PREPARING EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS FOR UPPER SCHOOL UTILIZING GRADE LEVEL PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMMING

A Record of Study

by

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ABSTRACT

This one-group pretest-posttest action research study of 2017–2018 eighth-grade students at a Pre-K through 12th grade independent school in Houston, Texas, will present information related to student anxiety during the transition into upper school. This study will seek to demonstrate lower student anxiety among eighth-grade students participating in a grade level peer-mentoring program. The research results present quantitative findings related to anxiety, utilizing the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), within a one-group pretest-posttest design. I will seek to identify supplemental programming to the current transition program at the school, which lowers anxiety among eighth-grade students transitioning into ninth grade. Data were analyzed using a paired samples *t*-test to determine the results for this treatment. These results will inform the administration about how the transition program affects student anxiety among currently enrolled eighth grade students.

DEDICATION

This Record of Study is dedicated to my grandfather Arthur Berthold. He was a lifelong educator and world traveler who instilled my desire to follow in his path. He always encouraged me to work and study hard so I could achieve anything I wanted. I would also like to dedicate this work to my parents, David and Nancy Berthold, who also encouraged me to work hard, but more importantly love the work I do. They have supported me through the ups and downs of my education and never wavered in their belief of my success.

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Contributors

This work was supervised by record of study committee consisting of Dr. James Laub, Dr. Radhika Viruru, and Dr. Edith Cassell of the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture and Dr. Krystal Simmons of the Department of Educational Psychology.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE Page

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE ACTION

The Context

Private schools represent some of the earliest educational institutions in the United States (Gutek, 2012). Long before compulsory schooling mandates and formalized public schools, private academies operated to educate wealthy males and to prepare others for service in the clergy. These private institutions developed leaders to guide the community along a prosperous spiritual and economic path. Though we now have well-organized public education across the United States, non-public schools continue to educate roughly 10% of students across the country (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015).

These institutions offer opportunities for students unavailable in many public schools: smaller class sizes; instruction, which is more flexible; broader extracurricular programs; and focused college preparation. However, these institutions must still address issues facing students in any school. The structure in many independent (non-sectarian) schools requires students to transition between academic divisions. As students graduate to each division, the expectations and demands on the student increase. Students who are unprepared for this increase may struggle in different areas of their school experience. Concern about this potential struggle often leads to anxiety among the students experiencing these transitions (Benner, 2011).

National Context

School transitions disrupt the socio-emotional development and relationship structures of students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). These transitions may affect academic performance, confidence, friendships, family relationships, and feelings regarding school, but not necessarily in negative ways (Langenkamp, 2010). In all schools, public and private, there exists the

potential for students to struggle during the transition period. The significant change during this period can lead to anxiety, lower achievement, and socialization issues. Mental health referrals and behavioral consequences, which lead to missed classroom time, also increase during this period (Benner, 2011). Easing this transition for students allows for a successful experience in high school (Langenkamp, 2009). Schools, which develop programming to address these concerns, can not only meet the needs of their incoming students, but also develop a healthier campus climate.

Situational Context

The study school is an independent, non-sectarian, Pre-K through 12, day school in Houston, Texas. There are approximately 160 students in each ninth-grade class with around 50 of those students entering to the school during the ninth-grade year. The school offers traditional entry points at Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade. However, occasional admission in other grade levels is possible if space is available. All students go through a rigorous admissions process and personal interview for both the middle and upper schools. With an admission rate under 10%, the students applying for admission are often exceptional in the multiple areas we focus on as a school. The school continues to diversify its student body in order to provide exceptional educational experiences to a wider range of potentially high achieving students, athletes, and artists. At over 100 years old, the school has adapted to the demographic of the greater Houston area and garnered attention from a wide range of prospective students (I. Bonet, personal communication, April 6, 2017).

Students join the school community from a wide range of public, private, and independent schools. As a result, these students enter with a range of academic experiences. All students are academically capable of success; however, prior educational experiences do not

always prepare students for success once enrolled. We have a very diverse set of student needs requiring support and attention. The variety of experiences our students have had necessitates a wide range of support programming for all students transitioning between academic divisions.

The school is divided into three academic divisions comprised of the lower school (Pre-K through fourth grade), the middle school (fifth grade through eighth grade), and the upper school (ninth grade through twelfth grade). In all divisions, we strive to develop well-versed students and recognize in our mission the importance of participation in the three A's: Arts, Academics, and Athletics. However, the way in which our students participate depends on their personal abilities. The school provides numerous opportunities for students to showcase their talents in every avenue. Though academic performance remains the primary objective as a college preparatory school, the school's mission requires us to prepare well-rounded students to contribute both locally and globally.

Problem

We have over 110 students who enter our upper (high) school from our middle school program. Additionally, we accept nearly 50 new students to join the ninth-grade class. We often have several ninth-grade students who struggle with transition-based anxiety (S. Terrill, personal communication, May 11, 2017). With all students requiring support at some level, the school has emphasized the development of programming intended to reduce anxiety among the ninth-grade class. The upper school has collected data that has identified the student transition experience as one reason for student frustration and difficulty during the ninth-grade year.

Our upper school has administered the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), developed by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University, to students in grades 9–12 in order to gather data regarding the perceptions of upper school

students. The survey explores student engagement in domains of intellectual, social, and emotional engagement. The school has administered the survey annually since 2016 and plans to administer it biennially beginning with the current school year to prevent students from experiencing survey burnout. This survey represents the only quantitative measurement our upper school uses to understand student perceptions about the school.

The survey is overwhelmingly positive and identifies many components of our program that regularly experience success. However, we do have a significant number of students who note stress and anxiety, occasionally at debilitating levels, as a significant concern in their daily school experience. Many students identify the number of expectations placed upon them by the school and in many cases their parents as well, as a source of their stress and anxiety. Across the upper school student body, we have an above average number of students who exhibit levels of anxiety that require some type of intervention. Within the free response section, respondents noted lack of preparation for the move to upper school, a challenging social environment, and stress or pressure as the main components of student dissatisfaction. These responses indicate a need to better prepare our students for the demanding expectations placed upon them in the upper school.

Many structured transition activities are already in place at the school. For our currently enrolled students, these activities begin in the spring of the eighth-grade year and seek to alleviate perceived anxiety as the students complete their last year of middle school and prepare to transition into the upper school. Once students enter the upper school much more programming occurs. Activities include student-led meetings with incoming ninth graders, identification and support for students prone to high anxiety, comprehensive team building, and after-school social activities. These types of activities address the social-emotional needs of

students and provide support for academic needs. The transition program at the school involves many different faculty members and student groups. The student life coordinator, counseling department, deans, student support staff, and administration all have roles in our current transition and orientation program.

Unfortunately, each year multiple students struggle to balance all of the expectations we place upon them as a school. Due to the extracurricular expectations, students often find it difficult to balance the academic workload with the time commitments required by athletics, arts, and community service. This leads to incomplete work, incomplete understanding of material, and often course failure. The school offers academic probation to students unable to meet the school's expectations, which provides these students with additional support structures. Required tutorials, meetings with the learning specialist, and referrals to the counselor are all services the school will provide to students who struggle academically. The school strives to provide strategies to support the student and correct maladaptive behaviors related to anxiety; however, repeated periods of academic difficulty might lead to the removal of a student from the community at the discretion of the school.

The school seeks to identify ways in which to support student health and wellness, while ensuring student preparation for all of the expectations put forth by the school. Unlike public schools, independent schools are insular and unique in their approach to problem solving. As a school, we do not have a standard set of procedures which we follow to address large scale phenomena on campus. While frameworks such as response to intervention (RTI) would be useful in approaching problems, we currently do not utilize these types of research based frameworks to address campus concerns. One benefit of this action research study is to

introduce a research framework which the school could adopt to address phenomena such as the transition research being explored in this study.

Relevant History of the Problem

There is an expectation for all enrolled students to be college bound as part of a rigorous, independent college-preparatory school. Throughout our curriculum, we focus on preparing students for the academic expectations of the upper school. As we admit students in Pre-K, Kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade, we attempt to support these students and to ensure the preparedness of all students for the rigorous curriculum offered in the upper school. We recognize students enrolling in the ninth grade come from diverse academic backgrounds; thus, we provide significant programming to transition into the school. However, adequate preparedness for the transition to upper school does not always occur for our current eighth grade students even though they participate in significant transition programming.

Within the upper school, we have many students who expressed concern about the way the school prepares students for the increased rigor and expectations of the upper school. Additionally, many upper school faculty believe the middle school does not adequately prepare students academically for the increased workload and time management required to be successful in the upper school. This disconnect indicates a need for further support during the eighth-grade year in order to prepare students for the higher expectations in the upper school. By providing transition programming earlier and aligning our curricular expectations with the upper school, we should see a decrease in concerns from both upper school students and faculty.

As a school, we would like to alleviate the anxiety among our eighth-grade students and integrate more targeted, student-led programming, to help these students successfully transition into the upper school. Students who successfully transition understand the workload expectation

is higher in the upper school. Additionally, these students recognize the importance of balancing social and extracurricular activities in order to successfully navigate the upper school. By providing opportunities for students to participate in activities early in the transition process, the school hopes to minimize perceived transition related anxiety earlier in the ninth-grade year.

Significance of the Problem

Students transitioning to high school represent a challenge facing educators and educational leaders. Difficulty during this adjustment period can lead to anxiety, depression, behavioral concerns, academic failure, and social difficulties (Lofgran, Smith, & Whiting, 2012; Shaunessy-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, & Fefer, 2015). Each year we have students who require medical treatment due to their debilitating anxiety, whereas others simply choose not to return to the school. Since we desire a more varied student body who exhibit talents and excellence in many areas, we must provide support for all students. Schools providing support to these students have lower incidences of this phenomenon and demonstrate increased achievement and social balance among their students.

Developing formal and informal support programs has indicated positive outcomes in lowering maladaptive responses to students' high school transition (Langenkamp, 2009). While our upper school program must be evaluated for effectiveness, we must also consider implementing programming earlier in the middle school to ensure our eighth-grade students receive the support they desire and need. Our rising eighth-graders do not need to re-apply to attend upper school and therefore do not have to go through the admissions process which prepares our incoming ninth-graders for the expectations of the school. Students who are admitted in ninth grade understand the demands of the school and are identified as the top applicants to the school. With an applicant acceptance rate under 10%, we are fortunate to enroll

very capable students. This disparity represents all the more reason to provide greater support and preparation for our currently enrolled students who will be transitioning to the upper school.

Research Question

The following question guides this study. Does participation in peer led student support programming in eighth grade decrease anxiety related to the transition to upper school? Based upon this research, I identified research based programming approaches the school may consider implementing during the eighth-grade year to support the student transition to upper school. Based upon the results I recommend that the school administration initiate a comprehensive evaluation of our student transition programming. This should be undertaken with the goal of aligning programming between the middle and upper school divisions. This will ensure our ninth-grade students begin the school year prepared to manage the increased academic rigor and extracurricular expectations.

Personal Context

Researcher's Role and Background

I am currently a middle school faculty member who, with the support of the administration, will assist in the evaluation and improvement of our middle-to-upper-school student transition program. My experience teaching in both upper and middle school classrooms provides me with a unique perspective on student development, which would be beneficial to those individuals who have only worked with one student demographic. Additionally, my role as an elective teacher creates opportunities for me to work with students both in class and on theatrical productions.

Within an action research study, I not only sought to understand multiple perspectives, but also the multiple roles I perform allow for me to potentially develop a more holistic

understanding of the problem (Herr & Anderson, 2015). There is no intention of acting as an outside researcher, because my relationship with the students bridges all aspects of daily life for the students. This is a unique position as it creates opportunities to know the students within different contexts and to support their growth both academically and creatively. I am fortunate to also coach both cross-country and soccer, which again provides me an opportunity to develop positive relationships with students beyond the classroom. Due to these strong relationships and the opportunities I have to work on both upper and middle school shows, I have access to student perceptions of school in both divisions. This allows me to potentially understand the transition process from the perspective of those who have completed the transition and those who are beginning the experience.

In areas of student support, I assist with the wellness committee, am a grade level advisor, and have professional interests in being involved with health and wellness. More recently I have sought additional ways to use my doctoral study to identify other areas where I can contribute directly to student support. The study at the school has led to my involvement with the student council in developing a plan for additional transition programming. Engagement in activities and my annual professional goals, combined with my doctoral programming, have propelled me to advocate for student wellness. I seek to assist in lowering student anxiety and worry on our campus in order to increase academic success and student self-efficacy. Effective support of students' emotional well-being allows for the modeling of healthy behaviors and promotes student focus on mental health.

Journey to the Problem

My interest in transition-related anxiety began as my own daughter was beginning eighth grade and was preparing for high school. As I sought information to support her through the

transition and to ensure she was prepared for the academic and athletic rigor expected of a student athlete at a large public school, I learned high school transition anxiety was pervasive among American high school students. I began exploring the phenomenon on my own campus only to discover, as a school we also enrolled students who experienced debilitating transition related anxiety as they moved into upper school.

As a school, we recognize the need to prepare our students for the successful transition to upper school. Normative transitions within schools often lead to increased anxiety among students (Langenkamp, 2009). The middle to high school transition period, from the start of eighth grade through the end of ninth grade, is no exception and this can be viewed as one of the more challenging transitions adolescents face (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). The school offers programming to assist in inducting students in the upper school community. We seek to provide our students with community building activities, academic support structures, as well as guidance and counseling related to both scheduling and wellness. Even with all of this programming, we still identify students who struggle with the transition process and seek additional opportunities to find belonging in the community.

Throughout both internship experiences within the Ed.D. program, I had the opportunity to talk with students, faculty, and administrators about the most immediate concerns we had as a community. Stress, pressure, and anxiety were recurring themes among all groups. From the student perspective, many individuals expressed concern about balancing commitments and meeting the expectations to gain admission into their top choice colleges. In the upper school the primary goal among students is performing well enough academically and contributing to school life in ways that set individuals apart so they can attend colleges and universities with highly selective admissions policies. All of our students attend the school with college-bound

expectations and our program supports this end goal as well. According to the HSSSE survey results, balancing expectations around this goal is the primary source of stress and anxiety among our entire upper school student population.

From the faculty and administration perspectives, students seem to struggle mostly with time management and understanding the rigor of the upper school classes. There is also a disconnect between divisions with regard to student preparation. The lower and middle divisions tend to be more progressive in their teaching approach, whereas the upper school, indicating the expectations of Advanced Placement courses and admissions tests, such as the SAT and ACT, force their curriculum to align with those traditional types of courses. Since many of our students are expected to enroll in these advanced courses, preparation ramps up during the ninth-grade year. Unfortunately, we are not only increasing academic expectations, but also extracurricular expectations as well. The faculty recognizes the need to manage the level of expectations we set; however, we also understand the demands of our parents who pay significant tuition for quality college placement.

Identifying ways to assist students in middle school and prepare them for the expectations of upper school will assist with the transition anxiety students experience as they prepare to enter ninth grade. While there is no expectation for the middle school to change curriculum or teaching approaches, working more closely with the upper school to provide effective programming during the eighth-grade year has the potential to ease the transition period for students and provide them with a better understanding of the expectations they will be faced with in upper school.

This research study will also introduce the idea of action research to the school community. Over 64% of faculty have advanced degrees either in their content field or in

education, which indicates a familiarity with research methods. However, like many schools in the United States a disconnect exists between theory and practice. By conducting action based research, which addresses a community identified problem, it is my hope that more on campus stakeholders will engage in needed research in the future. I recognize that one study may not present data and results which are immediately impactful. However, by engaging in conversation about research the stakeholders at the school are more likely to generate potential interventions for problems at the school (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Significant Stakeholders

The middle and upper school administrations at the school strive for all students to successfully transition into upper school. These individuals want to ensure the successful implementation of all transition activities to support student success. These school leaders seek to identify programmatic gaps, which would assist our struggling students as they go through the transition period as either a newly enrolled student or a rising middle school student. I will share the results of my study with both the upper and middle school administrative teams, as well as the admissions office, to develop a successful student induction program, which eases student transitions into the upper school.

The eighth-grade students at the school represent the target treatment population and have a significant stake in the quality of transition programming at the school. These students may suffer from anxiety or social emotional stress due to the middle to upper school transition. It is important to identify the needs of these students in order to introduce effective research supported programming to meet the needs related to anxiety reduction. These students participate in both required and voluntary activities to develop a sense of belonging and support in the upper school community. Additionally, teachers and administrators provide academic and

behavioral supports throughout the transition period to develop positive habits for the ninth-grade students. Since this programming directly affects the students, the school must ensure they maintain a voice in program development and modification.

The ninth-grade teachers work directly with the students each day. The students' anxiety and social adjustment directly influence the climate and the teachers' ability to manage their classrooms. All ninth-grade advisors are actively engaged in transition programming for the students. These faculty members attend and participate in the ninth-grade retreat, which takes place over the first weekend of the academic year. Additionally, the ninth-grade teachers provide enrichment and academic support geared towards supporting all students in their classes during the morning tutorial period. The faculty stakeholders support the mission of the school and actively engage in dialogue related to transition programming as well as general student life programming. The faculty members are committed to student success and feel empowered to voice their opinions related to student transition and support issues.

All stakeholder groups are directly affected by the successful implementation of transition related programming and support. The more the school evaluates and understands the effectiveness of the programming, the more likely all students will succeed. The school must ensure programming meets the needs of all stakeholders while upholding the mission and educational philosophy of the school. All stakeholder groups must work together to improve and modify programming to best meet the needs of all upper school students. By creating an effective transition program, the school will have lower academic failure, decreased emotional concerns, and lower student attrition. The removal of these maladaptive effects will create a more positive campus climate and a greater sense of school belonging among all students.

Important Terms

Advisory—Refers to a group of students who meet with a designated teacher to address topics beyond academic content. Advisors may provide guidance related to academics, social issues, emotional health, wellness, and participation in school activities. The advisor may also act as the central advocate for a student.

College preparatory curriculum—Rigorous and advanced curriculum, which prepares all students for the demands of post-secondary education.

Community connectedness—How individuals within an environment interact and feel a sense of belonging. Independent schools seek to include all stakeholders within the community and expect all members to engage with one another within the community.

Division Head—The school uses the term to represent the role of school principal.

Headmaster (HOS)—Head of School is the chief executive in charge of all aspects of school operation. The Headmaster is accountable to the board of trustees (National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS], 2017).

Independent School—A school governed by an independent body of trustees and funded through charitable gifts or donations. These schools are accountable to state or regional accreditation organizations, the board of trustees, and the parents who choose to enroll their students at the school (NAIS, 2009).

Mix It Up—A dining approach used by the school to encourage students to interact and have conversations with students they typically do not interact with in a social manner.

Student induction—A comprehensive program, which addresses student needs as they enter a new school environment. The program encompasses orientation programming, placement testing, student support, advising, and enrichment for all students.

Student transition—Refers to the change in schools, which typically occurs between elementary school and middle school, middle school and high school, and high school and college. Within the context of the school, students transfer between divisions of lower, middle, and upper. Additionally, newly enrolled students transition from their prior schools into the school community.

Transition anxiety—Excessive worry or stress related to life changes. Student transition anxiety can manifest itself through symptoms such as isolation, illness, academic failure, and persistent negative thought. Transition anxiety typically lessens over time once the individual adjusts to the new environment or situation.

Upper School (US)—The school uses this term to represent grades 9–12.

Whole family programming—Educational and informative opportunities, which engage all members of the community not just the students enrolled in the school. These activities promote the involvement of all family members in school related community events in order to demonstrate support for the students.

Closing Thoughts on Chapter 1

Successful implementation of a student transition program for all rising eighth-grade students at the school would serve as an example for other independent schools struggling to ensure a successful upper school transition for students. Numerous independent schools struggle to bridge the gap between middle and upper school, which often leads to higher anxiety among ninth-grade students. This study seeks to identify supplemental transition programming for eighth-grade students, which will lower transition related anxiety among all students entering ninth grade.

The supplemental programming is peer-led utilizing anxiety reduction strategies, socialization opportunities, mindfulness training, and community building, which are all cited in the literature as potential remediation strategies for anxiety. The student leaders collect initial feedback from the eighth-grade students to identify the specific needs of the class and tailor the implementation approach based upon those needs. These program approaches promote belonging, which aids in raising achievement and has a positive impact on the emotional and physical health of students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013).

As a researcher who is involved with school life in all three areas of the school, arts, academics, and athletics, I explore the phenomenon of transition anxiety as an inside researcher, who is limited by time and context, but who has a vested interest in the health and well-being of my students. I want to ensure my ability to authentically capture the experiences of the students and respond to their experiences in a way that directly meets the needs of the students and the organization (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Although this position represents a limitation of this study, I do not seek to generalize these results into other contexts. I want to help ease the burden on my students so that future data collection instruments, such as the HSSSE, indicate strong preparation and lower stress and anxiety among the students at the study school.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP

Transitional periods in education can negatively impact students as it disrupts their physical and social development (Benner & Graham, 2009). The advanced students who typically attend the study school are highly driven and motivated to advance earlier in their educational careers. However, this type of student is also at risk for higher levels of anxiety and stress due to the transition period and the advanced coursework (Lofgran et al., 2012; Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015). This anxiety becomes especially debilitating for students whose expectations do not match the real-life environment of the school. Individuals suffering from these higher levels of anxiety tend to struggle in forging fulfilling relationships, leading to loneliness and isolation, which further increases their anxiety levels (Mahmoud, Staten, Lennie, & Hall, 2015). This continual cycle of increasing negative pressure and distress may lead to even higher levels of failure in an academic setting. Anxiety within the educational context can affect any student and is exacerbated by a lack of understanding and support by parents, teachers, and administrators (Langenkamp, 2010). These students risk failure and even larger potential emotional issues if these integral partners do not provide remediation strategies for students suffering from any type of anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders cause significant impairment for affected students in both the educational and social contexts, and as they progress through adolescence these impairments can become debilitating (Vaughn, Wexler, Beaver, Perron, Roberts, & Fu, 2011). During transitional periods in school, students with learning disorders especially struggle, experiencing higher anxiety and worry as they lose their supportive learning environments and worry about maintaining friendships (Young, Dagnan, & Jahoda, 2016). The design of schools can inhibit the

formation of interpersonal relationships (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Many high schools are not only physically larger spaces, but the expectations on students are also greater. Additionally, many students in high school express concern about the reduced personal interactions between students and teachers in high school. Though most independent schools attempt to maintain quality relationships between students and faculty at all levels, the reality exists that with greater numbers of students, more course offerings, and overall greater extracurricular commitments, students sense of direct support understandably wanes.

As the school continues to diversify its student population in all areas, student support programs will need to adapt to the needs of a wider variety of students in an attempt to support them academically, socially, and emotionally. Additionally, the study school should ensure opportunities to foster school belonging are included throughout the program and in all programming at the school. As such, orientation and induction programs must adapt to those of different socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Soontiens, Kerr, Ang, & Scully, 2016) and foster the formation of positive interpersonal relationships to increase belonging and overall success (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Transition programming allows new students to make emotional connections to the school, easing anxiety, and allowing for a more successful transition into an instructional program (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013).

Action Research

Action research is practitioner driven and places the stakeholders, who have traditionally been the subjects of research, into the role of researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Action research allows for collaboration of practitioners and other stakeholders to initiate exploration of phenomena in their environment (Van Velzen, 2013). This research framework also encourages collaboration between researchers and practitioners to develop a more holistic

understanding of localized phenomena (Guiffrida, Douthit, Lynch, & Mackie, 2011). Researchers and participating stakeholders engage in reflective practice and examination of their environment when engaged in an action research study. Action research also has the potential to inform theory development by exploring phenomena in its natural environment and taking immediate steps to improve the environment (Forrest, 2007). This approach allows for practical application of treatments to be further explored and potentially validated for use in other environments (Guiffrida et al., 2011).

Within a problem-based action research model the research approach is more organic, typically beginning with a phenomenon then leading to a proposed solution which is tested (Ferrance, 2000). Throughout the research process new information, stakeholders, or conflicts may arise which requires the problem-based action researcher to modify or change treatment (Giles, Wilson, & Elias, 2010). Problem-based action research is adaptive and reflective in its design (Forrest, 2007). The research design is flexible enough to respond to changes in environment because the goal of the research is to address a localized and specific problem (Guiffrida et. al., 2011). Action research may implement whole structures or elements of quantitative or qualitative designs. Additionally, problem-based action research frameworks justify their approaches by utilizing the literature throughout the study (Archbald, 2010). The research is grounded in theory or best practices; however, approaches can change throughout the research process (Giles et. al., 2010).

The primary advantage to problem-based action research is the voice provided to stakeholders experiencing the phenomenon (Guiffrida et. al., 2011). It allows for multiple perspectives to influence the direction of the research in order to meet the needs of the organization. This open approach also allows stakeholders and researchers to connect to more

adequately address the problem phenomena (Van Velzen, 2013). By forging connections between theory and practice organizations and researchers benefit by utilizing valid approaches to address institutional needs.

Conversely, the application of research validates the theory and allows for researchers to further report on the validity and applicability of results from the field. This type of coordination has the potential to not only begin to shrink the disconnect between theory and practice (Archbald, 2010), but to also demonstrate the importance of applying traditional academic research in a real-world setting (Van Velzen, 2013). This allows for the formation of long-term relationships where researchers and stakeholders continue to evaluate the state of the phenomena and continue to make changes based upon data and other types of observations.

Challenges do exist when engaging in action research. For example, positionality of the researcher does threaten the validity of the research and may limit the generalizability of results (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As an action researcher, I am responsible for understanding the position I occupy and must acknowledge the multiple perspectives supporting my interpretation of results. Additionally, limitations within context exist such as time in an already overwhelmed schedule and parents who are sensitive to the types of data the school collects on their children. Within this particular study context, parents have a much more powerful voice and control over the experiences their students receive at the school. Their voice must be included in the research process as they represent a stakeholder group, which has a choice in where they send their children to school.

This record of study seeks to utilize action research to explore improvements to a student transition program, which better meet the needs of students at the study school. Within the action research tradition, this approach aligns with the framework of action science

(Argyis, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), which allows for the use of more theory-based, academic approaches to local problem solving. This approach seeks to aid organizations and groups in working together to solve problems based upon research and validated theory. The research approach aligns with the general action research approach allowing for multiple perspectives and viewpoints utilized in framing the problem studied (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Developing a comprehensive picture of what our students receive and what they are lacking will require coordination with all stakeholders involved in overseeing transition related activities since student transition activities at my school are managed by multiple individuals and departments.

Due to the number of stakeholders involved and its direct impact on what we as a school provide for students, action science is an appropriate way to integrate theory and practice. This framework will challenge the status quo and identify potential long term solutions for addressing anxiety among eighth-grade students transitioning into upper school. This study must respect the privacy not only of our students, but also our families. Due to the nature of the students who typically are able to enroll, afford, or receive scholarships for independent school education, I am limited on the types of data the school is able to collect while respecting the needs of all members of the community.

Within this action research study, we sought to identify whether a change in behavior occurred which would promote further evaluation of transition programming. The lack of a control group, while limiting in the determination of causation, is not uncommon in a study of this nature. Ip et al. (2012) found that 64% of evaluative program reviews published between 2005 and 2011 included single group designs. While this represents a narrow band of research, there is a demonstrated use of this type of study design within social science research. Research designs without a control group are a practical approach to avoiding logistical hurdles which

often prevent on campus, action based research. They may be used to fill a role in evaluating new programming ideas and demonstrating the potential for positive effects within an educational setting (Marsden & Torgerson, 2012). This type of research design, when combined with other research designs allows for greater contextualization for the problem and can support the decisions of campus administrators (Paulus et al., 2013).

My study involves the administration, student support team, eighth-grade teachers, and eighth-grade students in order to identify additional ways to support the eighth graders' transition to upper school. Involvement of so many groups allows for multiple viewpoints to influence the development of supplemental transition programming as well as evaluate the effectiveness of new program elements beyond the scope of this record of study. Additionally, by introducing so many adult stakeholders to the action research approach, this study may spur other individuals into action exploring another on-campus phenomenon.

As an organization, the school seeks to become more data driven and to empower study of the school from within. We have no formal approach or methodology that we regularly use to address phenomenon on our campus. Action research promotes reflective and adaptive methodologies which lead to research-based solutions to problems within a specific context (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Action research based approaches allow for context driven exploration of a problem and if stakeholders on campus are provided with the support and skills to perform this type of research then overall campus climate will likely improve.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Difficulty with the transition period to high school has negative consequences both academically and socially. Identifying the explicit needs of these students and implementing supplemental programming designed to address all identified student needs will promote a more

successful transition experience for all students. Middle school students are uniquely suited to engage in peer-based learning and mentoring (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010). Developmentally these students are more heavily influenced by the opinions of their peers rather than the adults who promote their social emotional growth (Young et al., 2016). Within the middle school context, students become more effective in cooperative learning environments and engage in much more open dialogue with one another related to their social and emotional needs (Johnson et al., 2010).

Social Learning Theory

I have chosen to frame this study within a Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) context and allow the execution of the supplemental transition programming to be led by the eighth-grade student leaders. Social learning theory suggests that individuals respond to stimuli in the environment and react accordingly. In children and adolescents, these individuals copy the behaviors of those in which they admire and seek approval. For young children, this tends to be parents, while adolescents have a stronger tendency to follow the behaviors of their peers for acceptance (Johnson et al., 2010). Therefore, when individuals in a position of influence demonstrate the positive, ideal behaviors, then other individuals will be more likely to respond in a similar manner. This approach empowers all individuals and leads to greater feelings of self-efficacy among participants (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, within social structures, such as school grade levels, students have an increased likelihood to conform to their peers when presented with behaviors modeled by respected student leaders.

By providing students with peer led activities designed to reduce anxiety, students have an increased likelihood of adopting those positive behaviors. The study school is a smaller community with fewer than 1,000 students in the middle and upper schools. Individuals who

choose not to conform to the norms of the community stand out and, in many cases, struggle within this context. Because of this, the school places significant emphasis on maintaining a positive campus climate and ensuring student belonging. By providing more opportunities for peers to support one another, I believe that we can further reduce anxiety among all students as they transition from the highly supportive middle school into the more independent upper school.

Peer modeling and influence have shown greater impact on reducing stress and worry (Johnson et al., 2010), which aligns with the framework of social learning. In order to promote a successful student transition into upper school the eighth-grade student leaders will lead mentoring activities, lead wellness exercises, and organize speakers and guests to address student needs related to the transition. It is the goal of this student led program to build more trust among the eighth-grade general population as it relates to the treatment and increase their buy-in to the programming. With guidance from adult stakeholders the student leaders will be taught how to implement appropriate, research-based approaches, which seek to improve student health and wellness within both full class and small group settings.

By creating positive interpersonal relationships through modeling by student leaders, it is our goal to increase communication within the grade as well as provide all students with a feeling of support and comfort. When students feel safe at school they are more likely to exhibit academic success and maintain positive relationships with other community members (Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2014). Student leaders have the most likely ability to foster these feelings within their classmates due to the typical middle school student's desire to fit in and feel safe in his or her learning environment (Johnson et al., 2010). Students are more likely to model the behavior of their peers, which supports the concept of peer assisted learning not only in academic contexts, but also social contexts as well. Since the transition to upper school

includes social, emotional, and academic changes facing the students the school would likely benefit from offering not only faculty and administration led programming, but also programming from student leaders and students from the general population to support one another through the transition process.

As eighth-grade students transition into the upper school we find they have increased anxiety related not only to their academic performance, but more importantly to the students' social inclusion and acceptance. By having opportunities to engage in conversations and modeling by peers, students will have a higher likelihood of remediation from anxiety and experience higher self-efficacy towards their abilities (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, student engagement among other participants will provide opportunities to foster stronger peer relationships, encourage the development of new relationships, and allow the grade as a whole to process their transition experience together (Johnson et al., 2010). Between the empowerment of peer leaders and the increased engagement among members of the eighth-grade class, this approach has the potential to increase the positive climate of the grade and the cohesiveness of the students as they prepare to enter a new stage in their academic journey together as a supportive cohort.

Most Significant Research and Practice Studies

Independent Schools

Before offering formal public education in the United States, community and religious leaders developed local primary schools offered training in reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic, as well as religious preparation (Gutek, 2012). These schools sought to prepare children to be upstanding members of the community. Additionally, males of high social standing had the opportunity to continue their education at Latin Grammar Schools, which would

prepare them for roles in society and community leadership. The establishment of dame schools in New England represents an early tuition model approach to schooling, which is central to private school funding.

By the late 18th century, private venture schools and academies were flourishing in the northeastern United States (Beadie, 2008). Due to the educational laws of the time, all children were required to engage in basic reading and arithmetic; however, many upper-class families sought out more opportunities for diverse curriculum (Gutek, 2012). These schools represent some of the earliest examples of private schooling due to their requirement for families to pay tuition and enrollment fees. The leadership structure existing of a board of trustees and a principal or head is not unlike most private and independent schools today.

The oldest private school in America, Collegiate School, still operates in Manhattan today. Founded in 1628 by the Dutch West India Company (Collegiate School, 2017), the school seeks to challenge young men to reach their highest potential in intellect, ethics, artistry, and athletic endeavors. This general philosophy is similar to many of the mission statements and school philosophies of independent schools nationwide. Independent schools provide broadly developed educational opportunities to capable young men and women in both day school and boarding school formats (NAIS, 2017). Many of our elite private schools are well over 200 years old and are located in the northeast United States. However, during the early 20th century as affluent families began to settle and establish their families throughout the western United States, independent schools began to open in these areas as well.

Modeled after the educational philosophies of the elite independent schools and often recruiting talented leadership from these elite institutions, western independent schools provided an educational opportunity for affluent young men and women in cities nationwide. These

schools have self-governing boards and are not beholden to follow state standards, though many exceed the standards imposed by the states where they operate. These schools offer rigorous college preparatory programs and often require extracurricular and community service participation in order to matriculate. This school is no exception.

A board made up of community leaders, parents, and alumni leads the school. These individuals seek to fulfill the educational mission and philosophy defined by the school. The school receives funding, similar to all independent schools, through private donations, endowments, investments, and grants, which allows them to make educational decisions based upon their mission and the will of the school community (Atkinson, 2010). Through a selective process, students are required to apply for admission and ultimately chosen based on the needs of the school. The autonomous nature of independent schools allows them to implement programs and curriculum without having to seek approval from central office administration or through a community vote (Beachy, 2006).

Diversity. Independent schools are actively diversifying their enrollment, seeking out new feeder schools and new students to enhance the quality and overall experience for all students. These schools recognize the importance of quality education for all as well as the benefit for students' exposure to the diverse, global society in which we live today. According to a 2011 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) survey, parents believe independent schools offer a more versatile all-around education and challenging curriculum (NAIS, 2012). Though the movement began with a focus on racial diversity (Irving, 2016), schools recognize the importance of religious, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity as well. Many more families of diverse backgrounds are seeking out independent schools as a higher quality educational opportunity compared to public schools.

These schools are seeking to expand the breadth of their student bodies both racially and socioeconomically. Many independent schools are increasing financial aid endowments and creating scholarships in order to provide educational opportunities for families who otherwise would not be able to attend independent schools (Irving, 2016). From 1996 to 2016, the number of students receiving financial aid at independent day schools has grown from 14% to 22% (Mitchell, 2016). Schools are striving to create more socioeconomically diverse student bodies since a homogeneous student body is not in the best interest of the students.

Student support. In order to support the expanding diversity of the learning community independent schools are expanding their instructional support staff to meet the needs of all learners (Vantine, 2016). In many schools this includes counseling and psychological support as well. Within independent schools the need to care for students both academically and emotionally is expected from many parents today (S. Terrill, personal communication, May 11, 2017). As tuition paying clients, these families want to ensure that student academic needs are being met as well as their ability to manage and maintain their emotional well-being within a rigorous college preparatory environment. The increase in student support is expanding as school recognize the need to meet a diverse set of learners (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

College preparatory curriculum. Vertical alignment of curriculum ensures no gaps exist for current students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Incoming ninth graders must be prepared for the intensive curriculum required at the school. State standards do not bind independent school curriculum and, therefore, varies between schools (Beachy, 2006). Curriculum at these schools tends to align with the criteria for highly selective colleges. The curriculum prepares the students to be successful college-bound graduates (Atkinson, 2010).

Teaming teachers across divisions allows for curricular alignment and provides uninterrupted student support for those who require consistency during the transition period. At a minimum, eighth- and ninth-grade teachers should meet regularly during the transition period to share information and strategies for best supporting the students as they fully integrate into the upper school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). The college preparatory curriculum begins in middle school in some subject areas (Atkinson, 2010). Ensuring no disconnect exists provides a seamless academic transition for students. For currently enrolled eighth graders, this will occur in their classes; for incoming students, evaluating and addressing these curricular gaps must occur.

Extracurricular requirements. Many independent schools require participation in all aspects of school life. It is an expectation for students to participate in athletics, fine arts, and community service activities throughout their time in the school (Atkinson, 2010). While requirements vary from school to school, students must learn to balance their activities in order to participate effectively in all aspects of school life (Beachy, 2006). Finding this balance can present a challenge for students who are unfamiliar with the larger expectations of upper school life. Additionally, these students also must maintain social lives in which they build healthy relationships with their peers.

Community connections. Parents and students value the community and strong relationships formed in independent schools. Along with challenging curriculum, a caring and nurturing environments is one of the primary reasons parents enroll their students in independent schools (NAIS, 2012). Upper school teachers must be aware of the developmental needs of ninth graders experiencing a transition period and support them both academically and emotionally. At this level, students often do not tend to develop the strong relationships with

their teachers, which they maintained in elementary or middle school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Additionally, adolescents rely more on the support and relationships provided by their peers, rather than parents and family (Langenkamp, 2010). These changes can lead to students feeling isolated or disconnected from their communities; therefore, an induction program must bring together all students and help them identify their place (Benner, 2011). Programs focusing on the building of connections and traditions help students who are struggling through the transition feel welcome and supported (Geltner, Law, Forehand, & Miles, 2011).

Independent school teachers. Teacher expectations go far beyond simply instruction in the classroom. The community expects teachers' engagement. Many schools require teachers to perform additional duties such as coaching, sponsoring a club, participating on committees, and actively engaging in student life (Atkinson, 2010). When expectations extend far beyond the classroom, private school teachers often have to stretch themselves far beyond the scope of traditional public school teachers and often for lower wages (Tamir, 2013).

Independent schools form much stronger community bonds and relationships between all constituencies involved in the school. Culturally these schools tend to have highly driven students, involved parental partnerships, and teachers who have the ability to focus on student learning rather than standardized testing (Atkinson, 2010). This type of environment, which is vastly different from the majority of public schools, can present a challenge for new teachers to the school who did not expect the freedom to teach what they want, while also keeping paying customers satisfied with the educational product (Beachy, 2006).

High School Transition

High schools are bigger: more classes are offered, extra-curricular expectations exist, and social relationships all become more important to adolescents (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013).

Students have more autonomy and can get lost among all the opportunities presented at this level. For most American students, this represents the second largest school transition in the student's educational journey (Benner, 2011). During this transition, many students are in the midst of or finishing puberty and continuing to develop as adults (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). This physical change, along with the changing emotional/social priorities in adolescents, can make the transition to high school especially challenging (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015).

During this time, many students demonstrate declines in academic achievement, have difficulties maintaining relationships, and struggle balancing the number of demands placed upon them (Geltner et al., 2011). While many students rebound from these difficulties, some continue to struggle and, in some cases, continue to decline. In public schools this often leads to students dropping out of school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006); however, independent school students would often be asked to leave the school long before this point (Atkinson, 2010; Beachy, 2006). Independent schools expect a higher level of achievement from their students, thus stressors centered on success tend to be greater (Atkinson, 2010).

School Climate and Belonging

School belonging is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodnow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). A positive school climate can increase student engagement and achievement, while also supporting the socioemotional growth of students (Shukla, Konold, & Cornell, 2016). Additionally, positive school climate can promote healthy relationships, school connectedness, and a sense of belonging, which makes students feel safe and supported (Thapa et al., 2013). Values, expectations, and other norms focusing on respect and engagement as a cornerstone of a school's operation will be more likely to achieve a positive school climate

(Shukla et al., 2016). Creating this environment goes beyond what is expected of students and teachers in the classroom.

Schools which include aspects of positive climate in their mission statements or vision are more likely to integrate this focus into all aspects of school life (Voight & Nation, 2016). All stakeholders on a campus are expected to operate within this context, meaning that teacher-administrator relationships must model the type of behavior expected of the students (Thapa et al., 2013). A positive campus climate affects all members of the community and school leaders must ensure the data they collect regarding campus climate does not silence the voice of any individual in the community (Shukla et al., 2016). Often school climate research is grouped and this may not provide school leaders with all of the information related to individual students on their campus.

Students must feel supported and engaged in the community (Thapa et al., 2013). Schools should provide staffing for support services which are actively utilized and engaged with the students in the school to provide any needed support either academically or socio-emotionally (Voight & Nation, 2016). These support structures allow for students to engage in meaningful dialogue about their experiences and develop relationships with stakeholders who are invested in their success (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015). Peer leadership programs, which promote health and wellness for all students, can foster a sense of belonging in the community, which aids in the improvement of campus climate. The importance of quality relationships with peers, teachers, and support staff can lead to student belonging in school (Kiefer et al., 2015).

Fostering a positive campus climate and increasing belonging on campus requires schools to extend the curriculum beyond traditional core content and the classroom. Schools must

integrate socioemotional education to teach students how to engage effectively within a community (Voight & Nation, 2016). Fostering civic responsibility both on and off campus through community service and work programming allows students to develop a sense of pride will help to develop engagement among students. By showing students that there is more to an educational experience than the learning within a classroom, they can forge stronger community connections and understand that successful communities are grounded in respect for one another (Feldman et al., 2014).

By demonstrating that every student has value and is integral to the successful functioning of a classroom, schools will have a better opportunity to empower all students and limit the struggle for dominance which often leads to bullying (Kiefer et al., 2015). This value and empowerment requires effective relationships to be formed amongst all stakeholders on a campus. Students and teachers, teachers and administrators, and parents must all engage in dialogue that supports positive growth and development of all students (Voight & Nation, 2016). It is essential for all students to have a voice and not be marginalized due to some difference that separates them from the perceived majority population (Wormington, Anderson, Schneider, Tomlinson, & Brown, 2016).

Inclusion and positive climate benefit all members of an educational community. Academic achievement is a common measure of school success; however, focusing on increased belonging will not only aid in raising achievement, but will also increase the emotional and physical health of students (Thapa et al., 2013). Broad approaches to campus improvement, which support the development of the whole child, will not only prepare these students for success throughout their school experience, but will also prepare them for successful contributions to their community as a whole (Voight & Nation, 2016).

Anxiety

Students who suffer from anxiety in school are less likely to experience success, more likely to demonstrate significant mental health disorders, exhibit lower self-worth, and often do not fulfill their potential (Lowe, 2015). Frustration, stemming from anxiety, leads to students taking longer to complete assignments, or rushing to make sure they do not fall behind their peers. These students experience significant amounts of fear in their daily classroom experiences: They worry about being embarrassed in front of their peers, disappointing their teachers or parents, and cannot accept the consequences of failure (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Ultimately all of this negative thought does nothing to increase the success of these students (Huchting, 2013); often these behaviors lead to student failure and underachievement. Students who struggle with anxiety symptoms are less likely to enroll in more challenging classes and dedicate the required time to their schoolwork once feelings of hopelessness have set in (Gillen-O'Neel, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2011). Avoidance, blame, and larger issues such as drug and alcohol abuse are also more prevalent among students suffering with these types of disorders (Mahmoud et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2011). There is a significant correlation between anxiety and depression, which can often become debilitating for students. Research shows a relationship among negative thought, maladaptive coping strategies, and increased levels of anxiety (Mahmoud et al., 2015). The severity of these symptoms varies widely, but all students suffering from anxiety require attention, encouragement, and support in order to achieve success (Lowe & Ang, 2012).

Anxiety disorders negatively affect numerous students in schools. The phenomenon leads to lower engagement, reduced academic performance, lower self-worth, and has a negative effect both emotionally and physiologically (Harrison, Vannest, Davis, & Reynolds, 2012). An

estimated 14% to 20% of school children are diagnosed with some type of mental disorder, which may affect students' performance, emotional stability, and personal affect. Studies have shown a relationship between untreated anxiety disorders in adolescents and behavioral and mental issues in adulthood (Mahmoud et al., 2015). These disorders commonly present symptoms in the form of behavioral acts outside the norm.

Anxiety disorders cause significant impairment in both the educational and social contexts. Worry plays a key role in the prevalence of anxiety disorders (Szabo & Lovibond, 2004). Not only do these students suffer as children, but also as they age symptoms often get worse and become debilitating (Vaughn et al., 2011). Research into the differences among different ethnic communities related to this phenomenon is ongoing and seeks to identify cultural differences, which might trigger the onset of such anxiety symptoms. During transitional periods in school, students with learning disorders especially struggle, experiencing higher anxiety and worry as they lose their supportive learning environments and worry about maintaining friendships (Young et al., 2016).

Students in the United States desire high levels of success, life satisfaction, and independence. Effectively achieving these goals can be stress and anxiety inducing. As students' progress through secondary school, these stressors become even more prevalent (Mahmoud et al., 2015). This becomes especially true for students whose expectations do not match the real-life environment in which they experience. Individuals suffering from these higher levels of anxiety tend to struggle forging fulfilling relationships leading to loneliness and isolation, further increasing their anxiety levels (Mahmoud et al., 2015). This continual cycle of increasing negative pressure and distress may lead to even higher levels of failure in an academic setting.

One of the challenges when identifying the underlying variables of anxiety has to do with the disorders' multi-dimensional framework (Mahmoud et al., 2015). Anxiety consists of behavioral dimensions, which support coping strategies, psychosocial dimensions related to life satisfaction, and cognitive dimensions, which are responsible for negative thought.

The creation of learning environments, which allow for more individualized instruction and projects, provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills. This type of environment can often contribute to lower overall anxiety. Teachers who provide their students with choice and the opportunity to explore personal interests within an assigned framework are more likely to take ownership and be proud of their work. These types of instructional approaches empower students, which is a key component of lowering overall anxiety.

These students must also be free to fail and given opportunities to learn from mistakes and make corrections. Removing arbitrary stakes in classroom assessments allows for learning to become a free flow of ideas and concepts, rather than just facts, which must be restated on a test. By the time students enter high school, basic knowledge and skill expectations exist in the classroom, which require students to have the necessary educational foundation (Gabriel & Davis, 2015). In many cases, lack of adequate educational preparation, especially in the areas of reading and writing, can have a negative effect on student achievement. This scenario leads to higher levels of stress and anxiety and presents a challenge for students at risk for anxiety disorders (Lowe, 2015).

Varied learning programs, along with teacher awareness of student needs, will often create a positive classroom climate and lead to lower overall classroom anxiety. If the students are comfortable, free to work as they please, allowed to take breaks, and know their teacher and

peers support them, they will be more likely to demonstrate low anxiety levels in the classroom. Even those students without anxiety disorders benefit from this positive learning environment. Students who feel valued are more likely to work hard and go beyond the minimum to demonstrate their intelligence and ability to succeed. As students age they become more concerned with abstract issues facing them which leads to higher levels of anxiety and worry (Young et al., 2016).

Remediation Strategies for Anxiety

Despite research-based interventions, anxiety remains steady among student populations (Mahmoud et al., 2015), which demonstrates the need for remediation strategies earlier in a student's educational experience. Due to the large number of variables and variation within the disorders, identification of effective treatment methods becomes challenging. Research identifies numerous strategies for temporary relief of classroom and test anxiety. Unfortunately, limited data exist regarding the efficacy of such strategies for long-term remediation (Mahmoud et al., 2015).

Along with thoughtful classroom and course design, temporary remediation strategies can provide students with an opportunity to relax and focus on the required tasks presented to them in the classroom. Many teachers utilize stress reduction strategies naturally in their classrooms. Wait time, opportunities for open note assessment, alternative assessments, and group work represent a small sample of instructional strategies, which can reduce overall anxiety among most students (Mahmoud et al., 2015).

Teachers must be well trained not only in a diverse set of instructional strategies, but also trained in the best ways to teach students how to utilize and connect with those instructional approaches. Students who have the understanding of how to effectively work in groups are less

likely to exhibit symptoms of anxiety (Huchting, 2013). Instructional strategies, which create support systems and encourage active engagement with the curriculum, have demonstrated success among anxiety prone students who suffer from literacy deficiencies (Gabriel & Davis, 2015). Conversely, students who are expected to produce a long-term project-based learning presentation related to their community are likely to fail if they are not taught how to go about creating the framework for their project and given explicit information regarding expectations (Mahmoud et al., 2015). Most students thrive in a structured environment and require minimal amounts of ambiguity in the expectations made of them, especially in the younger grades. Clear and concise preparation of all students combined with long-term anxiety relief strategies will assist students in reducing overall apprehension regarding their schoolwork and increase their success in the classroom.

The growing phenomenon of school anxiety cannot be solved without proactive communication between the students and the classroom teacher. Occasionally students will need more significant treatment options; however, these alternative treatments, most often medications, should only be utilized after a thorough diagnosis by a medical professional and after all other effective strategies have failed (Huchting, 2013). Mentors, friends, and other social support structures represent key elements in alleviating stress and anxiety in most cases (Mahmoud et al., 2015). Positive social support, while not directly correlated to anxiety, does demonstrate a positive association with lowering anxiety among students who do not already suffer from mental disorders. Availability of such support does increase life satisfaction among all groups. Additionally, cognitive intervention showed no effect on individuals already suffering from debilitating anxiety. However, students with low levels of anxiety reported a significant decrease in anxiety when participating in cognitive intervention methods (Mahmoud

et al., 2015). Activities such as meditation, positive thought, and active encouragement represent some of the positive cognitive intervention methods utilized.

Student contributions to curriculum creation and input into assessment types have shown success at lowering anxiety among students (Huchting, 2013). This empowerment allows for students to take ownership in their learning, promoting their independence, and increasing their self-efficacy. Involvement in course design also requires students to utilize critical thinking and problem solving skills, which can be utilized as adaptive coping strategies against stress and anxiety in all contexts (Mahmoud et al., 2015). Opportunities for guided practice, which are required, but not graded, provide opportunities for students to hone their skills before engaging in higher stakes assessment (Huchting, 2013).

Components of a Successful Transition Program

The high school transition period is exceptionally challenging for all students. At the study school, the two groups of incoming ninth graders experience divergent transition periods, with many overlapping similarities. For the new students removed from their own social networks, this transition can be even more challenging because they are joining a grade where many students already know one another (Langenkamp, 2009). A successful transition program must address the academic, procedural, social, and emotional concerns of all students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Students must balance an increased academic workload with extracurricular and social experiences. This causes significant anxiety among secondary students (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). By providing both students and parents with information about these expectations prior to the beginning of the ninth-grade year, students can develop coping strategies and other positive habits to set themselves up for success. Additionally, parents must understand their role

as a support system, which provides assistance when needed, without adding undue stress (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). A strong student support staff consisting of learning specialists, counselors, and educational psychologists can help provide greater depth of knowledge and analysis of student abilities (Benner, 2011). The opportunities for communication and support at independent schools are significant when comparing those opportunities to public schools and greatly influence why parents choose to send their students to independent schools (NAIS, 2012). These support structures, along with the openness of teachers and the expectation of teacher provided tutorials, creates a greater opportunity for student success (Beachy, 2006).

Peer led programming. Many students experiencing adolescence prefer to learn from their peers and social networks (Johnson et al., 2010). Because of this, many schools offer opportunities for peer mentoring within student support contexts to demonstrate positive behaviors to potentially struggling students. Forty to 60% of students become chronically disengaged or alienated when they reach high school (Davis et al., 2014). This can be due to the increase in class size and more isolation as students focus on their particular areas of interest. In order to prevent this disengagement in schools, peer leaders can focus on ensuring social engagement and providing academic support services such as peer tutoring (Jellison, Draper, & Brown, 2017). Class wide peer tutoring in the lower grades has demonstrated success within academic areas (Kamps et al., 2008), and due to the importance of social networks within middle school, the application of this approach would likely be beneficial in social and emotional contexts as well. Young people tend to spend more time with peers than adults and friendships play a key role in one's identity and the development of social supports (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2016). Because of this social structure, peers will have greater

influence upon behavior of other students. Social influences can justify the use of peer mentoring as a remediation approach for anxiety and other maladaptive school behaviors.

Peer-led programming provides opportunities for students to realize that everyone in the grade is experiencing the transition process in their own way. Schools provide support from older students and adults; however, opportunities for students to support one another are limited (Johnson et al., 2010). Within a positive school climate, many students receive support from adults and other leaders of the school; however, increasing social connections between peers can lead to additional positive outcomes such as higher levels of happiness, adjustment, and self-esteem by increasing a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). As social and emotional engagement increase students are more likely to demonstrate greater academic engagement as well (Davis et al., 2014). Increased engagement in all areas promotes student success and will likely lead to lower anxiety as students transition into the much larger context of the upper school.

Interdivisional communication. Successful transition programs, which include both middle and upper school teachers and administrators, can help bridge the gap between the two school structures. This would more adequately prepare current students for the transition (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Appropriate preparation throughout middle school can assist students in developing essential study habits and ensure adequate academic preparation regarding content knowledge, which will be required in the upper school. Meetings throughout the eighth-grade year can also assist in preparing students for the expectations of the upper school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Because we are a PK–12 comprehensive school, we have the ability for students at any grade level to meet with faculty and administrators from other divisions. Utilizing these

resources and encouraging faculty to meet and plan for transitioning students will lead to a lower anxiety entrance to the upper school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). The school must identify what students need to know and are able to do once they enter the upper school. Understanding student expectations will assist in the development of a targeted program, which adequately addresses student needs. Interdivisional communication allows support networks to continue as students' transition (Beachy, 2006). Additionally, upper school teachers can receive briefings on how to manage incoming students and best prepare to meet the needs of students (Rew, Tyler, Fredland, & Hannah, 2012). The ability for teachers across grade levels to communicate and work together in the best interest of the students is a valuable component of independent schools, and one leading many parents to choose independent schools in earlier grades (NAIS, 2012).

Whole family programming. Comprehensive programs involving parents, teachers, and students utilizing multiple approaches have demonstrated greatest success. Picnics, presentations, and community gatherings develop connections within the school and can help support families who are struggling with the transition (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Providing opportunities for all stakeholders to feel a sense of belonging can help ease stress and anxiety about the transition period. Both middle and upper school teachers should actively participate in transition programs to help bridge the gap between academic expectations in the middle school to those of the upper school (Atkinson, 2010). Elective teachers and athletic coaches should provide demonstration classes, rehearsals, or practices to make ninth-grade students aware of the routines and expectations of these programs. An emphasis on balance between all activities, when reiterated throughout the ninth-grade year, will help to develop students' intrinsic motivation while also advocating for their own well-being (Langenkamp, 2009).

Advisory. A strong advisory program led by a trained advisor can meet the transitional needs of students and advocate on their behalf. This individual can bridge the gap between counselor and teachers (Benner, 2011). These teachers also advocate and provide individualized support for students through the development of strong relationships. Students trust these teachers to act on their behalf, but also guide them when they face challenges or need to manage consequences of bad decisions (Langenkamp, 2010). Time utilized during the academic day for advisory as a supplement for the development of study skills or practice remediation strategies for stress and anxiety. Not addressing and repairing the emotional struggles of students can take a physical toll (Rew et al., 2012).

Closing Thoughts on Chapter 2

The transition from middle to upper school represents one of the most difficult experiences in an adolescent student's career. In comprehensive independent schools, the transition challenges manifest themselves in different ways since many students in the grade are simply changing buildings, whereas others are completely new to the school. A strong student induction program, which prepares students for the academic, social, and extracurricular realities of upper school, can assist students in their transition to the upper school.

Families expect the school to support the success of their students; however, students who are unsuccessful during the transition possibly placed on academic probation and potentially removed from the school. For the benefit of the student, the school has an obligation to provide a support system for all students and tailor those systems to meet the individual needs of each student. Unlike large public schools, most independent schools have small grade-level class sizes, which allow for teachers and administrators to develop strong relationships and bonds with

the students. This familiarity with every student may prevent any student from unintentional neglect and not receiving the support required for success.

Fostering strong community connections and building a sense of belonging is important for successful student transitions. All students must feel as though they are important not only to the adult stakeholders, but also their peers. Schools play an important role in building groups and social networks for students and offer unique opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). Providing opportunities for students to discuss stressors and anxiety inducing situations with their peers removes the feeling of isolation, which many student experience as they experience transitions in their lives. Programs that focus on all elements of student success, including academics, social, and emotional, will likely demonstrate the greatest impact on the reduction of student transition anxiety.

CHAPTER III

SOLUTION AND METHOD

Solution

In coordination with the eighth-grade dean (team leader), counselor, and learning specialist, we guided the eighth-grade student leadership (student council and peer mentors) to develop supplemental transition programming for the entire eighth-grade class. The programming was led by the eighth-grade student leadership within the framework of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which supports peer-led modeling as a tool to promote positive change in student responses or behaviors. Utilizing feedback from participants, the student leadership facilitated the implementation of programming, which emphasized transition related anxiety reduction.

The goal of this research was to address a localized and specific problem (Guiffrida et al., 2011) and not generalize the results to other contexts. Because problem-based action research is adaptive and reflective in its design (Forrest, 2007), it is flexible enough to respond to changes in environment. Therefore, collecting feedback from students, which informed the treatment design, is an acceptable approach to utilize within the study design. Additionally, the inside role of the researcher allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the problem, but does potentially limit the validity of the results in a more general context (Herr & Anderson, 2015). We recognized the importance of including student voice within the study design and though no formal evaluation of anecdotal evidence will occur within the study context, the school will use stakeholder feedback to make decisions regarding future programming. This transition study is intended to not only explore a potential program approach, but to also explore the schools transition program as a whole. Since the school does not regularly engage in program

evaluations on campus an ancillary benefit of this study is to provide the administration with data which would otherwise not be collected to inform future decision making.

The supplemental programming aligns with existing transition programming offered by the school. Though student feedback guided programming, it focused on activities related to mindfulness, peer mentoring, and community belonging. The goal of this programming was to fill in program gaps not currently offered to the eighth-grade class. Programming included grade level discussions related to transition anxiety, structured activities to promote belonging, and other peer-led activities to discuss specific concerns related to the transition to high school. We hoped for peer-led programming to allow students to focus on their experience through the transition process and not the importance of preparation for high school, which is often the focus of parents and teachers. While much of the current programming (Figure 1) occurs during the fall of the ninth-grade year, students are exposed to some activities which are designed to prepare them to effectively begin their upper school experience. Feedback from numerous stakeholders indicates a challenge in finding the correct balance between making sure the students are prepared for upper school, while not increasing their anxiety by sharing an overwhelming amount of information.

Current Transition Programming
Spring of 8th grade – Academic support and planning meetings with the deans
Spring of 8th grade – Upper school peer mentor presentations
Spring of 8th grade – Presentation on extracurricular options in the upper school
Fall of 9th grade – Orientation week prior to school starting
Fall of 9th grade – Freshmen retreat the first full weekend of school
Fall of 9th grade – Meetings with peer mentors and student life to address student wellness

Figure 1. Current transition programming offered by the school

Adolescents are more likely to engage in positive behavioral change when influenced by their peers (Johnson et al., 2010). With the exception of peer mentor presentations and the student council led teambuilding activities which occur during orientation week, the majority of our transition activity are led by adult stakeholders. Peer-led activities allowed students to focus on their actual concerns and not simply the perceived concerns of adult stakeholders. By tailoring programming to meet student needs and still requiring the students to participate in current transition programming, the school hoped to lessen the number of anxiety prone students who move on to the upper school. Additionally, peer-led programming promotes leadership among the student council and peer mentors by providing these students an outlet to share their own concerns regarding the transition to upper school. By demonstrating to all students' that apprehensions exist throughout the grade, peer leaders initiated discussions in an effective and supportive manner. The eighth-grade dean, counselor, learning specialist, and I guided the student leadership with instructions on how to implement the peer-led programming and support the student leadership as they develop the support activities effectively.

Study Context and Participants

Participants and Sample

All eighth-grade students who were present on the day of the STAI pre-test (N=115) were included in the STAI anxiety assessment. This included the ten student leaders who would be active participants in the activities they lead throughout the study. The student council members are elected by their peers at the beginning of the school year and the peer mentors are selected by the faculty through an application process. All of these students must maintain an acceptable grade point average and satisfactory or better citizenship. These students have demonstrated leadership ability by engaging in their roles, which led to their selection as the ideal candidates to

lead this peer led programming. The peer leaders were included in the pre-test and posttest since they were active participants in the supplemental programming. Both groups of student leaders receive leadership training, mentor training, and public speaking support as a part of their group membership. The school actively develops student leaders and promotes the development of leadership skills both in the academic classroom and in extra-curricular activities. Within the study context, all student leaders received direct guidance from the counselor and student council faculty sponsors to ensure the student leaders felt prepared to successfully deliver the program activities.

Study Context

All programming took place during the school day, utilizing time provided for both large and small group meeting time, we were able to ensure all students participated and were exposed to the programming. While we could not ensure that all students were present for every activity, attendance records indicated that no more than four students missed any given activity. Additionally, students who were unable to participate in the pre-test were not included in the posttest administration of the STAI. This was determined using attendance records from the pre-test school day. These students were able to participate in transition programming since logistically the school did not feel it was appropriate to exclude these individuals from the class wide activities.

This study did not seek to generalize the results, but merely demonstrate the effectiveness of the transition program to the school administration. Contextual limitations prevented dividing the class in such a way to create a truly randomized sample. The treatment had the potential to benefit all students and therefore the administration included all students in the peer-led programming. Additionally, time limitations in the spring prevented the opportunity to offer

multiple, different programming options, one for a control and another for a treatment group. Within these limitations, I present findings on only the effect of the treatment approach and not draw conclusions regarding the benefits of peer-led programming in this context compared to other types of programming.

The study implemented a peer led mentoring program aimed at providing a forum and support for the reduction of perceived transition related anxiety. The school had not collected any formal data regarding student anxiety related to the upper school transition, however referrals to counselors, aren't feedback, and student feedback via the HSSSE all indicated a need to explore anxiety reduction related to the transition.

Parents were informed about all elements of the study and understood that no identifying data other than gender were collected by the school or me. The level of confidentiality was requested by the school due to the nature of our student population and since this record of study would become a public document. Anticipating the potential challenge of discovering students who may demonstrate clinical levels of anxiety in the STAI results, the data were shared with the counseling department for potential follow up with each gender group. The increased attention on anxiety led to counselor facilitated gender group meetings after the to encourage students to meet individually with support staff if they felt higher levels of anxiety. Considering ethical obligations, I was able to identify any clinical level of students due to their registration email address for the STAI assessment portal. Fortunately, among the entire sample population any individuals who demonstrated high levels of anxiety were already receiving services related to this and any other pre-existing diagnoses.

All members of the community understood that the research was intended to provide additional student support programming to benefit our students. The school regularly

implements, changes, and removes programming based upon current trends and research in education; therefore, the implementation of new program approaches did not tend to alarm students or their families. However, on-campus, action research studies are uncommon and both the school and myself wanted to make sure we were transparent with all stakeholders throughout the research process. It was our goal to introduce the entire community to action-based research to collect useful data related to program improvement on our campus.

Proposed Research Paradigm

This quantitative study of the 2017–2018 eighth-grade class at the study school presented information related to student anxiety during the transition into upper school. Grounded in a social learning framework, the study identified trends in student anxiety utilizing the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). Utilizing a one-group pretest-posttest design the researcher sought to identify supplemental peer-led programming at the school, which sought to lower anxiety among currently enrolled eighth-grade students. Development of the treatment program utilized research based approaches as well as feedback from faculty in charge of current transition programming. Additionally, student input from both the student leaders and the general population approach guided the design and presentation of the treatment. The results of the treatment were analyzed utilizing a paired samples *t*-test. These quantitative results informed the administration about how the transition program influences transition anxiety of the eighth-grade students at the school.

Data Collection Methods

On campus, action research is limited at the study school. While many faculty understand the importance of collecting data to understand phenomenon on campus, many parents within the study school are apprehensive about allowing their students to participate in

research studies. Due to this limitation, I had to choose treatments, data collection methods, very carefully to ensure that activities were not adding unnecessary stress or anxiety to the students. Even though the study school regularly adds, removes, or modifies programming, our parent population has concerns about the data we are collecting on their children, which may not be directly related to their academic work. Within the context of the school, the study needed to occur within a limited time frame and utilize data sources that did not interfere with the daily activities of the students or potentially identify concerns about individual students. While parent concerns presented a challenge in utilizing multiple potential data sources, I felt that the STAI would provide enough information about student anxiety levels to evaluate program effect within the study time frame due to its long history as a popular and valid measurement instrument.

Data Sources and Analysis

This quantitative study utilized the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), which measured anxiety levels during the ninth-grade transition. The STAI measures both trait and state anxiety. State anxiety describes an individual's response to a specific situation or event. State anxiety is a temporary condition and may not correlate with a propensity towards more general anxiety. Trait anxiety represents a personality characteristic indicating an individual who is more likely to experience anxiety on a more consistent basis when presented with stressors (Spielberger, 1983).

All items rated on a 4-point scale from *Almost Never* to *Almost Always*. Higher scores indicate greater anxiety. The instrument is appropriate for students of at least a sixth-grade reading level (APA, 2017). The score range for both subtests is 20-80 with a clinical demonstration of state anxiety beginning with a score of 40 (Hullinger & Hogan, 2014). However, the instrument itself does not specify explicit scores related to clinical anxiety. The

STAI is designed only to report how an respondent scores in relation to the instrument norms, which vary based upon age, race, and gender. Within the context of this study, we sought to use this instrument within a one-group pretest-posttest design to determine the efficacy of transition programming at the school. The results of the treatment were analyzed utilizing a paired samples *t*-test employing both Past3 and Microsoft Excel. Instructions for data analysis were provided by Charles Spielberger in the *Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Adults* (2015).

Though the STAI presents limited information regarding specific strands of anxiety, the instrument does present valid information about a student's propensity towards anxiety and anxiety triggered by a context or situation. The instrument has been widely used to assess anxiety among populations within similar contexts (Spielberger, 2015). Additionally, it has been used to measure anxiety within a limited treatment window (Hullinger & Hogan, 2014), such as the context of this study. The STAI is also a simple instrument for students to complete. The inventory consists of 40 items, 20 measuring state anxiety and 20 measuring trait anxiety.

The school did not want the students to lose any time or add to their commitments by participating in the study. We were therefore limited in the type of instrument we could utilize for data collection. The STAI also does not collect significant demographic information, nor does it attempt to provide specifics regarding the different types of anxiety. Since this study sought only to demonstrate a reduction of anxiety, related specifically to the student transition process, both the school and I felt that an instrument, which did not disrupt the academic experience of the students, would be the best tool for measurement within the context.

Timeline

Transition programming for eighth-grade students begins during the fall of eighth grade where students set goals for their year in preparation to enter the upper school. During the

spring, transition programming becomes more intensive involving upper to middle school peer mentors, upper school deans (guidance counselors), and administrators who assess and prepare the eighth graders for the transition into upper school. Within this timeframe, we wished to introduce grade level, student leader led activities, which align and address topics covered in the current transition programming.

Due to limitations in student schedules the activities were limited to blocks of 45 minutes beginning the last week of March and occurring throughout April 2018. All activity topics were chosen directly from the students' responses to the initial questionnaire. The students are regularly reminded about the resources we have on campus and the middle school administration felt the context of the study provided another opportunity to present this information. Since many other activities and presentations were already scheduled during this time the treatment window was limited to five sessions. Since I worked in conjunction with students, who were already actively participating in all areas of the school, this limited treatment window also prevented them from becoming overwhelmed with the burden of implementing too much programming themselves. These student leaders had the benefit of additional transition related information as well as the opportunity to further develop their leadership skills as they prepare to become leaders in the upper school.

Activities. The activities listed in Figure 1 outline the structured activities that occurred during the study. However, there were additional conversations and resources shared with individual students or groups of students by the counselors and learning specialists at the requests of the specific students or groups. This was to be expected since programming related to the transition was already occurring and we did not want to withhold information from students seeking better preparation for the impending transition.

Activities	
3/29/2018	Introduction to study and administration of student created survey to the entire eighth-grade class during a class meeting
4/09/2018	Administration of STAI pretest and anxiety presentation to the entire eighth-grade class during a class meeting
4/13/2018	Forum organized and moderated by student leaders with upper school students to the entire eighth-grade class during a class meeting
4/20/2018	Presentation by student leaders on dress code and social experiences to the entire eighth-grade class during a class meeting
4/30/2018 to 5/03/2018	Mix It Up breakfasts moderated by students with guided questions at each breakfast table consisting of up to 10 students per table
5/09/2018	BRAIN model mindfulness activity presented to the entire eighth-grade class during a class meeting
5/11/2018	Administration of STAI posttest during class meeting

Figure 2. Timeline of treatment activities based upon student survey results

During our first grade-level class meeting on the Thursday following spring break, I provided the class with an overview of the study and a brief introduction to anxiety. I wanted to ensure buy-in and support for the student leaders who then spoke about their role in the study. After our presentation, the students were asked to complete a survey developed by the student leaders with guidance from the class dean and me. Figure 2 lists the questions the peer leaders created in order to develop an understanding of their classmates needs. The survey was completely anonymous and was administered as a Google form. We did not require a login so no identifiers, such as email address, were collected. The students utilized the results of this survey, with 111 students' responses, to guide their program selections.

Questions one through three were open ended and questions five through six required a response on a 1–4 Likert scale from *not prepared* to *well prepared*. As a school, we regularly

administer school-based surveys to gauge interest regarding programming needs on our campus, so this particular survey was similar in form to at least two other surveys, one on technology needs and the other on course offerings, which were administered to the grade during the academic year. While the validity of the survey instrument could be called into question it was only used to generate a list of student needs and understand if their needs were being met by our current programming. No decisions, other than what topics to cover, were made based upon the results of the survey data. While the structure of the activities was in place prior to the start of the study, the topics of discussion or presentation were not chosen until the student leaders, class dean, and myself reviewed the results of the survey and chose the best activity framework for each topic.

Survey Questions
1. What questions do you have about the upper school?
2. What additional programming would you like in order to prepare you for upper school?
3. What did you learn from the upper school students who presented to you in your class meeting?
4. How prepared do you feel for the academic rigor in the upper school?
5. How prepared do you feel for the social experiences of the upper school?
6. How prepared do you feel for the extracurricular expectations of upper school?

Figure 3. Student leader survey of students

On April 9, 2018, all 8th grade students who were present completed the pre-test administration of the STAI. Both the pre-test and posttest administrations of the STAI were delivered via the electronic portal provided by the publisher of the instrument. Of the 117 students in the grade, 115 were present on this day and were included in the results. The students who were absent on the day of the pre-test still participated in transition activities due to

logistical constraints, but they were exempt from the posttest administration. These students were identified using daily attendance records. Following the administration of the STAI, I led a presentation with the student leaders on anxiety. This presentation was an overview and addressed concerns related to the transition to upper school that past students had identified through personal narrative feedback as well as feedback on the HSSSE.

Activities three through five were designed completely by the students and required them to coordinate with the upper school administration and the upper school peer mentor students in order to present accurate information and facilitate discussion. Based upon the results of the student survey the student leaders moderated a forum with the upper school peer mentors. The upper school students addressed the topics requested by the eighth-grade participants and also shared stories of their upper school transition. The goal of this activity was to build community connections between eighth-graders and upper schoolers who would support these students in the coming year. During this session, small group breakout discussions occurred in order to provide a forum for students who felt uncomfortable voicing their concerns or asking questions in front of the large group.

The following class meeting was focused on rules and procedures as well as social offerings in the upper school. These topics had traditionally been addressed by faculty and administrators, however feedback from past students indicated that the presentation of this information had focused on the negative consequences rather than the potential benefits. Due to this negative feedback, the upper school administration decided to no longer present on these topics. This provided an opportunity for the eighth-grade student leaders to share this information in a fun and engaging manner. Their presentation on rules and procedures included a dress code fashion show, a student made video overviewing common upper school rules, and

finally a question and answer session with upper school faculty. Following the procedural presentation, the student leaders introduced the eighth-grade students to the social opportunities that are offered in the upper school. They discussed highlights such as homecoming, spirit days, and class events, as well as other community service focused events which occur throughout the year.

The Mix it Up breakfasts on the Washington D.C. trip were intended to promote discussion and to increase belonging among the class. The student leaders encouraged students to engage with peers whom they were less familiar with and to build stronger connections between one another. We provided guiding questions and the student leaders participated in these discussions with their peers. Feedback would be anecdotal based upon conversations with the student leaders after the trip, but the intention of the activity was to provide opportunities for community connectedness which can lead to reduced anxiety among students.

Activities culminated in May with the introduction of the BRAIN model mindfulness activity introduced to the upper school students and faculty by researchers at Texas State University who were on campus working with the upper school community on stress and anxiety reduction. The breath, relax, ask, imagine, notice (BRAIN) activity is a mindfulness activity focused on making conscious decisions about behavior to reduce maladaptive behaviors. This activity encourages students to take a moment to peacefully meditate and reflect upon their current struggle and identify concrete ways in which they can ease the burden of the expectations they are attempting to meet. The students were encouraged to use this activity not only to prepare for the transition to high school, but also as they prepared for their final exams.

The final activity was the administration of the STAI posttest and an overview of the goals of the study. I thanked the students for their participation and buy-in throughout the

process. Though students were required to attend all events, they were not required to actively participate in the events. The student population at my school tends to be very supportive of programming that is specifically designed to meet their needs. Additionally, they are much more enthusiastic when they have a voice in the creation of programming. The student leaders were recognized and encouraged to lead grade level activities that focus on inclusion and belonging as they progress through their educational experience. A follow up between middle school administrators and myself took place upon completion of the study to determine if we want to continue implementing peer-led programming in the future.

Reliability and Validity Concerns or Equivalents

The study context places several limitations on this action research study. However, the potential value for the students participating in the study still allows for an exploration into the effectiveness of this additional treatment, even without a baseline or comparison group. The results of the HSSSE indicate numerous students expressing anxiety and lack of preparation for the transition to upper school even with transition programming. This indicates a need for supplemental types of programming. Within the study design, threats to internal validity do exist when attempting to identify a causal link between the treatment and lower anxiety. However, within the study context, stakeholders are primarily concerned with lowering student transition anxiety utilizing any research based approach or method. This study attempts to identify programming specifically for the study school. The results are intended to show the administration effective strategies to meet student needs. We know many students feel the current programming is not adequate so we must add, modify, or remove programming to meet the needs of all students experiencing this transition.

Internal Validity

Within the study context, threats to internal validity exist. Since transition programming has already begun with students meeting individually with their dean, I did expect these meetings and any necessary follow-up to potentially influence the results of the study. Student anxiety may rise or fall due to the outcome of these meetings. The school did choose to cut much of the programming from prior years where administrators meet to discuss rules and procedures within the upper school. Comments from the HSSSE indicated too much focus on rules, making the upper school seem like a strict system focused only on discipline. This school year, the only programming besides dean meetings that occurred was a session with the upper school peer mentors. This allowed for the peer-led programming to replace much of the prior adult-led programming. The middle school administration and myself found this to be a positive change and one that justified the need to provide this information to all students, not simply a treatment group.

The single group design in this study does have the potential to be influenced by participant maturation and history, however the limited treatment window is intended to limit these effects (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Within the study time frame, all activities related to addressing transition anxiety are controlled within the study design. While this cannot address the potential influence of outside variables, data can be presented which supports a change in participants' anxiety levels. This information provides a starting point for further research by the administration within the context of a comprehensive program evaluation. The school recognizes that transition anxiety cannot be controlled for solely by the school. Students may become more anxious due to parent interactions, conversations with older students, or even a realization that the upper school program is focused primarily on college preparation. The

school identified too much programming in the past as a potential reason for increased anxiety and thus cut back on programming. Therefore, offering a fast and targeted intervention offers the best chance of demonstrating a result within this context.

The time of year also had the potential to influence study results. By the end of the study period, students were already preparing for final exams, which can be a stressor for many students. The administration of the posttest took place exactly one week before the first exam. However, it was our hope that by introducing the students to a mindfulness activity designed to lower stress and anxiety the week prior, we could continue to reduce not only transition related anxiety, but test anxiety related to final exams as well. Once again, the stakeholders all felt that providing opportunities to reduce anxiety was an important opportunity to which all students in the context should have access. The students often place additional pressure on their final exams because they believe class placement in ninth grade is dependent upon exam performance. The deans dispelled this myth, but gossip among students and parents unfortunately allowed this rumor to persist. The reality is overall performance and work ethic throughout the year are the greatest predictors of honors class placement in the ninth grade.

While many confounding variables exist within the community, such as an understanding of the study purpose, outside supports provided by parents, older siblings supporting some students and not others, the introduction of student leadership led components will provide an additional opportunity to reduce transition related anxiety among the grade as a whole. Follow-up with students who do not participate in all programming might demonstrate differences in anxiety levels, but will not likely determine causation. The goal of utilizing a limited treatment window, combined with a targeted measurement instrument, is to reduce the potential impact of

these variables and determine that any outcome was in fact due to the specific, student leadership led programming implemented in this study.

Instrument Validity

The STAI is widely accepted as valid scales to measure state and trait anxiety. The STAI has internal consistency coefficients ranging from .86 to .95 and test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from .65 to .75 over a 2-month interval (Spielberger, 1983).

Reliability Concerns

A question might rise from the results reliability as a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design without random assignment. Time constraints and the unfamiliarity of on-campus research projects are concerns of both the school and the parents, which limit the approach of this particular study. To address these concerns, we chose to include the entire grade, limit the collection of identifying information, and limit the treatment window. Many of these activities replaced administrator-led presentations with student-led presentations with the goal of having more student buy-in and understanding about the potential difficulties they may face throughout the transition process.

The student leaders who assisted with programming were all student council members who were familiar with presenting to their classmates. Additionally, these students received leadership training and participated in ongoing programming to develop leadership skills with the student council. Related to the study, I met with the student leaders each week to not only plan treatment programming, but also provide adequate preparation and training to implement the programming. Any programming they felt unable to present was instead presented by me. The student leaders did introduce these activities to demonstrate their support for non-peer-led presentations. By not relying solely on student presenters this limited the need for

comprehensive training, which the students did not have time to complete. Additionally, it allowed for the counselor, class dean, and myself to ensure the fidelity of the treatment. In all programming contexts, the student leaders requested that the eighth-grade teachers be present during all sessions to manage behavior. In all group sessions, I was in attendance as well.

As an action research based project, the results presented data to the administration regarding the effectiveness for individual students participating in the treatment. The administration may then make judgments on whether to widen the scope of the treatment to provide more reliable results. Through the limited treatment window, we hope to see improvement in student anxiety levels due to the increased programming and connections to peers. With several activities designed to address topics that the students requested, it is our hope that by answering their questions we can ease the transition anxiety among all students and demonstrate that all class members are experiencing the same transition anxiety.

Researcher's Resources and Skills

I had access to the campus, administrators, and current students to perform the study. Utilizing the methods learned throughout the Ed.D. program coursework and with the assistance of the administration of the school, I maintained all ethical standards in order to produce a reliable study. The research presented, used as a quality improvement (QI) project, is solely for the purposes of evaluating and refining supplemental student transition programming in the middle school at the study school. Administration members and program directors were the only individuals who utilized these data in order to make determinations about program success and areas of weakness.

Closing Thoughts on Chapter 3

This one-group pretest-posttest action research study will inform the administration at the school about the effectiveness of student leadership led support programming in addition to academic planning meetings held with the students' deans (counselors), during the spring semester for eighth-grade students preparing to transition to upper school. Using anxiety levels, as measured by the STAI, as the primary data source we sought to utilize these results to justify the implementation of a grade wide student led mentor program. This study utilized existing literature on successful student transition programming to identify gaps in the programming at the school and present options for remediation of these programming gaps.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this one group pretest-posttest study of the eighth-grade class, quantitative data were analyzed using a paired sample *t*-test. The STAI was administered to the eighth-grade students after spring break of 2018 as a pretest and again as a posttest during the second week of May 2018. The pretest was administered during the students' advisory period and the posttest was administered during a whole grade class meeting. These administration periods were determined by the school schedule and after consultation with the eighth-grade team leader. Data analysis took place in June of 2018 utilizing both Microsoft Excel and Past3. Both mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) data were calculated within Microsoft Excel, while *t*-test analysis was completed utilizing Past3.

Presentation of Data

This study sought to address perceived anxiety among the eighth-grade class related to the transition to upper school utilizing grade-level student leader led support programming. The support programming supplemented the existing transition activities and was implemented during the late spring of 2018. Due to the limitations placed on the study context by both time and access to the participants, the study took place within a limited treatment window from March to May 2018. To limit the collection of personal data we utilized a quantitative instrument to present only numerical results of anxiety levels among the study population. The STAI is a widely-used instrument which measures both state and trait anxiety among respondents. While this study focused primarily on state anxiety among the eighth-grade students, as it relates to the transition to upper school, higher levels of trait anxiety would influence the results of the state anxiety measure (Spielberger, 1983).

The STAI manual includes norm data for high school students (Spielberger, 2015), which provided a baseline by which to compare the scores of students preparing to enter high school. Table 1 identifies the means for male and female high school students' state anxiety as 39.45 and 40.54, respectively. Additionally, the state anxiety normed standard deviations are 9.74 for males and 12.86 for females. For trait anxiety, the mean is 40.17 for males and 40.97 for females, whereas the standard deviation is 10.53 and 10.63, respectively. Based upon the norm data, one can anticipate scores on both measures to be within one standard deviation for normal high school students. The STAI manual does not provide norm data by combined gender type.

Table 1

STAI Norm Data for High School Students

	Mean (*M*)	Standard Deviation (*SD*)
Male State Anxiety	39.45	9.74
Female State Anxiety	40.54	12.86
Male Trait Anxiety	40.17	10.53
Female Trait Anxiety	40.97	10.63

Note. Norm data provided by mindgarden.com the licensure agent for the STAI developed by Charles D. Spielberger, (1983, 2015).

The results in Table 2 for all eighth-grade students demonstrate anxiety levels below the norm for both state and trait anxiety on both the pretest and posttest administrations of the STAI. The state anxiety results for all gender are $p = .79$, which is greater than the p-value of .05. Therefore, I am unable to attribute a reduction of transition related anxiety due to student leader

led programming. The result t (114) = .26 also indicates no significant difference is present due to the treatment programming. The standard deviation falls below the norm level indicating scores among the eighth-graders are clustered closer together indicating the sample size is appropriate for analysis.

Table 2

STAI and Paired t-Test Results for State and Trait Anxiety for All Eighth-Graders (N=115)

	N	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
All Gender State Pretest	115	37.49	10.92		
All Gender State Posttest	115	37.88	11.67		
				.26	.79
All Gender Trait Pretest	115	38.10	11.30		
All Gender Trait Posttest	115	40.12	11.93		
				1.29	.20

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

The students' scores indicated a higher level of trait anxiety; however, the combined scores still fell within the normal range for trait anxiety. This indicates the eighth-grade students do not demonstrate clinical levels of anxiety as a grade, which would be expected of the class as a whole. The standard deviation of the trait anxiety scores is higher than the norm, which indicates the need for a larger sample size to compare trait anxiety. The data indicate state and trait anxiety levels within the norms for this age group of students at the school. The expectation is trait anxiety remains constant due to the internal propensity towards anxiety among

individuals. The high *p*-value (.20) indicates no significant difference exists, which for trait anxiety is expected and supports the use of the instrument for this measurement.

State anxiety defines feelings of anxiety due to outside factors, such as the transition into upper school. It is this trait, which was utilized to identify the effect of peer-led transition programming on eighth-grade student anxiety. Both male and female students scored below the norm data for state anxiety (Table 3) with mean scores of 35.93 and 38.90, respectively. Additionally, scores were clustered closer to the mean than the norm data with standard deviations of 9.74 for males and 10.94 for females. At the time of the pretest, existing transition programming had already begun, which indicates awareness of the impending transition did not raise state anxiety for the eighth grade above the norm level.

Table 3

STAI and Paired t-Test Results for State Anxiety Separated by Gender (N=115)

Gender	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Male Pretest	58	35.93	9.74		
Male Posttest	58	36.34	11.51		
				.19	.85
Female Pretest	57	38.90	10.94		
Female Posttest	57	39.34	11.44		
				.13	.90

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

Posttest scores for state anxiety demonstrated an unexpected increase with male mean scores rising to 36.34 and female scores increasing to 39.34. The standard deviation of these two groups also increased to 11.51 and 11.44, respectively. However, even with this increase, results still fell below the norm data for the instrument. Paired *t*-test values indicate no significant difference between pre-test and posttest exists with *p*-values 0f .85 for males and .90 for females. Variance between the scores below the norm can be attributed to natural variance of scores within an insignificant range.

Table 4

STAI and Paired t-Test Results for Trait Anxiety Separated by Gender (N=115)

Gender	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Male Pretest	58	36.93	12.13		
Male Posttest	58	38.51	12.22		
				.68	.50
Female Pretest	57	39.14	10.65		
Female Posttest	57	41.64	11.68		
				1.12	.26

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

Trait anxiety, an individual's internal tendency towards anxiety, was measured as part of the instrument in order to indicate a propensity towards anxiety, which may be triggered by external factors. Once again male and female eighth-graders' mean scores were below the norm for the pretest (Table 4) at 36.93 and 39.14, respectively. However, the distribution of scores

was above the mean for both groups with a standard deviation of male scores at 12.13. Female scores were only slightly above the norm standard deviation at 10.65, compared to 10.63 for the norm.

Similarly, to state anxiety scores, both male and female students demonstrated an increase in mean trait anxiety scores on the posttest administration of the STAI (Table 4). Since trait anxiety is expected to remain constant, a surprise result appeared with the mean scores increasing to 38.51 for males and 41.64 for females. The trait anxiety scores for females on the posttest represents the only mean above the norm group data. The standard deviation for both groups also increased and the results are located above the norm at 12.22 for males and 11.68 for females. Possible explanations for this result will be discussed in the results section of this study. This demonstrated change in score does not represent a statistically significant difference with *p*-values of .50 for males and .26 for females.

These data reflect the pretest and posttest mean scores of the eighth-grade class utilizing the validated STAI scale. Utilizing a paired sample *t*-test, the results indicate no significant difference between the administrations of the STAI for both male and female students. Variation between results exists, but is not statistically significant. Based upon these results, the researcher can determine the peer-led transition programming had no effect on the anxiety levels of eighth-grade students at the school. Further discussion of these results is presented in the following section of this study.

Results

The school administration is aware of the unique challenges and stressors facing students as they transition into upper school. This awareness has led the school to implement transition programming such as meetings with the upper school administration and deans during the spring

of the eighth-grade year. Additional programming commences with orientation and the freshmen retreat prior to and during the first week of the ninth-grade year. Even with participation in both the student focused and the whole family programming, many students still experience maladaptive anxiety as they begin their ninth-grade year. Teachers note a decrease in performance during the first quarter among many students and referrals to the school counselor and learning specialists increase. Highly engaged parents in the community express concern about student stress and anxiety, which leads to increased communication to faculty expressing this concern.

Interaction with Context of the Study

The school continues to evaluate transition activities and explores new programming to support students who transition from the middle school as well as those students who are new to the school community. This study sought to introduce new programming with the goal of supporting students through the transition process in eighth grade and lowering their anxiety about the transition to upper school. This study focused on peer-led programming, which has been increasing in use at the school. Peer programming offers students the opportunity to develop leadership skills as well as develop empathy for classmates. Additionally, students transitioning into upper school emphasize peer relationships more than their relationships with adults. The goal of this study was to demonstrate the effectiveness of peer-led activities as it relates to the reduction of transition anxiety.

The program utilized both small and large group breakouts to allow students to interact with the student leaders in different contexts. Whole-group programming took place during class meetings and individual reflections and small group activities occurred during advisory. Additionally, programming occurred during the eighth-grade class trip to Washington DC. This

culminating trip offered a unique opportunity to focus on peer relationships outside of the traditional school context. All activities within the study framework occurred once existing transition activities began for the eighth-grade students. The students began meeting with their deans (academic advisors) regarding their high school courses and tracking and initial presentations regarding expectations for upper school athletics, arts, and community service had already occurred. By providing supplemental activities centered on social and emotional needs within a peer led context, the school hoped to fill a gap in their transition programming.

Prior to the administration of the STAI pretest, the peer leaders collected comments regarding the transition to upper school from the students via a Google form. This information allowed the peer leaders to identify and group similar themes and concerns, which current eighth graders possessed regarding their ninth-grade year. The peer-leader survey consisted of open ended and Likert scale questions, which were intended to provide students the opportunity to suggest programming ideas and ask specific questions related to the transition to upper school.

Based upon the results of the questionnaire and the pretest STAI results indicating normal levels of anxiety among the class as a whole, the researcher and the student leaders utilized the open-ended responses to determine the most potentially effective treatment for the eighth-grade students. The primary concerns expressed by students were a lack of understanding of the upper school dress code requirements and opportunities for social engagement in the upper school. The majority of students responded positively about their academic preparation, as well as their understanding of graduation requirements. The peer leaders felt a focus on social issues would be the area in which they felt most comfortable leading programming among their peers.

The students and I met to propose the structure of our sessions. During this meeting, we outlined our goals for each session and chose our approach. I gave the students general results of

the STAI pretest and they shared the results of the student survey. Utilizing approaches such as class meetings, small group discussion, teambuilding, and social connection events we hoped to address the main concerns related to the transition to upper school. The peer leaders proposed offering a session with the upper school peer mentors, which addressed specific questions from the eighth-grade students. This town hall forum addressed specific topics from the student survey and allowed students to ask questions directly to the upper school peer mentors. The students actively participated in the activity and were debriefed in advisory groups the following day.

The next session required student leaders to run a class meeting that focused-on dress code. They presented a PowerPoint with humorous video clips to emphasize their point and followed up with a fashion show to demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate attire. This presentation was developed in conjunction with consultation from the upper school in order to ensure accuracy of the information presented. The students also took advantage of this presentation to help the eighth-grade students familiarize themselves with the upper school student handbook and its location on the school website for future reference. The students were able to ask questions of the peer leaders as well as faculty who were present at the class meeting. This topic was a common concern among the students and verbal feedback from the student leaders indicated appreciation from the eighth-grade students for addressing the topic of dress code.

The students felt more comfortable with faculty leading the mindfulness exercises that were introduced both in advisory and during the final class meeting of the research period. These activities focused on stress reduction and goal setting using the BRAIN stress reduction activity. This activity was presented to faculty from researchers at Texas State University who

were seeking to identify effective stress reduction programs for undergraduate fine arts students at Texas State. I chose to introduce this activity due to its accessibility for students of varying ages and the ability for students to implement the activity in an ongoing basis once they have transitioned to ninth grade. The activity requires students to focus on their breathing while not only evaluating their stress and anxiety levels, but also focusing on potential remediation strategies through goal setting. The activity promotes similar behaviors to cognitive behavioral therapy, which has been noted to alleviate anxiety among individuals suffering from debilitating anxiety (Benner, 2011). The school is promoting the development of mindfulness habits among all students beginning in lower school. Integrating such activities into the student transition programming was supported by the counseling department and will continue outside of the study context.

The final activities took place on the class trip to Washington DC where the students participated in Mix It Up breakfast groups to encourage conversation between different students in the grade. The opportunity was presented each morning, and based upon observation, the majority of students participated actively in the experience. The goal of the Mix It Up breakfasts was to encourage conversation and allow students to get to know those with whom they are less familiar. The class trip is one of the culminating events of middle school and offers numerous opportunities for students to interact and get to know their peers before they transition into the upper school or to other schools. The students are assigned to different chaperone groups with the goal of breaking up cliques and encouraging interactions among a variety of peers. The Mix It Up breakfasts provided an opportunity to interact with an even greater range of peers, while at the same time, students were prompted to discuss their time in middle school and what they were most looking forward to in the upper school. Students were also encouraged to share their goals

for upper school and to brainstorm ideas for achieving their goals. Student feedback indicated positive interactions and the desire among several students to get to become more personally acquainted with fellow classmates in their grade.

The variety of activities was intended to produce lower levels of anxiety when measured by the STAI posttest. However, as noted in Table 2, no significant difference occurred as a result of the treatment for both state and trait anxiety. When separated by gender, there is also no significant difference in state or trait anxiety, identified in Tables 3 and 4. While no quantitative support for programming success is available, anecdotal comments from students, faculty, and parents indicate an appreciation for providing more information related to the transition process. Additionally, many students reported utilizing the mindfulness activity when preparing for final exams. The school believes opportunities to develop peer leaders and to promote the interaction of students are always a positive contribution to the community. Going forward, we will continue to evaluate our transition program to ensure we are always adapting programming to best meet the needs of our current students.

Summary

As implemented, this research program identified both the state and trait anxiety levels of the entire eighth-grade class. With significant research identifying the transition to high school as a time of high anxiety among students, this grade did not demonstrate anxiety levels outside the norms based upon the STAI. Additionally, anecdotal data obtained by the school, both from student survey and discussions with students, indicated less anxiety about the impending transition than has been perceived in previous classes of eighth-grade students. The results indicate our current transition program is providing opportunities for students to become more comfortable with the transition to high school. Further investigation each year will be essential to

determining the needs of each class of future ninth-grade students. The school intends to follow up with the current eighth-grade students in the fall semester to evaluate student anxiety once they complete the first quarter of ninth grade.

Student support programming is designed to build community connectedness and provide opportunities for students to have their concerns and voices heard in a non-judgmental and participatory manner. This research context provided students with the opportunity to take control of their transition programming and hear from their peers who were likely experiencing similar emotions related to the upper school transition. While no significant difference was present in the quantitative data, all stakeholders involved in the research study felt the activities had value and provided additional opportunities for the eighth-grade students to build community connections and feel a sense of belonging within the school.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

Peer mentoring and peer-led programming is a common practice in American schools (Johnson et al., 2010). Students are more likely to engage with their peers and take guidance from peers who demonstrate topic knowledge and leadership. The integration of grade-level peer mentoring related to the transition to upper school sought to further reduce transition related anxiety for eighth-grade students. Though no statistically significant difference in anxiety was present, anecdotal evidence in the form of verbal feedback to both the student leaders and me indicates the value of peer-led programming usage related to transition anxiety.

The current eighth-grade class demonstrated normal levels of anxiety on the STAI pretest and similar levels on the posttest. This result provides an opportunity for further exploration of the school's transition program to evaluate the effectiveness of the current structure and identify other potential areas for program growth. Direct student feedback indicated adequate programming currently exists to support students transitioning into the upper school and any supplemental programming similar in the current study will not likely impact student anxiety levels. However, providing opportunities for students to demonstrate leadership ability, support fellow students, and create opportunities for social networks are all positive activities for building community and increasing student connectedness. Therefore, the school should explore opportunities to integrate this peer-led programming in a wider range of school connectedness initiatives. School connectedness allow for a more positive school climate and increase belonging among students.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature

Transition programming represents a commonly integrated and effective tool for limiting and remediating anxiety due to school transitions (Benner, 2011). Schools that offer this type of programming report fewer instances of maladaptive anxiety and weakened school performance due to anxiety (Langenkamp, 2009). Schools are encouraged to develop programming that not only meets the needs of their students, but also integrates with other community programming and the philosophy of the school. When programming aligns with school goals, it can be a useful tool in not only reducing anxiety, but also building connections in the school and cultivate belonging. While not necessarily an explicit goal of programming, fostering community connectedness has been noted to lower general anxiety among students (Davis et al., 2014).

The current study provided an opportunity to integrate peer-led programming to support students entering into the transition to upper school. While the goal of the research was to identify whether supplemental programming led by student leaders early in the transition process helped to alleviate transition related anxiety, it also provided an opportunity for the student leaders to develop their skills further in peer-support and mentorship. Additionally, the research created opportunities for community building, which were not previously offered to students as they prepared for the transition to upper school. Though no quantitative results are present to support the benefit of offering these opportunities for social connectedness, the literature supports the benefits of community building as it relates to student success and well-being.

The results of this study indicate additional programming had no demonstrable effect of student anxiety within the context of the study school. Students had questions related to processes and procedures in the upper school; however, they did not demonstrate above average levels of anxiety indicating a need for significant attention from the counselors at the school.

The results support the continuation of our current transition programming based solely on the existing literature and the evidence, which suggests best practices in student transition programming. The current program encompasses a variety of activities. The school provides traditional student orientation programming, meetings with advisors, peer mentors, and administrators. Additionally, ninth-graders have opportunities to tour the upper school, while asking specific questions related to the upper school experience. Students are guided through the transition to upper school with individualized support from an upper school dean who acts as guidance counselor throughout the students' upper school experience.

In designing this study, I identified grade level peer mentoring as an opportunity to support students during the transition based upon the theory of social learning through peer assisted activities. This approach not only promoted interaction amongst classmates, but also empower the peer-leaders to address their own concerns related to the transition experience. Peer assisted learning in middle school has demonstrated effectiveness in increasing belonging and raising achievement in performance based activities where peer acceptance and support were important to individual students. By providing an opportunity for students to feel cared for by their peers and understanding all students in the grade will be going through the same transition experience, students are more likely to accept and support one another through the transition process (Johnson et al., 2010).

Further evaluation is needed to determine which elements of the school's transition programs are most effective in order to determine future program revisions that might most benefit each eighth-grade class. With the current eighth-grade class, we were unable to determine a change in anxiety; however, we have raised awareness of transition related anxiety. This awareness will hopefully lead to a research based evaluation of on-campus student support

programming related to the transition to upper school with the goal of always adapting priorities to best meet the needs and personality of each individual class of students. By providing a variety of integrated programming options to benefit the school's students, we will likely remediate high anxiety for many students quite effectively.

Personal Reflection

A significant advantage of teaching in an independent school is the ability to maintain relationships with students once they transition into the upper school since they remain on the same campus. As I began my research, I was able to engage in casual conversations with my former students about their own transitions into the upper school. These conversations led to a more formalized study of transition related anxiety as I proceeded through my internship coursework. As I collected data, I learned the school does have a research based transition program in place; however, the program itself still had room for improvement. Due to resource constraints and challenges coordinating stakeholders, I was unable to do a formal evaluation of our transition program as a whole. Therefore, I chose to identify potential programming gaps, which, if filled, had the possibility of reducing anxiety among current eighth-grade students as they began the transition process.

The middle school has been actively working on improving community connectedness and increasing the sense of student belonging among students, which led me to focus on peer assisted learning within a social learning framework as the program intervention. We also felt we could further empower our student council representatives and promote development of their leadership skills. Our hope was to not only ease transition anxiety, but also ideally promote a sense of class cohesion, which would allow for ongoing peer support in the upper school by providing a context for the entire grade to participate in peer-led activities. The literature

supports the importance of forging and maintaining strong peer connections, therefore the school felt any activity to promote connectedness would benefit the eighth-grade students.

I am fortunate in my position as a theater teacher; I am able to work with all of the students in the eighth grade during their class musical production. This, combined with the time spent teaching many members of the class, allowed me to develop a rapport with the students prior to their introduction of the study. I believe the positive foundation allowed me to receive the support from the students during their participation in the study. The students in the school are regularly supportive of programming, provided the initiatives are transparent and designed to support their personal growth. It was my goal to develop an intervention which sought to reduce their anxiety related to their upper school transition, which would, at worst, create opportunities for the students to interact with one another in a positive and growth oriented context.

Throughout the research process I found myself engaging in meaningful discussions with both my colleagues and the student leaders regarding the approach in our sessions and numerous courses of action we could add to our programming. While the student leaders wanted to do more, we were unfortunately limited by time to add additional sessions. However, the students expressed positive feelings toward successfully implementing their ideas and guiding their peers through positive interactions. I enjoyed the candid feedback from the student leaders and the opportunity to learn about the class through observation of their implementation. I hope to find more ways to conduct program improvement and potentially evaluation projects on my campus in order to continue to get to work with students outside of my classroom context.

While the quantitative results of the study indicate no significant change in anxiety levels among the participants, the anecdotal feedback from both participants and student leaders indicates a need to further evaluate our transition program and potentially this treatment

approach with future eighth graders. Limitations of the current study design limit the presentation of more qualitative data, which might present a more detailed explanation of the study results. The introduction of the action research process on my campus will hopefully serve as a catalyst for further research on the current topic with the purpose of more effectively understanding the phenomenon. This study provides a foundation for further data collection and exploration, which is already beginning at my school. It is my goal to encourage a full evaluation of all student support programming to determine the impact on our students and track the impact over time.

Implications for Practice

The literature supports the use of transition programming for students transitioning from middle school to high school. The transition period begins with the eighth-grade year and continues throughout ninth grade (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Due to the rise in maladaptive behaviors and conditions among students who are unable to successfully navigate the transition process, schools have a responsibility to ensure their programming best meets the needs of current students. Within the study context, a well-researched transition program already existed and was demonstrating success about managing student transition anxiety. Exploring additional activities, such as the peer-led program for eighth-grade students which served as the study context, will provide one more tool for schools to explore as they evaluate and adapt their transition program. Interest in student transition anxiety will hopefully lead to a full evaluation of the transition program within the study context with the goal of identifying the most effective programming we offer to our students.

This study also demonstrates a need to understand more fully the context in which transition anxiety manifests. Mixed methods approaches would allow for a more in-depth

understanding of the phenomenon and provide more detailed information to on-campus stakeholders. Anecdotal evidence suggested the community building aspect of the program was important to participants and warrants further study as a tool to promote more positive campus climate. Additionally, by providing expanded opportunities for student leaders to develop their leadership skills and mentor their peers, we are empowering these individuals with tools to become stronger leaders in the upper school. Integrations of programming, which promote relationship building and peer mentoring, are positive contributions to the school community (Allen et al., 2016). These programs may not address a specific need, such as lowering student transition anxiety, but also their value within the context of school community is a topic worth looking at further.

Implications for Context

The introduction of action research into the study context had a significant impact on the professionals involved in the study. With two members of the middle school administration enrolled in a similar doctoral program, the ability to witness the implementation of this type of study firsthand had a positive impact. Additionally, many other faculty members spoke with me throughout the investigation period to understand more about the study itself and the action research model. From a professional development standpoint, this study provided a concrete example of the value of teacher research on campus. The cooperation and coordination necessary to design a study, while remaining flexible to the needs of the school, provided an excellent context for all stakeholders to learn about real phenomena facing our students.

Increased awareness of our transition program will hopefully lead to a detailed and research-based evaluation of the current program structure. Gathering more thorough data on program strengths and weaknesses, integrating additional programming, adjusting timelines, and

monitoring frequency of activities will benefit the school and allow us to become flexible, yet effective, as we tailor programming to each individual class of eighth graders and new ninth graders. I would like to explore how we transition our lower (elementary) school students in preparation for our middle school. The literature addresses the elementary to middle school transition as equally significant in influencing higher student anxiety. As the middle school, we have a unique opportunity to effectively transition students in and out of our division and can develop aligned programming that supports development of coping skills as students' progress through the middle school.

Implications for Field of Study

This record of study adds to the growing body of action research studies, which are led by aspiring teacher researchers. This study introduced professionals to the action research framework, while providing an example of its execution. By compelling more teachers and administrators to adopt more internal and robust studies of phenomenon occurring on their campus, we will not only promote change within our own contexts, but also provide frameworks for similar contexts to utilize in their own study of phenomenon. While the results of this study are not intended to be generalizable, the study does provide an example of potential peer-led programming which may yield significant results in another context. Furthermore, the current transition program, which aligns with existing transition research, could also be utilized within other contexts seeking to develop or modify a transition program in those other contexts.

The exploration of specific contexts allows for a clear demonstration of the combination of theory and practice. As research practitioners, we can share our experiences within our context and either support, challenge, or grow the existing literature within the field. While action research tends to be context specific, the results and data can serve as support for

continuing studies on a particular phenomenon. While this particular study demonstrated no significant impact on student anxiety, it did attempt to develop an additional programming method, which has the potential to be of greater value within a different context. Additionally, raising awareness regarding the implications of poor student transitioning can promote continued study in a wider variety of educational contexts to perform ongoing evaluations of student support programming.

Lessons Learned

Planning and integration of this study provided an example of action research to the students, parents, and faculty of my school. While many faculty are familiar with this type of practitioner research, the opportunity to see a study of this executed design allowed for professional growth opportunity on campus. In future action research studies, I will provide a more in-depth introduction to the research approach to encourage my colleagues to explore possibilities for action research in their content areas or based upon their interests. The more opportunities for self-study and evaluation we create on our campus, the more likely we, as a school, are to develop and modify programming, which best meets the needs of all of our students. Stronger foundations of action research methods will allow me to have greater support and involvement in future studies of our campus and hopefully engage more students in the research process with the goal of developing capable student researchers.

Opportunities to explore one's personal context not only promote reflection by stakeholders, but they also provide opportunities to identify deficiencies in programming, which might not otherwise come to light. For example, in the current study, we realized the current eighth-grade class actually felt academically prepared for upper school, but needed further introduction to the social context of the upper school. Anecdotal evidence from upper class peer

leaders indicated the reverse to be true. This evidence represents the importance of adaptable programming, which can target specific needs of each eighth-grade class. By including student voice in program development, though limited in execution, we were able to empower the current eighth-graders to express themselves and interact within the study context due to the buy-in we created at the beginning of the study. While the results of this particular study indicate no change from the intervention programming, many of my colleagues at the school feel creating opportunities for student voice in meaningful programming can positively contribute to the climate of the school. I also believe this study provided a useful introduction to the students regarding their involvement in research which directly affects their experience.

Throughout the research process both participants and student leaders interacted directly with me. These students offered ideas for programming as well as feedback about program quality and approach. The size of our context and the accessibility students and faculty have with one another supports more democratic forms of research and allows for more detailed exploration of phenomenon on campus. If I were to replicate this study in subsequent years to evaluate our transition programming, I would utilize a more qualitative methodology to provide a rich narrative of the transition experience. Quantitative data alone does not adequately address the nuances of anxiety nor present comprehensive data on the effectiveness of specific elements of programming. Methods which provide data on each element of our transition programming, combined with narrative feedback in a mixed methods study, would be much more useful to the school in any future evaluation of the transition programming at the school.

Recommendations

The results of this study indicate a further need to evaluate the transition programming at my school. Additionally, exploration of differing research designs within the context may lead

to a richer understanding of the transition experience we provide to our students. Identifying the most effective programming components and developing understanding of our student population's specific needs will be useful data when modifying our transition programming in adding other types of student support programming. I believe the interest in research forged by this study and the ongoing action research that will be led by other Ed.D. students, who are also completing studies on my campus, will promote a more research based approach to programming development and evaluation on my campus. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including the students, will increase collaboration and improve the already positive and inclusive climate on my campus. Even with an outcome indicating no visible change, the school has more data to make informed decisions moving forward regarding transition programming.

Related specifically to the student transition experience, the school should conduct a full, research-based evaluation of the transition and orientation programming for incoming ninth-graders at the school. The school should identify which programs and activities promote the greatest reduction in transition related anxiety. Additionally, exploring more individualized activities, which have a greater impact on specific students or different student groups, would aid empowering more students to experience a positive transition experience. Incorporating student voice into student support programming is an important element to any new programming introduced to aid students during the transition. Though outside of the context of this study, anecdotal comments from participants indicated positive feelings towards having a voice in the programs that directly affected the students. Exploring other avenues to integrate student voice into daily programming might be a positive influence on transition anxiety and other maladaptive phenomenon on campus. The ability to take action based on input directly from stakeholders

demonstrates the value of practitioner action research and its use within the context of my school.

Future research related to the student transition from middle to upper school could build upon several elements of the present study. One area of great importance is looking at the effect on the student leaders specifically. One of the initial goals of the research was to implement student voice and give student leaders an opportunity to further develop their leadership skills. While not identified in the study, comments from the student leaders indicated that they felt as though they gained more skills and approaches related to managing anxiety. This was due to the additional conversations and planning these individuals went through to support program implementation. If the study were focused on the student leaders themselves we would be able to explore how planning and mentoring effect future growth during the transition process for student leaders who are more empowered. Additionally, exploration of ways to incorporate student voice from the general population not only aligns with current trends in program development, but empowers students to take control of their social-emotional needs.

Though not generalizable to other contexts, there is potential benefit for students in other settings to experience implementation of student voice into transition related programming. Since my school currently has a research aligned transition program, a thorough evaluation could be utilized in other contexts to develop programming that aligns with the research. Additionally, the presentation of literature related to peer-led programming is worth exploring further in other research contexts. There is a limitation to the population, which this treatment is most efficacious; many of our students experience high levels of parental support since this is an expectation of admission to the school. Additionally, we offer numerous staff, which provide direct support for students struggling both academically and socially. Strong social adjustment is

not affected by mentorship. This population is unique in the amount of support students already receive and may not benefit from additional programming. In fact, we might need to do less programming. Further research might explore offering less programming in an effort to explore if less programming has a more positive impact than offering excessive programming.

Conclusion

This record of study on the middle to upper school transition was intended to reduce anxiety among eighth-grade students preparing for their move to the upper school. This traditional education transition can be a time of great anxiety for many students and support programming must exist to remediate the damaging effects of anxiety on the students. Significant research exists which supports the integration of transition programming to aid students preparing and beginning high school. This type of programming encompasses academic, social, athletic, and wellness preparation. Activities typically begin during the summer prior to the start of high school and some programs offer activities for middle school students who are preparing to transition into high school.

On our campus, we begin the transition process in the spring by introducing eighth-grade students to upper school teachers, student leaders, and administrators. The students also meet with their assigned dean who acts as their guidance counselor. These activities are intended to prepare students for successful transition into the upper school with limited anxiety and struggle. Within the context of the current study, students felt unprepared for social experiences in the high school and sought more information about involvement in the upper school community. Additionally, the students wanted clearer information regarding rules related to dress code. The peer leaders addressed dress and other handbook rules to ease anxiety among the students. This particular eighth-grade class is strong and independent. Initial results indicated normal levels of

anxiety, which remained unchanged by the end of the study. However, the positive bonding experiences the study context provided allowed many students to interact with others with whom they are less familiar. Since many of the activities encouraged dialogue and interaction among peers other than an individual's traditional friend group, one side effect of the study was an increase in class cohesion.

As we begin the 2018–2019 school year, I can already see the direct effects of the introduction of action research and a renewed focus on student support programming. At least two other action research studies are beginning, one related to historical thinking, and the other on student behavior management. By introducing the community to this type of research, I have encouraged more self-reflection and the desire to evaluate our programming for potential improvements. I will likely work with the middle school again this year on refining our programming and potentially introducing peer-led programming earlier with less focus on the transition and a greater focus on community building. Additionally, the focus on anxiety spurred the creation of multiple student led clubs in the middle school, one focused on stress reduction and the other focused on overall wellness. These clubs will meet regularly throughout the year and are designed to be peer led. The upper school has also introduced additional peer support programming through the wellness committee, which along with the peer mentors and governing council will provide opportunities for student support regularly throughout the school year.

While further exploration of approaches towards remediating transition anxiety are important, schools might also consider what types of programming they offer to increase connectedness between students in a across grade levels. Literature suggests better performance by students who feel connected to their community (Allen et al., 2016). If schools can provide more opportunities to forge belonging in a variety of contexts, it is possible the phenomenon of

anxiety might be reduced. Furthermore, increasing belonging can help promote a positive climate on the campus, which will benefit students in other grades and potentially help prepare them earlier for transition periods. Student support programming is a key component of a school. Focus should be directed at exploring and implementing programming, which supports student emotional needs. The study school excels and aligns with the literature in their transition programming, and exceeds many peer schools in the number of qualified support staff, which guide the students through non-academic challenges. Focus on supporting student emotional needs and facilitating anxiety-reduction programs encourages a healthy campus climate while promoting continued studies to benefit students.

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APPENDIX A

Dear Parents,

The middle school continues to explore all possible resources to support our 8th graders transition into the upper school. Based upon student feedback from prior years, students have identified areas that we find it necessary to explore as middle school students transition to upper school. In our ongoing efforts to provide programming which assists students in their transition to upper school, we will be implementing additional programming over the next few weeks. We believe this programming will further support students with questions or concerns about their transition into the upper school, and serve as an excellent opportunity for the 8th grade student leaders to guide their peers in exercises designed to reduce student concerns about leaving the middle school. The goal of all programming is to ensure that all of our 8th grade students are prepared both academically and emotionally for the Kinkaid upper school.

All activities will be initiated and led by the 8th grade student leaders, based upon feedback from all 8th grade students. In addition, we see this as an opportunity for student voice as they embark on this transitional milestone. This student-led programming supplements the work of the upper to middle school peer mentors, the upper school peer leaders, and the student life committee, which plans freshmen orientation. In order to measure the effectiveness of our supplemental programming, we will be asking the students to complete the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), which will inform the student support team regarding the effectiveness of our programming. The STAI is used for measuring both the temporary condition of state anxiety and the more general and long-standing quality of trait anxiety. The inventory consists of 40 questions with Likert scale responses. It will be administered online during advisory and will be completely anonymous. A sample copy of the inventory is included with this letter.

In this instance, we are utilizing this instrument as a metric to identify whether or not our supplemental upper school transition programming aids in the reduction of transition anxiety among the 8th grade students'. No personal or identifying information of any kind will be collected and the data will focus on the 8th grade group as a whole, not individual students'. Additionally, this program is being conducted as part of a faculty research project where the grade level group results will be presented along with the program design.

We appreciate your support as we continue to provide the best possible educational experience for your children.

Sincerely,

David Berthold

APPENDIX B

Student Leader Activity Report

Date: _____

Student Leader Name(s): _____

Activity: _____

Location: Advisory Class Meeting Other

Description of implementation:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Was the program activity implemented as reviewed? Yes No

Were there any behavior incidents? Yes No

If so, please elaborate: _____

Do you feel the activity was useful for the students? Yes No

Please elaborate:

_____

_____

_____

Please attach any additional information as needed. Thank you for your continued work on this project! – Mr. Berthold

APPENDIX C

Washington D.C. Trip Student Leader Guided Questions for Mix it Up's

Students: Please lead your table in a discussion of the following questions each morning. It is ok if you don't get through all of the questions or if you choose to answer additional questions. The goal of this activity is to create a safe space for all of you to share your thoughts on school and your move to upper school. As with all activities please submit a feedback form to me to ensure the discussion took place.

Day One Questions

1. What were some of your favorite activities in middle school?
2. What do you look forward to the most in upper school?
3. What concerns you the most about upper school?

Day Two Questions

1. How are you preparing for the move to upper school?
2. Do you and your friends talk about what upper school will be like? What do you say?
3. What are some ways you can support your classmates at the beginning of 9^{th} grade?
4. What support would you like to have at the beginning of 9^{th} grade?

Day Three Questions

1. How do you plan on spending your summer?
2. How will you welcome new students to the school this fall?
3. Do you expect your friend groups to be impacted by the move to upper school? Why?

APPENDIX D

Breath – Relax – Ask – Imagine - Notice

This is the BRAIN Model. This model is something you can do anytime and anywhere. It will not only give you the power to shift from the brainstem to the neocortex and change the chemical makeup of your body, but will allow you go into the next situation from the top of the mind.

We want to have more influence and more control in our lives so we can bring our best to light, regardless of the situation. That mea ns we've got to raise that unconscious part to consciousness, so that we are being more influential with how the limbic system interprets life and what part of the brain is engaged. To regain control, you must have your neocortex gain control of your brainstem. The easiest function for your neocortex to take over is your breathing.

BREATH: Breathe deeply and deeply is important. It's got to be a slow breathing. Inhale for a count of five and exhale for a count of five. The neocortex is the only part of the brain that can count. So, counting your breath allows the neocortex to control that function. This is the first step in allowing your neocortex to regain control!

RELAX: Muscle tension is involved in The Stress-Frustration Cycle. To assist in regaining control, add thinking or saying the word "Relax" on the exhale. Normally, the part of the brain that controls muscle tension is the brainstem. So, when you say or think the word "Relax" on the exhale your neocortex takes over two functions normally controlled by the brainstem. You may need to do repeat multiple times before you will feel your body responding, but the idea is to have this upper 80 percent of the brain take control of two functions normally controlled by the lower 20 percent of the brain. This addresses the physiological components of stress.

ASK: Next you are going to ask a Neocortex Question which can be answered only by the upper 80 percent of the brain. An example would be "How would I rather be feeling?" Another good neocortex question is "How important is my peace of mind?" or "How important is my clarity of mind?"

IMAGINE: So far, we are inhaling on a count of five, exhaling on a count of five saying the word relax on the exhale, asking ourselves we would rather be feeling, and now imagining ourselves feeling this way. Take a few minutes as part of your breathing exercise to imagine feeling the ways you identified worked better for you.

NOTICE: Now you are going to take a few minutes to notice the difference. Let's review the steps: Slow Breathing - inhale for a count of five, exhale for a count of five - thinking or saying "Relax" on the exhale. Ask how I'd rather be feeling, imagine feeling that way. Who am I when I'm calm and confident and in control? Who am I when I am pleased with how I feel and what's going on? I want to imagine being that way and then notice the change! This is important, because at this point in the model you will be feeling clearer, more confident, and more in control than you did at the beginning.

Repeat the model until you feel your body chemistry changing.