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Exploring Teacher Perceptions on the Effectiveness of the Freshman Academy

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

Teacher Leadership

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Abstract

A Southeastern school district created freshman academies to assist freshman students with strategies and support they need to combat ninth-grade failure successfully, but little change was observed. The purpose of the study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the freshman academy's transition program structure, benefits, challenges, and effectiveness. The conceptual framework for this study encompassed elements of constructivist theory, which explains how children adapt to their environments and learn how to process information successfully. The research questions examined teachers' perceptions regarding the benefits, challenges, and perceived effectiveness of the freshman academy intervention program. The data for this basic qualitative study were obtained through semi-structured interviews with seven freshman academy teachers who volunteered. The data were open-coded and reduced to reveal six themes: learning in the academy is dependent on the teacher, learning in the academy includes distinct classroom practices, teachers report challenges with the freshman academy model, teachers have concerns about the freshman academy model, there are many advantages to the freshman academy model, and teachers build relationships that foster learning. Using the findings, a position paper was created with recommendations to strengthen the academy in the district. If the recommendations are implemented the transition program may increase communication and effectiveness of the working and learning environment and promote positive social change by increasing freshman persistence toward graduation.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to several persons. First to my biggest supporter "Frederick T. Goode Sr, my grandfather who has always told me that I will be a doctor one day and run the place. Well, Daddy I know you are dancing in heaven and you were right "I did it", I ran a hair salon and I am running summer school this year, so you were correct. What the future holds is yet to come. Next, Marlene F. Goode, my mother thanks for expressing your love for me daily, teaching me life lessons and encouraging me to attend college. I know you are smiling in heaven because my life has been increased much more than I could have ever imagined. Marlene F. Goode, my grandmother, thank you for always being supportive and giving me the gift of "ignoring", it has allowed me to block out a lot of things and "people" in many situations especially during this journey. I know you too are smiling right next to my mother and your husband, Frederick T. Goode Sr.

To Derek, my husband thanks for going through this process with me, I love you. To my children Derek (Rashad) and Denae, who also witnessed the time commitment and all the emotions that came along with this journey to obtain this degree, I love you and thank you so much for your patience. Always remember that both of you are unique and can accomplish anything you desire, but you have to put the work in, and it is never too late.

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To all my family especially those who did not understand the process and those that did thank you for understanding the many times that I could not be there. To my group chat aunts, Willianna and Darlene, yes, I am done!

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Section 1: The Problem

The transition to high school is an unpredictable time for adolescents and a precarious time in their education (Somers & Garcia, 2016). Ninth grade is often the year adolescents become disengaged from school and student truancy, absenteeism, disengagement, and failure tend to begin in the ninth-grade year (Martin, 2018). Students drop out of school after struggling through ninth grade without success (Martin, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (2020) reported 2.1 million dropouts in 2018 between the ages of 16 and 24, and the overall dropout rate was 5.3%. Students who drop out make up disproportionately higher percentages of the nation's institutionalized population (McFarland et al., 2018). Academic-related stress can reduce academic achievement, decrease motivation, and increase the risk of school dropout (Pascoe et al., 2019). Students who do not have a successful ninth-grade year do not often see the value in finishing high school (Mills, 2020). The literature on transition in schools provides recommendations that school administrators, counselors, and teachers coordinate activities to make school transitions efficacious for students and their parents (Kenny, 2018). The idea of creating freshman academies arose to combat ninth-grade transition challenges and create successful changes in high school (Luna, 2017). Taking steps to address student retention and threats to graduation is especially important given the social implications of noncompletion (Kenny, 2018).

The Local Problem

School districts in the United States encounter many issues that may affect school learning on the student level; concerns such as parent divorce, living with a single parent, living in poverty, or experiencing violence may lead to school failure (Lacey et al., 2020). A Southeastern School District (SESD: pseudonym) created freshman academies in three high schools to assist the freshman students with the strategies and support they need to combat ninth-grade failure successfully. Unfortunately, the number of students completing the academic requirements and persisting in high school has not increased. The 2014-2015 school's academic improvement plan promoted programs and educational rigor strategies to assist with student success (https://vdoe.virginia.gov). There is a gap in practice locally because the research literature indicates freshman academy goals include helping students become academically successful and providing them with more individualized attention (Lourenco, 2019). Yet, according to graduation rates on the state website, ninth-grade student success has not increased at SESD according to end-of-course exams, report cards, and the senior year cohort results. Honetschlager (2020) indicated that freshman academies could influence achievement and, therefore, are a means of meeting national and state achievement standards. The potential positive social change from this study may increase academics, and attendance as well as positive engagement between students within the academy. Social change attributes can support the district's goal of combating ninth-grade failure. Moreover, the successes of the

academy can provide all secondary school leaders an avenue to help ninth graders complete their high school education.

The stagnant performance of ninth-grade students on standardized tests indicates that the current structural and instructional approaches in ninth grade do not lead to mastery of ninth-grade learning standards. Standards of Learning (SOL) is a standardized testing program administered in Virginia. The SOL standards establish the minimum expectations for student learning in Virginia's Public Schools, K12 core classes (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2016). The VDOE school quality report shows students are performing below state standards in math and science; conversely, English performs at Level 1, indicating that the English department meets or exceeds state standards or has made sufficient improvement (VDOE, 2018).

The middle schools that progress students into the SESD high schools have mandated guidelines for promotion from VDOE. Within the required guidelines, students must successfully pass the end-of-course exams or the required SOLs. The school district uses eighth-grade end-of-year or SOL scores as an indicator to benchmark success. Data from students' 2013-2014 eighth-grade year show students failed the mandated academic exams. VDOE (2022) guidelines require that the school division provide appropriate remediation to any student in Grades 3 through 8 who fails any SOL or end-of-course test needed for a verified credit. Since the freshman academies were instituted during the 2014-2015 school year in the SESD, the statistics on students passing SOL in all subjects

fluctuated. According to the VDOE (2021), SOL data for ninth graders in the district of study continues to be inconsistent. The data revealed two of the three schools had a successful pass rate in one core area for the 2018-2019 school year. One school showed successful scores in math while the other showed successful scores in history. Calculations for the 2019-2020 school year are not available due to the untimely end of in-person learning during the pandemic.

Although the timing of school transitions is predictable, there is consistent evidence that students tend to struggle as they learn to navigate their new educational setting (Benner et al., 2017). More recently, there is evidence that the required studying and rigor in high school causes exhaustion and makes the learning experience burdensome for high school students (Mikkonen et al., 2023). Identification of students with additional risk factors is observable as early as sixth grade. Still, some of the strongest predictors of failure appear to be ninth-grade indicators in areas such as attendance, course failure, and grade point average (McKee & Caldarella, 2016**).** Students reported the learning strategies provided by teachers and the foundation of teacher-student relationships that promoted student's self-esteem and disposition toward schools were important to student academic achievement **(**Lowder et al., 2022).

Rationale

As first-time ninth-graders transition to high school, students may become unsuccessful in completing their classwork, and fail classes required for promotion to the

10th grade. To reverse the retention rate, a more structured area secluded from the upper-class students called the freshman academy was created to increase ninth graders' academic success. Freshman academies provide students with supportive services atypical of traditional high school settings (Newsome, 2018). Currently, three schools in the district have freshman academies. Still, no formal investigation has been conducted to explore if the teachers working in the freshman academy believe there is a benefit or not, according to data released by the Virginia Department of Education (Mattingly, 2018). The district improvement plan, available online, indicated the district's goal is to increase academic achievement and reduce achievement gaps between and among all student groups.

Additionally, the improvement plan of the schools aims to reach proficiency in academic standards by developing and implementing a project with short and long-term practices. The district cultivates a climate and culture conducive to improving English, math, science, and history (School Improvement Plan, 2019). The improvement plan for SESD sets a goal to engage students and reduce the number of students with frequent and chronic absences by 10%. According to VDOE (2017), eighth-grade students must take a minimum of eight courses, including English, mathematics, science, history, and social science. Students who are not successful with courses or SOL exams are eligible to receive remedial services chosen by the division as appropriate for the child's academic needs and may include summer school (VDOE, 2022). However, students who may or

may not have had remediation after failing end-of-course exams or SOL tests can still enter high school.

Beginning in 2016, a year after the freshman academy was instituted at SESD, the State documented that ninth-grade retention occurs after entering high school unprepared for the rigor of coursework. The Virginia Biennial School Readiness Report Card (2018) documented retention rates continue to fluctuate over time due to retention practices being influenced by subjects' factors and policy priorities. For example, when social promotion was an educational phenomenon, the report indicated retention rates declined. However, the retention rates increased once social promotion criteria ended. After the 2018 report, and continued research on proven instructional tools, the district unceasingly supported the freshman academy model, as stated in the academic improvement plan, to eliminate achievement disparities among and between all student groups.

Bishop (2019) expressed that schools must find better ways to engage ninth-grade students and ease their transition into high school. Helm (2018) examined the impact of a freshman academy at Maryland High School on students' promotion, achievement, and discipline rates. Quantitative data on attendance, assessment, and discipline rates were all collected and analyzed. Additional intentional school counseling and mentoring were analyzed using a Z-test to explore the relationship between student performances in conjunction with the implementation of the freshman academy. Data revealed that promotion and graduation rates increased, dropout and discipline referrals decreased, and

lastly, the number of Advance Placement exams completed and passed increased. Study results acknowledge a connection between the freshman academy and improving graduation (Helm, 2018).

Jones (2020) explained academies provide specialized curricula and instruction to help incoming ninth graders focus and meet high school expectations while earning necessary credits toward graduation. Newsom (2018) affirmed that students benefit from freshman academies because they have lower student enrollment and smaller class sizes. Students at risk of dropping out of high school often display identifiable warning signs in ninth grade (Carlson, 2018). Currently, three schools in the district have freshman academies. Still, no formal investigation has been done to explore if the teachers working in the freshman academy believe the program benefits students or not, according to data released by the Virginia Department of Education (Mattingly, 2018). The purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of a freshman academy in the SESD.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are associated with the problem I am investigating with this study:

Freshman academy: Centers, separate wings, a school within a school (SWAS), houses, or separate ninth-grade schools. The goal of the freshman academy is to separate the freshmen from the upper-class students, to help ease the transition to high school, and to produce more successful ninth-grade students (Fulco, 2009).

Social-emotional learning (SEL): SEL assists students with managing stress, handling mistakes, and establishing healthy relationships (Gulbrandson, 2019).

Standards of Learning (SOL): SOL is a standardized testing program administered in the state of Virginia *(*VDOE, 2020)

Transition: Transition is the act of moving students from one school setting to the next and on a smaller scale−from one grade level to the following (Haynes, 2017).

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study will provide an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a freshman academy at SESD. In addition, the findings will produce qualitative data on strategies implemented within the freshman academy to determine if the methods were successful. The findings may help teachers and administrators better define how to meet all the needs of freshman students and set them on a successful high school completion path. The findings on the freshman academy's teachers' perceptions of the academy's effectiveness may lead to positive social change (Elam, 2021; Gruccio, 2011).

Research Question(s)

RQ1: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions of ninth-grade student learning in the SESD Freshman academies?

RQ2: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions of the challenges for ninth-grade students currently in the freshman academies?

RQ 3: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions on whether freshman academies effectively meet the needs of ninth graders?

Review of the Literature

SESD created the freshman academy model to assist first-year ninth-grade students with the strategies and support they need to adapt to high school's unique demands successfully. Unfortunately, the number of students completing the academic requirements and persisting in high school has not increased despite the freshman academy's creation. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of the freshman academy teachers regarding the benefits, challenges, and perceived effectiveness of the SESD freshman academy intervention program. This literature review provides information on transition programs by comparing traditional ninth-grade classes to courses designed explicitly as part of a freshman academy. Further, I describe the structure of the freshman academy and how students become acclimated to their new learning environment to meet the demands of a rigorous program. Lastly, this research explores the benefits students learn with their age-group peers.

I searched many electronic databases within Walden University's library to obtain relevant and current literature. The databases were *ERIC*, *ProQuest, Academic Search Premier, Scholar Works,* and *Google Scholar.* The critical terms explored to obtain information on freshman academies were ninth-*grade Academy, freshman academy*,

ninth-grade transition, ninth-grade success, and a *school within a school and teachers' perceptions of freshman academies*.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study is a combination of Piaget's cognitive development theory (1936) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on human development (1934). The development of Piaget's theory came from observations that led him to his idea of learning that occurs when children interact with their environment. The development of Vygotsky's theory came from observations that led him to his idea of learning that occurs when children interact with their environment.

All organisms adapt to survive; adaptations occur through active exchange between individuals and their environment (Salkind, 2008). Human beings are no different. Cognitive, affective, and self-regulatory abilities permit adolescents to adaptively pursue new goals and preferences that can be abstract (Dahl et al., 2018). Building on the basic scientific notion of learning to adapt to survive, the constructivist learning theory, founded in psychology, details how people acquire knowledge and learn (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Bada and Olusegun (2015) explained that students should actively construct knowledge in their minds to discover and transform information, compare new information against old, and revise rules when they no longer apply. This constructivist view of learning considers the learner as an active agent in the process of knowledge acquisition. Individuals connect new information with their previous ideas

and experiences. The individual then learns from this encounter; connections could change the individual's beliefs or the latest information may be abandoned (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

Kuhn et al. (1995) described knowledge acquisition as a process fundamental to survival that begins early and continues throughout life. Scientific ways of knowing and the ability to think and act to enhance one's understanding of the natural and social world are among the most significant human intellectual achievements (Kuhn et al., 1995). Piaget's theory of cognitive development supports using real-life scientific experiences to lead learners to a concrete understanding of complex concepts. Bada and Olusegun (2015) reported learning has historical roots in the work of Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961), Vygotsky (1962), and Piaget (1980).

The conceptual framework for this study encompasses the elements of constructivist theory, which explains how children adapt to their environments and learn how to process information successfully. Constructivists identify learning as an active process that constructs new ideas or concepts based on prior experience or knowledge (Eryaman & Genc, 2010). Bada and Olusegun (2015) explained constructivism as teaching and learning based on the presumption that cognition results from "mental construction." Constructivism details how people know and understand the world around them based on observation and scientific study (Jing, 2017). For this study, I conceptualize how adolescents learn and society's essential contributions to their

development, which represent constructivist notions of cognitive development. Moreover, the social-cultural theory will explain that socialization is also a part of the learning process.

Cognitive Development Theory

The theory of cognitive development proposed by Piaget, a cognitive constructivist, consists of four stages that children progress through sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational (Babakr et al., 2019). The development of Piaget's theory came from observations that led him to his idea of learning that occurs when children interact with their environment. Specific age ranges are associated with the mental development that children progress through to obtain knowledge. Allowing each stage to remain accessible in their environment during learning can lessen the stress of transition to high school. Vygotsky (as cited in Nicolopoulou, 1993) explained that children do not develop in isolation but with a set of matrices that two elements form. The two elements are social relations and interactions, such as family and school, while the other is conceptual and symbolic systems that are society's cultural heritage. The latter element includes more knowledgeable and capable peers and adults who pass on cultural heritage. Teacher education professors credit constructivist theories as a vital component for engaging in so-called "best practices." (Krahenbuhl, 2016).

Constructivism constitutes one of the big ideas in education; furthermore, its connection to how teachers teach and learn to teach is colossal (Sarita, 2017). When teachers possess strong perceptions in problem-solving, critical thinking, cooperation, communication, and creativity, they may provide their students with learning environments that are more open to inquiry and investigation (Anagün, 2018). Consequently, teachers' beliefs are powerful forces in their classroom decisions and actions that influence learner achievement. (Kaymakamoglu, 2018).

Social-Cultural Theory

Educators worldwide, including those working with exceptional learners, recognize the importance of sociocultural theory (Mahn, 1999). Vygotsky is known for his sociocultural theory on human development, where children learn values, problem-solving, and cultural beliefs through collaboration with more knowledgeable members of society (McLeod, 2008). Vygotsky is also known for his two principles. The first principle is the more knowledgeable other (MKO principal). Put plainly, one person has more knowledge or a better understanding of the concept and explains it to the other (McLeod 2008). The second principle is the zone of proximal development (ZPD principle), which details a learner's assimilation and accommodation. Cognitive development stems from social interactions within guided learning within the zone of proximal development as children and their partners co-construct knowledge (McLeod, 2008). Both Vygotsky and Piaget stated that children might differ in social and physical

characteristics based on their environments, foretelling their learning and development (DeVries, 2008).

Constructivist learning is unique because it does not follow schools' typical status quo. A learning environment is often limited by a 'student's sole identity' instead of an experiential and student-driven setting (Cross, 2017). Teacher-centered lectures and instructors teach students to take notes and complete assignments, ignoring the students' interest levels (Black, 2004). Constructivist teaching methods use observation and hypothesize learning as an active, contextualized, or constructive process (Khalid & Azeem, 2012). Vygotsky maintained that the social world is the interactions between peers and their teacher and consists of outside influences within the community (Kurt, 2020). Cognitive development theory explains why students need to be cognitively ready to take on specific learning tasks.

The social-cultural theory explains why students need to communicate with peers of the same age, promoting collaboration with academic learning. Together, these theories will address the benefits of allowing first-time ninth graders to experience their new academic demands without influence from older students. As students transition from middle school to high school, they become frustrated due to the setting differences of less structure and lack of personal connections with adults and peers (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

Review of the Broader Problem

The review of literature related to the broader problem is presented in several sections. The review encompasses primarily literature from the most recent five years. But to fully explore the problem, some seminal studies and studies that represent a background to the problem are also included. Traditional ninth-grade students who, during a transition, encounter abrupt environmental and social change simultaneously receive course expectations from different content area teachers (Hartley, 2012 Van Rens et al., 2018). Historically, the transition to high school involves students visiting the school on a predetermined day, receiving their class schedule, taking photographs for their school identification badges and yearbook, a tour of the school, and the opportunity to meet new grade-level peers (Holland, 2017). A one-time ninth-grade transition visit is the bridge between middle and high school. There is no substitute for visiting the new school environment to allow students to feel a sense of comfort (Van Rens, 2018).

RQ1: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions of ninth-grade student learning in the SESD Freshman academies?

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The main goal of the freshman academy should be to allow students to learn higher-level material without the distraction of upper-level students who may have already mastered the concepts taught in ninth grade. In examining the data of an existing freshman academy LoPresti (2017) provided details regarding which elements of the transition program effectively enhanced student connectivity and improved attendance, thereby increasing student academic achievement. Considerable measures must address the issues that impact the success of high school students; however, school connectedness continues to be an area of concern. Rich (2015) reported teachers in North Carolina confirmed students in the freshman academy achieved better grades, attended school more often, and exhibited fewer discipline ramifications that disrupted the learning process.

Importance of Successful School Transition

School transitions in the American educational system are frequent and predictable, but they can disrupt student functioning across developmental domains (Benner, 2011). Transitioning from eighth grade to ninth grade has been a decades-long topic of concern (Benner, 2011; Martin, 2018) since this year is often referred to as the "make or break" for ninth-grade students (Coates, 2017). The transition from middle school to high school can be when many students become overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety, isolation, disconnection, and unfathomable sense of loneliness (Evans et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). Research notes that the transition from middle school to high school

is oftentimes given less attention than the elementary school to middle school though the risks are often more notable (Cauley, 2006; Evans et al., 2018).

Understanding the challenges of ninth-grade transitions is important. According to Somers and Garcia (2016), freshman academies, also called ninth-grade academies, have gained national attention for supporting a successful transition for first-year high school students. Huggins (2016) reported how complex the ninth-grade change is, and how difficult it is to persuade these students to perform at grade level. The author further suggested how vital understanding the ninth-grade experience from actual ninth graders is so teachers can open a dialogue to improve the experience. Huggins (2016) reported the complexity of the ninth-grade change is the teachers' experience in persuading ninth graders to focus on their academics and perform at their grade level

Academic Concerns

First-year ninth graders often struggle to maintain appropriate achievement levels during that transition to high school. These students fail courses, directly resulting from the transitional process (Rook, 2018). Middle school students experience achievement loss more when transitioning to ninth grade than when transitioning from elementary to middle school (Alspaugh, 1998). If there is not adequate support, the academic losses students encounter during the transition could undermine their connections with school (Richey, 2019), which has shown to be essential for success in secondary school (Graham, et al., 2022).

The transition to ninth grade often leads to decreases in academic achievement (van Rens, 2017). A rigorous curriculum is needed for freshman academy students. Still, the author found a substantial number of first-year students were underprepared for the demands of high school (Emmet & McGee, 2012; Hanover Research 2017). While an older study, Weathers (2006) piloted a program to facilitate the transition of first-year students and found that the freshman class had the highest number of failing grades, as well as disciplinary referrals, and absenteeism. In addition to simultaneously having low benchmark test scores. After two years with the freshman academy model, Weathers' results showed discipline referrals decreased, absenteeism improved grades and benchmark scores increased. Moose (2015) similarly found that creating a freshman academy and integrating the curriculum affected the rigor, relevance, and relationships between students and teachers in the freshman academy. The study revealed a positive effect on academic progress for students within the freshman academy. The high school curriculum demands are rigorous, and mastery of these skills is vital for newcomers to succeed (Stelljes, 2020).

Nonacademic Concerns

Adolescent school transition is characterized by many changes due to social role redefinitions, pubertal development, cognitive development, and the emergence of sexuality (Hanover Research, 2017; Waters et al., 2012). Students in the ninth grade face many social challenges before focusing on academics (Mosley, 2018). Richey (2019)

reported most students to transition from a more structured middle school environment to a more independent high school setting. Richey's study explored the perspectives of ninth-grade teachers in a small learning community and its impact on student connectivity, transition, and dropout.

Rook (2018) presented three elements that consistently effect the student's educational experience during transition: The psychological development of the student, the relationship between teachers and students, and the connection between curriculum and environment are the three elements that consistently effect the student. Evans et al. (2018) reported that when children's psychological needs are satisfied through interactions and socialization in the classroom, they are more likely to be engaged in learning, develop academic and socioemotional skills, and experience adaptive psychological well-being. During the psychological development of adolescent students, they will encounter physiological, cognitive, social, and environmental changes (Graham, et al., 2022). Virtanen et al. (2019) echoed this when the authors stated school transitions pose educational and psychological challenges. Multiple non-academic factors influence the transition to a high school environment. Students, parents, and teachers in the middle and high school transition all had similar views of the challenges and opportunities posed by the school's transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

However, the participants suggested that diverse types of transition programming and an orderly introduction of academic, procedural, and social events facilitate

successful adjustment to high school. Schaffhuser et al. (2017) evaluated whether gender, puberty, and school transition help explain individual differences in change during the high school transition. Findings from 248 adolescents suggested that both biological (pubertal timing) and contextual factors (school transition) play a role in explaining individual differences and that girls fared worse during the transition to early adolescence.

Over the last several decades, the SEL framework has been used to discuss and address the areas needed to effectively build mental health and resilience in youth (Feuerborn & Gueldner, 2019). Many students adjust to ninth grade with only minor difficulty and steadily earn course credits toward graduation. However, when this adjustment is not satisfactory, the desire to belong or fit in can cause academic problems for first-time ninth graders (Martin, 2018). Similarly, Rens et al. (2108) found the transition environment, climate, and the school attachment perceived by adolescents correlate with misbehavior and aggressiveness. Also contributing to maladjustment and misbehavior is that ninth graders often must leave their friends and find new friends in a larger social environment (Felmlee et al., 2018). When incorporated into schools, SEL is the process by which children and young people develop and learn a broad range of social, emotional, and behavioral skills (Hughes, 2020). High school transitions that incorporate academic and social changes accompanying the shifts are challenging for

most students (Bravo, 2020), and addressing their larger social and emotional needs in the learning environment is necessary for success.

Benner et al. (2017) reported stable or increasing support and school belonging were linked to alleviating socioemotional disruptions as students moved from middle to high school compared to experiencing decreases in these sources of support. Coping with the transitional change from middle school to high school creates lasting implications for academic achievements and social adjustments (Mosley, 2018). During transition processes, activities accompanying the move should precede and support appropriate social and cultural understandings (Scanlan & Steblestova, 2019). To help address changes and attenuate possible negative or stressful repercussions due to the transitions to new schools, Cauley, and Jovanovich (2006) asserted school leaders should be proactive and address student needs. Kennedy and Walls (2022) updated this assertion in their work, detailing the need for intentional cultures of care to exist through school leaders, particularly during times of transition. Many ninth graders have difficulty adjusting to the environmental, social, and academic changes simultaneously with their adolescent changes, causing additional concerns during the transition to high school.

Benefits of the Freshman Academy Model

The goal of the freshman academy is to allow first-time ninth graders to feel comfortable with age-appropriate peers and have academic and emotional support with a designated group core teacher, a counselor, and an administrator available daily.

Carrington-Nord (2019) completed a mixed-methods study examining whether the freshman academy intervention program affected student persistence to graduation, retention rate, suspension rate, and attendance in a Southern Coastal School District in Alabama. Results revealed the freshman academy program improved graduation rates and retention for some of the most vulnerable student groups after the implementation. Several studies support the role of the freshman academy in reducing retention while improving overall student achievement and simultaneously decreasing suspension rates (Carrington-Nord, 2019; Law, 2018; Mosley, 2018).

First-time ninth graders have been shown to benefit from being in a freshman academy with their peers because they will experience their new academic environment together. Students are usually influenced by one another; therefore, it is beneficial to have students of the same age learning new material without outside impacts of upper-level students (Graham et al., 2022). Wang et al. (2018) echoed this stating that peers become increasingly critical socializing agents for academic behaviors and attitudes during adolescence. Mosley (2018) used open-ended interview questions to explore how the freshman academy operates. The findings indicated three emerging themes: community, relationships, and consistency. The final analysis revealed a small learning community provides opportunities for students and staff to build trust among themselves and a network of relationships within the community, echoing what the Hanover Research

(2017) report indicated was needed from school leaders. Freshman academies can avoid what Rook (2018) identifies as a mismatch of needs. When developmental needs are not considered during their psychological changes to new environments, "problematic" changes occur (Rook, 2018). Burrows (2010) examined the student engagement of ninth-grade students at a comprehensive high school to measure students' cognitive and affective engagement. Findings commonly supported the significance of the student engagement subtypes of cognitive and affective engagement in predicting educational outcomes.

Mells (2017) affirmed that student growth and achievement during the freshman year of high school are affected by the freshman academy structure, interventions in place in a freshman academy, the effectiveness of the relationships between teachers and students, teachers and administration, and administration and students. The freshman academy focuses on a high school transition model to improve ninth-grade attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement for at-risk students. School engagement encompasses three interrelated components: emotion, behavior, and cognition.

Freshman academies often have varied benefits, not all of which are tangible. Honetschlager (2020) examined the effect of a freshman academy model on students' academic achievement, behavior, and emotional engagement using existing quantitative educational performance data collected from a suburban high school located in Minnesota and triennial student surveys conducted nationwide. Results revealed

academic achievement indicators showed no significant difference between pre-and post-Freshman academy implementation. However, the freshman academy model did have positive and significant effects on behavioral engagement indicators and a small statistical effect on the academic composite score. Smith (2018) completed a study to evaluate a ninth-grade transition program where the goal was to ensure students were on the right track toward graduation. Smith reported that one benefit of a freshman academy is the close working relationship possible between the administrator's freshman teachers to monitor the performance of the students in the freshman academy.

Rothery (2020) examined the impact of two freshman academy models, isolated and school-within-a-school, on student achievement. Results showed no statistical difference between the two freshman academy models on student achievement and engagement, implying it is not the type of freshman academy that makes a difference**.** Examining the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents on a freshman transition academy and its ability to transition students into a high school smoothly, Clinton (2012) found perceptions were more positive in the academy about attendance, course mastery, and discipline referrals. The author also found a significant, positive difference between students, teachers, and parents' perceptions of the freshman transition regarding the academic, social, and structural environment in the academy

model. The success of the freshman academy is dependent on student outcomes. Lowder et al., 2022 presented evidence that ninth-grade literacy and learning interventions increase retention and ease the transition to ninth grade when used as a primary strategy.

Smith (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study to evaluate the Morrison High School's ninth-grade transition program, also known as the freshman academy, on student outcomes. Quantitative data were collected using students' GPA, attendance rates, the number of discipline referrals, pass rates on Virginia Standards of Learning End of Course tests, and credits earned. Smith collected qualitative data based on teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews. Data revealed that students participating in the program meet the benchmark and desired outcomes for attendance, discipline, and credits earned. In addition, students passed the required SOLs during the years covered in the study. Fulco (2009) used grade point averages, end-of-year grades in English and social studies, failures, credits earned, discipline referrals, and attendance to determine that the freshman academy did have positive effects on student achievement, and the students who experienced a freshman academy had significantly higher grade point averages.

Steffen (2015) conducted a mixed-method study comparing the pre-and post-academic performance of a freshman academy using predictors for freshman success. The quantitative data were derived from standardized test scores and credit accrual. The qualitative data were derived from perception surveys completed by staff members who worked in the freshman academy. The goals for the freshman academy met many

components that supported the school's goals of increasing student achievement, post-secondary enrollment, and on-time graduation for first-year students. In addition to the benefits of supporting achievement and on-time graduation, Finch et al. (2018) used ANOVA to determine those students with disabilities earned more credit for core academic areas when learning in the freshman academy model.

Challenges of the Academy Model

Conversely, several studies showed the model did not achieve the desired goals of the freshman academy. Morehead (2018) completed a study to explore a rural school district's freshman academy program through parent and staff member perspectives. Questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups that showed most respondents from the two schools in the study were either unsure about the academy or believed that the freshman academy at their respective schools did not promote student success beyond the ninth grade. Respondents from a third school believed their freshman academy promoted student success beyond the ninth grade.

A further example of the academy model not showing benefits was a comparison between a county with the freshman academy and a system without the model (Bennett, 2012). Three achievement variables were analyzed: growth on the English I End of Course exam, attendance, and discipline. Results showed no significant difference between student perceptions or performance on the achievement measures. There was no relationship established when comparing performance to perception within each district.

Similarly, Martin (2018) completed a study using four schools to determine if the ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classroom had a lower retention rate and fewer discipline referrals. The data revealed no statistical difference in either category.

The Honetschlager study (2020), showed that the composite academic measure in a freshman academy was statistically higher than the school with no academy, though the effects were small. However, overall, the other academic achievement indicators were not statistically significant between achievement before and after the implementation of a freshman academy. Moreover, emotional engagement indicators showed minimal differences between construct scales. Furthermore, the county and state surveys for the same years showed significant decreases, evidence that the freshman academy had an effect from a broader, downward trend in student emotional engagement statewide. One way to accomplish the goals of the freshman academy is to have the environment and structure of the class conducive to learning, which should include a community-like atmosphere (Wentzel, et al., 2019). Rothery (2020) completed a study examining the effect of a freshman academy model and an isolated school-within-a-school on the achievement and engagement of students in a rural school district and found while the model was well-liked, there was no statistical difference between the two freshman academy models on student achievement when examining state test scores. A MANOVA on the indicators of reading/English language arts and mathematics tests, along with the SAT or ACT, four-year graduation rates, four-year recommended high school

plan/distinguished achievement program rates, and longitudinal dropout rates, showed no statistical differences between academy and non-academy students (Starke, 2016).

Freshman Academy Environment and Structure

The freshman academy environment should consist of first-time ninth-grade students who receive support and feel connected with their peers and the teachers servicing them. Creating a dedicated wing of the building separate from other students, can form a sense of community with peers and teachers (Honetschlager, 2020). Haynes (2017) examined practices and behaviors in transitioning students from middle school to high school and recognized that a positive school environment, also referenced as culture, is essential to the transition. Lizar (2017) examined teacher, student, and parent perceptions of the high school transition program within a freshman academy. Findings determined that participants believed academies were effective in keeping students on track toward graduation at the study site in the Midwest. Lizar continued by reporting the data focused on positive relationships between students and adults. It recommended the study focus on increased community building and building structures for increased student accountability. Spernes (2020) stated students with positive interactions with their parents had better relationships with their teachers.

School connectedness is an essential foundation for the success of ninth-grade students (LoPresti, 2017 Newsome, 2018). Consequently, creating a freshman academy transition program with students similar in age and cognitive ability is vital. Positive

effects of the freshman academy experience included the importance of keeping first-year students isolated from the remainder of the school and the value of joint collaborative planning for curriculum and student intervention (Mells, 2017).

The structure of freshmen academies is well-examined in the literature. According to Gleason et al. (2017), the freshman academy should be in a separate space. The freshman academy, when possible, should be in a physically isolated area from the older students (Mells, 2017). Bennett (2012) found policies like housing freshmen in a separate area were perceived by both students and teachers to be beneficial though transforming a traditionally structured high school into an isolated academy requires more than funding and reallocation of district resources (Hartley, 2012). High school transitions can be a positive and successful experience when relationships with teachers, school counselors, and other adults in the building are made easier (Abdel-Jalil, 2020). Students are often engaged where they are safe and accepted (Honetschlager, 2020). The freshman academy is designed to create an atmosphere that fulfills a safe and accepted environment.

Students in the Freshman Academy

Some students use their relationship with the teacher to determine if learning the subject matter topic is important or not. For example, some students will interrupt learning in the classroom if the teacher-student relationship is lacking. Nevertheless, some students have a great relationship with a teacher and will complete all the assignments for that class and encourage others to do the same and to be respectful in that

class. Helm (2018) reported that the freshman academy supports relationships developed with teachers, which are crucial to successful academic experiences (Helm, 2018; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015). Oscar and Bamidele (2015) further asserted that schools can build connectedness among students by providing a caring and supportive environment, increasing interactions with positive adults, establishing elevated expectations, and creating multiple opportunities for youth engagement at home, in school, and in the community.

Smith et al. (2008) affirmed that research on student concerns about ninth-grade transition and effective school programs is limited. However, Letrello and Miles (2003) conducted individual interviews with six ninth-grade special education and nine ninth-grade nonspecial education students about their transition to high school in a suburban school district. The findings revealed that both groups, as eighth graders, expressed they were fearful of high school, especially of the size of the school, of older students, of not having enough friends, and of not being able to find all their classes. Fraser et al. (2021) found similar indications that eighth graders experienced a significant loss of hope before the transition to high school, which the authors recommended needs special attention to avoid this loss affecting school performance. Bennett (2012) also found that in the academy model, the environment provided led to fewer absences as compared to students who were not in an academy model. Student outcomes on several measures are improved in a freshman academy model.

Teachers and Leaders in the Academy

Teachers' perceptions are equally important in assessing the academy model because their job is to teach in the academy, and they have considerable influence over the day-to-day running of the model. Students transitioning from the structure and continuous monitoring of middle school staff can benefit from teachers who can enforce the freshman academy policies, which provide extra tracking of students and seclusion from older students (Tan et al., 2018). Students' ninth-grade year can lead to a lack of confidence and less independence in making decisions if the adults in the academy are not focused on the tenets of academy procedures (Muschkin & Bonneau, 2012). School transition has focused on adversities to transition as opposed to adolescent well-being and adaptation; however, factors that discuss how adolescents thrive during the school move are minimal (Bharara, 2020). Teachers are the first predictor of student success inside the classroom, this is why having an experienced teacher with more than 2 years matters (Mehrotra et. al., 2021).

Teachers and leaders play a crucial role in the planning, implementation, and support of the freshman academy model. Hattie (2008) reported that teachers provide supportive feedback to students that helps them learn by acknowledging and using their prior knowledge and experiences. Teachers in the academy model also monitor student work to ensure students understand the current topic and the learning goals; this trusting and supportive relationship can encourage students' learning processes and develop their

skills (Hattie, 2008). Sigler (2008) expressed that teacher-student relationships are one of the distinguishing features of the Academy. Lastly, the final element that impacts student transition is the connection between curriculum and environment.

During the transition year in high school, teachers are an enormous influence over the success of the student experience. Educators publicly call for positive change in teaching and learning models that accommodate student needs in our globalized economy (Little & Ellison, 2015). Hence, freshman academy teachers are critical in alleviating the stressors associated with successfully transitioning from middle school to school (Rook, 2018).

Knowing and understanding the developmental needs of students gives teachers the power to know their students and be effective in the educational environment (Rich, 2015). Rich further reported that teachers in North Carolina believed students in the freshman academy achieved better grades, attended school more often, and exhibited fewer discipline ramifications that disrupted the learning process. According to Newsome (2018), freshman academies provide students with supportive services, such as a team of teachers that only educate ninth graders, which is atypical of traditional high school settings.

A sample of high school students completed questionnaires on the transition to high school. The results of the survey revealed that it is important for students to have competent teachers a feel a sense of belonging, which was related to positive peer

relationships (Wentzel, et al, 2019). This was mirrored in a large-scale study with over four hundred students during a school transition. Longobardi, et al. (2019) found that while there is often teacher-student conflict in times of transition, there are times that students and teachers reported positive, low-conflict relationships during a transition, this was positively associated with protective factors, and student success. Teachers play an important role academically and socially in the transition to ninth grade. Students who attend high schools that emphasize personal relationships between teachers and students experience significant learning gains compared to peers at traditionally organized schools (Neild, 2009).

Though little specific research has been produced on leadership in the freshman academy, several studies have noted findings specific to school leaders during important school transitions. High school leaders must support the learning of all students; the responsibility of providing students with success starts with ninth graders (Smith, 2018). Rothery (2020) identified the freshman academy as an isolated area in a separate building or a school within a school, where first-year students' location is on a specific wing or hallway of a public school. These isolation methods are procedures to strengthen freshman academies and reduce behavioral problems, and school leaders are key in innovating and implementing these kinds of policies.

Traditional Ninth Grade

Transitioning to a new school and being uninformed about the next steps can be very daunting. Haggerty (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight participants to examine the views of eighth and ninth-grade teachers concerning the transition of students from junior high to high school. The findings showed teachers believed there was a need for smaller class sizes, teaching students life and academic skills, and providing opportunities for students and parents to visit the high school. Several studies found that teachers perceive the freshman academy as having multiple benefits. The academy structure allows first-time first-year students to obtain support, learn, and evolve in the small community (Lizar, 2017; Mosley, 2018).

A qualitative exploratory case study by Berwick (2020) examined teacher perceptions of peer-to-peer mentoring within a freshman academy. The teachers in this study confirmed that the peer mentors were knowledgeable about their role in belonging and mattering to impact freshman failures. Teachers acknowledged that the freshman students' peer mentors created a supportive, secure, and trusting environment that accepted first-year students as members of the high school community. In a qualitative case study examining the benefits of a freshman academy and through the lens of teachers, teachers perceived it was important to keep first-year students isolated from the remainder of the school and they affirmed the benefits of collaborative planning for curriculum and student interventions (Mells, 2017).

Teacher perceptions of freshman academies help affirm the issues that affect the success of high school students. In North Carolina, Rich (2015) found teachers reported the freshman academy model helped students achieve better grades, attend school more often, and exhibit fewer discipline ramifications that disrupted the learning process. Similarly, Pettiford (2020) completed a study in North Carolina on the Freshman Success Academy to explore the effectiveness of a program through educators' perceptions in an urban high school for first-time ninth graders and sophomore male at-risk males. The findings of the exploratory program evaluation helped the administration become culturally responsive and understand the experiences and successes affected by attendance, retention, and referrals. Overall, the Freshman Success Academy stakeholders expressed positive outcomes of the program for first-time ninth graders.

School leaders have a key role in any decision to utilize the freshman academy model. George (2016) articulated that before school leaders embark upon such an impactful change in school structure, it is crucial to determine if freshman academies serve the purpose that the research suggests. In 2017, a research brief was presented (Hanover Research, 2017) which articulated a need for high school teachers and leaders to provide support for incoming first-time ninth graders in a small, learner-centered community within the school. A qualitative study of teachers and their school leaders (Strand, 2020) concluded that teachers and leaders should ensure predictability, safe learning environments, and collaboration during important school transitions.

Implications

Exploring teacher perceptions on the effectiveness of the freshman academy, its benefits and its challenges in a southeastern school district can be an essential resource for strengthening the success of ninth graders showing mastery of the ninth-grade learning standards, core curriculum subjects, and attendance, behavior, and graduation rates. There are several implications that the findings of this study can effectively put in place to positively contribute to the education field. The first implication is that current information on the freshman academy's structure, student learning, and behavior will be updated and added to existing information on the freshman academy. The second implication is that findings on the freshman academy will allow administrators and educators to have current knowledge on the benefits and challenges of cooperatively grouping students of similar age, and grade level, which will ultimately allow leaders to decide on strategies to strengthen the academy model. The third implication is that the perceptions of teachers can inform school leaders about the current practices and needs in the existing freshman academy in this school district. The fourth implication is that this qualitative study can aid in the continued development of the ninth-grade transition programs by providing support and guidance to the school district of study as well as other school districts considering implementing a Freshman Academy wing. The fifth and last implication is that the findings can contribute to positive social change in the district and society by offering new or improved learning pathways. These pathways can aid in

student, peer, and teacher connectedness during the transition program that continues and builds a stronger foundation for high school success and persistence.

Summary

There is a considerable amount of literature on ninth-grade transition programs due to ninth graders not successfully being promoted to 10th grade and graduating high school. The transition from middle school to high school is known as one of the most challenging transitions for students (Carlson, 2018). Ninth-grade high school has been determined to be one of the most difficult years of high school, where students struggle both socially and academically while transitioning into high school (Luna, 2017). Research on ninth-grade success has shown that high school transition is an unpredictable time for adolescents, often associated with environmental and social changes that result in absenteeism and falling behind in academics. Perceptions of teachers that work directly with first-time ninth graders provide data on an area that is separated from the rest of the student populated, known as the freshman academy.

This section introduced the problem, purpose, and need for the study. Also included was an examination of the framework and the research supporting the investigation. The following section will present the research methodology, data collection methods, and data analysis to be used for this basic qualitative study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The research design for this study was derived logically from the need to explore teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a freshman academy. Qualitative researchers explore how people understand and experience their world in a particular time and context (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Qualitative research is descriptive and involves non-numeric data from interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, firsthand observations, and documents (Chalmers & Cowdell, 2021). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) presented six research designs that can be used when completing qualitative studies: phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, qualitative case study, and basic qualitative research.

Each research design was reviewed and considered before making my final decision. Phenomenology is an approach that involves describing the meaning of lived experiences involving a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The purpose of this study was not aligned with phenomenology because is not looking to explore only the lived experiences of the participants. According to Merriam (2009), grounded theory is designed to use data to generate new theories. I decided grounded theory was not appropriate Ethnography is used to seek information about how a cultural group works in terms of their beliefs, language, and behaviors, as well as issues involving power, resistance, and dominance (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I chose not to use the ethnographic

method because this study is not seeking information on cultural groups, their beliefs, language, or power. Narrative analysis obtains data through stories told by participants Merriam, 2009). Narrative analysis was not selected as a research method because this study was not looking for stories about teachers' experiences. The case study approach involves an in-depth exploration of a bounded system. (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Quantitative approaches were not considered as no inferential data were collected or analyzed.

A basic qualitative approach was chosen as the best design for this research study because as the primary researcher, I am interested in determining how teachers interpret the effectiveness of ninth-grade students located in the freshman academy based on their daily interactions with teaching and student learning. Sampling in qualitative research is not random and involves purposively including the most appropriate participants to answer the research question. The results of this study may convey the perceived benefits and challenges of having an isolated freshman academy wing which benefits first-time ninth graders in terms of attendance, behavior, and academics.

Participants

Criteria for Selecting Participants

Participants for this study were professional educators of ninth-grade students enrolled in the freshman academy wing of a high school in a southeastern school district. Purposive sampling guided the selection criteria for this study. There were only two

criteria for determining participants. All participants must have worked for at least 1 academic year in this freshman academy and were licensed teachers in the state where the study took place.

Justification for the Number of Participants

Purposive sampling involves matching the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, (Ames et al. 2019). The total population of freshman academy wing educators in this multisite southeastern district is 12 teachers. All teachers received an invitation to participate in this study, with a minimum pool of six to eight needed for strong data saturation. I selected participants based on their direct work with the freshman academy. Inviting educators who did not teach in the freshman academy could have led to answers that lacked firsthand knowledge. Seven teachers agreed to participate individually in Zoom interviews to provide information on the effectiveness of the freshman academy. Each participant was a current educator of first-time ninth graders in a comprehensive high school with a freshman wing.

Gaining Access to Participants

Gaining access to the participants began with completing an application to conduct research with the district. The application required that I provide study details and the approved research permission from Walden University. Once I received approval from SESD to implement the study, I emailed each principal of the three schools that housed a freshman academy. The email included the purpose of the study and the SESD

approval form. Once principals agreed for me to access the freshman academy teachers, I contacted each teacher separately via email, explaining the purpose of the study and providing them with the consent form. The consent form included the purpose of the study, interview procedures, research questions, information about the voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits of being in the study, confidentiality of participants, Walden University's approval number (08-19-22037387) and a contact number for the participant advocate if they had questions or needed to discuss their rights. The consent form also contained a request that participants respond to emails with the words “I consent” if they agreed to participate voluntarily. Those who responded in the affirmative received another email requesting their personal email address and times to conduct interviews.

Establishing Research and Participant Relationships

During data collection, I had a working relationship with all educators who worked on the freshman academy wing at each of the three schools. I did not have a supervisory position over any of the participants. Therefore, answers should be authentic. I discussed the details of the study and informed the participants about why they were asked to participate and how they could decide to participate or not with no fear of retaliation**.** Additionally, I offered each participant the option of talking by phone, in person, or over Zoom if needed before consenting to participate. All participants decided to use Zoom interviews. Once interviews started, I reiterated to each participant that they could withdraw at any time. Each interview began by thanking the participants for

participating in the study and informing them that a recording of the interview would be saved in a lock box for 5 years. All participants stated they understood and agreed to move forward.

Measures to Protect Participant Rights

Measures to protect participants' rights began with submitting the appropriate paperwork to the IRB for Walden University. Once approval was received I submitted the proper information to the Office of Community Partnerships, the district's approval team, and for approval. Upon acceptance from the district, I contacted the three principals who led each of the schools that housed freshman academies. I explained the purpose of my study and provided them with a copy of my district approval form. I reiterated information about the confidentiality of the study by providing a copy of confidentiality and consent forms that were sent to the district. I answered questions that principals had regarding the study. I used different alphanumeric codes for each of the three locations instead of the names of the schools and interviewees.

Data Collection

Data collection for this qualitative study consisted of semi-structured interviews with professional educators teaching in the freshman academy within the SESD. The educators selected were the appropriate informants to discuss how the freshman academy operates and disclose successes and challenges they observed. This type of data collection is appropriate for

this basic qualitative design because semi-structured interviews correspond with the qualitative research design for answering the questions "how" and "why" (Azungah, 2018). Semi-structured implementation depends on how the interviewee responds to the question or topic interpreted by the researcher (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Although there is a set of guiding questions, the subject's response gives the researcher the flexibility to pose more enhanced questions than the initially drafted ones (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Semi-structured interviews effectively gather specific participant information (Merriam, 2009).

All data were generated through semi-structured interviews via Zoom, the online video conferencing service. The interviews lasted between 45 – 60 minutes. After each interview, I completed a reflective journal that outlined the overall interview questions and answers that may have been conflicting or incomplete. I also took field notes on the body movements of the participants, which may or may not have explained the educators' comfort level about having the interview or giving false information to questions. The data are stored in a secure folder on my personal computer, on an external hard drive that is password-protected in a lock box at a family member's home, and on a password-protected flash drive in a fireproof safe in my home.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to explore the perceptions of the freshman academy teachers regarding the benefits, challenges, and perceived effectiveness of the SESD freshman

academy intervention program was an interview protocol containing 13 semi-structured questions (Appendix C). I designed the interview questions to focus on the experience of educators who work directly with ninth graders in the freshman academy. The pre-established questions ensured consistency with each participant throughout the interview process. Creswell (2012) stated that qualitative research relies on general interviews or observations to ensure we capture

participants' views.

Source for Data Collection Instrument

A freshman academy principal evaluated the 13-question interview protocol by consenting to a mock interview, which ensured content validity. The interview protocol is adapted from Lizar (2017) and Mosley (2018), who completed two similar studies (Appendix C). Semi-structured interviews and recordings from the interview were used to develop codes, categories, and themes related to the research questions. The interview protocol was sufficient for collecting data as the teachers were the only informants.

How Data Were Generated, Gathered, Recorded

Data were collected solely from Zoom interviews with key informants, the teachers who work within the freshman academies in the SESD. Each participant was asked to select how their interview would be conducted and a time to conduct the interview. I offered participants choices for answering the 13 semi-interview questions: in person or via Zoom, the online video conferencing service. All participants choose to

participate via Zoom. The individual interviews were scheduled once consent was returned via email. Each participant was encouraged to print out or download a copy of the consent for their records. Participants were asked about their availability for the interview, and I was able to accommodate each educator with their preferred time. A reflective journal was completed after each interview. The journal allowed me to write down information that I thought about during the interview. I also monitored and made notes about the body movements and facial expressions of the participants which may have determined that they felt differently than what they were saying. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. The participants were thanked for their time after the interview and informed them that after the interview was transcribed, they would receive a summary of my findings about their interview, so they could confirm I had understood them correctly.

Systems for Keeping Track of Data

Data were in the form of audio-recorded interviews, electronic copies, and printed transcriptions. The original copy of all the recordings is on a password-protected laptop in my home. Additionally, I have a fireproof lockbox that holds the flash drive with a copy of the interview recordings, a password-protected external hard drive with the interview recordings placed at my home, and a backup copy at a family member's house. I completed reflective journals on each interviewee's body language or tone. The reflective journal was also used to log my steps while completing the study, which helped

guard against bias about my thoughts on the academy and from influencing my analysis of the data. After five years, I will destroy all data, as required by Walden University.

Gaining Access to the Participants

First, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research. Next, I completed an application through the Office of Community Partnerships to obtain permission to use SESD's school's data provided through the participants. Upon receiving their approval, I emailed the building administrators of the schools that housed a freshman academy. The email explained the study's purpose and requested access to the freshman academy teachers. Attached to the email were the approved district letter and the consent form that the teachers would be sent. Lastly, I emailed the freshman academy teachers to inform them of the study purpose and the permissions I received. I provided them with an invitation to participate in the study. The email included a confidentiality clause and a letter of informed consent, informing them of their rights.

Additionally, the email discussed the interview process. I asked each potential participant to provide me with a personal email, which was used for those who decided to participate in the study. Accessing participants and research sites is central to educational research achievement; however, the researcher may not control the outcome (Amundsen et al., 2017).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was one of an observer. I do not teach in the freshman academy. In this study as the researcher, I was the sole collector of data, and I analyzed all the data independently. While I am an employee of the school district, I have no supervisory position over any teacher in the freshmen academies. My role was to design, collect, analyze, and present findings along with a project developed to address the problem.

Data Analysis Results

For this study, I used a deductive analysis approach to analyze the data. Before the interviews, each school and participant were given alphanumeric codes for confidentiality. After each Zoom interview, I wrote in a reflective journal to capture my feelings about the interview, which allowed me to keep track of any biases that I may have felt about the academy and the answers provided by the participants. Next, I uploaded the Zoom interviews onto my media within the Canva program. The Canva program transcribed each interview, and upon completion, I listened to the interview while reading the information transcribed to affirm that the information was translated correctly. After confirming the correct translated information, I made notes in the margin of things that seemed repetitive. I then highlighted individual words and phrases that I thought were similar in each interview, which assisted in the initial coding process. Following the initial highlighting of words and phrases during the first coding pass, I

used a different color highlighter to identify which words or phrases would be categorized together. I then selected emerging information based on my second reading and color-coded information.

Next, I used a content analysis spreadsheet to document and organize the information that was highlighted during my coding process. In the first column, I listed the schools by alpha codes; the second column listed the participants using alphanumeric codes; and in the third column, I listed raw data consisting of words and phrases from each participant who seemed to speak to the research questions. Following this, I returned to the raw data and began coding material not captured by my first two coding passes. I looked at the remaining words and phrases that were not highlighted to determine if any of them were relevant to be placed in one of the color-coded areas already created. The words that were relevant to one of the areas already in place were highlighted with the appropriate color and placed in the correct section. This allowed me to capture all words or fragments that needed to be coded. I also viewed the words that were not highlighted looking for discrepant cases. These additional codes were added to my content spreadsheet.

After the initial pass, I created a second coding column by condensing information from the first coding column. The new columns contained condensed codes that contained topics like the original codes on the spreadsheet. After the second coding column was complete, I analyzed the condensed codes and organized them into

categories based on the condensed coding of the second open coding column. Lastly, themes were created from the categories, and each theme was placed under the research question it could answer.

Open coding allowed me to capture any data with a word or phrase that appears to be a response to my research questions. I used an open coding system after each interview, which allowed me to capture any data with a word or phrase that is repetitive or appears to be a response to at least one of my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The open coding designation I used was based on the interview responses. Alphanumeric codes protect identity (Parrott, 2019). Using an alphanumeric coding system helped identify similarities and differences within specific schools and the district. analysis of the data led to 176 codes, which I was able to condense into 11 categories. I was able to create 6 themes from the categories. The complete coding table is in the Appendix.

Evidence of Quality

All participants received a list of findings once they were compiled to ensure that I interpreted their information correctly. After reviewing the findings, participants were asked to email any corrections that needed to be addressed. Allowing the participants to review my findings, which is known as member checks, will ensure the accuracy of reporting. Conducting member checks on data analysis assisted with developing the creditability of the results to assure correct interrelatedness. It also added to the validity

of the results because participants had the opportunity to assess that the data accurately represents their thoughts, further assisting with guarding against researcher bias. A common strategy for ensuring internal validity or credibility is member checks, also called respondent validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). No study participants provided any concerns or corrections to the member check. All interview, coding, and data analysis information is labeled with alphanumeric codes and secured in a locked file cabinet for five years.

Dealing with Discrepant Cases

In this study, open coding was used and would have identified any discrepant cases that were present, and it is my responsibility to report all information. There were no discrepant cases found in this study.

Validity and Quality Findings

Capturing truth or reality is not possible through qualitative research, but some strategies can increase credibility and validity (Merriman, 2009). Several strategies were used in this study to show the validity and credibility of the findings. Each interviewee received a copy of the findings to confirm if their information was represented correctly. There were no corrections reported from the participants. An audit trail was used in this study to record each step of the research process. An audit trail shows the project study history by documenting every step that was completed throughout the study (Merriam,

2009). This documentation log is another way to verify the credibility and validity of the study.

Purposeful sampling, single or small cases, and non-random cases are selected to study because the researcher wants to understand the situation in that area and not just general information about the topic (Merriman, 2009). The transferability of findings in one study, involving student experience is not a recipe, but rather a suggestion that must be researched for its applicability to a new context (Stahl & King, 2020). Transferability is only feasible when a detailed description that includes audit logs, recordings, and background information is documented. The local constituents must determine if their environment is like the researchers' situation because they are the ones interested. While this small, nonrandom, qualitative study has limited transferability, I have provided a thick description of the setting and participants so school personnel in other contexts can judge the applicability of the findings to their setting.

Data Analysis Results

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of the Freshman Academy teachers about the benefits, challenges, and perceived effectiveness of a Southeastern School District's (SESD) freshman academy intervention program. Data were collected from interviews with seven educators at three different schools on 13 semistructured questions. I analyzed the data after conducting interviews with educators who work in the freshman academy. The raw data yielded 176 codes. Some codes were

duplicated in the raw data. After removing the duplicated codes, 117 original codes could be reduced to 11 categories (Appendix C). I reduced the data further and developed six themes that address teacher perceptions about the first-year academy's benefits, challenges, and perceived effectiveness (Appendix D).

Teachers' perceptions of the freshman academy include their beliefs, what they see as challenges, and their perceptions about its effectiveness. The information under each theme was obtained directly from the data provided by the teachers during their interviews. Each theme is related to the framework for this study which is a combination of Piaget's cognitive development theory (1936) that explains that observations led him to his idea of learning that occurs when children interact with their environment and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on human development (1934) which explains that observations led him to his idea of learning occurs when children interact with their and adapt to their environment and learn how to process information successfully. The 11 categories were synthesized into the 6 themes that are explained below.

Theme 1: Learning in the Freshman Academy is Dependent on the Teacher.

Theme one is comprised of two categories: *teacher beliefs* and *experiences*. The data from this study revealed that teachers believed their experience affects student learning. Teachers reported the importance of teaching the basics, also known as reteaching information, to assist with current learning. More than half (4 out of 7) of teachers referenced their experience in teaching during the interview.

It was affirmed by 57% of the teachers that previous teaching experience is a contributor to their daily teaching. Additionally, teachers who discussed their experience expressed that routines are essential for first-year students. Teachers with experience working in a comprehensive high school were able to discuss the differences and similarities of teaching ninth-grade students within the academy compared to those taught outside the academy. Teacher A1 worked in both settings and stated there is no difference in teaching only ninth graders. Teacher A2 explained that teaching ninth graders in a comprehensive high school versus the freshman academy is not very different.

Teachers A2 and C1 both expressed that they believe ninth-grade students are better note-takers in the freshman academy than in a comprehensive high school because freshman academy students do not have the same distractions that may occur in classes with multiple grade levels. Teacher C1 also explained that she likes the maturity of high school students which was not seen when she taught middle school students. Teacher A3 did not share the same thoughts as teachers A1 and A2, she explained that teaching in a comprehensive high school was not as smooth for her as teaching in the freshman academy. She stated that while teaching various levels, she had to stop and explain to the ninth graders what needed to be done because they were not used to the routine of taking notes.

Learning in the academy may require academic preparation because not all students are ready for the academic rigor of the high school curriculum (Honetschlager,

2020). Reteaching basic learning concepts that are lacking before introducing new material can help the students with learning new material. Three out of seven teachers reported teaching basic information needed before moving on to a new lesson topic. Teacher A1 expressed that she believes learning was minuscule before high school, and she shared that "someone dropped the ball" with teaching, meaning the required material was not taught. Teacher B3 stated that as an English teacher, she teaches basic grammar and punctuation, therefore freshman students are prepared for the rest of their high school courses. Teacher C1 stated she does not get tired of reteaching or tutoring because freshman students need to learn about many high school things, such as how to act appropriately, ensure they arrive on time, and be prepared for class, which requires repetition. Teacher C1 also expressed that students need to learn information, but it needs to be understood in translation or communication, which appears to be missing.

A summary of the data provided by the teachers in theme one revealed that teacher experience, direct instruction of routines, and teaching the basics benefit the students in the freshman academy. Teacher experience is helpful according to 57% of the teachers in this study that have taught ninth graders. They believe that experience is helpful because it allows teachers to know what works and what needs to be tweaked. The same group of teachers rely on routines that assist students with learning how the day will be structured and what to expect. When students follow school routines and comply with the activities, they will observe positive results that benefit their learning outcomes.

Lastly, the teachers with experience in this study believe that teaching the basics always assists the student who needs to remember the information. Reteaching or teaching the basics makes learning what is needed next easier. This theme is related to the constructivist theory (Brau, 2020) because it verifies that learning occurs when children adapt to their new environment. The new environment for student learning is the freshman academy which is located within the comprehensive high school. In this new learning environment, teachers assist with learning by reteaching previously taught material.

Theme 2: Learning in the academy includes Distinct Classroom Practices.

Theme two is comprised of two categories: *instructional support for students* and *classroom practices*. These two distinct practices surfaced during the analysis of the interview data. Teachers said they use instructional support to help students learn in the classroom. Participant B1 expressed that bilingual support in each content area supports students with language barriers. Teacher C1 communicated that the additional support for students in the classroom is the unlimited use of English/Spanish dictionaries. Teachers A1 and C1 both responded that freshman academy teachers are the “bottom line”, where learning begins in high school, so they are the instructional support system. Teacher A3 suggested that "Teachers have patience with all students and ensure students receive their instructional supports so they can complete assignments. Being supportive of the

students helps with their success." Support from teachers affects the level of student engagement and performance of learning throughout school (Alrajeh & Shindel, 2020).

Participants in this study also explained how their classroom practices help with student learning. Classroom practices were identified as being beneficial to students' growth in learning by 71% of the participants. Teacher A3 stated she increases rigor, holding students to advanced expectations in her class. Some classroom practices or routines stated by Participant B3 are learning school rules, note-taking techniques, concept maps, and graphic organizers. She also expressed that her classroom practices include showing students how to submit homework using Chromebooks. Classroom practices or activities for first-year students include how to maneuver through high school. For example, students in the academy need assistance using the appropriate route to take to the school nurse, lunchroom, and the office according to Participant B1. Classroom practices have been identified as relevant support to student learning in the freshman academy (Finkelstein, Sharma, & Furlonger, 2021). When asked what support was needed to maintain the academy, teachers B3 and C1 stated that resources are sufficient in their schools. However, teacher B2 stated that resources, such as lab materials and chrome books, must be provided for students to be successful. These conflicting views indicate that the academy model may not be instituted identically across the district. Teachers are confident about instructional supports and classroom practices that they are using to assist ninth-grade students in the freshman academy. Theme two

contained evidence that the freshman academy is the entry-level to high school, and the teachers in the academy teach the foundation of what is needed for the next three years. These themes also conveyed the positive support systems for bilingual language learners in the classroom along with the utilization of classroom practices such as learning how to use the Chromebook, creating memorable learning artifacts such as foldable, regular communication engagement activities with school counselors, and class campus tours that assist with helping students locate their classes, the nurse, the main office, the counselor office, and the gym.

Theme 3: Teachers report challenges with the freshman academy model.

Theme three is comprised of two categories: *Teacher challenges* and *student challenges*. The data showed that teachers and students have challenges in the freshman academy. The most prevalent challenges mentioned by teachers are student attendance, student behavior, peer pressure, and academic difficulties. Six out of seven participants stated attendance is not good for freshman students. However, participant B1 stated attendance is spectacular for her class, which she posited is probably because their friends are in the academy with them. Along with attendance challenges, some behavioral issues have been reported by teachers in the freshman academy. Five teachers stated that behavior and attendance are not good in their classes. Teacher C1 discussed behavior and attendance issues by acknowledging that, “Teachers in this building deal with many

behavior problems, and principals are bogged down with other things". However, teacher B1 does not feel she has behavior or attendance concerns.

There were inconsistent opinions about the behavioral challenges among participants from academies housed in different high schools. Some of the student-oriented challenges mentioned by participants in the freshman academy model consisted of peer pressure and students moving from an intimate, more familiar environment to a larger environment. Teacher B2 stated that some students have anxiety when they go to their elective classes because many students are in the hall, and they have upper-class students in their classes. Teacher A2 stated that there are too many responsibilities for the new first-year student who had no responsibilities in eighth grade. Two of the participants stated that students act out due to peer pressure about topics such as their age, their dress, or how they look. Teacher C1 also stated that the transition from middle school has misconceptions about the SOL exams. They believe passing the test does not matter since they did not have to retake the exam when they failed in middle school. However, in high school, SOL failure can prevent students from graduating.

Lastly, academic student challenges are a concern that affects both students and teachers. Teachers are tasked with finding ways to help students learn, while students are required to understand current information provided to them and to be successful on exams that show they have learned new material. Teachers stated that students are overwhelmed with classes, new friends, and more independence, which was not given in

middle school. Teacher B3 expressed her academic challenge with teaching based on the new district schedule; she stated the course selection teaching year is shorter since we teach four classes in the first semester and 4 in the second semester, which is referred to as a (4 x 4). The participant went on to say that she feels that the year-long schedule allowed her time to catch up on objectives that she did not spend much time on at the end of the school year, but now due to the new schedule, she is unable to reteach material at the end of the school year. Teacher B1 stated that because the academy students lack maturity, they are more focused on socializing than on learning. These students need more help to be successful. Academic learning in the freshman academy is also a concern for teacher C1 who stated that students come in struggling to follow new school rules, need reteaching, and have academic gaps in reading and math. She also stated, "My kids are not behaving, I am just getting them to settle down, and we are in the ninth week of school, but I am very consistent, and I do not get tired of telling students 100 times to stop or not do something". Theme 3 participants discussed attendance, behavior, peer pressure, and academic difficulties as challenges with the freshman academy model. Participants expressed these challenges hinder the students' and teacher's instruction. Attendance and behavior were discussed by 57% of the participants as one of the significant challenges that occur in the freshman academy.

Theme 4: Teachers Have Concerns about the Freshman Academy Model

Theme four is comprised of three categories: *parental support, instructional support needs*, and *teachers' personal* feelings affect learning. The data revealed that most (71%) of the teachers discussed concerns about parental support. Teachers indicated that it is often hard to reach parents or guardians at students' homes, and when contact was made, it was rare to see a difference in the student. Two teachers expressed they call homes to ask parents to talk to their children about using cell phones in school, which is not appropriate and hinders learning. Teacher C1 explained that she considers parental support lacking when there is no change in the student's attitude, behavior, or class participation after contact with the parent. She also stated that parents she contacts often say what they think she wants to hear, but no change in behavior occurs. Teacher A3 stated that very few students say, "Do not call my home" This indicates that nothing will change if I contact a parent. Many teachers are exasperated about not being able to contact parents.

Consequently, some participants pursued parent contact and support outside traditional phone calls home. Participant A2 stated she goes further when there is no response at home; she responds to challenges by making home visits and sees about a 10% change in her students. Participant B1 shared that occasionally she detects a change. In one instance a student came to class daily and put her phone up. When the teacher

acknowledged her for doing so, the student stated, “You called my home”, this was a direct result of the phone call home.

The data revealed that teachers working in the freshman academy need instructional support, which helps ensure teachers meet the needs of student's academic and social-emotional learning development. Instructional support is provided through the school or district and is known as Professional Development (PD). Professional development training is to improve teacher knowledge, understanding, and teaching practices, which affect the development of students' learning (Mohamad Hasim et al, 2023). Participant A1 stated, “Teachers need diversity training because many issues plague our kids, and urban kids have a different set of problems in addition to being socially and economically disadvantaged". Also, the same participant said she still does not understand the purpose of the freshman academy. Instructional support can be orchestrated once on a topic or continuous professional development sessions and departmental training.

Teachers' beliefs also contribute to how they teach. Personal feelings or emotions of teachers are social interactions that can influence the learners' willingness to use what they have been taught (Richards, 2022). Teacher A2 stated, "Freshman students need a little more guidance with learning routines." Teacher B3 stated, "Teachers should learn how to give special attention to the new students in the building, establish routines, and teach the foundations of high school because students need to know routines such as

completing classwork, homework, conflict resolutions, and how to act”. Teacher B2 shared that students struggle to communicate with peers and teachers since one-on-one technology has been established into the schools. Teacher C1 said, "We need to meet more and build school pride and cohesiveness among students and staff within the academy." Personal feelings are subjective, and if educators are confident in their understanding of teaching students, their personal feelings could affect how students learn due to the teachers focusing on what they believe the students need and not the content.

Theme four revealed concerns about the freshman academy model. The concerns that were discussed are parental support and ways teachers had to take alternative methods to contact parents, instructional support needs (also referred to as professional development, PD) to assist with addressing specific needs in and outside of the classroom, and how a teacher's personal feelings about education and students learning and alter what they focus on when teaching. Three educators shared that first-year students should attend their elective courses and have lunch in the freshman academy. The other four participants expressed that first-year students should leave the academy to attend elective classes and eat lunch with upper-level students so they can observe appropriate and inappropriate behavior in their new larger setting. Participant A1 stated, "It is beneficial for students to interact intellectually with older peers.” However, Participant A2 believes most freshman students would be nervous or hesitant to talk if

classes were combined with upper-level students. Regardless of the participant's preference, the principal decides to remain in the freshman academy section or leave for lunch and electives.

Theme 5: There are many advantages to the freshman academy model

Theme five is comprised of two categories: *Benefits of the academy structure and relationships formed within the academy*. One advantage to the freshman academy is the classes are in a hall that is isolated from upper-level students. Another advantage is the student-to-student relationships formed within the academy can be sincere and long-lasting. Participants A3 and B2 both stated they like the freshman academy structure, which allows ninth graders to learn with other first-time ninth graders building peer-to-peer relationships in the classroom. These participants indicated the freshman academy allows all the ninth-grade students to be in one pocket of the building. The small community of freshman students allows them to become amiable with their classmates, school counselors, and teachers in smaller settings.

Participants A1 and B2 stated they like the academy being a separate entity because it helps with classroom management, and there is no pressure from upper-level students, so it helps them grow together. Three participants mentioned that the freshman academy should have a separate bell schedule from the rest of the students. Teacher A2 expressed that the separate structure of the Freshman Academy Model provides an excellent opportunity for the student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships to be

strengthened through enrichment activities such as analogy assignments, working in the garden, STEAM activities, community food packing projects for holidays, and special events. Participants A1 and C1 expressed they like the separation of the academy because it is an essential start to graduating on time. The separation of the academy allows time for teachers to address the specific needs of ninth graders such as how they can advocate for themselves, and conduct level meetings (town hall meetings) for school clubs or school activities such as intramurals, which are sports that students can play after school and are not subject to the same criteria as the official school team.

Four of the participants stated that the freshman academy helps with the transition from middle to high school. Participant C1 stated that the freshman academy is a discipline area of the school with only ninth graders, and all students are in class because they do not allow students to aimlessly walk the halls. She also expressed that the learning environment is small and isolated, with a community of teachers and ninth graders collaborating. Two educators stated that the first-year students engage in classroom discussions much more since they are all ninth graders. Participants A1 and A3 also expressed that having homogenous sessions with school counselors to address required courses and conflict resolutions is beneficial. Teacher A1 said, "Planning is much easier when teaching ninth grade only." Teacher A3 stated that the freshman academy is for high learning of ninth graders to prepare them for the rest of their high

school years. Participant A3 also indicated the academy allows time for ninth graders to address conflicts and adjust to the more extensive high school schedule.

Nevertheless, participant B3 revealed that teaching ninth graders is the same regardless of their physical location. The benefits of the freshman academy have been identified as; a small learning environment where peers and teachers can collaborate on community service projects, conduct grade-level meetings, and address behaviors without interference from upper-classmen. Most teachers expressed that they believe the freshman academy allows time for figuring out conflicts and adjusting to the more extensive high school schedule. This theme is related to the constructivist framework by confirming that children will adapt to their environments and learn how to process information successfully.

Theme 6: Teachers Build Relationships that Foster Learning

Theme 6 was built from data on Social/Emotional Environment and teacher/student rapport will be discussed. The freshman academy model environment is designed so students can learn without interruptions from the upper-level students. Being placed in the freshman academy allows students to assimilate into classes, socialize with peers from other middle schools that they may or may not know, and create a rapport with the leaders in the academy. Two teachers expressed that the students come to class to see their peers and they fraternize too much. As a result, many students need help completing their schoolwork, which could have been understood if they were not talking.

Participant A2 discussed freshman students being nervous or hesitant to talk because of upper-level students. Three educators shared that first-year students should be in elective courses and have lunch with the ninth graders in the freshman academy. The other four participants expressed that first-year students should leave the academy to attend elective classes and eat lunch with upper-level students so they can observe appropriate and inappropriate behavior in their new larger setting. Participant A1 stated, "It is beneficial for students to interact intellectually with older peers." Regardless of the participant's preference, the principal decides if the students remain in the freshman academy section or leave for lunch and electives.

Several teachers reported a great rapport with students and believed the relationship could determine whether a student is successful in school or not. Two participants expressed that they have a great relationship with the students, and one of them explained that she is a mother figure for the students and enjoys working with them. Teacher B3 stated that once the kids know you care and are not there only for a paycheck, they will start performing better academically.

The relationships formed within the freshman academy model, specifically through social/emotional conversations and the rapport created between teachers and students are beneficial to combatting the ninth-grade bulge. Communication in school is a big part of learning, however, communication for learning content taught by teachers is different than social communication with peers. The academy model, which is small,

serves as a small community creating a great rapport between teachers and students as well as students with other students. This theme is related to the constructivist framework by confirming that the social-cultural environment that contributes to learning is important with students' peers and teachers as evidenced by teachers having good rapport with students.

Themes Related to the Research Questions

Table 1 shows the alignment of the themes created to the appropriate research question.

Table 1

Alignment of Themes to Research Questions

RQ1: What are the freshman academy teacher's perceptions of ninth-grade students learning in the SESD Freshman academies?
Theme 1: Learning in the Freshman Academy is Dependent on the Teacher. Theme 2: Learning in the academy includes Distinct Classroom Practices.
RQ2: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions of the challenges for ninth-grade students currently in the freshman academies?
Theme 3: Teachers report challenges with the freshman academy model. Theme 4: Teachers have concerns about the freshman academy model.
RQ3: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions on whether freshman academies effectively meet the needs of ninth graders?
Theme 5: There are many advantages to the freshman academy model. Theme 6: Teachers build relationships that foster learning.

The first research question inquired about teacher perceptions of ninth-grade student learning in the SESD freshmen academies. Themes one and two address the first research question. Teachers related that their previous experiences in teaching affected their approach to teaching in the freshman academy, and they provided information on specific classroom practices they felt necessary to success for students in the freshman academy model. The data revealed that 57% of the teachers in the study perceive teaching the basics as important for learning and 71% of the teachers discussed their experience and teaching the basics which validates that long-term knowledge is

fundamental for learning in the freshman academy. Within these two themes, participants indicated that learning is often dependent upon the teacher. Classroom practices such as providing positive support systems for bilingual language learners in the classroom and reading content to answer crucial thinking questions are also contributors to helping students learn in the freshman academies. Teachers also disclosed that the freshman academy is a great entry-level to high school and teaches the foundation, providing what is needed for the next three years, so learning in this model must be effective.

The second research question explored teacher perceptions of the challenges that freshman academy students experience when transitioning to high school. Theme 3: Teachers report challenges with the freshman academy model and Theme 4: Teachers have concerns about the freshman academy model both address this research question. Reports from more than half of participants expressed challenges with attendance, behavior, academics, and peer pressure. Teachers reported students have challenges with academics due to their misconceptions about high school responsibilities. Students misunderstand how grades and the end-of-course exams (Sols) contribute to their passing classes and graduating on time. Students believe since they barely did work in middle school and they passed that high school, the same thing will occur, but this is not true. Another participant explained that the one on one technology hinders communication in class for group discussions or projects.

Teachers expressed concerns about the freshman academy model. The concerns addressed parental and instructional support along with teachers' personal feelings (emotions), which can determine how they teach (Burić et al., 2020). Teacher B1 expressed that cell phones are a concern with freshman students and being unable to contact parents to support this rule makes it hard for learning. Teacher B1 also reported her dislike of the academic year calendar change from a 2-semester whole year to a 4x 4 half-year schedule, which means the students attend class daily for half the school year, then switch classes. Teachers B2 and C1 discussed academic gaps as a concern stemming from this model.

Instructional support for teachers is a concern because teachers are not cohesive in the academy according to 50% of the teachers. Additionally, three of the seven teachers have never taught in the freshman academy and did not receive training on specifics that needed to be accomplished. A seasoned teacher stated she did not know the concept of the freshman academy and that teachers need diversity training.

The third research question explored teacher perceptions on whether freshman academies effectively meet the needs of ninth graders. Themes 5 and 6 provided information about participants' views on this question. Theme 5: There are many advantages to the freshman academy model provides insights about the advantages of the freshman academy by combining the benefits and the relationships within the academy. The structure of the academy, being isolated from the general population, and having core

teachers in proximity allows students and teachers to build relationships. Five out of 7 teachers appreciate that the behaviors and academics can be addressed with only ninth graders in a small setting without upperclassmen interfering. B1 agrees that the separate entity helps ninth graders grow and learn with their peers who are similar in thought processes because they can have midway checks to see if students are on track, it's easier to have meetings with homogenous groups that are around the same age group, and it helps with the transition to middle school by preventing the students from getting lost and falling into a deeper academic gap.

Theme 6: Teachers build relationships that foster learning within the freshman academy by having conversations to build trust. Building trust allows teachers to actively engage students in conversations about the challenges that ninth graders experience. Three participants expressed that many ninth graders enter high school and are very social, which can hinder learning. The same three teachers stated students attend school more because of the relationships that have with their peers and teachers. Having an environment that is caring and supportive allows students to feel connected and willing to learn.

Conclusion

Six themes were created based on the analysis of data in the study. The themes were aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework chosen for this study. The constructivist theory served as a framework for this study and was a

combination of Piaget's theory of cognitive developmen1936) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human development (1934). Both researchers have contributed to the development of learning (Huang, 2021). The first theory constructed by Piaget on cognitive development is related to ninth-grade learning in the freshman academy because ninth graders have many different emotions about getting older, moving to a new school, and making new friends. At the same time, the students are developing cognitively which is being addressed when students interact with the environment (Ramesh, 2022).

Assigning students to classrooms with students of similar age and developmental levels can improve their instructional needs (Zajda, 2021). An important implication of Piaget's theory on the transition of students is that they must adapt to their new environment to have meaningful learning outcomes (Keating, 2023). Students adapt to their environment and learn the necessary skills to move forward and continue to the tenth grade. The findings of my study confirm the results of a study that revealed a positive correlation between motivation, engagement, and achievement that has been contributed to constructivist learning environments (Savage, 2023).

The second theory Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on human development (1934) explained the importance of social interactions that aid in learning and cognition (Huang). The development of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on human development informs educators that there are three important aspects to learning: the zone of Proximal

Development/ZPD, Scaffolding, and social interactions (Margolis, 2020). The zone of proximal development is when the teacher initially explains material to students which they eventually learn on their own. Next scaffolding is a strategy that is regularly done to ensure all students understand what the learning objective is requiring them to do. Therefore, teachers must explain directions and show techniques several times due to the various ability levels that are in the classroom. Lastly, students must be able to articulate what is being done and why it is important, if they cannot fulfill that task then learning does not fully occur.

Learning in the freshman academy is beneficial for the students because they can learn with peers similar in age, and don't have to feel nervous or embarrassed to answer or ask questions due to upper-level students being present. Piaget and Vygotsky both stated in their way that learning is important. Piaget discussed exploring through the environment and learning cognitively when the time was appropriate while Vygotsky discussed incorporating the three strategies mentioned above to aid in learning.

Based on the findings of this study, a position paper was developed (Appendix A) to address the problem. Teachers disclosed both the advantages and disadvantages of the freshman academy model, therefore a position paper was developed recommending strategies to continue positive practices and strategies needed to improve some elements of the academy and ensure consistency of implementation across the district's three freshman academies.

Section 3: The Project

In this study, I explored teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of the freshman academy. The analyzed qualitative data collected from the participants revealed the benefits and drawbacks of the freshman academy. A review of the data revealed two statements that acknowledged help was needed in the academy. When help is needed, opinions or recommendations are ways to solve the problem, so based on the findings from the study, I decided the project that would best satisfy the problems addressed through the data would be a position paper. Participants said that there is a need to improve communication between staff members and that teacher stability is a problem within the academies in the district. These comments made it clear that there is room for improvement within the academy in addressing teacher communication, staff stability, and staff training through professional development. Providing recommendations through a position paper to district leaders and building administrators may provide them with alternative ways to create uniformity among the teachers, staff, and administrators who work in the ninth-grade academy.

The findings of the study revealed that teacher C1 believes that teacher stability is a problem in the academy. Participant A2 expressed that training for teachers who are accustomed to teaching upper-level students is needed because ninth graders need more guidance. Participant A2 also communicated that teachers need more time for communication and cohesiveness. The most experienced participant, A1, has been

teaching for 16 years but has been in the freshman academy for only the last few years. Moreover, the participant stated the freshman academy was a new concept and it is still misunderstood. Participant B3 stated freshman academy teachers do not need special training; they need to learn how to give special attention to the new students in the building. Participant A3, who was new to teaching, was not familiar with the concept of a freshman academy but stated that knowledge of learning gaps was needed.

Teacher A1 shared that because the population is diverse, PD on diversity training is needed. B2 would like teachers to receive PD training to understand personalities compared to emotions. These statements, among others provided by the participants, convey that support is needed. To provide the best outcomes, the selected genre of the project is a position paper (see Appendix A) to help the study site district better prepare for the success of the ninth-grade academy. The position paper describes three recommendations to help teachers address the drawbacks of the academy in this local school district. The findings indicated that teachers in the freshman academy would benefit from three recommendations that specifically address the findings of the study.

The three recommendations that will be presented are: (a) teachers would benefit from collaborating on classroom practices that support instruction in the ninth-grade academy, (b) the physical infrastructure that supports effective freshman academies should be evaluated by the administration, and (c) teachers would benefit from PD in building relationships and community within the academy. The literature review in

Section 3 provides research that supports these recommendations. The goals of this project are to convey the findings of my study, present recommendations with supporting literature, and initiate a process for teacher training implementation to the freshman academy coordinator, building leaders, and district leaders.

Rationale

The problem I explored was that a southeastern U.S. school district created freshman academies in three high schools to assist freshman students with strategies and support needed to combat ninth-grade failure, but the number of students completing the academic requirements and persisting in high school has not increased. Research indicated that the freshman academy helps students become academically successful by promoting graduation and providing individual attention. However, ninth-grade student success has not increased at SESD according to end-of-course exams, report cards, and senior-year cohort results. Based on this gap in learning, I interviewed teachers who work in the freshman academy at three different schools within the southeastern school district regarding their perceptions of the academy.

To arrive at my conclusions, I interviewed seven teachers using semi-structured structured interviews via Zoom. Upon completion of the interviews, I used open coding on the data to find the themes that were repeated across the data set. The extensive coding process yielded six themes:

- Learning in the freshman academy is dependent on the teacher.

- Learning in the academy includes distinct classroom practices.
- Teachers reported challenges with the freshman academy model.
- Teachers have concerns about the freshman academy model.
- There are many advantages to the freshman academy model.
- Teachers build relationships that foster learning.

Using recent scholarly research, I created three recommendations I believe will assist in improving the freshman academy. A position paper is appropriate because through it I will provide evidence-based recommendations supported by recent literature to promote ninth-grade success. This position paper will include background information on the local problem, a summary of the current study and findings, and three recommendations based on the findings of the study. The three recommendations that I am providing will support teachers working in the freshman academy are the following: (a) Teachers should collaborate on classroom practices to support ninth-grade instruction in the ninth-grade academy, (b) administrators should consider a dedicated physical structure for the freshman academy, and (c) teachers should be provided continuous professional development on building relationships and community within the academy.

Review of the Literature

I conducted a review of recent literature to support the proposed recommendations by searching the Walden University Library. The key terms I searched to locate peer-reviewed articles were *position* paper*, white paper*, *professional*

development, *freshman academy structure*, *small learning groups*, *ninth-grade academy*, *freshman academy*, *teaming*, *teaching strategies*, *teacher beliefs*, *teacher experience, parental communication*, *parental support*, *homogenous learning*, *school attendance*, *freshman student attendance*, *ninth-grade attendance ninth-grade behavior*, and *immature ninth graders*. This review of literature is organized in sections and addresses the chosen project genre (a position paper), teacher collaboration, academy structure, and building relationships and community in the academy.

Position Paper

A position paper presents an arguable opinion about an issue. Hwang et al. (2021) stated that the goal of a position paper is to prove to the audience that the researcher's opinion is justifiable and worth hearing. A position paper supports the need for further adjustments to improve a situation. Position papers can be used to advocate for educational changes. Position papers are topics that are of central importance to the field and make recommendations to advance the practice of the topic of Disciplinary and interdisciplinary science education research (2014). Additionally, a position paper focuses on the importance of the field of study and recommends advancing research and practice of the topic (Springer Open, 2023). Ninth-grade failure is a topic of vital importance in the district of study and education. A position paper is the appropriate genre for my study to defend a particular view (see T. W. Farrell et al., 2020). Position papers have been used effectively in education settings (Davies & Smith, 2006).

Collaboration and Collaborative Instructional Practices

Teacher collaboration is also known as collegiality, teaming, and professional networking. Regardless of what it is called, teacher collaboration encompasses activities and interactions that can lead to teachers' and students' gains (Saka, 2021). Working together allows teachers to collaboratively analyze data to solve educational problems at their school (Schildkamp, Poortman, Ebbeler et al., 2019). Teacher collaboration improves effective teaching practices (Saka, 2021). Collaboration allows teachers to share their ideas and exchange teaching practices on ways to help students learn. In a qualitative multiple case study of an urban district located in Southwest Georgia, Spradlin (2023) explored the perceptions of administrators, general education teachers, and special education teachers at both high- and low-performing high schools regarding the planning and implementation of coteaching to support the academic needs of students with disabilities. One of the goals was to research the influences that impact collaboration between high school coteaching pairs and to put into action better collaborative practices for coteaching. Data were collected through demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Results showed that common planning was a key theme in both planning and implementation and facilitators of coteaching. This study confirms the positive findings of collaborative co-teaching.

Freshman academy teachers should have weekly school-based team meetings, professional learning community meetings, or common planning, which all have the

same purpose to address student and academy concerns. This will allow teachers to address concerns that may be occurring with students and staff members regularly. A mixed-methods case study was conducted by Coogler (2023) in a district that mandated a team of teachers to investigate their methods and guidelines on the support provided to students during their first year of high school. Archived data, a survey, interviews focus groups, and observations were the sources of data collected. The findings revealed trust and mutual respect of peers and adults, genuine concern for students from their teachers, and the sustained implementation of interventions and support for the students. The study did not find a difference in attendance or credits for freshmen; however, there was a difference in individual students' attendance and credits. To ensure that students are receiving the needed support to succeed, the school-based team executed several practices and activities to ensure the all-around success of ninth-grade students. This study supports teacher collaboration and classroom practices.

Professional development, reduced workload, and improved student focus are all benefits related to collaboration associated with characteristics of successful schools (Muckenthaler et al. 2020). A study comparing collaboration types of teachers was part of a project "Risk-Check for Teaching Profession" at a university for quality educator training. There were two goals of the study; the first was to increase the quality of future teachers' training. The second goal was to establish standards and conditions for teaching successfully. Teachers who voluntarily participated completed an anonymous

questionnaire online providing general online tools for future teachers. Findings from the cluster analysis and analyses of variance revealed four collaboration types that differed in the benefits they perceived. Student teachers will be able to use the resource to reflect on their career choices.

A case study by Saunders et al. (2020) examined transcripts of collaborations between experienced sixth-grade teachers to determine if the framework for Pedagogically Productive. The protocol consisted of four specific tasks which detailed information during collaboration to help analyze student work and reflect on what was learned. Lesson planning, teaching, analyzing student work, and reflecting on what was learned are great tools utilized by teachers to help students succeed and teach new educators the process of effective collaboration. Teacher and staff collaboration about students' academic performance, behavior, attendance, and other factor that could play a part in their learning are extremely important to discuss so that if an intervention is needed, it can be put in place quickly to avoid any learning loss.

Dedicated Physical Structure

Separating first-time students from upper-class students by placing them in a separate hall or wing of the school is beneficial to students' grades, behavior, and attendance. The structure of the freshman academy is just as important as the location of the freshman academy (Iverson, 2022). The small school environment is intentionally separated from the upper-class students coupled with a principal, counselor, and teachers that solely teach students in the academy (Thomas, 2022). A benefit of the academy is the

environment that provides students with a unique learning space for students' needs that is solely for first-time ninth graders and separated from upper-class students. (Elam, 2021; Darrow, 2022). Students arriving from a larger environment could not feel overwhelmed by seeing hall traffic, which can be a distraction.

However, Lance (2019) communicated that freshman academies and similar programs could reduce negative behaviors that may adversely affect student's academic progress and social growth in high school. Iverson (2022) similarly recommended that 9th graders at risk for failure could be isolated in a location of the school with a select group of teachers, isolated from the distraction of the general population, and receiving the benefits of a small class.

The freshman academy model allows a structure that is not usually found in the general population due to the freedom of high school. Field (2020) used a case study design to explore how teachers describe their experiences with collegial collaboration before and after the implementation of the academy model structure. A descriptive analysis of existing survey data were used to provide the results. The surveys used were a district-based academy teacher survey, the TELL Kentucky teacher survey provided the results, and a group-level assessment (GLA) which are participants who taught at the school of study before and after the adoption of the academy model. Teachers felt collaboration was better when the academy structure was implemented.

Professional Development

Teachers in the academy would benefit from targeted training. Teachers need professional training to improve their knowledge, understanding, and instructional teaching practices, which allows students to obtain meaningful learning (Ajani,2019). Teachers need professional development to ensure they are using the best instructional and classroom management practices. Teacher teaching quality, class management, and motivating students are consistent with learning and the expectations of teachers (Wardan et. al., 2020). Teacher professional development (PD) is admired by leaders as a way of improving student outcomes and achieving fairness for all students (Gore & Rosser, 2022).

Parents have an important role in helping children receive good grades especially if the teachers are struggling and helping their children (Weinfeld et al., 2021). However, many parents do not know that students can fall behind due to the demands of the state-required exams, credits, seat hours, and grade requirements (Cummings, 2022). Furthermore, positive relationships between parents and teachers are necessary to address children's mental and physical concerns (Smith, et.al, 2022). The school can conduct workshops for parents on the school premises to address the power imbalance between home and school and to empower parents. Sheridan (2019) stated the field of consulting with families is instrumental to engagement activities and has identified as key components and collaborative practices for student learning that can be initiated and

supported by teachers. Building and maintaining communication and relationships with families is a specific training need for teachers in the freshman academy.

Project Description

By studying teacher perceptions on the effectiveness of the freshman academy, I had the opportunity to interview teachers who work directly with students in the academy. Based on the data from the interviews, I have provided three recommendations to present to the district of study. My presentation will be in the form of a position paper.

The position paper (Appendix A) allows me to address the concerns of the freshman academy and provide recommendations so that the academy can operate better and possibly mimic the results of the positive current literature. Through the position paper, I will provide recommendations to the district leaders that they can use to assist the teachers to feel empowered in their positions and take the initiative to move forward with educating 9th-grade students in the freshman academy. The project recommendations based on the findings of the data show that teachers would benefit from collaborating on classroom practices that support instruction in the ninth-grade academy, the physical infrastructure that supports effective freshman academies should be evaluated by the administration and teachers would benefit from professional development on building relationships and community in the academy. The position paper will include the recommendations, and provide clear, scholarly support for these recommendations, in the

hope that district leadership will address some of the needs and concerns expressed by the teachers in the freshman academies district-wide.

Necessary Resources and Existing Supports

The necessary resources and support for the freshman academy will require teachers in the freshman academy to have the same planning period so they can effectively plan collaboratively. Teachers should receive professional development sessions on how to effectively collaborate and address specific goals based on student performance and test grades. Teachers can also use student goal sheets to document progress that can be viewed by persons assisting in the student's goals and the students can view their progress. This may result in all students attending electives during the same time so teachers can have the required uninterrupted time to process strategies to help students move forward. Having all ninth-grade students attend electives is a scheduling procedure that requires no extra payment to any staff member. The school district already pays the teachers who work with the ninth graders as well as the outside agencies, the school counselors, and the assistant administrators in the school, so select persons will be relocated to the freshman academy, requiring no extra money being spent. However, careful attention is needed for the schedule to be created.

Other resources and supports that are required to carry out the recommendations in the position paper require the school to provide ample time to teachers so they can pack and move their belongings to their new location. Additionally, this separate area

should not have any required areas in it that students other than ninth graders need. For example, do not put the freshman academy in the hall with the school nurse because all students may have to visit the school nurse if they are not feeling well, which will defeat the concept of learning in a separate area.

The third and final needed resource existing support requires the district to utilize the professional development personnel to create or identify persons that can present engaging professional development series for the freshman academy teachers regularly. The teachers will also need time to complete a survey on how the training was presented and if they believe they can perform the objectives addressed in the training. If they are not able to perform the objectives, then a coach will need to model an example for them during class time. However, if the teachers can perform the objectives, a follow-up needs to occur with details about the skills used along with an extinction activity. Depending on the needs of the teachers, professional development could be one topic for several sessions. Freshman academy professional development sessions should be separate from the general staff meeting PDs that are held. The district will have to include a budget line to pay an outside person for conducting professional development sessions on specified lessons which could cost as much as fifteen hundred dollars per session.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project evaluation plan consists of pre and post-surveys that address teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the changes. Specifically, the pre-survey will ask what

needs to be changed and give a checklist, following changes the post-survey will ask how the changes are and if the teacher believes it is beneficial or not. Collaborative discussions about student assignments, exams, and challenges that occur in the freshman academy will be addressed weekly during collaborative planning.

The second evaluation will be a Likert scale survey, completed by the staff members who were involved in the recommended changes. A survey will allow data to be used to improve the next session. The survey will have two parts, the first part will ask about expectations that the staff members are looking for and the second half of the survey will be on the process used for collaboration meetings, and professional development. There will be an evaluation for teachers who have to move to the freshman academy wing. They will be asked how they felt about moving and what could have been done to make the move smoother for them. This will allow the administration to determine how to move forward if other teachers must move out of their rooms to another location in the building.

Moreover, I will evaluate the goals of the project on the feedback I receive from the teachers since they are the participants. I will solicit feedback from the leaders in the buildings, and lastly the student data on attendance behavior and academic grades. I will view the surveys and use the data to improve the next PD and provide resources that staff members request, if any, for collaboration.

Project Implications

This project may influence the climate, culture, and communication within the school building. Presenting district and building leadership, school board members, and other stakeholders in the community with the findings of the study and recommendations to improve the academy. This project can increase student learning and support schools with ninth-grade retention which can eventually increase graduation rates in high school resulting in the district earning a school report card rating of satisfactory. Preventing student academic failure is crucial to student health and life success. (Daley et al., 2020). When a school has a good academic report card through the state, parents move into that neighborhood so their child can obtain the best education possible (Mogstad & Torsvik, 2023).

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In Section 4, the strengths, and limitations of this basic qualitative study on exploring teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the freshman academy will be presented. Section four also discusses recommendations for alternative approaches and detailed information about what was learned about the research processes and development of this project. Lastly, reflections on the importance of the work and directions for future research are discussed in this section.

Project Strengths and Limitations

One strength of the project is that the recommendations provided are based directly on the statements of teachers who work with ninth graders in the academy, therefore they know exactly what needs to be addressed. Creating a position paper allowed me to communicate the needs of the teachers and students, thus making appropriate recommendations to improve the academy.

Another strength is that this position paper will be read by school leaders and administrators in the district, and they can decide if the schools will implement the recommendations which will benefit the individual school and the district. Along with the project's beneficial strengths, some limitations could hinder desired results. The limitations of this project are as follows. First, there is a teacher shortage, therefore having teachers meet collaboratively and that provide instruction to ninth graders only

may be difficult. Another limitation is the lack of school support staff that needs to be housed in the freshman academy to keep the small school community secluded from the rest of the building. There are physical and space requirements to strengthen the freshman academies in the district, which may also serve as a limitation to the district administration when deciding to implement some of the recommendations in the position paper.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach that I could have used to address the ninth-grade retention concern could have been to conduct a study on the end-of-course scores. The end-of-course scores are results from tests that are mandated by the State Department of Education. Students must have a minimum of 400 to pass the exam. The data would be used to assess if students were learning and retaining the material taught by the teachers. The follow-up recommendation would include a case study, including interviews, observations of the daily routines or activities of the freshman academy, and perhaps even analyzed lesson plans or team planning meetings to determine the effectiveness of learning based on teaching styles and benefits of team planning. At the end of the semester, data could be taken and a draft of findings could be presented to the leaders of the building. Lastly, an alternative approach could have been to create a curriculum design using specific programs such as Avid (Advancement Via Individual Determination) a proven national program designed to support and assist students to

succeed in a college preparatory path. The program provides resources needed to help students be successful in rigorous courses and to promote an awareness of the significance of higher education, which prepares students for college readiness could have been utilized to teach a sample group of ninth graders for one semester. At the end of the semester a comparison of grades could be made to determine if students in the Avid program were more successful in passing courses than students not in the Avid program. I could use the findings from any of the alternatives to create specific PD programs or a curriculum plan for the development of the teachers over some time. Instead, I chose to do a depth of inquiry with interviews and create research-based recommendations in a position paper, which may influence needed changes in the freshman academy model within the district.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Developing the study and project was a lengthy process. Initially, I did not realize that the course work, responses to other persons' entries in the classroom, reading and analyzing assignments, articles, journals, residency, and dissertation were all essential to developing my deeper understanding of the research process, and the project. The process taken to develop a project has allowed me to view research from a different perspective. I now know why being meticulous about the research and following the checklist is necessary. There were times when I deviated from the prescribed rubrics, and I needed to revise and edit multiple iterations of my study. By learning a meticulous, prescribed

research process, I will be able to apply these skills to new challenges and topics that will further benefit the school district.

While on my journey of developing a project, I have learned to research both sides of an issue and have an open mind. I have also learned to utilize a team of people in the field that I am researching so they can ensure I am not being biased, that the questions I am asking are valid and reliable, and that I am covering the topic thoroughly. I have learned that the more I write, the better it becomes, but also that proofreading and using Grammarly are very important. As an emerging scholar, I want my written products to have the maximum effect and potential to make social change.

Several gaps in education have been discussed and administrators or experts on the topics usually advise teachers on the process that needs to be taken to close the gap. As a researcher, identifying a gap in practice, completing research to determine if the gap is seen in a broader arena, then completing a study and using the evaluation process to execute a plan that can better the gap in practice has taught me so many skills that I can now share in education. Developing this project has allowed me to become a better teacher leader, and communicator in person and through writing. Additionally, I have a new respect for data because it tells a story. I now feel obligated to design a plan that can assist with the improvement based on data.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

The Ed.D. program has taught me much about myself and the professionals that I work with in the education field. I learned valuable information about writing, analyzing, and citing information beginning with my initial class. As a writer, I have learned that knowing your audience, reserving time to focus on the topic, editing, and proofreading are essential to success. There were many times when I had to reflect critically on the ideas I presented and whether or not I had properly paraphrased and given credit to previous authors. I quickly realized the necessity for practitioner-scholars to use high-quality research and resources, but also to appropriately credit previous scholars.

Researching the freshman academy guided my ideas and changed some of my thoughts about teaching and learning. I learned early on that the knowledge I was receiving in my classes would help me work with the students I serve. My writing and understanding of research also helped me become a leader to the teachers within the academy. Having completed a doctoral degree, I can share valuable information learned in my classes about writing style and using data. I have continuously provided teachers with spreadsheets for biweekly data and demographics to document the students' scores by groups of ten, this will allow us to compare data and discuss the next steps. I can now model how the data could be used to tell a story and plan for student success.

Appropriately using research and citing works used in that research is a skill I am consciously teaching my students. When I gather information for the department to use

for the improvement of teaching practices, I now provide the exact citation so everyone can review the material for themselves. Overall, this doctoral journey has taught me to respect research and all its components because this is a process that must be followed and if it is done erroneously then it must be amended. I also learned through researching the freshman academy that there is much that needs to be done to improve student outcomes. If the recommendations that I provided are put in place, then the district may benefit from being credited with a program that reduces the ninth-grade bulge and accelerates the promotion of first-time ninth-graders with instruction that is intentional and developmentally appropriate within the ninth-grade academy. Creating an environment where teaching and learning are appreciated and reciprocated in the school is the social change that I am happy to have played a part in.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This project study has the potential for positive social change at individual school sites and the district level. The freshman academy can assist in providing positive experiences for first-time ninth graders. The academy can add to the welcoming feeling and provide a secure environment to successfully pass all their classes. This study could not determine any evidence that the teachers on the freshman academy wing planned their lessons, discussed data, or met to discuss freshman academy activities or student goals. However, the data analysis showed that teachers met with their content area to discuss lesson plans, create parent contact logs, and discuss testing and attendance data.

The data analysis led to three recommendations that should be put in place to assist with improving teaching and learning within the freshman academy: strengthen collaboration between the freshman academy staff and receive evidence-based practice on approaches that support parents' students. Based on the study results, participants from each school mentioned criteria that determine the need for each of the above recommendations. It will be up to the administration to make the initial step of deciding which location is best for the freshman academy, then leaders must decide on the staff members that want to work with the freshman academy students. It is necessary to ensure the staff members agree to work with freshman students in the program for it to be successful because if teachers are not going to be supportive then the program will not be effective in its goal to provide a family-like environment for the freshman students to flourish.

Conclusion

As an educator who believes everyone can learn in an environment that supports them best, I believe tough love and empathy are needed. This journey took much longer than expected, but it is worth all the ambivalence that I felt throughout this process. Being able to address a gap in practice by using data that I collected from educators in different schools within the district where I am employed was very significant to me. Collecting and comparing the data confirmed that the same issues were occurring in different parts of town and need to be addressed. District leaders know that it is important

to have a transition plan for students and they are now aware of the specific concerns that staff members are having. The most significant part of this research study is that I was able to provide recommendations to remedy some of the concerns that teachers have within the freshman academy and they can easily be put in place.

The doctoral study process has allowed me to identify an issue within the district that is also being addressed globally. After interviewing teachers in the academy, I determined that teachers would like to have training and would like to meet collaboratively to plan. If this district moves forward with the position paper recommendations to improve the ninth-grade transition process, then the district could be a model for schools worldwide that have concerns about ninth-graders transitioning to high school.

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Appendix A: The Project

POSITION PAPER TO SUPPORT THE FRESHMAN ACADEMY

AT A SOUTHEASTERN SCHOOL DISTRICT

By

Renee C. Goode-Boyd

Introduction

As students transition from middle to high school, educators strive to provide the best experience for students so they feel welcomed and can learn in their unique environment. Programs have been established to improve the freshman year academic engagement and experience of high school to promote graduation rates (Nordall, 2022). The Southeastern School District (SESD) district continues to examine unique learning structures and programs for ninth graders to learn and succeed with their peers. Reducing the stress of longer hallways, bigger class sizes, and less guidance as support to freshman students can be a way of promoting student success in learning, and peer relationships with teachers and classmates. Allowing first-time freshman students to learn and grow together in an isolated area of the school building can improve student success V and the freshman experience giving a positive outlook on the next three years leading to graduation.

I conducted research that allowed me to explore teachers' perceptions of the benefits, challenges, and effectiveness of the freshman academy at their high school within the Southeastern school district. In the current academy model, teachers are required to meet with their content teams either before, after or during school hours depending on the school's schedule. The entire district's schedule is purposely set to allow a half hour before and after school for meetings. The district specialists for each

course have meetings monthly with department leads to discuss the “glows and grows” of the content area. The district also has school-wide professional development (PD) days in which content specialists meet with all teachers that teach the specific content that they are over to discuss various ways several ways to teach content, exchange strategies, and discuss best practices. However, content specialists or leaders do not meet district-wide or school-wide to discuss the freshman academy benefits, challenges, or effectiveness. As a result, the questions below were used to guide a research study.

RQ1: What are the freshman academy teacher perceptions on ninth grade student learning in the SESD Freshman academies?

RQ2: What are the freshman academy teacher perceptions on the challenges for ninth- grade students currently in the freshman academies?

RQ 3: What are the freshman academy teacher perceptions on whether freshman academies effectively meet the needs of ninth grader

Background Information

A Southeastern school district (SESD) academic improvement plan detailed the creation of three freshman academies programs at different schools during the 2014-2015 school year. Freshman academies were created to assist the freshman students with the strategies and support to combat ninth-grade failure successfully. The plan listed six themes that would be used to promote ninth grade success with specific programs, and educational rigor strategies (https://vdoe.virginia.gov). During the initial year of the

academies, the end of course scores increased in science and math. However, the following year the scores fell below satisfactory and the number of students completing the academic requirements and persisting in high school has not increased.

Three years after the inception of the freshman academies, without addressing the previous improvement plan objectives, the SESD created a five-year strategic plan. The five-year plan has goals and academic standards on how each goal will be measured. The purpose of this strategic plan is to ensure that all children receive an education that closes the proficiency gap by addressing the goals put in place by the district that will make a notable difference in the lives of children and the community. As of the date of this position paper, the school district continues to struggle with having fully functional freshman academies.

Through a qualitative research study, I explored how teachers perceive the freshman academy. I specifically asked about the benefits, challenges, and effectiveness of the freshman academy and its goals to promote freshman student learning. In this position paper, I provided three recommendations based on the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the teachers who work directly with freshman students in the academy.

Research Study

I conducted a basic qualitative study to explore the freshman academy at a southeastern school district. Muńo & Sanchez (2023) stated a qualitative study is an inquiry that is

focused on the worldview of people and how they see and appreciate things around them. I conducted this study to determine if what was happening in the district was aligned with what was stated in the literature. I recruited the participants for this study using purposive sampling. The sampling pool consisted of teachers who work in the freshman academy and teach ninth-grade students within the district of study. I chose to use purposive sampling because this is a method that uses participants who can provide the needed information (Mutungi, 2023).

Through this study, I explored the teacher's perceptions of the freshman academy. I adapted the open-ended question based on the interview protocol from Lizar (2017) and Mosley (2018), as their two studies were similar. The open-ended questions allowed me to use follow-up questions based on participant responses. Each participant was emailed a consent form that explained the purpose of the study, there was a section that invited the 12 potential participants to take part in a zoom interview with 15 open-ended questions, however only 7 teachers accepted the invitation to participate.

To frame the research study, I used elements of the constructivist theory (Huang, 2021), which explains how children adapt to their environments and learn how to process information successfully. During the interview process, teachers explained how they believe adolescents learn and the essential contribution that they make to assist in student development, which represents the constructivist notion of cognitive development. Constructivism details how people know and understand the world around them based on

observation and scientific study (Jing, 2017). Therefore, when children do not understand what is occurring, it is hard for them to move forward due to their lack of seeing how the information connects to the real world.

Social factors have had a significant role in cognitive development among children (Babakr et al., 2019). Once administrators and teachers' study and dissect Piaget's theory, it should be evident why children in the freshman academy should learn together with their age group peers and have specific staff members who are dedicated to their progress. The freshman academy model allows the structure for freshman students to socialize and complete their academics in a secure area free from a lot of distractions and full of diversions.

Data Collection

I collected data by conducting interviews via Zoom with seven teachers who volunteered. Each of the teachers works in the freshman academy at one of the three high schools within the district of study. The open-ended questions used during the interview were developed from two different interview protocols, created by Lizar (2017) and Mosley (2018), their two studies were similar. The questions were aligned with my research questions and conceptual framework. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and took place over three weeks. After each interview, I wrote in a reflective

journal to capture my feelings about the interview, which allowed me to keep track of any biases that I may have felt about the academy and the answers provided by the participants. Next, used the Canva program to transcribe my Zoom interviews. I used multiple coding passes to capture the data reported by the teachers.

Participants provided information on their perceptions of learning, benefits of, and challenges of the freshman academy. The coding process provided me with 117 original codes that were reduced to 11 categories. Out of the 11 categories, I was able to produce six themes from the teachers' perceptions about the first-year academy's benefits, challenges, and perceived effectiveness.

Research Findings

The themes created from the robust data analysis are:

Theme 1: Learning in the Freshman Academy is Dependent on the Teacher. Learning in the freshman academy received details from the questions that addressed teacher beliefs and experiences. Learning in the academy requires an academic review of the material learned. Reteaching basic learning concepts that are lacking before introducing new material can help the students with learning new material. Teachers responded that they believe their experience affects student learning and that it is important to teach the basics, also known as reteaching information, to assist with current learning. Additionally, teachers who discussed their experience expressed that routines are essential for first-year students.

All but one of the participants had experience working in a comprehensive high school and discussed the differences and similarities of teaching ninth-grade students in the comprehensive setting versus the academy.

Theme 2: Learning in the academy includes Distinct Classroom Practices.

Learning in the academy occurs when instructional support for students and classroom practices are available. Teachers explained how classroom practices such as reteaching information from previous years (teaching the basics) are beneficial to students' learning.

Teachers at two of the three schools expressed concerns about resources being available. Resources needed are lab materials, Chromebooks, and instructional support for bilingual language learners.

Theme 3: Teachers report challenges with the freshman academy model. The most prevalent challenges mentioned by teachers included student attendance, student behavior, peer pressure, and academic difficulties. Only one teacher stated she does not believe she has any behavioral challenges. Academic student challenges are another concern that affects both students and teachers.

Attendance and behavior were discussed by 57% of the participants as one of the significant challenges that occur in the freshman academy. Academic challenges with teaching based on the new 4 x 4 district schedule are hindrances for some teachers.

Theme 4: Teachers have concerns about the freshman academy model. The concerns addressed by participants were lack of parental support, instructional support needs (PD), and how teachers' feelings affect student learning. The data revealed concerns about parental support. Teachers' beliefs also contribute to how they teach. Giving special

attention to the new students in the building, establishing routines, and teaching the foundations of high school is how students will be successful according to the data. Additionally, the data revealed that teachers working in the freshman academy need instructional support, which helps ensure teachers meet the needs of student's academic and social-emotional learning development.

Parental support concerns were discussed by (71%) of the teachers. The data also revealed that teachers need diversity training and training on the goals of the academy.

Theme 5: There are many advantages to the freshman academy model. The structure and the benefits formed within the academy are advantages of having a small community. Housing students in one pocket of the building allows them to become acquainted with their classmates and teachers. The Freshman Academy Model provides an excellent opportunity for the student-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships to be strengthened through activities such as STEAM activities, community food packing projects, garden club maintenance, and special events. Group activities can build cohesiveness among the freshman academy students. This peer interaction can lead to new friends and it can be an essential start to graduating on time. Teachers can guide ninth graders on how to be advocates for themselves, conduct town hall meetings (grade level meetings), and meetings for school clubs or school activities.

Two advantages of the freshman academy are the structure and benefits of the freshman academy which half the participants agreed. Three out of 7 teachers stated that the freshman academy should have a separate bell schedule.

Theme 6: Teachers build relationships that foster learning. The small separated area that houses only freshman students and the core group of dedicated teachers allows daily communication to take place. Establishing a rapport with students provides a platform of trust and support, which could encourage students to attend school more often, complete assignments, and remain in school. Building relationships with students allows them to feel supported in and outside of the school environment. Students in the academy are also able to build relationships with other students, which could lead to lifelong friendships.

The academy model, which is small, serves as a small community creating a great rapport between teachers and students as well as students with other students.

Recommendations

1. **Evaluate the structure that supports effective freshman academies.**

The structure and location of the freshman academy should be evaluated by the administration to ensure that is in the most effective area for student learning based on the data. Participant B1 stated freshmen are still young students and being separated

allows them to avoid the pressures that sometimes are associated with upper classmen. Therefore, allowing the freshman academy to be in a separate wing, area or building that is only accessible to ninth graders is most appropriate. Ideally, a separate part of the building is where first-time ninth graders should spend the entire day for the entire school year (Thomas 2022). I recommend having a separate entrance that also serves as an exit to support the freshman academy students' independence. Additionally, there should be an administrator and counselor, housed in the academy (Honetschlager, 2020). Support staff like administrators and counselors is there to assist the teachers and the students as needed. Participant C1 stated, "We need the most experienced teachers in the freshman academy". I also recommend that each staff member have a minimum of 3 years of experience in education, so they are not trying to master the profession while teaching students who are also learning to maneuver the processes of a new high school. Experience matters when it comes to teaching students who need consistent guidance. Noor et. al. (2020) stated experience is valuable for the learning process, and how teachers can alter behaviors, beliefs, assumptions, and judgments, and change mindsets in students.

2. Secure daily collaboration for best practices, student performance, and goals

A teaming approach provides expertise and experience that contributes to meaningful results (Kittelman et. al., 2021). The teaming model is when the teacher or staff members who teach the students collaborate on the goals of the freshman academy

program (Marx & Goodman, 2019). These goals include student class movement schedules (bells), parental meetings, attendance, behavior, activities, and academics.

Teacher instructional support is important, therefore providing teachers with the resources necessary to successfully help students learn in a new and demanding school environment can help the students feel comfortable. Regarding the challenges that teachers are having, staff members should be meeting daily to discuss instruction, assessments, and goals for the students. Daily collaborative planning is a prototype for enhancing student learning through the shared planning and conveying of educational services (Kelley et. al., 2020). Teacher collaboration occurs when teachers from different subject areas work together to coordinate instruction, communication, and assessment for a common group of freshman students (Elam, 2021). It is important to pay attention to both the teacher team and the school environment to pinpoint specific concerns that should be addressed during these team meetings. Participant B1 stated that it is important to have language support to assist with barriers in learning due to the various languages spoken in the schools. Having the concerns within the academy addressed regularly will ensure that they acknowledge the issues that affect students' learning. Teachers are not taught how to have conversations that focus on student lesson objectives and outcomes, data results, and how to move forward with student learning. Therefore, unless teachers are taught how to process data during their planning time, that time may devolve into a negative sharing space. Effective interdisciplinary teaming and the effects of its impact

on teacher practices and efficacy are important to explore (Depaola, 2022). For teachers to be successful in collaborating on student goals and objectives within the freshman academy, they must practice. Practicing what will be done weekly will allow teachers to become fluent in collaborating, which is a benefit for the student.

De Jong et. al. (2020) stated that teacher collaboration is a critical element of effective professional development. Lipscombe et. al. (2020) stated that both the teacher team and the broader working environment of the school are important, therefore site-based professional development teacher teams should be provided the resources and support needed because the children will receive the input of the school's investment. When teachers collaborate and discuss what students should know, it is easier to address assessment data and create remediation plans for student improvement. Teacher collaboration and professional development activities are core issues of teacher professionalization (Methlagl, 2022). Teachers need to learn new techniques so they can adapt their teaching style to what helps the new generation learn best and this is one goal of professional development

3. Provide professional development on building relationships and community

Freshman academy teachers should provide professional development sessions on the challenges that occur within the academy and on how to build relationships and community within the freshman academy. Professional development can enhance professional learning on topics of collaborating with parents, guardians, and the

community as educational partners (Admiraal et.al., 2021). Parental involvement is a role that school leaders and teachers should promote to assist with student achievement (Admiraal, 2021). Positive communication is always the best way to move forward. At the beginning of the new school year and continuously throughout the year, PD sessions should be offered on teacher collaboration techniques, so teachers are reminded of how to communicate positively with parents/guardians and other community partners (Admiraal, 2021). Furthermore, teachers should then be allowed to practice their dialogue using real student data. Practice allows teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner and reflect on the process (Farrell, 2022). Professional development sessions, modeling appropriate techniques on teacher collaboration, and verbiage should be recorded weekly at all the schools housing a freshman academy and the recordings should be available to other schools with teaming models for viewing and suggestions. Teacher professional development should teach or reinforce skills and teaching styles needed to overcome the challenges that students are facing in the educational setting (Sprott, 2019).

Cell phones are quickly becoming an educational tool across various contexts; however, teachers are limited in incorporating them into daily lessons (Nazari & Xodabande, 2022). Providing professional development sessions that address electronic devices would be a benefit to the teacher and student. The teacher will learn ways to incorporate electronic devices in their teaching style and students will be able to learn on their devices. Allowing students to use their devices for learning is one way of building

relationships and community within the freshman academy. Building relationships with students begins on the first day of class. When students can communicate about the learning process, they feel empowered in the learning environment creating a good student-teacher relationship (Reeve & Shin, 2020)**.**

Encouraging parents to be involved in their child's education is an important role for a teacher (Yuliant et.al., 2022). It is also a good idea to inform parents/guardians about school meetings, parent nights specifically for the freshman academy, and activities that will take place during the school year. Teachers must collaborate with parents to build relationships that support the child (Szelei et. al., 2020). Teachers who work in the freshman academy should contact parents/guardians before the first day of school or within the first week to inform them of who they are, and their expectations. Communication is a good relationship-building technique, especially when it's positive. One participant indicated reaching anyone at students' homes was difficult, and when contact was made, it was rare to see a difference in the students. Consequently, some participants pursued parent contact and support outside traditional phone calls home. Teachers should also ask parents if they would like to volunteer to assist with the classroom, attend field trips, and/or become a member of the parent-teacher organization. One participant indicated reaching anyone at students' homes was difficult, and when contact was made, it was rare to see a difference in the students.

Most participants in the study stated they have a great rapport with students and believe that positive and supportive relationships could determine if a student is successful or not. One participant said that she is a mother figure for the students and enjoys working with them. Another participant stated that once the kids know you care and are not there only for a paycheck, they will start performing better academically. These responses reveal that relationships are needed and important.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the transition occurs between middle school and high school, ninth grade can either prepare young adults for success in this ever-changing world or diminish their dreams and likelihood of graduating high school. Having a support team of teachers and taking classes with like-minded peers who are also new to the environment with goals and dreams makes the transition a little easier. This position paper provided specific details of how the freshman academy can improve daily teacher and peer relationship interactions, continuous teacher training on strategies and accommodations to support the students in the academy, and lastly, collaborative data engagement sessions that will target key objectives for individual educational material to be taught. This position paper was based on data collected from freshman academy teachers and provides three recommendations that can improve the freshman academy and assist with the freshman transition process. First, it is important to evaluate and secure the structure of the academy to ensure its effectiveness. Second, regular collaboration for best practices,

student performance, and goals should be conducted by the academy staff members. Lastly, a routine should be established to ensure professional development sessions on ninth-grade behavior, attendance, teaching, and learning strategies are addressed.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Appendix B: Interview Protocol (adapted from Lizar (2017) and Mosley (2018)

Resarch Questions	Questions
Freshman academy educator's background Information	. How many years have you been teaching? . How many years have you been teaching ninth graders in a freshman academy setting? . Describe your experience working with freshman students? . How would you describe the school prior to the academy's creation?
RQ1: What are freshman academy teacher perceptions on the benefits of 9th-grade student learning in the SESD freshman academies?	. How does your freshman academy prepare ninth graders for their high school experience? . What are the advantages of the ninth-grade academy? . What do you feel makes the freshman academy successful?
RQ2: What are the freshman academy teacher perceptions on the challenges for 9th-grade students currently in the freshman academies?	. Why do you feel some students have difficulty transitioning to high school successfully? . What are the disadvantages of the freshman academy?

	. What changes do teachers in the academy need to make to support the student transition?
RQ 3: What are the freshman academy teachers' perceptions on whether freshman academies are effective in meeting the needs of 9th graders?	. Has relocating first-time ninth-grade students into the freshman academy impacted their behavior, attendance, and social connectedness? . Do you believe the academy is effective in its goal to have students complete their courses and prepare them for the next three years of high school? . What supplemental resources, interventions, or supports do you believe are needed to assist with helping students transition too high successfully?

Appendix C: Complete Coding Table

Theme	Categories in the theme	Codes in those categories	Example quote from the theme
1. Learning in the academy is dependent on the teacher	A, Teacher belief B. Teacher experience	Personal/beliefs Teacher experience	Coming from middle school there is a level of maturity that is now always in middle school. I have taught all levels of high school and it just happened that in the last few years of my career I have been teaching freshman
2. Learning has distinct classrooms practices	A. Instructional support for students B. classroom practices	Academic student support Homogenous learning benefits	We provide language support for students Difference in student learning with teaching only freshman students
3. Teachers report challenges within the freshman academy	A. Teacher challenges B. Student challenges C. Parental support	Academic support (needed from home) Student challenge Cellphones	Attendance is not good; I call homes and I do home visits. As a result, I see about 10% change in the students of the homes I call. Freshmen may be

		Parental support (needed)	intimated when going to lunch or electives with upperclassman Cell phones are a big problem If parents and teachers were on the same page it would help students academically and behaviorally
4. Teachers have concerns about the freshman academy model.	A. Instructional support Professional Development B. Teachers' personal feelings affect learning	Instructional support Teachers' personal feelings affect learning.	Teachers are not familiar with the term FA (teacher) A lot of issues plague our kids effect learning
5. There are many advantages to the freshman academy model	A. Benefit of the Structure B. Relationships formed within the academy	Learning Environment social/emotional relationship with peers	Keeping the freshman together academically helps with classroom management Freshman students

			are in a specific area with peers and teachers it is a small community We have a small community of teachers and students
6. Teachers build relationship that foster learning.	A. Social/Emotional Environment B. teacher/student rapport	Teacher rapport Trust	I have a great relationship with my students