

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Middle School Transition for Students with Autism: Considering the Student Perspective
of Formal and Informal School Structures

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By

Matthew E. Rubin

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The dissertation of Matthew E. Rubin is approved:

Kathleen Rowlands, Ph.D.

Date

Joan Lucid, Ed.D.

Date

Sue Sears, Ph.D., Chair

Date

California State University, Northridge

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to every student who has sat in my office wondering why they don't have the friends their classmates do, or why they never feel like they fit in.

You are my inspiration for writing this. I can't promise that one dissertation will solve the problem, but I promise you that I'll keep trying. You deserve it.

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ABSTRACT

Middle School Transition for Students with Autism: Considering the Student Perspective of Formal and Informal School Structures

By

Matthew E. Rubin

Doctor of Education
in Educational Leadership

Middle school is a crucial time for students, as it can have a significant impact on long term academic success. A successful transition from elementary to middle school increases the likelihood that a student will experience success. For students with disabilities, middle school transition can be particularly challenging, and this challenge is thought to be especially acute for students with autism. In spite of this, there has been very little research studying middle school transition for students with autism, and what research does exist does not include the students with autism themselves as a primary data source. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by considering student perspectives of systems and structures put into place by schools to assist with the middle school transition. Through a series of focus groups, interviews, and classroom observations, I find a number of themes, including the importance of certain formal structures, including student schedules using a cohort model and embedding social emotional learning in academic classes. Positive student to student and teacher to student relationships can be key in allowing these formal structures to be successful. Moreover, I

find that it is possible and necessary to include the voices of students in the conversation when discussing systems designed to help them experience success.

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

Introduction

Educators have long been concerned about middle school effectiveness, but have only more recently begun to explore the transition from elementary to middle school, and its role in an effective, successful middle school experience. As early as 1963, educational researchers were bemoaning the lack of attention schools paid to students' social and emotional needs as they entered adolescence (Meyer, 2011). As students enter middle school, they are typically asked to move from an environment rich with teacher-based support to one in which they are expected to be more independent and self-sufficient (Goldrich, 2014). All of this occurs at exactly the same time that adolescents are experiencing the physical and emotional changes of puberty, which only compounds the struggle of succeeding in a less emotionally supportive environment (Patrick & Drake, 2009).

Success in middle school is profoundly important, because a student's experiences in middle school play a significant role in the decision to drop out of high school (O'Brian, 2012). Studies have shown a significant drop in mathematics and language arts achievement as students move from fifth grade at an elementary school to sixth grade at a middle school (Sharp, 2012). This decrease continues through the 10th grade and is a key contributor to the decision to drop out of high school (Sharp, 2012). In spite of this, there has been more research done regarding the middle school to high school transition than on the transition from elementary to middle school (Sharp, 2012). A focus on the elementary to middle school transition, however, is necessary, since a key

predictor of middle school success is a successful transition from elementary school (Lorain, n.d.).

Making the transition from elementary to middle school can be difficult for all students, but is especially challenging for those students with autism. Autism refers to a wide spectrum of conditions, but is diagnosed based on an individual meeting three criteria. First, individuals must have a deficit in their social approaches, which impedes them from engaging in standard back and forth conversation. Second, individuals must have a deficit in non-verbal communication strategies, such as maintaining eye contact and reading body language. Finally, individuals must have difficulty making and maintaining social relationships, often because they are unable to adjust their behaviors to conform to age-typical actions (Autism Speaks, 2017).

Though it is not part of the official diagnostic tool, individuals with autism also typically have difficulty with executive functioning skills (Mandy et. al, 2016). Executive functioning skills include planning, organizing, strategizing, and paying attention to detail. All of these skills are key in going from one task to another (Wormeli, 2013). As students enter middle school, they are typically asked to move from one task to another more frequently than they were in elementary school. As such, students with weak executive functioning skills are more apt to struggle with making the transition to middle school (Goldrich, 2014). If the student with weak executive functioning skills also has autism, the difficulty is thought to be especially acute (Mandy et. al, 2016).

Problem Statement

There is a body of research studying the transition to middle school of students with disabilities. (Kalymon, Gettinger & Hanley-Maxwell, 2010). However, most such

research considers all students with disabilities as a single group. Additionally, most of this research relies on teachers and administrators, rather than on students themselves, as the primary data source. Some research (Akos, 2004; Duchense, Rattele, & Roy, 2012; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000) has considered the perceptions of students themselves as they make the transition to middle school. Again, however, these studies look at students in general rather than focusing on students with autism. Although it is commonly assumed that students with autism struggle with middle school transition even more than those with other disabilities, evidence of this struggle is primarily anecdotal (Mandy et al, 2016). Moreover, most studies on middle school transition are quantitative in nature. These quantitative studies (Gniewosz, Eccles, & Noack, 2011; Johnson, 2009; Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008), rely primarily on surveys as a data collection tool.

This study fills gaps in current research in three ways. First, it considers students with autism specifically, as opposed to looking at students with all disabilities as a single group. Second, it is qualitative in nature, utilizing personal interviews, focus groups, and observations to collect data. Qualitative research is the most appropriate research tradition when the researcher seeks to understand the experience and perceptions of study participants (Creswell, 1996). Finally, the study uses the voices of students with autism as the primary data source, capturing the feelings and perspectives of these students as they make the transition to middle school.

Research Purpose and Significance

In this study, I selected six student participants. These students were sixth or seventh graders with autism at a small independent charter school. Through a series of three focus groups, I examined how the participating students experienced the middle

school transition, and considered their perspectives on the structures their school puts in place to facilitate this transition. I also conducted personal interviews with the teachers of these students and observed their classes. Through these interviews and observations, I determined the extent to which the perceptions of teachers were similar or dissimilar to those of the students they teach.

This study provides a contribution to the field of education by offering new insights into middle school transition, as perceived by students with autism. The small sample size of the study precludes any of the study's findings from being statistically significant, but middle school leaders will benefit from hearing the voices of these often unheard students. As a middle school principal, I have seen the struggles of students with autism as they enter middle school. Many of these students become overwhelmed and feel they have no voice. These feelings can lead to withdrawal, disruptive behavior, and academic failure. Learning more about what students do or do not find helpful in easing their transition will lessen these negative outcomes.

Research Questions

My study seeks to answer the following questions:

Research Question: How do students with autism at a small charter school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?
2. How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was created based on a review of literature related to middle school transition. The framework is based on the work of Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013), who distinguish between the formal and informal school structures. Formal school structures are created by the school and are expected to be implemented school-wide. Examples of such structures include the bell schedule, curriculum, and student scheduling practices (Akos, Creamer, & Masina, 2004). For example, a school may choose to have, as part of its bell schedule, an advisory class. Such a class is intended to teach non-academic skills, often called soft skills, and serve as a home base for students (Johnson, 2009). Formal structures might also include scheduling practices such as coring and teaming. Teaming is a practice in which a group of students stays together for multiple classes. Coring is a practice in which a single teacher teaches a group of students in two content areas.

In contrast to the above-mentioned formal structures, informal structures are aspects of the school created primarily by teacher to student or student to student interactions, rather than by school policy (Eccles et. al, 1993). These structures often occur during parts of the day that include such times as nutrition, lunch, passing periods, and time before and after school, but can also happen during class time (Holas & Huston 2012). Holas and Huston (2012) argue that both formal and informal structures impact students' experiences transitioning to middle school.

My theoretical framework argues that it is not so much the systems and supports schools implement during these structured and unstructured times of day, but the *perspective* teachers and students hold about these aspects of school, that directly affect

the middle school transition experience. Moreover, I argue that student perspectives of these systems and supports affect teacher perspectives, and vice versa. These perspectives are informed by multiple factors. For example, students are often impacted by the experience they had as elementary students, especially if their schools offered a middle school transition program (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Teachers, for their part, may be impacted by their prior experience, biases, and values (Holas & Huston, 2012). In this way, I argue in my theoretical framework that student experiences in elementary school, as well as the prior experiences, values, and biases of teachers have the most direct impact on the middle school transition experience. For this reason, to study middle school transition among students with autism, the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of such students must be brought to the fore through direct conversations with them. Figure one shows this framework graphically.

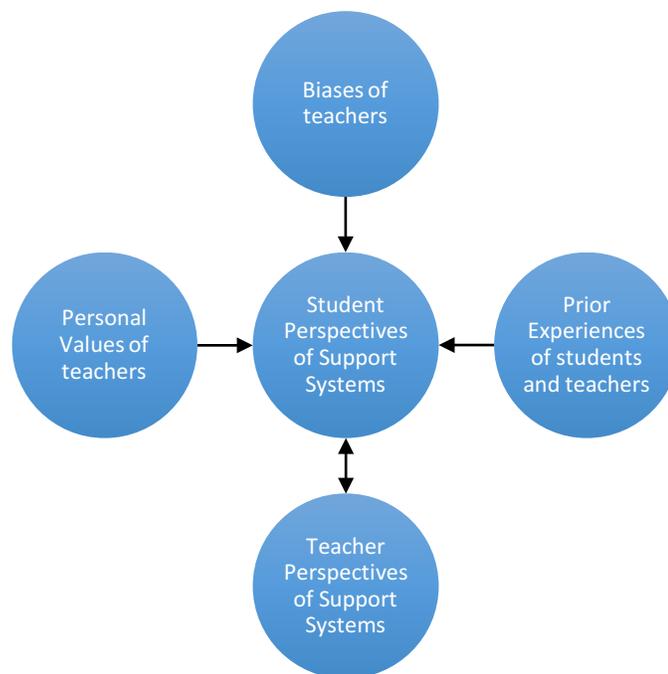


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Factors Impacting Middle School Transition

Overview of the Methodology

My study used qualitative research to capture the stories, feelings, and experiences of students with autism as they transition to middle school. Qualitative research describes phenomena, focusing on such things as the perceptions, activities, and experiences of participants (Hendricks, 2017). Within qualitative research approaches, my dissertation was a phenomenological case study. Exploring the experiences of individuals who have experienced a phenomenon is a key element of phenomenological research (Creswell, 1996). In the case of my study, the phenomenon being studied is the transition to middle school. My research also incorporated aspects of a case study. Since my research plan called for looking closely at the experiences of a small number of students at a single school, a case study was an appropriate type of qualitative research in which to engage (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

I conducted my study at Success Academy #4 (SA4), an independent charter school located in a suburban community of Southern California. (All names of schools, districts, organizations, and individuals are pseudonyms.) This site was selected through a combination of criterion-based and opportunistic selection methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Students with autism were my primary data sources. I selected six such students and conducted a series of three focus groups. Additionally, I used classes as a data source through observations. I observed three classes in which at least one of my participants is a student. Moreover, I interviewed the three teachers at SA4 whose classes I am observed.

As a qualitative researcher, I analyzed the data I collect continuously during the collection process. I first segmented the data, by pulling key quotations from interviews and focus groups, as well as notes from my observations. These segmented data were

then coded, a process in which I pulled significant ideas from quotations, observations, and short responses. Finally, I looked for broad themes found in the codes. With themes drawn from my data analysis, I began the process of interpretation.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its small size. The study only looks at six students, all of whom attend one school. Due to this sample size, the study is not generalizable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Additionally, any study that relies on interviews or focus groups as its primary data source has inherent limitations. Participants may mis-remember things and sometimes intentionally or subconsciously give answers that are inaccurate (Glesne, 2016). My role as a middle school principal may have further complicated my ability to obtain accurate information through interviews, as participants may have said what they thought I wanted to hear rather than what they truly believed.

My limited time in the field is also a limitation. Phenomenological studies are typically characterized by “extensive and prolonged engagement” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 48); I was only in the field for a relatively short period of time, for three focus groups and observations. I attempted to account for the limitations of my study by triangulating data sources, using observations along with focus groups and personal interviews.

Delimitations

This study seeks to understand the perceptions and experiences of students with autism as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. The scope of my study is limited to the experiences of six student participants at one middle school in a suburban neighborhood of Southern California. The time constraints of the study was the

period from September 2018 to February 2019, during which time all focus groups, personal interviews, and observations took place.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I have provided background information on the topic of middle school transition among students with autism. I have also laid out the conceptual framework and research questions that guide my study. In the second chapter, I conduct a review of relevant literature and present an argument that my study fills a gap in the existing research on the topic of middle school transition. Chapter three focuses on methodology. I review my reasons for selecting my research tradition along with discussing the data collection and analysis methods I will employ. The fourth chapter of my study discusses the results and findings of my study. These results are discussed and elaborated on in the fifth chapter, at which time I also discuss implications for practice, and opportunities for further research and investigation.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This study considers the transition of students with autism as they move from elementary to middle school. I look particularly at the perspectives of students, and their views of the systems schools put into place to assist with their transition. My theoretical framework states that schools consist of both formal and informal structures, and that both combine to impact student transition. Additionally, I argue that the perspectives of students and teachers about such structures are generally more important in facilitating a successful transition than are the structures themselves. This review of the literature will consider what is known about the transition to middle school, its impact on student success, and how it is specifically experienced by students with autism and other disabilities. I also discuss a gap in the literature focusing on students with autism in particular and using student voices as a primary data source. This gap in the literature is filled by my study.

Review of Empirical Literature

Middle School Transition, School Connectedness, and Academic Success

Researchers have long understood that going from elementary to middle school is not the same as making other grade to grade transitions (Goldrich, 2014; Meyer, 2011). This educational progression presents specific challenges for many students. Akos (2004) referred to middle school entry as a “risky endeavor” (p. 1) citing a substantial list of difficulties many students face when making this transition, including decreases in self esteem, academic achievement, and motivation, alongside increases in behavior problems and psychological distress. Akos, Rose, and Orthner (2015) considered the academic

achievement among students as they entered the sixth grade in a middle school. The authors found that while students increased their academic achievement every year, “relative to the other grade-to-grade advancements, the fifth-to-sixth grade change is substantially diminished” (Akos et al., 2015, p. 180). For many students, middle school is also a time when feelings of connectedness to school and adults in general decreases (Baker & Narula, 2012; Echols, 2014). This decreased connectedness is commonly used to explain the decline in academic and social-emotional success during the move from elementary to middle school (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008; Rudasill, Niehaus, Crockett, & Rakes, 2014). For this reason, middle schools have long sought to find ways to increase school connectedness as students moved from fifth grade at an elementary school to sixth grade at a middle school (Baker & Narula, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008).

Of the many factors impacting a successful middle school transition, school connectedness is widely believed to be among the most important (Baker & Narula, 2012). Tomek, Bolland, Hitchcock, Bolland, and Hooper (2017) define school connectedness as a situation where students have “positive or successful interactions with teachers and peers” (p. 2). Tomek et al. find a positive correlation between school connectedness and several desirable outcomes, including emotional health, physical health, and academic success. In contrast, decreased connectedness has been shown to lead to poor academic outcomes, risky behaviors, increased suspensions, and decisions to drop out of school (Rudasill, Reio, Spipanovik, & Taylor, 2010; Sharp, 2012). Rudasill et al. (2012) find that the correlation between low school connectedness and risky behavior is especially strong for students with disabilities. They found a negative correlation, for

example, between school connectedness and both peer-to-peer conflicts and student-to-teacher conflicts. Since their study was strictly quantitative in nature, Rudasill et al. point out that they cannot determine why connections decrease risky behavior, and suggest further research utilizing interviews and observations, to explore this question and make recommendations on how best to facilitate positive interactions between teachers and students with disabilities.

Identifying the Problem

Akos et al. (2004) found three broad categories into which the challenges of the middle school transition could be classified. They described these challenges as organizational, academic, and social. Organizational challenges refer to differences in the structure of middle and elementary schools. Such differences might include having a locker, moving from class to class, and having multiple teachers. Middle schools also frequently differ from elementary schools in discipline plans (Lane, Oakes, Carter, & Messenger, 2015), and this too is an organizational challenge students face. Academic challenges refer to the generally more rigorous course of study students encounter in middle school. Moreover, Lane et al. (2015) point out that middle schools frequently use a different grading system than do elementary schools and often have less lenient policies on missing and incomplete work. Social challenges refer to interacting with a larger, generally more diverse peer group. While these challenges are realities for all students, researchers have found that certain subgroups have especially significant struggles (Lofgran, Whiting, & Smith, 2015; Sebanc, Guimond, & Lutgen, 2016). Akos et al. (2015), for example, found that the challenges of middle school transition were more significant for males, students of color, and special education students.

Mitigating Challenges by Identifying the Core Problem

In seeking to explain, and thus lessen, the challenges described above, researchers have often started by considering what it is about middle school that leads to these difficulties. They most often point to the structure, size, and teaching practices of middle schools (Holas & Huston, 2012). Yet researchers disagree on which of these factors are most important, or if some of them are even important at all. Understanding the cause of the problem is important, because it can serve as a starting point for developing solutions. Moreover, multiple researchers (Barber & Olson, 2004; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000) have made the point that strategies intended to solve one problem can often solve others. That is to say, a strategy intended to mitigate the academic challenges of middle school may also reduce structural problems. As such, researchers tend not to focus solely on organizational, academic, or social problems in isolation, but instead tend to consider them holistically (Akos et al., 2004.)

Some (Barber & Olson, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993) have suggested that the drop in school connectedness and academic achievement in middle schools may be attributable to an age/ structure mismatch. They argue that the structure of a middle school (multiple classes and teachers) is inappropriate for a student in sixth grade. Eccles et al. argue that sixth graders would be better served in an elementary school. Barber and Olson support their age/ structure mismatch argument in a longitudinal study of 72 students the authors followed from fifth through eighth grade. Each year, the authors administered a survey to the students measuring 24 aspects of disengagement from school. Their results showed

that the greatest increase in disengagement was not during the fifth to sixth grade transition, when the students began middle school, but during the sixth to seventh grade transition. The authors make the point that at the school in the study, the sixth grade very much resembles a typical elementary school. Students are taught by a single teacher and remain in the same class the entire day. Thus, the authors conclude that it is not the physical act of being at a middle school, but rather middle school conventions (moving from class to class and from teacher to teacher) that cause students to struggle.

Not all researchers agree that middle school structures create the problem of decreased school connectedness and academic achievement. Some (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000) have argued that the problem with middle schools are not their structure, but their size. Middle schools are generally larger than elementary schools, and it has been argued that regardless of what structures schools put into place, students will never feel as connected to their schools in such a large environment. Crosnoe et al. conducted a longitudinal study of nearly 15,000 students at schools of various sizes. The authors controlled for all variables except school size and considered three factors commonly associated with school connectedness: participation in extra-curricular activities, student-teacher bonding, and attachment to their school (often thought of as school pride). The authors found a negative correlation between school size and the strength of all three of these factors, supporting the argument for small schools. The authors found this correlation was true for students of all ethnic groups. However, they found that since students of color and students with disabilities were pre-disposed to be less connected to school, the negative impacts of large schools were more problematic for such students.

Holas and Huston (2012) sought to confirm or deny the ideas of Eccles et al. (1994) and Crosnoe et al. (2004) that the size and structure of middle schools may have a causative effect on the academic achievement of middle school students. They conducted a longitudinal study of over 800 students, some of whom attended a small elementary school for sixth grade, and others who attended a large, traditionally structured middle school. They found that if teacher quality was controlled for, there was no significant difference between middle school and elementary school sixth graders. The authors define quality teachers as those who have academic competence, hold the belief that they can help all of their students, and are perceived as fair and nurturing by students. As such, the authors concluded that it was teacher quality, not the size or structure of a middle school, which led to the academic slide. Holas and Huston did not consider factors such as connectedness to school in their study, leaving open the possibility that middle school structure, size, and teacher quality each have an impact on the middle school transition, albeit in different areas.

Mitigating the Struggles of Middle School Transition Through School Structures

Preparing for middle school. For many students, the process of middle school transition begins well before they set foot in the door of a sixth grade classroom. Duchense et al. (2012) consider the effects of a student's pre-transition level of worry on their success once in middle school. Their longitudinal study administered a survey instrument to fifth grade students preparing to enter middle school in the fall, to determine their level of worry about their upcoming new school. The authors administered a second survey instrument in the winter of the sixth grade year to determine the level of adjustment experienced by the students. They found a strong

negative correlation between level of worry students self-reported and their subsequent level of adjustment. The article found that this maladjustment correlated negatively to academic achievement. Thus, the authors concluded that heightened worry about middle school in the fifth grade was a predictor of low academic success in sixth grade.

Duchense et al. found that this heightened level of worry could be lessened by fifth grade teachers working with students to set personal goals for middle school. It was found that mastery goals, which are broad and overarching, were more effective than performance goals, which are often linked to only a single achievement.

Elementary schools are not solely, or often even primarily, responsible for mitigating the worries of soon-to-be middle school students. Middle schools often seek to proactively address the pre-transition worries described by Duchense et. al (2012). Akos et al. (2004) describe an orientation program designed to reduce this worry among entering sixth graders. The program described by the authors occurs for a full year, commencing in the second semester of fifth grade and going through the first semester of sixth grade. Students spend the orientation getting to know their sixth grade teachers, engaging in specific lessons on organization, teamwork, and time management, and making connections with classmates. Of the students participating in the program, 89.9% agreed or strongly agreed that the orientation was helpful. However, the authors did not investigate if those students participating in the orientation had increased academic achievement once enrolled in middle school. Additionally, it should be noted that neither Duchense et al. nor Akos et al. (2004) distinguished between student sub-groups, such as students with disabilities, in their consideration of the relationship between pre-transition worry and middle school achievement.

Increasing personalization. The work of Akos et al. (2004) on areas of challenge for transitioning middle school students, recommendations from researchers such as Knesting, Hokanson, and Waldron (2008) and Kalymon et al. (2010) for assisting students with disabilities, and the work of Tomek et al. (2017) on school connectedness and academic achievement, all have at their core the idea that when students are more connected to school, they do better in all areas. Such work has led schools to introduce a number of formal structures intended to, among other things, increase personalization. The overall idea behind these measures seems to be that if school is more personalized, students will feel a greater connection to their school, which will lead to greater social comfort and academic achievement (McLure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010).

Teaming. One such personalization measure is interdisciplinary teaming, also sometimes called academic teaming or simply teaming. Teaming is defined as having a group of teachers who teach the same group of students for at least one school year (Boyer & Bishop, 2004). Boyer and Bishop (2004) were interested in hearing student perspectives on the experience of being part of an interdisciplinary team that was effective, as defined by a literature review conducted by the authors. The authors identified three themes that students indicated were positive outcomes of their participation in an effective interdisciplinary team. Students felt that their team experience led to positive long-term relationships, both with their teachers and their classmates. Students also felt that teams contributed to a more democratic learning environment, as they were able to participate in student-led team meetings. Finally, students argued that by working with the same students on a regular basis, they developed a greater tolerance for others.

Echols (2014) also considered the effect of academic teaming on the middle school transition, although she used a quantitative approach, in contrast to the qualitative approach taken by Boyer and Bishop (2004). In her study, Echols found that while academic teaming could result in increased academic achievement, there were significant downsides to this approach. Echols considered the impact of academic teaming on low social preference and peer victimization. The author defined low social preference as being disliked more than liked by peers. The author states that extensive research has shown a positive correlation between low social preference and peer victimization, but argues that little research has been done to consider the structures put into place by schools that mitigate or exacerbate this effect. To this end, the author sought to explore how academic teaming affects the social preference/ victimization relationship. She found that students who were disliked by their peers were more likely to be victimized if they were part of an academic team than if they were not. She speculates that if the number of peers a student encounters is reduced (as would be the case with academic teaming,) reputations may be harder to shake, and students with low social preference may be at risk for greater peer victimization by the peers they do see.

The findings of Echols (2014) seem to be at odds with Boyer and Bishop's (2004) finding that students in a teamed environment were more tolerant of classmates. Echols argues that the reason for this seeming contradiction may be that the literature largely fails to consider the specifics of an academic team. In a very large school, for example, an academic team may be large enough that students have a wide variety of peers with whom to interact. In small schools however, having an academic team may mean that students have exactly the same students in all their classes, allowing familiarity to breed

contempt for students with low social preference. Moreover, Echols laments that some schools use academic teaming as a system for de facto tracking, where schools place all low achieving students or students with disabilities on the same team, leading to social ostracism. In the end, Echols concludes that defining teaming very broadly makes it difficult to use when considering systems to improve middle school transition.

Advisory. While academic teaming is one method schools use in an effort to personalize instruction, it is not the only one. McLure et al. (2010) consider the effects of an advisory class on personalization and on student grades. The authors define advisory as a class designed to teach non-academic skills deemed important to school success, including goal setting, interpersonal skills, and time management. While the authors hypothesized that those students who valued advisory more would feel a greater connection to school and have higher grades, this was found to be only half true. While students who were more connected did indeed have higher grades, the authors found that the value a student placed on advisory actually had a negative correlation with students' grades. While McLure et al. are not able to conclude why this is, they speculate that to be truly effective, personalization must be more informal than the structured format of a daily advisory class.

Johnson (2009) attempted to build on the work of others who question the value of advisory classes by considering what makes an advisory effective. Johnson argues that most schools claiming to have advisory classes really have classes that are “glorified homerooms,” (p. 2) used more for disseminating school information and for homework completion than for making meaningful connections with students. The author concludes that for advisory classes to be effective, the school must establish clear goals for

advisory, determine who is charge of seeing to it that these goals are implemented, and provide teachers with sufficient time to design lessons that will meet these goals. Along these lines, Johnson rejects the idea of schools using commercially available curricula for advisory classes, arguing that schools must invest the time in creating an advisory class that is useful and appropriate for their particular school environment.

Partially in response to the criticism that there are no set criteria defining what makes an effective advisory, Shulkind and Foote (2009) sought to define such criteria. Using a mixed methods approach in which the researchers interviewed students and teachers in advisory classes deemed successful based on a survey instrument, the authors found three major factors needed in a successful advisory. First, the advisory class needed to be a place where students felt a sense of community, allowing them to openly communicate about any topic. Second, advisory teachers needed to genuinely care about their students, being acutely aware of academic and personal successes and challenges, and unafraid to speak frankly with their students about these. Finally, both teachers and students needed to be of the mindset that advisory could be beneficial, both in addressing academic and social challenges, and willing to take the risk of sharing those challenges as part of the class. Shulkind and Foote concur with Johnson (2009) that a commercially available advisory curriculum is unlikely to be successful in creating an advisory with the characteristics needed to be successful.

Social/ emotional learning curricula. Rosenblatt and Elias (2008) find more favor with commercially available programs designed to assist students with developing the sense of connectedness needed for a successful middle school transition than do Shulkind and Foote (2009) and Johnson (2009). They studied middle school students

receiving a prescribed social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, and found that there was a positive correlation between the fidelity with which teachers implemented the SEL program and increased GPA. Even this study, however, acknowledged that it might be an intangible quality of a teacher, and not a particular program, that is having the desired effect. As Rosenblatt and Elias point out, “Fidelity [of implementing the program] could easily be correlated with a number of teacher characteristics that could not be assessed” (p. 551). While a high quality program can be important, it may not be as important as intangible characteristics of the teacher implementing it.

Informal structures to improve middle school transition. In light of the questions surrounding highly structured supports, such as teaming, advisory classes, or commercially available SEL curricula in assisting with the middle school transitions, researchers have explored the impact of more informal factors on the successful transition to middle school. Informal structures are defined as those things which are not articulated as part of a school’s curricular or structural plan (Holas & Huston, 2012). Such factors would include student relationships with peers and teachers. Some researchers (Akos, 2004; Poulin et al., 1999; Sebanc et al, 2016) have suggested that for many students, informal structures can be even more helpful than formal structures in navigating the middle school transition.

Peer to peer relationships. Sebanc et al. (2016) considered the impact of friendships on transitions. Prior research had suggested that negative peer relations may impede academic success (Poulin, et al., 1999) and Sebanc et al. set out to see if this those students who self-reported having poor peer relations had a lower GPA in the sixth grade. The authors found that there was indeed such a correlation between poor peer

relations and GPA, leading them to conclude that schools should pay close attention to the peer groups within their sixth grade classes. Akos' (2004) qualitative study echoed the results of the quantitative work of Sebanc et al. His analysis of student writing samples found that eighth graders, when asked to give advice to an incoming middle school student, said they would tell them that it was most important to "manage and maintain friendships" (p. 1).

Goodearl, Salzinger, and Rosario (2014) further explored the idea of peer relationships during the middle school transition. The authors considered the transition of a group of middle school students considered highly at risk due to exposure to violence. While the authors found that positive peer relationships did not completely mitigate the negative effects of exposure to violence, such relationships did reduce anxiety as students entered into, and progressed through, middle school.

Student/ teacher relationships. In addition to student-student relationships, researchers have studied the relationships between students and teachers. Holas and Huston (2012) found that the presence of teachers who were perceived as caring, and invested in student success, was a key factor in determining which students experienced academic success in middle school. Ford (2005) expands the student/ teacher relationship to advocate not only for teachers who are caring and invested, but also culturally competent. She argues that in order for students to be successful, they need "learning environments [that] are safe, welcoming, and responsive to their needs" (p. 29). The author makes the point that the teacher is the person most able to create such an environment for the students in his or her class. This is best accomplished when the teacher sees students as individuals with different backgrounds and experiences.

Recognizing the diversity of students in our classes, Ford argues, is a first step in creating the type of classroom in which students can thrive.

Middle School Transition Among Students with Disabilities

The struggles of special education students transitioning to middle school is explored by Knesting et al. (2008). The authors describe specific factors contributing to the challenge students with mild disabilities face as they make this transition. Interestingly, of the three areas described by Akos et al. (2004), academic struggles are those Knesting et al. find to be the least significant for students with disabilities. Rather, they find most problematic middle school routines that differ from elementary school, or what Akos et al. (2004) would call organizational challenges. Tasks such as opening lockers, knowing which class to go to and which materials to bring to class are a significant struggle. Conforming to different expectations from different teachers was also found to be more difficult for students with mild disabilities than for their non-disabled peers.

In considering the struggles of students with disabilities as they enter middle school, Knesting et al. (2008) further found that as peer groups became more important to young adolescents, leaving the general education classroom to go to a resource room caused students to feel stigmatized and less connected. Moreover, they found that students were reticent to admit their need for help after making the middle school transition for fear of social ostracism. These final two areas would be classified under the heading of social problems, as described by Akos et al., (2004). Knesting et al. suggest personalization, and the development of teacher-student relationships, as an antidote to these problems.

Kalymon, et al. (2010) built upon the work of Knesting et al. (2008) by considering the social transition of students with disabilities not from the perspective of the student with a disability, but from that of the general education students with whom they might be friends. The researchers conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed general education seventh graders about the factors that would and would not lead them to be friends with a student who had a disability. The authors found that if the students spent considerable time together, had similar interests, and observed teachers treating the disabled student as an equal, friendships were more likely to be maintained. As such, the authors suggest that disabled and non-disabled students be educated in the same environment as much as possible. Among other benefits, this increases the likelihood that friendships will be maintained, which in turn improves the transition process for both the disabled and non-disabled student. One additional finding of the study was that general education middle school students frequently did not consider many students with mild disabilities as being disabled. Even though the interviewer identified specific students with disabilities for the interviewees to consider, students frequently expressed a view that if a student was not in special classes or have a paraprofessional aide, they, “did not really think of it as a disability” (Kalymon et al., 2010, p. 309). While Kalymon et al. did not intend to focus on inclusion in their study, these responses from students led them to discuss the benefits of inclusion as a way to reduce the difficult middle school transition among students with disabilities.

Transition Plans

While strategies designed to improve the middle school transition for all students can be helpful for students with disabilities, such students have additional supports in

place to support them during this challenging time. One such support is a transition plan written into their IEP. The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students age 14 and over have a post-secondary transition plan in their IEP, which outlines a plan for the student's life after high school (Kim & Bonati, 2011). A middle school transition plan is a common part of students' IEP during their last year in elementary school and can be very important in increasing the likelihood of success in middle school (Kim & Bonati, 2011). While there is relatively little peer-reviewed literature about what makes an effective transition plan, special education advisors recommend including specific goals relating to organization and work completion, recognizing that such tasks may be more challenging in middle school (Goldberg, 2011). Lawson (2016) points out the importance of ensuring that, with multiple classes, the IEP is written in such a way that it can be implemented in all classes.

Middle School Transition and Students with Autism

Defining autism. Autism refers to a wide spectrum of conditions. Lord et al. (2012) developed the most common diagnostic tool intended to diagnose autism among those for whom the condition was suspected. The tool, known as the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, Second Edition, (ADOS-2), measures items in five areas: language and communication, reciprocal social interaction, play and imagination, stereotyped and restricted interests, and other behaviors. In each of these areas, test subjects are assigned a code of zero to three, which represents how much they deviate from what is considered normal behavior. A diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be made based on the results of the ADOS-2, and the test enjoys high reliability and validity (McCrimmon & Rostad, 2014). Specifically, individuals with

autism have a deficit in their social approach, non-verbal communication skills, and in developing and maintaining social relationships. As a result of this, students with autism typically have difficulty engaging in standard back and forth conversation, in maintaining eye contact, in reading body language, and in adjusting their behaviors to conform to age-typical actions (Autism Speaks, 2017).

Autism and the middle school transition. While there is substantial research on middle school transition, some of it relating to students with disabilities, there is far less research focusing specifically on autism (Mandy et al., 2016). In thinking about the social problems described by Akos et al. (2004), it seems logical that students with the challenges associated with autism would struggle more acutely with the middle school transition than would their non-autistic peers. Individuals with autism also typically have difficulty with executive functioning skills (Mandy et. al, 2016). Such struggles would be expected to make it more difficult to plan for the day, and would present challenges when students were asked to move from one task to another (Wormeli, 2013). Thus, it stands to reason that the academic and organizational challenges of middle school transition Akos at al. (2004) describe would be especially problematic.

Mandy et al. (2016) conducted one of the only empirical studies specifically about the middle school transition of students with autism. The authors administered a pre- and post-transition survey to 20 students with autism, their parents, and their teachers, in an attempt to determine if those with autism struggled more with the transition than did their non-disabled peers. Contrary to their expectations, the researchers found that in the areas of psychopathology, adaptive behaviors, and peer victimization, there was no statistically significant difference between the final year of elementary and the first year of middle

school. Mandy et al. speculate that there may be subtle changes as these students transition that are not statistically significant or readily identified by a survey. They therefore suggest that future researchers investigate such changes through student interviews and classroom observation.

In addition to the relative paucity of research focusing on students with autism as they make the transition to middle school, some (Glynn-Owen, 2010; Goodley, 2007) have criticized that research which does exist as approaching the subject with the wrong mindset. Glynn-Owen (2010) argues that in most research about those with disabilities, the focus is either on a deficit model (considering what the subject is unable to do), a medical model (defining the subject by their medical differences), or a deviance model (contrasting the subject with a standard deemed by the researcher to be normal). As opposed to these approaches, the author advocates for a critical disability theory model, which would consider disabled people on their own merits, rather than based on how they differed from any other person.

Glynn-Owen (2010) argues that a number of changes must happen for a critical disability model to take hold, and that a first step would be that disabled people must be the ones to tell their stories. At present, she laments “the voices of those that are being researched are not being heard” (Glynn-Owen, 2010, p. 410). The author argues that when those with disabilities, such as autism, are able to tell their stories, the goal will cease being to cure or fix such individuals, and will move instead to a place of simply understanding and appreciating who they are.

Gaps in the Literature

While school transitions have been studied in some detail, there are some areas of this topic that are relatively under-studied. The transition from elementary to middle school has been studied less often than the middle to high school transition, even though the former has been shown to have a significant impact on the student's decision to eventually drop out of high school (Sharp, 2012). Additionally, existing research on middle school transition tends to be quantitative. Multiple researchers have attempted to correlate a particular factor or program to middle school success (Sebanc, et al., 2016; Lofgran et al., 2015; Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008; Rudasill et al., 2014). Far fewer have used a qualitative tradition to explore student perspectives and explain *why* particular actions aid or impede the transition process (Knesting et al., 2008). This is significant because student perspectives on a program are often more important in determining its success than the program itself.

There is a general need for more research into the transition of students with disabilities, and in particular for students with autism. While some (Akos et al., 2015; Knesting et al., 2008) have concluded that students with disabilities have a more difficult time with this change than do their non-disabled peers, more research is needed as to why this difference exists. Mandy et al. (2016) argue that "both clinical and indirect empirical evidence suggest that primary to secondary school transition may be especially difficult for children with [autism]. However, there is currently no systematic research that tests whether or not this is the case" (p. 6). While Mandy et al. attempt to address this problem through quantitative research, the authors conclude that it may be qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, which are needed to address the problem. Finally,

authors such as Goodley (2007) and Glynn-Owen (2010) reject entirely the quantitative approach as a deficit model that does not allow a place for the voice of students with autism to be heard.

The percent of students with autism in the U.S. who are taught in mainstream classes increased from 12% in 1991 to 59% in 2009 (Mandy et al., 2016). Understanding how to best assist students with autism as they transition to middle school is more relevant than ever given the increasing number of students with this diagnosis. As such, a study that uses student voices as the primary data source in analyzing the experiences and perspectives of students with autism transitioning to middle school would fill a gap that exists in the current research.

Goal of the Current Study

The goal of my study is to examine perspectives of students with autism on the efficacy of practices put into place by schools to assist with their transition to middle school. Through student focus groups, teacher interviews, and classroom observations, perspectives on the effects of both formal and informal structures were analyzed. Through a qualitative research approach, the questions posed are answered in great depth and detail.

It is my hope that through this examination of middle school transition among students with autism, I am able to provide information about what helped or hindered the student participants in my study during their middle school transition. Using information from my study, school practitioners will be able to learn about the experiences of students with autism at one middle school. This might help them make decisions about school structures and practices at their own school, by taking into account the perspective of the

students such programs are intended to serve. While not all practices will work at all schools, it is often beneficial to consider the successes of other schools when making decisions about programs at your own site. If schools know of practices that have proven to be effective at other schools, they can consider implementing them. In so doing it is hoped that schools will be able to mitigate the negative effects on academic and social-emotional success commonly associated with the middle school transition for all students, and in particular for students with autism.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Middle schools engage in a number of practices to facilitate the transition of students from elementary to middle school. The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives students with autism have of such practices. Through such an examination, it is possible that effective tools employed by one school can serve as a model for others. However, it is often ineffective to simply try and replicate the successful strategies of one school at another, since every school has unique structures, policies, and staffs. Thus, the ultimate goal of this study is to provide more information for school leaders about student perspectives of the middle school transition so that they can use such information in making evidence-based programmatic decisions at their schools.

In this study, I consider the following research questions:

Research Question: How do students with autism at a small charter school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?
2. How do such students perceive and experience school informal school practices?

This study is a qualitative phenomenological case study. Following this introduction, I discuss this research tradition and my rationale for choosing it. I then examine the research site and study participants. Next, I consider my data collection

techniques, including the tools and analysis methods I will employ. I conclude the chapter with a conversation about my role as the researcher in this study.

Research Tradition

My study uses qualitative research to capture the stories, feelings, and experiences of students with autism, as they transition to middle school. Glesne (2016) says that when doing qualitative research “you translate life into text” (p. iv). Moreover, qualitative research is an appropriate choice when the researcher seeks to describe phenomena, focusing on such things as the perceptions, activities, and experiences of participants (Hendricks, 2017). The experiences and perceptions of students with autism transitioning to middle school is exactly what I seek to describe and understand.

Within qualitative research approaches, my dissertation is a phenomenological case study. Creswell (1996) says of phenomenological research, "The investigator writes research questions that explore the meaning of [an] experience for individuals and asks individuals to describe their everyday lived experiences" (p. 54). My research question is "How do students with autism at a small charter school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?" and thus a phenomenological study is highly apt. Moreover, the purpose of my study is to discuss the experiences students with autism have as they transition to middle school, and explore how they perceive the practices in which middle schools engage to facilitate this transition. Exploring the experiences of individuals who have experienced a phenomenon (in this case transitioning to middle school) is a key element of phenomenological research (Creswell, 1996).

My research also includes aspects of a case study. A case study is, "an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ ...over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving

multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 1996, p. 61). My "bounded system" is the period of time from approximately September to February at a small charter school. I utilize focus groups, personal interviews, and observations to obtain the multiple sources needed for such a study. A case study is appropriate when the researcher wishes to look at one instance of a phenomenon very deeply in order to obtain an understanding of a broader idea (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Indeed, this study takes a deep look at the perceptions of students with autism as they enter middle school in an effort to more broadly understand middle school transition for such students.

Since my research plan called for looking closely at the experiences of six students at a single school, a case study was an appropriate type of qualitative research in which to engage. Given the small sample size, the six students in my study will not be a representative sample of all students with autism. Nevertheless, the study can have transferability. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) point out that transferability is determined not by the study but by the reader; if readers see a connection between their context and the context of the study, there is transferability. Many middle schools struggle to provide an effective transition for students with autism as they begin the sixth grade. Thus, other middle schools could benefit from my study by increasing their understanding of how middle school students with autism perceive the transition from elementary to middle school. A case study is further appropriate to my goals, because, along with learning about the students' perceptions and experiences, I aim to provide perspective and analysis on the transition process (Merriam, 2009).

Research Site

I conducted my study at Success Academy #4 (SA4), an independent charter school located in a suburban community of Southern California. (All names of schools, districts, organizations, and individuals are pseudonyms.) SA4 is a charter school. Like all charter schools in California, students wishing to attend SA4 apply for admission and are selected through a random lottery. The school is a part of the Success Academy charter management organization (CMO), which operates multiple schools throughout the region. During the 2017-2018 school year, approximately 350 students attended the school in grades 6-8. Close to 95% of students at the school identify as Hispanic or Latino. The school's population is over 50% low-income students (as determined by free and reduced lunch eligibility) and just under 14% of its students are English Learners. Approximately 15% of students at SA4 have been identified as having disabilities (website redacted, 2017).

I selected SA4 as the site of this study through a combination of criterion-based and opportunistic selection methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This dissertation studies students with autism as they make the transition to a small middle school, by focusing on their transition experience. As such, I established several criteria sites had to meet as a condition for possible inclusion in this study. First, the site needed to be small (under 500 students) and have students only in the most common middle school grades, sixth through eighth. A crucial part of my study is the idea that students (and thus parents) are selecting the school. For this reason, I sought to study a school that required students to make a decision to attend it as opposed to another school (i.e. not simply a neighborhood school). In the Southern California region, schools that students choose to attend include

magnet schools, charter schools, and schools of choice. Additionally, I sought to study a school that had a higher than average percent of students with special needs. The largest school district in the region in which this study will be conducted has a rate of approximately 13% students with disabilities (Stokes, 2016). Therefore, I set a criterion of the school being studied having at least 18% students with disabilities.

A number of schools in the region qualified for this study under the criteria outlined above. I therefore narrowed my selection further through opportunistic sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A professional associate of mine has professional connections to the Success Academy CMO, and was therefore able to assist me in obtaining access and cooperation from key gatekeepers at SA4. Having access to a site and cooperation from participants is important for a successful qualitative research study (Glesne, 2016). It should be noted that at the time of its selection, SA4 had a rate of 18% students with disabilities based on the 2016-2017 school year. Since that time, the rate has decreased to 14% as the 2017-2018 demographics became available. Such a change is not uncommon for small schools, where each percentage point represents a fairly small number of students.

Glesne (2016) further advises qualitative researchers to consider if the study conducted poses a benefit to the participants. She argues that it is unethical for researchers to conduct research that benefits only them. SA4 has, as one of its goals, the creation of a school where, “Students, parents, and teachers will feel a sense of community and connectedness” (Name Redacted charter petition, 2013). This study can provide such information, and will be directly useful to the teachers and administrators of SA4.

Study Participants

My study seeks to understand the experience of students with autism as they transition from elementary to middle school. To accomplish this, students with autism were primary data sources. I selected six such students and conducted a series of three focus groups. The focus groups were conducted between September 2018 and February 2019. Additionally, I used classes as a data source through observations. I observed three classes in which at least one of my focus students is present. Moreover, I interviewed the three teachers at SA4 who taught the classes I observed. My use of triangulation, through multiple data collection methods and sources, increases the trustworthiness of my study (Glesne, 2016).

Selecting Participants

I selected students for this study based on criteria selection and random purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To start with, the students must be currently enrolled at SA4. Furthermore, they must have an IEP with an eligibility of autism. I chose to study students with autism because it is widely speculated that such students have a more difficult time with the middle school transition (Mandy, et al., 2016). If I had a pool of more than six students who meet my selection criteria, I would have used random sampling to choose the six to be in the study. However, it turned out that only six such students consented to be in the study.

I selected classes to observe based on the classes of participating students and the willingness of teachers to be observed. Some research (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013) suggests that a high quality advisory program can assist with middle school transition while others (Johnson, 2009) question whether most such classes are doing any good. I

therefore observed one advisory class, developing an observation protocol that allowed me to determine the degree to which activities in the advisory class align with the needs of students as articulated in their focus groups. Given that formal and informal structures can occur in all classes (Holas & Huston, 2012) I also observed two non-advisory classes. Additionally, I interviewed the teachers of the classes I observed, looking again for similarities and differences between students' reported needs, teachers' reported actions, and observations made in the classroom.

Ethical Concerns

As a principal, I work with middle school students on a daily basis. No student in this study is a student with whom I have a principal-student relationship. Such backyard research would increase the risk of participant reactivity, with students feeling like they needed to say what they thought I wanted to hear (Glesne, 2016). Participation of both students and teachers was voluntary, and all participants, as well as their parents/guardians, signed an informed consent form. Pseudonyms are used to identify all participants and their school, and efforts have been taken not to be so specific in describing people and places as to reveal the real names of students, teachers, or schools.

Data Collection Instruments

To enhance the validity of my phenomenological case study on middle school transition for students with autism, I triangulated my data collection instruments (Glesne, 2016). I conducted focus groups, personal interviews, and observations. These multiple data collection methods acted as both a validation and a check on each other. In chapter four, I highlight themes that occur in more than one data source, while using data that contradict each other as a springboard for further inquiry.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a facilitated discussion in which groups of people who share a common experience or concern are interviewed together (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I conducted three focus groups with the six student participants in my study. This serves as my primary source for data, because I am interested in hearing these students' perceptions about how the programs implemented by their school impact their middle school transition. To this end, focus group questions asked the students about their overall view of making the transition from elementary to middle school, and how this transition was affected by practices such as advisory, coring, and teaming. I elected to use a focus group format for the students, rather than individual interviews, for two reasons. Rossman and Rallis (2017) argue that some adolescents prefer to talk about their lives in a small group as opposed to one on one. Additionally, Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) point out that focus groups are "more natural and relaxed than a one on one interview" (p. 156) and that this can lead to a deeper understanding of complex issues.

Focus groups are not without their drawbacks. In some cases, an individual with a dominating personality can take over the conversation, making others feel it is not safe for them to share dissenting views (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). To mitigate this possible problem, I engaged in strategies such as role-playing and including grand tour style questions to elicit responses from all participants. A grand tour style question is one that asks broadly about a topic, and often puts participants more at ease than questions that force them to be highly specific (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Additionally, I allowed the student participants to respond to questions in ways other than verbalizing an answer, including writing down their answers and drawing pictures to represent their responses.

Personal Interviews

I conducted a semi-structured personal interview with the three teachers of my participant students whose classes I observe. Semi-structured personal interviews are characterized by having a set of questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to adjust or amend questions based on participant responses (Glesne, 2016). A semi-structured interview can provide depth, and get at the nuance of what is being said, rather than dealing in generalities (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Moreover, they “offer the ability to capture a person’s perspective of an event or experience” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 155). For my study, I explore the school staff members’ perceptions of their school’s efforts to support middle school transition for students with autism. My questions focused on what the interviewee does to support such students, and the degree to which these efforts are effective. I compared and contrasted these adults’ perceptions with those of the students to determine similar and dissimilar themes.

One challenge of using interviews as a data collection method is that they are only as successful as the cooperation and willingness of the participant (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). As a researcher, I did several things to set my interviewees at ease. I ensured my participants of the anonymity of their responses. I started off with straightforward and surface-level questions, moving to sensitive topics only after a sense of rapport had been established. Additionally, I shared with participants my genuine interest in what they had to say, while trying to limit my own biases from coloring my reactions to their responses. While a researcher can never interview a participant without their biases affecting the data collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016), I made every effort to reduce such bias and participant reactivity.

Observations

As a final data collection method, I conducted three observations of a class in which my participant students are enrolled. Observations can sometimes provide information not obtained in an interview, since the researcher sees what is going on first-hand, rather than through the filter of an interview or focus group participant (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Glesne (2016) describes participant observation as a process in which, “the researcher carefully observes, systematically experiences, and consciously records in detail the many aspects of a situation” (p. 68). To this end, I created an observation guide, allowing me to note what I saw, heard, and experienced. Like all researchers, I brought biases and preconceptions to my observations (Glesne, 2016). I did not go into my observations thinking I would be able to determine objective reality. Rather, observations provided an additional lens through which to view the experience of students with autism transitioning to middle school.

Data Collection Procedures

In this phenomenological case study, I collected data through focus groups, interviews, and observations. These collection methods can provide rich data for such a study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). To collect these data, I conducted three focus groups with six students with autism who attend SA4. Additionally, I interviewed three teachers who teach at least one of my participant students. Finally, I will observed a classes taught by each of my teacher participants. My research questions and these data collection methods were well aligned, since all three of them can lead to a deeper understanding of the experience students with autism have as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. The collection methods also align to my research tradition, since

phenomenological studies often include a series of interviews or focus groups (Glesne, 2016) and case studies most often involve participant observation (Bloombeg & Volpe, 2016).

Focus Groups

During the fall of 2018, I met with the principal of SA4 and requested that he reach out to parents of students who have a special education eligibility of autism and obtain their consent to provide me their contact information and gauge their interest in this study. Six students whose parents express an interest were be selected based on the sampling strategies described earlier in this chapter. I then contacted the students' parents, inviting their child to participate in the research study. My invitation included:

- A brief introduction of who I am
- The purpose of the study
- What I would be asking of their child
- The risks and benefits of their child's participation in this study
- The small gift card I would be providing their child to thank them for participating

Since the parents of all six students spoke only Spanish, and I do not, invitations were made over the phone by the principal of SA4, who is bilingual. If parents declined the invitation or failed to respond after a period of ten days, an alternate student was chosen.

Focus groups took place on the school campus in an available classroom. The focus group were immediately after school. The focus groups followed a protocol (please see appendices A-C). Focus groups were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Making the participants feel at ease was crucial to the success of the focus

group (Glesne, 2016) To begin the focus group, I welcomed the participants and thanked them for participating. I reminded them that their comments would be anonymous, and that I do not work at their school. I reminded them that nothing they say or do not say will impact their grades. I reminded the students that if there is ever a question they did not wish to answer, they did not have to.

To improve the correlation between my research questions and focus group protocol, I will created a matrix linking each question to the aspect of the research question it sought to address. During the focus group, I monitored the air time of each student and invited participation from students who had not said as much. At the end of the focus group, I once again thanked each of the participants and reminded them one more time that everything they said would remain anonymous. Following each focus group, I revisited my interview protocol and observation guide to determine if changes were appropriate based on data obtained.

Personal Interviews

After the six participant students had been selected, I reviewed their schedules to identify each of their teachers. Three of these teachers were selected at random, and an email invitation with the same information as the focus group invitation was sent to them. The only additional information on the teacher invitations was a request for permission to observe their class. The email will state explicitly that my observations will not be evaluative of their performance in any way. If teachers declined to participate or failed to respond, another teacher was be chosen. Teachers were be invited to meet at a nearby restaurant or coffee house for the interview. However, they also had the option to hold the interview in their classroom if they found that more convenient, and all three teachers

selected this option. As with the focus groups, interviews were audio recorded with participant consent, and have a matrix linking interview questions to research questions.

(See Appendix D.)

Observations

I observed a class taught by each of the participant teachers. The observations ranged from 30 to 50 minutes in length, based on the length of the class, and sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent is the participant student connected to his classmates and teacher?
2. What formal and informal structures are in place to support or impede such connection?

McLure et al. (2010) find that students who make such connections will experience a more successful middle school transition, directly relating these questions to my overall research questions.

I entered the classroom before class began and sat at a location the teacher and I determined to be as unobtrusive as possible. During the observation, I took detailed notes observing what is occurring as well as my initial thoughts on these observations (Creswell, 1996). I made note of what is said, who said it, and how students and the teacher reacted. Special effort was taken during the observations to minimize participant reactivity by interacting with the participants only to the extent that was necessary to obtain the most accurate possible data. Following my observation, I exited the field by thanking my participants for allowing me to observe them. In a follow-up thank you note, I thanked the teacher and reiterated that I would be happy to share my final work with her.

Data Analysis and Procedures

As a qualitative researcher, I analyzed the data that I collected continuously during the collection process. Qualitative data analysis procedures involve preliminary data analysis, thematic data analysis, and interpretation of data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Moreover, in order to conduct the study in a reflexive manner, I completed a journal and wrote analytic memos throughout the process. This type of note taking enabled me to write about data analysis procedures, participant reactivity, and my own biases. Moreover, my analytic memos assisted in the development of codes and themes.

Preliminary Data Analysis

The goal of a phenomenological case study is to consider the perceptions and experiences of participants (Glesne, 2016). In this study, the experience in question was the transition to middle school. I collected data through focus groups, interviews, and observations, and these data gave me insight into the experience of the participants through the words and phrases they use (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis, in which researchers look for themes and patterns in data through a process called coding, is commonly used in qualitative educational research (Glesne, 2016). To analyze my data in this manner, I first segmented the data, by pulling key quotations from interviews and focus groups, as well as notes from my observations. I then coded these segmented data, a process in which I will pulled from quotations and observations short responses in order to, “discern themes, patterns, and processes to make comparisons and build theoretical explanations” (Glesne, 2016, p. 195). The analytic memos and thematic framework helped in guiding my coding efforts. I looked for broad

themes elucidated by the codes. These themes form the core of my data analysis and my attempt to answer my research questions.

Interpretation

With themes drawn from my data analysis, I was able to begin the process of interpretation. Since my research design is a phenomenological case study, I was looking for patterns, themes, or issues among the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). To this end, I searched for meaningful conclusions based on the data that I had collected and analyzed. I used the conceptual framework and research questions that I created to guide my interpretation of data. Throughout this process, I kept in mind my biases as a middle school principal and parent of a child with disabilities who was herself entering sixth grade at the time I was conducting this research.

Throughout the process of data analysis and interpretation, the anonymity of my participants was maintained. I used pseudonyms for schools, students, and teachers, and maintained one code list, which is the only place where actual names are linked to pseudonyms. The code list is maintained on a password-protected computer, and the document itself has a different password. Care has been taken not to describe people or places in such a way that they are identifiable to the reader.

Researcher Roles

A researcher must be aware of the ways in which their relationships with the participants of their study, along with their prior experiences pertaining to their study, will influence their ability to collect and analyze data subjectively (Watt, 2007). My position as the principal of a small charter middle school certainly was a possible source of bias in this study. Although I did not conduct research at my own site, the site of my

study, which is also a small, charter middle school, is very similar to mine. Indeed, one of the goals of my study is to provide research-based information to educational leaders such as myself. To further complicate things, at the very time I was researching the perspectives of students with autism as they enter sixth grade, my own daughter, who is a student with a disability, was entering the sixth grade. This role, as both provider and consumer of the knowledge ascertained in this study, is something that I, as a qualitative researcher, attempted to ignore. Rather, I reflect below on the effects of these biases (Glesne, 2016).

Researcher Bias

Many of the strategies commonly employed by schools to facilitate the transition of students as they enter sixth grade, including having an advisory class, coring, and teaming, are strategies I use at my own school because I believe they have value. In analyzing data, I ran the risk of assuming such practices would have value in the school at which I was doing research, even if my data said otherwise. Moreover, my belief in these strategies may have led me to explain away results that don't comport with my preconceived notions, by saying things like, "That teacher just isn't doing advisory properly" or "Teaming would be working at this school if they just improved their professional development." Unless these statements could be backed up by my data, they would represent not my findings but my biases coming to the fore.

Participant Reactivity

I have worked as a middle school principal for five years. While I am not conducting research at my school, the reality is that at whatever research site I visit, I am a principal. I cannot simply turn off this huge part of who I am and become solely a

researcher. Similarly, it is unrealistic to think that the participants in my study were oblivious to my role as a school leader. Even though I did not tell them my profession, the way I comport myself, the phrasing I used while interviewing them, and the manner in which I interacted may well have given me away. Indeed, more than once, students in the study questioned whether I was really a university student, based on my age, and made it clear that they saw me as more likely to be an employee of a school than a student at one. Most students, all else being equal, would like to please the teachers and principals with whom they interact. Thus, I was wary of students telling me what they thought I want to hear. Students may have said that they value the systems schools put into place to assist transition, because they realize that most adults associated with schools tend to like these things and think they are useful. Moreover, however I introduced myself, students may have thought that I was friends with their teachers or principal, and may be have been wary of saying anything that would reflect poorly on them.

Researcher Strategies to Mitigate Researcher Bias and Participant Reactivity

Practicing triangulation, by utilizing more than one data source and more than one data collection method, can lead to more meaningful data collection (Glesne, 2016). In addition to student interviews, I increased my data sources by personally interviewing teachers. I enhanced my data collection methods by not just interviewing students but also observing them during the school day. To encourage reflexivity, Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) further recommend maintaining a journal to track subjective thoughts during the data collection and analysis process. This is a practice in which I engaged. I also used an investigator triangulation strategy and used my dissertation chair as an

additional set of eyes as I coded and analyzed my data. The perspective of my chair, who is an expert on the education of students with disabilities, but who does not work with middle school students on a daily basis, helped to serve as a check on my own biases.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings of a phenomenological research study about students with autism who made the transition from elementary to middle school. The goal of this study was to look at the effectiveness of formal and informal supports put into place by schools from the perspective of students. Unlike most previous research, this study considered students with autism specifically, as opposed to looking at students with all disabilities as a single group. Additionally, in contrast to many previous studies, the voices of students as they made the transition from elementary to middle school were used as the primary data source. The study was qualitative in nature, utilizing personal interviews, focus groups, and observations to collect data.

The data collected attempt to answer the following questions:

Research Question: How do students with autism at a small charter school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?
2. How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?

My theoretical framework argues that the perspective teachers and students have about systems schools put into place to support students with autism making the transition to middle school is ultimately more important than the supports themselves. In addition, the perspectives of teachers and students are influenced by a myriad of factors, including prior experiences, values, and biases (Holas and Huston, 2012; Shoffner &

Williamson, 2000). Not only do such factors have an impact on perspectives, but it is also the case that student perspectives of these systems and supports affect teacher perspectives, and vice versa.

Participants

The primary source of data was a series of three focus groups conducted with students who attend Success Academy #4 (SA4). SA4 is an independent charter school located in a suburban neighborhood in Southern California. Like all charter schools in California, students wishing to attend SA4 apply for admission and are selected through a random lottery. The school is a part of the Success Academy Charter Management Organization (CMO), which operates multiple schools throughout the region.

Students were identified for participation in the focus group with assistance from the school's principal, who called the parents of the eight students in the sixth and seventh grade at SA4 with autism, and discussed the study with them. Six of the parents indicated an interest in learning more. I then met with these six parents and explained the study in more detail. The principal was also present for these meetings, and acted as a translator because all six parents spoke only Spanish, which I do not. At the end of our conversation, all six parents signed a consent form. I then met with each of the students, briefly explained the study, and invited them to sign an assent form, which all of them did. The six students in my study included three sixth grade students, Jose, Corwin, and Enrique, and three seventh grade students, Vicente, Bruce, and Randy. (All names of participants in this study are pseudonyms.) All of the students were male and all were Latino. Additionally, all of them had an individualized education plan (IEP) with an

eligibility of autism. At the request of the school, a teacher and instructional aide, who were not a part of this study, were present during all focus groups.

In addition to these focus groups, data come from three interviews with teachers at SA4. Dana, a white female teacher in her late 20's, teaches sixth grade science. She has been teaching for six years, all at SA4. Brittany, a white female teacher in her early 40's, teaches seventh grade English. She has been teaching for 13 years, and this is her second year at SA4. Finally, Anna, a Latina teacher in her mid 20's is a special education teacher who provides push-in resource services for students in grades six through eight with IEP's and teaches an ELD course for seventh grade students. This is her second year teaching, and both years have been at SA4. All three of the teachers have at least one participating student in at least one of their classes. Data were also obtained from observations of each participating teacher's classroom. Teachers were observed when at least one participating student was present in the class. Anna and Brittany were interviewed immediately after they were observed. Dana was interviewed a week after the observation.

Teachers were also identified for the survey with the assistance of the principal. The principal sent an email to all staff informing them of the study and asking if they had interest in taking part. If they did, he obtained their permission to send me their email address. Based on receiving this permission, he sent me the email addresses of eight teachers. I emailed all eight of the teachers and explained in greater detail what the study entailed. Three of the teachers responded to my email. Two of them, Brittany and Anna, indicated a willingness to participate in all aspects of the study. One other teacher said that he was fine with being interviewed, but not with me observing his class. Since

observations are an important part of my data collection strategy, I let him know that I would not be able to have him in the study. During my interview with Anna, she indicated that Dana, who had not been on the principal's original list, might be interested in participating. I spoke in person with Dana and she expressed a high level of interest and excitement about being in the study. After my meetings with them, Brittany, Dana, and Anna all signed consent forms.

Data Collection

Focus groups were held in October, November, and December of 2018. Each of the focus groups took place immediately after school in a classroom of SA4. The first focus group was about 35 minutes in length and the second two were about 50 minutes long. During the first focus group, students generally seemed hesitant to answer any questions. Of the six students, only Jose was eager to talk. His answers, however, tended to be only tangentially related to the questions asked. For example, when asked about what happens during his advisory class, he quickly stated that the class begins by watching the news program CNN 10, and then spent several minutes describing in detail one of the news stories from that day's broadcast about genetically engineered strawberries. Corwin was more typical of the student participants during the first focus group. When asked a question early in the meeting, he said, "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know to everything."

During the second and third focus group, as I began to tailor my questions specifically to things the students had brought up earlier, the feeling in the room became much more relaxed. With this more relaxed feeling, the students became much more willing to talk, and tended to remain more on topic. Randy was an exception, and spoke

very minimally during all three sessions. During the second and third focus groups, students were also allowed to share some of their answers in writing, rather than verbalizing them. All of the students, including Randy, seemed to contribute more in writing than they did verbally, although they quickly became tired when writing and indicated that they wanted to go back to talking.

One of the most important aspects of my focus groups was a willingness to veer away from the questions I had prepared in the focus group protocol. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are characterized by a willingness to allow the conversation to go in a direction not anticipated by the researcher based on the responses of the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Consequently, the actual questions asked during the focus groups differ, in some cases substantially, from the planned questions appearing in appendices A-C.

My observation of Brittany and Anna's classes took place in November of 2018. The class I observed of Brittany's was the last class of the day, and I interviewed her immediately after school. I interviewed Anna during her prep period, which took place immediately after the class I observed. I observed Dana's class in January 2019, and interviewed her about a week after the observation. All of the interviews took place in the teacher's classroom.

Data Analysis

After each focus group and interview, I transcribed the interview. I then read through the transcript and highlighted quotations I felt were relevant in answering my research questions. I then typed these quotations onto a Word document, and sorted them based on codes. Codes were created based on ideas from my theoretical framework, but

evolved as quotations were added to them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In some cases, when a quotation related to more than one code, I wrote it under each applicable code. I used the constant comparative method of data collection, in which data are analyzed as they are collected, and each interview and focus group is impacted by the ones that came before it (Glesne, 2016). After sorting my quotations by code, I clustered the codes into themes, which are big ideas suggested by multiple codes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). These themes are described below, and interpreted in chapter five.

Themes from Focus Groups and Interviews

Struggles of Middle School

One of the topics we discussed in depth during the focus groups centered around struggles students face in middle school that they did not encounter in elementary school. Understanding such struggles are integral to understanding the middle school transition experience (Akos, 2004). Vicente summed up the general consensus of the students, saying, “It’s hard... [the] work here is different... the tests, the homework, class work, everything.” As the students spoke about their struggles, it became clear that their concerns about middle school tended to fall in one of three areas: lack of routine, increased rigor, and increased school size.

Lack of routine. Knesting et al, (2008) found that students with disabilities often had more difficulty than their non-disabled peers learning the routines of middle school. Consistent with these findings, three of the participating students spoke longingly of the routines they had experienced in elementary school. Jose said, “I like they way we did it in elementary. First it was breakfast, then language arts, then writing, then, I don’t remember but always the same. That’s better for making you learn.” In contrast, the

students spoke of middle school as a place that lacked any such predictability. As Corwin put it, “It’s always different. Every day it’s different. You never know what’s going to happen.” Randy, in one of the very few times he spoke, echoed this sentiment, saying, “I used to be only in one room, but now I’m all over the place.” While many young people benefit from routines, the need to have such predictability is a characteristic of people with autism (McCrimmon & Rostad, 2014). Brittany, who teaches Vicente in one of her English classes, echoed this sentiment when she said that he, “thrives on routine, and if anything falls out of that routine, that can really upset him.” However, as she pointed out, “There’s more opportunity for disruption in the routine [in middle school] than... what you’d see in elementary school.”

Increased rigor. Several of the students spoke about the increased rigor they faced as they made the transition from elementary to middle school. Vicente commented, “You have to do more here. Like when you write an essay, you really have to write a lot. Everything is a lot – a lot more than it used to be [in elementary school].” Bruce echoed this sentiment, saying, “A lot of the teachers here make you do a lot. You have to be a good student.” When asked what being a “good student” means to him, he replied, “It just means do a lot of work. They don’t go easy on you with the work.”

All three teachers interviewed spoke at length about the increased rigor they see their students facing. Dana said, “We definitely see students who aren’t prepared for the level of work we are asking them to do. I think that’s probably more so for the kiddos with disabilities.” Anna stated, “Even with their accommodations and with me being there [providing services in the classroom], a lot of the work is a big ask and especially the sixth graders are not always expecting that.” Brittany was perhaps the most blunt,

saying, “I don’t know if it’s just self reported shock or if the rigor of the elementary schools they’re coming from just is that low, but they seem very startled [with the rigor of middle school].” There is little research indicating that work in middle school is actually significantly harder than the work in elementary school, although multiple researchers noted a decrease in motivation as students make this transition (Akos, et al., 2015; Duchesne et al., 2012; Eccles et al., 1993).

Increased size. Along with the lack of routine and increased rigor, the size of the school was brought up as a challenge of middle school. Large school size has often been cited by researchers as an impediment to student success (Crosnow et al., 2004; Holas & Huston, 2012). Even though SA4 is small for a middle school, having around 350 students in grades 6-8, the students spoke of the large size as an impediment to success. When given the writing prompt “What is the most frustrating thing about middle school?” Randy responded by writing, “when you get lost because the building is huge and I don’t know where they want me to go.” Bruce also spoke about the larger size of middle school, indicating, “Elementary was small and it was easy to find the stuff. Now you have to walk a lot... and go a lot because it’s big.” Interestingly, the perception that middle school is larger than elementary school is, at least for some of the students, not accurate. The elementary school Bruce attended actually had nearly 700 students, making it almost twice the size of SA4, yet he repeatedly spoke of elementary school being small and middle school being big.

Anna provided some insight into her view of why the students see middle school as bigger than elementary school, even when that flies in the face of reality. She said,

When the kids are telling you how big it is, I actually don't think they are thinking in terms of actual size. I think it's... more about going from one place to another. You go to your locker and then maybe you walk across campus to your advisory. And then an hour later you leave that and go to math... and so again you're walking to a new place. That's what's making it feel so big as far as I can figure. Being large may have more to do with what students are asked to do in middle school – things like going from class to class and having a locker – than with physical size. As Dana put it, “You'll definitely see those kids who are struggling with going from one class to multiple [classes]. There are definitely kiddos who still have their schedule in front of their nose like they're reading a treasure map in November.” In this way, the problem of the school being “big” seems very closely related to the problem of a lack of routine. The “bigness” of the school may come from students not being sure what they are supposed to do, and having less support in doing it.

Social difficulties. Along with uncertainty about what to do, the feeling that the middle school is too big may be related to social challenges. Such challenges present a particular challenge for students with disabilities (Knesting et al., 2008) and the students identified this area as problematic. For example, when Vicente was asked what made going to a big school more difficult, he didn't speak about size, but about people, saying, “If I don't know all the people, they are mean sometimes because you don't know them and they are not your friend.” I pressed Vicente on this point, asking him if this differed from elementary school, and he replied, “Elementary schools have friends. Middle schools sometimes do. It isn't always.” Enrique then piped in, saying, “When you are at a big school it's harder to make friends. The people don't want to be your friend

sometimes. Sometimes they want to be mean to you.” It seems that the students may be using the idea of a big school as a proxy for a school where it is, for whatever reason, more difficult to develop peer relationships.

Formal Structures for Addressing the Struggles of Middle School

Formal structures are supports that are officially part of school policies and procedures (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). The three teachers I interviewed differed substantially in their views of how much SA4 did to address the struggles students with autism face as they transition to middle school. Anna felt like very little was done to support transitioning students, and in particular those with disabilities. She said, “If I’m being honest, we don’t really do much that’s meaningful. You’ve got things that look good on paper, but mostly we’re focusing on academics over any kind of support for social-emotional [learning].” Brittany was somewhat equivocal, saying, “In those first weeks we are all encouraged to do a lot of relationship building, and we do, but then it gets more academic and that’s when the struggle starts.” Dana felt most strongly that the school was supporting students at this challenging time. “It’s remarkable how many supports the school puts into place,” she said. “And I feel like I can say that without being arrogant because it’s much more [the school’s principal] and the way he’s set up sixth grade that makes that happen.”

During the first focus group, students brought up cohorts and advisory classes as two things the school did to help sixth graders as they made the transition to middle school. During my first interview, which was with Brittany, these two structures were mentioned along with an event called college week. (The event is actually called by the name of the college at which it takes place, which, in the interest of confidentiality, I will

not name.) Based on this interview, I asked the students about college week during the third focus group, and they concurred that it was an important part of making the transition to middle school. In reviewing the transcripts of my three focus groups and three interviews, these three structures – cohorts, advisory classes, and college week – stood out as the formal school structures most associated with assisting in the transition to middle school for all students, including those with autism.

Cohorts. Of all the strategies put into place by SA4 to support students with disabilities, cohorts were what both students and teachers spoke about most. Cohorts are groups of about 30 students who are together for all of their academic classes throughout the day. While Echols (2014) questions the value of cohorts for students with disabilities, Sebanc et al. (2016) make the argument that building positive peer relationships, a major goal of cohorts, is correlated with academic success. At SA4, the groups are named after colleges and universities, and students remain in the same cohort for their three years at the school.

In speaking with the students, it was clear that cohorts were an important part of school culture. For example, when I asked the students to describe their daily schedule, a question that really didn't involve cohorts, Jose gave a lengthy answer that was framed entirely around them, saying

I start off in here [the room in which we were doing the focus group] because this is the advisory for Yale. Then I go over there a couple of rooms for math, which is USC's room. After that I get break and then I'm back in Yale's room because that's English. I have science in Harvard's room and then PE which is outside unless it's raining. Then we have lunch and book club, which is kind of in a

different place. And then finally it's history, which I think is Stanford's room, but it might be UCLA.

For Jose, rooms were defined not by numbers or by the teachers who taught in them, but by the cohort for whom the room is the advisory meeting place. This focus on cohorts as room identifiers is supported by the décor of the rooms. Banners of the college or university after which each cohort is named are displayed prominently on the walls of the rooms in which each cohort starts their day. Teachers use the names of the cohort to address their class, saying things like, "CSUN, I need the level of talking to come down and I need eyes on me."

Cohorts are clearly integral in school culture, and it is also clear that students find them to be helpful in creating an environment that supports students making the transition to middle school. Randy, for example, says of his cohort, "You get to meet new people, and it just helps because you see them and you have class with them." Enrique felt similarly. When asked what it meant to him to be in a cohort, he said, "Being together, working together, winning together, learning together, helping each other, being friendly." Given that developing social relationships seems to be a challenge the students identified when discussing the middle school transition, cohorts seem to be an effective strategy for addressing such challenges.

The teachers interviewed expressed feelings on cohorts that greatly mirrored those of the students. While Brittany did mention the challenge of, "kids being way too into each others' business by the time we get to fifth period," she also spoke specifically about the positive effect of being in a cohort for Vicente. She said,

It amazes me in [the cohort] CSUN how kind the kids are to [Vicente] and I wonder if he had to go to different groupings each day if that would be his experience. In a way I feel like this is a safe place for him and I'm just amazed with the generosity of the kids.

Dana spoke of cohorts in a similar way, saying, "I just can't imagine being able to build relationships with students like we do if we didn't have the cohort model." Finally, Anna, thinking specifically about students with autism, said, "When making new friends is hard for you, it stands to reason that repeated exposure to the same kids is going to be to your benefit."

Advisories. Advisory classes are closely related to the cohort model at SA4. Each cohort begins their day with a sixty-minute advisory class. These classes are intended to teach soft skills including conflict resolution, goal setting, team building, and self-advocacy. They also serve as a time for teachers to conference with students about academic progress. During their interviews, both Brittany and Dana explained that three years ago, in response to a finding from SA4's central office that the school lacked a strong program for social emotional learning, the school created the advisory program. Dana served as one of the teachers tasked with creating the program. She explained that it started strictly as a class for teaching soft skills, but explained that, "over the past couple years, the academic stuff has been added too."

Researchers have found limited evidence to support the value of advisory. (Akos, et al., 2004; Johnson, 2009; Shulkind & Foote (2009), and express alarm that advisories are so widespread, in spite of there being little empirical evidence on their effectiveness. The teachers I interviewed had varying feelings about advisory's impact on assisting

students with autism as they made the transition to middle school. Dana spoke about it most favorably. She said, “For a lot of my kids with autism – advisory – that’s their anchor. That’s where they get that semblance of routine that’s so important for them.” Brittany’s feelings about advisory were more mixed. She expressed the view that advisory was trying to be too much, saying, “There’s too much time in advisory, and it becomes just a catch-all for everything we can’t do at some other time during the school day.” Anna, who does not teach an advisory class herself, did not have a high opinion of advisory, saying, “I do question the value. These soft skills are very important. But to make them meaningful, you have to embed them in the school day. It’s not something best done as a stand alone class.”

During the focus groups, the students spoke extensively about what they did in advisory, but tended not to indicate that any of those things assisted them as they made the transition from elementary to middle school. For example, when asked about what happens in advisory, Vicente, Jose, and Corwin all took turns talking in detail about an anti-bullying program in which they had engaged. They identified key terms such as bully, victim, bystander, and upstander, and gave a descriptive definition of each. They were able to provide a hypothetical example of how a person could go from being a bystander to an upstander, and the importance of doing so. However, when I followed up this description by asking them, “And does that happen in school?” they all gave me blank stares. I tried to reframe the question by saying, “Can you think of a time in school when someone was an upstander?” and got more blank looks. Finally, Corwin said, “No. We were talking about advisory. Not school.” For these students at least, there does not

seem to be transference between the skills learned in advisory and what happens during the regular school day.

College week and the explicit teaching of social emotional skills. Rosenblatt and Elias (2008) make the argument that explicitly teaching social emotional skills has a direct and significant impact on academic achievement. To this end SA4 holds college week for its sixth graders each year in partnership with a nearby research university. Students have classes in university classrooms with their new teachers, and get to use many of the university's facilities. They have the opportunity, for example, to have lunch in a university dining hall, use the gymnasium at the university's student center, and tour the university's library. Dana was one of the teachers who helped implement the school's first college week and explained that the purpose of the event is twofold. First, the goal is to expose the students to a university in the hopes that it will help inspire them to pursue higher education after high school graduation. Second, the classes in which students participate while at the university are designed to teach them many of the procedures and expectations of their new middle school, as well as the social emotional skills they will need to be successful. Of the three teachers I interviewed, Dana was the only one who participated in college week with her students, and described it as a highly effective program. She said, "It's just a great way to start the year. The kids are super into it, it gets that college bound message out right from the start, and we can totally focus on procedures before we even touch academics."

The students in the focus group also expressed an overall positive opinion of college week. During the third focus group, I gave them a writing prompt saying, "Describe college week for a new sixth grader who is starting at [SA4]." Corwin wrote,

“You will like college week because it’s fun to see where they eat and sleep. Also, you will learn everything about how to be a scholar.” Enrique said, “[College] week is when you learn how to be a scholar at [SA4]. You will learn what you need to do, and if you do it you will have success.” Vicente added, “This is when you will meet the people in your cohort. It’s very important because they will hopefully be friendly. Also, the teachers are doing a good job teaching you about being a student here and a scholar.”

The repeated use of the word “scholar” led me to ask the students what this word meant to them. Jose said, “A scholar is someone who works hard, does the work, tries always. At [SA4] we are scholars.” During their interviews, both Dana and Anna mentioned that the use of the word “scholar” is intentional at SA4 in expressing expectations to students in terms of behavior and academics. Anna gave an example, saying,

If a kid is sitting at his desk without his papers out, instead of me saying, ‘get out your paper’ I might say something like, ‘what do scholars do when they come into class?’ The goal is to get them to think of themselves as scholars and act accordingly.

Dana indicated that the idea of being a scholar is a key part of college week. “That’s certainly a focus,” she stated. “We talk about what being a scholar means and the students brainstorm what that might look like.”

While there seemed to be near universal consensus that college week, and the first weeks of school in general, were effective at teaching many of the skills students needed to transition effectively to middle school, there seemed to be a sense that the lessons of those first weeks did not necessarily carry through the year. Brittany, for example, said,

“If I’m being real, once we start academics, and a lot of that nice touchy feely stuff gets left by the wayside.” Anna spoke specifically about how she sees this lack of transference from the spirit of college week to the rest of the year impacting students with autism.

For kids with autism consistency is paramount. So learning soft skills and transition skills can’t be a two week scatter shot thing. It’s got to be embedded throughout the whole year. And we have amazing teachers who try to do that. But there are standards, and testing, and everything else, and sometimes it just gets lost. I wish we could bottle that energy that we feel at [college] week and just sprinkle it throughout the year. That’s the consistency our kids with autism – and really probably all of our students – need. But it’s tough.

The students tended to agree that the soft skills lessons exemplified by college week were less valuable because they were not continued throughout the year. When we spoke about learning the skills to be, as the students said, a “scholar.” Enrique said, “It’s good to learn about that stuff. But now we don’t do that. We have to write essays and do our math and all the work.” As with advisory, there did not seem to be a feeling among the students that the lessons of the first weeks of the school continued as the school year went on. When I asked the group about how they could improve their school, Corwin and I had an exchange that I think epitomized the disconnect between college week and the rest of the year.

Corwin: Maybe we could do [college] week more times in the year. Because it’s good to not just do learning.

Me: What do you think you might do at a second [college] week?

Corwin: Maybe we could talk about how to be successful.

Me: That's interesting. I heard you say that [college] week would be a break from learning. Do you think talking about how to successful might be a kind of learning?

Corwin: (long pause) Learning is what we do in school and it's reading and math and writing and that stuff.

Informal Structures to Address the Struggles of Middle School Transition

Along with formal school structures such as cohorts, advisory classes, and the explicit teaching of soft skills through activities such as college week, students and teachers spoke about informal structures put into place to assist with the transition of students with autism to middle school. An informal structure was defined as something such as classroom culture, student to student interaction, or student to teacher interaction, which happened without being mandated by the school (Eccles et al., 1993). Vicente, for example, spoke about Ms. Parker, a sixth grade math teacher who was not a participant in this study, who would do periodic check-ins with him. "When I started sixth grade, I didn't have friends, so [Ms. Parker] would check on me, and she would say, '[Vicente], give me fist to five, how is today feeling?'" This anecdote about Ms. Parker led to several other students relaying similar stories about the math teacher. After hearing several stories, Jose summarized what seemed to be the thoughts of the group, saying, "Some of the teachers are always checking on you, but not for your work. They want to know if you are okay." I asked him how it made him feel when teachers did this and he said, "It's good. I like the teachers who do it." In contrast, Bruce spoke about his science teacher who he said, "only talks to you if you make bad choices." When I asked Bruce how this made him feel, he shrugged his shoulders. However, several times during the focus

group, Bruce spoke of not liking science class, and it does not seem a stretch to see a connection between his feelings towards his teacher and his feelings about the class itself.

Students also spoke about student to student relationships. Vicente, in particular, spoke about being teased versus being embraced. Much of this was in relation to his cohort, as described above, but he also spoke about unstructured time, such as lunch. He said, “lunch is hard if there is not a friend.” In general, the students spoke about lunch as a difficult time, which is consistent with the argument of Mandy et al. (2016), that students with autism struggle most with the least structured times, including nutrition and lunch. Brittany, mentioned a desire to help students who sit alone at lunch, saying, “there was a day when the teachers joined the students for lunch and ate with them. It was amazing. I’d like us to do more of that.” She then backpedaled slightly, however, adding, “It’s hard. I say I want more of that, but sometimes lunch is the only time I have a minute to make copies or make parent phone calls, so I don’t know if we could really do it.”

The teachers interviewed tended to de-emphasize the informal structures they put into place in their classroom. When I asked Brittany about what she did beyond those things mandated by the school to support students with autism as they transitioned to middle school, her mind went straight to academics. She talked about “creating a book life” and consulting with students on what effective readers and writers do. When I pressed her about non-academic things, she reverted back to formal structures, saying, “There are certainly things we do in advisory that would be non-academic.” Overall, her feeling seemed to be that non-academic informal structures would not have a place in an academic class. Even her suggestion above about teachers eating lunch with the students

felt more like a desire to create a formal structure than her just deciding on a given day to walk outside and sit down at a student lunch table.

Dana was similarly unable to identify informal structures she employed, saying, “Honestly, the school has so much in place already for transitions. I really think that’s the key thing.” Anna went the furthest, arguing that informal structures might be by their nature ineffective. She said, “It seems to me that if something’s going to make an impact, it really needs to be something we are all doing. One teacher doing something in isolation doesn’t change school culture.” It was clear from my interviews that all three teachers tended to think of assisting students with autism as they transition to middle school as something best accomplished through school sponsored, formal structures.

Findings from Observations

In addition to focus groups and interviews, I conducted three observations of classes at SA4. The observations were of a class taught by each of the teachers participating in the study that included at least one participating student. I observed an advisory class taught by Dana, an English class taught by Brittany, and an ELD class taught by Anna. During each observation, I asked myself the following questions:

1. To what extent is the participant student connected to his classmates and teacher?
2. What formal and informal structures are in place to support or impede such connection?

I looked at connection to classmates and the teacher based on the research of McLure et al. (2010) who found that students who make such connections will experience a more successful middle school transition.

Contrasting Brittany and Anna's classes showed a clear example of the power of the cohort in supporting student connection. Brittany's class, like all core academic classes at SA4, consisted of a cohort of students. As an ELD class, Anna's class included students who were in multiple cohorts. Since Vicente was in both of these classes, I was able to see how he interacted in classes with both his cohort and non-cohort peers.

During independent work time in Brittany's class, when students were revising an essay on which they were working, Vicente engaged in a number of atypical behaviors, including rocking in his seat, muttering words to himself, and swinging his arms. His classmates largely ignored him, or, in one instance where he fell as a result of rocking in his chair, immediately asked if he was okay with what seemed like genuine concern. In contrast, in Anna's class, he received a very different reaction when engaging in similar behaviors. Multiple students went up to him and made what seemed to be derogatory comments. The students did not make comments when they could tell I was watching, so I was not able to hear what the comments were, but they appeared to be hurtful based on Vicente's reaction. During my interview with Anna, she expressed embarrassment that she had not noticed this happening and stopped it, but also conceded that it was not uncommon. In fact, she said that the situation was actually an improvement over last year, when Vicente was, in her words, "terrorized."

Dana's observation provided an opportunity to see an advisory class in action. Many of the aspects of advisory discussed in focus groups and interviews were apparent in her class. Students discussed a fictional situation in which a student was being made fun of for being fat, and were asked to identify victims, bullies, bystanders, and upstanders in the story. Jose and Enrique were present in the class. I noted that although

Jose was by far the most talkative student during the focus groups, he did not contribute at all to the conversation, and seemed to have very little written in his reflective notebook, where students were supposed to record their thoughts about the bullying situation. Enrique also did not participate verbally in the conversation. He did write in his notebook, but his answers seemed to indicate a lack of understanding of the lesson. His notebook was modified to have sentence starters, such as, “In this story the bully is _____ because he _____.” Rather than fill these in, he had written, “don’t be bully” on the side of the page.

During my interview with Dana, I asked her if she felt that Jose and Enrique generally engaged during advisory class. She responded somewhat equivocally, saying, “Yes and no. They don’t really volunteer, but sometimes if you push them, especially if it’s a pretty straightforward question, they’ll share.” The overall feeling I had, both in observing the class and in speaking directly to them, was that Jose and Enrique felt more like advisory was happening to them, as opposed to it being something of which they were a part. Johnson (2009) describes this as the ultimate danger of an ineffective advisory class; they can become a place where students commit time but do not derive a benefit.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss my findings, relate these findings back to my literature review, offer thoughts about the implications of my findings, and make suggestions for further research. While a qualitative study, such as mine, does not seek to have findings that are statistically significant, such a study can be significant if it uncovers new information that, “is important, meaningful, or potentially useful” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 239). This is the definition of significant to which I will be referring throughout this chapter.

This study was a phenomenological case study, the purpose of which is to consider the perceptions and views of participants experiencing a particular phenomenon (Glesne, 2016). I examined the perceptions and experiences of six students with autism as they made the transition from elementary to middle school at a small independent charter school in a suburban neighborhood of Southern California. Through this examination, I attempted to answer the following research questions:

Research Question: How do students with autism at a small charter school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?
2. How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?

Theoretical Framework

In order to answer these questions, I developed a theoretical framework based on the ideas of Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013), who distinguish between formal and informal school practices. Formal practices are initiated by the schools themselves, and are intended to occur for all students. Examples of such systems include curricula, advisory classes, teaming, and coring (Akos et al., 2004). Informal practices are not initiated by the school, and often happen during unstructured parts of the day (Eccles et al., 1993). Such times would include nutrition, lunch, passing periods, and time before and after school. Student experiences during these parts of the day are impacted more by the personal relationships they create with peers and teachers, and the way teachers interact with each other and their students, than by any school program (Holas & Huston, 2012). Holas and Huston (2012) argue that both formal and informal structures impact students' experiences transitioning to middle school.

Review of my Methodology

My study is influenced by the ideas of critical disability theory. This theory makes the argument that instead of researchers writing *about* people with disabilities, they should be writing *with* such people (Goodley, 2007). For this reason, to uncover the most effective way to assist students with autism as they make the middle school transition, the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of such students were my primary source of data. To collect such data, I held three focus groups with the six student participants in my study. I developed a protocol for each focus group, but varied from it extensively as the students took the conversation in directions I had not thought of. I also interviewed three teachers of the student participants, and observed one class taught by each of them in which a

participating student was present. During these observations, I looked at the participant students' connections to their classmates and the teacher, which can directly impact middle school transition (McLure et al., 2010). During the focus groups, interviews, and observations, I utilized the continuous comparative method of data analysis by coding initial data as I was collecting more (Glesne, 2016). Following the conclusion of all data collection, I examined key quotations and observation notes, and used these to determine codes, defined as major ideas which come up frequently in the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Themes from the Data

One conclusion that is clear from my data is that the difficulty of the middle school transition, discussed extensively in the literature, comports with the responses to questions in my focus groups and interviews. As discussed by Knesting et al. (2008), students with disabilities often find organizational changes between elementary and middle school to be the most challenging of all changes. Students in the focus groups spoke of this challenge as it related to finding classes and knowing what was expected of them throughout the day. Moreover, the perceived increase in academic rigor, discussed by Sharp (2012) was described as a problem by both teachers and students. Finally, the decreased ability to form peer to peer relationships in middle school, examined by Tomek et al. (2017) is seen in the comments students made about the difficulties of engaging with peers during unstructured times such as lunch. Indeed, there seems to be no doubt about the need to offer structures to assist students with autism as they make the transition from elementary to middle school.

I have classified the codes from my data into four major themes about the perceptions of students with autism on the structures their school puts into place to assist with their middle school transition. These themes can be broadly identified as a informal structures being seen as less important than formal structures, the value of cohorts, the importance of integrated social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, and the benefits of prioritizing student voices as a tool for determining student needs. Below, each of these themes are discussed and related back to the literature. In cases where my findings differed from the literature, discussion is included to try and explain this discrepancy.

The Perceived Value of Formal Versus Informal Structures

At the start of this study, I believed that informal structures, especially the teacher-student relationship, were more important than formal structures, such as traveling in a cohort or having an advisory class, in facilitating a smooth middle school transition for students with autism. This idea was supported by Eccles et al. (1993) as well as Holas and Huston (2012), both of whom argue that a high quality student-teacher relationship is the most important predictor of academic success. My research found that while this was not the perception of students and teachers, it may nevertheless be the case.

In both student focus groups and teacher interviews, the importance of informal structures, such as student-teacher and student-student interaction seemed to be de-emphasized. The fact that students did not perceive such structures as being significantly important could be a result of the participating students having autism. People with autism tend to have greater difficulty describing and engaging in social interactions

(Autism Speaks, 2017). In light of this, it may be that the students struggled to articulate the value of informal structures, even if such value existed.

Another possible explanation for this discrepancy between my data and other research could be the nature of SA4 itself. During all three observations, I noticed effective informal structures taking place, such as teachers mediating student conflicts, students collaborating with peers, and teachers providing specific guidance and feedback to students as they worked. In spite of this, such exchanges and interactions were not brought up by students and teachers as important factors in assisting students with the middle school transition. When I brought such examples up in interviews, teachers tended to downplay the idea that these activities were unique or unusual. This suggests that informal structures such as teacher-student and student-student interactions may indeed be of high importance to the middle school transition, as the research suggests, but that because such behavior is the established culture of SA4, it is not seen as novel enough to be discussed in an interview or focus group.

One final and important factor to consider is that informal structures may be important not in and of themselves, but because they enable the formal structures students and teachers found valuable to come to fruition. Johnson (2009) argues that formal structures are only successful when implemented in the classroom of a teacher who can effectively leverage them as they were intended. Given this, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate formal and informal structures, and leads to the conclusion that both must be strong and consistent for a student to have a successful middle school transition. For example, when students speak of the value of cohorts (described in more detail below), they may really be referring to positive social interactions which take place

among the students in the cohort, or of the relationship teachers develop with their cohort of students. Both of these would be classified as informal structures (Holas & Huston, 2012), but can lead to the effective formal structures, such as cohorts.

Value of Cohorts

In focus groups, students spoke extensively about the value of being in a cohort, having an advisory class, and having specific instruction on social emotional skills. Of these three, cohorts were without question the structure students spoke of as being most valuable to them. Teachers, when interviewed, also touted the value of formal structures, and cohorts in particular. During observations, the value of cohorts was likewise on display. In one of the most striking examples of this, Vicente, a seventh grade student with autism who displays age atypical behavior, fit in well with and was supported by his cohort, but was victimized by his non-cohort peers.

The finding that cohorts are a key to improving the middle school transition for students with autism is in direct contradiction to Echols (2014), who found that the practice is damaging for students with low social skills, and particularly detrimental for students with disabilities. Specifically, the researcher found that cohorts led to increased victimization, exactly the opposite of what I observed. In attempting to determine the reason for this contradiction, multiple ideas come to mind. It could be pointed out that my study looked at only one school, and considered only six students at that school. Thus, as with most qualitative research, these data could be the result of coincidence and are not statistically significant (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Another possible explanation for the contradiction between prior research and my study is that much of this contradicting research (Eccles et al., 1993; Echols, 2014; Holas

& Huston, 2012) did not consider the perspective of the students themselves. The quantitative research conducted in these studies did not ask students whether they felt a cohort model was beneficial. Indeed, Echols (2014) suggests that future researchers attempt to find a correlation between self-reported victimization and victimization observed by peers, but does not suggest actually speaking to alleged victims and their classmates in order to obtain these answers. This seems to reflect the bias, observed and critiqued by Glynn-Owen (2010) and Goodley (2014), against qualitative research involving students with disabilities. Placing the voice of the student as the primary source of data can provide new insights not discoverable in strictly quantitative research (Goodley, 2014).

A final possible explanation of this seeming contradiction could be that the teaching methods employed at Success Academy #4 (SA4) mitigate the negative aspects of cohorts Echols (2014) describes. Echols concedes that her study does not consider teaching practices, and suggests that such practices almost certainly have an impact in the middle school transition. Again, because Echols uses a strictly quantitative approach, it is not possible to know if the schools she studied teach in ways similar to SA4.

The Importance of an Integrated SEL Program

Social emotional learning (SEL) is seen as key to a successful middle school transition (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008). My study does not contradict the importance of SEL, but suggests that such learning is most valuable when it is not taught as a stand-alone concept, but rather as an integrated part of learning throughout the day. During focus groups, students spoke of the value of advisory classes and college week, two formal structures SA4 uses to teach SEL. However, the students failed to see the

connection between these learning opportunities and the rest of their school day. In interviews, teachers conceded that their focus on SEL waned dramatically outside of the time when it was formally taught. The SEL program of SA4 was made less valuable by its limited scope.

This finding echoes the criticism Johnson (2009) levies against most advisory programs. The author finds that, while well-intentioned, such programs fail if they are not given time to become a part of school culture. Similarly, Shulkind and Foote (2009), when writing about what makes an effective advisory, refer repeatedly to the relationship between advisor and advisee expanding to the entire school day. Moreover, as Dexter and Hughes (2011) point out, the transference of knowledge from one setting to another is often more difficult for a student with learning disabilities than it is for a student without a disability. In view of this, SEL programs that are limited to a specific part of the school experience (including an advisory class or designated days such as college week) are unlikely to assist middle school transition for students with disabilities in their academic classes. Rather, the most effective programs are likely to be a part of the very classes in which they are needed. For example, if a teacher uses collaborative learning as a teaching strategy, it seems that it would be beneficial to teach students the skills needed for effective collaboration in that class. This would be superior to relying on those skills being taught elsewhere, or assuming skills taught in one setting would transfer to another without explicitly calling it out. One wonders if the victimization observed happening to Vicente in his ELD class would have been mitigated if the teacher had taught SEL skills to the students of that class rather than assuming they had been taught in advisory.

Prioritizing the Voice of Students with Disabilities

This study makes plain that the voice of students with disabilities can be utilized as a primary data source in studies which examine their experiences in school. Current literature about students with disabilities tends to take a clinical view of disability and does not include the voice of those with disabilities themselves (Glynn-Owen, 2010). Critical disability theory seeks to challenge this paradigm by replacing, “experiments to modify and correct young autistic children... with a focus on qualitative responses to data collection and analysis” (Glynn-Owen, 2010, p. 413). While Glynn-Owen (2010) clearly advocates such an approach, even she questions the ability of young people with autism to be a part of such research. The rich and varied responses I received from my focus groups demonstrate that such research is possible. Several strategies increase the possibility that a researcher working with students with disabilities can obtain high quality qualitative data.

Building rapport. Building rapport with study participants is a critical step to any successful focus group (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) and this is certainly true for a participant with autism. Individuals with autism tend to have a more difficult time developing new trusting relationships (Mandy et al., 2016) and researchers must therefore allow time for trust to build. During the first focus group I conducted, there was relatively little information stated that eventually made its way into this study. Rather, I allowed the students to get to know me, and to validate their stories. I also was unafraid to allow the conversation to veer off the topics I had established in my focus group protocol. When the students began to speak about topics not related to middle school transition, I did not immediately attempt to steer the conversation in this direction, instead allowing the side

conversation to continue. My intention was to show the students that I was there to listen to them, and that listening included being a party to whatever the topics were that they wanted to discuss. These strategies paid dividends in the second and third focus groups, when the students were much more willing to talk about the highly personal topic of their own middle school transition than they were in our first meeting.

Providing opportunities for alternative responses. Some of the student participants in this study, including Jose, Vicente, and Corwin, were very eager to respond verbally to questions. Others, such as Randy and Bruce, were quite hesitant to do so, even after rapport was established. To avoid a situation where only the loudest voices were heard, I allowed the students to respond to some questions in alternative ways, including writing down their answers and drawing pictures to show their responses. In this study, drawings proved of limited value, as students were not interested in participating in this manner. Written responses, however, provided some of the richest ideas from those students who did not typically speak out when verbal response was the only option.

Recommendations for Practice

The results of a qualitative research study cannot be generalized as being applicable in all cases. Nevertheless, results can be offered as suggestions for other practitioners with questions similar to those asked by the qualitative study in question (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In this spirit, I offer below three recommendations for schools seeking to establish systems for supporting students with autism as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. While these recommendations are based on focus groups, interviews, and observations of students with autism, such

recommendations can also be helpful for many non-disabled students (Kalymon et al., 2010).

Team Students with Intentionality

Teaming is a practice in which a group of teachers have the same students for a period of at least a year (Boyer & Bishop, 2004). For example, an English, math, science, social studies, and PE may share a group of 150 students, who travel through their classes throughout the day. In some instances, as is the case at SA4, teaming includes a cohort model, where students remain in the same group for all classes, while in other cases all students in the team have the same teachers, but at different times during the day. The results of this study support a cohort-based team, where all students have the same teachers with the same classmates. If schools wish to implement a cohort model, care should be taken to be intentional about which students are placed together. If two students who engage in disadvantageous interactions are in a common cohort, being together for every class would clearly exacerbate their problems. For this reason, schools should consider carefully the students being placed in the same cohort, and be unafraid to change a student's cohort, should there be a peer in their cohort whose presence is limiting their academic or social-emotional success.

Embed Social-Emotional Learning Opportunities into Academic Classes

Social emotional learning (SEL) skills, including teambuilding, goal setting, conflict resolution, perseverance, and responding to setbacks are key to scholastic success (Wormelli, 2014). This study demonstrates that the places to teach these skills are not only in stand alone classes like advisory or start of the year intensive learning sessions, but in the very academic classes in which the skills are needed. My research does not

suggest the elimination of stand-alone classes like advisory, but argues they alone are insufficient. Since students with disabilities often have a difficult time connecting material in one class to content learned previously (Dexter & Hughes, 2011), SEL skills taught only in advisory are less likely to be utilized in academic classes. Therefore, teachers should include lessons teaching SEL skills as they are needed in class, so that students clearly see the connection between what they are learning and the circumstances in which to use them. With many things to teach, some teachers may wonder if they will have the time to embed SEL skill development in their classes, but doing so often saves time in the long-run, as students are equipped to address problems that come their way.

Include Students with Disabilities in Discussions about Practices Impacting them

As educators work to develop and improve systems to support students with autism as they make the transition to middle school, it is important that the students themselves be a part of the conversation. The old paradigm of talking about students with disabilities instead of talking with them needs to give way to making them the ones from which information is obtained. This study has shown that through relatively simple means, including building rapport and providing alternative methods of response, the voice of students can be included, in a meaningful way, in discussions of systems and structures that will impact them directly.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study focused on a very particular type of school, a small independent charter school in a suburban neighborhood with a high level of poverty. As such, the study leaves unanswered questions about how results might be similar or different at a different sort of school. Future researchers would likely learn a great deal by asking

questions similar to those I did at a large school, a traditional public school, or a more affluent school. Finding similar results among a variety of school settings would lend more credence to the value of cohorts and embedded SEL programs indicated in this study. Additionally, future research might also look into students with disabilities other than autism, and consider how they perceive the formal and informal structures their schools put into place to assist with transition. It would be similarly interesting to contrast the findings of this study with prior research conducted with students who did not have disabilities. Finally, it would be interesting to consider the transition of students from middle school to high school using a protocol similar to this one.

Conclusion

The transition to middle school is critically important. It impacts students' academic success for years to come. Schools put into place a variety of formal and informal structures to support students as they make this transition. For students with autism, the transition may be especially difficult, but there is relatively little research examining what structures assist the most in making an effective transition, from the perspective of the student. In this study, I conducted three focus groups with six middle school students with autism, three interviews with teachers of these students, and observed a class taught by the participating teachers. This study addressed gaps in the literature in two ways. First, there exists little research on middle school transition among students with autism (Mandy et al., 2016). Second, prior research tends not to make students the primary data source (Glynn-Owen, 2010). By conducting a study of students with autism in which they were the primary source of data, both of these gaps in the literature were addressed.

Data collected from my focus groups, interviews, and observations demonstrate that many students perceive some of the formal structures schools put into place as helpful to their middle school transition. Specifically, the idea of having students in a cohort for all academic classes and embedding social emotional learning in all academic classes are seen by the students as beneficial. Moreover, my study demonstrated that including the voice of students in these conversations is crucial to making decisions involving them. While there is a perception among some that students with disabilities are unable to effectively participate in research studies (Goodley, 2014), I was able to obtain helpful and relevant data from my focus groups. All of our students deserve a place where they are supported and encouraged as they make the difficult transition to middle school, and engaging in effective structures to support middle school transition can bring us closer to this goal.

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Appendix A

Guiding Questions for Focus Group Number One

Thank you all so much for being here. I really appreciate you taking some time to talk with me today. This study is voluntary. That means that at any time, if you want to stop doing this, you can. I'm going to be recording what you say using this audio recorder. This is just to help me make sure I get what you are saying right. When I'm done collecting information, I'm going to write a big paper called a dissertation. When I write this paper, I promise that I won't put your name in it, or say that you go to [name of school redacted]. Do any of you have questions? Okay, I'm going to turn on my recorder and we'll get started.

RQ	Related Focus Group Question
How do students with autism at a small charter middle school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?	I want you to think about starting middle school. What words describe how you are feeling about that? PROBE: I heard you say that you feel XXX. Can you tell me more about that? PROBE: Have you heard things about middle school that make you feel that way?

<p>How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?</p>	<p>Let's think back to fifth grade for a minute. Tell me what your schedule looked like on a typical day.</p> <p>PROBE: It sounds like you XXX (spent a lot of time with the same teacher, did English all morning, always had science in the afternoon, etc.) Do you think that was helpful for learning? Why do you think so?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?</p>	<p>That was interesting hearing about what fifth grade was like. I know that at this school, [point out a scheduling contrast with what they said about 5th grade]. What do you think about that?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?</p>	<p>We all know that no school is perfect. Can you tell something about your elementary school that wasn't very good?</p> <p>PROBE: I heard you say [something related to social emotional learning, such as few friends, bullying, cliques, etc]. That sounds like a real</p>

	<p>problem. What types of things did your elementary school do to help out with that? How did that go?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?</p>	<p>If you were in charge of your school, what would you do to help out students with [the problem mentioned in the previous question]?</p>
<p>All</p>	<p>If you could tell your middle school teachers just one thing, that you think would help you have a good start to the year, what would you tell them? Why is that?</p>
<p>All</p>	<p>I'm really interested in learning more about how students feel about going from elementary to middle school. Is there anything else you'd like to tell that might help me learn more about that?</p>

Appendix B

Guiding Questions for Focus Group Number Two

It's nice to see all of you again. I really appreciate you giving some more of your time to talk with me today. I want to remind you again that this study is voluntary. That means that at any time, if you want to stop doing this, you can. Just like last time, I'm going to be recording what you say using this audio recorder just to help me make sure I get what you are saying right. Remember that when I'm done collecting information, I'm going to write a big paper called a dissertation. When I right this paper, I promise that I won't put your name in it, or say that you go to [name of school redacted]. Do any of you have questions? Okay, I'm going to turn on my recorder and we'll get started.

RQ	Related Focus Group Question
How do students with autism at a small charter middle school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?	I want you to think about these first couple months of middle school. What words describe how the beginning of school has been? PROBE: I heard you say that middle school so far has been XXX. Can you tell me more about that?
How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?	You all know that the schedule at [name of school redacted] is different than elementary schools. For example, at this school, you go

	<p>from class to class instead of staying in the same room all day. What do you think about that?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?</p>	<p>Another thing that makes middle school different is that you have more than one teacher. How has that been for you?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?</p>	<p>What are the students like at [name of school redacted]?</p> <p>PROBE: I hear you saying that students here are XXX. Can you tell me more about what makes you say that?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?</p>	<p>How about your teachers? What are they like?</p> <p>PROBE: It sounds like you are saying that this teacher XXX. What makes you say that?</p>
<p>All</p>	<p>Let's imagine for a minute that you were the principal of [name of school redacted]? What would be the very first thing you would do to</p>

	<p>help out students who were starting middle school here?</p> <p>PROBE: That's an interesting idea.</p> <p>Can you tell me more about why you think that would be helpful?</p>
All	<p>I'm really interested in learning more about how students feel about the first few months of middle school. Is there anything else you'd like to tell that might help me learn more about that?</p>

Writing Prompt: Last time I was here, you told me about [name of university redacted] week. I'd like you to write a letter to a new sixth grade student telling them what to expect during that week

Drawing Prompt: I'd like you to draw a picture of what it's like to start middle school. You can include captions, like a cartoon, if you want.

Appendix C

Guiding Questions for Focus Group Number Three

It's nice to see all of you again. This is the last time we'll have this kind of meeting, and you all have been so helpful the first two times. Thank you! Even though I've said it before, I want to remind you one more time that this study is voluntary. Remember, that means that at any time, if you want to stop doing this, you can. Just like last time, I'm going to be recording what you say using this audio recorder just to help me make sure I get what you are saying right. Remember that when I'm done collecting information, I'm going to write a big paper called a dissertation. When I right this paper, I promise that I won't put your name in it, or say that you go to [name of school redacted]. Do any of you have questions? Okay, I'm going to turn on my recorder and we'll get started.

RQ	Related Focus Group Question
<p>How do students with autism at a small charter middle school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?</p>	<p>It's hard to believe, but it's almost winter break, and once you get back, you'll be just about done with your first semester of middle school. How has this first semester been?</p> <p>PROBE: It sounds like your first semester was XXX. Can you tell me more about that?</p>
<p>How do students with autism at a small charter middle school</p>	<p>It's really interesting to hear you say that [point out a contrast with</p>

<p>experience the transition from elementary to middle school?</p>	<p>something they anticipated would be a problem August that they are now saying is not a problem]. I feel like you thought [what they said initially]. Is there something [name of school redacted] has done to make you feel [what they are saying now]?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?</p>	<p>You might remember that when we met the last time, you told me that [a problem with the schedule, changing classes, or changing teachers they brought up] was a real problem. How has that been going? PROBE: I'm so glad that's not as much of a problem anymore. Is there anything in particular that you think has helped with that? Or PROBE: I'm so sorry to hear that's still a problem for you. Is there anything you think [name of school</p>

	redacted] could do to help students with that problem.
How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?	I'm sure that [name of principal] and your teachers work really hard, but there are always things that schools could do better. What's the biggest change you wish could happen at [name of school redacted]?
All	<p>The last time we talked, I asked you imagine for a minute that you were the principal of [name of school redacted]. Let's do that again, and let's imagine that you were talking to 5th graders who were about to start [name of school redacted].</p> <p>What would be the very first thing you would do to help out students who were starting middle school here?</p> <p>PROBE: What a great idea. Why do you think that would be helpful to them?</p>

All	I'm really interested in learning more about how students feel about the first few months of middle school. Is there anything else you'd like to tell that might help me learn more about that?
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Appendix D

Guiding Questions for Teacher Interviews

Thank you so much for being here. I really appreciate you taking some time to talk with me today. This study is voluntary, and while I appreciate you signing the consent form, you can revoke that at any time. I'm going to be audio recording this so I can be accurate in my transcription of our conversation. In my dissertation, I will not include your name or the school name. I also want to remind you that I'm not an employee of [name of charter management organization redacted] nor are they paying me to conduct this research. As such, nothing you say during this interview will have any impact on your position as a teacher at [name of school redacted]. Do you have questions? Okay, let's get started.

Preliminary questions:

1. Can you tell me how long you've been teaching?
2. And has that all been at middle school, or have you taught other grades?
3. How long have you been here at [name of school redacted]?

RQ	Related Interview Question
How do students with autism at a small charter middle school experience the transition from elementary to middle school?	What do you see as the biggest challenge students face as they enter middle school? Why is that? PROBE: My research is specifically focused on students with autism. In your experience with such students,

	do you see [the problem they identified] as similarly difficult for them? Or is it more or less of a problem?
How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?	How do you think the schedule, as it's structured at [name of school redacted] impacts student transition, and in particular the transition of students with autism?
How do such students perceive and experience formal middle school structures?	I know there are a number of things [name of school redacted] does to support students with special needs, including autism, as they enter middle school. What do you think is the most effective thing the school does? PROBE: What is it about [support they stated] that is so impactful?
How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?	We all know that a school is only as good as its teachers. With that in mind, I'm curious to hear what you do in your classroom, beyond the official things done by [name of

	<p>school redacted] to support students with autism as they begin middle school?</p> <p>PROBE: What do you think makes that so effective?</p> <p>PROBE: Do you feel like that's a pretty widespread practice at [name of school redacted]?</p>
<p>How do such students perceive and experience informal school practices?</p>	<p>It seems like we never have the time to do everything we'd like to do to support our students. What do you most wish you could do to support student transition that you are not currently able to do?</p> <p>PROBE: Is there anything [name of school redacted] could do to allow that to happen?</p>
<p>All</p>	<p>If you were the principal of [name of school redacted], what would you do prior to the start of the year to help with the middle school transition?</p>

	<p>PROBE: Do you feel like that's being done now?</p> <p>PROBE: And how effective is it?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>PROBE: What do you think is stopping that from happening?</p>
All	<p>Let's stick with this idea of you being the principal of [name of school redacted] for a minute. What would the first week of school look like for 6th graders?</p> <p>PROBE: I hear you saying a lot about [common theme]. Why is that so important?</p>
All	<p>I appreciate so much everything you've said so far. Is there anything else you'd like to let me know?</p>