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Examining Administrator Perceptions on the Success of a Ninth Grade Transition Model

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

Examining Administrator Perceptions on the Success of a Ninth Grade Transition Model

by

Felicia R. Walker

MEd, Charleston Southern University, 2000

BS, South Carolina State University, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

January 2016

Abstract

Ninth grade students are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school than are other grade-level populations. Factors such as a lack of academic preparedness, social and developmental changes, and the decline of parental support often result in 9th grade students falling behind in their academic work. Using holistic education as the conceptual framework, the goal of this intrinsic case study was to explore the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that a 9th grade transition program has on the 9th grade retention and dropout rate of a high school located in the southeastern United States. The features of the 9th grade transition program (designated personnel, classes, location, and resources) were analyzed. Data collection occurred by a review of the school's evaluation reports and one-on-one interviews using a purposeful sample with 4 school and district office administrators. Thematic analysis of data followed an open coding process to identify categories and themes. The findings indicated that the 9th grade transition program positively impacted student and school performance and revealed inconsistencies in the transition programs and services among the 3 high schools within the school district. The resulting project was a policy recommendation that advocates for the use of standard 9th grade best practices. This study contributes to positive social change through the implementation of a best practice policy recommendation, intended to reduce 9the grade retention and dropout rates of the students within the school district.

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Dedication

This project study is dedicated to the memory of my lost loved ones and to my two aunts who never allowed me to endure their deaths alone. To my beloved grandmother, Luvern Dowling Nimmons; your support, love, prayers, and belief in me have always fueled my desire to win and be successful. I never wanted to let you down, and during the most difficult times of my doctoral journey, the memory that I have of you was the lamp beneath my feet. To my mother, Vernetha Walker, my sister, Jenelle, and my Aunt Gloria, the memories that I have of you and your struggles help me to find the strength to make it through some of my most difficult days and to always be grateful. To my Aunt Fanni and my Aunt Catherine, who love me as your own, thank you for being my constant support system and for helping overcome the perpetual feeling of being a motherless child.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Ninth grade transition consists of helping first-time ninth grade students to successfully acclimate to the demands of high school. The ninth grade year is often considered the most critical year in high school due to increased academic rigor, graduation requirements, and new social pressures accompanied with poor middle school preparation and reduced family support (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The increased academic demands often result in many ninth grade students falling behind and eventually dropping out of school (Blount, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Styron & Peasant, 2010). Students failing to meet the new demands, struggle academically resulting in retention, frequent discipline referrals, and social conflicts with peers that become repeated incidents throughout the students' high school tenure.

Attention to ninth grade transition and data collection on ninth grade retention and dropout rates began after national reports analyzed national graduation and dropout rates among high schools. Reports such as *A Nation at Risk* from the U. S. National Center on Excellence in Education (NCEE, 1983) scrutinized the U.S. educational system as a failing system and recommended federal reforms for improvement. Federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) act required state and local educational entities to provide reform strategies aimed at improving the graduation and dropout rates through federal accountability mandates. Nationally, the retention rate among ninth grade students continues to be higher than any other grade level, and many of these students

who are retained eventually do not return to school; thus, they become high school dropouts (Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2008).

Reform efforts such as ninth grade transition programs help first time ninth grade students meet the academic, social, and behavioral expectations of the high school environment by providing classes, strategies, efforts, and dedicated personnel that work as a team to meet the needs of ninth grade students. Many high schools, however, fail to use any ninth grade transition reform effort despite the data that suggest a growing national problem among ninth grade students (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009). As a result of the absence of 9th grade transition programs, ninth grade students generally have higher rates of retention than any other grade level and schools have higher dropout rates than schools with 9th grade transition programs.

Definition of the Problem

Ninth grade students fail at a higher rate than any other grade level. Ninth grade students have higher rates of retention due to typical problems associated with the transition from middle school to high school (Blount, 2012; Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). Compounding the retention problem, ninth grade students who are retained also face the likelihood of becoming dropouts. Neild (2009) found that 30% of the nation's dropouts were retained repeatedly in the ninth grade. Bornshuer et al. (2011) also found that ninth grade students who were retained were 6 times more likely not to graduate on time and many ultimately became dropouts. The ninth grade problem parallels a continuous cycle of failure that leads to the

student becoming a high school dropout. Repeated failure and retention fosters growing frustrations that continues until the student is old enough to dropout of school

The absence of ninth grade transition programs in school districts within the United States suggest that ninth grade students are dropping out of high school before being given an opportunity to develop marketable skills or an educational background. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), for the 2010-11 academic year, approximately 80% of public high school students graduated on time with a regular high school diploma, leaving 20% as dropouts. These statistics include a 73.2% graduation rate improvement that was reported for the 2005-2006 academic year; however, the graduation statistic was a decline from the graduation rate of 86.5% for the 2000-01 academic year (U. S. Department of Education, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The event dropout rate (EDR) for 16-to 24-year-olds for the 2010-11 academic year represents approximately 3 million dropouts nationally.

Lack of academic progress often results in repeated failure and retention. Wheelock and Miao (2005) attributed the decline in the graduation rate and the large number of national dropouts to a national ninth grade enrollment bulge. The enrollment bulge is often a direct result of large numbers of retained ninth grade students, combined with newly matriculated ninth grade students, and ninth grade transition issues such as poor academic preparedness, a lack of school connectedness, and reduced family support (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). The enrollment bulge often results in a cycle of retention in the ninth grade that ultimately leads to the growing number of dropouts (Wheelock &

Miao, 2005). The ninth grade bulge is evident with a review of data on retention and dropout statistics and could be used as the catalyst for school improvement efforts.

Ninth grade transition programs are defined as ninth grade specific classes, strategies, and efforts used by schools to ease the transition of eighth grade students into high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Ninth grade transition programs help first-time ninth grade students meet the academic, social, and behavioral expectations of the high school environment; however, few researchers have discussed the impact that the programs have on ninth grade students and overall school performance. Most of the literature related to ninth grade transition, discuss the problems associated with ninth grade students (poor grades and rates of dropout, discipline, and graduation), ninth grade transition models, or essential components of ninth grade transition programs (Blount, 2012; Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Cushman, 2006; Emmett & McGee, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). This study may help to fill the void within the literature on examining the impact of ninth grade transition programs from an administrator perspective.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

The setting in which the study took place (School A) is a middle class, suburban high school that has an average student population of 1,579 students and has a dedicated ninth grade transition program called the Ninth Grade Academy. The Ninth Grade Academy addresses comparative student retention and dropout problems identified in

national reports as well as within the school and district. School A has an average retention rate of 5% and an average dropout rate of 3.6% (from 2009-2013). Based on the actual statistics for School A, the majority of dropouts occur in the ninth grade (South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card [SCDE], 2013).

Schools with ninth grade transition programs, such as the Ninth Grade Academy, often provide a separated learning environment with teaching teams similar to the teams that commonly operate within middle schools and an educational system based on strategies that use the holistic educational concept (academic, social, mental, and behavioral supports; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2008). Holistic education, the conceptual framework for this study, includes a focus on educating the whole child including the academic, social, mental, and moral aspects of the student. The teaching teams are given flexibility to provide personalized instruction based on the needs of the students (Habeeb, 2013). The Ninth Grade Academy at School A is housed within a separate area of the high school and houses the team of dedicated ninth grade teachers, counselors, and other personnel to meet the needs of the ninth grade students based on the holistic educational concept (School Principal, personal communication, October 11, 2005).

School A has shown improvement with declining dropout and retention rates and graduation rates over the past 5 years; however, the need for continued improvement continues to exist. According to present statistics, there is a 3.1% reduction in the retention rate and a .9% reduction in the dropout rate. The 5-year dropout and retention trend data for School A is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

School A Dropout and Retention Trend Data

School Year	Dropout Rate	Retention Rate
2013-2014	2.6%	2.8%
2012-2013	3.9%	5.7%
2011-2012	5.5%	6.9%
2010-2011	2.5%	5.3%
2009-2010	3.5%	5.9%

Note. This table was developed from "South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card" (SCDE, 2009; SCDE, 2010; SCDE, 2011; SCDE, 2012, and SCDE, 2013).

The dropout and retention rate at School A are comparable to the statistical data for South Carolina, the state where School A is located. During the 2011-12 school year, there were almost a quarter million public high school students in South Carolina (author, year). Of the nearly quarter million students, 28.4% were categorized as ninth grade students (SCDE, 2012). Approximately 2.5% of the nearly quarter million students were dropouts, and of this number, approximately 1,350 students were considered to be ninth grade students (SCDE, 2012). The ninth grade dropout count represents 26% of the total percentage of dropouts. Comparatively, the graduation rate within the school district for School A (School District A) also showed continuous improvement within a 5-year period as the graduation rate improved from 74.7% to 83.3% from 2009-2013; however, the average number of dropouts (242) for the 5-year period is still concerning (SCDE, 2009; SCDE, 2010; SCDE, 2011; SCDE, 2012; SCDE, 2013). Two hundred and forty two high school dropouts is a considerable number of students for the small community of School District A and may have negative implications due to their lack of education and employability skills.

For the 2012-13 academic year, the graduation rate for South Carolina improved to 77.5%; this statistic was an improvement from the graduation rate of 73.6 % for the 2011-12 academic year (SCDE, 2013). Even though the graduation rate shows continuous, yearly improvement, the state still ranks with the five lowest states in the nation for graduation rates (Aud et al., 2013). Table 2, 3, and 4 show 5 years of trend data for the 2007-08 academic year through the 2011-12 academic year for the state of South Carolina. Table 2 shows the state's dropout statistics by grade level, and Table 3 shows

the state's total dropout statistics with the percentage totals for all grade levels. The

dropout statistics shown in Tables 2 and 3 adversely affect the graduation rates shown in

Table 4.

Table 2

Grade Level Dropout Counts Trend Data

Grade Level	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
9th	2342	2085	1691	1539	1350
10th	2325	1970	1810	1647	1393
11th	1897	1713	1545	1458	1291
12th	1468	1309	1219	1256	1198

Note. This table was developed from "South Carolina Dropout Numbers Decline" data (SCDE, 2013).

Table 2 shows the number of dropouts in the state of South Carolina for each grade level

for 5 years beginning with the 2007-2008 school year through the 2011-2012 school year.

For the 2007-2008 school year, there were more ninth grade dropouts than any other

grade level. By the 2011-2012 school year, the number of dropouts in the ninth grade

continued to be higher than the number of dropouts in the 11th and 12th grade, and only

slightly lower than the number of dropouts in the 10th grade.

Table 3

Dropout Rate Trend Data

School Year	Dropout Count	Dropout Percentage
2011-12	5232	2.5
2010-11	5900	2.8
2009-10	6265	2.9
2008-09	7077	3.4
2007-08	8032	3.9

Note. This table was developed from "South Carolina Dropout Numbers Decline" data (SCDE, 2013).

Table 3 shows the total number and percentage of dropouts in the state of South Carolina based on a span of 5 years. For the 2007-2008 school year, the total number of dropouts and percentage rate were 8032 or 3.9%. Both statistical categories showed improvement improving to 5232 or 2.5% by the 2011-2012 school year.

Table 4

Graduation Rate Trend Data

School Year	Graduation Rate
2012-13	77.5%
2011-12	74.9%
2010-11	73.65
2009-10	72%
2008-09	73.7%
2007-08	74.9%

Note. This table was developed from the "2012 Statewide Graduation Rates" report and the "High School Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate" report (SCDE, 2012 and SCDE, 2013).

Table 4 displays the 5-year graduation rate for the state of South Carolina. The

graduation rate improved from 74.9% for the 2007-2008 school year to 77.5% for the

2012-2013 school year.

   This project study included administrators of School A (the building principal, the

ninth grade assistant principal, and one other assistant principal) and the executive

director over K-12 instruction from the district office. The selected administrators are

directly responsible for the Ninth Grade Academy. School A is the only high school

within School District A that uses an actual ninth grade transition model. School District

A consists of three high schools; thus, the study has implications for positive social

change within the entire district.

This study was used to develop a policy of best practice with the intent of standardizing ninth grade transition programs and strategies in School District A, thus meeting the needs of all students locally. This study may also contribute to the existing body of literature on the effectiveness of ninth grade transition programs by providing the perceptions of leadership of an existing program. Case study methodology was used as I sought to provide a more in-depth understanding of the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy than statistical data may imply. The findings were shared with the school and district office administrators of School District A as described, by Langenkamp (2010), in respect to the district's role in ninth grade transition.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The ninth grade retention and dropout problems in high school are a national issue as opposed to an isolated issue for School A and the state of South Carolina. Neild (2009) emphasized the evidence collected from the Common Core of Data (CCD), a federal database of public school information, to determine that the transition to high school is a place where students across the U. S. are getting "stuck" (p. 541). The study explained the prevalence of ninth grade students failing and eventually dropping out of school. The likely causes of this phenomenon include developmental changes, the transition from a smaller school to a larger school, and inadequate academic preparation (Neild, 2009). Blount (2012) associated higher dropout rates among ninth graders to social and academic changes. Jackson and Schulenberg (2013) attributed greater ninth grade difficulty, retention, and dropout rates to a more demanding curriculum, more complex social requirements, more freedom, and increased stress due to life changes.

McCallumore and Sparapani attributed higher dropout and retention rates among ninth grade students to increased social and academic demands and identified the higher rates as a growing national problem McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) examined national ninth grade statistics and found that ninth grade students typically have the lowest grade point averages, the majority of failing grades, and the highest number of discipline referrals. Pietarien, Pyhalto, and Soini (2010) examined the vertical and horizontal approach to ninth grade transitions in Finland and drew attention to the possibility that ninth grade transition problems exists in other countries as well. Scholars have validated the prevalence of difficulties associated with ninth grade transition and have identified likely causes (Blount, 2012; Jackson & Schulenburg, 2013; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2010; Pietarien et al., 2010).

Some researchers use case study research to highlight individual high schools, teachers, and freshmen student experiences of ninth grade transition issues that often results in increased ninth grade retention and dropout rates. Beland (2014) referred to the transition of middle adolescent students into high school as a developmental choke point that is associated with increased academic rigor, fewer personal and emotional supports, and a more impersonal school environment. Beland also discussed the historical results of this transition that included high rates of ninth grade retention and lower grades that often lead to less motivation and poor attitudes about school. Frank (2011) discussed the problem of ninth graders falling through the cracks of a suburban high school in Pennsylvania. Frank attributed the ninth grade problems and high retention rate to the lack of academic supports, absence of teaming strategies by the teachers, dwindling

parental support, and the large environment of the high school setting as the main barriers that prevent ninth graders from succeeding. Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) used a phenomenological study of 16 student experiences to explain the challenges faced by ninth grade students as they transition into high school. From their study, Ganeson and Ehrich found that ninth grade students experienced curricular and academic challenges due to the increased rigor, physical challenges of attending a larger school, and organizational challenges due to the complexity of earning high school credits needed to graduate and for attending college as well as problems adjusting to the social structure of students among different grade levels. Research indicates that the ninth grade problem is caused by several factors such as the lack of academic preparedness, social maturity, unfamiliar school environments, and reduced parental involvement (Blount, 2012; Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). Repeated retention and dropout occurrences are often resulting outcomes.

Retention Rates

Scholars also emphasize the prevalence of ninth grade issues positively correlating to higher rates of ninth grade retention and dropouts (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) referred to the ninth grade year as the "make or break year" (p. 447). McCallumore and Sparapani associated the ninth grade with higher enrollments due to higher retention rates and found that many of the ninth graders who are retained eventually become dropouts. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) discussed the ninth grade

problems resulting in higher rates of course failure, discipline and behavioral problems and students failing to be promoted and ultimately dropping out before their 10th grade school year. Gray, Sable, Dalton, and Sietsema (2006) found that in high schools with large low-income students, almost 40% of students drop out after reaching the ninth grade after several attempts to be promoted. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) used a quantitative comparative analysis and found a statistically significant relationship between ninth grade retention and on-time graduation. Almost 86% of the ninth grade students within the study who were retained did not graduate on time (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). For this study, I attempted to provide an understanding of the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate with respect to the common ninth grade issues described within the professional literature.

Definitions

For the purpose of this research study, the following terms will apply:

Academic rigor: Academic rigor refers to instruction or course work that is academically and intellectually challenging (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Average freshman graduation rate (AFGR): Average freshman graduation rate is a percentage indicator that uses aggregated counts of students by grade and the overall diploma count that provides a 4-year on-time graduation percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

At-risk student: At-risk students demonstrate academic performance that is significantly below average and below their grade level (Kayler & Sherman, 2009).

Dropout rate: Dropout rate is the number or percentage of students who fail to earn a diploma or complete the requirements for the grade equivalent certificate or general educational development (GED) within in 4 consecutive years after enrolling in the ninth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Event dropout rate (EVR): The event dropout rate is the yearly number or percentage of students who leave school without earning a diploma or GED (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Feeder middle school: A feeder middle school is the middle school from which students are drawn from for their ninth grade year in high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; McIntosh & White, 2006).

General educational development (GED): GED refers to state approved educational programs and assessments used to earn a high school equivalency credential (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Graduation rate: Graduation rate is the percentage of students that is calculated by dividing the number of graduates by the sum of dropouts for Grades 9 through 12 plus the number of graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Holistic education: Holistic education refers to the educational practice of educating the student as a whole and includes students' academic, mental, behavioral, social, and spiritual needs (Forbes, 2012).

Ninth grade academy: A ninth grade academy refers to a specific team of teachers and units or houses of the school for first time ninth grade students (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

Ninth grade transition program: A ninth grade transition program is a specialized school program with classes, strategies, and efforts used by schools to ease the transition of eighth grade students into high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Smaller learning community: A smaller learning community is a group of students housed together based on themes, principles and practices, and grade levels and is commonly referred to as a school within a school (Davis, Chang, Andrzewski, & Poirier, 2010).

Status dropout rate (SDR): The status dropout rate is the number or percentage of students age 16-24 who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a diploma or GED (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Significance

The dropout, retention, and graduation rates at School A indicate significant improvement within the last 5 years. School A is the only school within School District A with a dedicated ninth grade transition program. While most of the literature pertaining to the ninth grade focuses on ninth grade student problems and reform efforts such as transition programs, the literature is void of explanations or discussions on the impact of ninth grade transition programs. This study may be used to fill the void within the literature as I sought to understand the perceptions of school and district administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on reducing the ninth grade retention rate and the high school dropout rate of School A. The graduation and dropout rate statistics for School A are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

School A Graduation and Dropout Rate

School Year	Graduation Rate	Dropout Rate
2013	84.1%	2.6%
2012	85%	3.9%
2011	72.7%	5.5%
2010	72.6%	2.5%
2009	74.3%	3.5%

Note. This table was developed from South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card" data (SCDE, 2009; SCDE, 2010; SCDE, 2011; SCDE, 2012, and SCDE, 2013).

As displayed in Table 5, the graduation rate improved from 74.3% to 84.1%, and the dropout rate improved from 3.5% to 2.6% respectively. The improvements at School A are comparative to the improvements seen in national statistics. Table 6 displays 5-year increments of improvements of the national AFGR and SDR.

Table 6

National Graduation and Dropout Rate

School Year	Graduation Rate	Dropout Rate
2010-11	80%	7%
2005-06	73.2%	9.4%
2000-01	86.5%	10.7%
1995-96	85.3%	11.1%

Note. This table was developed from *AFGR* and *SDR* NCES data (USDE, 2014).

Table 6 displays the national graduation and dropout rate for 5 years with 5-year increments of time. The graduation rate slightly declined from 85.3% for the 1995-1996 school year to 80% for the 2010-11 school year. The dropout rate improved from 11.1% to 7% for the 2007-2008 school year to the 2010-2011 school year.

Guiding/Research Question

This study was used to understand the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of students. An intrinsic, case study methodology was used to gather the data. Using holistic education as the conceptual guide for this study, the strategies used within the Ninth Grade Academy were also examined. The research questions that guided this study are

RQ1: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the dropout rate of high school students?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators of how the Ninth Grade Academy may be affecting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate from a holistic approach to educating students?

RQ4: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on what could be added to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase the impact that the program may have on ninth grade retention and dropout rates?

The study of the administrator perceptions provided insight as to how similar transition programs ease the transition of ninth grade students into high school and assisted in the development of a policy of best practice ninth grade transition programs and strategies used throughout the school district.

Review of the Literature

This section provides an overview of problems associated with the ninth grade, ninth grade transition reform efforts, and what is being used to help ease the transition of ninth grade students into high school. To obtain the most recent and relevant, peer-reviewed articles, I searched the Walden University Library and other databases using key search terms such as *ninth grade transition, academies, ninth grade retention,* and *smaller learning communities*. From this search of the literature, I found suggested programs, strategies, and smaller learning communities that are being used locally and nationally to help ninth grade students overcome common ninth grade problems and to successfully acclimate into high school.

The suggested reform efforts that were found during my search of the related literature focused on improving the transition of ninth grade students into high school from a holistic approach instead of focusing only on academics. Many ninth grade transition programs use concepts involved with the holistic education conceptual framework that is defined as measures and strategies used to educate the whole child (Forbes, 2012). The holistic approach to education is being used to reform the failing educational system by using a student-centered approach to providing students with

academic, social, and total development skills (Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, & Seebaluck, 2012).

Ninth grade transition programs assimilate the conceptual framework of holistic education by providing flexible scheduling and planning; extra resources; specialized teachers and other personnel; and integrated, personalized instructional methods. The holistic concept is being used to prepare students academically, socially, mentally, morally, and in all other aspects for total human development to ensure the success of first-time high school students. Kayler and Sherman (2009) referred to the holistic approach as the "it takes a village" (p. 437) concept as it also includes family support with the school system of specialized teachers and other relevant personnel. For this research study, I examined the administrators' perception of the Ninth Grade Academy based on the holistic approach to educating ninth grade students. Holistic education was also used as a guide as themes developed during data collection and analysis.

Ninth Grade Problems

The ninth grade year is considered to be the most critical year as a predictive indicator for the possibility of becoming a high school dropout (Blount, 2012). Habeeb (2012) explained the "freshman problem" (p. 18) common among ninth grade students across the United States resulting in the highest rates of truancy, discipline referrals, failures, and retention. The Education Partnership Inc. (EPI, 2010) associated the ninth grade dropout risk with the following ninth grade issues:

- A decline in academic achievement from middle to high school

- An increase in behavioral problems resulting in suspension or expulsion

- Inability to manage time and stay on track

- Limited social skills

- Increase in social problems and peer relationships that overshadow academic concerns.

Additionally, the EPI (2010) explained that the problems associated with ninth grade students impact the decision to drop out of high school. Students experiencing ninth grade problems can become overwhelmed and view dropping out of school as an easier, alternative route, thus ninth grade issues have the potential to negatively impact ninth grade retention and high school dropout rates.

Ninth Grade Retention and the Impact on Dropout Rates

Dropping out of school can have long-lasting negative implications for students, schools, school districts, states, and the nation. Neild (2009) discussed the correlation between students dropping out of high school and lower salary wages, long periods of unemployment, and the increase in the likelihood of incarceration. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) discussed several implications of ninth grade retention and included statistics from juvenile courts that indicate that dropouts are more likely to engage in criminal activity due to their lack of education and employability skills. Leckrone and Griffith (2006) explained that students who are retained and students who drop out increase the educational tax expenses for schools, districts, states, and the nation. Martin (2011) found grade retention to have a correlation to disruptive classroom behavior, poor academic performance, and to be a predictor of school dropouts. The South Carolina State Superintendent of Education correlated South Carolina's economic prosperity with the

state's graduation rate and explained that the long-term economic growth depends on high schools improving their graduation rate SCDE (2013). Students who decide to stay in school increase the probability of acquiring a high school diploma and employable skills, thus improving their school's graduation rate and the state's economic prosperity.

Suggested Reform Programs

It is important to note the suggestions and recommendations from the related literature that are being used to resolve the high rate of ninth grade retention and high school dropouts. Many educational reform efforts designed to improve graduation rates and reduce dropout rates are initiated by state and federal regulations. Federal legislation from NCLB (2002); specifically Title V, Part D and the revised Subpart 4 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965); encouraged the use of smaller learning communities as a means of boosting student achievement (NCLB, 2002). The smaller learning community concept (with the use of designated strategies, interventions, and personnel) was adopted to address the needs of ninth grade students as researchers identified factors affecting the graduation and dropout rates of high schools that begin with issues starting in the ninth grade school year (Blount, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Styron & Peasant, 2010).

Ninth grade programs such as ninth grade academies use the smaller learning community concept as a reform effort that specifically targets ninth grade students. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) believed formal ninth grade transition programs, such as ninth grade academies, might ease the transition from middle school to high school by better preparing and equipping first-time freshmen students to meet the new

challenges of the high school environment. Styron and Peasant (2010) recommended the use of freshmen academies for improving the academic achievements of ninth grade students, particularly among African American students. Neild (2009) highlighted the features of two comprehensive reform models personalizing the school environment with interdisciplinary teams and the use of specialized training for ninth grade teachers to meet the academic, social, and behavioral needs of ninth grade students. Emmett and McGee (2012) concluded that freshmen academies are effective means of transitioning middle school students into high school due to academies using teachers and leaders that focus on identifying the needs of ninth graders and provide a supportive, stable environment. Abbott and Fisher (2012) concluded that intervention strategies such as middle and high school collaboration, summer orientation, mentoring, academic support, smaller classes, and the use of personalized learning environments were also effective means of helping ninth grade students successfully transition into high school. Ninth grade programs use grade specific instruction, strategies and interventions, personnel, and environments to support and help students acclimate to the demands of the ninth grade. In the absence of actual programs, schools also use individual strategies to help ninth grade students adjust to high schools.

Smaller Learning Communities

Smaller learning communities (SLC) are a specific type of program recommended for ninth grade and high school reform efforts. The US Department of Education (2001) defined SLCs as structures within large high schools that group students into smaller groups based on themes, strategies, or grades. SLCs are often referred to as schools

within a school as the groups are often independent, operational units. Ninth grade academies and other forms of ninth grade transition programs often operate as a SLC. Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, and Poirier (2010) found that SLCs such as ninth grade academies positively correlate to student engagement and success with respect to students' behavioral, relational, and cognitive experiences in high school. Legters and Balfanz (2010) also identified comprehensive whole school reform efforts, such as the use of SLCs and ninth grade transition programs that should be used to create personalized, flexible, and responsive approaches to students' needs.

Ninth grade transition programs are often considered as SLCs that consist of an interconnected system of people, courses, and services. Often referred to as a community of care, the interconnected system may include personalized instruction, study skills training, orientation programs, family outreach, mentoring, remediation strategies, designated halls or buildings, and dedicated faculty members (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Jackson & Schulenberg, 2013; Somers, Owens, & Pililawsky, 2009; Stryon & Peasant, 2010). All of these program strategies are consistent with the research by Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) who recommended a ninth grade transition program and curriculum, academic support and intervention, programs that promote school connectedness, and a "school within a school" (p. 72) structure for ninth grade students.

Suggested Stand-Alone Strategies

In contrast to actual transition programs such as SLCs or academies, the individual or stand-alone interventions maintain consistent characteristics. Ellerbrock and

Kiefer (2010) examined how high schools can establish ninth grade communities of care by any of the various strategies for ninth grade transitions that incorporate smaller learning communities, supportive teachers, or a curriculum that focuses on academic and life skills. McIntosh and White (2006) determined that freshman paths to success should include a caring environment, additional academic intervention, transition meetings with parents, and collaboration with feeder middle schools. Smith, Akos, Sungtaek, and Wiley (2008) suggested appropriate interventions for freshmen that should include middle and high school collaboration, parental involvement and communication, academic support, and peer mentoring with guidance support. Fulk (2003) emphasized solutions to freshmen transition issues that include expanded collaboration with middle schools, student mentoring, summer orientation, smaller classes, and specialized training for teachers. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) claimed that middle school educators need to be included with ninth grade transition efforts through the creation of partnerships between feeder middle schools and the high school. Blount (2012) advised high school guidance counselors to work with school administrators to create transition programs that reduce the anxiety of first-time ninth grade students by guiding freshmen through the curriculum and program procedures and by providing academic, behavioral, and social advising. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) concluded that high school programs that use personalized instruction, interdisciplinary teaming, and mentoring minimize the risk of ninth grade retention and increase the likelihood of on-time graduation. Dynarski et al. (2008) provided recommendations for ninth grade transition that were included within the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) that identified high risk students and assigned mentors and

provided academic and enrichment support, programs for behavioral and social skills, personalized learning environments, and rigorous and relevant instruction. Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, and Smith (2000) analyzed the transition of low income, urban African American freshmen and found that parental communication, peer tutoring, mentoring, additional academic support, and guidance resulted in fewer students being retained. Additionally, the Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast (2009) discussed how intervention procedures and strategies used within current ninth grade transition programs demonstrate positive results in terms of decreasing ninth grade retention and dropout rates. Overall, researchers discussing ninth grade transition programs described ninth grade academic, behavioral, and social programs provided by teachers, counselors, and related educational professionals.

Strategies that involve and use middle school concepts and are initiated during the students' eighth grade year are also suggested. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) found that the middle school concept of teaming used on the high school level with flexible scheduling, shared teacher planning, and specialized activities promotes school connectedness, thus building a school environment that fosters ninth grade success. Letrello and Miles (2003) recommended middle and high school collaboration, ninth grade transition teams, extra academic support, and programs that promoted school involvement to ease the transition for students with and without learning disabilities. Cushman (2006) suggested providing experiences that bridge the gap between the eighth and ninth grade school year, using a separated educational setting for all ninth grade students, using mentoring and advisory groups, incorporating a ninth grade orientation

class, and providing additional academic support in order to promote ninth grade success. Collaboration with feeder middle schools, the continued use of middle school teaming, and other integrated middle school concepts can provide familiar consistency that eases the transition into high school. Despite the encouragement to use academies, SLCs or transition strategies, many schools nationwide fail to use any form of ninth grade transition effort.

With the goal of making large high schools smaller, providing first time high school students with the people and resources needed for promotion, and ultimately easing the transition from middle to high school, ninth grade transition programs represent a grade-specific effort to combat the dropout crisis. Although ninth grade transition programs evolved from legislation aimed at improving high schools, ninth grade transition programs are not mandated reform strategies (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Despite data on ninth grade dropout rates, the decision to use this high school reform effort is typically a district- or school-derived decision.

Implications

The information obtained from this study was shared with the school and district office administrators for School A and was used in the development of a best practice policy that recommends standardizing ninth grade transition programs and strategies throughout School District A. The study was also beneficial to School District A as it provided the opportunity for reflection on current ninth grade transition and school reform efforts. Although the data from the study is specific to the local school and school district, the findings may help to fill the void within the literature on the impact of ninth

grade transition programs on student and school performance based on the perception of school leaders.

Summary

Ninth grade transition programs provide dedicated personnel, resources, classes, and strategies within a smaller community of a larger high school. The programs are used to ease the transition of middle school students to high school with the hope of increasing the promotion and success of ninth grade students. Scholars have examined problems associated with the ninth grade, suggested reform strategies, and specific ninth grade transition programs. Researchers often recommended the use of ninth grade programs (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Fore & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast, 2009), but the literature is void of discussions on the impact that ninth grade transition efforts have on student and school performance from an administrative perspective.

An intrinsic case study was used to examine the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of School A. School A is the only high school within School District A that has a designated ninth grade transition program. The understanding of the school leaders' perceptions was used to identify essential transition characteristics and strategies, both positive and negative, of this ninth grade transition program, may be used to fill the void within the literature. The findings from the study were used in the development of a policy recommendation that attempts to standardize the ninth grade transition program and strategies among all of the high schools within the district.

In Section 2, I explain the procedures and processes that were used for the study. I outline the research design, the participants, ethical considerations, data collection, instrumentation, and analysis. The role of the researcher and the limitations of the study are also discussed.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In Section 2, I explain the methodology and research design that was used for this study. In this section, I also provide an overview of the study that includes the participants, ethical considerations, data collection, and data analysis. Section 2 will conclude with an explanation of the assumptions, limitations, scope, delimitations, and the discussion of the findings.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of students within School A, a middle class, suburban high school located in the southeastern United States. The impact of the Ninth Grade Academy was examined based on the perceptions of school and district office administrators. The research questions that guided this study are

RQ1: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the dropout rate of high school students?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators of how the Ninth Grade Academy may be affecting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate from a holistic approach to educating students?

RQ4: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on what could be added to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase the impact that the program may have on ninth grade retention and dropout rates?

Research Design and Approach

An intrinsic case study approach was appropriate to explain the perception of school and district office school leaders on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students and the dropout rate at School A. Yin (2014) explained that the decision to use the case study design should be based on the researcher's intent to explain how or why a phenomenon works. Intrinsic case study designs are used when the case (leadership of the Ninth Grade Academy) is being studied (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, Yin (2014) explained that the study of the case is important if the research can result in a significant contribution to the body of knowledge. I selected an intrinsic case study approach because of the intent to give an explanation of the school and district office administrators' perception.

The intrinsic case study (qualitative) approach consisted of interviewing school and district office administrators and reviewing the school's evaluation reports for information pertaining to the Ninth Grade Academy. I used the information that was collected from the interviews and the review of the evaluation reports to triangulate and corroborate the information obtained from the multiple participants and data sources. The corroboration of multiple sources of evidence helped me to develop themes of emerging findings and consistent categories of inquiry as explained by Yin (2014).

Alternative methods were considered for this study. In quantitative methodology, a researcher seeks to test a hypothesis or hypotheses in order to explain the views of a large sample that is representative of the general population (Creswell, 2012). A mixed-method approach would have required the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in which the hypothesis would be tested (quantitative) and followed up with more detailed information to explain the quantitative data (qualitative) (Creswell, 2012). It was my intent to focus on the perceptions of the administrators within an established ninth grade program; therefore, I did not use a hypothesis and did not use a large sample for generalization; thus, the quantitative and mixed-method methodologies were not appropriate applications of inquiry.

Other qualitative designs such as phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory were not appropriate for the intentions of this study. Creswell (2009) explained that phenomenological research is used to explain a phenomenon as described by the lived experiences of the participants. Ethnography is a strategy in which the researcher studies and explains the lived experiences of cultural groups within natural settings, and grounded theory research is used to develop a theory based or grounded within the views of the participants (Creswell, 2009). Considering that the purpose of this study involved examining a case, the use of an intrinsic case study approach aligned most appropriately with my research questions as it allowed me to examine administrator perceptions on the impact of the strategies and processes of the Ninth Grade Academy on ninth grade retention and the dropout rate.

Participants

Gaining Access to the Participants

Gaining access to the participants for this study required three levels of consent. The first level of consent consisted of acquiring permission to conduct the study from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Permission from the IRB was required to ensure that my research plan met the ethical standards of Walden University and adhered to U.S. Federal regulations (Walden University IRB for Ethical Standards in Research, 2014). Specifically, the IRB assures that there is informed consent, equitable procedures, minimized and reasonable risks, and that the potential benefits of the research outweighs the potential risks (Walden University IRB for Ethical Standards in Research, 2014; Walden University Approval #05-22-15-0345799, Expiration: May 21, 2016). I submitted an application to the IRB that outlined the research questions, data collection tools, data points, data source, the plan for data analysis, participants, potential concerns, and the plan to share the findings of the study. The process and scope of the plan provided the IRB an explanation of how data would be collected and analyzed and the methods that would be used to protect the participants.

The second level of consent consisted of seeking permission to conduct the study from the superintendent of School District A. I provided the superintendent a formal introduction and request to conduct this project study that outlined the purpose, proposed procedures, goals, and the benefits that the study would provide (see Appendix A). The request included my intent to interview administrators within the district, as well as my intent to review and reference the evaluation reports for School A. I also explained my

role as the researcher and as a previous school administrator within the district. The

interview questions that I used were also provided to ensure disclosure and transparency

(see Appendix B).

The third level of consent consisted of acquiring permission from the proposed

participants. I sought consent to interview the principal and assistant principals of School

A, as well as the director over K-12 instruction for School District A. All of the selected

participants received an e-mail that provided an explanation of the role and the

responsibilities of the researcher. The e-mail explained that responding to the e-mail with

"I consent" indicated their willingness to participate (see Appendix C). Participants were

also permitted to reply with their intention to decline participation. The e-mail also

included an attachment of additional information that included the following suggestions

from Creswell (2009; Appendix D):

- Researcher information (including my previous role as an administrator within the district

- My university

- Explanation of participant selection

- Research purpose

- Research benefits

- Participant involvement (how the data will be collected)

- Potential risk to participants

- Limitation of confidentiality (confidentiality to the best of my ability due to the nature of the study site and responsibility of being a mandated reporter)

- Participant right to decline or withdraw at any time. (p. 89)

The elements of providing informed consent are consistent with the ethical approach to fieldwork discussed by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Creswell (2012), and Merriam (2009). According to Creswell, even if there are administrators who decline to participate the sample size would still be appropriate for the case study design. Case study designs can consist of using a single individual or several individuals as the intent is on examining the case (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Ultimately, four out of the six selected participants agreed to participate in the study.

Protection of the Participants

For the study, I followed the ethical principles for conducting research involving human participants that takes into consideration the Belmont Report (1979) and the Walden University's IRB Guide for Archival Researchers and the Research Ethics for Educational Settings. The Belmont Report established three basic ethical principles that include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Institute of Health [NIH], n.d.). Additionally, Walden's IRB has guidelines for the researcher conducting a research study within a school and when reviewing and analyzing public data to be included within a study. To be sure that I understood and applied the ethical principles, I completed the NIH training course on the protection of human participants, and I

acquired the training's certification of completion prior to conducting this study (see

Appendix E).

Setting and Sample Participants

School A is located in the southeastern United States. The middle class, suburban

high school has approximately 1,579 students in Grades 9-12. The school is comprised of

74% European American, 20% African American, 2% Hispanic American, 4% other

(SCDE, 2013). The ninth grade population is the largest of the four grade levels

consisting of approximately 450 students. The selected sample for the study consisted of

six participants and included the school administrators (building principal, ninth grade

assistant principal, and two other assistant principals) and the executive director over K-

12 instruction in School District A. Ultimately, two of the assistant principals for School

A declined to participate; thus, the study included four administrators (the building

principal, two assistant principals, and the executive director over K-12 instruction).

Sampling Technique

The purposeful sample for this study was selected based on the participants' role

with the Ninth Grade Academy. The sample represented the case: the leadership of

School A. Qualitative research typically involves only a few individuals or cases to

provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon, and the size of a sample within a

case study is contingent upon the saturation of data (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2012)

explained this is as a purposeful sample because I intentionally interviewed the

administrators within an established ninth grade transition program and the director over

K-12 instruction as participants within the study. The chosen participants work closely

with the Ninth Grade Academy and were able to give insight about the key characteristics and strategies of the program. The data collected from the interviews were used to understand the perception of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of students of School A.

Data Collection: Interviews and Review of Evaluation Reports

Understanding administrator the perceptions of the administrators about the Ninth Grade Academy was the central focus of this study. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) explained that case study research is used to understand and gain insight into a group or issue. Interviews within a single case study, in which one particular issue or case is examined, were used to collect the data. Yin (2014) explained that the single case study design is appropriate for exploring individuals, organizations, partnerships, and small groups. The case or phenomenon consisted of the leadership of the Academy at School A.

For the one-on-one interviews, I used semistructured, open-ended questions that were conducted at the school and at the district office, respectively. Yin (2014) noted that the case study design is used when exploring a case within its natural setting; thus, interviews of the school administrators were done at the school, and the interview of the district office administrator was conducted at the district office. I conducted the interview sessions during times of convenience for the administrators during the summer work hours.

Prior to starting the interview, I asked permission to digitally record the information to ensure that the responses were recorded accurately. The questions for the interviews were based on the literature review pertaining to ninth grade transition models

and holistic education. The interview questions consisted of the six types of questions

that are explained by Patton (2002); (a) knowledge questions that elicit participants'

knowledge about the Ninth Grade Academy; (b) feeling questions that elicit participants'

feelings about the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy; (c) sensory questions that elicit

data about what the participant has seen, heard, or experienced with the Ninth Grade

Academy; (d) opinion and values questions that elicit participants' feelings or beliefs

about the Ninth Grade Academy; (e) experience and behavior questions that allows the

participants to explain their roles and responsibilities within the Ninth Grade Academy;

and (f) background and demographic questions that are important to associate how the

participants' experiences are relevant to the study. Additionally, I used probing and

follow-up questions to elicit a more profound description of the Ninth Grade Academy.

The data from the interviews were manually transcribed within a research log; I made

sure to note the tone of voice and the body language of the participants. The purpose of

the interview questions was to determine the administrators' perception on the impact

that the Ninth Grade Academy has on ninth grade retention and the dropout rate of

School A (see Appendix B).

Using the interview protocol and structure as outlined by Bogdan and Biklen

(2007), I began each interview session by establishing a rapport with the participants. I

explained the purpose of the study, procedures that will be used for confidentiality, and I

informed the participants of their right to decline or stop the interview at any time. The

semi structured, open-ended questions that were used allowed the participants to explain

their experiences uninhibited by my perspective (Creswell, 2012). I also used probes and

subquestions to clarify and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' responses. Upon completion of the interviews, I manually transcribed the recording verbatim for analysis and coding.

My review of the school's evaluation reports was done for the purpose of reviewing the summative explanations of how the Ninth Grade Academy may be impacting the ninth grade retention and dropout rates. I analyzed the executive summaries from the reports as they provided additional supporting data of the Ninth Grade Academy's impact. The evaluation reports that I reviewed included the information from the school's High Schools That Work (HSTW), School Improvement Council (SIC), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and the school's State Report Card.

Research Log and Reflective Journal

The manually transcribed information and notes from the interviews and the notes from the review of the school's evaluation reports were kept in a research log and reflective journal. The process of qualitative research requires a journal for data collection, as well as a reflective log for documenting thoughts, reactions, and other emotions that may arise during the experience. Reflective notes allow the researcher to process his or her own beliefs and values as they relate to the experience during data collection, which helps to increase the awareness of how these feelings may influence researcher bias (Ludico et al., 2010). I kept a reflective research log to document and make notes of all interviews and interactions with the participants and to record information obtained during my review of the evaluation reports. I made notes of the date

and times for all entries. I later transferred the data to a password-protected computer file.

I kept the reflective log and journal within a locked file cabinet as a measure of security.

Role of the Researcher

As another measure to ensure full disclosure, credibility, and ethical standards, I

fully explained my role as the researcher. I am an educator with 18 years of experience

(14 as a middle school and high school administrator), 6 years as a ninth grade transition

program administrator, and 4 years as the Ninth Grade Academy administrator within

School District A. Despite my previous role as an administrator in School District A, I

have never held any supervisory role over any of the participants.

During the course of my career as I have transitioned from the middle school to

high school environments, I have seen ninth grade students struggle during and as a result

of their transition academically, socially, behaviorally, and mentally. Presently, as a ninth

grade transition administrator at another high school in the same state as School A, I

regularly review my school's ninth grade data (retained students, teacher class failure

rates, discipline reports, dropout reports, and transition program efforts) to ensure that our

transition program is meeting the needs of our students. As a result of my experiences,

successful ninth transition efforts are my passion. My current responsibilities continually

increase my curiosity and interest of how other administrators feel about the impact of

transition programs on ninth grade retention and dropout rates.

Considering my previous roles and responsibilities with ninth grade transitions,

demonstrating researcher reflexivity was necessary to increase the credibility of the

study's results. Merriam (2009) explained the importance of establishing researcher

reflexivity by reflecting and explaining their role, potential bias, assumptions, and dispositions. Began and Bilked (2007) discussed reflexivity as researchers acknowledging and making notes about their biases as side notes. Maxwell (2005) also explained the importance of making the researcher's biases and assumptions clear for readers to understand how a researcher's values, beliefs, and assumptions may have influenced the conclusions of the study. My experience as an educator, administrator, and ninth grade transition administrator has influenced my support for ninth grade transition programs, and this bias is explained and noted throughout the study. I provided full disclosure of my previous role within School District A to the Walden University IRB and within my meeting with district office and school administrators to gain approval to conduct the study and gain access to the participants. My biases were acknowledged with my request to conduct the study (for the Superintendent) and while taking field notes as the participants were interviewed.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves a "bottom-up approach" (Creswell, 2012, p 237). Data analysis is the process that includes organizing and preparing the data, reviewing and making sense of the data, coding the data into categories, constructing thick, rich descriptions of the people, places, and activities, building themes, and reporting and interpreting the data (Lodico et al., 2010). For this study, data analysis was performed on the interview data and data obtained from the evaluation reports.

Data Analysis: Interviews

Descriptive codes and themes from the interviews were developed without the use of a computer software program. Hand analysis was consistent with the description for small databases of information that was be gathered from the small number of participants (Creswell, 2012). Memos made within the reflective log assisted with the process of analysis. Creswell (2009) defined coding as the method of organizing data into segments to formulate meaning. The open coding process that I used consisted of analyzing the data obtained from the interviews into themes and categories of emerging information. The development of categories and themes, referred to as the constant comparative inductive process, helped me to describe, classify, and interpret the data.

Data Analysis: Evaluation Reports

The evaluation reports (HSTW, SACS, School Report Card, and SIC) included discussions pertaining to ninth grade retention, dropout, and graduation rates that assisted me in developing summaries. These findings were summarized and recorded within a research log. The analysis of this data included open coding and the development of themes (consistent patterns of information). The thematic analysis helped me to identify major concepts and was used to explain and present the findings (Lodico et al., 2010). Memos about the findings from the evaluation reports were also kept in the reflective journal. I developed the codes and themes from the data by hand analysis; however, I stored the data in a password protected computer program.

Research Accuracy and Credibility

As another measure to increase the credibility of my study, I used member checking of the findings. Ludico et al. (2010) explained that member checks could be used to ensure that the researchers own biases do not influence the perceptions that are being described. Creswell (2012) also explained that member checking is the process in which a researcher uses the participants to check and confirm the accuracy of the narrative. In addition to member checking, I used triangulation of multiple sources of evidence. According to Merriam (2009) triangulation involves the use of checking multiple sources of data, the use of multiple methods, or the use of multiple theories to confirm emerging findings. Yin (2014) explained the importance of using multiple sources of data for the development of converging lines of inquiry. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) explained how researchers also reviewed and analyzed the archival data of ninth grade students to help determine the impact of retention on on-time graduation rates. The process of establishing credibility started prior to the approval to conduct the study and continued through the presentation of the findings. The data, once collected and transcribed, was presented to the participants for their review. Feedback from the participants was reviewed, and it was determined that revisions were not necessary. After member checking, I triangulated the interview data from the multiple participants with the data that I summarized from the multiple evaluation reports. Member checking and the collection of multiple sources of data helped me provide rich, thick descriptions that were accurate and credible.

Discrepant Cases

It is important to note the likelihood that I would discover discrepant information. Lodico et al. (2010) explained that discrepant information is data that is contradictory to an emerging category or theme and provides a varying perspective. Negative case analysis involves examining data for examples that contradicts other data, and the use of negative case analysis with discrepant cases increases the credibility of the study as it increases the confidence that the researcher is giving full disclosure of all findings (Lodico et al, 2010). There was the chance that I would find a discrepant case as I interviewed the four participants and reviewed the evaluation reports; however, the data collected indicated consistent perceptions and conclusions of the impact of the Academy.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

Assumptions

There were two main assumptions that guided this study. The first assumption was that the school and district office administrators of School A would voluntarily share the data and their perceptions of the Ninth Grade Academy. The second assumption was that the school and district office administrators of School A would be honest with their perception of the Ninth Grade Academy considering my role as a former employee and colleague.

Limitations

The nature of qualitative, case study research does not provide the ability to generalize the results. This study also only utilized four participants; thus, transferability may be significantly limited. The findings were used for the development of a policy

recommendation that could be used to standardize ninth grade transition services and programs in School District A, thus potentially promoting positive social change for the school district; however, my previous role as the Ninth Grade Academy's assistant principal and my support for ninth grade transition programs may prevent the recommendation from being realistically and carefully considered.

Scope

The scope of the study focused on the perceptions of school and district office administrators from School District A on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and the high school dropout rate of School A. The study used three school administrators at School A and one district office administrator of School District A who is responsible for K-12 instruction. The participants were chosen because of their association with the Ninth Grade Academy at School A.

Delimitations

This study focused on the perceptions of school and district office administrators. The study does not cover teacher and student perceptions due to ethical concerns of using teacher and student groups as well as the potential to disrupt the normal learning environment with the data collection process. The study only focused on the Ninth Grade Academy from the holistic education framework, as there are a plethora of components that may be involved with ninth grade transition programs. Additionally, the study included only participants at School A and one district office administrator of School District A to respond to the problem at the local level (School District A).

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Data Analysis Results

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine administrator perceptions on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on ninth grade retention and the dropout rate at School A. The findings includes a synthesis of all of the participants' perceptions of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention rate and the dropout rate of School A. Evident emergence of categories and themes assisted in the development of the study's findings, and the inclusion of direct quotes and specific examples helped me provide rich detail to the narrative.

Findings

The conceptual framework for this study, holistic education, guided my understanding of the data that I collected. The data from the participants as well as from the evaluation reports provided consistent themes of the holistic structure of the Ninth Grade Academy that were regularly noted. The study's four research questions are used to frame and present the findings.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students?

The administrators all perceived that the Ninth Grade Academy positively affected the ninth grade retention rate (reduced the ninth grade retention rate). Table 7 provides the statistical data that supports this perception.

Table 7

School A 9th Grade Retention Rates

School Year	9th Grade Retention Rate
2013-14	6.8%
2012-13	9.51%
2011-12	10.85%
2010-11	9.7%
2009-10	12.29%

Note. This table was developed from personal communication (Participant 1, personal communication, July 1, 2015).

The data shown in Table 7 display the ninth grade retention rate from the 2009-2010 school year until the 2013-2014 school year. Within the five-year span of time, the ninth grade retention rate decreased from 12.29% to 6.8%. The data support the administrators' perception that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting their ninth grade retention rate.

The school's evaluation data also supported the administrators' perception that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting the retention rate for the entire school as indicated with statistical data that provided the overall retention rate for School A. Table 8 shows the school-wide retention rate for School A.

Table 8

School A School-Wide Retention Rates

School Year	School-Wide Retention Rate
2013-14	3.1%
2012-13	2.8%
2011-12	5.7%
2010-11	6%
2009-10	5.3%

Note. This table was developed from personal communication (Participant 1, personal communication, July 1, 2015).

Table 8 provides statistical data for the retention rate for School A for all grade levels (9th-12th) for the 2009-2010 school year through the 2013-2014 school year. During the five-year span, the school retention rate decreased from 5.3% to 3.1%.

The administrators provided other examples of how the Ninth Grade Academy reduces the ninth grade retention rate as well. The examples included specific situations of how the Academy structure and instructional strategies challenged students academically, provided remediation and extra support, or used adaptive and additional services to meet the needs of its students. Although the structure of the Ninth Grade Academy has evolved in recent years, the administrators explained that the purpose, goals, and flexible design remain constant and are still based on the ever-changing needs of its ninth grade students. Despite the academy name, the program no longer utilizes the

middle school teaming structure to organize its students and teachers as it once did during the first few years of inception; however, various teaming strategies are still used to provide instruction, plan for courses and ninth grade activities, and resolve common ninth grade issues. For example, students' core teachers (math, social studies, science, and English language arts) may meet, conference, and plan intervention strategies for common students or students grouped based on common courses. Participant 2 shared examples of how the Ninth Grade Academy's structure impacts ninth grade retention:

> Teaming made it extremely difficult to manage the unique academic requests that we were starting to see. For example, ninth grade students coming in from other school systems needing a semester of a class that we offered as yearlong course. There was just no way to modify that student's schedule for him or her to meet the seat time requirement for a high school credit towards graduation. Even though we're no longer an Academy (technically) with two different teams, we have a team of core teachers that only teach ninth grade students and we continue to use the middle school teaming mindset and approach to provide instruction and intervention for students in need. These teachers teach ninth grade students all day and have a ninth grade focus only. This means having a lot of flexibility and patience for handling playful and often socially immature students who are going through a number of different changes. Our ninth grade teachers only want the best for their students, and they go above what's required of them to provide them with quality instruction,

opportunities for extra help and remediation, and more guidance and

assistance for social and behavioral situations to prevent students being

removed from classes. Simply put, we work extra hard to prevent them

from failing.

The participants also discussed various strategies that are only used within the

Ninth Grade Academy to meet the academic needs of all ninth grade students especially

to the students demonstrating academic difficulty. The Ninth Grade Academy strategies

such as "Zeros Aren't Permitted" (ZAP), retakes, supplemental year-long classes

(Skinnies), remediation opportunities, advisor sessions, and the credit recovery program

are utilized to increase the likelihood of the promotion of ninth grade students. Participant

4 shared more specific information:

The Academy is helping to reduce the ninth grade retention rate as the

program uses specialty courses and practices unique to the ninth grade.

These include supplemental classes, a summer orientation and tour for

rising ninth graders, and a High School 101 course. We feel as though

these programs along with a team of dedicated ninth grade teachers

provide a hands-on approach of meeting the needs of our most vulnerable

population.

Participant 1 and Participant 3 also explained how the specific strategies used by the

Ninth Grade Academy significantly contributed to the reduction in ninth grade retention

and the overall success of the program. Participant 1 stressed the yearlong skinnies in

math and ELA as being essential to the success of ninth grade students' ability to be

successful in all classes as well as the End of Course Exams (EOC) that the state of South

Carolina uses to measure student success. Participant 3 added that middle school team

concept used among the ninth grade teachers help the ninth grade students, teachers, and

other related personnel build strong relationships based on good communication and a

strong desire to meet needs of ninth grade students during the critical ninth grade year.

RQ1 analyzes the perceptions of the school and district office administrators on

the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade

students. Every administrator believed that the Ninth Grade Academy is helping to

reduce the number and percentage of retained ninth grade students by using specialized

teachers, counselors, and administrator, flexible and specialty courses, academic support

and remediation, an orientation system, and other related strategies to instruct, remediate,

orient ninth grade students to their new school environment. The perception is supported

by evaluation and statistical data that indicate declining ninth grade retention rates at

School A.

RQ2: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators

on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the dropout rate of high

school students?

Retention and dropout rates are closely related as ninth grade students who are not

promoted have an increased probability of repeated grade-level retention that leads to a

greater risk of dropping out of school (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). Norton (2011) also

emphasized empirical research that explained how retention impedes the progress of

students and ultimately leads to greater chances of educational failure and dropping out

of school. The administrators shared their overall belief that the Ninth Grade Academy

was effectively reducing the dropout rate by reaching at-risk students early in their high

school career and giving them the academic, social, and behavioral tools needed to

successfully acclimate into high school.

The dropout statistics indicated by participants and evaluation data show a

consistent and relatively low dropout rate for School A. The overall perception is that the

Ninth Grade Academy is positively affecting the dropout rate of School A. Participant 1

explained the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy on the school's dropout rate:

The Academy positively affects the dropout rate by teaching and fostering

study skills, academic concepts, foundational knowledge, and planning

strategies that are necessary for students to be successful high school

students. The academic knowledge and skills that students first acquire in

the ninth grade help them navigate and experience success throughout

their years in high school. These skills are not just ninth grade skills;

they're also life skills. Our ninth graders who acquire these skills are

generally promoted, continue to be promoted, and eventually graduate.

Our ninth grade students who do not successfully acquire these skills are

often retained. Many of our retained ninth grade students eventually

become our dropouts.

Participant 2 agreed with Participant 1 by offering a similar account of how the Ninth

Grade Academy initially impacts students as ninth graders and continues to influence

students through their senior year, thus positively affecting the dropout rate. Participant 2 shared:

> Our overall dropout rate has slowly improved, but this doesn't show statistically. For the most part, the dropout percentage has been consistently low for a number of years. Prior to becoming dropouts, students may be categorized as at-risk. The Academy, unlike other grade levels, has many courses and intervention strategies and resources designed to help the at-risk and low performing ninth grade students overcome and acquire the academic and social skills that they will use for the rest of their high school years. It's not uncommon to see former Academy students visit their previous ninth grade teachers because they benefitted from the academic remediation and hands-on approach that the Academy system provided.

Participant 4 also provided similar examples of how the Ninth Grade Academy positively impacts the dropout rate for School A. Citing the designated personnel assigned to the Academy as essential components, Participant 4 shared:

> Our low dropout rate is a testament to the work that started when the students were first in the Academy in the ninth grade. The core group of teachers working collaboratively with the ninth grade counselors, mental health counselors, and behavioral interventionist has been a model for teachers and administrators in grades 10th-12th. Some of the accommodations, teaching strategies, and even specialized courses that

were established for ninth grade students who exhibited greater needs as

freshmen followed the students into the upper grades. I don't think they

would've graduated without those modifications and supports.

Table 9 shows the dropout rates for School A. Although the data indicate only

incremental changes in the dropout rate, the statistics still supports the administrators'

perception that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting the dropout rate of

School A.

Table 9

School A Dropout Rates

School Year	Dropout Rate
2013-14	2.3%
2012-13	2.6%
2011-12	3.9%
2010-11	5.5%
2009-10	2.5%

Note. This table was developed from South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card (SCDE, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010, and 2009).

Table 9 displays the dropout rate at School A from the 2009-2010 school year through

the 2013-2014 school year. For the 2009-2010 school year the dropout rate was

statistically low (2.5%). The following school year, 2010-2011, the dropout rate

increased to 5.5%, but improved to 2.3% by the 2013-2014 school year.

RQ2 analyzes the administrators' perceptions of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the dropout rate of School A. All of the administrators believed that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively affecting the dropout rate, and three of the administrators provided specific examples of the impact. The administrators cited the students' acquisition of academic and life skills as essential skills that foster school success and contributes to students graduating. The statistics for School A indicates a slight reduction in the dropout rate over a five-year span, but the rate has remained consistently low. Evaluation data also supports the administrators' perceptions that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting the dropout rate as the reports list the ninth transition program as a strategy that promotes school-wide success.

RQ3: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators of how the Ninth Grade Academy may be affecting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate from a holistic approach to educating students?

The holistic educational concept helps schools support the growingly diverse needs of students by using a plethora of measures to educate the whole child (Forbes, 2012). Holistic education includes incorporating academic, mental, social, and behavioral supports. School A utilizes various programs and personnel (school and community based) to educate and meet the needs of its ninth grade students.

The administrators acknowledge the holistic structure of support that the Ninth Grade Academy has and provided examples of how it positively affects ninth grade retention and the dropout rate at School A. Participant 2 stated that the Ninth Grade

Academy consists of dedicated teachers, two counselors, a ninth grade administrator, advisors, and mental health professionals. Participant 2 also shared the following:

> The diverse group of dedicated ninth grade personnel and the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) that's being used school-wide is designed to meet the needs of all students mentally, socially, academically, and behaviorally; however, the ninth grade students have so many other layers of supports that keep students from falling through the cracks that may exist within a large school system.

Participant 3 agreed with Participant 2 and discussed the use of mental health and guidance counselors who work with the ninth grade teachers to provide other areas of support.

> There are times that home issues, issues with friends, and normal life issues supersede the algebraic equations that a teacher may be teaching in class. Our ninth grade students have extra mental health, guidance, and behavioral counselors who step in and get students back on track. I'm sure there are few students who may still fall through the cracks by failing to be promoted and eventually become dropouts, but the Academy's system of support (academic, social, mental, and behavioral) has saved quite a few students from self-destruction as they struggled with their personal issues that would have caused them to fail or dropout out.

Participant 4 acknowledged the unique structure of the Ninth Grade Academy as holistic

in nature and agreed with the other participants that all of the members of the Academy

team work together to educate the whole child.

> Honestly, I've never really viewed the Academy structure as holistic, but
>
> that's exactly what it is. Just understanding ninth grade difficulties in
>
> general, we knew we needed to provide more than just instruction and
>
> academic supports. The ninth grade level, through the Academy is the
>
> only grade level with a designated administrator and two guidance
>
> counselors. We also provide a mental health counselor and behavioral
>
> interventionist who are housed within the Academy even though they are
>
> used by all grade levels. These support positions really do help us foster
>
> the development of the whole student no matter what issues they may
>
> come to school with.

The administrators all made references to the holistic structure and approach that

the Ninth Grade Academy utilizes to positively affect ninth grade students by providing

mental, behavioral, and social supports to the academic program. Three participants

provided specific examples of how the added personnel are being used. All of the

participants believed that the holistic structure of the Ninth Grade Academy helps ninth

grade students successfully meet the requirements for promotion to the tenth grade, thus

reducing the retention and dropout rate.

RQ4: What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on what could be added to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase the impact that the program may have on ninth grade retention and dropout rates?

Although the administrators perceived that the Ninth Grade Academy is successful as demonstrated by the declining ninth grade retention and consistently low dropout rate at School A, all of the administrators provided several strategies and practices that could be added to improve the overall impact of their ninth grade transition program. Each strategy for improvement involved personnel training and specific program practices that would benefit the students academically and provide a greater structure of support for at-risk students. The administrators acknowledge that they usually see the need for improvement as the needs for new, incoming ninth graders change.

The administrators all saw the need for greater content related teacher training. Participant 1 shared:

It would really assist the Academy if we could provide special training to

the 8th grade teachers to help prepare their students for what's to come in

the high school. This may involve some vertical articulation especially in

math and English Language Arts. If this were provided, this may reduce

the number of at-risk students entering the high school.

Participant 2 agreed with Participant 1 that more teacher training is needed but focused on site-based training and the sharing of effective teacher strategies.

To assist and better equip our ninth grade teachers, we need to re-establish

our monthly ninth grade teacher meetings. The meetings would be used

for teachers to share ideas and strategies about what works and what

doesn't for each student or groups of students. Additionally, having

dedicated ninth grade, focused professional development (PD) throughout

the year could support the pedagogical growth necessary to teaching ninth

grade students.

Participant 3 agreed with the Participant 1 and 2 that teacher training was the greatest

need in order to increase the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy is having on the ninth

grade retention and dropout rate of School A.

I think the Academy would benefit from the teachers receiving training as

a unit based on the deficiencies that the students are demonstrating. This

would require providing them greater autonomy to make decisions such as

this. The PD should also include strategies to help teachers build greater

relationships with its at-risk students.

Participant 4 agreed with all of the other participants but stressed the need for more

content specific teacher training to improve student mastery of the state standards and

objectives as a means for improving the ninth grade retention rate and dropout rate of

School A.

Our ninth grade EOC scores weren't consistent with our ninth grade

course passage rate. Our class passage rate was high, but our EOC scores

were terrible. This means that the teachers were promoting them, based on

their performance in class, but this didn't correlate to mastering the state

objectives for math and ELA; therefore, we started providing more content

related (PD) to our math and English teachers. I think that the Academy

teachers would benefit from PD that helps them develop more content-

related and engaging activities. I believe this would manifest into better

EOC scores and as a result, our rising sophomores would be better

equipped for 10th grade level academic expectations and rigor.

The administrators also explained other practices and strategies that they would add to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase its impact on ninth grade retention and the overall school dropout rate. The additions and changes include the following:

- additional dedicated ninth grade teachers (for honor students)

- additional ninth grade elective options for students needing skinnies

- a completely separate location (adjacent wing or building)

- smaller class sizes to provide more one on one time with at-risk students

- more autonomy to make changes (scheduling or personnel) in response to student needs

- more collaboration with 8th grade middle school teams to better prepare rising ninth grade students

- more intervention procedures for identified rising at-risk students

- a summer bridge program (summer remediation) for rising ninth graders

- more collaborative efforts with tenth grade teachers for ninth grade students transitioning to the tenth grade

- more specific 9th grade recognition for academic achievement (a 9th grade awards program)

- 9th grade transition team meetings (meeting times for 9th grade teachers and other

  related personnel with a focus on 9th grade students and the Ninth Grade

  Academy program)

Participant 4 explained, "The changes and additions that the administrators described are the result of years of careful reflection and the yearly review of the ninth grade statistical data". The changes described that include additional teacher training, procedural amendments, and program expansion are all consistent with empirical research on the components of effective ninth grade transition programs (Cushman, 2006; Ellerbrock &Kiefer, 2013; Hazel et al., 2014; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). All of the participants discussed various factors and requirements that would be needed to acquire or make the described changes that included budget and growth considerations. For example, providing additional teachers and course offerings would occur if the ninth grade student population increased and School A received additional funding.

   All of the participants shared their perception of what should be added to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase the program's impact on the ninth grade retention and dropout rates of School A. The changes and additions that were discussed involved adding additional core and elective ninth grade teachers, more collaboration with feeder middle schools, but the most identified need focused on providing the Ninth Grade Academy teachers with more training and professional development. The participants stressed that the addition of teachers, more collaboration with the middle school, and more training for the teachers would help the Ninth Grade Academy continually meet the growing needs of its ninth grade students.

Discussion of the Findings

The participants of the study discussed a number of factors that they believe are essential to improving ninth grade retention and the school's dropout rate. My analysis of these various factors, assisted me in the development of three descriptive themes that include the following:

- the Ninth Grade Academy program structure

- the Ninth Grade Academy strategies

- other Ninth Grade Academy practices and protocols

The three descriptive themes were used to organize the data provided by the administrators who collectively perceive that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of School A.

The Ninth Grade Academy structure consists of a dedicated ninth grade administrator, two guidance counselors, core academic teachers for math, English, science, and world geography, and mental health counselors. Based on the collected data, the Ninth Grade Academy structure positively affects the ninth grade retention and the school's dropout rate from a holistic approach by working as a unified team to provide academic instruction, remediation and extra academic help, and behavioral and mental support. The administrators explained that the Ninth Grade Academy structure is designed to prevent any ninth grade student from failing; thus, the structure is regularly modified based on the changing needs of each ninth grade population. The administrators explained that the Ninth Grade Academy structure is based completely on the holistic approach, the conceptual framework for this study, as all of the varying roles and

responsibilities of each ninth grade professional is used to help ninth grade students academically, socially, mentally, and behaviorally.

As with the structure, the strategies used are also regularly modified. The administrators described this process as adaptive strategies based on the identified needs of students. Strategies such as "Zeros Aren't Permitted" (ZAP), remediation opportunities followed by test retakes, supplemental year-long classes (Skinnies), advisor sessions, and a credit recovery program are utilized to increase the likelihood of the promotion of ninth grade students. Other strategies include providing eight grade tours, summer orientation after eight-grade completion, and a high school orientation course (High School 101) to help ninth graders feel more comfortable in their new school environment.

The other essential Ninth Grade Academy practices and protocols support the program's structure and strategies and also include what the administrators believe should be added the program. The essential practices and protocols include the following:

- a clear purpose and goal of helping first-time ninth grade students successfully acclimate into high school

- ninth grade only core courses

- a middle school teaming concept of which the ninth grade administrator, teachers, and counselors use to develop and educate students collectively

- instructional and behavioral flexibility to eliminate or reduce the loss of student opportunities to be successful

- additional dedicated ninth grade teachers (for honor students)

- additional ninth grade elective options for students needing skinnies

- a completely separate location (adjacent wing or building)

- smaller class sizes to provide more one on one time with at-risk students

- more autonomy to make changes (scheduling or personnel) in response to student needs

- more collaboration with 8th grade middle school teams to better prepare rising ninth grade students

- more intervention procedures for identified rising at-risk students

- a summer bridge program (summer remediation) for rising ninth graders

- more collaborative efforts with tenth grade teachers for ninth grade students transitioning to the tenth grade

- more specific 9th grade recognition for academic achievement (a 9th grade awards program)

- 9th grade transition team meetings (meeting times for 9th grade teachers (8th grade teachers at the end of the year) and other personnel with a focus on 9th grade students and the program)

The administrators believe that the structure, strategies, and other essential protocols are critical to the success of the Ninth Grade Academy. Additionally, the Ninth Grade Academy is characterized by its holistic nature. The Academy system of administrators, teachers, and counselors acknowledges the unique circumstances and needs of ninth grade students and adapts to help the students acquire the academic and life skills needed to be promoted and to ultimately graduate from high school.

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of students within School A. The participants were interviewed on their perception of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy is having on ninth grade retention and the school's dropout rate from a holistic approach. Evaluation reports for School A were also reviewed and support the information obtained from the interviews. From the analysis of the data, I developed three descriptive themes that include the Ninth Grade Academy structure, strategies, and other practices and protocols. The descriptive themes were described by the administrators as being the foundation of what makes the Ninth Grade Academy successful. Although the participants acknowledged that the program has identified areas that need improvement, they collectively emphasized the actual statistical data that demonstrate a declining retention rate and consistently low dropout rate.

Conclusion

Section 2 described the appropriate research methodology for this study provided an explanation of the school leaders' perceptions of the impact that their ninth grade transition program has on ninth grade retention and the school's dropout rate. An intrinsic case study design demonstrated the intent to collect data that will provide a thick description of the case, the Ninth Grade Academy. The intended purposeful sample consisted of five school administrators and one district office administrators; however, one administrator declined to participate and another administrator was re-assigned to other responsibilities apart from the Ninth Grade Academy; thus, the total sample

consisted of four administrators (three school administrators and one district office administrator). Data was also obtained by reviewing evaluation reports.

Section 2 also explained the analytic strategies consistent with the research methodology that was used to make sense of the data. The collected data was reviewed, analyzed, coded, and put into themes. Member checking (of the interview data) and triangulation was discussed as measures to ensure accuracy and credibility of the study. An explanation of my role as the researcher was provided to acknowledge the potential bias that may affect the study. Additionally, Section 2 also outlined the discrepant cases, assumptions, scope, limitations and delimitations of the study. After developing a report of the findings, an ensuing plan to address a gap in secondary policy was developed. The policy of best practice consisted of developing a ninth grade transition standard of a practice, strategies, and procedures at the other schools within School District A as a method of reducing ninth grade retention and the overall dropout rate at all high schools, thus, promoting positive social change.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Following the analysis of this study's findings, the project developed from the desire to address the gap in educational practice among the high schools within School District A. In this section, I describe the project and include the rationale for the project and a review of the literature that supported and guided the project. This section will also include suggestions for the implementation of the project as well as potential barriers. I will conclude this section by providing a process for the project's evaluation that can be used by the schools and School District A that will provide the data to measure the impact and implication for social change.

Description and Goals

In this study, I examined the perceptions of the administrators (school and district) of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy at School A has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate. The project, Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation, was developed based on the findings from the research study and from a review of the literature on building intrinsic motivation by using student-oriented, engaging school environments. In this project, I also address the ninth grade problem identified within Section 1 and the ninth grade retention and dropout issues among all of the high school within School District A. Considering that the administrators who participated in the research study perceived that the Ninth Grade Academy is having a positive impact on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate at School A, the policy recommendation includes three areas of focus:

- Ninth grade transition program structure

- Ninth grade transition program strategies

- Other ninth grade strategies and protocols

The three areas of focus include program characteristics that were found to be essential components of the Ninth Grade Academy that help reduce the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of School A. The goal of the policy recommendation is to establish consistent ninth grade transition efforts throughout School District A that would also be used to reduce the ninth grade retention rate and dropout rate at each of the three high schools within the school district; thus, the policy would address a gap in the educational practice among the district's high schools. The participants of this research study all explained that the Ninth Grade Academy was developed and continues to evolve based on the identified needs of School A and its ninth grade students. The same logic could be used at the other two high schools given the perceived needs that are identified within their different school environment, culture, and community.

Rationale

After analyzing the collected data from the research study, I reflected on the collective perception of the administrators that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting the ninth grade retention rate and the overall dropout rate at School A. Additionally, Participant 1 included a discussion of ninth grade transitions district-wide, expounding on the differences of each high school's ninth grade program and efforts. As a result, I elected to design a Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation. The recommended policy would establish consistent procedures and

components for the ninth grade transition programs in all three high schools. The policy

recommendation includes three themes for consideration:

- The system of personnel established for the ninth grade transition

    programs

- The strategies used within the ninth grade transition programs

- The strategies and protocols of the ninth grade transition programs

The personnel system includes establishing a dedicated ninth grade administrator,

guidance counselors, teachers, and core ninth grade populated classes. The strategies

consist of a system of extra help, remediation, supplemental classes, academic mentoring,

and additional efforts to assist at-risk ninth graders (behavioral or academic). The

components involve ninth-grade-focused professional development, flexible planning and

scheduling of classes, high school orientation courses, and inviting the feeder middle

schools (teachers and eighth grade students) to ninth grade programs to assist with eighth

grade preparation for ninth grade.

The three themes within the policy recommendation are consistent with successful

ninth grade transition programs identified within several research studies (Abbott &

Fisher 2012; Blount, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Styron &

Peasant, 2010). The themes incorporate the conceptual framework for this study, holistic

education, in that the system, strategies, and components would help educate and develop

the whole child (academically, behaviorally, and socially) as they include specialized

personnel and strategies with the intent of total ninth grade student development. The

policy recommendation would help to eliminate, or at least reduce, the inconsistencies among the ninth grade transition programs at the three high schools within the district.

Review of the Literature

I used the findings from this study to explain how the administrators perceived that the Ninth Grade Academy is positively impacting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate at School A. The three descriptive themes developed from the findings (program structure, strategies, and other essential transition practices) implicated the existence of an interconnected ninth grade school community. Consequently, in the literature review for this section, I examined the concept of establishing a school community to increase academic achievement and prevent student failure.

The theoretical framework used for the literature review was based on the creation of caring, nurturing school communities in respect to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the building of intrinsic motivation within students that leads to the attainment of academic achievement. I used a Boolean-based search within the Walden University Library that included the ERIC, Education Research Complete, Sage Premier, and Thoreau database to retrieve the most up-to-date, peer-reviewed research studies of school community. My search included the following terms: *high school community, school culture, student achievement, student motivation, intrinsic motivation, self-determination, school climate, student goals, learning communities, failure prevention, school teaming, school program, school strategies, school improvement, school barriers,* and *school environment.* The Boolean search operators allowed me to combine and isolate key word searches that narrowed the literature search to more specific articles on

school environment. My search consisted of using peer-reviewed articles within the last 5 years. For this search, I purposefully excluded extrinsic motivation as a contributing factor to student achievement. With the focus of my research study concentrating on the Ninth Grade Academy with respect to student and school outcomes, I chose to analyze how the Ninth Grade Academy inherently affects its students.

Self-Determination Theory

The theoretical framework of school community for the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation project was based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. According to the self-determination theory, organisms have intrinsic needs that encourage and result in how the organisms act (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) concluded that a ninth grade transition program as a school community, based on the self-determination theory, can be used to establish connections between students and schools by meeting the basic psychological needs of students relating to their sense of competence, autonomy, and sense of belonging, thus increasing the likelihood of student success. Nurturing, caring school communities such as ninth grade transition programs can be catalysts that foster student achievement by providing a caring, nurturing environment with varied academic, behavioral, social, and mental supports that meet students' basic needs. The satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of students is found to promote intrinsic motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Caring school communities promote student achievement by cultivating intrinsic motivation in students (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation as it pertains to self-determination has been shown to be a catalyst for high levels of learning and academic performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) acknowledged intrinsic motivation as a phenomenon by which organisms engage in curiosity-driven behaviors without the presence of rewards. Froiland, Oros, Smith, and Hirchert (2012) explained that intrinsically motivated students seek to learn for the pure sense of enjoyment and correlated this motivation to student achievement. Hayenga and Corpus (2010) also found a correlation between high levels of intrinsic student motivation and achievement and emphasized the past and present research on the same connection. Students with little intrinsic motivation have been found to do poorly in school in all or critical aspects of schooling that include academics, behavior, and social and mental health.

Intrinsic motivation in students may be manifested in academic achievement with respect to depth of knowledge, content mastery, grade promotion, social development (based on student interaction with peers), behavioral practices (with respect to following rules and procedures), and mental health (with respect to students having a general sense of well-being). Fostering intrinsic motivation in students may have benefits for both student and school outcomes. In the context of helping first time ninth grade students to successfully acclimate into high school, fostering intrinsic motivation may have implications on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate. Froiland et al. (2012) found that intrinsically motivated students exhibit a greater sense of well-being and are more engaged within classroom settings because they understand and value the benefits of

education. Consequently, students lacking intrinsic motivation often struggle with all aspects of school and often result in repeated retention, discipline referrals, social conflicts, and poor mental disposition. Fan and Wolters (2014) discussed the correlation between the lack of intrinsic motivation and the increased likelihood of students dropping out of school and implied that the use of intrinsic motivation building practices within school could be used as an effective dropout prevention strategy. Wiesman (2012) asserted that many high school students come to school unmotivated; therefore, their success and resulting school performance outcomes may depend on the fostering of intrinsic motivation within students. Consequently, creating positive and motivating school environments should be a part of school reform efforts to improve student and the school's performance.

School Environments

School environments can foster or stifle student motivation to learn and achieve. With 2 decades of school reform within the United States focusing on systemic academic requirements, present reform focuses more on improving teaching practices and creating engaging, student-oriented school environments (Esposito, Davis, & Swain, 2012); however, despite the plethora of present educational reform efforts, the task of changing rigid, policy-mandated environments has proven to be difficult (Burke, Marx, & Lowenstein, 2012). Forced with balancing the enforcement of local, state, and federal mandates and attempting to address students' psychological needs, educators within schools systems unintentionally create institutionalized, uncaring school buildings where

large populations of students are not motivated to learn; thus, many performance

outcomes are not met (Esposito et al., 2012).

The difficulty of transforming school environments is discussed in various related

research studies. Froiland et al. (2012) found that most school environments do little to

foster intrinsic motivation and, in many cases, deprive students of the opportunities that

are used to encourage intrinsic motivation. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) discussed how

the rigid, structured aspects of high school such as the typical schedule, grouping of

students into classes, and the transition of students into high schools can create

unresponsive school environments that do little to promote student development and

engagement. Eilish-Piper, Matthews, and Risko (2013) discussed unintended

consequences of federal standards and tests as a "one size fits all curricula" (p. 14) that

render both teachers and students as invisible in uncaring school environments. Park,

Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, and Li, (2012) explained that as students progress

through the educational system from elementary, middle, and high school, they often

experience decreasing levels of engagement due to unconnected and disengaging school

settings. Booth (2011) concentrated on middle school adolescents' perceptions of their

needs and their description of their school environment as disorderly, unconnected, and

boring and stressed the importance of establishing positive school environments in order

to promote student autonomy and independence. Kaplan (2014) described present

educational reform policies as corporate-inspired and does not consider the relational

aspect teachers and students. Kaplan explained that schools cannot improve without

concern for improving the social, cultural aspects of student and teacher relationships to

improve student motivation, engagement, and achievement. Roberson (2014) described

education in the United States as a failing system due in part to shallow, simple learning

environments. Researchers have provided evidence of how school environments can

negatively impact intrinsic motivation and student engagement; however, there is also

evidence of the increasing focus to change and reform school environments into student-

oriented, responsive settings where students thrive.

Standard Principles of Practice

With high-stakes testing, educator accountability reform, school funding, and

local, state, and federal mandates, schools may not inherently possess the necessary

environments to nurture intrinsic motivation, but they can take efforts to create them.

Roberson (2014) concluded that in order to positively reshape the U. S. educational

systems, educators should focus on using relevant, rigorous curriculum; creating

engaging and stimulating classrooms; and providing opportunities for students pursue

their personal interests. Peterson and Taylor (2009) explained eight principles of whole

schooling that are used to meet the individual needs of students and to develop the whole

child as it pertains to holistic education. The eight principles include the following:

- Create learning spaces for all students to foster a sense of belonging

- Empower citizenship to encourage responsibility

- Use inclusive learning to create a sense of community

- Build a caring communities to create unity and a team concept

- Support learning to foster independence and self management

- Partner with families for collaboration and to better understand effective teaching strategies

- Teach with authentic, differentiated instruction to adapt to students' different academic needs

- Use authentic assessment to demonstrate actual growth and improvement

According to Peterson and Taylor (2009), the eight principles help form positive teacher-student and peer relationships; assist with developing the whole child; and create caring, nurturing school environments. Van Bockern (2014) also explained the importance of meeting students' needs based on standards of caring school cultures that result in the development of the whole child. The standards include creating a sense of belonging, nurturing the desire for academic mastery, providing opportunities for autonomy to encourage independence, and using the adults to demonstrate genuine concern for the well-being of the various groups of students. Richards, Aguilera, Murakami, and Weiland (2014) discussed the use of Positive Behavior Intervention and Support program (PBIS) to reform the school environment; the PBIS program used a supportive administrator, leadership team of teachers, concerned and involved teachers, and district support to provide an inclusive, positive school environment to motivate students to success, teach self-determination, and provide social and behavioral supports to students. Tausan (2015) stressed the importance of the ability of school environments to adapt to the learning needs of students to create inclusive, integrated educational system to stimulate the learning motivation in students. Rhodes, Stevens, and Hemmings (2011) focused on creating and sustaining positive and engaging school culture by hiring diverse teachers

and professional staff, formulating teaching teams who work with the same groups of students, using student orientations and advisory periods, and providing a challenging relevant curriculum. Raphael and Burke (2012) evaluated a middle grades reform initiative and found that school environments where adults created supportive relationships with students, created teams to personalize learning, and used highly trained content teachers and other specialized personnel were more capable of meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of students thus creating comprehensive, adaptive schools where students flourish. Hardre (2012) explained how schools could be transformed into motivational systems for both students and teachers with demonstrative support from school administrators.

Considering that the basic psychological needs of students include the need for autonomy and a sense of competence, schools can create nurturing communities of care with the strategic use if its resources. Gosine and Islam (2014) explained that educators should build a sense of community within schools by emphasizing the community concept among teachers, students, and other related personnel, contextualizing the lived experiences of the students, building the critical consciousness of students, and by cultivating new and adaptive ways for students to learn. McMaster (2015) asserted that nurturing school environments are inclusive environments that have "a place for every student" (p. 29), and uses teams of teachers to cater to groups of student who experience social or academic difficulty. Daniels (2011) explained that students perform better in school when they form positive relationships with teachers and other students and stressed the importance of using nurturing, caring teachers, mutual teacher and student

respect, flexibility with instruction, and student connections to motivate students. Danielson (2010) also found that students demonstrated academic initiative when they perceived pedagogical care and autonomy support from their teachers and learning environment. Smith, Ito, Gruenewald, and Yeh, (2010) concluded that students are motivated and feel good about themselves when they have a sense of safety, belonging, respect, fairness, and pride. Smith, et al. also explained that positive and effective school environments are environments in which students are motivated to learn, and utilize teachers who help to establish positive teacher to student and student to peer relationships.

Ninth Grade Transition Programs

Based on the self-determination theory, students are intrinsically motivated to succeed when their psychological needs are met (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Ninth grade transition programs are often given the flexibility, autonomy, and resources to create intrinsically motivating environments that meet the psychological needs of its students. Transition programs may vary based on local and state resources, but most have similar attributes that align with related, empirical research that focus on creating motivating, student-oriented school environments. Growing support for ninth grade transition programs is based on improved statistical data that show decreasing ninth grade retention and dropout rates in schools (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, and Beechum, 2014). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) explained the use of a Freshman Focus program to foster an adaptive, responsive process for students transitioning from middle school to high school. The Freshman Focus program promoted a sense of community by encouraging quality

teacher-student and teacher-teacher relationships, providing quality academic instruction and life skills, and fostering student pride and a sense of belonging. The Ninth Grade Academy at School A was developed based on the core principle of utilizing flexibility, autonomy, and resources to create a nurturing, caring community for its first time ninth grade students (Participant 2, personal communication, July 7, 2015). Many of the participants, school and district office administrators, discussed various resources and strategies that the Ninth Grade Academy uses to promote a positive, motivating environment that include the following:

- Dedicated, caring teachers, counselors, and administrator who work to resolve 9th grade issues and advocate for the grade students

- Established system for extra help and remediation

- Flexible scheduling to provide the time needed for instruction, extra help, and remediation

- Additional counselors (mental health) to help resolve specific 9th grade issues

- Flexible discipline to prevent loss of instructional time

- Activities that acknowledge and reward academic and behavioral achievement

The strategies used by the Ninth Grade Academy are in alignment with the strategies described in various research studies that discuss how schools can meet the psychological needs of students, thus fostering the intrinsic motivation of the ninth grade students (Daniels, 2011; Elish-Piper, Matthews, & Risko, 2013; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Froiland et al., 2012; Gosine & Islam, 2014; Hayenga & Corpus, 2010). The Ninth Grade Academy system that includes an administrator, guidance counselors, ninth grade specific teachers,

and other related staff members provide the structure and processes necessary for

establishing and maintaining an environment conducive to fostering intrinsic motivation.

Implementation

As a result of the study and literature review, a policy recommendation project

was developed. The project, the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy, addresses

the inconsistencies among the ninth grade transition programs at the three high schools

within School District A as it pertains to ninth grade program personnel, ninth grade

transition program strategies, and other essential ninth grade transition practices.

Implementation of the project would require the approval of the Superintendent of School

District A as well as the School Board. In order to explain the policy recommendation

and to advocate for this new policy, a meeting with the Superintendent is necessary.

Successful implementation of the proposed policy depends heavily on the willingness and

ability of School District A to hire high quality, ninth grade designated administrators,

content teachers, guidance counselors, and other specialized staff members, as well as the

willingness and ability to incorporate ninth grade focused strategies and resources. The

meeting with the Superintendent would provide the opportunity to explain the study's

findings, explain the policy recommendation, and the potential plan for implementation.

The Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation would be

presented to the superintendent in the form of an executive summary report. The report

contains the following:

- Background information that explains the ninth grade problem
- Overview of the study

- Summary of the findings

- Policy recommendation

- Plan of evaluation

The evaluation of the policy implementation would provide the opportunity to review formative and summative data such as semester passage rates, end of year promotion rate, retention rate, and EOC exams.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The potential resources include the following:

- Policy recommendation document with supporting research

- Designated ninth grade teams that include administrators, core content

- Teachers, guidance counselors, and mental health professionals

- Ninth grade focused professional development

- Ninth Grade Academy at School A

Existing supports include:

- Executive Director of Secondary Schools

- Director of Professional Development

- Principal and ninth grade administrator at School A

Potential Barriers

The greatest potential barrier to implementing the policy recommendation is the ability to acquire the necessary faculty and staff. Successful implementation relies heavily on the ninth grade transition program being staffed with designated administrators, teachers, counselors, and other specialized professionals for whom ninth

grade students are the priority. Consequently, acquiring the necessary personnel depends on funding for the various teaching and faculty positions that is also dependent upon the size of the school's student populations. Schools with small student populations have less funding than larger schools (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011); therefore, the ability to hire additional personnel and resources within School District A, will be dependent on the size of the student populations. School District A has three high schools that vary greatly in size. School A is the largest high school with approximately 1579 students. The other two high schools have student population of 963 and 459 students; thus, acquiring the appropriate personnel at the other two high schools may not be practical or achievable.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Prior to implementation of this policy recommendation, a meeting with the Superintendent to determine the feasibility of implementing the policy among all three high schools must take place. The policy may be modified for each school based on the individual school funding and established administrator, teacher, and counselor positions. If the Superintendent agrees upon the implementation, a collaboration meeting with the Executive Director, school principal, and designated ninth grade administrator for the three high schools should be held. The collaboration meeting would help to align and modify the policy standards to the unique structure of each school. For the purpose of this paper, Table 10 provides an example of the implementation timeline.

Table 10

Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy Recommendation Implementation

Month	Activity

May 2016	• Review the ninth grade problem • Review and discuss each schools data (ninth grade retention, dropout rate, and EOC exam scores, and disseminate the research study's findings • Determine the ninth grade team at each school • Review and devise ninth grade transition plan based on the policy recommendation for the ninth grade program, strategies, and other essential transition practices for discussion at July meeting • Develop semester and EOC formative and summative evaluation plan
July 2016	• Discuss school based ninth grade transition plans • Determine needed resources and professional development
August 2016	• Initiate the school based ninth grade programs • Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
September 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
October 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
November 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
December 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development • Plan for review of the semester data (summative and formative evaluation)
January 2017	• Review each ninth grade program data (passage rate and EOC exam

	data)
	• Plan professional development based on data results
February 2017	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
March 2017	
	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
April 2017	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
May 2017	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
	• Plan on final district-wide meeting to discuss results and revisions to the programs
June 2017	• Discuss results (retention and passage rate and EOC exam data)
	• Discuss needed revisions and plan for 2017-2018 school year.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

Student. As the developer of the Ninth Grade Transition Program Policy, my

primary responsibility would be to provide guidance for successful implementation of the

plan. I would work closely with the Superintendent, Executive Director for Secondary

Schools, Director of Professional Development, school principals, and the designated

ninth grade administrator for each school to ensure the understanding of the study's

findings, policy recommendation, and ninth grade transition program purpose. I would

also present related research data and sources to support and provide examples of the best practices standards and principles.

Superintendent. The initial responsibility of the superintendent would be to lobby for the policy adoption by school board members. This would depend on the superintendent fully understanding the policy purpose, requirements, and potential outcomes. After agreeing to support the implementation of the policy recommendation, the superintendent would need to support the work of the Executive Director for Secondary Schools, Director of Professional Development, school principals, and the designated ninth grade administrator for each school. Supporting the work of the ninth grade teams at each school may require the superintendent to approve additional funding or allocating needed resources.

School Board. The school board members represent the different local towns and cities within School District A. Considering that the school budgets and resources vary greatly due to the varying school sizes (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011), the school board members from the varying areas would have to agree to adopt the policy recommendation and support its implementation for each school site. Each school board member would need to be aware of the purpose and basic principles of the policy especially as to how it would affect and develop in each school based on the varying school budgets, school populations, and personnel.

Executive Director of Secondary Schools. The Executive Director is responsible for all student related programs in the middle and high schools of School District A. This responsibility includes overseeing the principals, assistant principals, and secondary

teachers. For the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy, the Executive Director would ensure that Policy's program, strategies, and other essential transition practices are implemented based on the established guidelines consistently among the three high schools within the district. The Executive Director would also work with the school principals and Director of Professional Development to determine the appropriate PD, revisions, or modifications that would be needed based on evaluation results.

Director of Professional Development. Providing appropriate ninth grade focused professional development would be essential for successful implementation of the policy recommendation. Considering the different sizes, characteristics, and environments at each high school, effective professional development would need to have a school-based designed based on the evaluation results of each school (Lane, Peia-Oakes, Powers, Diebold, Germer, Common, & Brunsting, 2015). The Director of Professional Development would work closely with the Executive Director for Secondary Schools and school principals to determine the strategies for PD based on the evaluation results and identified needs.

School principals and ninth grade administrators. The school principals would have oversight of the ninth grade administrators, and the ninth grade administrators would have oversight of the ninth grade transition program teachers and counselors within their school. They would work to facilitate the policy implementation by the ninth grade faculty and staff. They principals would need to demonstrate buy-in and be willing to participate in the school based professional development. The principal would also be responsible for providing the program with direction based on the vision that he/she has

for the school. The School principals and ninth grade administrators would work with the Executive Director for Secondary Schools and the Superintendent to revise their program based on evaluation results.

Ninth grade transition teachers and counselors. The ninth grade teachers and counselors would be responsible for the day-to-day planning and implementation of the policy strategies and components. As a part of the implementation, the teachers and counselors would provide instruction and other services based on best practices as it pertains to ninth grade student populations. They would also attend ninth grade focus group PD and incorporate modifications and revisions based on the direction provided by their principals, ninth grade administrators, and the Executive Director for Secondary Education.

Project Evaluation

Considering the project that developed from this study involves policy and not an actual program, the project evaluation will consist of two different analyses to provide formative and summative data. Bruch and Reynolds (2012) explained that the purpose of program assessment is not only to defend programs, but assessment should also be used to help programs make incremental change over time. For the purpose of the policy recommendation, the evaluation will involve reviewing the promotion statistics for ninth grade students and EOC exams for the schools' first semester (formative assessment) and reviewing the passage and retention statistics and EOC exam data for the second semester (summative assessment). Promotion data will be determined by the average of the ninth grade courses attended by ninth grade students compared to the number of courses in

which credit was awarded. Students earn credits for courses taken during the first and second semesters. Retention data will be determined by the number of ninth grade students who did not acquire adequate credits to be promoted to the tenth grade compared to the total number of ninth grade students. End of course data will provide the percentage of students who passed the state's end of the year comprehensive exams for Algebra I and English I, the two ninth grade level courses.

The review of the passage and retention rate and the EOC exam data should occur at each school prior to the policy implementation and after each following semester. Starting the school year with a review of the initial statistics prior to implementation of the policy would provide baseline data for comparison. Spaulding (2008) explained that with program evaluations, there is an emphasis on change with the intent to make improvements. The formative and summative data collected at the end of the first and second semester would be used to make modifications and/or amendments to the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy and the ninth grade transition programs at each school. The modifications and/or amendments to the programs may include the addition of professional faculty and staff members, additional classes for remediation or mastery, designated ninth grade buildings or settings, needs based PD, or similar additional resources, and may be specific based on the organizational structure, size, and location of the school.

The formative data collected at the end of the first semester could be used to make necessary modifications and amendments that may positively impact the end of the year data. The end of the year analysis (summative assessment) would be used to make

modifications for improvement for the following school year. This evaluation cycle could be modified to include dropout and graduation statistics. The project evaluation has the potential to yield critical evidence as to whether the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy is an effective means of reducing the ninth grade retention and the dropout rate at each school and for School District A as an educational entity.

Implications Including Social Change

The purpose of the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation is to address, reduce, or eliminate the inconsistencies among the ninth grade transition programs within the three high schools in School District A. This project has the potential to create social change for students of School District A as well as for school environments. The policy implementation has the potential to improve school environments by developing interconnected smaller learning communities that provide the structure and intervention strategies designed to meet the psychological needs of students. As a result of the improved school environment, student achievement, ninth grade retention, and the overall school dropout rate should improve, thus, ninth grade students will have the academic, social, and behavioral skills needed to successfully acclimate into high school and continue school through graduation. The list of potential outcomes include the following:

- Improved inter- and intra district communication

- Identified strategic plan for grade related improvement

- Consistent ninth grade transition program district-wide

- Improved school environments

- Team strategy within and among the three high school

- Teacher and student empowerment

- Lower ninth grade retention rate

- Lower school dropout rate

- Focused PD

Key stakeholders. The policy implementation would benefit many stakeholders locally and on a larger scale. The local stakeholders may see the benefits more directly, but the policy has the potential to be adopted by other school districts within the state and nationwide that are targeting ninth grade level improvement. For this study, the list of key stakeholders and their responsibility include the following:

- School board: Based on the research findings, the board members would have to adopt the recommendation and understand how the policy affects the high school within their constituent area and the district as a whole

- Superintendent: Based on the research findings, the Superintendent would have to approve the policy implementation and understand how it affects the student achievement district-wide

- Executive Director for Secondary Schools: Based on the research findings, the Director would have to understand the policy recommendation and ensure consistent implementation among the three high schools

- Executive Director for Professional Development: Based on the research findings, the Director would have to understand the policy recommendation and provide ninth grade related PD

- School administrators: Based on research findings, administrators would have to understand the policy recommendation and provide the resources and direction for the faculty and staff for successful implementation

- Teacher: Based on the research findings, teachers would have to understand and implement the policy recommendation strategies

- Students: Based on the research findings, students would have to adhere to the policy recommendation's strategies and the principles of operation

Local Community

The project was designed based on the inconsistencies described among the three high schools within the school district concerning their ninth grade transition programs. The administrators of this study believe that the ninth grade year is the most critical year in high school and has the potential to positively or negatively impact student performance throughout their high school years. This belief is supported by empirical research studies (Blount, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Styron & Peasant, 2010). The policy recommendation advocates for consistent ninth grade program structure, strategies, and other essential transition practices, and if successfully implemented, could improve the school environment and student performance within the district's high schools.

Far-Reaching

Successful implementation of this policy recommendation should improve student, school, and district outcomes in School District A but also has the potential to positively impact neighboring school districts in other counties, states, and nation-wide.

District and school leaders outside of School District A may use this policy

recommendation or a modified version based on different school and district dynamics to

target their ninth grade or other at-risk student populations. In a larger social context, a

standard Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy could be adopted and implemented

to establish national consistency.

Conclusion

Section 3 explained the application of the study's finding by the development of a

project. The project, located in Appendix A, was developed to address the inconsistencies

among the ninth grade transition programs at the three high schools within School

District A. The policy recommendation could be used as the standard principle of action

for the Superintendent, school board, Executive Director for Secondary Schools, school

administrators, and ninth grade faculties. Additionally, the policy recommendation is

supported by evidence from this case study and other empirical research studies that

identified various program structures, strategies, and other essential transition practices.

While the policy recommendation was designed specifically for School District A, the

broadness of the project allows for modification by other district leaders.

The following section includes an analysis of the project and reflections of myself

as scholar, practitioner, and project developer. Additionally, the project strengths and

limitations are described with implications and directions for future research. Section 4

also includes a reflection of my learning and growth as a result of this study. I will

conclude section 4 with an analysis and consideration of the study's potential for creating

social change locally and afar.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the Ninth Grade

Academy, a ninth grade transition model, on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of

students within one suburban high school located in the southeastern United States. Data

collection occurred through interviews of school and district administrators, as well as

through a review of the school's evaluation reports. An analysis of the findings and a

review of the literature guided the development of a policy recommendation that

addresses the gaps and inconsistencies among the ninth grade transition programs located

within the three high schools of School District A. The policy recommendation was

designed to standardize ninth grade transition programs within the school district and is

based on the three major themes that were developed during my analysis of the collected

data. The themes are ninth grade transition program structure, ninth grade transition

strategies, and other essential transition practices. According to the findings of this study,

the collective perception that the Ninth Grade Academy positively impacts the ninth

grade retention and dropout rate of the high school; however, during the data collection, I

discovered that each high school within the school district uses different transition

strategies and organizational structures, and as a result, experiences varying levels of

success as explained during the data collection process.

This section provides a reflection of my doctoral project study journey and

includes the successes and limitations that resulted during the data collection and

analysis. This section will also include potential alternative research approaches that could be used to provide other data pertaining to ninth grade transition. Additionally, suggestions for further research that derived from the findings and ensuing project will also be included.

Project Strengths

The project that resulted from this study has strengths based on the procedures involved with its application. Considering its purpose, the project is a policy recommendation that was developed to establish district-wide consistency among the ninth grade transition programs within School District A's three high schools. Each of the three high schools within the school district provide three different types of transition programs based on the needs of the culture of the school and community (Participant 1, personal communication, June 24, 2015). The structure, strategies, other essential transition practices, and resulting outcomes of each ninth grade transition program also vary between the three high schools (Participant 1, personal communication, June 24, 2015). Based on the study's findings and a review of the literature, the policy recommendation, the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy, addresses previous gaps and inconsistencies in the ninth grade transition programs by standardizing the school district's ninth grade programs. Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, and Wang (2013) explained how authentic, strategic change within a school district involves the consistent use of best practices by teachers and principals. Peurach and Glazer (2011) also discussed the use of best practice for large-scale school improvement and supported the replication of successful strategies and practices by schools and school systems. Consequently, the

project has strengths as it relates locally to School District A, but the project also has implications for use on a larger scale. Although the policy recommendation is intended to standardize ninth grade transition program and services, schools in other school districts and in other states could modify the program requirements, strategies, and procedures to best meet their needs; thus, the project has the potential to positively affect students, schools, and systems abroad.

Another strength of the project involves the required procedures of implementing the policy recommendation. If the superintendent and school board of School District A approves and adopts the recommendation, the ninth grade administrators, faculty, and staff at each high school would be implementing a biannual evaluation system that requires school and district-wide critical reflection and application that would foster organizational improvement. Owens (2010) explained the power of using practitioner and professional community reflection for critical and sustainable school improvement. Smith and Goodwin (2014) also explained the importance of organizational, critical reflection for school and organizational improvement through the use of a Guided Empowerment Self- Audit approach from the American Evaluation Association. The Self-Audit is a tool used to foster school improvement by evaluating schools in the following areas:

- Curriculum

- Assessment

- Instruction

- School Culture

- Community and Family Support

- Professional Development

- Leadership

- Organization

- Comprehensive Planning

- Data Use

- Extended Day

The evaluation within the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation also includes a comprehensive review of these areas.

The evaluation process included with the Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy recommendation requires each high school to begin with an analysis of their ninth grade statistics, program structure, strategies, and other components that are used for ninth grade transition. The analysis is repeated at the end of each semester and school year with the purpose of documenting growth and improvement or the need for changes and modifications. The evidence of improvement or the need for changes may be incremental or substantial for students as well as the ninth grade transition program structure and strategies for an individual school or for all three schools as a whole. The policy recommendation requires the use of organizational reflection and analysis through an embedded evaluation process.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

The policy recommendation was designed for one school district and uses the analysis of the ninth grade transition program at one school as the model for the standard ninth grade transition best practice. Additionally, only four administrators provided their

perceptions that contributed to the development of the project; thus, the limitations of the study pertain to the transferability of the recommended policy to other school organizations. Other school districts, school leaders, or general readers would have to assess how this policy recommendation could be adopted by their school organization based on their existing program structure and strategies.

While the findings and ensuing project from this study could be used to address the gaps and inconsistencies among the ninth grade transition programs within School District A, there is no expectation that the superintendent, and other district leaders, will actually implement the policy recommendation. Considering the current era of increased school accountability mandates, school and district leaders must determine the need for another policy mandate or more school autonomy. The study, however, did provide the opportunity for the school leaders to inventory and reflect on their ninth grade transition efforts.

The need for ninth grade transition program improvement was also considered as a limitation. The project was developed based on the assumption that school and district leaders see the need for improvement and standardization of the three ninth grade transition programs. The initial analysis for the project evaluation may provide the evidence that the programs at all three schools are producing adequate results, thus not needing changes or improvements.

Alternative approaches to addressing the problem were considered. Conducting this study on a larger scale that included the administrators of the other three high schools or administrators in other districts would be appropriate for providing more insight on

district-wide ninth grade transition processes and transferability. A research study that

includes programs designed for other grade levels may provide insight into the practices

and the methods that are used to affect a larger percentage of students compared to this

study on only a program for ninth grade students. For example, examining the

perceptions of administrators on the impact of SLCs in general would include ninth grade

transition programs and may also include additional school communities in which

students are grouped for various educational benefits.

Another recommendation for an alternate research study involves using a different

methodology. For this study, I intended to give voice to the administrators of the Ninth

Grade Academy. A qualitative, case study design was used to provide a thick, rich

description of the administrators' perception. Further research that uses quantitative or a

mixed -method approach could be used to produce statistical evidence of the impact that

the academy is having on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of a selected school.

A quantitative study would allow the researcher to test a hypothesis on the impact of the

Ninth Grade Academy. A mixed-method approach would also support the testing of a

hypothesis and allow the researcher to also provide a detailed description of the

experience, thus taking advantage of both qualitative and quantitative research.

Scholarship

As a scholar, I have always enjoyed the entire process of education and learning.

My interest in education, particularly public K-12 education, led me to obtain both

elementary and secondary certifications for teaching and for school administration.

Consequently, I have worked at every level in public school, K-12 education that

includes elementary, middle school, high school, and at the district office. As a teacher and administrator, each level presented new challenges and required different strategies, but the goal of providing high quality instruction and educational services to students and their families has remained constant.

My interest for ninth grade transition, the research topic, is a direct result of my experiences as a professional educator, my work on every level of K-12 public education, and my most recent work and observations at the middle and high school level. Because of my familiarity with ninth grade transition and the Ninth Grade Academy, I initially struggled with the decision to do a study on the ninth grade phenomenon and within the school district where I previously worked. With almost a decade of my professional career devoted to being a ninth grade administrator, I was concerned that my personal experiences would hinder my ability to remain impartial and to explain the experiences of others without injecting bias. Ultimately, my desire to give voice to other administrators on the subject of ninth grade transition became the overriding factor and facilitated my intent to complete this undertaking and improve the ninth grade transition process for students and their parents, teachers, other administrators, and high schools.

As a self-directed and intrinsically motivated learner, completing the process of the study was not an issue; however, at times I would underestimate and misjudge the amount of time that would be needed to complete various stages or steps such as the development of the written transcripts for member checking. During the study, I learned to exhibit patience while balancing my zeal to complete the research study. Ultimately, I

have learned from the inquiry and study of the Ninth Grade Academy as well as from the process required for each step.

The study of the Ninth Grade Academy and the application of the methods in educational research have increased my leadership capacity as a school administrator. The data collected from the school and district office administrators on the Ninth Grade Academy, the information reviewed from the literature review, and the constant reflection on my own experiences with ninth grade transitions has impacted my beliefs as a school leader. Consequently, as a result of my doctoral journey, I believe that I am an educational practitioner equipped to bring about positive social change locally and abroad.

Project Development and Evaluation

The project was not immediately evident, but I found it important to carefully study the collected data. Studying the data helped me to identify both strengths and shortcomings within School District A. As a result of the data collection, analysis, and review of the findings, the gap in educational services for ninth grade students among the three high schools became apparent. I found that the Ninth Grade Academy at School A positively impacts their ninth grade retention and dropout rate; however, the review of the collected data provided evidence that the other three high schools may not share similar outcomes. The participants all shared information on how differently each high school's ninth grade transition program operates and how each program is structured differently. The policy recommendation to address the gaps appeared to be the most appropriate

action to ensure that all ninth students receive equitable and consistent services to help them successfully acclimate to high school.

The project has an evaluation component that is designed as a measurement tool for growth on the school and school district level. The evaluation process begins at each school by collecting baseline data that includes defining the ninth grade problem at their school and collecting the evidence of the problem that includes the ninth grade retention and dropout rate and EOC exam scores. With the baseline data, each school will develop a ninth grade team and devise their plan for improvement based on the policy recommendation for similar program structure, strategies, and other essential transition practices. Formative or midyear evaluations will be used for professional development decisions to improve program areas showing the continued need for improvement. Summative evaluation data will include the end-of-the-school-year data for ninth grade retention and dropout rates as well as for end-of-course exams.

Throughout the process of developing the project and subsequent evaluation, I experienced several challenges due in part to using only one school for data collection. Even though I used only one of the three high schools within School District A, I wanted the project to positively affect more than just the ninth grade students at the study site. As a ninth grade administrator and an educational practitioner, I hope to promote positive social change for as many ninth grade students, schools, and school leaders as possible; therefore, I felt the need to involve all of the high schools within the district.

The intent to develop a policy recommendation for all three high schools presented the greatest challenge. Considering that I only used data from School A, I

wanted to develop a project that considers the pride and the emotions of teachers and school administrators at the three schools that could potentially develop with a mandate that requires some degree of school and educator comparison and the adoption of similar strategies and programs. While it is fair to assume that all educators desire to help students succeed in school, it was also important to consider and respect the stakeholders who will be involved. To overcome this challenge, I relied on support found within the literature that advocated the use of comparable programs.

In addition to the use of supporting literature, I designed the project evaluation to incorporate consideration for different school dynamics, communities, and stakeholders. The participatory-oriented evaluation begins with each school defining their ninth grade problem based on the realities of their high school. While the goal of the policy recommendation is to address the gaps in educational services and provide a district standard for ninth grade transition, the varying baseline data (ninth grade retention, dropout rates, and end-of-course exam results) collected during the initial phase of the evaluation, may not indicate the need to provide similar ninth grade programs. Despite the differences among the high school programs, the policy recommendation would be the standard for the use of similar program structure and strategies.

Leadership and Change

Reflecting on my doctoral journey, I have acquired a greater understanding and appreciation of school leadership and the process of change. My doctoral journey that included establishing a topic, reviewing related literature, collecting and analyzing the data, determining the findings, and developing a project and ensuing project evaluation

has helped me in determining what is required for and what should be avoided to experience successful change. Prior to starting this journey, I considered myself to be an effective school leader due to my experiences as a teacher and school administrator. Even with my educator experience, I have never created a new initiative for educators or school leaders outside of the school in which I worked. As a result, I am more confident and eager to conduct research on a larger scale as a benefit to the greater educational community.

The policy recommendation that I developed as a result of this research study could be used, if approved and adopted, as a change agent within School District A. Implementing the recommendation could also be a change agent for the participating educators and school leaders of School District A. While the project is designed for a specific district, school leaders in other school districts and in other states could also use the recommendation to initiate change. I will also use this research study as a change agent for the school district where I currently serve as the ninth grade administrator, and I hope to use what I have learned from this study to find other ways to improve ninth grade transition and my professional skills as a research practitioner.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

My doctoral journey has been one of, if not the most, challenging educational processes of my life. Although most of the journey seemed isolated, I found comforting support from the Walden faculty, my committee chair, and classmates on the same doctoral journey. During the times that my progression felt slow or stalled, I looked to the advice of the Walden faculty and the progress of my classmates, and I used personal

reflection to motivate myself to press onward. During the most difficult periods of completing my doctoral study, I felt most compelled to progress, an attribute that was most evident for me during my years as a high school and collegiate athlete. As a result, my doctoral journey represented my intrinsic desire to win.

As a scholar, the improvement of my ability to analyze and synthesize information has been my greatest accomplishment. As I reflect upon the information that I use daily as an administrator, I have a new perspective. I have learned to view data as a part of a collective story that gives voice or explains the whole picture. With a new appreciation for data and the process of synthesis to explain an issue, I hope to use data more frequently to benefit my educational environment and school environments abroad.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

This doctoral journey has encouraged me to have a new sense of being a life-long learner. I have always searched for opportunities to acquire new knowledge, however, my intent to use newly acquired information and knowledge now seems selfish. My coursework experience and the completion of my doctoral study have defined my purpose as a scholar and practitioner. I have a new desire to acquire knowledge for the purpose of promoting positive social change, thus giving me a new purpose as an educator.

The topic and scope of my research study focuses only on the perceptions of ninth grade transition within one school and one school district, but the research process and information that I gathered has sparked my interest for other issues in education. Considering the increased requirements for schools due to new accountability measures

within the U.S., the daily work environment for any educator exposes problems for

potential investigation and the creation of resolutions that may initiate educational and

school improvement. With my newly acquired doctoral experience, I feel compelled as a

practitioner to explain the educational issues that I encounter and explore methods that

may initiate a resolution, thus initiating positive social change. I will use what I have

learned for the rest of my life and career as an educator, practitioner, and researcher.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Developing a project based on an actual problem with the intent of addressing the

problem and producing positive social change was, at times, an overwhelming challenge.

However, by carefully analyzing the findings in conjunction with the supporting

literature, the project's purpose and goal became evident. In an essence, it was important

to synthesize the collected data in order to reveal the problem and recommend a solution.

The project development required careful study of the data, findings, and the collective

perspective of the participants beyond my normal level of comfort. As a self-proclaimed

'big picture' person, I have never felt confident in developing the initial strategies of

strategic plans for improvement. As a result of this study, I was forced to study the

details. I now understand that as a practitioner, reviewing and understanding the details

associated with all stakeholders is critical for any project development, large or small.

As I reflect on my role as the project developer for this study, I used numerous

forms of data with consideration for the dynamics of the district's three high schools. As

a former school administrator in School district A, the Superintendent, participants, and

other district leaders were aware and understood my abilities, but I wanted the district

leaders to respect and be receptive to my work as an objective researcher and educational

practitioner. I accomplished this with a careful analysis of the Ninth Grade Academy that

included member checking and support from the literature. By explaining and giving

voice to the administrators of the Ninth Grade Academy and by using supporting

empirical research, I gave credibility to the policy recommendation and my role as a

researcher and practitioner.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

The project that resulted from this study has potential implications for School

District A as well as for other school systems locally and abroad. The policy

recommendation addresses the educational gaps and inconsistencies of the ninth grade

programs and services among the three high schools within the district and provides a

document that the school and district leaders may use as a standard for ninth grade

transition best practice. If used, the policy recommendation may be able to facilitate

improved ninth grade retention and the dropout rate at the three high schools and for the

district as a whole. School and district improvement occurs as the individual and

collective performance of students improves; thus, the policy recommendation can be

catalyst for positive social change within all of the high schools of School District A.

Considering this present era of increased accountability in public schools, this

project also has the potential to initiate positive social change in other school systems

outside of School District A. While the specific policy recommendation may be relevant

only to School District A, other educators, seeking ninth grade and total school reform,

may use the process and information that I have provided to analyze their program and

initiate a similar standard of ninth grade transition best practice. Other school districts within the same state and nation-wide may be able to apply the findings from this study and ensuing project to reduce their ninth grade retention and school dropout rate that may result from students' inability to successfully acclimate to high school.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The findings from this study indicate that the school and district office administrators of School A perceive that the Ninth Grade Academy has a positive impact on their ninth grade retention and dropout rate. The study provided insight on the three areas that the administrators believed contributed to the Academy's success that includes the program structure, strategies, and other essential Ninth Grade Academy practices and protocols. The findings and ensuing project implies the need for school leaders to view ninth grade transition as a critical piece of school reform that impacts the performance of all grade levels and the entire school. As educators review their role and perceptions of ninth grade transition, more education, training, and professional development may be necessary. Additionally, as ninth grade transition efforts are reviewed, existing untapped resources may be used to further improve ninth grade student performance. Consequently, educators may determine that by initiating reform on the ninth grade level, continuing the improvement efforts in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade may be more easily attained.

Future research may benefit from expanding the scope of this study and project. Future research opportunities using quantitative, mixed-methods, or project evaluation methodology could be used to test, examine, and further explain the statistical

significance of ninth grade transition variables. Research using alternative methodology may be able to provide further insight into other ways that ninth grade transition programs are impacting students and schools. The findings could potentially support the need for greater ninth grade transition efforts.

The findings from this research study were used to establish a standard of ninth grade transition best practice. The best practice standard acknowledges and uses the support of related literature and the Ninth Grade Academy's structure and strategies. The establishment of an actual best practice standard draws attention to similar and consistent strategies used in ninth grade transition programs nation-wide.

Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to examine the perception of school administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of School A. The study and its findings have the potential to alter the way school leaders in School District A plan and maintain their ninth grade transition programs. The study also has the potential to alter the way educators in neighboring districts and states across the U. S. view ninth grade transition; thus, the study has the potential to be a catalyst for positive social change locally and abroad. My initial desire for conducting the study was to give voice to administrators about their perceptions of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on ninth grade retention and the dropout at School A. As a result of the analysis of the findings and the associated review of the literature, I discovered inconsistencies in the educational services that ninth grade students receive based on the location of the three high schools in School District

A. I developed the policy recommendation with the intent of standardizing the ninth grade transition programs and services.

The study also contributed to the existing literature on ninth grade transition programs and strategies and smaller learning communities as a strategy for grade-level and whole school reform. While the resulting project was designed to meet the specific needs of the students within School District A, the policy recommendation has the potential to be modified based on the needs of other school systems. The purpose of this project was to increase the district wide consistency among the ninth grade transition programs and services within School district A by developing a standard of ninth grade transition best practice. If the *Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice* policy is adopted, the high schools may be able to improve the educational performance of all ninth grade students, thus improving their overall school performance. While this conclusion serves as the end of my doctoral journey, it also represents the beginning for me to act as a more confident, skilled, and experienced educational practitioner with the potential to positively impact society on a larger scale.

The final section of this study includes implications for future research and my reflections on the project and my role as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. I also explained how this study might provide positive social change both locally and abroad. This study and resulting project has helped me develop a greater understanding of using educational research to positively impact student and school performance.

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Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation

June 5, 2015

Dear Felicia Walker,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give you permission to conduct the study entitled "Examining Administrator Perceptions on the Success of a Ninth Grade Transition Model" within the _____School District.

Although you have had previous roles as an administrator within the _____School District, I understand that you will be undertaking a Walden University student researcher role, and I authorize you to recruit participants in the form of administrators at _____High School and the school district office, conduct individual participant interviews and review evaluation reports for the purpose of data collection, conduct member-checking to ensure the accuracy of the collected data, and disseminate the findings from the study. Individual's participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

I understand that you will allow participants to volunteer and decline confidentially in order to minimize ethical problems and conflicts of interest. I also understand that _____School District's responsibilities include allowing access to the participants and the study site's evaluation reports and allowing for you to use an area within the study site and the district office to collect data and review evaluation reports based on what is most conducive to the participants. I reserve the right to withdraw the district from the study at any time if circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of my supervising faculty/staff without permission from Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Name

Superintendent
_____School District

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions: Understanding Administrator Perceptions of the Impact of a Ninth Grade Transition Model

1- Could you tell me about yourself, education, years of experience as a teacher and administrator, and how long you've been at this school.

2- Could you please describe the school (study site with demographics, enrollment, and numbers in each grade level)?

3- What factors led to the decision of the need for reform such as the Ninth Grade Academy?

4- Why was an academy selected as the ninth grade transition model?

5- What is your role within the program?

6- What are the characteristics of the Academy at the school? What are the components?

7- Do you believe that the Academy is successful? Why?

8- What do you believe are the specific factors contributing to the success of the program?

9- How is the Academy meeting the holistic needs of ninth grade students? Could you provide examples?

10- Based on the holistic concept, how is the Academy affecting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate?

11- What changes have you observed as a direct result of the transition program (student grades, discipline, retention, graduation, teacher roles and performance, student performance)?

12- How is the Academy impacting your ninth grade students? Teachers? School? District?

13- Do you have specific stories about how the Academy impacted students?

14- What are some lessons learned in the development of the Academy?

15- What would you add or change about the Academy? Why?

16- Would you recommend that all schools develop a ninth grade transition program? Why or why not?

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate

Dear_____

I am writing to request permission to include you as a participant within a research study involving the Ninth Grade Academy. The aim of the proposed study is to explain the perception of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of your school. As a doctoral candidate at Walden University, I am conducting research on ninth grade transition programs and believe that the results from this study will benefit your school and your entire school district.

I have provided additional information about the study as an attachment. The attached consent information explains the following:

- background information

- planned procedures

- voluntary nature of the study

- potential risks and benefits

- privacy

- contact information

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Felicia Walker
Walden University, EdD. Candidate

Approval #05-22-15-0345799
Expiration: May 21, 2016

Appendix D: Additional Consent Information about the Study

You are invited to take part in a research study of ninth grade transition programs. This study aims to provide an understanding of the school and district office administrators' perception on the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of your high school. I am inviting school and district office administrators to participate based on their role within the Ninth Grade Academy, to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Felicia R. Walker who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may know the researcher as a former school administrator at the study site, but this study is separate from that role.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of school and district administrators on the impact of the Ninth Grade Academy has on the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of students.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:
- be interviewed on your knowledge, feelings, perceptions, experience, and your background associated with the Ninth Grade Academy. The initial interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour and will take place at the school and a time based on your convenience.
- review the final study results to ensure accurate representation of your experiences

Here are some sample questions:
- Why was an academy selected as the ninth grade transition program?
- What are the characteristics of the Ninth Grade Academy? What are the components of the program?
- What is your role within the program?
- Do you believe that the Ninth Grade Academy is successful? Why?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one within the _____School District will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as loss of time and possible encumbrance of your daily routine as you're being interviewed.

This study will contribute to the existing body of literature on the effectiveness of ninth grade transition programs by providing your personal perspective as an administrator of an existing ninth grade transition program.

Payment:

Payment will not be provided for participation in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

The privacy and confidentiality of participation within this study are limited. Because the Ninth Grade Academy is the only specific ninth grade transition program within your school district, your participation may be determined by deduction; however, the researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you individually in the study reports. The reports will only refer to the administrators collectively with respect to school and district office administrators. Data will be recorded with a digital recorder and by written transcription. These files will be secured within a locked file cabinet. All recorded and written information will also be transferred to a password protected computer file for analysis. The data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Even as a researcher, in the state of South Carolina, I am a mandated reporter of child abuse and neglect thus, I am obligated to report child abuse and neglect situations that are shared and discussed. If participants provide risky or dangerous information, I will consider the most appropriate way to report the dangerous information and consult with my supervising faculty. However, prior to asking the interview questions, I will explain that the questions do not seek information about individual students or faculty members.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via _____ and/or felicia.walker2@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **#05-22-15-0345799** and it expires on **May 21, 2016.**

For convenience, you may respond to this email and attachment by replying, "I consent" to indicate your agreement to participate. Please print or save a copy of this consent information for your records.

Felicia Walker
Walden University, EdD. Candidate

Appendix E: National Institute of Health Certificate
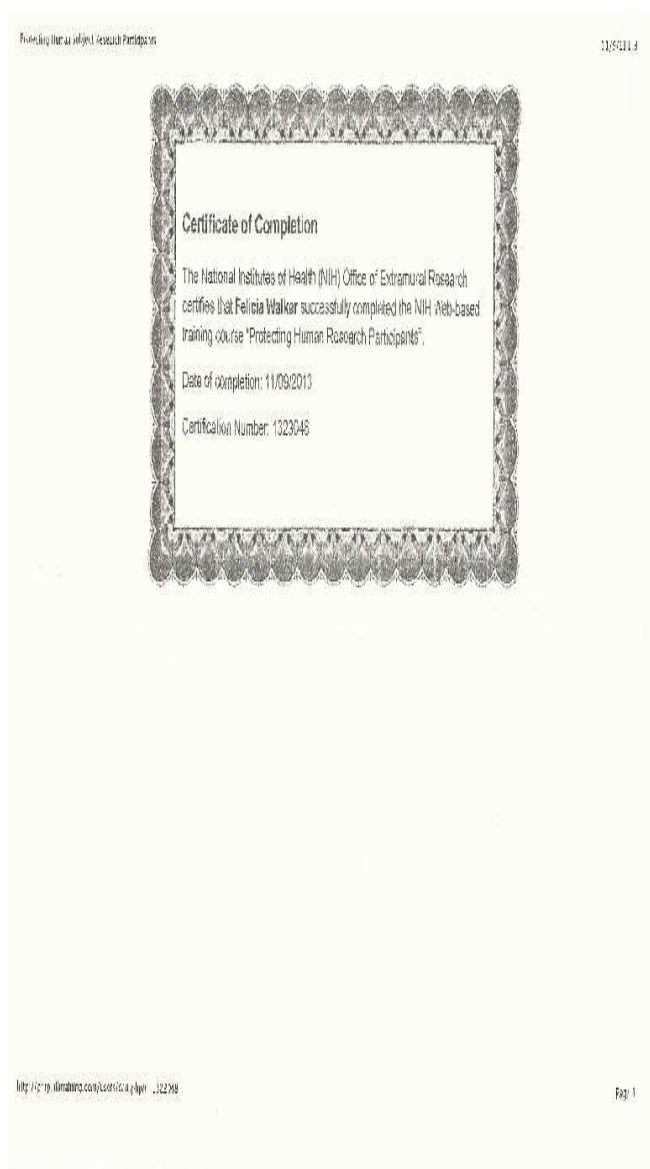
Appendix F: Confidentiality Agreement

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Appendix F Confidentiality Agreement

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Name of Signer: Felicia R. Walker

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: "Examining Administrator Perceptions on the Success of a Ninth Grade Transition Model" I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature: _Felicia R. Walker_   Date: _Apr. 29, 2015_

Appendix G: The Project

Ninth Grade Transition Best Practices Policy: A Systemic Guide to Positively

Impact 9th Grade Retention and the Overall Dropout Rate of High Schools

Prepared by Felicia Walker, Doctoral Candidate
August, 2015

_____

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Ninth grade transition efforts continue to present challenges to school leaders who look for effective means of helping ninth grade students successfully acclimate into high school (Habeeb, 2013). While many consider the ninth grade year as the most critical year in high school due to increased academic rigor, graduation requirements, and new social pressures accompanied with poor middle school preparation and reduced family support, high schools often struggle with consistently high ninth grade retention rates (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The cycle of retention in the ninth grade with newly matriculated ninth grade students creates an enrollment bulge that ultimately leads to the growing number of dropouts (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Ninth grade transition efforts involve both school and district leaders as a means of ensuring effectiveness and consistency as they are often utilized among all of the high schools within a district. School District A operates with three high schools under the leadership of one High School Executive Director. All three high schools utilize various ninth grade transition strategies based on the specific needs of the high school and its students. The research findings identified specific strategies that School A utilizes to effectively reduce the ninth grade retention rate, and the improving ninth grade retention rate has also positively affected the overall dropout rate. These specific strategies could be used in the development of a ninth grade transition best practices policy to be used as a means of reducing the ninth grade retention and dropout rate at all three high schools.

Background

Ninth grade transition consists of the process of helping first time ninth grade students successfully acclimate to the demands of high school. The ninth grade year is often considered the most critical year in high school due to increased academic rigor, graduation requirements, and new social pressures accompanied with poor middle school preparation and reduced family support (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Several studies show that the increased demands often result in many ninth grade students quickly falling behind and eventually dropping out of school (Blount, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Styron & Peasant, 2010).

> The ninth grade year as the most critical year in high school due to increased academic rigor, graduation requirements, and new social pressures accompanied with poor middle school preparation and reduced family support.

Ninth grade students fail at a higher rate than any other grade level. Various studies indicate that ninth grade students have higher rates of retention due to typical problems associated with the transition from middle school to high school (Blount, 2012; Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). Compounding the retention problem, ninth grade students who are retained also face the likelihood of becoming dropouts. Neild (2009) found that 30% of the nation's dropouts were retained repeatedly in the ninth grade. Bornshuer et al. also found that ninth grade students who were retained were six times more likely not to graduate on time and many ultimately became dropouts.

The absence of ninth grade transition programs in school districts within the United States suggest at-risk students are dropping out of high school before being given an opportunity to develop marketable skills or an educational background. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), in the 2010-11 academic year, approximately 80% of public high school students graduated on time with a regular high school diploma, leaving 20% as dropouts. These statistics include a 73.2% graduation rate improvement that was reported for the 2005-2006 academic year; however, the graduation statistic was a decline from the graduation rate of 86.5% for the 2000-01 academic year (U. S. Department of Education, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The Event Dropout Rate (EDR) for 16-24 year olds in the 2010-11 academic year represents approximately 3 million dropouts nationally.

Wheelock and Miao (2005) attributed the decline in graduation rate and the large number of national dropouts to a national ninth grade enrollment bulge. The enrollment bulge is often a direct result of large numbers of retained ninth grade students combined with newly matriculated ninth grade students, and ninth grade transition issues such as poor academic preparedness, lack of school connectedness, and reduced family support. The enrollment bulge often results in a cycle of retention in the ninth grade that ultimately leads to the growing number of dropouts (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Local and Regional Concerns

This study arose from an interest in the apparent the success of the Ninth Grade Academy at School A as evident based on the statistical data from their annual school report card that shows a consistent decline in their retention and dropout rates. School A

is a middle class, suburban high school that has an average student population of 1579

students and has a dedicated ninth grade transition program called the Ninth Grade

Academy. The Ninth Grade Academy addresses comparative student

retention and dropout problems identified in national reports as well

as within the school and district. School A has an average retention

rate of approximately 5% and an average dropout rate of 3.6% (from

2009-2013). Based on the actual statistics for School A, the majority

of dropouts occur in the ninth grade (South Carolina Department of

Education School Report Card [SCDE], 2013).

> The Ninth Grade Academy at School A addresses comparative student retention and dropout problems identified in national reports as well as within the school and district.

School A has shown improvement with declining dropout and

retention rates and increased graduation rates over the past 5 years;

however, the need for continued improvement continues to exist. The

present statistics indicate a 3.1% reduction in the retention rate and a .9% reduction in the

dropout rate. The 5-year dropout and retention trend data for School A is shown in Table

1.

Table 1

School A Dropout and Retention Trend Data

School Year	Dropout Rate	Retention Rate
2013	2.6%	2.8%

2012	3.9%	5.7%
2011	5.5%	6.9%
2010	2.5%	5.3%
2009	3.5%	5.9%

Note. This table was developed from "South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card" SCDE, 2009; SCDE, 2010; SCDE, 2011; SCDE, 2012, and SCDE, 2013.

The dropout and retention rate at School A are comparable to the statistical data for South Carolina, the state where School A is located. In the 2011-12 school year, there were almost quarter million public high school students in South Carolina. Of the nearly quarter million students, 28.4% were categorized as ninth grade students (SCDE, 2012). Approximately 2.5% of the nearly quarter million students were dropouts, and of this number, approximately 1,350 students were considered to be ninth grade students (SCDE, 2012). The ninth grade dropout count represents 26% of the total percentage of dropouts. Comparatively, the graduation rate within the school district for School A (School District A) also showed continuous improvement within a five-year period as the graduation rate improved from 74.7% to 83.3% from 2009-2013; however, the average number of dropouts (242) for the five-year period is still concerning (SCDE, 2009; SCDE, 2010; SCDE, 2011; SCDE, 2012; SCDE, 2013).

In the 2012-13 academic year, the graduation rate for South Carolina improved to 77.5%; this statistic was an improvement from the graduation rate of 73.6 % for the 2011-12 academic year. Even though the graduation rate shows continuous, yearly improvement, the state still ranks with the five lowest states in the nation for graduation rates (Aud et al., 2013). Table 2, 3, and 4 show five years of trend data for the 2007-08

academic year through the 2011-12 academic year for the state of South Carolina. Table

2 shows the state's dropout statistics by grade level, and Table 3 shows the state's total

dropout statistics with the percentage totals for all grade levels. The dropout statistics

shown in Tables 2 and 3 adversely affect the graduation rates shown in Table 4.

Table 2

Grade Level Dropout Counts Trend Data

Grade Level	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
9th	2342	2085	1691	1539	1350
10th	2325	1970	1810	1647	1393
11th	1897	1713	1545	1458	1291
12th	1468	1309	1219	1256	1198

Note. This table was developed from "South Carolina Dropout Numbers Decline" data
(SCDE, 2013).

Table 3

Dropout Rate Trend Data

School Year	Dropout Count	Dropout Percentage
2011-12	5232	2.5
2010-11	5900	2.8
2009-10	6265	2.9
2008-09	7077	3.4
2007-08	8032	3.9

Note. This table was developed from "South Carolina Dropout Numbers Decline" data.
(SCDE, 2013).

Table 4

Graduation Rate Trend Data

School Year	Graduation Rate
2012-13	77.5%
2011-12	74.9%
2010-11	73.65
2009-10	72%
2008-09	73.7%
2007-08	74.9%

Note. This table was developed from the "2012 Statewide Graduation Rates" report and the "High School Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate" report (SCDE, 2012 and SCDE, 2013).

School Reform

Many educational reform efforts designed to improve

graduation rates and reduce dropout rates are initiated by state and

federal regulations. Federal legislation from *NCLB* (2002) and

specifically Title V, Part D, and the revised Subpart 4 of the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)

Ninth grade transition consists of the process of helping first time ninth grade students successfully acclimate to the demands of high school.

encouraged the use of smaller learning communities as a means of boosting student

achievement (No Child Left Behind, 2002). The smaller learning community concept

with the use of designated strategies, interventions, and personnel was adopted to specifically address the needs of ninth grade students as research identified factors affecting the graduation and dropout rates of high schools that begin with issues starting in the ninth grade school year (Blount, 2012; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild, 2009; Styron & Peasant, 2010).

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) believed formal ninth grade transition programs, such as ninth grade academies, might ease the transition from middle schools to high school by better preparing and equipping first-time freshmen students to meet the new challenges of the high school environment. Styron and Peasant (2010) recommended the use of freshmen academies for improving the academic achievements of ninth grade students, particularly among African American students. Neild (2009) highlighted the features of two comprehensive reform models personalizing the school environment with interdisciplinary teams and the use of specialized training for ninth grade teachers to meet the academic, social, and behavioral needs of ninth grade students. Emmett and McGee (2012) concluded that freshmen academies are effective means of transitioning middle school students into high school by identifying the needs of ninth graders and by providing a supportive, stable environment with common, supportive teachers. Abbott and Fisher (2012) also concluded that intervention strategies such as middle and high school collaboration, summer orientation, mentoring, academic support, smaller classes, and the use of personalized learning environments were effective means of helping ninth grade students successfully transition into high school.

Other Suggested Reform Elements

In contrast to the varying titles and forms of existing ninth grade transition programs, the elements of these programs maintain consistent characteristics. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) examined how high schools can establish ninth grade communities of care by using various elements of ninth grade transitions that incorporate smaller learning communities, supportive teachers, and a curriculum that focuses on academic and life skills. McIntosh and White (2006) determined that freshman paths to success should include a caring environment, additional academic intervention, transition meetings with parents, and collaboration with feeder middle schools. Smith, Akos, Sungtaek, and Wiley (2008) suggested appropriate interventions for freshmen that should include middle and high school collaboration, strong parental involvement and communication, academic support, and peer mentoring with guidance support. Fulk (2003) highlighted solutions to freshmen transition issues that include expanded collaboration with middle schools, student mentoring, summer orientation, smaller classes, and specialized training for teachers. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) included implications for middle school educators to be included with ninth grade transition efforts through the creation of partnerships between feeder middle schools and the high school. Blount (2012) advised high school guidance counselors to work with school administrators to create transition programs that reduce the anxiety of first-time ninth grade students by guiding freshmen through the curriculum and program procedures and by providing academic, behavioral, and social advising. Bornsheuer et al. (2011) concluded that high school programs that utilize personalized instruction, interdisciplinary teaming, and mentoring minimize the risk of ninth grade retention and increase the likelihood of on-time graduation. Dynarski, Clarke,

Cobb, Finn, Rumberger and Smink (2008) provided recommendations for ninth grade

transition that were included within the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) that

identified high risk students, assigned mentors, and provided academic and enrichment

support, programs for behavioral and social skills, personalized learning environments

and rigorous and relevant instruction. Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, and Smith

(2000) analyzed the transition of low income, urban African American freshmen and

found that strong parental communication, peer tutoring, mentoring, additional academic

support, and guidance resulted in fewer students being retained. Additionally, the

Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast (2009) discussed how intervention

procedures and strategies used within current ninth grade transition programs

demonstrate positive results in terms of decreasing ninth grade retention and dropout

rates. Overall, the literature discussing ninth grade transition programs described

designated academic, behavioral, and social programs provided by specific teachers,

counselors, and related educational professionals.

Program Strategies

Additional studies also recommend the use of similar program strategies for

successful ninth grade transition. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) found that the middle

school concept of teaming used on the high school level with flexible scheduling, shared

teacher planning, and specialized activities promotes school connectedness that builds a

school environment that fosters ninth grade success. Letrello and Miles (2003)

recommended middle and high school collaboration, ninth grade transition teams, extra

academic support, and programs that promoted school involvement to ease the transition

for students with and without learning disabilities. Cushman (2006) suggested providing experiences that bridge the gap between the eighth and ninth grade school year, using a separated setting for all ninth grade students, using mentoring and advisory groups, incorporating a ninth grade orientation class, and providing additional academic support in order to promote ninth grade success. All of these program components are consistent with Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) synthesis of current research on ninth grade transition that recommend a ninth grade transition program and curriculum, academic support and intervention, programs that promote school connectedness, and a "school within a school" (p. 72) structure for ninth grade students.

Smaller Learning Communities

Smaller learning communities (SLC) are also recommended as specific programs for ninth grade and high school reform efforts. The US Department of Education (2001) defined SLCs as structures within large high schools that group students into smaller groups based on a specific theme, specific strategies, or specific grades. SLCs are often referred to as "schools within a school" as the groups are often independent, operational units. Ninth grade academies and ninth grade transition programs often operate as a SLC. Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, and Poirier (2010) found that smaller learning communities such as ninth grade academies positively correlate to student engagement and success with respect to students' behavioral, relational, and cognitive experiences in high school. Legters and Balfanz (2010) also identified comprehensive whole school reform efforts such as small learning communities and ninth grade transition programs that should be used to create personalized, flexible, and responsive approaches to students' needs.

Ninth grade transition programs are often considered as smaller learning communities that consist of an interconnected system of people, courses, and services. Often referred to as a community of care, the interconnected system may include personalized instruction, study skills training, orientation programs, family outreach, mentoring, remediation strategies, designated halls or buildings, and dedicated faculty members (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Jackson & Schulenberg, 2013; Somers, Owens, & Pililawsky; 2009; Stryon & Peasant, 2010). Despite the encouragement to use smaller learning communities and specifically ninth grade transition programs, many schools nationwide fail to use any specific ninth grade transition effort.

With the goal of making large high schools smaller, providing first time high school students with the people and resources needed for promotion, and ultimately easing the transition from middle to high school, ninth grade transition programs represent a grade specific effort to combat the dropout crisis. Although ninth grade transition programs evolved from legislation aimed at improving high schools, ninth grade transition programs are not mandated reform strategies (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Despite data on ninth grade dropout rates, the decision to utilize this high school reform effort is typically a district or school decision.

Overview of the Study

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine administrator perceptions of the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on ninth grade retention and the dropout rate of students.

Study Design

An intrinsic case study approach was used to explain the perceptions of school and district office school leaders on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students and the dropout rate at School A. Yin (2014) explained that the decision to use the case study design should be based on the researcher's intent to explain how or why a phenomenon works. Intrinsic case study designs are used when the case (the Ninth Grade Academy) is being studied (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Purpose of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was chosen for this study because it provided the opportunity to examine administrator perceptions of the specific strategies and processes of the Ninth Grade Academy. Yin (2014) explained that the decision to use qualitative case study designs should be based on the researcher's intent to explain how or why a phenomenon works. Qualitative case study research allows the researcher to provide a rich, thorough, and detailed description of the bounded system or case (Merriam, 2009).

Participants

Qualitative research typically involves only a few individuals or cases to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon, and the size of a sample within a case study is contingent upon the saturation of data (Merriam, 2009). For this study, the case

consisted of the building principal, the ninth grade principal, another assisted principal, and the Executive Director of Secondary Instruction.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study. The questions are as follows:

- What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students?

- What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the dropout rate of high school students?

- What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators of how the Ninth Grade Academy may be affecting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate from a holistic approach to educating students?

- What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on what could be added to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase the impact that the program may have on ninth grade retention and dropout rates?

Data Collection and Research Analysis

Data collection consisted of semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted at the school or at the district office with the administrators who provided prior consent and a review of evaluation reports from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), High Schools That Works (HSTW), and the school's State Report Cards. The participants were given the opportunity to review the transcribed date to ensure accuracy

of the report. Data analysis consisted of using a constant comparative inductive process that helped to develop various codes and categories and themes that helps to describe and interpret the data.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the retention rate of ninth grade students?

The administrators all perceived that the Academy positively affected the ninth

grade retention rate (reduced the ninth grade retention rate). Table 5 includes the specific

data that was provided to support this perception.

School A 9th Grade Table 5

Retention Rates

School Year	9th Grade Retention Rate
2013-14	6.8%
2012-13	9.5%
2011-12	10.85%
2010-11	9.7%
2009-10	12.29%

Note. This table was developed from personal communication (Participant 2, July 1, 2015.

The school's evaluation data also supported this claim as indicated with specific

statistical data that provided the overall retention rate for School A.

Table 6 provides an overview of the consistently low retention rate at School A.

Table 6

School A School-Wide Retention Rates

School Year	School-Wide Retention Rate
2013-14	3.1%
2012-13	2.8%
2011-12	5.7%
2010-11	6%
2009-10	5.3%

Note. This table was developed from personal communication (Participant 2, July 1, 2015.

Administrators provided other specific examples of how the Ninth Grade Academy reduces the ninth grade retention rate as well. The examples included the Ninth Grade Academy structure and specific academic strategies. Although the structure of the Ninth Grade Academy has evolved in recent years, the administrators explained that the purpose, goals, and flexible design are still based on the ever-changing needs of its ninth grade students.

The administrators all perceived that the Academy positively affected the ninth grade retention rate (reduced the ninth grade retention rate).

The administrators shared information on the specific Academy strategies that included the following:

- "Zeros Aren't Permitted" (ZAP)

- Retakes

- Various remediation opportunities,

- Advisor sessions

- Credit recovery program are utilized to increase the likelihood of the promotion of ninth grade students

- Supplemental yearlong (skinnies) classes in math and ELA as being essential to the success of ninth grade students' ability to be successful in all classes as well as the End of Course Exams (EOC) that the state of South Carolina uses to measure student success

- The middle school team concept used among the ninth grade teachers help the ninth grade students, teachers, and other related personnel build strong relationships based on good communication and a strong desire to meet needs of ninth grade students during the critical ninth grade year.

Research Question 2

What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on the impact that the Ninth Grade Academy has on the dropout rate of high school students?

Retention and dropout rates are closely related as ninth grade students who are not promoted have an increased probability of repeated retention that leads to a greater risk of dropping out of school (Bornsheuer et al., 2011). Norton (2011) also emphasized empirical research that explained how retention impedes the progress of students and ultimately leads to greater chances of educational failure and dropping

> The 9th grade retention rate at School A declined from 12.29% to 6.8% from the 2010-11 to 2014-15.

out of school. The administrators shared their overall belief that the Ninth Grade Academy was effectively reducing the dropout rate by reaching at-risk students early in

their high school career and giving them the academic, social, and behavioral tools

needed to successfully acclimate into high school.

The dropout statistics indicated by participants and evaluation data show a

consistent, but relatively low dropout rate for School A. Table 7 shows the overall

dropout statistics for School A.

Table 7

School A Dropout Rates

School Year	Dropout Rate
2013-14	2.3%
2012-13	2.6%
2011-12	3.9%
2010-11	5.7%
2009-10	2.5%

Note. This table was developed from South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card (SCDE, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010, and 2009).

Additionally, administrators reported that the Ninth Grade Academy system not

only helped the at-risk and low performing ninth grade students, but the former Ninth

Grade Academy students (10th, 11th, and 12th grade students) periodically seek to their

previous Academy teachers because they benefitted from the academic remediation and

hands-on approach to teaching that the Academy system provided.

Research Question 3

What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators of how the Ninth Grade Academy may be affecting the ninth grade retention and dropout rate from a holistic approach to educating students?

Holistic education helps schools support the growingly diverse needs of students by using a plethora of measures to educate the whole child (Forbes, 2012). This includes incorporating academic, mental, social, and behavioral supports. School A utilizes various programs and personnel (school based and community based) to educate and meet the needs of its ninth grade students.

The administrators acknowledge a holistic structure of support that the Ninth Grade Academy has and provided examples of how it positively affects ninth grade retention and the dropout rate at School A. The Ninth Grade Academy consists of dedicated teachers, two counselors, a ninth grade administrator, advisors, and mental health professionals. The administrators agreed that the diverse network of dedicated ninth grade personnel is designed to help and meet the needs of all students mentally, socially, academically, and behaviorally. The Ninth Grade Academy system offers layers of supports that keep students from falling through the cracks that may exist within large school systems.

Research Question 4

What are the perceptions of school and district office administrators on what could be added to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase the impact that the program may have on ninth grade retention and dropout rates?

Although the administrators perceived that the Ninth Grade Academy is successful as demonstrated by the declining ninth grade retention and dropout rate at School A, all of the administrators provided several strategies and practices that could be added to improve the overall impact of their ninth grade transition program. Each strategy for improvement involved personnel training and program practices that would academically benefit the students and provide a greater structure of support for at-risk students. The administrators acknowledge that they continually see the need for improvement as the needs for new, incoming ninth graders change. The practices and strategies that they would add to the Ninth Grade Academy to increase its impact on ninth grade retention and the overall school dropout rate include the following:

- additional dedicated ninth grade teachers (for honor students)

- additional ninth grade elective options for students needing skinnies

- a completely separate location (adjacent wing or building)

- smaller class sizes to provide more one on one time with at-risk students

- more autonomy to make changes (scheduling or personnel) in response to student needs

- more collaboration with 8th grade middle school teams to better prepare rising ninth grade students

- more intervention procedures for identified rising at-risk students

- a summer bridge program (summer remediation) for rising ninth graders

- more collaborative efforts with tenth grade teachers for ninth grade students transitioning to the tenth grade

- more specific 9th grade recognition for academic achievement (a 9th grade awards program)

- 9th grade transition team meetings (meeting times for 9th grade teachers (8th grade teachers at the end of the year) and other personnel with a focus on 9th grade students and the program)

Recommendations

The development of a Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy emerged as a result the consistent themes created during the analysis of the data. The administrators of the Ninth Grade Academy perceive that the structure, procedures, and elements of the program are reducing the ninth grade retention and dropout rate of the school,

> All administrators believed that the Academy is a successful school reform method that has improved their 9th grade retention rate and the overall dropout rates.

and their perceptions are corroborated by statistical data obtained from various evaluation reports. The recommendation of the Best Practice Policy Consists of three areas of focus outlined in Table 8.

- Ninth Grade Transition System Structure

- Ninth Grade Transition Strategies

- Ninth Grade Transition Program Elements

Table 8

Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Standards

Ninth Grade Transition System
• Dedicated team of teachers who only teach 9th grade students (ELA and Math are

critical areas)

- Dedicated 9th Grade Administrator

- Dedicated 9th Grade Counselor

- Mental Health Advisor

- Assigned Academic Counselor

- Common 9th Grade Only Classes

- Middle School Transition Liaison

- Strong Communication System with Parents

- 9th Grade Focus Teams for Professional Development

- Middle School Teaming Focus for Holistic Student Development

Ninth Grade Transition Strategies

- System of extra help

- System of remediation

- Supplemental classes

- At-Risk Student Focus

- Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS)

- Advisor/Advisee mentoring

Ninth Grade Transition Program Elements

- System of continuous and adaptive professional development for ninth grade

  teachers

- Flexible scheduling

- 9th grade summer orientation

- 8th grade tours

- Math and ELA vertical articulation and professional development among 8th and 9th

  grade teachers

- High school 101 classes

Implementation Plan

The implementation of the policy would begin by reviewing the ninth grade

problems and data from each school in the months preceding the start of a school year.

The administrators, teachers, counselors, and other needed personnel would be

established as the school based ninth grade focus teams. The implementation involves

establishing the actual program, strategies, and other essential transition practices. The

implementation plan is displayed in Table 9.

Table 9

Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy Recommendation Implementation

Month	Activity
May 2016	- Review the ninth grade problem - review and discuss each schools data (ninth grade retention, dropout rate, and EOC exam scores, and disseminate the research study's

	findings
	• Determine the ninth grade team at each school
	• Review and devise a plan based on the policy recommendation for the ninth grade program, strategies, and other essential transition practices for discussion at July meeting
	• Develop semester and EOC formative and summative evaluation plan
July 2016	• Discuss school based ninth grade plans
	• Determine needed resources and professional development
August 2016	• Initiate the school based ninth grade programs
	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
September 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
October 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
November 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
December 2016	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
	• Plan for review of the semester data (summative and formative evaluation)
January 2017	• Review each ninth grade program data (passage rate and EOC exam data)
	• Plan professional development based on data results
February 2017	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development

March 2017	
	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
April 2017	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
May 2017	• Conduct monthly, district-wide ninth grade focus group professional development
	• Plan on final district-wide meeting to discuss results and revisions to the programs
June 2017	• Discuss results (retention and passage rate and EOC exam data)
	• Discuss needed revisions and plan for 2017-2018 school year.

Program Evaluation and Other Considerations

For the purpose of the policy recommendation, the evaluation will involve reviewing the passage statistics and EOC exams for the schools' first semester (formative assessment) and reviewing the passage and retention statistics and EOC exam data for the second semester (summative assessment). Passage data will be determined by an average of the ninth grade courses attended by ninth grade students compared to the number of courses in which credit was awarded. Students earn credits for courses taken during the first and second semesters. Retention data will be determined by the number of ninth grade students who did not acquire adequate credits to be promoted to the tenth grade compared to the total number of ninth grade students. End of course data will provide the

percentage of students who passed the state's end of the year comprehensive exams for Algebra I and English I, the two ninth grade level courses.

The review of the passage and retention rate and the EOC exam data should occur at each school prior to the policy implementation and after each following semester. Starting the school year with a review of the initial statistics prior to implementation of the policy would provide baseline data for comparison.

The recommended Ninth Grade Transition Best Practice Policy standard could be used as a guide at all three high schools with special considerations and accommodations made based on the individual high school budget, personnel, at-risk student populations, school goals, and ninth grade student needs. Successful implementation of this policy recommendation should improve student, school, and district outcomes in the Kershaw County School District but also has the potential to positively impact neighboring school districts in other counties, states, and nation-wide.