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Socially promoted students' lived experience of transition into high school

Anthony Hadzimichalis

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**SOCIALLY PROMOTED STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITION
INTO HIGH SCHOOL**

by
Anthony Hadzimichalis

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
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at
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Dissertation Chair: Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Anthony Hadzimichalis
SOCIALLY PROMOTED STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITION
INTO HIGH SCHOOL

2014

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Doctor of Education

Educational leaders nationwide cannot decisively agree on a preference for either social promotion or grade retention. Throughout history varied opinions have stimulated divergent public policy and practice. The longstanding divergence becomes understandable in light of consistently inconclusive achievement results. Nevertheless, social promotion and grade retention are commonly practiced in a number of New Jersey Public Schools. This study will undertake qualitative research into student experiences of social promotion. It will strive to understand the factors that contribute to some low achieving students passing later grades on merit while others continue to fail. Given this inconsistency of outcome, it is fitting that recent public policy and educational research has suggested that there is a need for specific programs and practices independent of both social promotion and grade retention. The conclusions of this study will be discussed in light of their potential applications to those alternative recommendations.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the interest of creating school environments in which every student demonstrates full proficiency with the curriculum, teachers and policymakers have a crucial choice to make as to what is to be done with students who fail to perform in the short term. For three decades the issue has been characterized by conflict between social promotion and grade retention, with policy supporting each alternative at different times and in different places (Greene & Winters, 2006; Jimerson, 2002; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research [WIHSR], 1999). The debate is kept current by diverse interpretations of how promotion and retention affect both academic opportunity and self-esteem, and how those effects contribute to overall performance in the long term (Greene, 2010). Though there is no shortage of data on either side of the dispute, there is a deficiency of research that focuses on the actual lived experiences of students impacted by these policies.

Social promotion is one of the two currently recognized options. It is the process of moving students along into higher grade levels despite poor academic performance (Denton, 2001). The process allows the underperforming students to avoid the immediate damage to self-esteem and confidence that might come of being separated from their peers according to performance (Jimerson, 2002). Grade retention stands as the sole alternative policy for student failure, and it reflects the current landscape. The policy involves mandating that a child repeat the same grade level in the year following his failure to meet key performance benchmarks in an effort to increase the accountability of

public schools for student achievement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; No Child Left Behind Act 20 U.S.C. § 6301 [NCLBA], 2001). This is offered as a means of providing students with further opportunities to acquire necessary prerequisite skills in order to attain academic success at the higher grade levels (Robertson, 1997).

In comparison with this policy, the practice of social promotion remains a highly contentious issue for public school stakeholders (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 1997; 2010; Clinton, 1998; Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004). However, researchers find the alternative to also be fraught with negative consequences. Owings and Magliaro (1998) and Holmes (1989) have identified a combined 120 studies showing increased behavior problems, disengagement, and ultimately long-term negative achievement outcomes related to grade retention. Jacob et al. (2004) specifically point to surveys indicating that while teachers are not concerned about the overall effect of retention, nearly half of them recognize adverse short-term impacts on self-esteem and attitudes toward school. Interestingly, these researchers strongly advance the theory that traditional practices of both social promotion and grade retention have little to no long-term educational value.

The Social Promotion/Retention Controversy in Education

Regardless of whether this theory is accurate, there is still no consensus in favor of either promotion or retention. Critics suggest that unjustified promotion keeps underperforming students with their social peers but is ultimately counterproductive in that such students fall further behind their classmates (Greene & Winters, 2006). This in

turn has a deleterious impact on self-esteem and peer relationships. When addressing the social promotion versus grade retention debate Greene (2010) suggests:

Promoting students who lack basic reading skills sets them up for failure as they fall further behind academically. Likewise, the greatest source of lasting self-esteem is genuine academic success, not the artificial success of being pushed into the next grade, regardless of how much one has learned. (p. 1)

Social Promotion

Studies have found that social promotion policies and practices increase classroom disruptions, teachers' feelings of frustration, and parents' misconceptions of academic success on the part of their children (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002). Moreover, social promotion calls for teachers to work with underperforming students at the expense of the other more prepared students (Babcock & Bedard, 2011). On the parents' side, having a socially promoted child can give them a "false sense of security," which is ultimately harmful to both the parents and the student (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

Thomas (2000) claims that social promotion policies largely fail to deliver on their supposition that students will remain engaged in the educational process after sidestepping the emotional distress associated with holding failing students back. Proponents of social promotion hold this distress to be unnecessary and counterproductive. Thomas, however, contends that it is not avoided via social promotion. She claims that the inability of socially promoted students to keep up with their peers actually heightens emotional distress and leads to continued adverse academic outcomes.

At the same time, Heubert & Hauser (1999) argue that social promotion has done little or nothing to address student underperformance and dropout/graduation rates. In

fact they claim that it has compounded the difficulties faced by academically challenged students and has overburdened teachers by promoting failure, behavioral difficulties, and low self-esteem among students who are not given the opportunity to make up for deficient skills.

Furthermore, a report by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE, 2000) concluded that social promotion, as a broad policy, sends all students the message that little is expected of them and that they can get by—eventually—without working hard. According to this line of thinking the inevitable result will be a culture of laziness among socially promoted students. The two sides of the debate are thus informed in part by differing perceptions of how to best keep children engaged with their education. Broadly speaking, advocates of retention show greater concern for the sincerity of that engagement, whereas defenders of social promotion worry more about preserving engagement that might otherwise be lost altogether.

Retention

Social promotion proponents are adamant that the practice works to make sure that students do not become discouraged, alienated, and disinterested in continuing with their studies. They argue that with social promotion academic performance improves, dropout rates decline, and graduate rates will steadily increase (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). These advocates, and other researchers, are hostile to the notion that retention has a role to play in any education system. Rather, they suggest that it has exactly the opposite effect of social promotion, or, at best, confers negligible academic benefit at the same time as it alienates students from their peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Hagborg, Masella,

Palladino, & Shepardson, 1991). Whatever academic benefit retention might produce is, from this perspective, more than offset by the emotional distress wrought by the experience of retention. It is an experience that is recognized by sixth grade students as “the single most stressful life event higher other than the loss of a parent or going blind” (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002).

However, no such data has afforded lasting dominance to either social promotion or grade retention. Indeed, each of the two alternatives has held dominance in distinct time periods and distinct localities. According to Owings and Magliaro (1998), grade retention policies and practices in the United States, and by extension social promotion as its conceptual opposite, date back to the mid-nineteenth century. Formal research of both practices was ongoing throughout the twentieth century. Social promotion was widely in favor in the 1970s but gave way to grade retention in the 1980s before social promotion gained prominence again in the 90s (WIHSR, 1999). At each turn, newly publicized negative information about things like student self-esteem, poor performance, college preparation, and dropout rates cast doubts upon the prevalent policy. But at no point has the effectiveness of either practice been empirically proven. In fact, the polemical nature of these practices implies that policymakers have thus far been merely choosing between the lesser of two evils.

The influence of public opinion on this debate illustrates disconnection between educational research and practice. Robertson (1997) discusses how parents and teachers tend to argue for grade retention as a means of “enforcing standards.” While at face value this stance may seem admirable, the position is often informed by limitations in the programming options available in a given school. It is arguably shortsighted to generalize

support for retention on this basis, since it fails to take into account that different schools may have greater availability of programming options such as academic tutoring and coaching, which might be used to remediate unlearned skills. In fact, depending on the quantity and variety of these programming options, they could be utilized to compensate for academic deficiencies in either retained or socially promoted students. This is noteworthy since such intervention strategies may be more important than either policy, especially in light of how difficult it is to fully establish one policy over the other.

Further emphasizing this difficulty, Robertson (1997) suggests that even if convincing educational research supporting social promotion or other alternatives were presented during decision making processes, popular pressure for retaining students would prevail. Meanwhile, the same dynamic could work in reverse, with people pushing to safeguard children's emotional states when they are threatened by retention. Indeed, this constantly contrarian public pressure seems to be on display in the history of the debate, which has continued to vacillate between implementation and reversal of each policy. Furthermore, that points to the apparent shortsightedness of the debate, which trades between two initiatives that never prove effective enough to garner consistent support.

Sakowicz (1996) as quoted by Robertson (1997) contributes to this perception of current policy as being somewhat shortsighted, claiming that "the practice of retention gives the appearance of a school's being accountable about a problem and enforcing standards but may neglect the underlying cause of a student's failure" (p. 2). This is arguably because current policy is concerned with public opinion in equal or greater measure than finding actual best practices. The strength of public opinion in cases like

this suggests a situation in which emotional reactions from some stakeholders in the policy environment contribute to the contentiousness, and perhaps the longevity of the debate.

Social Promotion in the National Context

Within the ongoing debate, there are points of general agreement. In the United States, social promotion is normally limited to the period between kindergarten and the end of the eighth grade, largely because at the high school level graduation standards require earned credits (Fager & Richen, 1999; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Green & Winters, 2009). This is certainly the case in New Jersey. In line with New Jersey Administrative Code (2010) high school graduation requirements throughout the state encompass a minimum attendance obligation, proficiency on standardized assessments, and a minimum of 120 earned credits, among other local requirements. The New Jersey Department of Education establishes a sequence of required minimum courses in mathematics, history, English, and language arts along with a variety of student-selected elective courses allowing students flexibility to choose a course schedule that coincides with their own interests and goals. Researchers have found that high school students tend to gravitate toward a course sequence in which they will do well (or well enough) and minimize their exposure to those in which they may underperform (Alexander et al., 2003), thus minimizing the risk of failing to such a degree as makes retention necessary. But at lower levels, retention remains as a viable and often defended policy option. Nationwide, it has been put forward not just for its own sake but as a means of eliminating social promotion, even among younger students.

Frequent Policy Changes

In 1997 The National Research Council (NRC) was commissioned by the Clinton administration to consider the consequences of ending social promotion and to study the appropriate uses of test data in the grade retention decision making process (Hauser, 1999). The study revealed that across the country, legislators and educational administrators have struggled for decades with establishing the meaning of the phrase, “accountability for educational outcomes” (p. 5).

Hauser (1999) suggests that the result of imposing strict standards on students via individual standardized test scores will result in “flunking kids by the carload” specifically “poor” and “minority children” (p. 5). In support of this claim, Alexander et al. (2003) found 50% of students in urban schools have been retained. Additionally, students raised in poverty have a 50% higher retention rate than their peers. The issue has profound national implications. Xia and Glennie (2005) indicate that “retained students have a higher probability of dropping out of school than their promoted counterparts” (p. 3). Meanwhile, Hauser (1999) laments:

Everyone is in favor of creating high standards and holding students to them. No one is in favor of social promotion, if that means promoting students who have not mastered the work of one grade and who are not ready for the next. (p. 64)

The NRC, as quoted by Hauser (1999), concluded by recommending that:

Accountability for educational outcomes should be a shared responsibility of states, school districts, public officials, educators, parents, and students. High standards cannot be established and maintained merely by imposing them on students. (p. 64)

Hauser (1999) indicates that large school districts such as that served by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) have a history of abolishing and reinstating social promotion repetitively. In the early 1980s The NYCDOE established

the “Promotional Gates” retention program which required students in grades 3 and 7 to attend summer school and attain a cut off score if they did not achieve a minimum score on standardized examinations given during the regular school year. According to House (1998), retained students were provided remedial support during the subsequent repeated grade level in the form of supplemental small group classes of less than 18 students.

Estimated costs of the Promotional Gates program vary between 40 million and 70 million dollars annually including the hiring of 1,100 new teachers (House, 1998). Research soon thereafter indicated that students retained under the Promotional Gates program did not achieve better outcomes than socially promoted students with similar records of previous performance. As such, the program was dismantled. But in 2004 NYCDOE started standardized test-based promotion once again, though this time for grade three only (McCombs, Sloan, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009). Shortly thereafter, and following in the footsteps of the Promotional Gates program the NYCDOE test-based promotion policy was extended through 2009 and expanded to include grade 5, grade 7, and grade 8.

These back-and-forth transitions in NYCDOE reflect a common tendency in promotion and retention policy implementations nationwide, including in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati and states including Florida, Texas, and Oregon (Riley, 1999). Xia & Kirby (2009) quoting Zinth (2005) found the following:

As of 2005, 18 states had policies that specified an assessment to be used in determining student eligibility for promotion or retention, and several others authorized local authorities to establish promotion policies or consider specific criteria for promotion... However, our survey of state Web sites in 2006 and 2008 indicated that states and districts changed the content of policies over time and sometimes decided to end their policies. Thus, at any given time, it is surprisingly difficult to identify the number of states and districts implementing test-based promotion policies. (p. 1)

The debate frequently appears to be so polarized that the response to observed negative effects of the dominant policy is to attempt to completely reverse course and replace wholesale promotion with wholesale retention or vice versa. This trend has also engendered litigation in response to promotion/retention policies.

Social Promotion and Retention Case Law

In the late 70s and early 80s, state governments began to institute high-stakes testing as a determinant of whom to graduate from high schools (Heise, 2009). In 1981, the Federal Court of Appeals, in the landmark *Debra P. v. Turlington* case, struck down such testing-based promotion requirements in Florida on the bases of racial bias and the fact that the test contents were not aligned with statewide curriculum (Murray & Murray, 2001). This groundbreaking case set the stage for other similar cases brought before the courts in response to standardized testing-based promotion policies. Murray & Murray (2001) point out further that in 2000, a Texas parent group contested the requirement of successful completion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The complainant group in *GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al.* (2000) concluded that the test unfairly discriminated against poor and minority students based on discrepancies between student passing rates.

Such cases clearly demonstrate the need for careful and complex reevaluations of policy with regard to high-stakes testing and student promotion. They also establish the potential role of government officials and school leaders in recognizing and responding to associated problems at an early stage. Their efforts can avoid the need for litigation as a response to problems like racial disparities. While government officials have a unique ability to change policy, school leaders may play the dual role or recognize the need for

policy shifts and creating institutional interventions that compensate for such problems in absence of new policy. Although problems like discrimination in testing may be addressed in a number of ways, it would be difficult to deny that there is a problem in the disparate effects of retention strategies as currently implemented. Additionally these cases offer a window into society's call for promotion policies inclusive of opportunities for parental involvement, multiple determining criteria, and for neutral assessments in terms of student race, gender, and income level. Through the court system, society's plea for equitable treatment of all students can be heard.

But these concerns can also be addressed more directly by educational leaders and policymakers, as they respond to the demands of their communities while also recognizing the needs of their students. Interestingly, the plaintiff's requests for equitable promotion policies echo much of what researchers have long established as critical variables directly correlated to poorly performing students, including, "gender, race, [and] socioeconomic status" (Xia & Kirby, 2009, p. 15). This is one aspect of the information that educational leaders ought to rely on in crafting thorough interventions in response to student failure. But it is not the only aspect.

Moving forward from this background data, this current study, as an instance of phenomenological research, focuses on the personal experiences of socially promoted high school students while remaining attentive to any meaningful statistics that arise from the research with regard to the above demographic variables and their perceived academic influence. It is hoped that this will somewhat compensate for the established tendency of the promotion policy debate to ignore personal and emotional impacts upon students, particularly of at-risk demographics. That is, it is hoped that the current study

will promote further progress towards finding common ground between arguments based on cold, quantitative data and those based on appeals to compassion.

There has already been measured progress towards this end. Heise (2009) indicates that the California Department of Education (CDE) instituted statewide graduation exams in 2001 but delayed using it for actual student retention when less than half of students passed the first exam. When the legislation was set to take full effect in 2006, a class-action lawsuit was filed to prevent the widespread retention that would ensue. In *Valenzuela v. O'Connell* (2006), the court ruled to delay implementation of the CDE legislation by another year, but the state appellate court later upheld the state exams, indicating that delaying them would be undue interference in the domain of the legislature. However, the ultimate result of the case was a settlement between the litigants, requiring the state to provide benefits and services to students whose graduation might be threatened by state exams (Heise, 2009).

The decision by the California legislature, explained Lead Counsel Arturo J. Gonzalez, to delay implementation, even before the court case, indicates an awareness of the inequities inherent to standardized test-based retention policies, especially to poor and minority students (Governor Schwarzenegger 2007). On October 12, 2007 Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed bill AB 347, resolving *Valenzuela v. O'Connell* (2006). The new law provided for two years of remediation classes and additional resources to help students pass the exit exam after high school (Governor Schwarzenegger..., 2007). This resolution indicates how awareness of the personal effects of retention and promotion upon students can guide leaders towards initiatives that do more than simply trading between the two alternative policies.

Litigation, legislation, administrative policies and practices, and empirical evidence suggest an unsettled policy question, as retention is repeatedly instituted and repealed. Existing scholarship and anecdotal evidence shows many negative consequences associated with social promotion policy and practices. Retention policies attempt to ameliorate these consequences by requiring a student to repeat a grade in preparation for scaffolding with higher grade level competencies. But amidst this vacillation in policy, overall analysis has failed to present either side of the debate as having a more thoroughly positive outcome for the student.

Limited Alternatives

Jimerson et al. (2006) state explicitly, “Research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion is a successful strategy for improving educational success” (p. 85). And according to Heubert & Hauser (1999):

Social promotion and simple retention in grade are only two of the educational interventions available to educators when students are experiencing serious academic difficulty. Schools can use a number of possible strategies to reduce the need for these either-or choices, for example, by coupling early identification of such students with effective remedial education. (p. 285)

Jimerson et al. (2006) go on to point to a number of separate alternatives that existing data indicates are effective strategies, including preschool intervention programs, looping and multi-age classrooms, school-based mental health programs, and parent involvement. Furthermore, James and Powell (1997) argue that “merely abolishing social promotion will not solve the problem” (p. 1). Thus they recommend such intervention programs as smaller class sizes and one-on-one tutoring, evaluation for learning disabilities, and early identification of at-risk students (p. 11). Adams (2006) also emphasizes intended progress toward individualized learning, as well as promotion of greater parental involvement through government support of poor and disadvantaged families. All of these

recommendations speak to the capability of educational leaders and government policymakers to look beyond overused and seemingly ineffectual initiatives. And such looking-beyond depends on emphasizing different types of data, other than the familiar quantitative analyses.

Standardized test-based promotion policy has a record of unintended social consequences, which might not be thoroughly recognized or explained by those sorts of data gathering methods. Anagnostopoulos (2006) used a cultural/sociological perspective in examining such social consequences of a district-wide merit-promotion policy that yielded near disastrous effects. Rather than compelling teachers and students to remedy student failure through program development, the policy facilitated a type of moral boundary that ultimately distinguished "deserving" students from those deemed "undeserving." Procedural instruments for equitable implementation, which are absent in such policies, could otherwise be used as catalysts for students' identity construction and as a mechanism of social inclusion.

The California Department of Education (2010) reported that students who fail to meet grade-level standards "promote" from eighth grade to ninth, sometimes with full graduation ceremonies. However, the question about what to do with students who are not ready for ninth grade is a troubling one. Approximately 30% of students who begin ninth grade do not complete high school. Yet a review of the literature shows little unqualified support for grade retention, and it suggests that holding students back will not in itself solve this dire dropout problem.

In fact, Jimerson (1999) confirmed that retention is one of the factors found to increase the likelihood of students dropping out. Grade retention also appeared to affect

later career success. All in all, systematic reviews and meta-analyses examining research over the past century conclude that the cumulative evidence does not support the use of grade retention as an intervention for academic achievement or socio-emotional adjustment (McCombs et al., 2009).

Social Promotion in New Jersey

These apparent shortcomings of grade retention illuminate the overall lack of data conclusively supporting one policy. They also point to the lack of meaningful alternatives to either policy. This has been the case at the local level, as well, where there has been policy commitment but a shortfall of analysis as to the effectiveness of social promotion. Conflict in local promotion policy is prevalent in New Jersey as evidenced by significant procedural differences among the three largest school districts. The Paterson Board of Education (PBOE), with an enrollment of 24,080, supports social promotion by empowering teachers to recommend promotion if students have “demonstrated the proficiencies required for movement into the educational program of the next grade” (Paterson Board of Education, 2005). Jersey City Public Schools, with 27,670 students enrolled, requires input from a variety of sources in recommending promotion, yet maintains a social promotion policy for kindergarten through grade eight (Jersey City Public Schools, 2013). Newark Public Schools, with 39,992 students enrolled, attempts to maintain neutral ground by disallowing more than one retention in a given grade level (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012).

Interestingly, whereas Paterson Board of Education has recently gone public about their goals of ending the “informal policy” of social promotion (Malinconico, 2012), New Jersey’s largest school district, Newark Public Schools (2005), argues against

both practices yet allows for social promotion. As a matter of policy it states, “The District does not support either social promotion or retention, since there is little scientific research substantiating its value and considerable research to the contrary. Therefore, a student may, at most, be retained once during grades K-8” (p. 1).

Associated policies and practices have been *de facto* for a number of years at the selected research site for this study. For present purposes it will be referred to as Lakeview North High School. The school from which students in this study have been socially promoted, where policies and practices have been largely the same, will be identified as Hillside North Middle School. Both institutions are located in the XXXX Public School District of New Jersey. Though well entrenched in the culture of the schools, social promotion practices suffer from an absence of empirical evidence that could potentially improve outcomes for both students and educators. XXXX Public Schools (2008) policy states:

The Chief School Administrator shall direct development of and the Board shall adopt detailed regulations to govern progress of pupils through levels K-12. Parents/guardians will be notified whenever exceptions are contemplated in a pupil's normal progression from level to level. The final decision in all cases will rest with school authorities. (p. 1)

While the problem of how to handle the advancement of failing students has national and international significance, what is of issue for the present study is not only the lack of overall consensus, but more importantly, the “missing voice” in this debate—that of *students* who have first-hand experience of social promotion policies and practices.

According to XXXX Public Schools (2008) policy, social promotion is practiced in all grade levels, kindergarten through grade 12. In the academic year 2010-2011, 31 out of 147 Lakeview North High School freshman (21%) had been socially promoted

despite failing grade 8 (Lakeview North Lakeview North High School [LNHS], 2011). Twenty of these have been involved in breach of behavior, or in violation of school rules, 22 are failing at least one course for this academic year, all are receiving social counseling, and only eight of the 31 are involved in extracurricular activities (LNHS, 2011).

Hillside North Middle School and Lakeview North High School represent ideal locations from which to extract data related to contemporary social promotion practices. Both have sufficient years of experience in social promotion and, as such, are in an excellent position to provide information on a practice whose ultimate impact still is not fully understood. The research sites are located in a suburban district, but not an especially affluent one. The median household income is \$84,000 and 7% of students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch programs. These dual factors imply that the schools will provide a fair amount of social and economic diversity in the sample population. At the least, students will be in the middle ground of the national range of socioeconomic status.

Data findings on social promotion have local, regional, and national implications. Especially coming from sources that reflect roughly average student experiences, such data can contribute in a meaningful and productive way to the current debate. In the long run, it can help shape, or perhaps reshape, key policies and practices. What's more, if at least some of that data refers to the direct impacts that existing policies have upon the poorly performing students it might be possible for educational leaders to use that information to tailor supplemental policies to the lived experiences of those students.

Statement of the Problem

Policies and practices involving student retention and social promotion continue to generate enormous controversy in the United States. The vast majority of peer-reviewed studies dedicated to the issue offer a variable and frequently contradictory picture of the short-, medium-, and long-term value of these practices (McCombs et al., 2009). Social promotion continues to be advocated as a counterbalance to what many researchers argue is the deleterious emotional impact of retention (Alexander et al., 2003; George, 1993; Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Hagborg et al., 1991). However, the existing literature largely fails to take into account direct observation of and testimony from the students who are subject to these policies. Studies have been conducted addressing the effects of retention and social promotion on students (Frey, 2005; Hauser, 1999), but this sort of data on its own has not been sufficient to cease the vacillation between the two alternatives or to reconcile the contrasting information that has emerged from opposing sides of the debate.

Although research regarding grade retention and social promotion does look beyond simple short-term academic outcomes, it still tends to focus almost entirely on statistical data and documentary evidence (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Surveys of classroom teachers seem to represent the farthest that researchers have ventured into the investigation of personal experiences and attitudes (Riley, 1999). The experiences of students are largely absent from the literature. Despite this, many interpretations of the existing data tend to make reference to student self-perception, even while failing to make reference to specific examples of expected outcomes in this area (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr,

Nickerson, & Kundert, 2006). This study seeks to fill in that gap in the research by making the central element of the research the student's lived experience of social promotion with respect to academics, social interaction, transition to high school, and personal autonomy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of socially promoted students as they transition from Hillside North Middle School to Lakeview North High School in the XXXX Public Schools of New Jersey. Such students, graduating from a middle school that practices social promotion into a high school that is bound by state law graduation requirements, undoubtedly experience school differently than their non-socially promoted peers. The study will rely on brief student journal entries and the process of graphic elicitation on the topics of self-perception, classroom interactions, academics, and future prospects. These data collection methods will complement and guide direct interviews with student participants at the study site.

This research design will serve the end of exploring whether socially promoted students are subject to, and how they are affected by, the notions of social reaction and self-fulfilling prophecy outlined by Becker (1963) and Rist (1970), respectively. Graphic elicitation and semi-structured interviews will be designed to elucidate these topics from a phenomenological perspective, focusing on the lived experiences of relevant students, irrespective of data regarding the input of instructors and non-socially promoted classmates.

For the purposes of this study, "socially promoted student" refers to a student who has been promoted to a grade level or grade levels, despite academic failure at the

preceding level. For this study, the students come from Hillside North Middle School and were recently socially promoted to Lakeview North High School, which is where the study will take place.

Research Questions

This study deals with one overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of socially promoted students as they transition from middle school to high school? Within this larger topic of inquiry, the study seeks to investigate the following questions regarding particular student experiences in the areas of academic achievement, social interaction, high school transition, and personal autonomy:

1. How do socially promoted students perceive their academic performance and, by comparison, their academic potential?
2. Do teachers' and peers' perceptions of the student affect the student's engagement with schoolwork? How so?
3. What are the essential features of a socially promoted student's interaction with his teachers and his school?
4. What are the essential features of a socially promoted student's interaction with his peers?
5. How do teachers' and peers' apparent perceptions of the student affect the student's classroom behavior?
6. To what extent does the student feel prepared for high school? In what ways?
7. How much does the student exhibit a sense of belonging in high school, as compared with middle school?

8. What experiences do socially promoted students anticipate as they complete the transition from middle school to high school?
9. What steps do socially promoted students commonly take to help improve their academic performance and social lives?
10. In what ways do socially promoted students see their academic and social futures as being determined by circumstances?

Definition of Terms

The vocabulary used in this study is specific to its conceptual framework.

Psychological vocabulary as well as social vocabulary will be used. Use of phraseology pertinent to these specific genres will be used throughout the study. All terms used will be consistent with the specifics of my study, including,

- *Social promotion.* The policy of promoting students to the next grade level even though they exhibited poor achievement in their present grade level (Beebe-Frankenberger et al., 2004)
- *Grade retention.* The practice of requiring a student in a given grade level to remain at the same grade level for the entirety of the next school year (Jimerson et al., 2006).

Significance of the Study

This study will investigate inequalities within the education system, but because of the universal nature of this issue, any tentative findings will have significant implications. The study will provide a rubric for understanding socially promoted populations prior to implementing programs and interventions aimed at improving performance among this group. In this way, the study may be of particular significance to

government policymakers and school leaders who are pursuing this goal. While the potential applications of the specific results may be limited to interventions at the study site or with students of similar circumstances and demographics, the research methods and general conclusions may be useful as leaders deal with social promotion anywhere.

Amidst the contemporary socio-political zeitgeist emphasizing educational standards and accountability, debates are recurring on the subject of the relative merits and limitations of grade retention and social promotion. This investigation of the personal effects of previous failure may provide additional context for the debate and assist educational leaders in creating alternative policy initiatives. While social promotion alone is not likely to enhance educational success, the confluence of research examining the effectiveness of grade retention on academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment does not support this strategy as an educational intervention.

The recognition of the interconnectedness between socio-emotional adjustment and academic achievement has recently received further attention in the educational literature. There is also an increasing emphasis on implementing empirically supported, proven, or exceptionally promising educational intervention strategies. Educational professionals have to be encouraged and prepared to move beyond solely utilizing grade retention and social promotion as academic interventions (Jimerson et al., 2002). Such preparation can likely be promoted by a greater understanding of the social and psychological effects of failure itself.

Significance of the Study for Further Research

Specific reasons for the study are numerous, but mainly center on the need for greater understanding of factors associated with high school drop-outs, development of

behavioral problems and low self-esteem. It seeks to understand whether and how social promotion benefits the students academically or perpetuates and aggravates the specified problems. These issues are very important because they will help ascertain the best methods of intervention for this particular demographic. As Penna & Talerico (2005) point out, while no single factor could predict whether or not a student would drop out (and various overlapping factors lead students to drop out), grade retention is a significant predictor of which students eventually will do so. Studies of these predictors can help educational professionals to determine ways of responding to them which generate more positive consequences.

Holmes (2006) put forward that too much reliance on the use of single test scores as a basis for the large part of the retention decision is counterintuitive, especially with the available educational literature demonstrating overwhelming consensus that retention of students leads to negative results in academic achievements. According to Holmes (2006), it would be more cost effective to increase educational resources to improve student performance than it would be to incur an average of \$10 billion in annual expenses for the retention strategy.

The study will thus provide insight into the appropriate intervention strategies of all relevant stakeholders, especially educational leaders including those involved in resource development and programming. Ultimately, the goal of all K-12 institutions is for students to graduate with both the academic and emotional skills required to contribute positively to the community (Society for Research in Child Development, 2011). This study will address the high school completion rate for socially promoted students. It will uncover facts about students' academic goals and their self-perceptions.

It will uncover details about students' interactions with their high school education as a whole. Put simply, the study is significant because socially promoted students themselves will finally have an opportunity to weigh in on the social promotion debate from the perspective of personal experience. In the past, the debate has always been centered among educators and academicians. This study will add a crucial but chronically overlooked perspective to the debate.

Significance of the Study for the Field of Educational Leadership

Teaching faculties have been wrestling with the issue of socially promoted students for years, and there are many differing opinions on how this issue is best addressed (Chen, 2011). Some professionals feel a school-wide solution is required, while others believe it is best solved at the individual level (Starr, 1997). Understanding this unique demographic will better enable educators to address these students' special needs and will ensure that their success will also help improve the overall performance of schools in a way that will help them to remain viable institutions.

Also, it is important to expand upon previous studies, particularly regarding "self-fulfilling prophecies," as they relate to expectations. The study seeks to address the particular experiences of socially promoted students and how their perceptions reflect the level of support being provided by and the educational institution and its programming. This study will provide the first comprehensive investigation of this subject, and will generate unique insights into why some socially promoted students ultimately succeed in high school while others do not. This study will be the first to draw on Rist's labeling theory for the purpose of identifying codes and themes related to negative stigmas perpetuated by schools and staff members.

As a group, socially promoted students are prone to academic failure at every level. If the essential reasons for that correlation also remain the same, then this study will provide information that may be helpful in early recognition of future social-promotion candidates, and thus earlier intervention. Also, it may aid in recognition of poor perceptions of socially promoted students. That label may be attached to them at any level of their education and then serve to encourage behaviors and attitudes that fit this pre-conceived model. A keener understanding of this process, and of who tends to be subject to it and how, can help educators to control for their own impulses. Otherwise these may contribute to the negative effect as well as helping them to promote the organizational and practical changes needed to mitigate the contributions of other students to potential worsening of behaviors in socially promoted students.

Significance of Study for Social Justice

Social promotion is still an ongoing issue within our educational system, and as such, there is much that is still being learned about it. It is also an extremely dynamic phenomenon, dependent on outside variables that may not be represented in this study (Ellis-Christensen, 2011). The effect of regional variations, temporary circumstances, and even political climate can be significant.

There is also evidence that social promotion has important implications for race relations. Studies indicate that white females are most likely to complete their schooling, while African-American males are least likely (Johnson, 2010). Frey (2005) suggests it may be the case that white females are being socially promoted—and not retained—on the basis of conscious or unconscious ideas about race while African-American males experience exactly the opposite phenomenon (retention without promotion). If this is so,

then the issue has important ramifications for racial disparities within education and the state of race relations more generally. Some studies indicate that social promotion is unduly influenced by preconceived attitudes toward race among administrators (Greene & Winters, 2009). This touches on “labeling theory” and “self-fulfilling prophecies,” which are both discussed in the Literature Review. In other words, a strong argument is made that social promotion and retention have become accepted practices on the basis of perceived racial attributes (Hauser, 1999). Evidence for these sorts of biases may be uncovered by this study if its results show significant variation according to racial or ethnic demographics.

Whatever the factors involved, understanding how a student becomes a socially promoted student will also prevent any heavily negative impact on society in general. Assuming that the relationship between social promotion and dropout is causal, these students, once labeled, have a high dropout rate that adversely affects the economy and increases the likelihood of criminal activity in the community (Fields, 2008). The need for a stable system that can begin to address these issues at the earliest possible age is paramount.

Also, middle schools must accept “ownership” of students who do not perform well academically. The present system makes it too easy to promote these students to high school, thus eliminating any incentive on the part of middle schools to put in sustained extra effort. In short, the study has the potential to help illuminate the enormous challenges and significant opportunities that face socially promoted students when they transition to a more challenging educational environment such as college and university.

Limitations

The study does not take into account factors such as the participants' date of birth, mobility rate, and the number of siblings, living situation, or religion. It will be age-specific, and, as such, concerned with a narrow sample. General limitations include the research site and the data being the perspective of students attending a suburban district with high graduation rates, moderate to low attrition and mobility rates, high family income and other factors. Rates of parental approval for research to study individual children may also be a limiting factor.

This study is limited in the same way that most any study is limited, in that the accuracy of the findings depends on the honesty and participation of its subjects. The research is reliant on participants expressing true feelings, opinions, processes, methods, and approaches. Qualitative action research assumes the participants will be willing to take risks to develop new actions and implement them in an effort to make a positive difference toward organizational issues (Haverkamp, 2005). The interpretations will be based on the observations of the researcher as a "participant observer." Also, this study will be conducted in a relatively austere cultural environment lacking in deep and sustained cultural diversity.

The XXXX School District has a very large majority white population. According to most recent statistics, only 363 students out of a total 2,966 are nonwhite or mixed race (National Center for Education Statistics 2013). About 1% of the total district population has limited English proficiency. There is thus a small potential for cultural diversity in the study. This is made even smaller by the fact that chance alone determines whether culturally diverse students are recommended to the Lakeview North summer transition

program. If some such students are available in the potential sample, their presence in the final sample is decided by their willingness and ability to participate, as well as random chance. Thus cultural and racial diversity cannot be a variable in the present study. Further research will be needed to determine whether the findings of this study apply more generally to different cultural situations and demographics.

Delimitations

For this study, the geographic location may be a delimiting factor. A large portion of the research will be performed in New Jersey's XXXX Township Public Schools. This is largely because the practice of social promotion is a public practice there, and the geographic location is manageable. It may be that reliance on additional sites in diverse locations may improve generalizability, but this is not to say that a limited geographic reach lessens the reliability of a phenomenological study. Coghlan and Brannick (2005) documented several examples of qualitative action research performed by researchers in their local communities and within organizations that researchers work in, or know.

Herr and Anderson (2005) actually encourage environments that are familiar to researchers. Herr and Anderson suggested that researchers might have a deeper desire to solve problems in familiar environments. The present study is conducted in Lakeview North High School, and although the scope of findings is intended to be national, as social promotion and retention are practiced in virtually every part of the country (Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004), caution must be taken in overgeneralizing findings.

Organization of Dissertation

Including this introduction, the study is organized into five chapters. The above chapter has introduced the topic of investigation and presented the purpose of the

research, research questions, significance of the study, and the overall delimitations. The second chapter of this study establishes its context and provides a brief review of the literature on topics associated with this research. The third chapter addresses the methodology for the study, which includes participant selection, instrumentation, a description of the methods of data collection, data analysis, data trustworthiness, and finally, a discussion of the researcher's role in the study and the ethics of the study. The fourth chapter provides an overview of the findings and explains the overall structure of the dissertation, and introduces chapter five, placing them in the context of the earlier chapters. The fifth chapter is designed as traditional journal articles that describe the study, the context, the methodology, and findings that emerged after the completion of data collection and analysis. It also delineates implications for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Continuing debate surrounding social promotion demands deeper and broader investigation within a setting that has, in the past, proven itself receptive to the observer-participant model. The main purpose of this proposed qualitative research study is to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of socially promoted students in New Jersey, specifically Lakeview North High School in XXXX Township, in order to promote improved instructional practice across the field of education as a whole.

The demographics of Lakeview North High School closely match those of the area surrounding it. That is, the population is Caucasian, with similarly sized minorities of black, Hispanic, and Asian students, and socioeconomic diversity reflects the \$84,000 median income of the surrounding area. Thus, data collected within the school should prove relevant to nearby schools and general educational policy in XXXX Township and the state of New Jersey. Lakeview North High School has exhibited substantial success compared to the performance of the state in which it resides, but there are broad discrepancies of performance within the student population. This provides an ideal environment for the study of how socially promoted students perceive themselves and are perceived by peers who demonstrate higher academic achievement. It is also an excellent environment for observing effects of interventions targeted at the higher risk subgroups. Because there has been such a gap in the performance of different subgroups, it should be comparatively easy to observe relative gains.

Options for such interventions include summer programming, additional academic support during the school year, and peer tutoring. There is a small amount of empirical work on peer tutoring, and it has focused particularly on retained students. While grade retention often fails to advance the academic and socio-emotional outcomes of retained students, students who act as peer tutors often experience notable gains in their school performance and self-concepts (Mesler, 2009). This may be reflected in improved academic efforts, better social interactions, and greater ease of transitioning to high school, all of which are in the purview of this study.

Examples of specific interventions that have been researched include the implementation of a 12-week peer tutoring program in which a retained third-grade student acted as a tutor for a classmate who was performing poorly in mathematics. Mesler (2009) found that the student who served as a peer tutor benefitted not only from improved math achievement but also from an enhanced self-concept and better classroom behavior as well. These improvements indicate that one effective means of improving both academic achievement and socio-emotional outcomes is by having struggling students serve as peer tutors. The study seeks to underpin the relevance and effectiveness of measures of this kind by establishing their connection to factors of self-concept, social support, and autonomy in the socially promoted student's experience. The research will first identify the features of this experience. Once this is done, it will be possible to assess what interventions will positively affect these things, and how.

Scope of the Literature

This section discusses the social promotion debate and the important literature related to it. It will demonstrate the familiar framing of the discussion and debate over

social promotion and grade retention, and it will reinforce the claim that although this debate is abundantly investigated, studies looking into the perspectives of the students themselves are lacking. A survey of the literature will suggest the dearth of this content. In turn this will establish the need for additional research on the topic, and thus serve as the motivation for the present study.

The single most important background source for the proposed study is the work of Howard S. Becker (1963), who formulated and promulgated the Social Reaction Theory. The work of Ray Rist (1970, 1977) builds on many of Becker's basic contentions and will likely prove particularly important in trying to understand the true impact of "self-fulfilling prophecies" in the classroom and the way that both instructors and students contribute—often unconsciously—to a prevailing atmosphere of "quiet defeatism" or, at the very least, of seriously diminished expectations. Rist's focus on the deleterious effects of "labeling" students, a process initiated and sustained—consciously and unconsciously—by both instructors and the peers of socially promoted students, could also prove enormously valuable in helping the researcher make sense of observations, interviews, field notes, and extended reflections.

The Social Promotion Debate

While the theorists and practitioners noted above are integral to the study's broad approach, the ongoing (and seemingly endless) controversy over social promotion itself, marked out by a number of key studies, serves as its chief justification. Social promotion and grade retention have been an on and off debate even amongst the highest policy makers. Former Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, are in favor of grade retention

and the abolishment of social promotion as school reforms (Neill, 2003). The following sections will discuss the controversial issues related to grade retention.

Controversy on Grade Retention

Retention is defined as a practice that places a student on a certain grade level to repeat the level during the following school year. Officially published grade retention rates do not exist on a national or state level. But some researchers estimate annual student retention rates may be close to 10% (Anderson, Jimerson & Whipple, 2002; Dawson, 1998; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Retention separates students from their age-group peers, and the existing literature has a good deal to say about the apparent effects of retention on student outcomes. To the extent that these are negative, it is frequently assumed that they can be ascribed to stigmatization of the student as a failure, slow, or different from those who move on to the next grade (Anderson et al., 2002). To date, however, this is largely based on intuition, rather than on direct observation of student self-perceptions or of the nature and effects of social circumstances on those students.

McMillen (1997) observes that retained students are more likely to drop out of high school. Furthermore, as the grade-level gap increases, the probability of subsequently dropping out increases as well (Wilkinson & Frazer, 1990). Seidel and Vaughan (1991) concluded that retention of a student in even one grade correlates to dropout sometime later. Students who are retained drop out at twice the rate of students who have never been retained (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006; McMillen, 1997).

Existing research also indicates that the experiences of retained students, and thus their educational outcomes, vary according to the grade level at which they have been retained, and the number of times they have been held back. Students who have been

retained 2 or more years are nearly four times more likely to drop out than students who have never been retained (McMillen, 1997). Additionally, students who are retained in kindergarten through third grades are less likely to drop out than students who are retained in middle and secondary grades (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006; McMillen, 1997). This fact may suggest that understanding the experiences of retained students at the high school level will provide greater clarity regarding the consequences of retention in general.

Jimerson (1999) conducted a 21-year longitudinal study, investigating the effects of retention upon students, and found that there were eight significant characteristics of retained students. These significant characteristics are: (a) retained students had lower levels of academic attainment at the end of grade 11; (b) were more likely to drop out of high school by age 19; (c) were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20; (d) were less likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary education program; (e) received lower education/employment status ratings; (f) were paid less per hour; and (g) received poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low achieving students. Such studies illustrate negative impacts of grade retention, but they do little to explain the mechanisms behind those impacts. Consequently, they cannot be said to provide a sufficient groundwork for a resolution to the problem, and in absence of better explanatory measures, policymakers might be tempted to simply shift away from grade retention without establishing meaningful alternative strategies.

The precise dynamic contributing to high dropout rates amongst retained students is not clearly understood, but the simple presence of that harmful correlation between retention and dropout is. Studies such as those by Peng and Lee (1992) and Weber (1988)

concur with Jimerson's (1999) study, citing student retention as a salient predictor of student dropout. Balfanz and Herzog (2006) also stated that student retentions were observed through four predictors, which are poor attendance, poor behavior, and failure on math and English subjects. These predictors indicate a 10% possibility of graduating on time and a 20% chance of graduating a year later. Roderick (1994) stated that students who experienced grade retentions twice are most likely to drop out of high school. Such students do so at a rate of 90%. Balfanz and Herzog (2006) stated that students who repeated middle school were observed as having 11 times the probability of dropping out of high school as compared to a student who never failed a subject in middle school.

According to Tanner (2003), to be able to prevent U.S. elementary and secondary school students from dropping out and to increase their chances of graduating, it must be detected early on who among them are at the greatest risk of dropping out. He claims that significant social and psychological differences exist between students who graduate and students who drop out. In this sense, some research begins to touch upon the question of not just which students are failing, but why.

Those who drop out are disproportionately low achievers. Using reading and mathematics data, Tanner (2003) performed a discriminate analysis to predict which groups tend more towards dropping out of school. The participants were divided into two groups of 50 students. The first one was comprised of the randomly selected dropouts while the second group contained the graduates. They were students that had taken both reading and mathematics portions of the Scholastic Assessment Test. The findings revealed that achievement data is a statistically reliable prediction of who will drop out of schools.

Grades are important components of a student's life and learning process. A student is more likely to graduate if they have earned a sufficient number of credits. According to Allensworth and Easton (2007), not doing well in the freshman year and not being able to achieve grade-level outcomes in that year alone could already compromise a student's chance of graduation. Furthermore, students who participate more in extracurricular activities have higher chances of earning good grades and avoiding failures. The same scholars posit that students who do well in certain subjects will be more likely to be motivated to do well in others (Allensworth & Easton, 2007), but that is exactly the sort of conclusion that would be better supported with information derived from direct communication with a relevant student population, rather than with theoretical speculation.

MacIver and MacIver (2009) illustrated that the success of a student at high school level may be highly affected by the student's performance during ninth grade. Students who fail at least a course during ninth grade will be unable to fulfill the number of credits needed for graduation. A student's failure in the ninth grade can be traced to the student's performance in previous grades. Students who frequently get poor grades, fail courses and remain behind in one grade have a greater chance of leaving school before graduation. Those who have trouble in fulfilling the academic requirements of school may choose to drop out to avoid feeling the frustration of their inability to get good grades (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). These observations once again demonstrate the need for research centered on high school grade levels, especially the ninth grade level, which is the focus of the current study. The same observations establish

the need for a closer investigation into the nature of student's personal frustrations, how they are experienced, how they develop, and how they can be interrupted.

Bowman (2005) investigated whether grade retention is a help or a hindrance to academic success. She found out that contrary to popular assumptions, grade retention does not necessarily increase student performance and in fact correlates with school dropout rate. Many schools believe that an extra year of schooling will produce improved academic outcomes that will make students meet the necessary criteria for grade promotion. But this is disputed and may be an erroneous assumption.

Stearns, Moller, Blau, and Potochnick (2009) also contradicted such assumptions. They find that students who are retained in grade will be at higher risk of dropping out of high school than those who are continuously promoted. Critics of the grade retention strategy claimed that the financial costs and the impairments to student self-esteem are great, and that these effects of the strategy could eventually push students to drop out of school (Bowman, 2005).

Bowers (2010) conducted an analysis of the entire grade 1-12 longitudinal, cohort-based grading histories of the class of 2006 for two school districts in the United States. He adopted longitudinal risk perspective, instead of the longitudinal conceptions of dropout found in previous studies. This was accomplished by using survival analysis, life tables, and discrete-time hazard modeling to appropriately account for student graduation, transfer, and dropout. The risk of dropout began in grade 7, with the most hazardous years being grades 8 and 11. Bowers revealed that teacher-assigned grades, as well as noncumulative GPA are strong predictors of student dropout. Research is thus very well established as to how to identify those students who are at risk of dropping out.

This could mean that there is a relatively easily recognized subsection of the student population to which to apply new qualitative research going forward, in order to gain a more lucid understanding of those students. The importance of student grades demonstrates the significance of academics as an aspect of student experience investigated in the current study. The association with risk of dropout further establishes the need for this kind of research into the lived experiences of poorly performing students.

Research shows that grade retention is ineffective for raising achievement and is actually counterproductive. A Chicago study revealed that students left back a grade in elementary school often “fell further behind, dropped out, or languished in special education classes” (Caruso, 2005, p. 1). Among New York City students compelled to repeat a grade on the basis of standardized tests score, 38% failed the same test the second time. The results are not surprising, but they are somewhat poorly explained, indicating the tendency of much prior research to focus on quantitative data and to identify trends and failures, but not to explain them in a way that significantly opens the way for new alternatives.

On the other hand, there are other aspects of the current literature that comment on specific problems in current instructional practice. These, however, are focused on theory and merely utilize the above-mentioned quantitative data to support their ideas. Rock (2005) refers to the “chronic disengagement” of low-performing students (p. 3). Decrying the practice of teaching to the test, Rhone (2006) declares that consistently repeating the same material to improve test scores does nothing more than provoke boredom and undermine students’ genuine comprehension of the material. Such boredom

may be regarded as a result of compromised student autonomy. This is to be explored in the current study as an aspect of socially promoted students' lived experiences.

There is a belief amongst educators and academicians that students who are retained will catch up to their peers by and by, and at the same time will be instilled with the message that the best is expected from them (Winters & Greene, 2006). On the other hand, there has been research stating that students who are retained may catch up early on, but that retention is not really helpful in maintaining improved performance over the long term. It remains for future research to establish what would help in reaching that goal.

Grade Retention

There has been research that suggests that grade retention is helpful, such as the study conducted by Holmes (1989). As a case study, Karl Alexander (1995) indicated that these retained students displayed positive attitudes toward self and school. Looking at the same population after 6 years, however, it showed that the positive benefits are not in the short-term only. These same students had a higher chance of dropping out.

Another research study, by Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon, and Easton (2000), this time from Chicago, reported that in the third grade, there is no evidence that retention led to greater achievement growth two years after the promotional gate. And in the sixth grade there was significant evidence that retention was associated with lower achievement growth.

Holmes (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 controlled studies of grade retention in elementary and junior high school through the mid-1980s. When promoted and retained students were compared 1 to 3 years later, the retained students' average

levels of academic achievement were at least 0.4 standard deviations below those of promoted students. In these comparisons, promoted and retained students were the same age, but the promoted students had completed one more grade than the retained students.

Promoted and retained students were also compared after completing one or more grades. This occurs when the retained students were a year older than the promoted students but had completed equal numbers of additional grades. Here, the findings were less consistent, but still negative. When the data were weighted by the number of estimated effects, there was an initially positive effect of retention on academic achievement after one more grade in school, but it faded away completely after three or more grades.

Of the 63 studies reviewed by Holmes (1989), 54 yielded overall negative effects of retention, and only nine yielded overall positive effects. Some studies had better statistical controls than others, but those with subjects matched on IQ, achievement test scores, sex, and/or socioeconomic status showed larger negative effects of retention than studies with weaker designs. Holmes concluded, "On average, retained children are worse off than their promoted counterparts on both personal adjustment and academic outcomes" (p. 27).

The ongoing struggle between, and among, proponents and critics of both student retention and social promotion remains central to current educational debate, and it presents abundant quantitative and some qualitative studies on the issue from a variety of perspectives. Greene and Winters (2009), for example, offer a rigorous, well-constructed study endorsing the value of selective retention. However, they make clear their belief

that students will only make significant academic improvements if given additional opportunities to successfully meet grade level requirements for advancement.

Greene and Winters (2009) suggest that Florida's policy on retention has increased the probability of minority students being retained at levels disproportionate to retention of white students. Despite this, after 2 years, retained students actually outperform students who received an exemption from the policy in reading. The authors reconcile these two points by endorsing the overall value of retention but emphasizing that exemptions in Florida have not been granted to the students who would actually benefit most from them.

Hong and Yu (2008) confirm elements of Greene and Winters' (2009) work in their examination of the effects of kindergarten retention on children's social-emotional development in the early, middle, and late elementary years. Comparing effects of retention across different respondents over different points in time, the authors conclude that, in general, there is no evidence suggesting that kindergarten retention adversely affects children's social-emotional development. Indeed, in line with Greene and Winters's support for retention, the authors conclude that by being retained kindergartners may have actually avoided developing social, emotional, and learning problems in the following 2 years.

Negative Outcomes of Retention

By contrast, there are still many supporters of social promotion. Most backers point to research illustrating the ostensibly positive impact of social promotion on self-esteem, peer acceptance, behavioral difficulties and risk of dropout. Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber (2003) offer a powerful, passionately argued indictment of retention in *On the*

Success of Failure, while Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) suggest that most children with academic problems are quickly identified by schools and subsequently offered highly-variable educational treatments based on perceived competence. The authors contend that retained students lack the ability to catch up to their promoted peers and rapidly develop problems more serious than those affecting other underperforming students.

According to Gleason et al. (2007) both of these phenomena are largely temporary, and can ultimately generate academic benefits depending on individual circumstance. The truth or falsity of claims like these can be fairly well-apprehended by broad-based qualitative studies dealing with the lived experiences of retained and socially promoted students, to which the current study may serve as a precursor.

Grissom and Shepard (1989) and Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) find that no other factor influences student dropout rates as much as retention; the latter researchers suggest that as the single strongest predictor of student dropout, retention's impact remains consistent for students who leave school both early and late. Goldschmidt and Wang's study is eye opening and its conclusions stark and dispiriting yet this kind of material data is not alone sufficient when dealing with a subject in which the emotional states of students is such an essential part.

In 1993, the state of California issued a strongly worded report that also highlighted the damage wrought by retention (George, 1993). Gottfredson, Molden-Fink and Graham (1994) largely concur with much of Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) as well as the California report in their conclusion that retention leads invariably to an exacerbation of pre-existing problem behaviors and the fostering of new behavioral

difficulties. But while these can be recognized through external observations, an understanding of them is much more likely to lay the groundwork for new solutions if it takes into account how student experience contributes to these behavioral difficulties, and thus how instructors and administrators can engage with students in a way that mitigates behavioral problems which contribute to their poor outcomes.

Interestingly, however, Gottfredson et al. (1994) found that most of these behavioral effects are short term and essentially disappear within 11 months of the retention decision. The study is thus notable for its nuanced, stimulating and provocative take on the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of retention and promotion. Finally, Hagborg et al. (1991) offers a classic indictment of retention on the basis of virtually all academic and behavioral criteria, finding that the practice has clear and demonstrable associations with lower grades, negative school attitudes, less time on homework, diminished educational expectations, discipline problems and lack of self-control.

Social promotion is often discussed and debated along the same lines as its opposite, grade retention. Although abundant materials investigated the conflict between these two, studies looking into the perspectives of the students themselves are lacking, despite their being important to a thorough understanding of the nature of each policy's effects. The dearth of literature calls for additional research to be done on the topic and this serves as the motivation for the present study. The motivation for the particular design of the study, meanwhile, is found in the more theoretical aspects of the literature.

Conceptual Framework

The present study proposes to explore, in the context of social promotion, two phenomena identified by Howard S. Becker and Ray Rist. It will look at the lived

experiences of socially promoted students in the interest of seeking for evidence of any perceived inequality or unique labeling, as well as how that perception might affect the students experience.

Despite the gap in current research on social promotion and grade retention, it is clear that students who have failed in the past are notably at risk going forward in their educational careers. A significant share of the associated problems can arguably be attributed to emotional factors associated with self-perception and social reaction in light of prior failures. This study seeks to highlight those emotional factors in relation to the highly unique experience of socially promoted ninth grade students. Those students' experiences will be investigated for evidence of Becker's and Rist's concepts of social reaction and self-fulfilling prophecies, in hopes that this will begin to expose the factors driving long-term student failure.

Social Reaction Theory

The overarching conceptual structure at the heart of the present study will borrow heavily from the early work of Howard S. Becker. Becker (1963) lays out the core principles behind what eventually came to be known as the Social Reaction (or Labeling) Theory. As relevant and insightful today as it was in the early 1960s, Social Reaction Theory contends that an individual's sense of self and outward behavior are shaped to a great extent by the terminology used to refer to that individual by both peers and figures of authority.

Terms with negative connotations in particular work relentlessly to shape individual self-identification and self-esteem, as well as objective performance. This may occur on both a conscious and unconscious level. Becker's core assertion—that casually

employed, frequently inaccurate terms of reference have an immense, clearly discernible impact on individual attitudes and behaviors—is the central conceptual construct supporting the proposed study. Becker’s conclusions will ground and shape the study’s approach and inform the majority of its findings and conclusions.

Overall, Becker’s (1963) belief in the essential fragility and malleability of individuals, and their responsiveness to external judgment, however subtle or unconscious, works to highlight many of the problems that continue to plague modern education and, in particular, the experience of socially promoted students.

Becker (1963) makes a distinction between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance is the initial actions that cause a person to acquire a label from other elements of his society. Secondary deviance is the acceptance of that label by the person to whom it is applied, causing the given behavior to become entrenched and deliberately averse to the dominant society. Becker specifies that the primary deviance may be either intentional or unintentional. In the present case, that so-called deviance is academic failure, which is almost certainly never intentional in itself, though behavioral problems that contribute to poor learning may or may not be.

What moves a person from primary to secondary deviance is, first, recognition of an imposed label as representative of who the person is, and second, being made part of a subculture wherein that behavior is a norm or an ideal. Taking this theory seriously as applying to the case of behaviors and mental states that contribute to academic failure, the current study will seek to recognize what brings about acceptance by a student of the failure label, as well as what constitutes being placed into a subculture wherein failure is commonplace or expected.

Becker (1963) suggested practical, behavioral effects of social labelling and external judgment. Thus, in addition to contributing to the general rationale for this study, the concepts from Becker's work inform the research design and questions in order to focus them upon student behaviour and response to labelling. Beyond this, the study will be more generally concerned with the lived experiences of students who have been socially promoted and are making the transition to high school. But this conceptual framework also promotes a particular focus within that larger topic, namely behavioural outcomes, as per Becker, as well as the perception of labelling and alienation, as per Ray Rist.

Social Identity Theory

Individual malleability is also a crucial theme of the social identity theory, which could prove equally important to the proposed study's attempt to understand how socially promoted students perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. In the social identity theory, the self has the capacity to regard itself as an object and essentially "self-identify" on the basis of external social categories or classifications.

Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) and Hogg and Abrams (1988) have authored landmark studies examining exactly this phenomenon—a process of social comparison in which subjectively constructed "in-group" and "out-group" social categories shape a broad range of interpersonal relations and emotional states. Turner et al. and Hogg and Abrams are clearly relevant to the proposed study in the way the in-group/out-group dichotomy can be applied to the classroom in terms of how particular stakeholders regard their fellow stakeholders. In this study, the distinct groups consist of socially promoted students, non-socially promoted students, and the teachers and

administrators of their school. The conceptual framing of these as in-groups and out-groups lends itself well to a broader understanding of student self-identification within the classroom.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Model

Becker's belief in the formative influence of language used by those in positions of authority serves as a foundation for the work of Ray Rist (1970, 1977). Though more than three decades old, Rist's work remains highly relevant to the present study and continues to offer a rewarding model dedicated to explaining dysfunctional educational environments—especially those containing large numbers of students with a history of educational and/or emotional and physical difficulties.

In “Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education” (1970) and his more detailed 1977 text, *The Urban School: A Factory for Failure*, Rist's principal focus is on the woeful plight of African-American secondary students in U.S. inner cities and the way that modern educational practices and theoretical principles, as well as basic educational infrastructure, produce poorly educated students entirely unequipped to deal with the demands of the real world and fully inculcated with the notion that they are unimportant, disposable, and largely irrelevant to the American sociocultural and economic mainstream. Being influenced by Rist's work in this area, the current study strives to identify the extent to which this trend applies among socially promoted students. It makes this effort for the sake of beginning to identify the programs and initiatives that can reverse such trends.

Building on Becker's (1963) observation that language employed by peers and authority figures has a profound, cumulative impact on self-identity, Rist's (1977) self-

fulfilling prophecy model focuses on how established systems work, frequently unconsciously, to maintain inequality through language—particularly terminology employed in the process of addressing particular students’ challenges inside and outside the classroom. Rist ultimately identifies the disturbing consistency with which both instructors and students, carrying previously established ideas and beliefs into the classroom, develop a symbiotic relationship involving self-reinforcing patterns of behavior and interaction rooted in negative beliefs and a quiet defeatism.

Rist (1977) notes that the effects of labeling students—essentially a classroom version of stereotyping individuals and groups across society as a whole—are disastrous over both the short and long term, adversely affecting students’ ability to rise above their externally identified failings and supposed core characteristics. That is, they quickly conclude that these are objectively true and permanent descriptions of them, as opposed to subjective constructions on the part of biased instructors and peers. Rist’s work remains especially important to understanding the true impact of self-fulfilling prophecies and labeling on socially promoted students from virtually any socioeconomic, cultural, or ethnic background.

This study is not aimed at identifying whether or not the associated schools have institutionalized poor perceptions of some or all of those students who have experienced failure. Rather, it is concerned with whether, following upon such failure, students’ experience is in some way shaped by their being positioned as objects of these poor perceptions. Regardless of the objective structures involved, Rist’s theoretical construct is still important, viewed from a phenomenological perspective, for what it says about the

practical impact of student's emotional reactions. This will help frame the subsequent analysis.

Rist's basic paradigm establishes a substantial portion of the context for this present study. It is expected that the processes on display in the experiences and perceptions of socially promoted students are processes initiated and sustained, consciously and unconsciously, by those students, their instructors and institutions, and their peers. The latter parties may or may not have reached the conclusion, long before classes have even met, that at least some of the socially promoted students are destined to fail. Rist's model will be used as a lens to make sense of common themes emerging from observations, interviews, field notes, and extended reflections.

Social-Constructivist Worldview

In important ways, Rist's work owes as much to Albert Memmi as it does to Howard S. Becker. Memmi—particularly his *Colonizer and Colonized* (1965)—offers an important foundational perspective in addressing the essential nature of the relationship between *any* two groups comprised of a powerful party and a powerless party. In the context of education, the parallel divide is between a privileged, established group with vested authority and an underprivileged, alienated group subject to disdain. Memmi's argument about the initial influence and lingering effects of one group's exercise of power and the other group's profound, deeply felt trauma—a dynamic that can be perpetuated and reinforced over time—is clearly relevant to the proposed study and the relationship of vulnerable socially promoted students to the educational mainstream. Memmi places much emphasis on the dysfunctional dynamic between groups, which can

be established and maintained through the influence of deep psychological trauma and, as is crucial in the present context, powerful social stigma.

Kurt Lewin (1946) is undeniably relevant to formulating the approach to research of these phenomena. Lewin is one of the key figures in the establishment of the social-constructivist worldview, especially in his early and enthusiastic embrace of the researcher–practitioner paradigm. Lewin’s belief in action science and his advocacy of “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action” were predicated on the idea that action instigates “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (pp. 34-36).

Lewin adamantly believed that a researcher must have a clear aptitude for blending theory and practice and that direct involvement on the part of system members in the inquiry process itself positively influences outcomes. This remains of paramount importance to the way that contemporary qualitative research is conducted. Lewin (1943) was especially interested in social interaction and larger systems predicated on interaction between individuals. In response he formulated the concept of “force field analysis,” a rubric through which to examine the elements that work to shape the direction and eventual outcome of social situations in particular. Highly relevant to the proposed study is Lewin’s (1947) rigorous analysis of how attitudinal shift occurs. This is a process that takes place in social promotion and grade retention. Lewin recognized that this process was both slow and immensely difficult. Lewin was of the firm belief that the researcher must actively seek out practical issues in highly specific contexts. Significantly, this approach recognizes the full and irreplaceable value of concrete situational experiences.

It can account for how policy may shift on the issues related to this study, as well as suggesting what educational leaders can do to emphasize specific situations and thus promote such a shift.

Policy Alternatives

The accumulation of research undermining claims about the effectiveness of grade retention is perhaps contributing to an attitudinal shift on the subject. Jackson (1975) in his extensive research, concluded that “[t]here is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties” (p. 627). Jackson focused in on three studies since 1911. The first compared the grade achievement and social construction of retained students with those who were socially promoted. The student population was matched based on various criteria such as age, grade level, gender, grades, IQ, achievement test scores, and socioeconomic status. Jackson noted that the bias with these studies is that they lean more on the benefits of social promotion. The inference from the first type of study is that those retained were having the most academic problems. Jackson reviewed 204 studies where he found out that socially promoted students were seen as having greater social adjustment and achievement as opposed to those retained.

The second study that Jackson observed compared retained students before and after retention. Obviously, this study favored grade retention, as no other comparison groups were used. The third study focused on randomly sampling promoted and retained students. This study looked at gains in achievement in a period of one semester or a 6-month period for primary and intermediate students. According to Roderick and Nagaoka (2005), promotion decisions cannot be solely based on test scores; the research does not

support this. The issue is blurry at the moment, especially when decision lies more in political hands than with educational institutions (Jacob, 2010). The section that follows gives other alternative factors that are related to student dropout, such as disciplinary infractions, poor school attendance, and difficulties with reading.

Disciplinary Infractions

The studies demonstrate that it is not disciplinary problems, but rather the issues that result in disciplinary problems that affect student retention (Heymann, 2010). In the United States, serious disciplinary infractions most often involve removal from school and instructional settings (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Zeidenberg, 2000). Serious infractions of the school code include drinking, drug use or sale, assault, carrying of illegal weapons, and robbery. Serious infractions are considered grounds for permanent school expulsions or exclusions. Minor offenses are often subject to in-school suspensions that remove the student temporarily from the classroom to another part of the school (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2009). Contrary to the general perception that discipline problems signal a likelihood of dropping out, school dropouts had been suspended slightly less frequently than at-risk students who remained enrolled in school at the same age. According to Romanik & Blazer (1990) the suspension rate for dropouts was 3.2%, compared with 3.6% for at-risk students who did not drop out.

While studies indicated that there are many underlying factors behind student dropouts, these same factors have been identified as a cause for misbehavior. The current study may isolate some such causes as it explores social aspects of student experience and the extent to which environment affects classroom behavior. Although the relationship between dropout and misbehavior would generally result in a correlation

between the two outcomes, there are students who are prone to misbehavior without the same causes that result in attrition. Thus, while there are students that will misbehave but will remain in school, there are also students who drop out, but do not misbehave (Romanik & Blazer, 1990). Therein lies a distinction that can probably only be well understood by qualitatively investigating the mental states, attitudes, and personal reporting of the associated students themselves.

Poor School Attendance

Students also tend to drop out after exhibiting poor attendance. Research indicates student attendance as a predictor for possible student dropouts (Alpert & Dunham, 1986; Kortering, Haring, & Klockars, 1992; Weber, 1988). Incidentally, poor attendance is also related to other tendencies that increase the risk of dropping out. Among these are low levels of self-esteem, which also decrease chances of these students being identified and classified as being at-risk (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Student attrition is also significantly related to the ability or inability to foster good social relationships in school, as well as to a school's unsupportive atmosphere (Natriello, 2000).

Students who dropped out demonstrated a higher rate of absenteeism than at-risk or regular students (Romanik & Blazer, 1990). Romanik and Blazer and Vaughan (1991) found that dropouts incurred an average of approximately 28 absences per year before leaving school. Students in poverty and/or urban settings may demonstrate patterns of poor attendance that lead to dropping out. Allensworth and Easton (2007) established excessive absences to be a more significant dropout predictor in schools serving higher proportions of urban students. Balfanz & Herzog (2006) found that fewer than 20% of

students from high poverty areas in an urban school district missed less than 20 days of school.

Studies have indicated student attendance as a predictor for academic performance (McCarey, Barr, & Rattray, 2006). Students who do not attend school are not receiving the necessary information with which they can pass their classes. Reeves (2003) found that students in an urban school district of high poverty status who had at least 95% attendance made academic gains of as much as 20%. This bodes well for prospects at the current research site, which has related demographics. That is, students have a high rate of attendance (94.7%), but a significant number are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced lunch programs. Distractions that lead to problems with student attendance are also often predictors of attrition. This includes familial problems, social issues (such as drug use), and criminal behavior (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006). These can be expected to have some presence in Lakeview North High School but not enough to skew results widely.

Difficulties with Reading

According to Greene (2002), academic performance, specifically in reading, is one of the predictors of high school student dropout. Other researchers have proposed that the prevailing reason behind high dropout rates is high school students' lack of reading and comprehension skills (Abadzi, 1996; Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2008; Hamby & Blackburn, 1999). Students' abilities to read and to write at advanced levels at least partially determine their success in contributing to society, sustaining a wage, and remaining in school.

According to national data, more than eight million students in grades 4 through 12 in the U.S. struggle to read (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). A policy statement from Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik (1999) stated, “Adolescents in the 21st century are required to read and write more than any other generation in the history of the world” (p. 3). The *Reading Next* report by Biancorosa and Snow (2004) identified elements that would improve adolescent reading. Biancorosa and Snow asserted that research and funding for reading should be targeted toward adolescent youth, who need intervention, and they identified motivation, instruction and supports as primary needs. They stated that motivation was self-directed learning, and that encouraging this entails providing students with the instruction and support needed for independent learning tasks that they will face after graduation. The specified needs further establish the relevance of research into student experience. The notion of support for these needs relates to the goal of identifying initiatives that benefit that experience.

Reading proficiency has been elusive for U.S. students at all levels, however. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), there has been a concentrated effort to determine and understand the causes of reading difficulties and disabilities in primary students. Lyon (2003) stated that over 20 million primary school-age children were suffering from reading difficulties and disabilities. Gersten and Dimino (2006) studied reading difficulties and disabilities in primary grades and concluded that more intensive interventions should be used in practice. Educators generally agree that students not capable of reading by third grade require immediate intervention if failure is to be avoided (Harvey & Housman, 2004). More intensive intervention needs skillful teaching, wherein teachers who are capable of

doing intervention activities are those considered most equipped with training and experience (Torgesen, 2006). Given that intensive intervention resources are not available due to teacher shortages, a more teacher-friendly and powerful kind of instruction is given to teachers (Torgesen, 2006). The less experienced the teacher is with her or his craft, the more scripted programs are in terms of addressing interventions to the child (Torgesen, 2006).

The nation's trend of below-level reading performance has presented sizable academic obstacles in all content areas. Gaps created by low reading levels will continue to increase as students grow older and are confronted with more complex curricula and learning situations (Mathes, Denton, & Ware, 2005). According to MacIver and MacIver (2009) poor attendance, failure in English or math and the presence of disciplinary records predict more than half of all eventual dropouts. High school dropouts have many characteristics in common; one of the most prevalent is the necessity for extra literacy support (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). Cappella and Weinstein's (2001) research showed that reading level is the most difficult area to improve in the age group of 8th to 12th grade students, thus showing the necessity for preventive measures and early interventions (2001). Low literacy rates often prevent high school students from mastering other subjects (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004).

Students were at greater risk of dropping out of high school when their reading performance decreased. Nationwide, dropouts' reading scores were at the 35th percentile, falling between the average students' scores at the 48th percentile and the at-risk students' scores at the 21st percentile. Standardized test scores are among the strongest dropout predictors, specifically in the area of reading and language arts (Balfanz &

Herzog, 2006). Students who struggle in reading may avoid reading and other related activities. Students who do not read well face the possibility of failing the nation's standardized tests, possibly resulting in the student being retained and resulting in increased likelihood of dropping out. As such, dropout rates and reading proficiency may be inextricably linked.

Amidst all of this, it remains an open question whether an initial awareness of these challenges contributes to students' mental states, such as confidence and willingness to learn, and thus whether it affects their outcomes. This is the question that the current study will seek to answer. Naturally, academic failure is the primary contributor to likelihood of dropout, but no doubt it works in concert with secondary contributors, which might reinforce failure and enhance the likelihood that dropout will be the end result. This study seeks to deal with failure and disengagement from school as phenomenological topics, uncovering factors surrounding them, which may exist in student culture and mental states, as opposed to simply in school structures, policies, and other concrete factors.

Literature Summary

This section has extensively discussed the issue of social promotion, grade retention and dropout rate. The three concepts are highly inter-related. Relevant theories were also presented as the bases for said concepts. Conversely, other factors that determine the dropout rate besides social promotion and grade retention were given for clearer understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, social promotion is often discussed and debated along the same line as its opposite, grade retention. Although abundant materials investigated the said controversy, there is a literature gap when it comes to

research studies investigating the phenomenon from the perspective of the students undergoing social promotion.

Taken together, the historical and conceptual literature makes it clear that social promotion and grade retention have been involved in a never-ending struggle for dominance and that neither alternative is sufficiently effective at improving academic outcomes or reducing dropout rates. Government policymakers, educational leaders, and others have a shared responsibility to secure these improvements. And doing so requires that they look beyond the limitations of the current options for responding to student failure. But to look beyond the existing policies one must look beyond the existing data, which is largely quantitative and fails to account for the profound but more elusive effects of social reaction, social identity, and self-fulfilling prophecies. To fill in these gaps an account of the total experience of students who have faced failure must be made. This includes their academics, their social supports, their means of transition between stages of education, and their sense of personal autonomy.

The observed dearth on the literature on these topics establishes the need for additional research and serves as the motivation for the present study. This study is interested in beginning to fill in the missing data by conducting research illustrating a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of socially promoted students at Lakeview North High School in XXXX Township, New Jersey. The findings of the study could serve to promote improved instructional practice across the field of education as a whole. The methodology for arriving at those findings is outlined in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Continuing debate surrounding social promotion demands deeper and broader investigation within a setting that has, in the past, proven itself receptive to the observer-participant model. This study sought to answer the following research question: What is the lived experience of socially promoted students as they transition into high school?

Qualitative Research Methods and Study Design

The methodologies of other researchers undoubtedly influenced the essence of the present study in important ways. John W. Creswell (2009), throughout *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, expressed a belief in the value of a properly structured and assiduously executed observer-participant model. Creswell also introduces the ethnographical concept of long-term immersion through participant observation. This is a highly effective means of acquiring what some researchers refer to as “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), a broad and fundamental understanding of how group members of any type work to construct and share meaning.

Moreover, Creswell (2009) takes pains to suggest creative yet rigorous methods of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, and seeks to dispel the notion that there is an inherent conflict between the two models or that they cannot contribute in a meaningful way to each other’s overall efficacy. Creswell seeks to achieve a balance between the inevitably compromised objectivity that the full-immersion model fosters through lack of complete detachment and, conversely, the heightened awareness of nuance and detail (as well as flexibility) that only complete participation and observation in the field of study itself can generate.

For the current study, Creswell's (2009) work served to bookend the broad qualitative approach outlined and endorsed by other researchers—an approach that does not shy away from the influence, however muted, of emotion, subjective perception, and immediate impression, balanced, of course, by hard data. Indeed, Creswell's recommendations inspired me to choose a study site where key social processes, receptive to both observation and participation, came together with the specific lived experiences of individuals who contribute to those processes in manifold ways, both conscious and unconscious.

Phenomenology as a Strategy of Inquiry

More importantly, though, the research design of this study served to place it firmly in the context of phenomenological research, which is undoubtedly the most appropriate historical perspective for the given research questions. That is to say, this study is concerned with resolving in the specific context of social promotion the same question that Heidegger (2008/1962) is concerned with resolving in its most general form: the question of being. The stated research question for this study can be further reduced to ask: what is it like to be a socially promoted student?

That question, in Husserl's (2012/1931) words, is one of essence and the science of essences, as opposed to one of facts and the science of facts. Factual or quantitative data does not enter into this consideration of social promotion. The objective contents of a socially promoted student's circumstances and outcomes are irrelevant, and the line of inquiry that this study applied to that subject acknowledges Husserl's observation that "what things are... they are as things of experience" (p. 46). To the extent that this study of social promotion is concerned with concrete effects, it is not concerned with the effects

of social promotion as a policy, but rather it is concerned with the effects of social promotion as an experience of those affected. This purely phenomenological approach adds data and perspective that has been sorely lacking in policy discussions about social promotion and grade retention, which seemingly tend to regard those policies as having consistent impacts which exist irrespective of each student's experience of them. For the sake of making up for this deficit, the present study adopted phenomenological research methods in designing procedures that would ascertain the essential being of the social-promotion experience.

Clark E. Moustakas' (1994) *Phenomenological Research Methods* is as important to my understanding of the observer-participant model as Creswell's text, and it is absolutely integral to the current study's approach and assumptions. Moustakas' text is wide ranging and detailed, but its core claim is that qualitative phenomenological research can—and must—have extreme rigor and be receptive to much, if not all, of the tests of validity and reliability that mark the acceptance of any basic quantitative study. Moustakas' step-by-step procedures have proven especially valuable for conducting, recording, and analyzing transcriptions of graphic elicitation response, interviews, and participant journal entries. His core emphasis on the importance of overarching observable themes, and connecting these themes to supporting concepts, is an easily comprehensible, yet multifaceted, approach that helped the present researcher to establish a relationship between theory and data-gathering methods.

Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the fundamental importance of asking study participants about the nature and quality of their experiences, as well as the context and specific situations informing those experiences—a key element of the present study.

Moustakas' text worked to ground, organize, and shape this study's core approach, findings, and conclusions, and inspires confidence in both the researcher and hopefully the reader that the study took seriously the notion that its core assertions are both trustworthy and valid.

The methodological approach of the present study was shaped in large part by Giorgi (1985), who divides the content of phenomenological research into four broad categories: description, reduction, essences, and intentionality. These primarily serve as guides to the data analysis procedures, which are thus aimed at:

- Getting a sense of the whole of the experience concerned
- Reducing qualitative data in order to represent that which represents distinct experiences
- Categorizing these experiences and explaining them in simple language appropriate to the field of research
- Deriving statements about the essential meaning of the experiences with respect to that field of research

Deep and comprehensive data collection toward this end is achieved principally through a blend of traditional techniques melded to structure, rigor, and overall discipline.

Phenomenology rejects rational objectivity and emphasizes the importance of subjective experience and contextual consciousness (Groenwald, 2004). Only those individuals experiencing a phenomenon constitute a reliable source of insight into reality and certainty (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenology, reality is established through a process of uncovering the meaning of a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the meaning of social promotion as a phenomena was uncovered through the

analysis of graphic elicitation results, semi-structured interview transcriptions, and journal entry transcriptions of participants, all of whom were chosen by purposive sampling of socially promoted students recommended for the summer transition program from Hillside North Middle School to Lakeview North High School. Moustakas (1994) contended that every phenomenon is worthy of exploration. Phenomenology captures the essence of the phenomenon within the context of meaning for those experiencing the phenomenon, which signifies the uniqueness and subjective nature of the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two classical approaches to phenomenology: interpretive and transcendental (Heidegger, 2008/1962; Husserl, 2012/1931). These two approaches are similar in philosophical foundation in that both rely on the subjective accounts of those that are studied (Brocki & Weardon, 2006). The difference between the two approaches is in the manner in which the data are processed by the researcher. In interpretive phenomenology, the researcher clarifies and explains the experience of the phenomenon: “Joint reflections of both participant and researcher form the analytic account” (Brocki & Weardon, 2006, p. 88). In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher does not provide an explanation of the participant’s experience; the participant’s experience is recorded and described, “just as we see them” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). For this study, a transcendental approach was used, whereby the meaning of the experience is based on the participants’ description of the phenomenon. That is, no further explanation was required; the essential explanations were taken as reported by the student participants themselves.

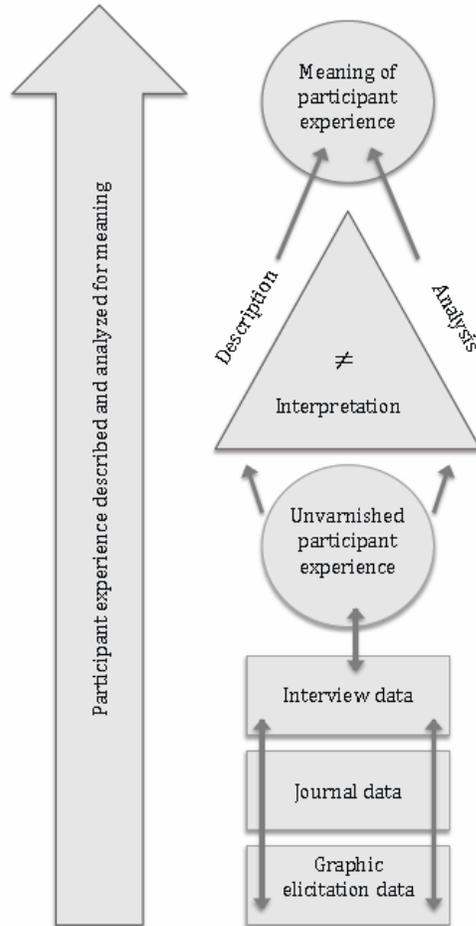


Figure 1. Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994).

Participants and Sampling Methods

The present study required the design of a unique interview schedule, which would account for differences in student schedules. Sessions were scheduled with individual participants either immediately after school during pre-established study sessions, before school during pre-established study sessions, or during lunch periods. Time for interviews corresponded with the confines of the previously established 42-minute daily class period framework. Forty-two minute sessions were scheduled with each student at the beginning, midway point, and conclusion of the study. During these

sessions, the selected students participated in semi-structured interview sessions, journaling, and the graphic elicitation portions of the methodology.

The research site was selected on the basis of its connection to the policy under consideration, as well as because of convenience of access. Lakeview North High School and Hillside North Middle School both have established policies of social promotion and mechanisms for handling them. This means that the practice is limited, such that performance at grade level is necessary in high school after a student has been socially promoted from middle school. Whether related to this fact or not, socially promoted students at Lakeview North High School tend to go on to eventual academic success. This also contributed to selection of the research site, as it was hoped that such an environment would provide significant opportunities for positive results regarding student experiences that can improve outcomes for formerly poorly performing students.

As there is such a specific topic of inquiry in this study, the principal sampling method involved was homogenous sampling. The essential goal was to acquire study participants who could provide qualitative data about the experience of social promotion. More specifically, the study dealt with the social promotion experience at the crucial stage of transition from middle school to high school. The sample was selected from among students who had been socially promoted out of their last year at Hillside North Middle School. Eligible students had received a letter grade of F on at least three of their core subjects, had scored in the “partial proficiency” category on two or more sections of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge, and thus had been recommended for the summer transition program specifically set up by the Principal of Lakeview North High School for incoming socially promoted students.

The sampling method was purposeful insofar as it began by identifying this very specific group of students, but beyond that, the sample was not large enough to lend itself to random or stratified sampling within the homogenous group. The number of socially promoted students was limited to the extent that the research could not rely on identifying participants who match meaningful demographic or other variables. Additionally, the sampling procedure was limited by the willingness of students to participate, of parents and teachers to allow those students to participate, and by the observer's availability to align scheduling and methodology with individual participants' limitations. Given these limits to accessibility, time, and resources, it was necessary that further sampling within the homogenous group follow a convenience method (Patton, 2001). The largest possible sample was identified first, consisting of all students recommended into the Lakeview North High School summer transition program. From that large, purposive sample, the group was narrowed down purely on the basis of willingness and availability for participation. All students recommended for the summer transition program were sent informed consent forms (see Appendix B) requesting their participation in the study and detailing expectations for it. From those who returned completed forms, the final group of participants was selected at random by drawing numbers assigned to each form until the ideal number of participants was reached.

This is all perfectly in keeping with Englander's (2012) explanations of the differences in sampling between qualitative and quantitative research. Whereas the generalizability of quantitative data is dependent upon the question of from whom it is coming, the essential question in choosing participants for qualitative research is, "Do they have the experiences we are striving to understand?" Thus, procedures like random

sampling are less relevant to phenomenological research than to quantitative research, where creating a representative sample is an essential goal. As Englander (2012) puts it, “in phenomenological research, representativeness does not apply until the general structure of the phenomenon is worked out” (p. 19). That is to say that the current study was far more concerned with the nature of the social promotion experience being described, and less with the nature of the population providing those descriptions.

This distinction affects the parameters for sample size, as well. To maximize the significance and generality of the results of this phenomenological study, the sample size was meant to fall within the range of not less than three and not more than ten student participants. Englander (2012) further explains that phenomenological and all other qualitative research is distinct from quantitative, natural scientific research in terms of its ideal sample size. It is in keeping with his work that this study set a lower limit of three. Englander points out that understanding of the fundamental framework of a phenomenon requires imaginative variation of the ways in which individual experiences fit within that framework. For this reason, the use of only one or two participants may limit the variety of responses to the research and make it more difficult for the researcher to understand the phenomenon from a range of angles. Furthermore, reliance upon multiple participants may make it easier to draw general conclusions about the phenomenon and avoid having results skewed by individual and demographic factors.

On the other hand, Englander (2012) suggests that such beneficial effects are only meaningfully associated with relatively small increases in sample size. Imaginative variation does not depend upon direct observation; it only requires enough quantitative data to allow the researcher to make valid inferences about the essential framework of the

given phenomenon. Thus, Englander indicates that although using upwards of twenty participants may help the researcher to better understand the variety of the phenomenon, it likely would not affect the general conclusions drawn from research with a smaller sample size. For this reason, the additional work created for the researcher by a larger sample size was not justified. On the basis of these factors, Dukes (1984) and Creswell (2009) find that the ideal range for the sample size of phenomenological study extends only up to ten participants. This range of three to ten was embraced by the current study for the same reasons.

Data Collection Methods and Instrumentation

Prior to beginning data collection of any sort, IRB approval was obtained. Next, the superintendent's office was contacted to obtain formal district approval, and then the school principal was informed to gain her formal consent to begin the study. The parents of all students recommended to the Lakeview North summer transition program were then contacted via mail and were provided with a permission slip and informed consent document, as were the teachers of those same socially promoted students.

In an effort to maintain a sample size with a range of up to ten participants, those who gave back the informed consent forms within one week were considered part of the sample pool from which the final participants were selected. Provision of informed consent demonstrated understanding and willingness of would-be participants to discuss the potentially sensitive subject of the socially promoted students' past and present interactions with others. The language of the forms made clear what input was expected of participants, and discouraged participation from those who were unwilling to engage in the requisite discussion.

Parents of student participants were contacted by phone after final selection from among the sample pool. These conversations confirmed receipt of informed consent, reiterated expectations, and scheduled times to meet with the student for each of three interviews. Once participation was confirmed pseudonyms were assigned to each student for the sake of maintaining confidentiality. Those students who chose to and were permitted to enter the study furnished data about their social promotion experience through three clearly defined processes. First, in line with Bagnoli (2009), graphic elicitation was used as a means of gathering individual background information and structuring further communication, as in the form of participant interviews. Following upon this, in accord with Seidman (1998), three individual interviews were conducted with each student participant eliciting detailed reflections on specific topics related to their social promotion experience. Additionally, following the guidelines of Ganeson (2006), these students were asked to make reflective journal entries sometime after each of the three interviews. Interviews were recorded to an audio device and stored in a password-protected smartphone application called Evernote. Supplementary field notes were maintained in a notebook until the completion of data gathering. Participant journals were composed and submitted in Google Drive, and graphic elicitation materials were submitted directly to the researcher after their completion. All of these materials were gathered together and transcribed upon completion of the data gathering process. At that point, participants were contacted again and copies were given to them. This final step filled the role of member checking (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). That is, participants were given an opportunity to make additions or deletions to their materials or to add further commentary in order to aid in understanding of their experience.

By utilizing these three different methods of gathering qualitative data on the same subject matter, this study's content was expected to achieve high levels of both trustworthiness and validity (Cresswell, 2009; Toma, 2006). On one hand, the integration of these methods serves the end of triangulation, in that any conclusions that might be drawn from one set of data can be checked against another set. Ultimately, drawing from Toma's (2006) call for various data-gathering methods, reliable overall conclusions can be based upon the combined evidence found in student journals, graphic exercises, and interviews. Specifically, conclusions in the chapters below will refer to those pieces of evidence which are found to be similar among multiple student participants.

In addition, the use of multiple data-gathering methods means the study had multiple opportunities to acquire data that might be missed by other means (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Interviews provided an opportunity to guide student reflections in directions that were particularly helpful to the study, but the direct interaction between researcher and student sometimes emotionally affected the student and made him nervous or generally unwilling to share helpful data (Seidman, 1998). Ideally, any such suppressed reflections came to light in the form of journal entries, which are more private for the student and allowed him to explore ideas freely (Ganeson, 2006).

Although the professional input of an interview can be helpful in guiding the conversation, the associated drawback of using this method on its own is that it may allow the researcher to inject personal biases or preconceptions into that same conversation (van Manen, 1990). This is contrary to the aims of phenomenological research, but the problem can likely be solved to a great extent careful research design and careful execution of it. The process of bracketing explains how qualitative

researchers can achieve neutrality not by abandoning their biases but rather by understanding them and reacting to them throughout the research process. Meanwhile, reliability of the primary method of data collection can be increased by balancing interviews with other methods. Journal entries better permitted the researcher to assess what the student had to say both on his own and in structured or social contexts (Seidman, 1998). At the same time, graphic elicitation was used to structure interview sessions, to whatever extent possible, according to the concerns and qualities of the student, rather than those of the researcher (Bagnoli, 2009).

Graphic Elicitation

Bagnoli (2009) presents graphic elicitation (GE) as a versatile means of fostering communication. It serves this role in two distinct ways within his research. Firstly, GE is a form of communication unto itself. More specifically, it is a form of communication that does not require a high degree of verbal expression. As such, Bagnoli points out that while it is a helpful technique in general it is especially useful in performing research with children, in cross-cultural contexts, and in any circumstances where it is reasonable to assume that the subjects may have a hard time communicating verbally. GE is thus applicable to the current study, if only for the reason that its subjects are children.

As the children in this study are of high school age, however, the primary rationale for an alternative to verbal communication was not concern for their intellectual ability to communicate, but rather concern for their psychological comfort in so doing. It could reasonably be expected that some student participants might have proven to be guarded and uncomfortable in conversation with an unfamiliar adult. Furthermore, some students may have been naturally disinclined to communicate verbally. As Bagnoli

indicates, the visual content of GE methodology adds another dimension to data gathering, which goes beyond the verbal and may allow the researcher to elicit something which would be missed if he were to rely on interviews alone.

GE also serves the end of fostering communication in the sense that it forms the basis for dialogue between the researcher and participant, according to different methods, as the research proceeds. It effectively identifies what topics are of concern to the subject himself and thus what lines of inquiry are likely to provide meaningful information once pursued by the researcher. At the same time, and depending on specific methodology, GE helps the researcher to understand the individual experience within the context of the larger subject matter of the study, as well as within that of the wider world in general. More to the point, it allows the researcher to approach an understanding of this relation as it is seen from the perspective of the subject being studied (Bagnoli, 2009).

In this way graphic elicitation can help the researcher to fill the Epoche role in phenomenological study, or the process of blocking out biases and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). That is, by avoiding personal engagement with the subject at this stage and instead relying upon the subject to provide information regarding his own self-concept in the context of the study, the researcher can focus his attention on the lived experiences of the individuals and strip away his preconceptions about the circumstances and symbols surrounding those experiences. By gathering virtually isolated evidence of the subject's phenomenological experience, the researcher ought to be able to achieve the greatest possible objectivity about his areas of inquiry. This is especially the case if the researcher pays close attention to the process of bracketing during both the gathering and the analysis of data. Graphic elicitation, being both the process of Epoche and the first

step in data gathering, helped the researcher to clarify the questions to be explored through dialogue and writing samples, as well as helped him to bracket those questions so that they were concerned only with phenomenological inquiry and not with objective concerns regarding social promotion or classroom interactions.

Bagnoli (2009) explains two specific methods of GE that he used in his own research. The first of these was relational mapping, which entailed asking children to draw diagrams or pictures representing the strength and character of relationships to other people within their social environment. They were also directed to include representations of relationships to imagined persons, role models, or special objects, if they so wished. The second method was the creation of timelines identifying most significant events in the individual's personal life and in his or her perception of larger events. Bagnoli allowed his subjects to extend these timelines back to their earliest memories and also to project into the future, thus eliciting data regarding identity, expectations, interests, and social context.

Graphic elicitation protocol. For this study, relational maps were collected at the outset of the research, before interviews commenced with each participant. Instructions for creation of those maps were given to students at the point of their being confirmed as participants in the study, and maps were mailed directly to the researcher before the second stage of the study commenced, so as to allow review and analysis of their content before any direct communication began. These relational maps were used to structure the specific questions that started the first interview for each participant. Specifically, depictions of relationships that deal with the student's academic career prior to high school were searched for, as well as anything that might have shed light on how the

student came to be a socially promoted ninth grader. The specific content that proved relevant for each student was different because the guidelines for the relational maps were open-ended.

Bagnoli (2009) emphasizes that he consciously kept the instructions for each exercise as broad as possible in order to allow the subjects to express their individual character and ideas in the structure of detail of the GE materials. However, the examples of GE gathered in his research, while often distinct, are quite limited in their scope. Bagnoli's guideline of openness and flexibility was useful to the current study, but because of the age of the participants, they were actively encouraged to add content to their GE exercises that went beyond that which one might expect from the timelines and relational maps of younger children. GE in the present study was thus simultaneously as open-ended as Bagnoli's examples but also more complex. That is, if children had so chosen, relational maps could include not only graphical representations but also statements and observations about those relationships and about the environment they inhabit. For the sake of minimizing researcher effect on the data, the suggestion of this content was as broad as possible. Children were simply encouraged to map their relationships and make notes and embellishments on those maps regarding whatever they were then thinking.

Timelines were somewhat more structured. These were created and collected at the beginning of the first and third interview sessions. As per Bagnoli (2009), initial timelines only included past events and students were asked later, after the second interview, to update it and include projections for the future. The additional data reflected the self-concept and ideas of the students when they were particularly aware of their

status as socially promoted students, having just discussed it. This information was then collected and analyzed to guide additional lines of inquiry when moving onto the final formal interview.

In the case of both timelines, they were the basis for the first portion of the corresponding interview. Events that were obviously related to the student's personal history with school or the influences that may have contributed to his status as a socially promoted student were isolated. The interview sought for more information on each of these points, and the student was encouraged to make his own connections on the basis of the timeline.

Interviews

The entirety of graphic elicitation material was used in the design of each individual interview throughout the course of the study. As far as each individual participant was concerned, the length of the study was about 3 weeks, not counting the member-check process that came at the point of data analysis. Seidman (1998) recommends that in phenomenological research distinct interviews with the same subject ought to be spaced roughly one week apart so that previous sessions remain clear in the minds of the participants, but without multiple sessions being affected by similar external circumstances. Following that logic, in this study every effort was made to schedule interviews with single subjects on consecutive weeks and at the same or similar dates and times. But since student availability was limited and individual attention is required, it proved impossible to accommodate all participants within the same windows of time without encountering conflicts.

Nevertheless, a concerted effort was made to schedule all interviews so that each interview with the same participant was appropriately close to the others. This was accomplished by scheduling all of the interviews, or as many of them as possible, at the very outset of the study, when the final participants were selected. Recommended times were arranged in advance to coincide with student study periods and after school hours. Participants were strongly encouraged to accept second and third sessions that were a week or less away from first sessions.

Interviews were conducted in a private office within the Lakeview North High School office, where the student would have no difficulty meeting, and where there was virtually no danger of being overheard or interrupted. Each interview spanned a 90-minute period of time, excepting the time spent with the graphic elicitation exercise, plus short breaks to avoid frustration or boredom on the part of the participant. The long form of the interview allowed for a definite beginning, middle, and end in the process, with ample time to pursue trains of thought and uncover useful information and insights. It also served to give the participant the idea that he or she is being taken seriously.

In addition to discussing the timing of interviews, Seidman (1998) identifies the format of the three interviews used in his own phenomenological research. The current study strived to emulate the basic form of this methodology. In it the first interview focuses on the subject's life history, the second deals with his current experience relative to the topic of the research, and the third consists of the subject's reflections on the meaning of those experiences in a wider context. Throughout the three interviews, the general goal was to pursue answers to the defined research questions dealing with social promotion and its effects upon academics, social interactions, transition to high school,

and personal autonomy. Basic interview questions directly paralleled research questions. These, however, were deferred until the second and third interviews.

The second interview focused on the student's relationships with teachers, administrators, classmates, and other members of the school community. It aimed to have the student reconstruct the details of the high school experience for one who has been socially promoted. In the second interview, some variation of most or all of the interview questions listed in Appendix A were asked. Each of these questions corresponded to a general research question, and each one set the stage for any number of follow-up questions as they arose and showed themselves to be important for understanding the experience of the specific participant.

In addition to these fairly straightforward questions, the second interview presented some open-ended questions. Each student was asked to describe the routine of an ordinary school day, from the point of waking up to the point of going to sleep. Students were asked to tell stories regarding specific experiences in their high school career so far. These included stories of bullying, stories of unique academic success, of stories about friends. Much depended on what emerges from the straightforward questions in this interview.

Unfortunately, it was not practical for the general research design to go into detail about the line of questioning beyond these basic and introductory prompts. Of course, this is appropriate since in phenomenological studies "the research questions posed are usually open-ended and broad" (Ganeson, 2006, p. 76). Furthermore, as part of a phenomenological study, the interviews are meant to explore the unique experiences of the individual student, so specific inquiries were based upon input from each student. As

Seidman (1998) clearly indicates, each interview is intended to build upon the insights gained from the previous sessions. For this to be accomplished, the dialogue must be pursued in a flexible and organic way. In this case it was organized prior to each session both in response to the content of previous sessions and in response to the content acquired from other data collection methods. In essence, the protocol for interviews beyond the posing of broad research questions was simply to carry on a purposively directed conversation with the subject. The pre-established interview questions began the lines of inquiry and introduced the relevant topics. They were not, however, sufficient to fill the allotted time or explore the significance of those topics.

Yet there was a defined theme and basic structure for each of the interview sessions. The third session began with the construction of the future-oriented timeline, and proceeded into a conversation aimed at having the participant explore the meaning of his own experience. According to Seidman (1998), the focus here should be upon “intellectual and emotional connections.” In the case of this study, those connections were between social promotion to high school and broader life experience. Primary questions in this session directly requested reflection and insight into the meaning of the social promotion experience. For instance, students were asked early in the session, “How do you understand social promotion in your life?” Later they were asked, “In light of what we’ve discussed in these sessions, where do you see yourself in your senior year?” This explicitly gave the researcher an opportunity to paraphrase and interpret the student's socially promoted circumstances as the student experiences them.

Supplementing this understanding, the three different methods of data gathering worked together throughout the process. The study began with graphic elicitation and the

first interview continued the data gathering begun by that means. Individual questions were designed to encourage students to discuss the experience of the content of their relational maps. It was hoped that these interview questions would get students thinking about the topics that might continue to appear in individual journal entries, subsequent interviews, and the other graphic elicitation exercises. In that case, the student's reflections would then come with more speed and depth, and virtually on their own. This, once again, aided in the process of phenomenological research in the sense that it allowed for pure investigation into the perceptions of the research participant, with a minimum of imposition from the researcher's perspective or concept of meaning.

Participant Journals

Supplementary data came in the form of student journals that were provided shortly after each interview session, as a reflection upon it. This additional content contributed to triangulation of the overall study data, and provoked communication from some students that could not be secured graphically or by engaging the student in direct conversation. It was especially useful in the case of participants who had a high degree of verbal skill yet were nervous or otherwise disinclined to be forthright in the context of an interview. But it also added value to the collection of data from every participant, either through new information or by helping to confirm observations and conclusions drawn from interviews and GE. It also eliminated time restrictions and the need for scheduling, which were limitations for the interview process.

Participants were expected to write their journal entries the night following the interview sessions, and to take it as an opportunity to reflect upon those sessions. They submitted their reflections to me through Google Drive. Any participants who did not

have a Google account were given unique login information to use for the study. The entries were available immediately and were used to outline a partial line of questions for the following interview. However, each interview dealt with a different focus and so the main purpose of the journal entries was to serve as elaboration upon field notes and audio transcriptions from the interviews. In a way, they were preliminary member checks, and they were available for comparison with separate interpretations of the experiences described in interviews.

Ganeson (2006) suggests an appropriate protocol for student journaling as an aspect of similar studies. Naturally, there are not many specific guidelines that need to be identified for how to collect journal entries. Ganeson identifies the procedure as asking students to write about an experience they had which was related to the topic of inquiry for the study. They may be prompted further by being asked to think about questions like what happened, why, who was involved, why it happened, and how the student felt; or they may be given specific phrases to build upon as introductions to their journal entries. In this, the current study also followed Giorgi (1985), particularly as his data collection methods were applied by Parse, Coyne, and Smith (1985) in asking study participants to write a description of a situation representative of the phenomenon under investigation.

In this study each participant was given the same simple prompts. First of all, they each were reminded to “Write about your experience transitioning to high school after your academic experiences last year. Explain how it has made you think or feel about yourself and the people around you.” The general prompt applied across all three journaling sessions. In addition to that, participants were asked to “Identify what were the most important points that came up in today’s interview session. Take this time to explain

anything that you didn't have a chance to say on those topics earlier." These, however, were open-ended guidelines. In the interest of not injecting bias into this phenomenological research, students were permitted to write on any particular topic that they personally thought was relevant to the topics at hand.

Writing samples derived context from preceding interviews and GE exercises, which also aided in understanding and interpreting the situations described in writing. At the study outset, student journals were anticipated to be a relatively minor part of the process of conducting research. However, it was also anticipated that they could also provide possible clarity by prompting some study participants to communicate more freely on the topic than they would have done orally, because of the apparent privacy of written communication. And perhaps more importantly, they provide written text straight from the participant, which makes it quite easier to isolate and compare key phrases relevant to the social promotion experience.

It is admittedly a limitation of the study that there was no reliable means of guaranteeing sustained participation from students in this portion of the study. However, the informed consent forms made reference to the journaling process as a portion of the study and those who completed the interview portion early were prompted to submit journals that same day.

Data Management and Analysis

The volume of notes that were taken and the amount of written and drawn materials collected required skill and commitment to organize. However, the purpose was to ensure the trustworthiness of all data as well as the conclusions drawn and the recommendations offered. Moustakas' (1994) recommendations were followed with

regard to what sort of data should be favored. He emphasizes the need for extensive field notes, a combination of subjective and objective impressions, and participant-led feedback.

The variety of data gathered, information regarding social promotion policies and other factors affecting the research site, further ensured a strong element of triangulation. The triangulation of data relied on Moustakas' recommendation to focus on emerging themes. A process of rough coding using the Ryan and Bernard model (2003) facilitated this. Examining field notes and interview transcripts in exacting detail allowed attunement to the emergence and recurrence of any key terms, phrases, references, and names, which permitted the formulation of larger categories into which chunks of data were "warehoused."

Special attention was paid to certain data, including linguistic metaphors and analogies used by socially promoted students; the way students' transitioned between topics; and the nature of any information that they omitted during discussion (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Ryan and Bernard's cutting-and-sorting method was employed, along with word lists and close attention to both key words and word co-occurrence. Coding on the basis of superficial terminology gave rise to deeper, more fundamental and revealing categories that captured underlying motivations, beliefs, behaviors, and prejudices (Becker, 1963; Rist, 1970).

Method of Phenomenological Data Analysis

The phenomenological design involved investigating the experiences of individuals in order to obtain "comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience," in the absence

of researcher interpretation (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Researchers use phenomenology to arrive at the essential meaning of lived experience as it pertains to a particular research focus. Specifically, the current study used the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological reduction described by Moustakas, in order to “derive meaning” from the collected data. The procedure entailed the following steps:

1. Horizontalization via listing “every expression relevant” to the social promotion experience.
2. Reduction to determine “invariant constituents” and to vet data for moments of the social promotion experience necessary for clear understanding.
3. Clustering and thematizing data in thematic labels thus revealing overarching core themes of the social promotion experience.
4. Construction of an individual textural description reflective of the participants experience as a socially promoted student. (p. 120- 121).

The students’ responses to individual interviews and written prompts were analyzed to arrive at the essence of the participants’ experiences and opinions with regard to the experience of socially promoted students. The final, and most important, step involve the formation a “composite description” of the meanings and essences of the experience. The composite description “[led] us back to the source of the meaning and the existence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) of social promotion. This represented the entire actual experience of social promotion among students transitioning into high school. But it was extracted from the individual experiences of particular students.

Moustakas’ (1994) modified van Kaam model for phenomenological data analysis was most appropriate to this study because of the open nature of the analysis. It

allowed for data yielded from the conscious individual participant (the phenomenon or “noema”) to provide a sense of the whole experience of social promotion (the essence or “noesis”). The composite description (ideation) served to “transform” individual experiences into “essential insights” providing an accurate understanding of the “real” experience of social promotion versus the intended or “ideal” portrayed by social promotion policy.

Horizontalization

Initially, the process of horizontalization was applied to the full transcription of each participant’s interviews, graphic elicitation, and journal entries in which every quote relevant to the experience of social promotion was listed on a spreadsheet. Next, the process of reduction and elimination was applied to each quote to determine the invariant constituents by testing each expression for two requirements. The first requirement calls for determining whether or not the quote includes mention of a “moment” of the social promotion experience necessary for understanding it. Secondly, if it was possible to label a quote as a moment of the social promotion experience then it was determined whether or not the moment was a “horizon” of that experience. Other quotations were eliminated, leaving on the spreadsheet only these horizons, or invariant constituents, of the social promotion experience.

Clustering and Thematizing Invariant Constituents

Once the invariant constituents were vetted, quotes were clustered into thematic labels yielding the core themes of the social promotion experience. Moustakas (1994) suggests undertaking a “final identification” of the invariant constituents and themes by asking the following two questions of each remaining quotation or invariant constituent.

First, are the invariant constituents and themes explicitly expressed in the complete transcript? Second, are the invariant constituents and themes compatible if not explicitly expressed? When invariant constituents and themes were determined not relevant to the social promotion experience, they were deleted, while all others remained.

Individual and Composite Textural Description

In line with Moustakas (1994), the final component of the data analysis process called for the construction of an individual textural description for each participant followed by a composite description representing the social promotion experience as a whole. First, an individual structural description was established for each participant based on the individual textural description and imaginative variation. Next, a textural structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience was constructed. This was done for each participant and was drawn from the invariant constituents and themes, as well as quotes extracted directly from the graphic elicitation, interviews, and journal transcriptions. Finally, the composite description of the meanings and essences of the social promotion experience were composed, and this composite was taken to represent the actual, complete experience of transitioning to high school after being socially promoted.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative data necessitates flexible data-gathering procedures and a different approach to rigor, and these were of course called for by the current study. Toma (2006) disputes the notion that quantitative studies are inherently more rigorous than qualitative studies and suggests that qualitative researchers take advantage of their greater relative freedom to develop more creative ways of ensuring rigor. Imagination, Toma says, can be

channeled to ensure greater validity and reliability, instead of serving, as some critics assert, to promote fuzziness and inexactitude.

However, imagination ought to also serve to anticipate potential problems raised by a given study and its setting. A number of factors clearly introduce real and potential elements of bias and distortion. My presence, however temporary, in the school routines of student participants may have elicited behavioral or attitudinal reactions from those students or even from their teachers. It may have been viewed as a potential source of academic support or guidance in classroom management, since highly challenged students and teachers might be prone to searching for any help available in their environment. If students perceived themselves as having had support through this study, then it likely positively affected their experience of social promotion and high school transition. If teachers or peers had the same impression, it might have changed their expectations of student participants, thus changing the social environment.

On the other hand, for the student, his peer, or his teacher, my presence may have channeled additional focus onto the student's socially promoted status, thus intensifying the response of the social environment or the student's replies in interviews and journaling. It was nearly impossible to tell which of these effects, if either, influenced the data collected. Precautions were taken to minimize these effects, but to the extent that they were unpredictable, it was assumed that they only influenced the relative intensity of responses, but not their basic content. There is no cause for thinking that the mere presence of the researcher influenced each student's response in so similar a way as to affect the general conclusions that could be drawn from analysis of their multiple forms of input.

At the same time, my own experience and possible knowledge of the students who might have participated in the study had some potential to compromise elements of the study and influence its overall findings. For these reasons it was necessary to take measures to assure personal objectivity while limiting possible sources of bias in the environment. The purposive sampling method served to limit bias that might have resulted from preconceptions about students. If there had been more than minimal contact in the past on the part of the researcher with any of the students recommended to the summer transition program, they were removed from the potential sample. Apart from this, researcher neutrality was achieved through a process of reflexive bracketing.

Ahern (1999) explains that subjectivity is actually beneficial to qualitative research and that the researcher's neutrality is mostly a function of his capacity for maintaining awareness of his preconceptions, and responding to them. Much of this process of reflexivity occurs during data gathering. It involves recognizing areas of potential bias at the start, then maintaining that awareness and seeking data to compensate for the bias. It also calls for an awareness of feelings and situations that might compromise neutrality. These also must be either avoided or controlled for.

At the point of data analysis, bracketing was accomplished, for instance, by taking note of whether one data source was being quoted more often than others. If it was, then there was either an indication made about an appropriate reason why this was the case or else attention was shifted to compensate for the apparent bias. Meanwhile, additional analysis was done when data seemed to agree with acknowledged biases. Both during analysis and after conclusions were reached, this questioning of results helped to confirm that the conclusions were truly based upon the information provided by participants and

not upon personal preconceptions. For this reason, the discussion of results below was sure to cite and respond to any and all data that could be seen as standing in opposition to major conclusions (Ahern, 1999).

Confirmation that results are neutral was also accomplished by the member-check process. This process was applied both during student interviews and after the conclusion of all data collection. It calls for paraphrasing and repeating participant responses to questions. In this way, the researcher conveys his person understanding of the information, and gives the participant an opportunity to confirm, contradict, or clarify that understanding. The same measure should be taken with the overall conclusions drawn from all of the data sources for that participant. In that case, it was a matter of referring back to the participant and providing my own understanding of preliminary findings about his or her experience with social promotion and high school transition. If the student expressed disagreement with these findings, it offered an opportunity to reassess the validity and neutrality of those conclusions. At the same time, this process offered an opportunity for any participant commentary to be included in the study, and to strengthen results.

After the bracketing and member check processes were performed effectively, and after ensuring that there were no extreme deviations in participant responses or social environment, no effects of the research were felt to have seriously damaged the credibility of the data. Ongoing attention to bracketing allowed me to recognize and correct any such extreme deviations on my part. And the confidentiality of the research process limited any deviations on the part of students and instructors. Any minor deviations that remained appeared to affect only isolated aspects of the data-gathering

process and were limited in scope. Conclusions were derived from the synthesis of graphic elicitation, individual interviews, and student journaling, each asking a variety of questions of an array of participants. As such, data gathered by one method could only ring true if it is broadly compatible with the alternative data sets.

The conclusions resulting from this data were then expected to be transferable to other circumstances and other student populations. Although purposive sampling is necessarily limited to the homogenous sample of socially promoted students, convenience sampling could not here be expected to exclude additional variables, and the conclusions below refer to social promotion in general, or at least in schools with similar structures and demographics.

The multiple methods of data collection involved also suggested that that data is dependable and confirmable. Forming a composite image of the participants' attitudes and experiences as reported through a variety of sources, it is reasonable to assume that if the same inquiries were run by other researchers on the same or similar students, the conclusions would be fundamentally the same. Serious efforts were made to bracket and control for bias and interference within individual methods of data gathering. Furthermore, the resulting data is available in its raw form so that even if interpretations are disputed, the accuracy of the data can be tested by comparison with additional studies in other contexts and by researchers prone to different biases.

Taken together, these factors argue for the overall trustworthiness of the data collected. In a seminal work in the 1980s, Guba and Lincoln substituted reliability and validity with the parallel concept of "trustworthiness," containing the four aspects referred to above: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Within

these were specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative rigor, such as the audit trail, member checks when coding, categorizing, or confirming results with participants, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, structural corroboration, and referential material adequacy (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) developed authenticity criteria that were unique to the constructivist assumptions and that could be used to evaluate the quality of the research beyond the methodological dimensions. While Guba warned that their criteria were "primitive" (Guba, 1981, p. 90), and should be used as a set of guidelines rather than another orthodoxy (Guba & Lincoln, 1982), aspects of their criteria have, in fact, been fundamental to development of standards used to evaluate the quality of qualitative inquiry.

Reliability and validity thus have been subtly replaced by criteria and standards for evaluation of the overall significance, relevance, impact, and utility of completed research. Strategies to ensure rigor inherent in the research process itself were backstaged to these new criteria to the extent that, while they continue to be used, they are less likely to be valued or recognized as indices of rigor.

Ethical Considerations

As the students told their experience as a socially promoted student, the necessary steps to mitigate their risks were taken by this study. The first step was to solicit their informed consent prior to the study. Groenwald (2004) outlined the importance of informed consent for participants of research studies. The provision of informed consent allows participants to fully contribute to the study and increases the likelihood of honest and open responses during the interview process (Creswell, 2007).

For this study, potential participants were provided with a brief overview of the study and a provision for their voluntary participation in the interviews in a consent form and an assent form that was mailed to them (See Appendix B for Informed Consent and Assent Form). Groenwald (2004) posited that informed consent can be accomplished by having each potential participant sign a consent letter that explains the key components of participation in the study.

According to Groenwald (2004), the informed consent form should present the purpose of the study and the procedures of participant involvement in the interviews so that the participants are fully informed of the research in which they are participating. For this study, participants were informed that although there was not any remuneration for their participation, only minimal risks were involved in participating and that they would be contributing to a deeper understanding of the issue (Groenwald, 2004).

The informed consent form contained information to explain that participation was voluntary, and that participants had the right to opt out of being included in the research at any time (Groenwald, 2004). The procedures to protect confidentiality were also included on the consent form, and the participants were informed that they might be asked to participate in a follow-up contact after the interview to clarify their responses (Groenwald, 2004). Each research participant acknowledged participation by signing the consent form.

Summary

In the interest of achieving the ends pursuant of the current study, a phenomenological study design was selected. The choice for an appropriate research design is an integral part of the research process. The research design determines the

process of data collection, the analysis and interpretation of the collected data, and finally the reporting and evaluation of the research. The study that allows for a better understanding of experiences and behavioral relationships was achieved through a qualitative, phenomenological analysis of the actual lived experience of socially promoted students.

A central purpose of the study was to improve current instructional practices with regards to students identified as having been socially promoted. In accord, Creswell (2005) characterizes the selected research methodology as a means for bringing societal change. Utilizing that method, this study was meant to promote such change by illuminating often overlooked data about the experiences of socially promoted students. The study was intended to help improve instructional practices to respond to the enormous challenges and significant opportunities that face socially promoted students, as well as open the way to further phenomenological research on this and other topics relevant to conceptual frameworks characterized by labeling and social reaction.

Chapter 4

Findings

The findings of this study are drawn from a detailed analysis of data collected on the phenomenon at the heart of this study, the transition from middle to high school as a socially promoted student. The chapter begins with a description of the analytical process used in data gathering and data analysis. In short, that analysis process entailed use of a modified van Kaam method for investigating in phenomenological data and uncovering how participants of the study experience a given phenomenon. The data presented in this chapter were derived from action science: dialogues with participants and the expression of muted voices through material culture. This approach allowed for the identification of terms, phrases, and sentiments that appear across the data that describes the essence of the phenomenon as participants experienced it. These findings were then analyzed and categorized according to general themes, which were in turn connected to relevant concepts from the larger body of research. That is, they are attached to specific research questions and analyzed according to researcher understanding of the prevailing context of student responses.

Findings are reported in this chapter following a more detailed discussion of the analysis process and of emergent and common themes. These broader findings are followed by a more detailed discussion of the extractions, overarching themes, and composites of the students interviewed. Important to the study was the analysis of the students' graphic elicitations, which is essential to comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Data from each student's interviews and written and drawn materials are composited to provide a complete description of that student's experiences. Finally, this

analysis is connected to the research questions that guided this investigation of social promotion and the transition to secondary school.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with students during the school day. Three students participated in the final study, and will be referred to in this study as Jack, Nate, and Edward. All three had attended the Lakeview North High School summer transition program and transitioned from middle school to high school. During the period of the study, each participant was enrolled at Lakeview North High School, but each had attended a different middle school. The three students were not close friends or related in any other manner; they were not aware of one another's participation in the study and were not in contact with one another during data collection. Sources of data were limited to these three male students owing to the lack of female responses to requests for voluntary participation.

Interviews

Participants were interviewed in three separate sessions, rather closely following the methods outlined by Bagnoli (2009). Each session was focused on a particular theme. The first addressed specific research questions; the second discussed a students' typical day; the third sought direct feedback and commentary from participants regarding the summer transition program in which they had participated. Participants were asked to keep detailed journals during the study period, and were directed to create graphic elicitations reflecting their transition experiences. These were analyzed both separately from and in context with responses during interview sessions.

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the early stages of analysis, all transcriptions of the interviews were read through and certain potentially noteworthy details were highlighted. The initial data collection process was exploratory, and allowed the researcher to mentally note patterns and themes that would later be relevant, as well as to identify significant comments or themes that stood apart from the overall topic of the interviews. Researcher field notes and journal entries also helped in identifying these separate topics as they emerged. Where necessary, the researcher engaged in member checking by following up with the students to gain clarity on a specific statement they had made or something that they had mentioned in their journal. All of these materials were used to inform the researchers understanding of the students' social promotion experience.

Following this initial reading of the transcriptions and review of all materials from students, the researcher began the process of phenomenological reduction in order to derive meaning from the data, including transcribed interviews and the students' journals and drawings. The process of data analysis was completed in three stages before constructing an individual textural description from the participants, in keeping with the modified Van Kaam approach established by Moustakas (1994). The first stage, horizontalization, consisted of isolating specific, relevant interviewee statements and sentiments, and arranging them into preliminary groupings based on shared or synonymous words and phrases. The goal at this stage was to identify every statement or comment that was relevant to the social promotion experience and place each in context with the others. In the first place, the researcher categorized and coded statements based on a wide definition of social promotion and student experiences. Afterwards, the

researcher went through the data twice more, focusing more closely on the overall research questions and aim of the study. This later process yielded a smaller set of codes and aided in the process of grouping them and observing similarities.

Step two of the van Kaam method is identified as data reduction. In the case of this study, that process involved the grouping of data around invariant constituents that describe the social promotion phenomena. In this case, data was grouped first around themes and then around research questions. In order to do this, the researcher examined the codes for two criteria. The first criterion was whether or not the code directly referenced a moment of social promotion. If so, review of that statement determined whether or not the moment was a “horizon” of that experience. It is through this process that invariant constituents of the social promotion experience were identified.

The third stage of analysis entailed what van Kaam describes as the “clustering and thematization” of the invariant constituents. Once the invariant constituents were identified, the vetted statements were clustered into thematic labels yielding the core themes of the social promotion experience, following Moustakas’ (1994) suggested approach. Both explicit and implicit statements were evaluated following the approved approaches. It is also relevant to note that all three stages of analyses were repeated three times in order to ensure that the researcher was not overlooking themes or patterns.

The final stage of the analytical process was the construction of an individual textural description reflective of the participants experience as a socially promoted student. The idea in this stage is to formulate the “composite description” of the meanings and essences of the students’ promotion experience. This is the textual description constructed from the stories of each student. In doing this, an individualized

structural description for each participant was established, based on his or her lived experience and drawn from the invariant constituents and themes as well as quotes extracted directly from the graphic elicitation, interviews, and journal transcriptions. Finally, the composite description of the meanings and essences of the social promotion experience were composed to represent the actual, complete experience of students who attended a summer transition program transitioning as they moved from middle school to high school after being socially promoted.

Graphic Elicitation

In gathering data via graphic elicitation, Bagnoli's (2009) suggestion was employed, in which multiple approaches to ideas are used, such as "self-portraits" in getting young participants to think and reflect holistically about who they are and about their lives. Bagnoli's ideas about using the timeline and the relational map to help students find visual answers were also relied upon. Thus, students were given the following directions:

"The following questions ask you to draw about your experience as you transition from the middle school to the high school after experiencing the high school transition program. Please draw your responses to the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. Draw a relational map or picture of the important people or influences in your high school experience.
2. Draw a timeline of important events pertaining to high school starting in the past, moving toward the present, and include expectations for the future.
3. Draw a picture of your perfect classroom. Include as much detail as possible."

The graphic elicitations were a part of the study and were included in all analysis, including in developing themes. What follows below is an outline of the themes and constituents found in this study, with graphic elicitations reviewed and analyzed in Figures 1, 2, and 3 below.

Themes and Invariant Constituents

Table 1 lays out the themes that emerged from the analysis. More specifically, it follows Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method in reducing the data to "invariant constituents," or those references and statements that are necessary and sufficient for understanding the given phenomenon, and that also can be abstracted and labeled. Table 1 also gives the analytical definition of each theme identified. Four of these emerged that particularly reflect the students' social promotion experience and also speak to their understanding of those experiences: *self-perception and expectations for self, future orientation, adapting to change*, and *social capital and reciprocity*. These four primary themes were selected from a larger set that was identified upon first review. From an initial list of twelve themes, nine were selected as being more prominent than the remaining three, and then the above four were identified as being of primary significance. A more detailed analytical definition and description of each theme is also explained in Table 1. These themes and definitions describe my interpretation of feelings, thoughts, and opinions that are were derived from the students' comments throughout this process. The students' thoughts were reflected directly or indirectly by all three students and captured how they felt about their experience and thoughts about the summer preparation program and making the transition from middle school to high school.

Table 1

Emerging Themes and Analytical Definition

Theme	Analytical definition
Self-perception and expectations	<p>Students had a strong sense of what they need to do to be successful. Students describe their transition as “hard work” and refer to having to focus on their academic lives. They discuss this in themes of their own responsibility, acknowledging what they had to contribute to make their transition to high school and their general academic success. All students spoke directly and indirectly about their own expectations to do well. They expressed a desire to do well academically, but also a level of pressure to perform. They expressed a fear of failing in school where they could disappoint themselves and those who had high expectations of them.</p>
Future orientation	<p>Students were focused on their future, including the near future, such as upcoming academic experiences like the next school year, graduation, and their future jobs and careers. Students also spoke of their sports, school, and life goals.</p>
Adapting to change	<p>Each transition from middle school to high school required a kind of adaptation. This adaptation included adjusting to the school, classes, classwork and homework, teachers, and even at times, classmates and peers.</p>
Social capital and reciprocity	<p>The students found positive social capital in their teachers, friends, and families. Teachers represented one level of social capital. The students felt that the quality of their teachers was important. They spoke of quality in terms of how the teachers taught and their general relationships with the teachers. They also spoke of the basic quality of the schools. Reciprocity in peer relationships proved to be extremely important to these students and in some situations peers appeared to be the most important element to their process. These relationships included experiences and expectations with close friends as well as acquaintances at the same grade level.</p>

Overview of Student Experiences with Promotion

Below are detailed overviews of each student's experience making the transition from middle school and high school via the summer transition program. These composites were made up of the collective experiences of the students taken from all data available from their interviews, journals, and artwork. Following the composite, there is a separate analysis of students' artwork.

Jack's Themes

Self-perception and expectations. Jack expresses his self-perception through his assessment of the general character of participants in the summer transition program. He identifies that program as being geared towards people "who might have been a little lost in middle school." This assessment also touches upon the topic of expectations, in that Jack sees the program as helping students to learn the expectations of high school, and thus how to be successful therein. He claims to have learned this himself, suggesting that he perceives himself as being on a successful course through his academic career.

Future orientation. Based on this same observation, Jack can be seen to be future oriented. That is, he sees himself as being on a path that will lead to envisioned future outcomes that he formed in part through his experiences in a program that helped him to learn relevant expectations and tools for success. Those envisioned outcomes have a number of specific focuses. Jack expresses a desire to prove himself to his family and to make himself personally proud. He also focuses on more specific goals including obtaining good grades, going to a good college, and securing a good job. He recognizes a direct connection between his high school performance and his entire adult life, and he has already begun to think about the process of selecting the right college. At the same

time, he expresses a defined interest in social outcomes, as well, to be obtained through participation in things like the school's cross country team and its chess club.

Adapting to change. In outlining his future-oriented vision, Jack demonstrates awareness of the changed circumstances of high school, in comparison with middle school. He builds his expectations and plans around the new academic and social setting, and the specific opportunities available therein. He was perhaps most keenly aware of the change in expectations and consequences. He expresses the belief that grades now matter more than they did in middle school, and he fears being left behind, in light of former academic difficulties, specifically with math. These fears are significant motivators for his adaptation, which is expressed through the formation of new habits and the use of current resources including his peers, teachers, and staff, each of who he identifies as dependable sources of help.

Social capital and reciprocity. This willingness to utilize the social setting of course reflects Jack's awareness of his own social capital and the role of reciprocity in his interactions within the school. He appears to take great comfort in the collective nature of his experience, and he describes himself and his classmates as all going through the same thing. Jack places much importance on the notion of his being part of a larger group, and his journal refers to the value of knowing that older students struggled with the same transition and are now available to help those just entering the high school. And indeed they have helped him with such things as navigating the building.

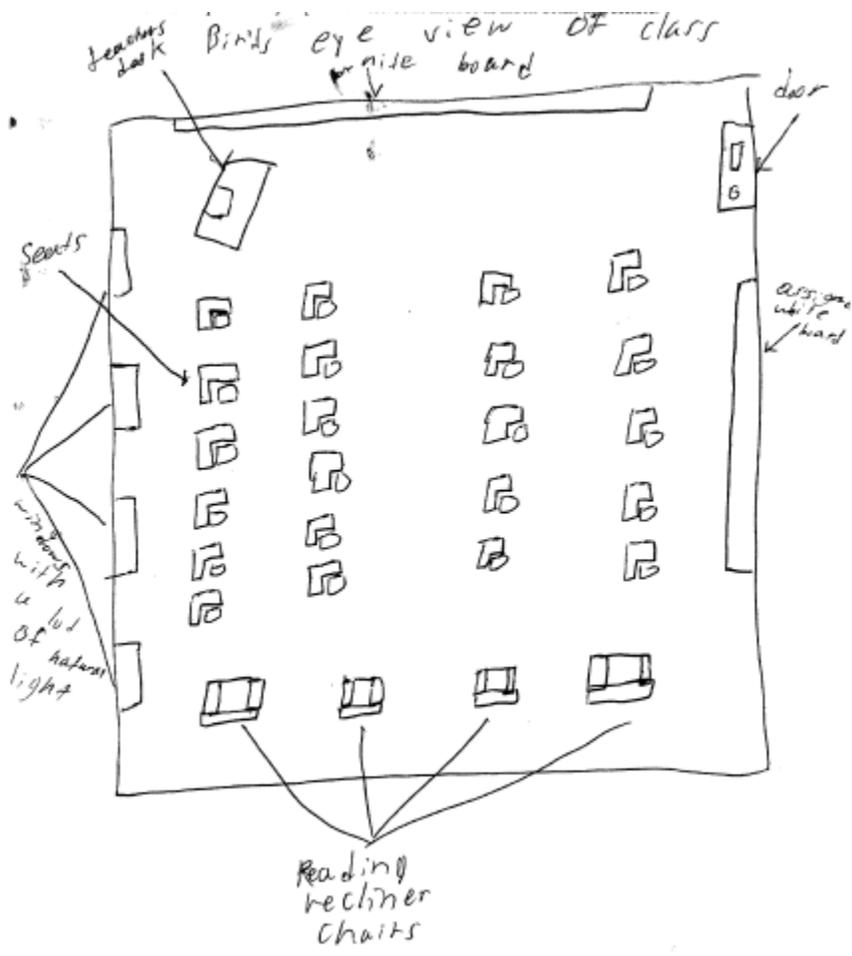


Figure 2. Jack's classroom.



Figure 3. Jack's picture.

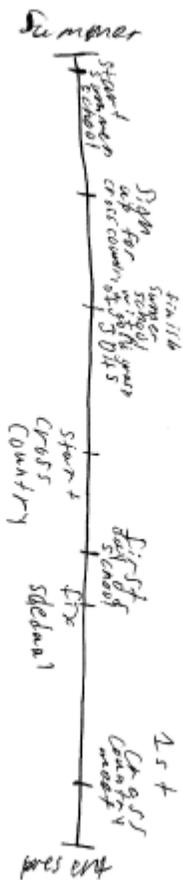


Figure 4. Jack's timeline.

Analysis of Jack's Graphic Elicitations

Jack's illustration of important people or influences actually includes no people at all. It is a drawing of what looks like a college building, like a clock tower, what looks like a filled-out standardized exam, two doors that lead into the college building, and one box that says "study" leaning on four other boxes that say "Math, History, Science, and Literature." One other drawing includes what appears to be a finished paper with the grade A+. What is written on the paper along with the grade is the word "collage." Given the background of the drawing, one suspects that this is actually a misspelling of the word "college."

Jack's timeline reflects his interest in cross-country as he points out where in the timeline his cross-country meets would occur. Unlike the other students, his drawing does not go into the future or to graduation, but it brings him to the present. Jack's perfect classroom is entirely academic. It includes several rows of desks, perfect views of the board, good lighting so that everyone can see better, and even a bird's eye view of the board. In the back of the room there are four reclining chairs for reading. In his interview, Jack expressed valuation of close relationships with his teachers and wants the independence to do well in his classes. But his artwork also shows that he is a serious student who likes structure in his academic life. The desks in his picture reflect this. They are all in order, as are the chairs in the back room. Taken together, he is a student who is thinking about college and the path it takes to get there. These experiences and thoughts about promotion suggest that even though his timeline stops at the present, he is extremely future-oriented and wants to do what it takes to be successful.

Nate's Themes

Self-perception and expectations. Nate is apparently very aware of his behaviors in school, and he is very positive about them. He explains that he talks a lot in class and often raises his hand to ask questions and otherwise participate. However, he also recognizes that he did not perform well at the beginning of his high school transition. He describes this as having negatively affected his self-esteem and personal outlook, but also says that he now compensates for this and maintains high expectations for himself in terms of good grades and an improved self-perception. But he also tempers high expectations with a sense of realism, reporting in his journal that he knows he will not be an A+ student. Yet he is also committed to never again being an F or a D student. What's more, he reports that he is in "a better place" in life, where those more positive outcomes will be quite attainable. This does not mean that he is satisfied with a minimal outcome though. Rather, he expresses concern that he might do well only to find that the reason for the improvement is that he hadn't been challenging himself. He wishes to do well with material that comes near to the limits of his ability, or at least his perceived ability.

Future orientation. Although unsure about his major, Nate definitely sees college in his future, attributing this to the summer program and the encouragement of his friends and teachers. He imagines that four years from now he'll be considering what college will be right for him, and he anticipates feeling emotionally and academically prepared for college by the end of high school. He described a specific vision for transitioning to college and pursuing a career in the field of criminal justice.

Adapting to change. In addition to the change involved in transitioning from middle school to high school, Nate indicates that he is dealing with a changing home life

as he strives to cope with his parents' divorce and other such problems. The divorce occurred while Nate was in high school, leading him to deal with one set of adaptations ahead of another, and possibly influencing how he dealt with each. Indeed, Nate reports feeling like he could have handled his high school situation better. Now as he strives to handle a different situation, he indicates that he is concerned about the larger facility and the absence of former friends. But he recognizes the high school transition as an important opportunity to make changes and strengthen his academic experience.

On the other hand, Nate has had some advantages that other students have not. For instance, he indicated that he was already familiar with the high school through his mother, who was acquainted with some of its teachers. The summer transition program added to this sense of familiarity. More generally, he described the summer program as playing a key role in his transition, saying that it helpfully served as time to practice and adjust to the pace of high school. It was also a social learning experience and so in his own words, he "didn't just see (the program) as summer school."

Social capital and reciprocity. Peers, friends, and parents played an important role in Nate's transition from middle school to high school. Nate's social network helped him increase his expectations about himself and helped him develop the goal of pursuing better grades. He recognizes that this network, which includes teachers, will encourage him and hold him to high expectations. His journal indicates that both encouragement and external motivations have had an impact on him. In it he wrote that his teachers and some classmates in middle school tended to urge him to try harder and to recognize his own intelligence and the fact that he could accomplish the tasks in front of him. Nate recognized his own poor grades and understood that the encouragement was aimed at

helping him to improve them. He also wrote that improving his grades to the utmost would fulfill teachers', peers', and parents' expectations for him. This, he said in his journal, was an additional reason for him to strive towards better academic performance.

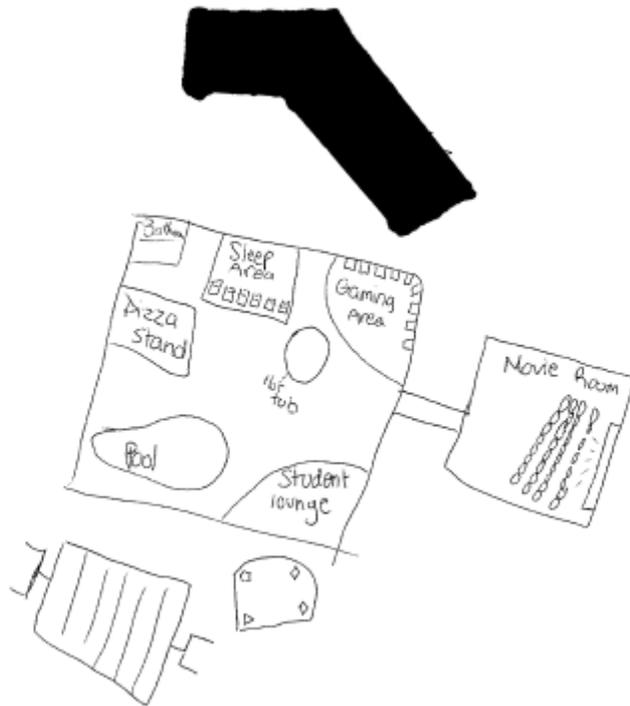


Figure 5. Nate's classroom drawing.



Figure 6. Nate's picture.

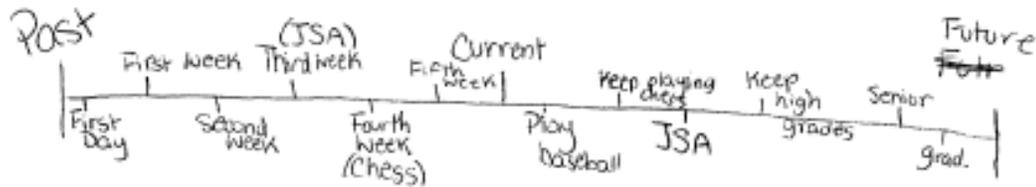


Figure 7. Nate's timeline.

Analysis of Nate's Graphic Elicitations

In Nate's artwork he drew what looks like an organizational chart, with a box with one teacher in it at the top, growing from the name of another teacher. That teacher below the top teacher comes out of two boxes side-by-side with the name of yet another and just the word "guidance" in the other box. At the base of the picture are two additional boxes, one that says "teachers" and the other that says "office." The organizational chart builds from that.

In the timeline that Nate drew, the word "chess" comes up a lot, indicating that chess is very important to his life. Nate also indicates in his interview that he "really likes chess." Nate's timeline also goes toward the future after graduation, as if he is saying that there is more to come. Nate's idea of the perfect classroom has no academic areas. There is a bathroom, pizza stand, sleep area, gaming area, student lounge, and pool. In the center of the room is a hot tub. Just off of that main room is a movie room and sports fields right outside of the building. Nate has made it clear that he believes that being a good academic student is important, but his artwork suggests that he finds structure in

nonacademic activities. Some of these activities, such as chess or karate may be intellectual, but Nate is communicating that for him self-actualization may come with self-care and activities that do not usually occur on the classroom.

Edward's Themes

Self-perception and expectations. Edward has high expectations for himself, specifically including A and B grades. Despite this, he acknowledges that academics are of secondary importance to him. He claims to value athletics foremost, but has built his personal academic expectations into this value system. He uses this self-awareness as a meaningful academic motivator. It also contributes to his sense of being in control of his own destiny. His journal explicitly states that he is committed to taking responsibility for his own actions, mistakes, and even states of mind.

Future orientation. Edward has a clear outline of his goals, with respect both to academics and to sports. He wants to participate in soccer throughout his high school career, and fully expects to receive the grades he has set his sights upon. Although his deliberate motivations are not primarily academic, he has college aspirations that have been structured around the aspects of his life that he does value. Like the other participants, he has already begun looking ahead to college, and he has a sense of what type of institution would be suitable for him.

Adaptation to change. Edward expresses strong awareness of the high level of independence involved in high school, as compared with middle school. He emphasizes the perceived need for self-reliance in his new academic setting. He acknowledges that the transition involves a major mental shift, which is an issue separate from the increased workload. Edward is adjusting well to the transition from middle school to high school.

He does well socially and is balancing academics with playing for the school's soccer team. He describes a packed schedule consisting of classes, soccer practice, and homework, leaving time for little else. But he explains that the balance of activities motivates him, as he has to keep his grades up in order to be permitted to continue playing soccer. This focus has allowed Edward to remain emotionally positive in his transition. He states that he is not at all afraid of the high school process or of transitioning to college, even in spite of the challenges that he faced in middle school.

Social capital and reciprocity. The social influence of peers, friends, and family members is there for Edward, but it works a bit differently for him. Edward exhibits a deep understanding of how social factors impact his success, explaining that surrounding oneself with negative people will in turn make one negative. He recognizes that he is in control of the social influences that he surrounds himself with. He is well liked among his classmates and shows confidence in making friends and getting involved socially. He explained how he made new friends among upperclassmen whom he knew from soccer, while also maintaining friendships with students he knew from earlier grade levels. He wrote in his journal that he started his transition with plenty of friends, and now has more, thanks to both the internet and various social events.

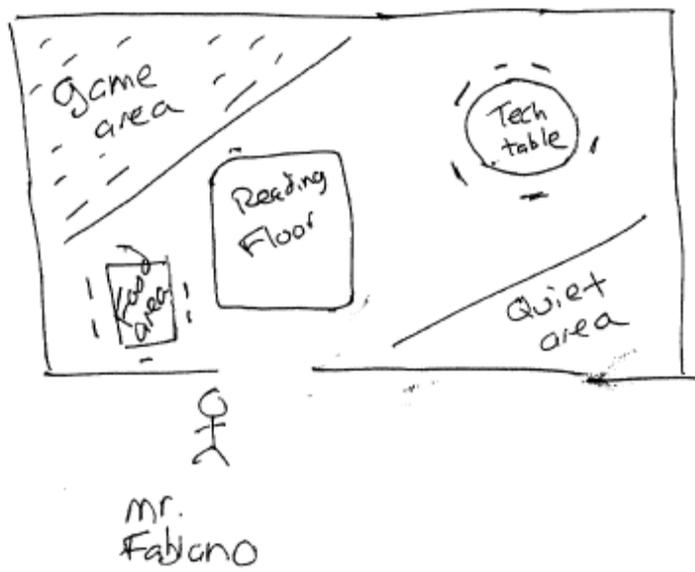


Figure 8. Edward's classroom.

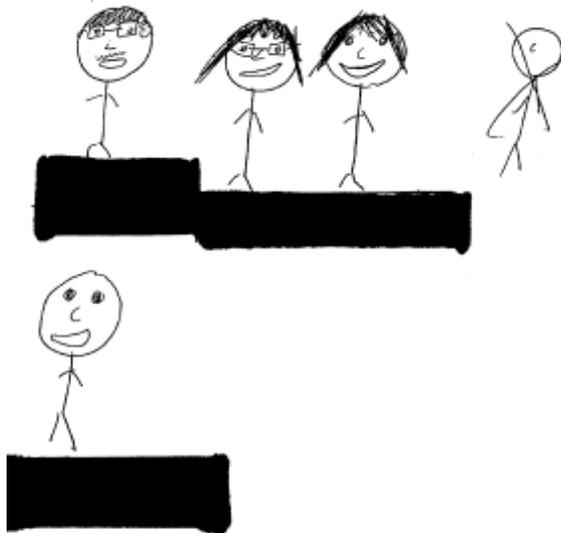


Figure 9. Edward's picture.

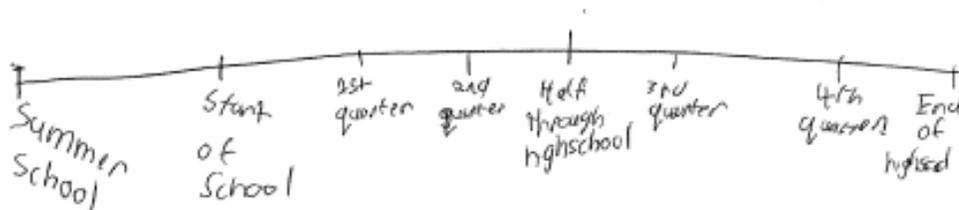


Figure 10. Edward's timeline.

Analysis of Edward's Graphic Elicitations

In his illustrations, Edward draws several teachers who are important to him, indicating that they have a strong influence over his progress in school. He did not make much mention of these Teachers in his interviews. In his drawings of the perfect classroom, it is telling that he places the reading floor in the center, and just to the side, the food area, and the tech table. Over in the corners of the room are a game area and a quiet area. Standing just outside of the room is a teacher, who, because this is the “perfect” classroom, could be the person he considers the perfect or at least his favorite teacher.

It should also be noted that in his drawings of teachers, the one who is also standing outside of the door is also included in the artwork of the perfect classroom. What Edward's illustrations suggest is that while gaming and technology are important to him, there are other elements of the classroom that he sees as influential to his education, including his teachers, and one teacher in particular. The fact that the reading floor is directly in the center of the room is meaningful and suggests that Edward does see reading as an important part of education. During the interview, Edward does not say what class is his favorite, but he does communicate that classes should be more “fun.” Based on his drawings, Edward's idea of what fun means appears to center around

reading, technology, gaming, food, and having a quiet place to go during the day.

Furthermore, the drawings suggest that Edward's experience of promotion to high school from middle school is tied to many factors, including his teachers and specifically the dynamics of the classroom.

An Overview of the Social Promotion Experience

Below is a composite overview of the social promotion experience of students in this study. It attempts to examine all three students' experiences as a single, collective set of experiences. As part of this study, three students spoke in detail about their social promotion experience and transition from middle school to high school. While the students all had unique experiences, there were certain similarities among them. As discussed above, the participants addressed four principal areas and repeating themes:

1. Self Perception and Expectations for Self
2. Future Orientation
3. Adapting to Change
4. Social Capital and Reciprocity.

Their collective experience tells the story of a process that had multiple layers and dealt with multiple factors associated with academic and social issues.

Self-Perception and Expectations

For all students, this process started during the summer between middle school and high school in a transitional program. According to all three students interviewed, the program helped prepare them for the transition into high school and affected them in both specific and non-specific ways. In terms of self-perception and expectations, students had to deal with how others saw them and how they saw themselves. The students' use of

terms like “hard work” and “focus” suggested that they knew what they had to do in order to be successful, but they did not always know that they were up to the challenge. Their perceptions of themselves seemed to drive their ambition. Some attributed their understanding of themselves to their summer programs; others, like Jack just spoke in boarder terms, but he seemed to know what he needed to do to be successful:

I like my possibilities...I expect for me to get honor roll every marking period of the year...Yes, because what I do in high school affects my adult life... I think if I try and work harder then I will do better. In the past I was always told to keep doing what I am doing and all will work out but I don't think that will work here at the high school.

Nate, too, understood what he needed to accomplish, even when he knew he had to face his fears:

I would probably most likely avoid homework. Homework out of anything, because sometimes I'm scared that I'm going to miss it, and then when I get into class, like, you know, I'm just scared that I'm going to mess up on something. And then whenever I go home, I just feel like I missed something. You know, I always get that feeling like, oh I missed something, even though I didn't.

Future Orientation

The transition process was helped in great part by the students' ideas and thoughts about their future. They all expected to be social and active in high school and then go on to college and beyond. Jack, for example, was very serious about what he wanted for his long-term future:

[T]he more – the better I do, the more that it affects my adult life – my future life. Like maybe I'll get a better job, have like, um, a better house or something.

The students did not generally look as far ahead as beyond college, but still the emphasis was on what was going to happen in the future. The students all seemed to understand that they had to accomplish certain acts now in order to make a better future

for themselves. The following quotation from Edward was consistent with all three students' ways of thinking about the future.

I see myself, senior year probably graduating, hopefully with an average of A's and B's the whole four years, and probably going on to college...a big college that not everybody knows each other. Kind of like, like, U of Florida or somewhere around there.

Adaptation to Change

In reaching such goals, one hurdle faced by all three students is the need to adjust to the differences between their middle school and high school experiences. The students spoke about adjusting to the amount of work. Nearly all said that the workload was heavier in high school. They also had to make a new set of friends, or at least add to their social group. Added to this was the reality of a physical transition to a new setting. Nate described the entire situation:

The school is a little overwhelming. It's a very large building that seems almost too gigantic. It's also very large in other ways too with so many electives and programs that it seems a bit too much. In middle school teachers really knew me very well. They knew my interests and based on that they were always talking about how my interests would be a good match for certain things going on in school. Here at the high school I doubt if the teachers will ever really get to know me.

Nate also wrote in his journal about adjusting to the challenge of making friends.

He did not struggle with this:

Meeting new friends is not the problem. I have the ability to do that in just about any class I am in. For me it's a matter of getting over the fact that my real friends are not at this high school. Another inner struggle for me. Do I put the time into making new friendships here or sit around and dwell on the friendships I had in the past? What is best for me really is to begin making new friendships with the students here. Going to the activities I described before and being involved in their production is a good start I'm sure.

Social Capital and Reciprocity

The emphasis that Nate places on friendships is relevant to the experiences of the other two participants as well. Their relationships with both peers and teachers were extremely important to their transitional experiences. Specifically, these relationships involved reciprocity and social capital. The friendships that the students developed, both new and old, contributed in some way to their process. The students felt that they owed something to their friends, their parents, and even teachers who helped them advance in their academic careers. These connections represented a reciprocal relationship, or give-and-take among the students, but also the reality that teachers in high school had an effect on the students. As Jack pointed out:

... in middle school, if you're like – if you have a good relationship with a good teacher and like you're kind of friends...I think it depends on the teacher's attitude. Because if the teacher's having a bad day, then everyone has a bad day. But if a teacher's, like, in a good mood and is all fun and happy, then everyone's like happy. So it really depends on the teacher.

The students gained a lot from their teachers, and some of these benefits were tangible while others were not. This is where the idea of social capital, as defined earlier, comes into play. While reciprocity is connected to social capital as one of the by products, it also stands alone among these students. Social capital from friends helps the students get through their schoolwork and helps them in their overall transition. As an example, Edward said that his fellow students help him to make sure that he completes his school work even when he misses a class, thanks to what he calls a homework buddy system:

I usually text someone that has the same class as me and they usually tell me if we did or didn't [have homework].

Nate describes another by-product of his relationship with his friends: helping him relax and stay focused when things get difficult.

Um, well, like some of my close friends sit next to me...And if I were to be like, with my head down, or if I were showing, like, some sort of [signs of anxiety, stress, being tired, something like that]...they would know. And then if I wouldn't want to talk about it, they would know that something's wrong...

Nate expresses the reciprocity of the students' relationships:

And, like, yeah, and in the class sometimes, like my neighbors, like, one behind me and then one to my left – if one of them have like, you know, just an issue with something, I'll help them out. Because the one to my left, he needs to like use a calculator for simple math problems, so I told him one time to put the calculator down because it was just, you know, so simple.

As it turns out, the students in this study used these four categories to navigate the middle school to high school transition. They found these factors during the summer transition program, but also within their high schools, families, and among their peers and friends.

Research Questions

Students' reports of their own experiences were analyzed for relevance to ten specific research questions. Select phrases and sentiments were identified and recorded as having particular relevance to each of these questions. In most cases, a broad range of relevant responses contributes to a high level of confidence in the ability to connect these observations to a general account of the lived experiences of socially promoted students vis-à-vis the research questions.

Research Question 1

The first of these questions asked how students who have been through the summer transition program perceive their academic performance and their academic potential. Nate and Jack provided four and three highly relevant responses, respectively,

while Edward provided an additional one. Jack indicated a personal expectation to try his hardest, to do his best, and to be proud of himself for a high level of effort even if it results in only moderate success in terms of grades. However, he envisioned his end-of-year grades as rising to the level of 80s and 90s. Nate similarly emphasized an issue of personal pride, in that he reported making up missed assignments merely for the satisfaction of so doing, even though he did not expect to obtain points for the work. He also spoke of trying his hardest and doing his best, but went on to point out that even if he felt he was putting in significant effort, poor results would indicate that that effort was not strong enough. On the other hand, he seemed to contradict this when he stated that he expected to do the best that he could and to push himself “even if I fail at what I’m doing.” Regardless, effort was a major theme for Nate, and he was sufficiently convinced of its value that he reported making an agreement with himself to push himself to perform better throughout his four years. Edward reported an expectation to try his hardest, as well, but also stated that he expected to earn As and Bs.

Research Question 2

The second research question was, “Do teachers’ and peers’ perceptions of the student affect the student’s engagement with schoolwork? How so?” Jack pointed to a difference between student-teacher interactions in middle school and in high school. He pointed to a tendency of hand-holding among middle school teachers, as opposed to a potential for relatively friendly and respectful relationships in high school. This was reinforced when Jack discussed his willingness and ability to contact teachers by e-mail if he was unsure about homework assignments.

Discussing the question of whether people would treat him differently if his grades changed, Nate expressed his views about peer relationships through the hypothetical situation of “becoming above-average,” a situation that he expected would lead other students to feel bad about themselves and be uncomfortable around the newly above-average student. Nate appeared sensitive to the opinions of others, in that he said that his need for good grades was partly related to a need to make his parents proud. He also anticipated that people would treat him as a more mature individual if he did what he was supposed to do, and that they would treat him worse and give him less responsibility if he did poorly. At the same time, he expressed the belief that the school environment provides a support structure for his efforts. Specifically, he remarked that teachers would continue to go over subject matter and answer questions for as long as he struggled to understand it.

Responding to the same question regarding people’s reactions to changing academic performance, Edward emphasized the more negative aspect of interactions when he suggested that low grades would lead others to perceive one as if they were “dumb, or not as sophisticated as others, or didn’t try as much.” This clearly illustrates a situation in which students are aware of the perceptions that are being predicated upon them. In turn it suggests the danger that those perceptions and that awareness may become self-reinforcing. Each student made it quite clear that he does care about his performance and schoolwork. If, in spite of this sense of caring, they receive low grades that lead others to perceive them in a contrary fashion, that could be a psychologically hurtful experience, or worse yet, grounds to question what their effort is worth, if it is poorly received by peers and teachers.

Research Question 3

The third set of responses dealt with the more specific question of the essential features of students' interactions with his teachers and with the school as a whole. When asked about how he felt about his new school overall, Nate described it as a "safe environment." As mentioned in the previous question, one aspect of this is the willingness of teachers to respond to problems and to provide help to whatever extent is needed. Jack seemed to share this sentiment, and was able to identify a couple of specific individuals who would give the most help if problems arose. Edward agreed that if he needed extra help he would be sure to receive it.

Nate also pointed out that the summer transition program gave him and other students an opportunity to practice school-related behaviors and understand the way things would be different in their new setting. With this he implied that summer transition program students may have an enhanced opportunity to develop a relationship with the school as an institution.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question concerned the essential features of interaction with peers. Jack described his peers as all sharing a similarly serious perspective on high school, post-transition. His view is that everyone understands that their performance matters to a greater extent than it did in middle school, that this adds pressure to everyone, and that that is for the best. In Jack's journal he reported that a visit to his middle school by high school students had contributed to his understanding of the situation he would be entering, and that this helped him to develop techniques for dealing with the pressure. He wrote, "I worked on being more organized right away and took

their advice to use Google Calendar to keep organized and to set reminders. I also remember what they said about talking to your teachers for more help.” These anecdotes indicate that Jack’s interactions with his peers have largely been positive and have served to reinforce good behaviors and to support his academic goals.

Jack added that the summer transition program had an effect similar to this visit. Nate perceived its effectiveness, as well, insofar as he agreed with the statement that he had become a source of knowledge for students who did not participate in the summer transition program. Here it can be seen that students who did participate are capable of quickly taking on the same roles as those high school students who helped Jack to anticipate his then-forthcoming adjustment.

Nate and Edward both touched upon the topic of peer conflict. Edward was asked how he would handle the situation if he ever had a disagreement with somebody, and he indicated that if another student had a problem with him, he would talk it out with that person and that it “wouldn’t be that big of a deal.” However, he also reported that he didn’t believe other students were aware of the fact that this is how he would handle the situation. Nate took a similar approach, though his response to the question had unique implications. He specifically accepted the possibility of his personal responsibility for conflicts when he gave a hypothetical situation in which “I don’t even notice what I’m doing wrong.” He also attached his conversational, understanding approach to conflict resolution to the issue of peers’ perceptions: “I don’t have to be seen as a negative person.” Comments like this represent students’ awareness of external perceptions, and they suggest that those perceptions can serve as motivation for conscious controls and changes of personal behavior and performance.

Nate also indicated that his circle of friends was expanding. “I’ve communicated more with other students since middle school, and not just with the same groups,” he said. When asked about how he felt about his classmates overall, he observed that these people are “nice and respectful” towards him, and that this makes them good sources of in-class collaboration. Jack similarly indicated that peer relationships were helpful at school, though he focused on the closeness rather than the quantity of those relationships. Jack pointed out that he has one friend in particular whom he calls to check about homework assignments, and vice versa.

Research Question 5

Research question number five asked how teachers’ and peers’ apparent perceptions of students affected those students’ behaviors. Jack described the first days of high school as being stressful and leading him to be insular while attempting to memorize information and adapt. But he added that recognition of his peers as being subject to the same stresses helped him to cope. On the other hand, he admitted to being wary of speaking up to calm down fellow students and secure the work environment that he personally needed. Jack claimed that if he were to do that, “I think everyone in the classroom would turn on me.” This speaks to the potential negative influences of external perceptions upon internal behavior changes. Students may be personally inclined towards more positive, academically-oriented behavior in some circumstances, and yet draw back from them out of fear of poor reception from among their peers.

Despite this, Jack clearly recognized the classroom environment as having a potentially serious impact on the individuals within it. Discussing the question of his general sense of other students in class, he put this concept of environmental influence in

context of teacher behaviors: “If the teacher’s having a bad day, then everyone has a bad day. But if a teacher’s, like, in a good mood and is all fun and happy, then everyone’s, like, happy. So it really depends on the teacher.” This data strongly suggests that the student feels as though he personally responds to changing perceptions and attitudes in his educational environment. It stands to reason that if he were the focus of those perceptions and attitudes, they would elicit a particularly strong response or the perception thereof.

Edward emphasized a different dimension of teacher influence. He stated that he perceives expectations in high school as being “a little bit easier” than those in high school. Edward evidently perceived teachers as being less closely connected to students in his new settings and less likely to “hold your hand.” Notably, this seems to be in tension with Nate’s observations that teachers are highly responsive and willing to go over material *ad nauseam*. However, the difference between the two comments may simply be a matter of student initiative. That is, together both students may be saying that teachers are highly responsive and communicative, but only in situations where students have personally sought them out for help.

Edward further expressed some concerns about the possibility of being perceived as having poor initiative or less interest in education. He stated that if he missed a homework assignment and the entire class was made aware of it, that would make him look as if he didn’t care, which, he says, is not the case. This is indicative of the general motivational qualities of apparent student and peer perceptions. On one hand, the fear of self-misrepresentation before the classroom is a motivator that prompts the student to complete homework. On the other hand, the fear of misrepresentation may be a

psychological stressor, and the apparent perception that arises from actually missing an assignment may affect self-esteem or, in the long run, self-perception.

Nate, on the other hand, seemed almost entirely positive about his in-class interactions. When considering the question of whether people would notice him acting differently in class, he described himself as ordinarily being outgoing and “always raising my hand, answering questions... willing to help other people out if they have trouble.” He claimed to raise his hand in response to almost every question. But based on his self-description, his talkativeness does not correlate with disobedience or lack of focus. In response to the question of whether he acts the way people expect him to, he said, “I know that I’m supposed to give the respect to the teachers,” and thus, “I would just go along with what they have to say.” This series of self-descriptions paints an interesting picture. Nate seems to perceive himself as an attentive and generally well-behaved student, and he seems proud of this self-image, and thus committed to making sure that his teachers agree with it. This is a likely reinforcing factor in his efforts to be respectful and follow classroom protocols.

Research Question 6

The sixth research question asked to what extent, and in what ways, the student feels prepared for high school. Edward stated that he was ready for the independence of high school, a remark that seems to reflect upon the perception he expressed in a sideline conversation that emerged in response to the question of whether he acts the way he is expected to in class. He described middle school teachers as “trying to hold your hand,” a situation that he saw as quite unlike the independence afforded to him in high school. However, when asked if he felt he was personally ready for high school, he also said that

in general he “might have been halfway through ready and halfway through unready” for high school as of his completion of middle school. He knew some of what was expected of him academically, but did not have complete context for this. He cited the summer transition program of helping him with the physical adjustment by making him more familiar with the high school building.

When spontaneously asked, in his interview session, about the meaning of the summer transition program, Jack recognized his participation in it as being based on the need of “a little bit more help” after being perhaps “a little lost in middle school.” But far more than familiarizing students with the building, Jack saw the program as enhancing preparedness by telling eighth grade students “what to expect and what to do to be successful.” Nate shared this sense of the program, as indicated by his response to a similarly spontaneous interview question about whether summer transition program teachers had helped him in understanding specific high-school-related processes. He said that the program gave participants “more time to understand how to do things in high school,” and the ability to practice those procedures and behaviors.

Nate regarded himself as being ready for high school because he was ready for maturity and the acquisition of more responsibilities. Nevertheless, the transition program did not eliminate all anxieties for Nate, who expressed particular concern about homework, which always gives him the feeling that he is missing an assignment.

Nate also phrased his perception of the summer transition program in particularly positive terms. Discussing whether he thought his peers perceived him different based on his participation in that program, he acknowledged that some of them might think of it as “a full-out summer school” and conclude that the participant was stupid for going there.

But Nate dismissed this characterization, focusing on the fact that “it wasn’t necessarily just for learning,” but gave participants an advantage in adjusting to the structure and culture of the school. Nate used this perspective in gauging his own readiness for high school both in general and as a consequence of the transition program. He also stated that he would be able to explain this to other students, suggesting a high degree of confidence in his new situation, sufficient to allow him to overcome potential challenges to his self-perception that might come from his peers.

Research Question 7

The seventh research question compared the student’s sense of belonging in high school to his sense of belonging in middle school. All three participants perceived positive features of the school culture, which made them feel that they belonged there either to a greater extent or in a different way than they had in middle school. Edward reported that everyone at the high school seemed welcoming, and that the environment provided new opportunities to get involved with the community and learn things that are of personal interest to the student. He concluded that this freedom and responsibility led teachers to treat students more like adults than they had in middle school. Jack regarded high school as a place where individual characteristics could be more easily expressed, meaning that people tend to group together according to their interests and shared intellect, more so than they had in middle school. Meanwhile, Nate emphasized a greater degree of connectedness between the school’s teachers, its community, and the student’s family.

Research Question 8

Research question number eight shifted from comparative experiences to student's expectations of the future. It asked what experiences students anticipate as they complete their transition. Jack indicated that as of the time of the interview, he was still very aware of being in transition. As such, when asked what he was looking forward to next year, he referred to "getting the hang of everything," "knowing where to go," and simply having "a normal day." He worries about the prospect of never completing this transition and being left behind, struggling to keep up. More specifically, he expressed worries about completion of volunteer hours, and about math, in which he had struggled during eighth grade. However, he expressed hope of improvement, thanks to help from a tutor.

Jack's worries may be connected to a sense of the greater importance of high school education. When asked what it was like for him to graduate from middle school to high school, he explained that the transition entails the requirement to "change your mind" and "to think that this is more serious than maybe eighth grade and seventh grade." Edward, when asked the similar question of how a person goes about graduating from middle school to high school, made similar comments, saying that "you kind of have to graduate mentally because it's a big change from being in middle school." He elaborated by saying that whereas in middle school a lot of things were done for the student, in high school he will have to rely on himself and take on a lot more work.

Nate also acknowledged a difference in that middle school didn't provide many choices, whereas high school will involve many more opportunities in the form of clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities. Jack reported being "enthused and excited" about

taking advantage of these opportunities, after being asked about how he felt about his new school overall. Expressing a slightly different perspective, Nate, when asked about what he was looking forward to for the rest of the year, stated that he was mainly interested in getting good grades, because “I’m tired of feeling like I’m not good enough for where I am.” Taken together, these remarks seem to indicate that the high school transition is viewed largely as an opportunity, through which the student can have new experiences and deliberately reverse the negative aspects of their previous middle school experiences.

Research Question 9

The ninth research question asked what steps students commonly take to improve their performance and social lives. Relevant comments were numerous. Jack pointed out that he regularly checks over his homework, after having learned the seriousness of small mistakes during middle school. He also keeps in touch with a friend to make sure that he knows what assignments are due, and in other instances he relies on an electronic classroom interface for this information. If all else fails, Jack e-mails the teacher directly. Edward also pointed out that he has a friend whom he uses for the purpose of keeping up to date about assignments.

In addition, Jack reported that he makes sure to utilize his free periods and free time in class to review for tests or quizzes, and to check over homework. Edward noted that such free time is helpful in the event that he forgets about a homework assignment. Though he tries to do this at home consistently, he keeps in contact with classmates who will remind him if he has forgotten about something, which he can sometimes then complete during the day.

As to meeting these sorts of people, and people in general, Edward indicated that a person can join sports and clubs. He has also met people in his lunch period, including upperclassmen who reached out to him. But those social contacts haven't severed others, and Edward reports splitting his time between upperclassmen and students in his own grade, and will not leave his current friends. Meanwhile, non-academic activities benefit Edward's engagement with his academics. Specifically, he recognizes that if he doesn't do well in classes, he will not be able to continue playing soccer. This shows that in at least some cases, social and academic concerns can mutually support each other, with one providing motivation for the transitional student to maintain focus on the other.

On a much different note, Nate suggests that he can improve his academic performance through persistence, by using teacher responsiveness to go over a question or subject as much as is needed until he understands it. In this it can be seen that transitional students may also enjoy intrinsic motivation for improved performance, and that at least in the short term it prompts students to commit to vigorous action in pursuit of that aim.

Research Question 10

The final research question asks to what extent students see their academic and future successes as being determined by circumstances. To get at this subject, one interview question asked students how in control they felt, and this generated some positive responses. Edward explicitly stated that he is in control of his grades, as well as the people he surrounds himself with, and that this latter point is important since it can impact one's own character or mental states. As a consequence of this sense of control, Edward has a clear vision for himself as graduating with an average of As and Bs for

each of his four years of high school, and then going onto college, possibly the University of Florida. He added that:

I hope by then that the soccer team will win a championship or two, and um, I get, like, scholarships from that, from soccer, so I can go to college too with that.

Here he acknowledges the partial influence of circumstance, since that victory must be a team effort, but will lead to personal benefits.

Jack also sees himself as college-bound, and he envisions a plan for initial steps to be taken towards that endpoint. This involves going over college options, talking to others, and visiting campuses. He expresses a sense of control over where he ends up and what he does with his education. This sense of control is not total, though, and Jack acknowledges that not all plans and aspirations can work out. But he explained that the desire to go to, for instance, Harvard, can lead a person to do well enough that even if he falls short of that goal, he still enjoys extremely positive outcomes.

In the shorter term, Jack sees himself as being

very fluent about the school, and knowing a lot of people and teachers...And being one of those people that walk around that, maybe like people would say hi to, and you're in all sorts of conversations.

But it is unclear from this description how much of that responsiveness from others is determined by them alone, and how much of it is under his control.

Nate states explicitly that he is in control of his academics and his behavior, and that it is up to him to keep on top of work and understand what is needed of him. Similar to Jack, Nate sees himself as taking the initiative in comparing colleges and choosing the one before taking that next step with his education. So what?

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide an overview of the students experience in their summer transition program and their transition from middle school to high school. These findings were derived from detailed analysis of the three interviews with each student, the students' journals, and their graphic elicitations. Students were greatly influenced by their teachers, their peers, and their community. Those elements along with the teachers and school environment also helped shape how the post-transition students see themselves and their futures. The findings also suggest that the students used several techniques to help establish themselves socially and academically. They are also driven by their success or failure in academics, including their relationships with their teachers, and the overall environment of the classroom and school.

The next chapter of this dissertation will discuss the outcomes and further implications of this study to education professionals and those designing programs to help middle school students make a successful transition to high school. Further discussion will examine implications for students' academic and social lives.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

This study has several possible implications for the development of a model or theory relevant to the practices of social promotion and grade retention. While educational leaders nationwide cannot decisively agree on either of these policies (Greene & Winters, 2006; Jimerson, 2002; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; WIHSR, 1999), this research suggests that there are a number of factors to consider when developing school policies and practices for managing student failure in a previous year of school, especially when that year marks a transition from one school or one program to another. It is not entirely clear to what extent this current research can be fully linked to teachers' perception of their students, but the students in this study do follow a pattern that suggests that there is a strong interaction with their environment at multiple levels, which plays a role in student experiences. Furthermore, the research illustrates the operation of certain conceptual models cited in this study, as well as pointing to the factors that contribute to those frameworks of interactions and student outcomes.

This chapter will discuss the findings in light of what is already known about practices and theories drawn from relevant literature and presented in chapter 2. It especially focuses on the findings in relation to corresponding theory, and especially the key theoretical assumptions regarding self-fulfilling prophecies, quiet defeatism, and the roll of teachers in these phenomena.

Discussion of Findings

Environments such as schools, neighborhoods, and interaction with peers and family shape both the psychological development and academic outcomes of adolescents (Duncan, Boisjoly, & Harris, 2001). In fact, it is those social environments that shape who young people are and how they perceive themselves. This study is built around the context of self-perception as shaped by environment. As stated in chapter 2, the single most important background source for the proposed study is the work of Becker (1963), who developed the Social Reaction Theory. Rist (1970, 1977), who built on Becker's theory, established the framework for the research conducted here. Instead of the negative outcome often associated with Rist's ideas of "self-fulfilling prophecies" and "quiet defeatism," this study demonstrated that these two phenomena were both recognized and feared by participants, and thus served as motivators in helping students to struggle against former perceptions as they made their way through a transitional phase in their education.

As is seen in the theme of self-perceptions and expectations, the three students actually had fairly high expectations for themselves, not wanting to let down themselves or their families. Jack's statement, "I expect for me to get honor roll every marking period of the year," is one indication of these expectations. Another student noted, "Academically, I think I'm doing great so far. My grades are where I want them to be. They're not too low. I don't have anything below a C, which is what I want to try to do." Despite previous struggles, each student demonstrated high personal expectations in the early stages of their high-school careers.

However, in light of those previous struggles, the participants also seemed to be highly aware of the possibility of not living up to their expectations. Likewise, they were keenly aware of the implications of such failure. At least one participant recognized that his inclusion in the summer transition program reflected the fact that his performance in eighth grade had been lagging and that he might not have been initially prepared for the transition to high school. All three reported that the summer transition program had been helpful in establishing this readiness, even if it came at a later date than it did for many of their peers. This fact further illustrates that the high school transition marks a conscious departure from students' previous experiences, and thus an opportunity to detach from the self-fulfilling prophecies that might have been established by them. The students in this study are aware of the fact that expectations have changed for them, that challenges are substantially different, and that readiness for the transition is of issue. And yet despite all of this, and despite seemingly being aware of their own troubled academic backgrounds, the students in this study are optimistic about their future performance, in contrast to the expectation of quiet defeatism that comes of having been recognizably associated with failure in past endeavors.

These observations indicate that transitional periods in education may be regarded as either threats or opportunities when it comes to compensating for prior student failure and associated perceptions of those students by teachers, peers, and the students themselves. On one hand, the presence of enhanced or modified expectations may cause students to feel increasingly overwhelmed, knowing that failure at one level compromises their readiness for the next, and that subsequent failure reinforces existing negative perceptions. On the other hand, the fact that the situation is materially different from what

they are used to means that students have a chance to essentially start fresh in the new stage of their education.

This latter possibility seems to be strongly reflected in participants' comments. It can be seen in their optimistic, forward-looking perspective on their own performance, and it can also be seen in some of the things that they report about their social lives and interactions with peers and teachers. They indicated that they were able to either form friendships with or receive guidance from upperclassmen. And in any event, their new setting brought with it a new set of interactions, many of them productive, as in the case of students partnering to keep each other up to date about homework assignments.

These latter observations indicate that transitional periods of education may often present a special case both for self-fulfilling-prophecy models of social reaction and for the prospects and threats associated with social promotion and grade retention. The existing literature indicates that there is a very good reason why districts and policymakers are unable to settle on either of the competing policies for responding to student failure. Put simply, neither constitutes a complete solution to the problem, and both bring their own sets of problems to the students' subsequent experiences.

Support for grade retention is, of course, based on the notion that student readiness for each subsequent level of education is paramount, and that students are far more likely to fail at higher levels if they have already failed at lower levels. Support for social promotion, on the other hand, is often based on arguments regarding self-esteem and self-perception (Green, 2010; Jimerson, 2002), and these arguments are easily placed into the context of Social Reaction Theory and the self-fulfilling-prophecy model. The possibility of that model operating differently at the ninth grade level may actually

enhance existing arguments that social promotion is less harmful than grade retention for students at this particular stage in their academic lives.

The primary danger that grade retention brings into students' lives is an increased risk of dropout (Vaughan, 1991), and this risk may be attributed to reinforced student perceptions of themselves as failures who are out of step with their classmates. While social promotion may not completely compensate for those problems, this study seems to indicate that those problems are much diminished in students making the transition from middle school to high school. Despite academic problems at the prior level, each of the participants in this study fully envisions himself reversing his former failures after the transitional period, and not only completing high school but also going on to college.

Furthermore, the transitional experience of these students appeared to entail formation of some close connections with teachers, leading to a sense of being able to rely upon at least some of them, and diminishing the danger of those teachers being the source of negative perceptions that reinforce poor student attitudes toward school. Student accounts of these relationships were often given without reference to teachers at prior grade levels, so there is a distinct possibility that the social relationships at the new level represent a departure from previous negative experiences.

In other instances, the students specifically commented that middle school teachers made stricter demands and guided students more closely through their work, but did not trust those students to take full responsibility for themselves. This is clearly indicative of a different perception of social interactions and student prospects on either side of the transition, and it implies that retention at this level may have caused students

to be stuck for another year in a situation that had negative or, at best, neutral, impacts on those students' perceptions of themselves with respect to their academic settings.

Admittedly, there is little indication as to whether students agreed or disagreed with the approach taken by eighth grade teachers, but it is abundantly clear that they are ready and eager to take on the perceived increase in responsibility that comes in ninth grade, and this suggests that the ninth grade social and academic setting may be a better place in which they can work to overcome prior failures. In fact, the firmness with which each student insists that he is ready for that responsibility suggests that he may have felt insulted or personally constrained by the absence of it in a situation of retention. It is also possible that that feeling of constraint or offense, among retained students, is a partial explanation for their feeling of disaffection and their high dropout rate.

Retention, by its very nature, would keep students hung up on past experiences, struggling to get through the same situations after failing in them the last time around. Regardless of whatever potential this might have to reinforce fledgling skills and knowledge, this past-oriented method of intervention would be out of keeping with the attitudes held by the participants in this study. It was apparent from their graphic elicitations that the students were all future-oriented and positive-minded about their plans, and not looking back in defeat or seeing a negative self-fulfilling prophecy – a situation which is perhaps attributable to the fact that they had been promoted into a transitional phase, and given the tools to feel prepared for that transition, via their inclusion in the summer transition program.

This difference between the past orientation of retention programs and the future orientation of transitional students is a key point in demonstrating the apparent strength

of the summer transition program as an alternative intervention for at-risk and failing students at the eighth grade level. The existing literature seems to establish firstly that both social promotion and grade retention are flawed responses to student failure, and secondly that policy debates nonetheless focus on arguing for one over the other, as opposed to establishing more comprehensive alternatives. This study indicates that summer transition programs may be put forward as one such alternative, in that they allow students to make remedial gains in their learning and social development, but without losing the sense of progress and personal motivation that comes with the transition not only to the next grade level but, more importantly, to an entirely different school. It is conceivable that such a sense of progress could be built into retention programs as well as long as those programs involved much more deliberate design than simply holding students back and asking them to essentially do the same things all over again.

But it is much easier to think of this sort of program as being a supplement to social promotion than grade retention, especially in light of how seamlessly the two programs seem to blend together in the context of the current study. Indeed, the student participants made it clear that they had entered ninth grade without a significant sense of even having been socially promoted. This, no doubt, helps to undermine the self-fulfilling prophecies that might otherwise have been manifest. Conversely, the advantages provided by the transition program allowed students to compensate for their previous deficiencies by actually feeling more advanced than some of their peers in other respects. This has clearly helped them to retain or even expand their feelings of motivation and belonging within the school.

These observations of course raise the question of how students can be led towards such positive perspectives in light of negative past experiences. While Rist (1970) focused on “ghetto” education in his understanding of self-fulfilling prophecies, and Becker’s work emphasized the issue as a problem in education, others have taken a “cause and effect” approach to the same theories, which may help one to conceptualize how self-fulfilling prophecies can be deliberately resisted and undermined. Darley and Fazio (1980), for example, identify six different routes by which teacher perceptions can help shape a student’s self-perception and identity development:

1. The teacher develops a set of expectations related to the student
2. The expectations influence a teacher’s reaction to the student
3. The student interprets the teacher’s action
4. The student responds to the teacher’s reaction as he or she interprets it
5. The teacher interprets the students’ response
6. The student interprets his or her response to the teacher

This understanding of the process suggests that the theory of self-fulfilling prophecies goes beyond the students’ understanding of themselves, but is an issue that grows out of the student’s environment where he or she is shaped.

In the present case, the summer transition program constitutes a part of that environment, and it influences the way the longer-term environment of ninth grade develops. It gives students a longer period of time to acclimate themselves to the emerging situation and it allows relatively private interaction between socially promoted students and teachers and faculty, so that there are considerable opportunities for more realistic, less presumptive perceptions of those students to develop. As Darley and

Fazio's (1980) six-stage process occurs, the students sense of who they are comes into view, as explained by Becker (1963) and his social reaction theory. But as that process is controlled by the more positive factors associated, for instance, with the summer transition program, that self-image becomes more salutary.

This is not to say that the students in the study, or participants in the summer transition program in general, have only positive self-perceptions to guide their adaptation and pursuit of academic success. Quite the contrary, the three students in this study also expressed the fragility and malleability that Becker discusses. However, the effect on the students was not as negative as Becker may have predicted. Instead, that fragility represents a fairly constant threat to the positive self-perceptions they had managed to develop. This is evident from the fact that participant communications frequently expressed a fear of mistakes and referred to the possible consequences of failure. Students worried about missing homework, failing to satisfy requirements such as service hours, and letting themselves down. These were clearly not the expected outcomes in any case, but in every case they were recognized as genuine threats. The students' worries did not evolve into self-fulfilling prophecies in the classic manner predicted by Rist (1970, 1977), but the theory still applies even though it does not operate in the unidirectional or dramatic way that can be expected from the model.

Meanwhile, the consequences that they tended to envision did not reflect the future orientation of their optimism and academic plans. Instead, when communication turned to the subject of failure or error, students expressed the belief that these things would affect other people's perceptions of them, and imply, for instance, that the student did not care about his work or outcomes. The overall impression of these students is that

their self-concepts are vulnerable to outside influence, but that despite this and despite their prior academic difficulties, they have managed to secure a positive and optimistic outlook on their academic and social future around the time of their transition to ninth grade. For these students the negatives are not clearly negative, only potentially so. They are determined by interactions among the student, his or her peers, family members, and authority figures from the students' environment. These interactions help the students shape how they understand themselves and their goals in high school and beyond, for better or for worse.

Becker's and Rist's idea of "quiet defeatism" is not fully realized in the situations of the study, likely due to several important factors that suggest that there is some integration between the negative and the positive forces in these adolescents' life. It can be seen that peer interactions and teacher perceptions matter, but these things neither alone nor together shape a student to the point of defeatism, quiet or otherwise. Both Becker and Rist seem to suggest that once others have helped adolescents shape their sense of self, then little can be changed about their potential. But the findings of this study suggest that students' identities are not set in stone and that they are always processing experiences that are both encouraging and disparaging. According to Rist's ideas, the labeling of students will have a long-term negative effect, but for the students in this study, that was not the case.

Gender Limitations

It must be acknowledged, however, that to whatever extent the above observations can be described as representing the typical socially promoted student experience, they can only be reasonably applied to the experience of the socially

promoted *male* student. The research involved participation from only three students, and each of these was male, owing in part to poor luck and the withdrawal of consent from female respondents. But in addition to these factors, the larger factor at play in this area was the small number of potential female participants from which to choose in the first place. Of a total 30 socially promoted students, only seven were female.

This allows for the argument to be made that the gender limitations in this study are not in fact weaknesses, and do not cast significant doubt on the accuracy of the conclusions. That is to say, the aim of the research was to uncover the typical experience of post-middle school social promotion in the wake of a summer transition program at the given research site. And as it happens, being male is one aspect of that typical experience. Naturally, it is possible that female students would have notably different characteristics with respect to self-esteem and self-concept, but observations of those female-specific features would be more representative of the socially promoted student experience in schools where the social promotion of girls is more prevalent. Similarly, a study that features gender parity would generate representative results only in a school where there are similar numbers of socially promoted girls and boys.

Of course, all of this information is important to a broader understanding of socially promoted student experience in American schools as a whole. As such, the current study does not pretend to be anything more than a starting point for ongoing investigation into the lived experiences of socially promoted and post-transition students. Nevertheless, the data gathered from the three participants at the given level and in the given institution should be viewed as representing some of the common features of the

post-transition experience, at least until such time as further research shows the above-discussed data to be peculiar to certain categories and demographics of students.

Even then, it will be important to confirm that such future research not only compensates for the gender limitations of the study but also emulates or parallels the strengths afforded by those gender limitations. It is worth noting that the incidental absence of female participants from the final sample may have actually boosted the efficiency and trustworthiness of the data gathering process. The study was conducted by a solitary male researcher, and it is fair to assume that male students would typically be more comfortable engaging in candid conversation with such an individual than female students would be. This observation is underscored by the circumstances contributing to the ultimate absence of female participants in the current study.

Two female students initially returned consent forms, but both discontinued participation in light of council from a female teacher with whom they had a pre-existing relationship. In the same sense as these students were more inclined to develop such a relationship with a female teacher and more inclined to heed her advice about the study than that of a male teacher, those students may have been far more comfortable talking about their lived experiences with a female researcher. However, no such secondary researcher was available for the study, and so staff limitations created a situation in which matching gender limitations provided presumably stronger data.

Students' Environment and How It Shapes Their Self-Perception

In considering the students' understanding of themselves, there were several differences between what would be predicted on the basis of conceptual models illustrated in certain literature and what the three participants actually experienced. When

considering the self-fulfilling-prophecy point of view, for example, no students speak of teachers who are overly negative or who had bad things to say about the student. Does this mean that all teachers were supportive? Likely not, but it may be an indication that any negative experience with a teacher was outweighed by positive experiences. It may also be a clue that these students were able to internalize their positive experiences better because the system in which the positive is communicated operated in an effective manner (Rist, 1977). In other words, the quiet defeatism that Rist discusses actually is not there or never has the chance to develop.

The essential experience for the three students in this study evidently included positive aspects that would not only prevent them from dropping out of school in the short term but would also help them stay in school until graduation. Not only does their intervention start early, actually prior to high school, but the students perceive themselves as successful by the ninth grade. These types of findings are entirely consistent with MacIver and MacIver's (2009) findings about how student performance in high school is affected by ninth grade academic success. In their study, MacIver and MacIver found that students who frequently got poor grades early, failed courses, and remained behind in one grade had a greater chance of leaving school before graduation. Students may realize by ninth grade that they would not have enough credits to graduate. Without intervention many of those students would just give up. The students in this study, however, did have intervention and saw their forward progress as successful.

Given the literature, the students in this study have a strong chance of continuing to do well and of graduating from high school. These findings are also consistent with Bowman's (2005) discovery that without intervention early failure in school to the point

of being left behind does not produce improved academic outcomes but, rather, sets the student up for future academic failings. While the role of the teacher is clearly expressed by the students in this study, one other message is that their peers heavily influenced them. It appears that the students' sense of self came from their peers just as much as from their teachers. This is also consistent with the literature that focuses on the influence of peers and the "in-group" and "out-group" dynamic where a student's identity and development of social norms are strongly related to peer groups and where they fit within or outside of their group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner et al., 1987). One student, Jack, described the role of his peers in his journal:

Last year the high school students came to the middle school to talk to us and this helped me start to really think... It was nice to hear that they had struggled with adjusting to high school and they figured things out and are now helping the upcoming freshman. I worked on being more organized right away and took their advice to use Google Calendar to keep organized and to set reminders. I also remember what they said about talking to your teachers for more help. The summer program was also talking about the same things. It gave me a better idea of what to expect and how to be more organized.

In the above example, Jack describes feeling connected to a like-minded young person with experiences similar to his own. He describes the influence the high school students had on how he believed that he could be. The students' presentation helped Jack see how he could be a part of the in-group. These messages were reinforced by the program and so helped Jack shape his sense of self.

In conversation, the students showed strong signs of positive social capital, meaning that they displayed positive pro-social behavior within their groups, including support for each other, and lack of arrests, focus on school, and displaying no negative behavior (Porter, 1998; Putnam, 2000). But the students could have also experienced bad influences from their peers, in the form of antisocial or negative behavior. Every

indication, however, is that the students in this study did not receive such negative feedback from their peers or from most of their teachers. Furthermore, it can be inferred from the study that the students' sense of clear separation between the pre-transitional eighth grade and post-transitional ninth grade likely contributed to the ease with which those students developed new and positive interactions, separate from whatever was related to their poor performance at the earlier stage. What this suggests is that the students' peers, along with other factors, may have served as a protective factor against earlier failings. Unfortunately, the sample size is too small to draw definite conclusions, but the students' relative success and their relationship with their peers does raise interesting possibilities.

As Becker's (1963) core assertion from the literature is explored here—that casually employed, frequently inaccurate terms of reference have an immense, clearly discernible impact on individual attitudes and behaviors—it is important to understand the relevance of the peer interaction and influence among students because of its potential to shape self-perceptions and contribute to character-forming behaviors. The social context for the students in this study is extremely important in that it shapes who they are as well as how they respond to their environment. Using Becker's theory as a guideline, at least for the students in this study, one cannot say that negative statements worked to shape individual self-identification and self-esteem, and objective performance, but positive support and statements did seem to exist and help shape the students' views of themselves. In short, the students in this study may, in fact, be fragile and malleable, but perhaps because of the intervention of the transition program, positive rather than problem behavior resulted from that malleability.

Data from this study suggests that multiple influences came from the environment and that, while negative behavior was not an issue, students were shaped by those around them; some of them with power and authority and others without. This reality is consistent with aspects of the social-constructivist view espoused in the classic works of Lewin (1946) and Memmi (1965). According to Memmi, the essential nature of the relationship between any two groups is that comprised of a powerful party and a powerless party, a privileged and under privileged. The group with power and privilege can greatly influence the less powerful group, but these situations most often occur within an environmental context. More recently, Hardiman and Jackson (1997) framed the concept of target and agent status to reflect privilege and power among groups. Agent status suggests power within the relationship, while target means a social identity that is marginalized. Those with target status have less influence because they must navigate a system that agents control. In doing this, those with agent status dictate the context of the target's experiences.

What the students in this study represent is in keeping with Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory of the ecological model and what Miller and Garren (2008) call the "social identity pie." Bronfenbrenner's model suggests that children have different realities that interact with each other (micro, meso, macro) in the development of a child. None of these environments are better than the other, but they all constantly interact and equally affect one another. Given the other theories, this interaction helped create and shape the experiences shared by the three students in the current study. They shaped their experiences based on their interaction inside and outside of school and inside and outside of their families. In the Bronfenbrenner model these elements interact with psychological

factors such as self-esteem and the benefits of nurturing. These academic and psychological issues, too, may also interact with environmental factors, such as the students' home life, extracurricular activities, and experiences with peers.

Miller and Garren (2008) use Bronfenbrenner's model as the foundation for their conceptual framing of social identity development, suggesting that no one is a bystander for a social environmental perspective. They use the metaphor of the "social identity pie," (p. 6), with the self in the center affected by ethnicity, identity, social class, and other social factors, but with all those elements driven by political climate, economy, history, community, family, institutions, culture, and religion. Like Bronfenbrenner, some of these elements are psychological, others social, and others political, but all exist within the developing person.

By seeking out a comprehensive account of the subjective experience of the socially promoted student, this study shines light on the various internal and external factors that affect that experience and the broader life of the socially promoted student. While the mental responses of such students are the focus of this study, the study is also sensitive to the fact that those responses are not self-contained. Rather, they are manifested in and affected by home life, school work, social interaction with peers, social interaction with teachers, and more. The themes examined by this study—self-perception, future orientation, adaptation to change, social capital and reciprocity—can be better understood with reference to the entirety of a student's lived experiences surrounding the period of social promotion. The study indicates that in the mind of each student, the development of those themes has multiple sources, in turn leading to the conclusion that educational interventions alone may not be sufficient to overcome the

stigma attached to social promotion or the negative effects of prior failure. The influence of friends, family, other acquaintances, and personal development all are also factors.

Reflection and analysis of the students' experience data have prompted thought to a range of theories, which suggests that education policymakers and practitioners may see models for social promotion or grade retention programs within these experiences. Several policy implications are discussed in the following section.

Implications of the Research

Policy

The centerpiece of this study's implications for policy is that it points to the potential effectiveness of alternative intervention programs in general, and the summer transition program in particular. This research may be seen as demonstrating how such programs can preserve student motivation and engagement, when these things might otherwise be placed at risk by grade retention. Participants in this study showed self-perceptions that encouraged them to look eagerly towards academic success and graduation. Policymakers would be well advised to take a close look at how such self-perceptions are either supported or undermined by their policies of intervention with failing or at-risk students.

Tanner's (2003) research suggests that early detection and early intervention are effective in dropout prevention. Among the students in this current study, none presently seem to be at high risk of academic failure, but they all did experience a program that focused on their successful transition into high school from middle school. There is strong evidence in the literature that this kind of focused attention is helpful in putting children on a path toward graduation (MacIver & MacIver, 2009; Tanner, 2003). Focused

attention may well have benefited the young people in this current study. Also beneficial were the effects of increased responsibility and the corresponding sense of respect afforded to students by teachers and figures of authority. Thanks to focused attention and a sense of clear separation between two phases of education, students were highly motivated to succeed after making their transition.

This motivation and strong sense of self can further be related to five additional elements of student experiences that can be inferred from a close examination of the sentiments expressed by participants in this study. New programs or policies may benefit from inclusion of the following components:

1. Academic focus: helping students prepare for the academic load of high school
2. Nurturing: A bit of psychological as well as logistical handholding in the short term, which is relinquished, gradually and with warning, after it has contributed to a smooth transition
3. Self-esteem/self-efficacy building: Focusing on student confidence and success in high school. This could help students with building an “I can do it” attitude.
4. Peer/teacher relationships: Understanding how to use other students as successful peers and building relationships with teachers.
5. Environment outside of school: Consider the role of factors that do not include school academic factors such as sports and family members and friends.

One way in which to consider this area is to think about the larger factors that play a role in the students’ development and experience with middle school to high

school transition. These factors are important to a student's process because the student is still at a vulnerable developmental age (Greene & Winters, 2009). The academic factors may appear obvious, but those academic factors may interact with psychological factors such as self-esteem and the benefits of nurturing. These academic and psychological issues, too, may also interact with environmental factors, such as the students' home life, extracurricular activities, and experiences with peers. Much of this thinking is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1971) theory of the ecological model focusing on children's different realities that interact with each other. The model for programs in social promotion may look a bit like the suggestion illustrated by Figure 11. The middle school experience in such cases would come from an academic, psychological, and environmental perspective that influences what happens in high school. It should be clear that none of these environments are better than the other, but they all equally affect each other.

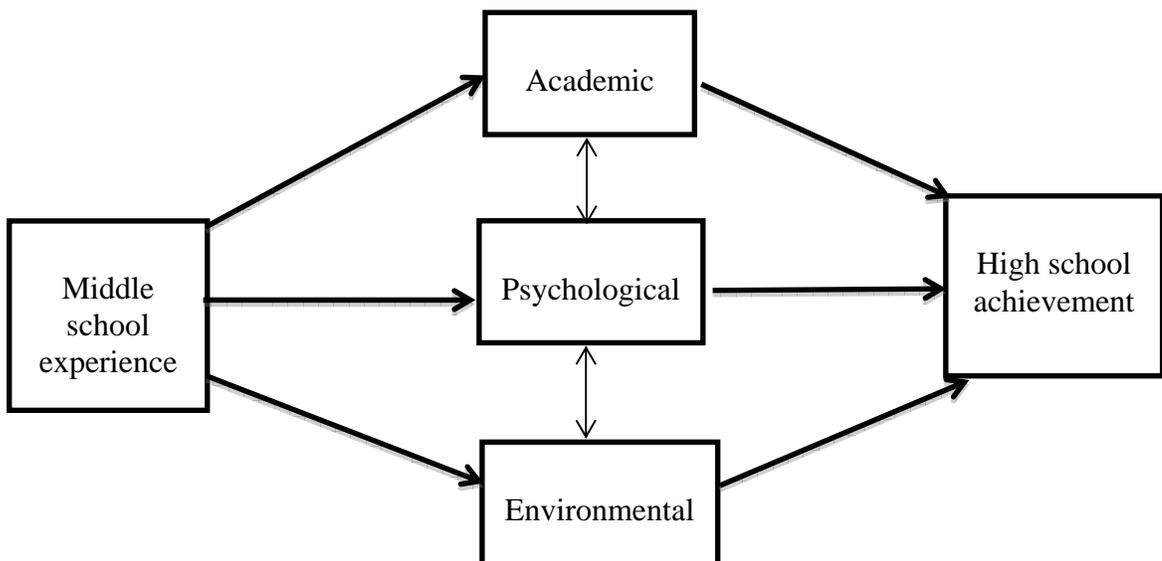


Figure 11. Social promotion transition.

Notable in Figure 11 is that no one element is more important than another. When examining the historical and conceptual literature, it is easy to find a debate over whether social promotion or grade retention is best. While the data opposing grade retention suggests negative outcomes for kids, social promotion alone has negative political and academic consequences (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). This study ultimately suggests that young people may benefit best from an alternative model that looks beyond the simple matter of retention or promotion and focuses on a combination of factors related to students' everyday experiences both in and outside of schools, regardless of whether those factors manifest in a new or repeat grade level.

Practice

In a practice context, teachers should consider the environmental and social reality of children in the classroom. Perhaps classroom teachers should consider the journey their students have taken to get to their classroom. What that entails is a consideration of students' life within and outside of the classroom, such as family dynamics and social relationships with peers. Given these findings, it is also necessary to consider the academic struggles of the student in order to put any struggles into context and allow for adjusting and outside help, if necessary. Finally, classroom teachers and administrators, alike, should consider the students' self-perception and perception of the school as that can shape their experiences as well.

Do teachers consider the future of their students? The students in this study were extremely future-oriented, which provides them with perspective and goals. Teachers and school administrators should think about the goals and future direction of their students,

and incorporate the students' stated desires and goals into communicative and task-setting strategies. This current research suggests that students who have struggled academically do think about their future and that it particularly matters to them.

Teachers and schools should be as willing and able to adapt to change as their students. These findings suggest that students spend a great deal of time adapting to various changes in their lives, both at school and in their homes. Ambiguity seems common to the students. As such, teachers and administrators may do well to adapt to similar uncertainty or the changing nature of the students' environment.

Teachers and administrators should also pay attention to the students' peer groups and their social group, keeping in mind that it is not just important to understand the social group, but to know what the student gives to and takes from the peer group. Understanding this reciprocity in the students' social environment appears particularly relevant to the students in this study because they were so defined by their peer groups.

Research

While this current study only focused on three students, the in-depth examination of their experiences provides us with a number of factors to consider in the research of social promotion. This research speaks to the complexity of a student's life. He or she does not just go to school, go home, study, sleep, and return to school the next day. Instead, while students spend a great deal of time in school, this study reminds us that they are shaped by multiple factors in many ways that they themselves may not fully understand. As such, this study raises the question of what is the student's experience of social promotion? What can be learned from someone who is going through the process?

This qualitative exploration of students' experiences raises many questions regarding the transition and social promotion process. For example, if some students are defying the "self-fulfilling-prophecy" model, then what are the driving forces behind that? Nate, spoke of a driving desire to do well; but would many others in his age group, who are growing through similar experiences, reach the same conclusion that they ought to aspire to high academic performance and that they really have the capability to achieve it? Why or why not? This research raises several questions for further inquiry that may help shape an effective social promotion model.

Further research could offer an even greater understanding of many of the dynamics that exist for the students. It might be helpful to use an approach similar to Telljohann & Price (1993) who used a qualitative study and content analysis to examine the experiences of gay and lesbian youth between the ages of 14 and 21, combining statistical data with interviews and observational study. Their approach used open- and closed-ended questionnaires to learn about day-to-day experiences, as well as collecting life history data in order to capture a fuller picture of students' experiences. Another approach may be similar to that employed by Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, and Blum (2010), who spent considerable time in the lives and schools of adolescents who were transitioning to other middle schools and high schools because of their parents' military careers and constant post transfers. They used a directed qualitative study approach to conduct interviews and focus groups with youth, parents, and school staff to learn about the transition-related stressors of military students, to identify ways children and family members coped with stress, and to identify strategies schools developed to ease

transition. Such a comprehensive approach could provide greater detail and understanding of the phenomenon.

Another way to uncover the dynamics of what is going on for students and explore the intersections among factors of school, family, and peers is through an in-depth ethnography or case study of the students' experiences. Such an approach may function as an alternative to the phenomenological methods on display in this study. That is, both techniques allow for consideration of significant qualitative factors beyond the educational policy or process being investigated. Whereas the phenomenological approach of this study sought to broadly characterize the diverse factors influencing students' lived experiences, in-depth ethnographies often give sharper focus to particular factors. Examples from prior research include Lisa Delpit's (2006) look at the intersection of school culture and individual children's cultures, and Jonathan Kozol's (2012) exploration of the homes and communities of school children.

In-depth ethnography thus presents an opportunity for subsequent research to build off of the phenomenological portraits that this study paints of post-transitional socially promoted students. Ethnographers may individually determine that certain cultural or environmental aspects of the student experience are particularly salient factors in the development of self-perception, self-concept, etc., and may elect to explore these in depth using their own methods. Furthermore, those methods can be combined with others in order to better uncover a qualitative account of cultural and behavioral lived experiences. This possibility has been effectively demonstrated by Brantlinger et al. (2005) in a study of special needs children which combined ethnographic techniques with

individual case studies in order to obtain two types of perspective on the day-to-day experience of the student group involved.

Finally, a program evaluation may be useful in fully determining the efficacy of the program in this study. Since a program evaluation is a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using data to help stakeholders better understand the effectiveness and efficiency of their organization (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010), such an approach would be useful to schools and policymakers. Program evaluation can also inform schools about the needs and logic of a program in addition to its costs and cost effectiveness.

In addition to the focus of this current study, researchers can expand on this program by also collecting cultural, socioeconomic, neighborhood, attitudinal, and life course data to fully understand the overall impact of the students' experiences. One useful approach may be a longitudinal study of students' experiences transitioning from middle school to high school and beyond, such as that conducted by Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, and Spas (2007), who examined depressive symptoms over time in adolescents from middle school as they transitioned to high school. Such detailed and longitudinal data can provide us with richer and more detailed information that could be implemented in a more specific context and that allows for evidence-based interventions. Further research in these regards can examine in more detail students environmental context: family, neighborhoods, and schools to provide a clearer understanding of the child's life experience. More detailed studies can also consider areas that this current research did not explore, such as race, economic status, health status, and other cultural

and demographic factors that would generate an understanding of the whole child and the context in which they live.

Of course, in addition to suggesting how others can expand upon this research, the current study may also provide some direct guidance in terms of the methodology for such research. The value of interviews and journaling in similar qualitative research is largely self-explanatory, but the use of graphic elicitation warrants some separate comment. This study has arguably demonstrated how a partial emphasis on visual expression can generate a different kind of qualitative data, as well as facilitating more effective data gathering through other, more familiar methods.

By using graphic elicitation at the start of researcher interactions with the three participants, this study seemed to help those participants to ease into communication with a notably low-pressure activity. At the same time, it set the stage for a more effective and objective line of questioning insofar as the initial round of visual data represented personal reflection by the participants, without researcher input or influence other than the simple introduction of the task. Thus, researchers who utilize this method in combination with interviews and journaling may find that they are able to freely analyze the participant's apparent central interests and concerns vis-à-vis the research questions and then structure or modify specific lines of questioning based on that analysis. Such a first step adds an up-front element of dialogue to the process of interaction and it at once saves time and helps in the development of rapport between researcher and participant.

More specifically, the current study appears to demonstrate that a sense of enjoyment contributes to that rapport. The three participants seemed to truly relish the opportunity to depict an ideal classroom, a timeline of events, and a map of significant

relationships, and they were eager to discuss and elaborate upon these points once they had discussed them in visual form. Assuming that this response is typical of students at roughly the same stage as the participants in this study, there are clear implications for the usage of graphic elicitation as a complementary and ice-breaking exercise in similar qualitative studies.

It is worth noting, however, that the lack of gender diversity in the current study raises questions about the extent of these implications. Until the same methodology is tested on a broader sample space, it remains possible that the enjoyment and effectiveness of graphic elicitation is unique to males of the given age group. It also remains possible, however unlikely, that the three participants in the current study were aberrations from the norm of male students their age. The rapport-creating effects of graphic elicitation could be offset in the case of female participants if they are less comfortable with graphic elicitation or uncomfortable having conversations with male researchers regardless of graphic elicitation. But this would not seriously compromise the implications thus far observed. Rather, it would simply introduce the need for the involvement of female researchers and/or an alternative rapport-creating exercise in studies where female student-participants are involved.

But in absence of research to the contrary, there is no reason to suppose that graphic elicitation is gender-specific. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that it has broad application, not just for male and female students but also for male and female teacher-trainees. At the research site for this study, but separate from the study, graphic elicitation has been used by administration as part of “opening day” programs, in order to facilitate interactivity and conversation about future visions for education. In this way,

the same methodology is applied to eliciting teacher self-concepts as has been applied to generating visual representation of student expectations and concerns.

What's more, these "opening day" programs reflect on the broader context of this study, contributing to teacher preparedness in a manner not unlike how the summer transition program contributes to the preparedness of socially promoted students. This speaks to the possibility of more general effectiveness of summer transition methods, and thus it may call for further research into the application and outcome of those methods. As a potential starting point for such research, this study has apparently demonstrated that that program provided students with an outlet for their anxiety and concerns and a place where they could find peers and teachers with whom they were compatible, and who could help them to focus. According to the students, the summer transition program offered a pathway to high school and guided them in looking forward. Researchers with an interest in social promotion may be motivated to look into how the summer transition program and other such alternative interventions can be used to change the overall profile of social promotion, moving it beyond mere academic endeavors and into experiences of a more broadly motivation and inspirational variety, which may help students to see themselves in a different light and develop a positive and comprehensive vision of future academic, social, and psychological outcomes.

Conclusion

This study was a qualitative mixed methods study of student experience and perception of social promotion and grade retention. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with three students during the school day. The three students who volunteered had attended the summer transition program and had transitioned from

middle school to high school. The three students volunteered for the study and were all enrolled in the same high school, although they attended different middle schools. Only male students volunteered for and were interviewed for this study.

For data analysis, interviews were transcribed and content analysis was conducted on students' journals, and their artwork. The process of data analysis was completed in three stages before constructing an individual textural description from the participants, in keeping with the modified Van Kaam approach: Horizontalization, reduction, clustering, and thematizing. The final stage of the analytical process included constructing individual textural descriptions for each student based on his experience of social promotion.

Ten research questions focused on the social promotion of the students in the program drove this study. The findings from this study identified four major themes that reflect the students' social promotion experience and also speak to their perceptions of their experiences: self-perception and expectations, future orientation, adapting to change, and social capital and reciprocity. Teachers and administrators should take into consideration students' complex lives and the multiple factors that both complicate and complement their lives. The reality that students in this study were so greatly influenced by their teachers, peers, and community suggests that these elements are important parts of how students make sense of and shape their experience transitioning from middle school to high school. They used these elements in their environment to help them establish themselves socially and academically.

The students in this study showed that they had built a dream despite certain struggles in their earlier academic lives. They perceived themselves as successful so far

in life, despite their academic and personal struggles. The students presented themselves as whole people, affected by their home, school, and peer environments. For these students, those environments are not different, but closely related in their lives and in their experiences.

Overall, the students were upbeat about their academic success, the contributions of their teachers, and their future prospects. They appeared through their statements to be forward looking and all wanted a level of academic success in high school. All students believed that the transition program contributed to their success so far, although they do see that there are multiple factors also benefiting them. They all made mistakes and even had minor setbacks and issues with teachers. In all of this, however, they kept looking forward.

More detailed research is needed in this area to explore students' experiences and perceptions. Their school environments and teacher's perceptions should be examined as well. The goal of further research should be to capture the complete student and learn from their experiences as they move from middle school to high school and beyond.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Table A1

Interview Questions Protocol Matrix

Research Question (RQ)	Interview Questions (IQ)
1. How do socially promoted students perceive their academic performance and, by comparison, their academic potential?	<p>IQ1. Overall, how are you doing in school?</p> <p>IQ2. What do you expect from yourself academically?</p>
2. Do teachers' and peers' perceptions of the student affect the student's engagement with schoolwork? How so?	<p>IQ3. Do you have good reasons to try to improve your performance?</p> <p>IQ4. Would people treat you differently if your grades changed?</p>
3. What are the essential features of a socially promoted student's interaction with his teachers and his school?	<p>IQ5. How do you get along with your teachers?</p> <p>IQ6. How do you feel about your school overall?</p>
4. What are the essential features of a socially promoted student's interaction with his peers?	<p>IQ7. How do you get along with your fellow students?</p> <p>IQ8. How do you feel about your classmates overall?</p>
5. How do teachers' and peers' apparent perceptions of the student affect the student's classroom behavior?	<p>IQ9. Do you usually act the way people expect you to?</p> <p>IQ10. Do people notice if you act different in class?</p>
6. To what extent does the student feel prepared for high school? In what ways?	<p>IQ11. Were you ready to enroll in high school?</p> <p>IQ12. If there was one thing about high school you could avoid, what would it be?</p>

Research Question (RQ)	Interview Questions (IQ)
7. How much does the student exhibit a sense of belonging in high school, as compared with middle school?	IQ13. How does LNHS compare to HNMS?
8. What experiences do socially promoted students anticipate as they complete the transition from middle school to high school?	IQ14. Did you have more friends last year or this year? IQ15. What are you looking forward to for the rest of the year?
9. What steps do socially promoted students commonly take to help improve their academic performance and social lives?	IQ16. What are you afraid about for the rest of the year? IQ17. How can you do better at schoolwork? IQ18. How can you make more friends?
10. In what ways do socially promoted students see their academic and social futures as being determined by circumstances?	IQ19. Are you in control of what happens to you in high school? IQ20. What's one command or piece of advice you wish you didn't have to listen to?

Appendix B: Informed Consent and Assent Forms

Socially Promoted Students' Experiences in Transition into High School

Informed Consent

Dear Mr./Mrs. _____

As a Doctoral Candidate in _____ at _____ University, I am conducting a qualitative, phenomenological research study that may concern your child. I wish to learn about the experiences, challenges, and opinions of students who have entered the ninth grade at _____ High School through the summer transition program after facing academic difficulties in eighth grade.

As I understand that your child is one such student, I am asking for your and his/her informed consent to possibly participate in this project.

Please understand that not everyone who returns this form will be used as a participant. But in case you submit this form and are chosen, there are some things you should know:

Benefits: By participating in this study, your child will be adding greatly to knowledge of students with academic backgrounds similar to his/her own. This research may help educators to respond positively to the unique needs of those students in the future.

Confidentiality: Your child's participation in this study will be strictly confidential. S/he will be interviewed under an assumed name and will not be named in the study. These interviews will be recorded in audio for information purposes only and the recordings will only be held by the researcher. Your child will also submit short writing samples and these too will be held solely by the researcher.

Expectations: If your child elects to participate in this study, a modest investment of time will be expected. Upon confirming his/her participation, we will schedule times for him/her to meet with me for three extended interviews. These will last up to ninety minutes each and will take place over the course of about three weeks. They will be scheduled either for free periods, immediately after school, or other mutually agreed-upon arrangement.

In addition, your child will be asked to submit a brief journal entry reflecting upon the interview at the conclusion of each one. S/he will never be expected to divulge

information that s/he is uncomfortable divulging. However, honesty is expected in response to all other questions.

By signing your name below, you give permission to be contacted for the arrangement of an interview with your child and the discussion of his/her participation in this research project.

If you have any questions about this study, your participation, or your rights, please feel free to contact _____.

Thank you for your attention.

Student's Name: _____

Parent's Name (Print): _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Anthony Hadzimichalis

Socially Promoted Students' Experiences in Transition into High School

Assent Form for Student

Dear _____

I am a Doctoral Candidate in _____ at _____ University, and I am conducting a research study that might be of interest to you.

I understand that you recently entered the ninth grade through the High School summer transition program. I am interested in learning about the experiences of students like you, and I wonder if you would like to participate in this study by sharing your thoughts with me.

Your participation is completely voluntary, but if you agree to be interviewed, the information you provide could be very helpful to schools and to students like yourself, for a long time into the future. You should understand that not everyone who returns this form will be used as a participant. It only means that you are giving us permission to choose you, at random, to be interviewed. If we do, there are some things you should know:

Everything you share will be kept **strictly confidential**. You won't even give your name when I interview you, and it will not be used in my study. Your classmates and teachers will not have any information about the study. My interviews with you will

be recorded in audio but I will never share the recordings with anyone. You'll be asked to submit short writing samples, but these will also be kept only by me.

If you agree to participate in this study, you're agreeing to do the following things:

- Work with me and your parent(s) to arrange times when you can participate in **three private interviews** over the course of three weeks. Interviews will last ninety minutes each, but they will be informal and low-pressure. I will be available immediately after school and during your free periods, but other arrangements can be made between us.
- Arrive at your scheduled interviews and answer questions honestly and as accurately as you can. You're **not required to share anything** you don't want to share. Just be willing to talk to me.
- Submit a brief journal entry reflecting upon each interview. Submit these directly to me through Google Drive a day after the interview. You will be given login information if you don't have your own.

By signing your name below, you give permission to be contacted privately if you are chosen to participate in this research project.

If you have any questions about this study, your participation, or your rights, please feel free to contact _____.

Thank you for your attention.

Student's Name (Print): _____

Student's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Horizontalization Interview Analysis

Research question (RQ)	Student response
<p>1: How do students who have experienced the high school summer transition program perceive their academic performance and, by comparison, their academic potential?</p>	<p>(J, 1) I think that I should try the hardest – the best that I can do, and even if I do, like, get, like 75, but I still try my hardest, like I can't do any better than that so I'll still be proud of myself.</p> <p>(J, 3) I see myself with 80s and maybe like – yeah 80s and 90s, probably.</p> <p>(E, 1) Um... I expect to get As and Bs, and try my hardest</p> <p>(N, 1) But I redid them all, so I thought if I just redid them, then I would still get the self-pride in doing it. So I just missed a few homework grades, but I'm going to try not to, you know, let that slip away from me.</p> <p>(N, 1) I want to try my hardest to get good grades, and if I don't I have to try harder, because if I'm getting back grades that proves that I'm taking away from school and putting more into outside activities.</p> <p>(N, 2) I would say that I would be doing good, because this year I've been trying to do my best, and I guess I would say that I'm doing good. So, I would – I made a pact to myself that I'm going to be doing – I didn't make a pact, but I said to myself, like, I'm going to be – I'm going to try to do good for all four years because you know, with high school now, and this is where things start to really count. So I'm going to try and take the best – take things to the best of my ability.</p> <p>(T, 1) My grades are where I want them to be. They're not too low. I don't have anything below a C, which is what I want to try to do.</p> <p>(T, 1) Academically, I expect myself to just do the best I can even if I fail at what I'm doing(?) – that I did, like, the hardest that I could, and really push myself to be the best I can be.</p>
<p>2: Do teachers' and peers' perceptions of the student affect the student's engagement with schoolwork? How so?</p>	<p>(J, 2) I'd think that there is definitely a difference between relationships, like how close a teacher is with a student compared to Walton, compared with XXXX XXX high school. 'Cause at XXXXX they're asking you, oh, you need to do this, you need to do that. And they're constantly, like, right next to you. But in FMG if you're like – if you have a good relationship with a good teacher and like you're kind of friends, and like you have a [unintelligible]...</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>(E, 1) Um, I guess people would look at you – if you had bad grades they would think you were, like, dumb, or not as sophisticated as others, or didn't try as much.</p> <p>(N, 1) So what I'm going to do is just try to focus on school more and, you know... Just try my best...but like, say I was becoming above average, all of the below average people would feel probably uncomfortable talking to me, because I would – they would feel like they were dumb around me.</p> <p>(N, 2) For one, the teachers, like – if you were to like have a question and you would not understand, like – let's say I don't understand this and I just keep asking the same question over no matter how many times they're explaining it, they'll just keep going over until I really understand.</p> <p>(T, 1) My good reason to improve my performance is to make my parents proud, make myself proud, and get the good grades I need to go to a good college and get a good job. Well, for the better, I guess people would treat me more maturely because I'm doing what I – what I should be doing. And for the worse, people would probably not give me as much responsibility because I'm not doing that well.</p>
<p>3: What are the essential features of a student's (having experienced the summer transition program) interaction with his teachers and his school?</p>	<p>(J, 3) AH: ...that you may go to to kind of help – ask for help in guiding you towards that goal? J: Um, probably my guidance counselor, and I think that maybe Mr. Crumholz would help a lot.</p> <p>(E, 2) AH: If you asked for extra help, do you think that you would get it? E: Um, yeah.</p> <p>(N, 1) I feel like it's a safe environment. I like the school overall. (N, 1) Let's say I don't understand this and I just keep asking the same question over no matter how many times they're explaining it, they'll just keep going over until I really understand. They won't get really aggravated or anything like that. (N,2) AH:...did the teachers in the summer transition program help you to understand this process that you just explained so well about how to seek extra help? N: Yeah, because in uh, in the summer transition program it was really helpful, because we got to, like have more time to understand how to do things in high school , because we would practice that sometimes.</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>(T, 1) I understand them and I'm behaving the way I should and I'm showing that I'm responsible and that they can count on me to do my work and get everything done the way I should.</p> <p>(T, 1) avoid misbehaving and troubling my teachers and staff, because I just want to have good conduct and not get into any trouble because that can affect my grades, too, and academically in my future.</p>
<p>4: What are the essential features of student's (having experienced the summer transition program) interaction with his peers?</p>	<p>(J, 1) J: I think that they're trying just as hard as I could. And we all, like, know what we're trying to do in high school. We all know that this is like for real. Like this isn't just like, oh if you get like a seventy, and it's okay, we're still going to the next grade. But like, it actually matters what we get.</p> <p>AH: Does that add more pressure to you in any way? To you specifically.</p> <p>J: I would say yes. In like a...</p> <p>AH: Do... do you think it's a good thing?</p> <p>J: Yeah.</p> <p>(E, 1) E: Uh, I guess we would talk it out. It wouldn't be that big of a deal.</p> <p>AH: Now, do you think that other students are aware that that's how you would handle a [disagreement]?</p> <p>E: Uhh, no, I don't think so.</p> <p>(N, 1) I'll be doing something and I don't even notice what I'm doing wrong, then I would ask them – I would go up to them and be – I would ask them, like, what's the matter with me? Do you have an issue with me that I need to straighten out... You know, something like that, so that I don't have to be seen as a negative person.</p> <p>(N, 3) AH: You become a source of knowledge for [students who did not participate in summer program].</p> <p>N: Mm-hm.</p> <p>(T, 1) I've communicated more with other students since middle school, and not just with the same groups, so I've expanded my friendships with other people.</p> <p>overall I feel they're very nice and respectful towards me. They – they really appreciate my choices, so I appreciate what they think, and we just work together in the class.</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
<p>5: How do teachers' and peers' apparent perceptions of the student affect the student's classroom behavior?</p>	<p>(J, 1) ...the first two days I was like very silent because I was very on track, and I just wanted to keep notes and like just try to memorize and take everything in. I was like, yeah, it's just stress, and like, ah, well we're all going through it, so I guess it's okay.</p> <p>(J, 2) AH: What if you...said, guys, can you settle down? I'm trying to do my work. I'm studying for a test. What do you think would happen if you said that? J: I think everyone in the classroom would turn on me. (J, 2) I think it depends on the teacher's attitude. Because if the teacher's having a bad day, then everyone has a bad day. But if a teacher's, like, in a good mood and is all fun and happy, then everyone's like happy. So it really depends on the teacher.</p> <p>(E, 1) E: I guess the expectations here are a little bit easier. People aren't really on you about it. Like it's your problem now. AH: I guess you could say, teachers being very closely connected to the students, maybe. E: Yeah, they were like trying to hold your hand and like, make you do all this stuff for you.</p> <p>(E, 2) AH: Really? Okay, okay. How does that make you feel if you didn't do your homework and everybody knows? E: It makes you look like you don't really care. AH: But you do care? E: Uh-huh.</p> <p>(N, 1) I would usually act the same, because I would have the respect... I would have to... I know that I'm supposed to give the respect to the teachers, and uh, I wouldn't be like, telling the teacher no. I wouldn't say anything, you know, to oppose them, in a sense. So I would just go along with what they have to say. (N, 1) I talk a lot in class. Not as in like the negative way, but in a positive way. I'm always raising my hand, answering questions. I'm always like, willing to help other people out if they have trouble. Like, for example, in math class I'm raising my hand for almost every single question. So if someone's having an issue and the teacher can't get to them, I'll, like, lean over if it's like someone that's next to me, and I'll tell them, you know, how to do this or that, so...</p> <p>(T, 1) I act responsible, and the way I should. I like to be a role model for other kids. So I really want to stay, like, with good conduct, and not misbehave. (T, 1) ...how I misbehave – what I do – it can also affect other</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>people, and their emotions, and the way they see me. They might not see me the same way.</p>
<p>6: To what extent does the student feel prepare for high school? In what ways?</p>	<p>(J, 3) J: ...maybe for those who kind of need a little bit more help – need just to be put on track. For those who might have been a little lost in middle school...And it tells the people that are going – the students that are going from eighth grade into ninth grade what to expect and what to do to be successful.</p> <p>(E, 1) Yeah... I was just ready for the independence.</p> <p>(N, 1) ...because in uh, in the summer transition program it was really helpful, because we got to, like, have more time to understand how to do things in high school, because we would practice that sometimes.</p> <p>(N, 1) Uh, yeah I was, because I was just ready for the – to be more mature in life. I'm ready to, uh, you know, take on more responsibilities. And like, I notice that I was ready to take on more responsibilities...</p> <p>(N, 1) Um, I would probably most likely avoid homework. Homework out of anything, because sometimes I'm scared that I'm going to miss it, and then when I get into class, like, you know, I'm just scared that I'm going to mess up on something. And then whenever I go home, I just feel like I missed something. You know, I always get that feeling like, oh I missed something, even though I didn't.</p> <p>(N, 3) I would think that some people would be like – they would think of it as just like a full-out summer school and they would be like, oh, well you're stupid for going there – you know, something like that. But then it would take like a minute for them to realize after I'm explaining that it wasn't necessarily just for learning; it was also because when we get into the school, and like, when the – we were having discussions about when we get into the school – us, the people that went to it – we would have the better advantage on them because we would know a lot more about the school than they would. People would be coming to us, saying where do we have to go – something like that.</p> <p>(N, 3) I felt that, uh, I knew a lot more about the school than all of the other students that did not go to uh, the transition program. So... And I didn't just see it as summer school. I saw it as a help – like, it's helpful. It's there to be helpful for us if, you know...</p> <p>(T, 1) My opinion, I think – might have been halfway through ready and halfway through unready... because I knew what was</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>expected of me academically, but at the same time, I didn't. now I know how to get around the building very well. Since I was in summer transition program I got familiar with the building even more...</p>
<p>7: How much does the student exhibit a sense of belonging in high school, as compared with middle school?</p>	<p>(J, 2) I would say it's more... I would say it's more like intellectual-wise, like of how like people – like their characteristics. Like, whoever has the same characteristics usually stays together at the same table.</p> <p>(N, 1) AH: so you have the connection between your family and the teachers and the community...</p> <p>(T, 1) Everyone here is welcoming. There's like more opportunities and chances to get involved with the community and all these new teachers and I'm learning new things that I want to. [Teachers] see us differently, not like middle school, where we had not as much opportunities and they treated us still like kids a bit.</p>
<p>8: What experiences do students anticipate as they complete the transition from middle school to high school?</p>	<p>(J, 1) getting the hang of everything. Just, like, walking, like, normally to class, like knowing where to go, and just, like, having like a normal day.</p> <p>(J, 1) I would say completing the volunteer hours, and also being, like, left behind. Like everyone ahead of me and me being far being, and like trying to keep up.</p> <p>(J, 1) I would say math, but this year I have like a tutor, so I don't think I'll like be so far behind as I was in eighth grade. 'Cause I was trying to catch up like every single day and I tried but like sometimes it just didn't like, add up.</p> <p>(J, 3) ...change your, uh, mind... like, mental – mentally... To think that this is more serious than maybe eighth grade and seventh grade... Because messing up a test you could always pick it up, like you know... If you get an eighty it won't affect you as much as in high school.</p> <p>(E, 3) ...but also you kind of have to graduate mentally because it's a big change from being in middle school, 'cause in middle school they do a lot of things for you and in high school you're set free and you got to rely on yourself. So you need to change mentally and you got to do a lot more work.</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>(N, 1) Mainly, getting good grades. That's what I mainly want to do. And... because I'm tired of feeling like I'm not good enough for where I am, you know, something like that.</p> <p>(T, 1) ...enthused and excited about the school because, like, in middle school we didn't have that much – as much choices, but here we have a whole new handful of opportunities, like clubs, sports and all those thing that we can join and extracurricular activities, so I'm really excited.</p>
<p>9: What steps do students commonly take to help improve their academic performance and social lives?</p>	<p>(J, 1) Now I try to check over my homework, just to make sure, because like those small answers can actually do like a difference. Then I started to slack off in the seventh grade, but then I started doing it toward the end of eighth grade.</p> <p>(J, 2) Uh, yeah I have one [friend]. I usually like call him on the phone, if like I forget the homework. And then sometimes he doesn't know. But then I would find out on Study Whiz, so then I would tell him, so then we would both know.</p> <p>(J, 2) If I didn't have any friends in that class I would go on Study Whiz. Or sometime – like, Spanish gives me a syllabus, so if I forgot in Spanish, then I would have a syllabus. I would go on Study Whiz, and if all else failed I would just e-mail the teacher, asking.</p> <p>(J, 2) I would usually – if I have a test or a quiz, I would usually go over notes, and just like review what I did last night. Homework, maybe I would check over it, if I have extra time.</p> <p>(E, 1) You can join clubs and you can join sports. That's where you meet a lot of people.</p> <p>(E, 2) ...because I usually do all my work at home, but if I like forgot about something it comes in handy. Like if I forgot about one homework assignment it comes in handy because people tell you about it, remind you about it.</p> <p>(E, 2) E.M. ...because sometimes some upperclassmen ask me to sit with them, and then some days I sit with, like, the kids in my grade.</p> <p>AH: ...Okay. But there there's other times that they don't do that.</p> <p>E: Um, they do, but I don't want to leave my friends there because that's kind of mean.</p> <p>(E, 2) AH: Do you think that your involvement in soccer maybe helps you academically?</p> <p>E: Yeah, 'cause if I don't do good in classes I can't play.</p> <p>(E, 2) E: Uh, I usually text someone that has the class as me and</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>they usually tell me if we did or didn't. AH: So do you have like a friend, or the teacher kind of assigns you a homework buddy or something? E: [Yawns] I have a friend.</p> <p>(N, 1) for one the teachers, like – if you were to like have a question and you would not understand, like – let's say I don't understand this and I just keep asking the same question over no matter how many times they're explaining it, they'll just keep going over until I really understand.</p> <p>(T, 1) T: I could – I could study more and work harder and be able to do much better in school. Like, maybe study for an extra thirty minutes and like really go over my homework. AH: So you, but – you believe that you're able to do better. T: Yes.</p> <p>(T, 1) I could go up to a kid I've never seen, maybe start a conversation. Meet new people. Talk to new people, and just see their liking and compare them to my likings.</p>
<p>10: In what ways do students see their academic and social futures as being determined by circumstances?</p>	<p>(J, 3) I would see myself very fluent about the school, and knowing a lot of people and teachers... And being one of those people that walk around that, maybe like people would say hi to, and you're in all sorts of conversations.</p> <p>(J, 3) ...go over maybe the colleges, like do – maybe visit it and talk to the people... and do, like, my homework on each university or college and see which one I think is best, and once I find out which one has the best, like, later benefit – like after I graduate from it – I think that's the one I would choose.</p> <p>(J, 3) Like if they want to go, like to go to, like I don't know, Harvard, or something like that... They will be – they know – that means that they know what they want to do, even though, like – even if it doesn't happen. They could still do, like – go to a pretty good college because that's a pretty high up goal, so even trying to get to that you'd have to have, like high grades, but even if you do still have high grades and you still don't get accepted to Harvard, you could still go to a, like, good college.</p> <p>(E, 1) E: I guess I'm in control of my grades and the people I surround myself with. AH: Negative people will make... E: You negative...</p> <p>(E, 3) Um, I see myself, senior year probably graduating, hopefully with an average of As and Bs the whole four years, and</p>

Research question (RQ)	Student response
	<p>probably going on to college.</p> <p>(E, 3) AH: Describe to me the kind of college setting you see yourself in.</p> <p>E: Like, um, a big college that not everybody knows each other. Kind of like, like, U of Florida or somewhere around there.</p> <p>(E, 3) I hope by then that the soccer team will win a championship or two, and um, I get, like, scholarships from that, from soccer, so I can go to college too with that.</p> <p>(N, 3) Like, that, but I would probably, you know, have my own car, you know be getting ready to – I probably already applied to some colleges, and I’m just going around looking for...the right college for me...And I’ll be ready to go off to college and take on the maturity level.</p> <p>(T, 1) I’m in control of, basically, like, my academics. Because I use my mind and just know not to get sidetracked and know that I have – that there’s homework, that there’s something the night before I have to study, too, if I have a test or something. And I’m also in control of my conduct, the way I behave.</p>

Appendix D: Letter to Parents

Lakeview North High School
XXX XXXXX Avenue
XXXX, New Jersey XXXXX
(XXX) XXX-XXXX

Mr. Anthony Hadzimichalis
Director of the XXXXXXXX Summer School Program
Teacher, Lakeview North High School

September 13, 2013

Dear Parents and/or Guardians,

It is my pleasure to welcome your child to Lakeview North High School. Over the years I have worked with the school community in various capacities toward improving the experience of our students as they enter the high school for the first time.

In addition to serving as Summer School Director and High School Teacher I have also dedicated the previous four years to researching best educational practices in the area of middle school to high school transition as part of my doctoral dissertation at Rowan University.

The purpose of this letter is to humbly request your approval to allow your child to confidentially partake in a set of activities with me designed to discuss and reflect upon their experiences as high school students after having completed the high school transition program.

Please read and sign the attached consent and assent forms. The information obtained will be extremely helpful as we plan for the next group of eighth graders as they make the transition into the high school. Please feel free to contact me directly at XXX-XXX-XXXX with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Anthony Hadzimichalis