combat the Middle School Plunge experience for urban school children. On a federal level, lawmakers must deal with the poverty problem that not only exits in our inner cities, but the detrimental educational consequences that it has on both the economic security of our nation and the families of disenfranchised youth (Acs & Nichols, 2010). Further, it is

critical that schools become safe havens for poor students in order to counter the negative home and community circumstances that they face everyday. This study brought to light that student perception sets the tone for academic performance outcomes in middle school. Teachers in urban districts must realize that their role extends beyond instruction; educators have a major role in reshaping and breaking down student perception barriers that mold students' beliefs about school and impede academic growth. Therefore, educators must understand that they have an obligation to develop caring relationships with their students and build up students' internal desire and motivation to choose a trend towards high achievement and improvement. This is most challenging, but imperative to ensure that students from impoverished populations are college, career, or workforce ready to make investments into society. Ultimately, it is important that urban students believe that their dreams really can come true.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Question Protocol

Qualitative Instrument
STUDENT PERCEPTION FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

Purpose: The purpose of this study and focus group interview is to explore your thoughts, feelings and experiences about your transition to middle school, academic progress, and overall encounters. You will be asked 6 questions that will allow you to voice your feelings in more detail.

Focus Group: 1 2 3

Name of School: School A_____ School B _____ School C _____

Date of Focus Group Interview: _____Time of Focus Group Interview: _____

Introduction:

1. I am a doctoral student at Rowan University and I am studying student's perception on their transition to middle school experiences and their academic status once they become middle school students. A decline in a student's academic progress once they move into 6th grade is known as "The Middle School Plunge." For the sake of this study, a middle school student is defined as a student in the 6th, 7th or 8th grade. A middle school student is one who has completed the 5th grade and has been promoted to the 6th grade. This study is being conducted to explore your thoughts on "The Middle School Plunge" and your academic progress once you have completed elementary school. The results of this study will be used to provide suggestions and information to principals, teachers, administrators, and students on how to improve the middle school transition process and provide the supports necessary to promote academic achievement.
2. I want to assure you that this focus group interview is confidential and private. Your names will never be used. The information that you share with me will not be told to your teachers or school administrators. Therefore, you may express your true feelings and experiences.
3. You have completed a Student Informed Assent Form detailing your rights as a research participant. I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary and even though you may have signed the assent form, you may decide at anytime during this interview session not to participate. Contact persons are provided on the student assent form and the parental consent form just in case you have any questions during or after this interview. I have you and your parent a copy to keep.
4. I am going to record this interview if you feel comfortable so that I may correctly transcribe the interview later. This will allow me a correct and accurate understanding of your responses to the questions. My goal is to give you a voice and allow you to be heard. Therefore, I may need to review the transcript with you if I have issues interpreting your responses. The transcriptions will not be shared with anyone.

5. Please feel free to openly discuss your views and perspectives during this focus group session. During the interview, I may ask for clarification to further understand your comment or responses. Please remember that all responses are confidential, therefore I am asking that you please do not discuss or share others comments once the interview is over. I also ask that we respect one another and allow each person the opportunity to speak freely.
6. Do you have any questions? If anyone feels uncomfortable and would like to stop participating, please let me know. You may withdraw without penalty. Remember your participation is strictly for my research and has no impact on your grades.
7. Thank you for helping me and sharing your thoughts. Let's begin.

Focus Group Questions:

The move to middle school is different for everyone. Some of you have found yourselves in an entirely new building, while others of you may have switched floors or hallways at the same school. No matter what kind of middle school you attend, the one thing that stays the same is the move is an important step. Take a moment to think about what made the move to 6th grade difficult.

1. Can you share your experiences when you moved from 5th grade into middle school?

2. Was the middle school transition a difficult experience? If so, how?

3. Some researchers suggested that students experience a sharp drop in student achievement when they move to a middle school compared to the performance of students who remain in a K–8 school. What do you feel?

4. Many students describe middle school as more socially and academically challenging than elementary school.

    a. Do you feel that the schoolwork is harder in middle school than 5th grade?
    b. Do you feel that you are more or less engaged in school now that you are in middle school?
    c. Explain what you think can be done to reduce or eliminate things that make it hard to do well in school and make the transition to middle school better.

5. How well do you feel your teacher(s) prepared you to do on the state test?

6. What "anti-plunge" support practices do you feel can influence student achievement and performance in middle school?

I will read aloud some of the responses form the survey in which you participated. These responses indicated many of the challenges and pressures that students

suggested made it difficult to do well in middle school. Which of these affect(ed) your ability to do well in school?

Choose five of the following support practices and number them in order of most important to least important (from 1-5, with 1 being the most important and 5 being the least important) that you believe or feel will help you be successful and prevent an academic decline from 5th grade into middle school:

___ Incentives

___ One-on-one meetings with your teacher

___ Time to talk out issues and problems

___ Celebrate when students are doing well

___ other: _____

___ Push me to do well

___Active/involvement/hands-on learning

___ Motivational youth speakers

___ Security presence in the school

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

August 18, 2014

Shawna Bu Shell Hyman
Teacher Education
James Hall

Dear Shawna Bu Shell:

In accordance with the University's IRB policies and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has exempted your project, category 2 through its exempted review process.

IRB application number: 2015-006

Project Title: Middle School Plunge: A Mixed-Methods Study Exploring Student Perception and School Achievement for Urban Middle School Youth

If you need to make significant modifications to your study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please reference the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

If, during your research, you encounter any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, you must report this immediately to Dr. Harriet Hartman (hartman@rowan.edu or call 856-256-4500, ext. 3787) or contact Dr. Sreekant Murthy, Chief Research Compliance Officer (murthy@rowan.edu or call 856-256-5150).

If you have any administrative questions, please contact Karen Heiser (heiser@rowan.edu or 856-256-5150).

Sincerely,

Harriet Hartman

Harriet Hartman, Ph.D.
Chair, Rowan University IRB

c: Lakecia Hyman

Office of Research
James Hall

Appendix C

Student Consent/Assent Forms

Rowan University

Informed Assent for Participation in a Focus Group Interview
Student Assent Form

Introduction:
You are being asked to participate in a focus group as part of a research study conducted by LaKecia Hyman, a doctoral student from Rowan University. You have been recruited as a possible participant in the focus group. Your help is needed in order to complete the research by providing your feelings and beliefs regarding your transition to middle school in more detail during this second phase of study. Your participation is voluntary; you may ask questions or stop participating at any time. There are no direct benefits you as a participant; however the results of this study may be used to provide suggestions and recommendations to teachers, administrators, and community leaders on how to improve the transitioning process and provide the necessary supports to foster an anti-plunge experience for middle school students.

Purpose of Focus Groups:
The purpose of the focus group is to determine what influences student achievement and success when moving from 5th grade to 6th grade. The focus group will last approximately 40 minutes and will be held on-site at the students' school. There will be one focus group of 6-8 students. The focus group session will occur during non-instructional time; therefore students will not be penalized for missing class. Participants will be asked questions regarding factors that contribute to the difficulty of transitioning to middle school from elementary school and whether they experienced an academic decline once the move to middle school has occurred. Questions will also focus on students' feelings toward academic preparation in a middle school setting versus a K-8 school setting and practices students suggest will assist them to perform better and combat "The Middle School Plunge."

Students will need parent's permission to participate in this study. Students are encouraged to discuss the survey with their parents before deciding to participate in the focus group. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask the researcher or your principal.

Potential Risks:
There are no known risks associated with this research. However, it is possible students may experience embarrassment during the focus groups. In order to minimize this risk, I will direct conversation to avoid potential problems.

Compensation:
Students who complete the focus groups will receive compensation in the form of pizza treat or a comparable incentive.

Confidentiality and Privacy of Data:
Notes will be taken during the focus group session and records will be kept confidential. However, the focus group moderator and researchers have no control over information shared by participants outside of the focus group discussion. We ask each participant to be respectful of each other's privacy in the focus group. If you do not feel comfortable answering specific questions for any reason, you do not need to answer.
Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however Rowan University Institutional Review Board may review the research records. Information obtained during the focus group will be anonymous and in publication of such information no identifiable data will be used. Records will be stored on the researchers' password-protected computers and audiotapes will be held in a locked filing cabinet for up to 5 years then destroyed.

Questions:
If you have any questions about anything you have read here or regarding your participation in the focus group, please direct them to LaKecia Hyman (email hymanl21@students.rowan.edu). You may also ask your principal or teacher. If you have questions regarding this research project, your rights as a participant, and would like to contact someone other than the researcher, please contact the Associate Provost for Research at Rowan University Institutional Review Board for Research, Dr. Sreekant Murthy, Chief Research Compliance Officer at (murthy@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5833.

I have read the contents of this assent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. Your signature confirms that you have agreed to participate in this focus group and that you understand the purpose of the information. You may stop participating at any time with no penalty or consequence. A copy of your signed assent is available upon request.

Student's (Print Name):_____

Student's (Signature): _____Date:_____

Parent/Guardian (Print Name): _____

Parent/Guardian (Signature): _____Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____Date: _____

Students under 18 years of age will be required to return a completed and signed parental permission consent form in addition to the student assent form.

Rowan University

Informed Student Assent Form: On-line Survey

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Lakecia Hyman, a doctoral student from Rowan University. I am also a principal of an elementary school. Your help is needed in order to conduct a research project for completion of my doctoral dissertation. You are being asked to participate in an on-line survey as phase I of this study by providing your feelings and beliefs regarding your transition to middle school and your academic progress. Your participation is voluntary; you may ask questions or stop participating at any time. There are no direct benefits you as a participant; however the results of this study may be used to provide suggestions and recommendations to teachers, administrators, and community leaders on how to improve the transitioning process and provide the necessary supports to foster a positive experience for students as they move into middle school.
You may also be recruited to participant in a focus group of 6-8 of your classmates as phase II of the study. The purpose of the focus group is to gain a deeper understanding of the responses obtained from the survey.

Purpose of this study:
The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between student perception of their transition to middle school experience and academic learning outcomes. This survey is designed to determine what influences student achievement when moving from 5th grade into middle school (6th grade). The survey will take approximately 25 minutes and will be held on-site at the students' school. Participants will be asked a series of questions regarding factors that contribute to the difficulty of transitioning to middle school from elementary school and whether an academic decline occurred once the transition to middle school has occurred.
Students will need parent's permission to participate in this study. Students are encouraged to discuss the survey with their parents before deciding to participate in the focus group. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask the researcher or your principal.

Potential Risks:
There are no known risks associated with this research. Participation in this survey will not affect your grades nor is it required.

Compensation:
There will be no compensation or incentives for this study. Participation is voluntary.

Confidentiality and Privacy of Data:
The information obtained from the survey will be strictly anonymous. At no time will any student name be identified or known. The results of the survey and information obtained will be stored on a password-protected computer for up to 5 years then destroyed.

Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however Rowan University Institutional Review Board may review the research records. Information obtained from the survey will be anonymous and in publication of such information no identifiable data will be used.

Questions:
If you have any questions about anything you have read here or regarding your participation in the survey, please direct them to LaKecia Hyman (email hymanl21@students.rowan.edu). You may also ask your principal or teacher. If you have questions regarding this research project, your rights as a participant, and would like to contact someone other than the researcher, please contact the Associate Provost for Research at Rowan University Institutional Review Board for Research, Dr. Sreekant Murthy, Chief Research Compliance Officer at (murthy@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5833.

I have read the contents of this assent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. Your signature confirms that you have agreed to participate in this survey and that you understand the purpose of the information. You may stop the survey at any time without penalty or consequence. A copy of your signed assent is available upon request.

Student's (Print Name):_____

Student's (Signature): _____Date: _____

Parent/Guardian (Print Name): _____

Parent/Guardian (Signature): _____Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Students under 18 years of age will be required to return a completed and signed parental permission consent form in addition to the student assent form.

Appendix D

Parent Consent/Assent Forms

Rowan University

Informed Parental Consent Form: Online Survey

Introduction:
My name is Lakecia Hyman, a doctoral student from Rowan University. I am also an elementary school principal. I am interested in studying the relationship between student's perception of their experience once they transition into middle school and reasons for academic declines from their perspective. This phenomenon is considered, "The Middle School Plunge." You are being asked to grant permission for your child to participate in an on-line survey as phase I of this research study. In order to help you to make an informed decision on whether or not to allow your child to participate in the survey, please read the information provided. Students will need parent's permission to participate in this study. Students are encouraged to discuss the survey with their parents before deciding to participate.

Your child may also be invited to participate in a focus group comprised of 6-8 fellow classmates as phase II of this study. The purpose of the focus group will be to obtain a deeper understanding of their responses based on results from the on-line survey. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

There are no direct benefits to your child as a participant; however the results of this study may be used to provide suggestions and recommendations to teachers, administrators, and community leaders on how to improve the transitioning process and provide the necessary supports to foster an anti-plunge experience for middle school students. There are no known risks associated with this phase of the study.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to determine what influences academic achievement in an urban setting as students move from 5th grade into middle school. The focus is on the relationship between student's perception of their experience once they transition into middle school and reasons for academic declines (the Middle School Plunge) from their perspective. The survey will take approximately 25 minutes and will be held on-site at the students' school. The students will be required to complete the survey during class time via a computer on an on-line website. Student responses will be submitted electronically.

Confidentiality and Privacy of Data:
The information obtained from the survey will be strictly anonymous. At no time will any student name be identified or known. The results of the survey and information obtained will be stored on a password protected computer. The data will only be used by the

researcher during the time period of the study and kept no longer than 5 years after the study is completed. The information obtained from the survey will be published in the form of a dissertation and possibly published in journal articles, presented at professional conferences and shared as discussion topics with educators.
Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however Rowan University Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

Questions:
If you have any questions about anything you have read here or regarding your child's participation in the on-line survey, please contact LaKecia Hyman (email hymanl21@students.rowan.edu). You may also discuss it with your child's principal. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to allow your child to participate and withdraw your child at any time without penalty. Your child's participation is in no way connected to their grades or class participation. If you have questions regarding this research project, your rights as a parent, your child's rights as a participant, and would like express your concerns with someone other than the researcher, please contact the Associate Provost for Research at Rowan University Institutional Review Board for Research at Rowan University Institutional Review Board for Research, Dr. Sreekant Murthy, Chief Research Compliance Officer at (murthy@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5833.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. Your signature confirms that you have agreed to allow your child to participate in this on-line survey and that you understand the purpose of the information. Students may stop the survey at any time without penalty or consequence. A copy of your signed consent is available upon request.

Child's Name (Print Name):_____Date: _____

Child's Name (Signature): _____Date: _____

Parent's Name (Print Name): _____Date: _____

Parent's Name (Signature): _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____Date: _____

Students under 18 years of age will be required to return this completed parental consent form and sign a student assent form in order to participate in this study. I thank you in advance for your support in my efforts to provide important information that will add to the field of education for our students.

Rowan University

Informed Parental Consent for Focus Group Interview

Introduction:
My name is Lakecia Hyman, a doctoral student from Rowan University. I am also an elementary school principal. I am interested in studying the relationship between student's perception of their experience once they transition into middle school and reasons for academic declines from their perspective. This phenomenon is considered, "The Middle School Plunge." You are being asked to grant permission for your child to participate in a follow-up focus group as phase II of this research study. Your child has been chosen because they also participated in phase I of the research by completing an on-line survey. I am interested in exploring student's thoughts further to obtain a deeper understanding of how they feel in order to provide a better explanation of their experiences in middle school.

There are no direct benefits to your child as a participant; however the results of this study may be used to provide suggestions and recommendations to teachers, administrators, and community leaders on how to improve the transitioning process and provide the necessary supports to foster an anti-plunge experience for middle school students.

Procedure of Focus Groups:
The purpose of the focus group is to determine what influences student achievement and success when moving from 5th grade into middle school (6th grade) in urban settings. The focus group will last approximately 40 minutes and will be held on-site at the students' school. There will be two focus groups of 6-8 students. The focus group session for each group will occur during non-instructional time; therefore students will not be penalized for missing class. Questions will also focus on students' feelings toward academic preparation and their experiences in a middle school setting versus a K-8 school setting as well as practices students suggest that will assist them to perform better and combat the middle school plunge. It is important that I maintain the integrity of your child's words; therefore, I may need to review the summary if necessary with your child if I have difficulties with the interpretation.

Students will need parent's permission to participate in this study. Students are encouraged to discuss the survey with their parents before deciding to participate in the focus group. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask the researcher or your child's principal.

Potential Risks:
There are no known risks associated with this research. However, it is possible students may experience embarrassment during the focus groups. In order to minimize this risk, I will direct conversation to avoid potential problems.

Confidentiality and Privacy of Data:
Notes will be taken during the focus group session and records will be kept confidential. However, the focus group moderator and researchers have no control over information shared by participants outside of the focus group discussion. We ask each participant to be respectful of each other's privacy in the focus group. If you do not feel comfortable answering specific questions for any reason, you do not need to answer.
Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however Rowan University Institutional Review Board may review the research records. Information obtained during the focus group will be anonymous and in publication of such information no identifiable data will be used. Records will be stored on the researchers' password-protected computers and recordings will be held in a locked filing cabinet for up to 5 years then destroyed.

Questions:
If you have any questions about anything you have read here or regarding your child's participation in the focus group, please direct them to LaKecia Hyman (email hymanl21@students.rowan.edu). You may also contact your child's principal. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to allow your child to participate and withdraw your child at any time without penalty. Your child's participation is in no way connected to their grades or class participation. If you have questions regarding this research project, your rights as a parent and your child's rights as a participant, and would like to contact someone other than the researcher, please contact the Associate Provost for Research at Rowan University Institutional Review Board for Research, Dr. Sreekant Murthy, Chief Research Compliance Officer at (murthy@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5833.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. Your signature confirms that you have agreed to allow your child to participate in this focus group and that you understand the purpose of the information. Your child may stop participating at any time with no penalty or consequence. A copy of your signed consent is available upon request.

Child's Name (Print Name): _____Date: _____

Child's Name (Signature): _____Date: _____

Parent's Name (Print Name): _____Date: _____

Parent's Name (Signature): _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Students under 18 years of age will be required to return this completed parental consent form and sign a student assent form in order to participate in this study. I thank you in advance for your support in my efforts to provide important information that will add to the field of education for our students.

Appendix E

Paired-Validity Analysis (PVA) Student Perception Survey

You are invited to participate in this 40 question student perception survey. This survey is part of the requirements for completion of my doctoral dissertation at Rowan University. It will take 25 minutes to complete the survey. The information collected from this study will be kept confidential and are for research purposes only. Student individual responses and answers will not be shared with teachers. Responses will be submitted anonymously using an online survey tool. Since your name will not be asked or obtained on the survey, you will not be identified. Therefore, you may answer the questions based on how you truly feel. Once the researcher receives the responses, they will be stored securely. Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. If for any reason you decide that you would like to discontinue your participation, simply return the blank or incomplete survey. The purpose of this survey is to provide information to schools that will help improve student experiences in middle school and enhance student-teacher relationships.

Please place a check mark next to all that apply to you.

I attend: **_____6-8 Middle School** **_____K-8 Elementary/Middle School**

Gender **_____Male** **_____Female**

Ethnicity
_____Hispanic or Latino **_____Black or African American**
_____Asian **_____Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander**
_____White **_____American Indian or Alaska Native**
_____Other

THE QUESTIONS BELOW ARE ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS A MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT. A MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT FOR THIS STUDY IS DEFINED AS A STUDENT IN THE 6TH, 7TH OR 8TH GRADE. PLEASE CHOOSE THE NUMBER THAT BEST DESCRIBES HOW YOU FEEL.

This question is an example (you do not have to answer it)

Example: Music helps me to focus on doing my school work.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

Please begin the survey below:

1. My grades in 6th grade are better than they were in 5th grade.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

2. Being a 6th grade middle school student is hard.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

3. I would feel more comfortable and safe remaining in my K-8 neighborhood school for middle school.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

4. There are so many distractions in my class; it is hard for me to focus and understand what is being taught.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

5. I don't feel that my teacher(s) like me, so I don't do my work in class.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

6. My grades and test scores matter to me more in middle school than when I was in elementary school.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

7. My 6th grade teacher(s) helped me learn more than my 5th grade teacher(s).

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

8. I care more about what my classmates think about me than getting good grades.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

9. My test scores and grades improved once I became a middle school student.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

10. I believe that I would learn more in a K-8 neighborhood school than attending a separate 6th-8th grade middle school.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

11. I follow my teacher's directions during class and focus on the lesson that is being taught.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

12. Changing classes and having multiple teachers is better than just having one teacher all day.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

13. Being a middle school student is easier than I expected.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

14. I received better grades in 5th grade than I did in middle school.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

15. I don't understand the work so I don't do well in class.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

16. My 6th grade teacher(s) listen to me less than my 5th grade teacher(s).

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

17. I feel safe leaving my neighborhood school and going to a new building for middle school after 5th grade.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

18. My 5th grade teacher(s) listened to me more than my 6th grade teachers.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

19. I feel attending a 6th-8th grade middle school is better for my learning than remaining at my neighborhood K-8 elementary school.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

20. My teacher has control over the class; therefore I can focus and understand what I am taught.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

21. I feel that my teacher(s) prepared me to do well on the state test.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

22. My test scores and grades went down once I became a 6th grade middle school student.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

23. I don't feel comfortable answering questions in front of my classmates.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

24. School is boring and not enjoyable so I am not motivated to learn.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

25. I feel that my teacher(s) like me so I try hard to do my work in class.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

26. I understand the work so I do well in class.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

27. I avoid participating in class because my classmates may laugh or my answer may be stupid or incorrect.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

28. I feel comfortable answering questions in front of my classmates.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

29. School is enjoyable and I am motivated to learn.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

30. I do not like switching classes and dealing with different teachers.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

31. I participate in class because my classmates and my teacher(s) make me feel that I am smart.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

32. I sometimes don't follow my teacher's directions during class and I disrupt the lesson that is being taught.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

33. It is more important to me that I get good grades than what my classmates think about me.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

34. I feel that all students from different learning levels should be placed in the same class together.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

35. I believe that my teacher(s) did not prepare me to do well on the state test.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

36. My grades and test scores were more important to me in elementary school than in middle school.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

37. It is hard to focus in class when I am being bullied or intimated by a classmate.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

38. I feel that the smart students should be placed in a separate class than the struggling learners.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

39. My 5th grade teacher(s) helped me learn more than my 6th grade teacher(s).

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

40. I do not feel bullied or intimidated in school, which makes it easy for me to focus in class.

Very True	Often True	Somewhat True	Often Not True	Not True at All
④	③	②	①	⓪
Always Feel This Way	Feel This Way Most of the Time	Feel This Way Sometime	Not Really, Rarely Feel This Way	Never Feel This Way

Appendix F

Paired-Validity Analysis (PVA) Question Pairing Combinations

PVQ 1: My grades in 6th grade are better than they were in 5th grade.
PVQ 14: I received better grades in 5th grade than I did in middle school.

PVQ 2: Being a 6th grade middle school student is hard.
PVQ 13: Being a middle school student is easier than I expected.

PVQ 3: I would feel more comfortable and safe remaining in my K-8 neighborhood school for middle school.
PVQ 17: I feel safe leaving my neighborhood school and going to a new building for middle school after 5th grade.

PVQ 4: There are so many distractions in my class; it is hard for me to focus and understand what is being taught.
PVQ 20: My teacher has control over the class; therefore I can focus and understand what I am taught.

PVQ 5: I don't feel that my teacher(s) like me, so I don't do my work in class.
PVQ 25: I feel that my teacher(s) like me so I try hard to do my work in class.

PVQ 6: My grades and test scores matter to me more in 6th grade than when I was in elementary school.
PVQ 36: My grades and test scores were more important to me in 5th grade than in middle school.

PVQ 7: My 6th grade teacher(s) helped me learn more than my 5th grade teacher(s).
PVQ 39: My 5th grade teacher(s) helped me learn more than my 6th grade teacher(s).

PVQ 8: I care more about what my classmates think about me than getting good grades.
PVQ 33: It is more important to me that I get good grades than what my classmates think about me.

PVQ 16: My 6th grade teacher(s) listen to me less than my 5th grade teacher(s).
PVQ 18: My 5th grade teacher(s) listened to me more than my 6th grade teachers.

PVQ 37: It is hard to focus in class when I am being bullied or intimated by a classmate.
PVQ 40: I do not feel bullied or intimidated in school which makes it easy for me to focus in class.

PVQ 38: I feel that the smart students should be placed in a separate class than the struggling learners.
PVQ 34: I feel that all students from different learning levels should be placed in the same class together.

PVQ 35: I believe that my teacher(s) didn't prepare me to do well on the state test.
PVQ 21: I feel that my teacher(s) prepared me to do well on the state test.

PVQ 32: I sometimes don't follow my teacher's directions during class and I disrupt the lesson that is being taught.
PVQ 11: I follow my teacher's directions during class and focus on the lesson that is being taught.

PVQ 31: I participate in class because my classmates and my teacher(s) make me feel that I am smart
PVQ 27: I avoid participating in class because my classmates may laugh or my answer may be stupid or incorrect.

PVQ 30: I don't like switching classes and dealing with different teachers.
PVQ 12: Changing classes and having multiple teachers is better than just having one teacher all day.

PVQ 29: School is enjoyable and I am motivated to learn.
PVQ 24: School is boring and not enjoyable so I am not motivated to learn.

PVQ 28: I feel comfortable answering questions in front of my classmates.
PVQ 23: I feel comfortable answering questions in front of my classmates.

PVQ 26: I understand the work so I do well in class.
PVQ 15: I don't understand the work so I don't do well in class.

PVQ 22: My test scores and grades went down once I became a 6^{th} grade middle school student.
PVQ 9: My test scores and grades improved once I became a middle school student.

PVQ 19: I feel attending a 6^{th}-8^{th} grade middle school is better for my learning than remaining at my neighborhood K-8 elementary school.
PVQ 10: I believe that I would learn more in a K-8 neighborhood school than attending a separate 6^{th}-8^{th} grade middle school.