

**WHAT HELPS AND WHAT HINDERS STUDENT
TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL TO
SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL**

by

Richard Lawrence Oliver
M.Ed., University of British Columbia, 1995

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APPROVAL

Name: Richard Oliver

Degree: Doctor of Education

Title of Thesis: What Helps and What Hinders Student Transition from
Middle School to Senior Secondary School

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. Michelle Pidgeon
Assistant Professor

Dr. Natalee Popadiuk
Senior Supervisor
Assistant Professor

Dr. David Paterson
Supervisor
Senior Lecturer

Dr. Michelle Nilson
Internal/External Examiner
Assistant Professor

Dr. Ronald Lehr
External Examiner
Professor, School of Education
Acadia University

Date Defended/Approved: April 22, 2010



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ABSTRACT

This study examined students' experiences as they transitioned from middle school to senior secondary school. The Critical Incident Technique was used to explore student experiences given that students were able to tell their own stories in their own voices. It is an exploratory methodology that helps in the development of a more complete understanding of the transition process. Through interviews with 31 participants 203 discrete incidents were developed from retrospective self-report interviews examining helping and hindering experiences related to this transition. The 203 incidents were placed into nine categories and six sub-categories developed as a result of analysis of the data. This study confirmed much of the previous literature on transition, but it also extended its scope through the development of a comprehensive category system as well as the identification of new situations of extreme student anxiety and the impact of poor teacher practice. This research developed several recommendations for school administrators, teachers and counsellors which, if implemented, would likely help them to support students as they experience the transition process.

Keywords: Student transition; transition from middle school to senior secondary school; adolescent adjustment; student perspectives; Critical Incident Technique; educational leadership; school counselling.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family all of whom have been tremendously supportive of me through the entire process of completing this work. To my wife, Heather, who is the love of my life and who has been my conscience and my inspiration. To my children, Nicholas, Andrew, and Sarah, you have been and always will be, my guides to what is real and meaningful. To our extended family, your encouragement and willingness to help out along the way has made this possible. To my mom who is always doing amazing things for her kids, including transcribing the many hours of interviews for this project. To my dad and brothers, who along with my mom, have always been there supporting me. Words simply cannot describe how I feel, but my love and thanks go out to each and every one of you.

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1: CHAPTER ONE – OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

‘School transitions are moments of peril. Students who do not navigate a school transition well face the possibility of personal and academic turmoil and even falling off track for promotion and graduation’ (Curran-Neild, 2009, p. 54). This statement highlights the profound and possibly long-lasting impact on students as they move across the transition to senior secondary school. It also provides a call to action for school staff to deepen their understanding of this process so that they can provide support where it is needed.

Having been on different sides of the transition to senior secondary school as a teacher, a counsellor, and an administrator has made it clear to me that there are some significant issues which students must deal with before, during, and after the actual transition to senior secondary school. The system that I work in requires students to move from grade 9 in a middle school to grade 10 in a senior secondary school. There is a need to develop a more complete understanding of what is actually happening as students anticipate, experience, and, ultimately, adjust to the move to senior secondary school. The understanding that is gained in this study could help schools to develop more effective interventions and programs that are designed to help mitigate the negative effects of this transition. There has been very little research published

on this transition within the school system. This is just as true today as it was when Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French (1996) wrote the following:

Despite the declines in academic and psychosocial functioning, few studies have examined prospectively the impact of the normative transition to high school on the psychological and interpersonal behaviour or on youth perceptions of their transactions with a new school, set of teachers, and peers. (p. 490)

This stands in stark contrast to the earlier transition from elementary school to either middle or junior high school, which has become a 'focal point of scholarship' during the past twenty years.

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) state in their study, 'Although much research exists regarding the transition into junior high school, surprisingly few studies have focused on the move into high school'(p. 1). Given the statements by these and other researchers (Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999) and the fact that there is a scarcity of articles which turn up in literature searches, one can only conclude that there is a gap in the literature concerning what happens to students across this transition within the school system. A desire to understand the transition from middle school to senior secondary school from these mid-adolescent students' points of view and to fill the void that exists in this area of the literature is fundamental to the case for conducting this study.

1.2 Relevance of the Study

It is clear that individual students experience and adjust to the transition to senior secondary school in a variety of ways. I have observed and worked with

students who have experienced very little difficulty with the transition and others who have withdrawn from school after the transition. Most students would fall in between these two extremes, but it remains clear, as evidenced in practice and in the literature, that the effects can be quite dramatic. Barber and Olsen (2004) summarize their review of the literature with the following: 'The consensus from anecdotal, theoretical, and empirical studies of varying design is that the academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning of students suffers after making the transition' (p. 3). While it is commonly acknowledged in the literature that there are negative effects associated with the transition to high school, there has been very little work done to elucidate what these are and why they occur. In one of the more recent studies on transition, the authors comment:

Thus, it is not yet clear enough why school transitions are hazardous for adolescents. To what extent is the difficulty students have in their lives at the transition to a new school explained by less than adequate school environments, as opposed, for example, to psychosocial changes occurring in student lives at this stage of their development. (Barber & Olsen, 2004, p. 5)

There are more questions than there are answers in terms of understanding the impact of transition on individual students. Even a broad review of the literature including search terms with reference to adjustment, transition, articulation, middle school, high school, secondary school, adolescence, coping, child development, psychology, education, behaviour intervention, school counselling, school psychology, and school social work have failed to turn up more than a handful of recent studies addressing the middle school to high school transition

(see Benner & Graham, 2007, 2009; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Frey, Ruschkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009; Smith 2006a, 2006b; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006; Stein & Hussong, 2007; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). This study of transition using the Critical Incident Technique will provide a more complete picture of what is happening to students across this transition. Armed with this more complete understanding, it should be possible to develop interventions which will help schools to ease the transition effects for students.

1.3 Researcher's Experience

My own experience with transition was relatively seamless transition from junior high school grade 10 to senior high school grade 11. I was involved with student council and many school activities in junior high school and continued with some of these in high school. I was one of the students who welcomed the flexibility and the opportunity presented by the change in schools. I am also aware that several of my classmates had a much more difficult time with the move to high school and in some cases they withdrew from school. I mention these experiences so that the reader will have an idea of the early influences that could subconsciously have an influence on this research.

As well, I have spent most of the past twenty years observing and working with students on both sides of the middle school to senior secondary school transition. The different roles that I have held in the system include: teacher, counsellor, and school administrator, each of which has provided me with a different vantage point from which to watch and gain an understanding of the difficulty of this move for students. Through my many interactions with students,

it became apparent that there were many challenges and opportunities that presented themselves to students as they made the move to senior secondary school. It was also apparent that there was a lot more that could be done within the system to assist students through this process. My awareness of these issues and my belief that more could and should be done to support students has certainly influenced my practice over the past several years and therefore has likely made me susceptible to the influence of this thinking as I interviewed the participants and analyzed the data.

I have worked with a group of other professionals within the school system to develop programs to assist students with the transition. We looked to the literature for guidance and program ideas, but this met with only limited success, we found very few studies and even fewer program ideas that were focused on this transition. The desire to gain a better understanding of the transition process and the experiences of students as they moved from grade 9 in a middle school to grade 10 in a senior secondary school is what precipitated this research. The rationale for conducting this study is that a better understanding of the factors that impact students may lead to systemic interventions that could positively impact students as they experience and adjust to the transition to senior secondary school.

1.4 Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted while adhering to the highest principles of ethical standards. The study was subject to an ethics review and was approved as proposed (see Appendix 1). There are some ethical considerations beyond

the design and approval process that need to be addressed. There was a definite power differential between the researcher and the participants, given the roles that each of us held in the system. Care was taken to minimize the impact of this differential on the collection of data for this study. First, none of the participants had been students where I was the school principal. Second, I introduced myself by my first name when I met the participants and continued to establish and build rapport in a deliberately casual manner. Third, I dressed down for the interviews, removing my tie and jacket prior to meeting with the participants. While these steps did not completely remove the power differential in the study, I believe that they minimized the impact of the differential on the collection of data. These steps, when combined with the requirements of the data collection process, including self-selection by participants to be a part of the study, and reasserting the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time, provided more balance to the relationship than our roles would typically have allowed.

Researcher subjectivity is another consideration that needs to be addressed. Creswell (1998) suggests that 'the investigator needs to set aside, as much as possible, theoretical ideas or notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge' (p. 58). There is no doubt that I am influenced by my experiences with students as they encountered this transition. The different roles that I have held provide me with a rich source of understanding, but they also

might bias my analysis. I have had to remain aware of these influences as the research has progressed and I have taken a number of steps to minimize them in order to allow the study to unfold as it should. First, the Critical Incident Technique utilizes participants' own accounts of what helped and what hindered them. Second, the design of the study required collection of data to be sustained through to the saturation point to ensure that it was comprehensive. Third, my senior supervisor was involved in the initial category formation and my committee provided guidance and advice all the way through to final category formation. This ensured that the categories were being formed by way of consideration of the incidents and not due to my preconceived notions. These steps, when combined with the reliability and validity checks embedded into the design of this study as well as with my own awareness, have helped allow the results to be driven by the data with a minimum of bias.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to develop a more complete understanding of the transition from grade 9 (middle school) to grade 10 (senior secondary school). The need to develop a more thorough understanding of this transition is supported by the authors of recent studies like Stein and Hussong (2007), who state: 'Currently, little is known about what students even expect from high school and how they experience this transition' (p. 60). In order to gain a more complete understanding of this phenomenon, it is necessary to determine what

students' experiences are across this transition. This is especially true given that much of the classical research on this transition has focused on a few relatively easy to measure characteristics. Akos and Galassi (2004) state, 'It is surprising, however, that, in most of the transition research, the voices of those who are most directly involved – the students. . . have been heard only infrequently' (p. 2). In this research, the Critical Incident Technique will be utilized to ensure that student voices are heard. A short overview of this methodology follows, but in chapter three I will fully detail the methodological considerations and design features of this study.

The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) is a well-accepted qualitative research method which is gaining popularity, especially in areas of counselling research (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). It is a form of interview research in which participants provide descriptive accounts of specific events that helped or hindered a particular end. It includes characteristics of various qualitative and evaluation research approaches, which makes it particularly useful in researching a wide range of activities and settings. The most important of these characteristics are the flexibility and adaptability of the design, which allow the data collection process to be modified to fit a wide variety of situations. It is an exploratory methodology which is designed to develop a broad understanding of the factors that impact the phenomenon being examined. Participants selected for a particular study must have been in a position to observe or experience relevant helping or hindering effects, and must be capable of articulating their experiences.

In this methodology, data is collected until the point when there is no new information coming forward about the phenomenon being studied. This is referred to as the saturation point and it ensures that the data will represent coverage of what is being studied as completely as is possible. Each potential incident is reviewed in order to establish that there were three basic components as per Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005). First, that there is a source for the incident; second, that the action taken or the experience can be stated with reasonable completeness; and third, that there is an outcome that has a bearing on what was being studied. Critical incidents are extracted from each participant's account of their experiences at the completion of each interview and then grouped by similarity to form a set of categories that encompass all of the incidents. The category system provides a map of what facilitates or hinders a given end. This categorical map can be used for the development of theory, for test construction, for practical programs, and for further research. Since Flanagan's initial formulation of this research approach over five decades ago, it has been successfully used in hundreds of studies in a wide variety of fields. A few examples include education (Popadiuk, 2009), communications (Koning & De Jong, 2004), and dentistry (Fitzgerald, Seale, Kerins, McElvaney, & Fitzgerald, 2008).

Secondary school students who have experienced the transition from a middle school grade 9 program to a senior secondary school grade 10 program will provide the first hand experience of the transition that this methodology requires. This should help to fill the void in the transitions literature.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research will be important, given that it will collect students' firsthand experiences in their own voices. The research will provide a more complete understanding of what is happening for individual students as they move between schools. This should provide some insight into how we can more effectively facilitate the transition process in order to mitigate the negative effects that students experience. Rice (2001) suggests that 'the research community has provided little guidance about how, when, and to whom to target resources intended to ease systemic educational transitions for students' (p. 373). A goal for this study is to provide leadership to schools in the form of recommendations for changes in practice. This is necessary to help schools to support their students as they move through this transition. The fact that the effects of transition can be devastating for some students is a call for action. More needs to be done in order 'to prevent difficult transitions before they become an insurmountable issue' (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 183). This research is being undertaken in an effort to be proactive and more responsive to student needs as they experience a normative transition within the school system.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

There are a number of considerations which will limit the ability to generalize the results of this study. The participants of this study self-selected to be a part of it and were in no way intended to be representative of all students. The participants all came from schools located within one school district in the

province of British Columbia, Canada. The study only looks at the transition from middle school grade 9 to senior secondary school grade 10. Further, interviews for the study took place at the end of the first semester after students had entered senior secondary school for students in grade 10 and at the end of the first semester of grade 11 for students in grade 11. The limitations are further addressed in Chapter Five.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

Transition: is defined as a process of related occurrences extending over a period of time (Aneshensel & Gore, 1991) which, for the purposes of this study, extends from grade 9 (middle school) to grade 10 (senior secondary school) and involves changing schools. In this study, student participants recounted specific incidents and related occurrences which either helped them or hindered them as they prepared for the move, actually moved, or adjusted to the move from middle school to senior secondary school. It should be noted that the grade configuration referenced here is common to all of the schools whose students participated in this study. Beginning senior secondary school (high school) at grade 10 is a very common configuration across North America and other countries around the world including Australia, Japan, and Taiwan.

Normative transition: is defined as a school transition that is planned at a certain point within the school system by school authorities. It is a transition that all students within that system must complete in order to advance to the next level of schooling.

1.9 Outline of the Dissertation

In the five chapters of this dissertation, I examine the experiences of students who have transitioned from grade 9 in a middle school to grade 10 in a senior secondary school. The first four chapters focus on indentifying the elements of the transition that impact students either positively or negatively as they move across this transition. The final chapter uses these elements as a basis from which to make suggestions for change in practice to better assist students in their adjustment to this transition.

In the first chapter, I provide an introduction to the study. I outline the purpose of the study, as well as some of the background and considerations which influenced my decision to conduct the study. In the second chapter, I review the literature that relates to school transitions and specifically the transition from middle school to high school. In the third chapter, I develop an argument for my choice of methodology using the literature to support the decisions that I made in the design of the study. Later in this chapter, I detail how the study was conducted. In the fourth chapter, I focus on the results of the study including the development of descriptive categories and a category system. In the fifth chapter, I discuss the categories and the category system in order to develop an holistic understanding of the factors which impact students as they transition from middle school grade 9 to senior secondary school grade 10. Lastly, I focus on the implications for practice and the challenges to changing the system to meet the needs of students from an educational leadership perspective.

2: CHAPTER TWO - CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

I conducted a review of the literature to help elucidate what occurs to students as they move from middle school to senior secondary school. The research on the transition from middle school to senior secondary school was thoroughly examined. It was also necessary to examine the research on other transitions within the school system in order to develop an understanding of student experiences as they make a school transition. This knowledge of school transitions will be utilized in the current study as I try to develop a comprehensive view of student experiences as they transition to senior secondary school, grade 10, from middle school, grade 9. For this review, I surveyed the literature on transitions from one school to another using topical selections that referenced adjustment, transition, articulation, middle school, high school, secondary school, adolescence, coping, child development, psychology, education, education leadership, behaviour intervention, school counselling, school psychology, and school social work.

The transitions literature is dominated by classical studies that focused on a few specific aspects of the earlier transitions from elementary school to either middle school or junior high school (Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Kurita & Janzen, 1996;

Wigfield, Eccles, Maclver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Some other studies focused on the transition from elementary school to high school (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Johnstone, 2001; Reyes, Gillock, & Kobus, 1994). After reviewing the studies on school transitions, it is evident that there is a small, but increasing body of research focused on student transitions to high school from either middle school or junior high school (Benner & Graham, 2007, 2009; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Frey, Ruschkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009; McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007; Smith 2006b; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006; Stein & Hussong, 2007; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Smith (2006a) stated that transition is receiving increased attention due to the fact that the first year of high school has the highest failure and dropout rate in the entire system. While there are a limited number of recent studies on the transition from middle school to high school, there are fewer still that examine transition for the grades that reflect the design of this study (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996).

It is interesting to note that most of the studies that do examine the middle school to high school transition tend to be very narrow in focus, examining only a few specific constructs, such as: achievement loss (Smith, 2006a) and self-esteem (Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996). The studies examining the transition to high school reported significant negative effects, such as increased depressive symptoms (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007) and increased problem behaviour (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). In almost every instance, the authors of these studies have called for

more research in order to generate a more complete understanding of the factors that impact students as they transition to high school.

What follows is a synthesis of the available research on student transitions. It will help to elucidate what we know and do not know about the transition from middle school to senior secondary school and will also help to position the current study in the context of the broader literature. After reviewing this body of research, it is readily apparent to me that the transition from elementary school to middle school or junior high school has been thoroughly explored (Elias, Gara, & Ubriaco, 1985; Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Wigfield, & Eccles, 1994). Indeed, this earlier transition was the focal point of the literature for the past 25 years or more. Given the attention from researchers and the thorough examination in the body of research, there is a solid understanding of the factors that impact students and guidelines for schools to help ensure a smooth transition from elementary school; for example, student induction programs, a comprehensive teacher-advisory program to connect students to the school, and the teaming of teachers to provide greater support to students (see McElroy, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2002).

In direct contrast to the attention paid to the elementary transition in the literature, there is only a limited body of research on the transition from middle school to high school. What follows is a compilation of findings from the research body that will focus on the transition to high school. To begin, personal and developmental factors are considered with respect to the transition to senior secondary school. Then, academic, social, and organizational factors will be

presented as they relate to this transition. These are included as overall themes for this review given that several researchers have identified: personal, academic, social, and organizational/structural factors as important in the literature (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Rice, 2001; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). Program interventions will be reviewed in order to establish if they can have a positive impact on student outcomes as students transition to senior secondary school. The ongoing call for further research in the literature will be highlighted in order to build an awareness of the demands as presented in the research body. The educational leadership literature, as it pertains to program development, will be discussed, as programmatic change is a goal of this research. Then finally, a summary will follow to bring forward the key conclusions from the body of empirical research.

2.2 Personal and Developmental Factors

Research has shown that normative transitions in the school system are associated with a number of changes that can adversely affect students (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Petersen, 1996). As students experience this transition, they must deal with increased academic stress, and increased time demands. They exhibit lower self-esteem and fears about new social situations that involve greater numbers of students, including older students (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). The consensus in the literature from studies using quantitative methods, supplemented by a few qualitative studies, is that after making a transition to a new school, the academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning of students was negatively affected (Barber & Olsen, 2004). The vulnerabilities that students

experienced during school transitions highlight a frequent mismatch between the readiness of the student and the demands of the school environment (Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996). On these vulnerabilities, Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French (1996) suggested that differently structured environments concurrent with biological, cognitive, and interpersonal changes make students developmentally vulnerable across this transition. Aneshensel and Gore (1991) suggested that during a time of physical and emotional change, adolescents must also endure the transition to high school. The difficulty is that social, cognitive, and emotional capabilities are subject to rapid developmental changes during this period of development. Benner and Graham (2009), using large scale survey research, reported that as a whole, the results show that the transition to high school negatively altered students' psychosocial life course trajectories.

Similarly, Cohen and Smerdon (2009) suggested that the timing of the move to high school coincides with adolescence, which is a critical and unique stage of human development marked by physical and emotional changes. The literature suggests that there is a convergence of developmental and contextual factors across the high school transition that likely add to the severity of the challenges that students face. Many developmental tasks will culminate in high school. Late-maturing males will enter puberty, and other students will have pubertal changes completed. This observation is reflected by Cauley and Jovanovich (2006), who stated that the move through adolescence is an ongoing struggle with the conflicting desire for autonomy and independence and the need for support. These factors may explain some of the differences observed between adolescent students as they experience the transition.

Benner and Graham (2009) found that students had high levels of anxiety through the transition to high school and that the levels of anxiety did not diminish with time. This is consistent with the previous discussion suggesting that when adolescents move between schools, their anxiety can be exacerbated by other normative changes such as puberty, and social and emotional development. In a previous study using longitudinal surveys, Benner and Graham (2007) noted that adolescents rely on social support, coping skills, and self-concepts to moderate stress during these years. Indeed, the social network, or relationships within a students' social sphere, have been found to play a critical role in the well-being of students experiencing stressors associated with transitions (Trickett & Buchanan, 1997). Benner and Graham (2007) went further in describing students' sense of belonging as a complete reflection of their social adaptation.

In a small study utilizing Grounded Theory, Johnstone (2001) purported that the periods leading up to and following school transitions can be as difficult for some adolescents as the actual move. This suggests that anticipation of the change creates stress; however, students appear to be able to prepare for the change. Johnstone (2001) also noted that while some students approached the transition with trepidation, some also expressed excitement in anticipation of the move. This difference in outlook has been shown to have an impact on student adjustment.

Stein and Hussong (2007) conducted interviews with students and found that students' expectations play an important role in their adjustment to high school. They found that students who held positive expectations of high school

had a positive experience in high school. Students who held negative expectations of high school had a negative high school experience. This finding demonstrates the importance of changing students' expectations of high school as a possible way to help students have a more positive high school experience.

Less research has been conducted on students' psychosocial adjustment through the transition to high school. The findings of the few studies that have been done offer mixed results. Kinney (1993) found that students developed more positive self-perceptions and welcomed the increased opportunities that were presented in high school. Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French (1996), using a longitudinal survey, found no significant changes in students' self esteem across the transition. This is in contrast to Barber and Olsen (2004) who tied their research to a national longitudinal survey and found declining self esteem and increasing depressive symptoms across the high school transition. Benner and Graham (2007) sought to extend the literature by examining some little studied constructs, including school worries, school liking, and their sense of belonging. They found that students tended to like their high schools more than their middle schools. In addition, after two months of attending high school, they expressed fewer worries about school.

The available research shows negative effects in several personal and developmental domains such as motivation, increased depressive symptoms, increased behaviour problems, and increases in social stressors (Alspaugh, 1998a; Barber & Olson, 2004; Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981; Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Petersen, 1996; Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996; Simmons, 1987). Not enough is known about the factors that precipitate these

effects. Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) suggest that many of these could be linked to a feeling of connection with the school. They call for future qualitative research to identify the factors that promote students' connection with the school.

2.3 Academic Factors

The research on the transition to high school has been largely focused on students' academic achievement and their engagement through the transition to high school. This is apparent in the number of studies that have reported on student grade point averages, academic demands, and school engagement for the transition to high school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Reyes, Gillock, & Kobus, 1994; Rice, 2001; Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996; Smith, 2006a). Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French (1996) found that there was a significant decrease in GPA and a lower participation in extracurricular activities post-transition. Similarly, Benner and Graham (2009) found that adolescents who were doing well before the transition to high school experienced transition disruptions in grades and psychological functioning during the transition; for many, this struggle continued for several years. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) argued that although the transition from middle school to high school is often given less attention than the transition from elementary school to middle school, the risks are often more notable. This is punctuated by the fact that more students fail the first year of high school than any other grade.

Cohen and Smerdon (2009) noted that all high schools are pushing students hard academically, and they also observe that secondary schools are seeing adolescents drop out at an alarming rate, with the greatest losses reported immediately following the first year of high school. Although students highlight their social and emotional concerns across the transition to high school, their academic fears often prove to be more serious and longer lasting (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Similarly, Smith (2006a) studied related constructs using national longitudinal data and reported that achievement loss from middle school to high school had a long term impact on students and was associated with college failure.

Some students experience difficulties during the transition to high school from which they never recover. Declining grades, course failures, increased absences, and decreased school involvement are evidence of the negative effects of transition (Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981; Roderick, 1993). Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, and Spas (2007) conducted a cross-sectional longitudinal study and were able to confirm that the transition to high school is associated with a number of negative outcomes, including poorer attendance, declining grades, discipline problems, and feelings of alienation and social rejection. Isakson and Jarvis (1999), using school level data and various inventories, observed a significant decline in GPA across the transition to high school. They found that attendance rates actually improved early in the

transition, but then dropped, by the end of the year, to a significantly lower level than was experienced pre-transition. It was also noted that there was a marked increase in stressors in the first term after the transition, but that these levelled off by the end of the year. They argued that it is important to identify those students who are experiencing increased stressors, since identifying these students early may help prevent greater problems.

Difficult transitions are associated with high dropout rates (Alspaugh, 1998b; Smith, 1997). The transition from middle school to high school presents some major challenges for students who are at risk for dropping out of school, and for this population, the negative effects described previously are often exacerbated (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, Cochrane, 2009). These authors conducted surveys and utilized school discipline data in this study. They concluded that there is a clear need to assess and support students' academically, emotionally, and behaviourally as they enter high school.

Benner and Graham (2009) found that adolescents struggled academically over time with declining grades and increased absences. The findings of this study corroborate much of the previous research, particularly with respect to the negative impact that the transition can have on adolescents as they transition to secondary school. This strengthens the case for developing an holistic understanding of what students are experiencing as they transition to secondary school.

2.4 Social Factors

Benner and Graham (2009) reported that to date, most of the research on school transition has focused on the move from elementary school to middle school and that the research on the transition to high school is more limited. They suggested that the students' feelings of belonging and interest in school may be challenged during transitions because pre-transition friendships and social supports are often disrupted. They pointed out that there has been minimal attention paid in the literature to how the high school transition alters adolescents' perceptions of social ties. The transition affects students' social, emotional, and academic identities and well being in varied and significant ways (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Some examples of these include: increased loneliness after the transition (Benner & Graham, 2009; Johnstone, 2001); parents and peers play a sustaining role in adolescents' well being (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, and Spas, 2007). At the opposite end of the spectrum, some students find the transition to high school exciting and liberating because they have an opportunity to redefine themselves socially or academically (Kinney, 1993).

Kinney (1993) also found that for some students the transition brings increased opportunities for them to connect and develop meaningful relationships with, the more diverse groups or cultures found in most high schools. Lettrello and Miles (2003) conducted structured interviews with regular and learning disabled students. From this research they concluded that older friends and siblings played an important role in helping students understand high school life.

They also reported that activities involving older students helped new students become acquainted with high school, and that positive interactions with older students, such as sporting events, helped them feel comfortable at the high school. These findings are very similar to the finding of Johnstone (2001), who purported that interactions with older students previously known to the students gave them a sense of security about the new school.

A less positive aspect of developing relationships was discussed by Isakson and Jarvis (1999), who found that decreases in student achievement across the transition were associated with family, school, and peer stressors. This is consistent with the suggestion by Smith (2006a) that students experience a drop in achievement as they enter high school even when their peers are supportive. He speculated that the achievement drop is associated with the distracting nature of peer relationships. It would appear that for some students, these new opportunities and the focus on developing new relationships can take away from their academic focus.

Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) reported that school attachment was associated with academic motivation and that perceived teacher support was associated with positive perceptions of school climate and academic motivation. They also reported that after the high school, transition students perceived less support from the school and were generally less involved with the school. Students with a low attachment to school were found to perceive school more negatively and had lower academic motivation. This is in contrast to students who had a high attachment to school. They experienced higher academic motivation and had a more positive perception of school.

Some students reported a decrease in social support at the high school level, especially as it relates to school staff, and that this had a significant effect in numerous aspects of academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning (Barber & Olsen, 2004). These researchers also found that the teacher-student relationship was the prime element of the school environment's impact on student well-being. Supporting this, Benner and Graham (2009) suggested students who form close relationships with teachers early in the year might buffer some of the negative effects of transition. Smith (2006a) also concluded that a positive connection with one adult on campus is a strong predictor of retention for all students, but it may be particularly important for high achieving students.

Student motivation and success has been linked positively to other adult relationships, in particular, parents (Frey, Ruschkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009). There are multiple references to parent involvement in many studies that cover the entire education system (Mizelle, 2000). Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001), using structured interviews, examined the transition to high school and found that students who successfully transitioned to high school were more likely to have parents who were involved in the school. Through examination of a related construct, they found that those students whose parents monitored their progress at school and intervened when there were indications of problems were more likely to be successful in high school. Similarly, Frey, Ruschkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) found that parental supervision and involvement was associated with higher academic motivation. These researchers also found that even when faced with challenging environments, parental involvement and support have been shown to help students cope.

Those students who do not have these positive relationships and support may experience significant adjustment issues. Benner and Graham (2009) found that some adolescents were both lonelier and more anxious, following the transition to high school and that they tended to become increasingly lonely and more anxious across the first two years of high school. This is consistent with earlier findings by Aneshensel and Gore (1991), who reported that school transitions appear to produce substantial dislocation and re-adjustment of friendships. They found that almost without exception, students who had recently experienced a school transition described it as a difficult, troublesome, or stressful experience. Other researchers have similar findings, reporting that some students are so devastated by the highly impersonal environment that they have transitioned into that they end up dropping out of school (Roderick, 1993; Catterall, 1995).

2.5 Organizational Factors

Previous research on the transition to high school suggests that context matters greatly in how students perceive and experience the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000). On this point, Johnstone (2001) found that students complained about a lack of knowledge concerning the high school system. Further, students transitioning from elementary school to high school had many anxieties related to the physical environment and the organizational culture of the high school. Students reported feeling scared and nervous about the transition to secondary school, but they also expressed excitement about the move.

In a similar finding, the Akos and Galassi (2004) study concluded that school transitions pose both challenges and opportunities for students. These researchers found that students and caregivers had similar perceptions of the positive aspects of transitions, while teachers and school staff had different perceptions of what concerned students. Students' top concerns included classes being more difficult and the amount of homework they had. Teachers listed their top concerns for students as difficulty in fitting in or in making new friends. Overall, these researchers suggest that most students adjust more quickly to the procedural aspects of a school transition than to the academic or social aspects.

On these procedural aspects of the transition, Letrello and Miles (2003) reported that students had difficulty getting used to the class schedule in high school, and they were fearful of the size of the school and not being able to find their friends. Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, and Smith (2000) echoed these findings. Using student narratives, they reported on challenges with school size, class organization, length of class periods, and interactions with many new people. Similarly, Benner and Graham (2009) reported that students found their large high schools and unfamiliar settings to be more turbulent and less supportive than their previous schools. On a related construct, Smith, Feldwisch, and Able (2006) found in their survey study that students were worried about getting lost in the high school. In addition, in a longitudinal study, Rice (2001) reported that students had increased concerns about safety at the high school.

A different aspect of the move into high school, generally viewed as positive by students, is the increased flexibility and freedom that the move brings (Akos

and Galassi, 2004). Smith, Feldwisch, and Abell, (2006) reported that students liked the freedom and independence that they had at high school, but they also acknowledged that these changes came with increased responsibility and possible consequences. Similarly, Letrello, and Miles (2003) reported that students appreciated that high school provided more freedom and flexibility, and they also found it easier to get involved in the school.

2.6 Program Interventions

Helping students make a successful transition to high school requires programs that specifically focus on student needs across the transition (Mizelle, 2005). Hertzog and Morgan (1998b) suggested that the transition begins at some point in middle school and extends throughout the first year of high school and possibly beyond. Smith (1997) reported that transition programs were effective at getting students to high school and increasing student retention through graduation. She noted that transition programs had a significant impact on reducing the dropout rate, provided that there was a system focus on students' successful transition. These programs targeted students, parents, and staff. Jordan (2001) noted that students' experience and behaviour at the beginning of high school when coupled with systemic support can make a significant difference in the educational success of students.

Each secondary school possesses a unique culture. Its traditions and values have been established and embedded into every aspect of the school. By exposing incoming students to the expectations, customs, and general operations of the high school they can begin to internalize the culture of the

school. This should ease much of their anxiety (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). Stein and Hussong (2007) concluded that transition programs may be improved by specifically targeting expectations to help students experience high school more positively. Wigfield and Eccles (1994) suggested that as schools make changes to better match adolescents' developmental needs, there should be reduced negative outcomes across the transition.

Helping adolescents make a successful transition into high school is one of the fundamental functions of middle level education. Indeed, one of the initial tenants of middle level education was to articulate students' transition into high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Despite the resolve of the middle school movement, it is important to note that students frequently have a difficult time with the transition into high school. Efforts to increase peer and teacher support to students may help reduce the transition stress and increase student attachment to their high school. It is likely that difficult transitions are responsible for many students' failure to reach their academic or social potential (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982; Smith, 1997).

Mizelle (2005) suggested that the transition from middle school to high school can be a major turning point for students. Most students will overcome the challenges that they encounter. However, if students have not been adequately prepared in middle school or if they are not supported through the transition, then they may struggle academically. Adolescents must make the major transition to large impersonal high schools, where it is not uncommon for new students to feel alienated and unsure of themselves. Akos and Galassi (2004) found that academic, procedural, and social components of the transition

may require different types of programming to facilitate successful adjustment. This has many implications for the development of school transitions programs to mitigate the negative effects of transition, including the breadth of factors considered and the timing of interventions.

Despite the increasing evidence calling for action, little has been done to help to smooth the transition to high school (Jordan, 2001). Programs to assist students moving from middle school to high school are all but nonexistent. The lack of interventions and information hampers one of the most crucial moves that students make in their entire educational experience (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998a). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) argued that 'every high school reform initiative should include a focus on the middle to high school transition' (p.177).

2.7 Educational Leadership

It is extremely arrogant for us as educators to believe that we understand what is best for students without first, understanding our students. This argument was also advanced by Fullan (1991), who stated that 'tremendous numbers and diversity of students, combined with minimal research from the students' point of view, make it impossible to do justice to the question of where students are' (p.170).

At several points in the educational leadership literature a case is made for involving students in all aspects of their education. This is critical in designing new programs and changing existing ones to meet their needs as Scott (1999) argued:

A particularly important group to involve in the design process is the learners for whom it is intended....an ideal source of ideas is a sample of students who have already completed a similar program. They can give excellent advice on how they learnt what to do, what the key problem areas were, what was most useful and what was a waste of time. (p.40)

On this same advocacy, Fullan (1991) wrote:

We should stop thinking of students just in terms of learning outcomes and start thinking of them as people who are being asked to become involved in new activities....The more complex the change, the more that student involvement is required. (p.189)

If an understanding of what students think and how they are affected by change were truly desired, perhaps it would be wise to ask the students. It is unfortunate that this is almost never done. Supporting this argument, Fullan (1991) suggested, 'We hardly know anything about what students think of educational change because no one ever asks them' (p.182). If students are not asked about their needs and their experiences then programs that are developed for them cannot possibly meet their needs, let alone have the desired impact.

Educators must recognize that adolescent students view life events and institutions through a different lens than adults:

There is an important discrepancy between adults' and adolescents' view of school. While adults evaluate school primarily with respect to their contribution to adolescents' cognitive and career development, adolescents are more likely to view school as an important setting for socializing. (Craig, 2000, p.167)

This different world view has led to a situation where '[students] feel alienated from their schoolwork, separated from the adults who try to teach them, and adrift in a world perceived as baffling and hostile'(Noddings, 1992, p.2). This situation, as it was described by Noddings, strikes home as akin to the findings from the studies described in the earlier sections of this literature review — a hostile environment across the transition presenting hassles and stressors, a decreased attachment to the school, and significantly lower grades. Students have some basic needs that must be met by the school, given that 'schools cannot accomplish their academic goals without attending to the fundamental needs of students for continuity and care' (Noddings, 1992, pp.63-64). The basic needs referred to by Noddings in advocating a 'community of care' can only be met through the development of relationships. It is implicit that in order to develop strong relationships that there would be a willingness to listen and a desire to understand. This has not been the general practice within the education system to date, but this needs to change to meet student needs. The importance of relationships and connectedness cannot be overstated in an educational setting.

One of the major proponents of developing schools as communities has been Sergiovanni (1994, 1999, 2000). He argued the metaphor for school should be changed from an organization to a community. Finn (1989) described increased feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection from society in work reviewing the process of dropping out of school. Sergiovanni (1999) also reflected that schools must counter the societal trend towards individualism and isolationism, and reconstruct themselves as learning communities. He noted that

schools that function as communities envision human connectedness in a different way. They are based on relationships that are founded upon reciprocity, care, and commitment. These are the 'conditions needed to make schools academically, socially, and developmentally effective places for all of our students' (Sergiovanni, 2000, p.36). These conditions will help foster an environment in which students will be empowered to take charge of their lives and be able to adapt to change. This 'involves thinking of the child as a total cognitive being, one who, when empowered, has access to a full range of intellectual resources and thus can respond proactively as opposed to reactively in various in-school and out-of-school contexts' (Prawat, 1989, p.34).

These assumptions, if applied to school, would form the basis for substantial reform resulting in a system that is more responsive and in touch with the needs of the students. It is evident from the literature on educational leadership that students deserve an important role in influencing the conditions under which they work. In other words, 'we must respect their ideas, opinions, and desires' (Levin, 1994, p.97). And further, the only way that we can give students the respect that they deserve is to ask them what they think and how they feel.

Clearly, for the system that is being studied in this research, the students have an opportunity to broaden our understanding of what factors helped them or hindered them as they moved to senior secondary school. The understandings gained from the students' accounts of their transition should allow me to make recommendations for school administrators, teachers, and counsellors on how they may be able to support students as they move between schools. In my

opinion, this study represents a small step towards what scholars in the educational leadership realm are advocating for the system as a whole — students providing input and direction on how school practices should change.

2.8 Demand for Further Research

The calls to examine the factors that impact upon student transition to secondary school simply cannot be ignored. Systemic normative transitions are predictable events dictated by school policy makers, and therefore, there is an obligation to understand the effects and attend to the consequences (Rice, 2001). There is a limited body of literature that has examined what students experience in the transition to secondary school. There are only three studies that have examined student expectations and what specifically students experience in the transition to secondary school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000; Stein & Hussong, 2007).

Felner, Primavera, and Cauce (1981) demonstrated that school transitions affect different students in different ways, and they suggest that future research needs to be done to determine those factors that help students successfully adapt during such transitions. Similarly, Simmons (1987) suggested that the factors that mitigate and aggravate the adjustment to school transitions should be investigated to generate more understanding. Given that much of the research have been quantitative surveys or ex-post facto in design, Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) suggested that future qualitative research is needed to identify the factors that promote students' connections with their high school.

Currently, there is little known about how students experience the transition to high school (Stein & Hussong, 2007). To date, the research community has provided little guidance on how to help ease the systemic transitions for students (Rice, 2001). The research on educational transitions is limited. Further research is needed to examine the overall trends within and across educational transitions (Smith, 2006a). Benner and Graham (2009) suggested that much of the high school transition experience remains to be explored. The study of school processes, school structural variables, and relationships between teachers and students across the transition are all areas that need to be examined. The heightened risk of school drop-out during high school is associated with negative educational outcomes experienced across the transition to high school. This finding highlights the need to understand the factors that impact students as they transition to high school (Stein & Hussong, 2007).

2.9 Summary

This review of the research demonstrates that school transitions can have a profound impact on students. There is virtual unanimity within the literature that there are significant negative effects on adolescents as they experience the transition to high school. There is also recognition that there is an incomplete understanding of the transition to high school. The research on the transition to high school has been limited despite the fact that studies have documented similar academic challenges across this transition to those that were experienced in the move to middle school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Reyes, Gillock, & Kobus, 1994). This review sought to illuminate the impact that the transition to high

school has on adolescent students and highlight the need for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon and the process of transition.

The review highlights developmental factors associated with adolescence as these almost certainly complicate the transition and adjustment process. The review also brings forward transition programming to help mediate the negative impact of high school transition. The studies encapsulated in this review demonstrate convincingly that any school transition can have profound effects on students. This is in spite of the fact, that most of the studies used measurement scales and inventories, which did not provide opportunities for students to explicate what was happening to them. Most students were subjected to the same questionnaire type instruments repeatedly, over the course of these studies (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

The studies that have been examined report a variety of effects across the transition to high school with some implications for practice in school settings. Some of the literature suggested that it may be possible to mediate the level of stress associated with transition from school to school as was the case for students who had been exposed to adaptive coping strategies in the Isakson and Jarvis (1999) study. Others, such as Finn (1989), suggested that there is a need to develop intervention efforts to deal with the increased stress and the associated decrease in both school involvement and school membership. These interventions are necessary because as students go through a process of disengagement, there is an increased likelihood for them to withdraw from school. As a whole, the findings suggest that there is a need to examine

programming and procedures around school transitions in order to assist students towards making a successful adjustment to high school.

3: CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological Choice and Research Design

Considerations for the Study of Student Transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School

3.1.1 Choosing a qualitative methodology

The debate at the formulation phase of this study was whether to use a quantitative research methodology, such as correlational research, or a qualitative approach to studying this issue. Most of the research that has been done on school transitions is dominated by quantitative methodologies involving the use of surveys, and a variety of other instruments, scales, and assessments (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2008; Jordan, 2001; Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abel, 2006). There is a noticeable dearth of studies using qualitative methodologies in this area of the literature (Johnstone, 2001; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Lucey & Reay, 2000; Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000). The literature searches conducted for this study that were focused on the earlier transition from elementary school similarly produced an abundance of quantitative studies (Elias, Gara, & Ubriaco, 1985; Fenzel, 1989; Fenzel &

Blyth, 1986; Kurita & Janzen, 1996), but very few qualitative studies (Lehmann, Bassett, & Sands, 1999).

In reviewing the literature on school transitions, a thorough understanding of the student experience has not been fully explicated, particularly for the transition from middle to senior secondary school. It is apparent from the literature (see Barber & Olsen, 2004; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Siedman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996) that there is a very limited understanding of what is happening to students both personally and emotionally as they transition to senior secondary school. This lack of awareness of the students' perspective is reflected by the quantitative methodologies being employed in the majority of studies conducted on student transitions. There is a need to develop a clearer picture of what is happening at this stressful juncture in the lives of many students, and this would most effectively be accomplished using a qualitative methodology.

By generating a more detailed description of what students are experiencing, it may be possible to develop interventions and programs that reflect the needs of the students. While it is true that quantitative methods have enabled educational researchers to make important discoveries, Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) suggest, that in the view of many researchers, 'qualitative research plays a discovery role, while quantitative research plays a confirmatory role' (p. 29). Banyard and Miller (1998) suggest that 'quantitative methods seem poorly suited to helping us understand the meanings people make out of significant events in their lives. Numbers may describe experience, but they too often do not give voice to it' (p. 500). It is to this end that the study is focused – collecting

student stories and developing a more complete picture of what they experience in this transition. In essence, this study is a discovery of what is happening from the students' perspectives as they move between schools.

It is most important to hear from the students, in their own words, what is happening to them throughout this transition so that we may become aware of the factors that are important to them. Qualitative research allows the 'research participants the opportunity to share their experiences using whatever words and metaphors they choose, rather than having to reduce their experience so that it fits into a range of predefined answer choices' (Banyard & Miller, 1998, p. 499). To allow students to give their own accounts of what has happened to them, and in an attempt to develop as complete a picture of what is happening as is possible, a qualitative research methodology will be utilized for this study.

3.1.2 Choosing the Critical Incident Technique

Given that the research on student transition to senior secondary school is quite limited, and that the literature which does exist focuses on changes in select student attributes using quantitative methodologies, it is most appropriate and important to bring the students' stories of transition forward. In order to develop a better understanding from a student perspective, the methodological approach used in this study had to meet two main criteria: it had to be exploratory in nature; and it had to allow the participants to voice their own experiences. The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) is one method that meets these requirements. It is appropriate to use this Technique for this study because it allows the students to share their own knowledge and voice

their own experiences of what they have been through, and it allows for the development of an holistic understanding of the phenomena being studied.

In some recent studies cited in chapter one, the Critical Incident Technique was utilized to develop a better understanding of phenomena from the participants' own accounts of their experiences. In one study, the researchers interviewed dental students to gain insight into the students' perceptions of their pre-service practice and their preparedness (FitzGerald, Seal, Kerins, McElvaney, & Fitzgerald, 2008). The authors point out that they were able to extract rich, detailed, and immediately relevant information from the student interviews using this methodology. In Popadiuk's (2009) study on unaccompanied international students, the specificity of the qualitative data uncovered using the Critical Incident Technique provided distinctive and useful information about students' experiences in a new country. In another study, Konig and De Jong (2004) examined the quality of organizational communication in a high school. They reported that this methodology enabled them develop a deeper awareness of the issues and to answer questions that were previously left unanswered by surveys. The flexibility of the Critical Incident Technique has enabled it to become a well established research tool that is used in many areas of study (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005).

Flanagan (1954) suggests that the Critical Incident Technique lends itself particularly well to the study of many areas, including counselling and education settings. He states, 'The Critical Incident Technique consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and

developing broad psychological principles' (p. 327). More recently, the Critical Incident Technique has been referred to as ' . . . a flexible set of principles that can be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand. By gathering factual reports made by observers, researchers can build a picture of the situation under study' (FitzGerald, Seale, Kerins, & McElvaney, 2008, p. 299). By collecting the stories of multiple subjects who are reporting on what they have personally experienced, it should be possible to develop a comprehensive view of what is happening to students during this transition.

3.1.3 Choosing interviews for data collection

In a now classical series of studies, Andersson and Nilsson (1964) looked at the different data collection methods available for use in studies using the Critical Incident Technique. They suggested that 'the method of collecting material did not affect the structure to any great extent, although fewer incidents were obtained with questionnaires' (p. 402). A study done by Jackson and Rothney (1961) looking at methods of data collection found that the data 'yielded by questionnaire was a mean of 2.8 problems per response while the interview yielded a mean of 8.8 problems per response' (p. 569). More recently, Borg, Gall, and Borg (1996) suggest that studies comparing questionnaire and interview protocols have yielded significant differences in the number of problems reported – interviews being clearly more productive. Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005) state that one of the distinctive features of the Critical Incident Technique is that 'data collection is primarily through interviews, either in person or via telephone' (p. 483). This does not entirely exclude, the

use of questionnaires with this methodology, but rather these authors make their suggestions based on what has evolved into best practice over the past five decades.

The case could be made for using interviews as opposed to questionnaires based solely on the studies presented. There is, however, an interpersonal dimension to the collection of data which should be considered. Interviews enable the establishment of trust and rapport with respondents, 'making it possible to obtain information that the individual probably would not reveal by any other data collection method' (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 289). Interviews also allow for the clarification of responses in order to gain a more accurate understanding of a participant's intent, since 'self-reports on surveys are very difficult to interpret and are especially difficult to utilize in designing programs to improve the quality of life of those surveyed.' (Flanagan, 1978, p. 146). Given the goal of developing as complete a picture as is possible in order to assist students with the transition to senior secondary school, it is most appropriate that individual interviews were chosen as the vehicle for data collection in this study.

3.1.4 Sampling, reliability and validity using the Critical Incident

Technique

Given that the Critical Incident Technique is exploratory and descriptive in nature, the sample size is determined by the complexity of the activity or task that is to be analyzed (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). As with other exploratory research designs, sampling is purposive and 'is intended to exploit

competing views and fresh perspectives as fully as possible. Sampling stops when the information becomes redundant rather than when the subjects are representatively sampled' (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 276). Flanagan (1954) also supports the position of redundancy when collecting data using the Critical Incident Technique. He suggests: 'It can be considered that adequate coverage has been achieved when the addition of 100 critical incidents to the sample adds only two or three critical behaviours' (p. 343). If data collection stops at this point, a condition which I have earlier termed *saturation*, then the subsequent category formation should provide a reasonably comprehensive picture of the situation (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). These procedures will ensure the collection of a large enough sample represent the range of incidents associated with transition. Woolsey (1986) suggests that 'the major purpose of a critical incident study is to provide complete coverage of the content domain' (p. 245). The breadth of the data will assure that the categories that are developed meet the objective of developing an holistic understanding of what is happening in transition.

The quality of the data collected does not appear to be at issue with the Critical Incident Technique, so long as care is taken to follow the procedures for observing and reporting incidents to ensure their accuracy. Generally, the more detailed and vivid the account of the incident is, the more likely it is to be correct, 'if full and precise details are given, it can usually be assumed that this information is accurate' (Flanagan, 1954, p. 340). Once the data has been collected it 'can be expected to be comprehensive, detailed, and valid in this form' (p.341). The process of category formation is designed to make the data

more useful and not more valid (Woolsey, 1986). Category formation needs to be performed with care, 'sacrificing as little as possible of the comprehensiveness, specificity, and validity' (p. 344). In a classical piece of research, Andersson and Nilsson (1964) conducted a series of studies to check the reliability and validity of the Critical Incident Technique. Their conclusion at the end of their studies was that the information collected by this method is both reliable and valid. Their recommendations are still applied to current studies, but they are bolstered by additional tests of reliability and validity (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005).

3.1.5 Critical Incident Technique studies on similar subjects or populations

One measure of the appropriateness of the Critical Incident Technique for use within a given population could be whether it has been used previously and with what degree of success. In his paper describing the Critical Incident Technique Flanagan (1954) noted multiple examples of studies which have been done on specific populations or in specific research areas using the Critical Incident Technique as the methodology. One of these specific populations mentioned is high school students. The Critical Incident Technique was used to develop tests of specific value areas related to students' perceptions of their classmates (see p. 354). Popadiuk (2009) in a study of unaccompanied Asian secondary students examined student adjustment to their new context using the Critical Incident Technique. This study provided rich data that highlighted the importance of relationship connections and how these can make a difference in

student adjustment. In another study, junior high school students were asked to recall successes and failures. The researchers provided the following rationale: 'We anticipated that the critical incident approach would yield particularly useful information for educational practice because the students were asked to evaluate important real-life events' (Vispoel & Austin, 1995, p. 399). The data collected in this study are discussed along with the implications for educators and researchers. Young (1991) used the Critical Incident Technique to look into early school leavers' transition to adulthood. She found that early school leavers were hindered by poorly developed self-identity, inability to meet their basic needs, and maladaptive coping patterns. These findings had implications for program development in the areas of student retention and self esteem.

It is evident from the few examples presented here that the Critical Incident Technique has been used effectively with students who are of a similar age and grade as the intended participants of this study. The studies used in this discussion provide further justification for the use of the Critical Incident Technique with grade 10 and grade 11 student participants in the study of student transition to senior secondary school.

3.1.6 Critical Incident Technique studies with related topics

Just as it is important to have a method which will work for the specific population to be studied, it is equally important to select a method which will provide the data required to understand the problem or phenomenon being investigated (McCormick, 1994). To this end, it is appropriate to look at research on related constructs to determine if the method has applicability to the current

area of study. The Critical Incident Technique was used by several researchers to examine adjustment after a move. The Young (1991) study described earlier on school leavers' transition to adulthood looks at several constructs which overlap with the proposed study of student transition. These include, but are not limited to, things like school effects, and transition. Broughton (1984) used the Critical Incident Technique in an exploratory study and made recommendations for the facilitation of successful adjustment after a move. In these studies, the researchers successfully examined closely related constructs utilizing the Critical Incident Technique.

In recent studies, researchers have used the Critical Incident technique to examine international student transitions. Popadiuk (2009) examined the factors that help or hinder the adjustment of unaccompanied Asian secondary students after the transition to secondary school. For instance, interpersonal relationships were found to impact students' sense of self and well-being. Moores and Popadiuk (in press) highlight the positive aspects of international student transitions. Their study developed a more complete understanding of international student adjustment to life in a new country and provides a number of recommendations which should assist school staff and counsellors in their efforts to support international students. Popadiuk (in press) recently examined the transition into high school for Asian international students. This study highlights the importance of having school counsellors who are culturally aware, knowledgeable, and highly skilled in order to support international students in their transition. These studies demonstrate that the Critical Incident Technique

has been successfully used to examine phenomena closely aligned with those being examined by the current study.

One measure of whether or not a methodology is appropriate for use in the study is whether studies using the methodology in similar areas of research have produced quality data that has in some way led to a more complete understanding of the phenomena (McCormick, 1994). If these studies have produced quality data, then this would give support to the use of the methodology. It is evident from the studies cited previously that the Critical Incident Technique has been successfully utilized to research several areas that are closely aligned with that of the proposed study. Researchers have been able to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena that were studied and this has enabled them to make appropriate programmatic recommendations with consideration of these findings. The findings provide a further rationale for the use of the Critical Incident Technique in the study of student transition to senior secondary school, and they also support the prospect of being able to develop interventions that will assist students in transition with this methodology.

3.1.7 In summary

In the previous sections, a case has been made for the use of a qualitative methodology, specifically the Critical Incident Technique, in this study. This study needs to collect data that will encompass students' entire experiences in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this transition and the factors which help and hinder students as they make the move to senior secondary school. Flanagan (1954) states:

The Critical Incident Technique is beholden to two basic principles that may be summarized as follows: (a) reporting of facts regarding behavior is preferable to the collection of interpretations, ratings, and opinions based on general impressions; (b.) reporting should be limited to those behaviours which, according to competent observers, make a significant contribution to the activity. (p. 355)

These principles support the use of the Critical Incident Technique for this study given that the students know what they have experienced and whether these experiences were helpful to them or hindered them in the transition to senior secondary school. Relying on student accounts of their experiences is consistent with more recent applications of the Critical Incident Technique. Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (1995) report that there has been a move away from direct observation and toward retrospective self-report in studies using this methodology. Additionally, the principles stated by Flanagan underline the importance of collecting quality data that, in this instance, should result in a better understanding of what happens to students as they transition from middle to senior secondary school.

The previous discussion on developing a rationale for the use of the Critical Incident Technique for the study of student transition to senior secondary school has made it clear that this method is an appropriate choice for this study. It has been clearly demonstrated that the methodology is grounded in a rich philosophical tradition which is consistent with the objectives of this study. The Critical Incident Technique is likely to yield data which will fill a significant gap in the literature and add to our understanding of student transition to senior

secondary school. Further, the Critical Incident Technique is well appointed for use, both with the population to be studied and in the general area of the phenomena to be researched.

3.2 The Critical Incident Technique as Applied to Student Transition: The current study

3.2.1 Introduction

The major considerations in selecting a design for the study of student transition were twofold. First, rather than focusing on one factor or set of factors, the goal was to provide a reasonably comprehensive picture of what helps and what hinders students in the transition from middle school to senior secondary school. Secondly, students needed to tell their own stories so that there was an understanding of what was happening during the transition from their perspective.

3.2.2 The study

A pilot study was conducted to determine whether the process would yield sufficient incidents to make the study worthwhile and to refine the interview questions and procedures. Subjects for the pilot study included two males and three females from grade 10. Each of the subjects was interviewed using the Critical Incident Technique protocol developed for this study. A total of 13 critical incidents were identified from the males' interviews and 26 incidents were

identified from the females' interviews. The pilot interviews yielded incidents sufficient in quantity and quality to merit continuing on with the study. With the agreement of the research committee, the decision was made to incorporate the pilot interviews and critical incidents into the larger body of the study.

Initially, I had planned to interview only grade 10 students at the end of their first semester. However, the possibility of students experiencing the transition effects over longer periods of time pointed to the need to collect the stories of some students one year removed from the transition in order to ensure that the study was as comprehensive as possible. This meant a revision in the research design to include some grade 11 students who had experienced the transition from grade 9 to grade 10 as additional participants.

Table 1: Participants and Incidents

| | # of Participants | # of Incidents |
|------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Grade 10 Males | 14 | 56 |
| Grade 10 Females | 13 | 125 |
| Grade 11 Males | 2 | 10 |
| Grade 11 Females | 2 | 12 |
| Totals | 31 | 203 |

The main study took place using 26 participants in addition to those of the pilot group, for a total of 31 interviews and 203 critical incidents. Table 1 provides a summary of the participant groups by grade and by gender, as well as the number of incidents that were identified from the interviews held with

participants from each group. The participants for this study came from four different senior secondary schools within the same mid-sized school district in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. The grade 10 males related an additional 43 critical incidents and the grade 10 females related an additional 99 critical incidents. The grade 11 interviews yielded 10 critical incidents from the males and 12 critical incidents from the females. The protocol for the study remained the same for each of the interviews. There were no specific adjustments made for either the gender or the grade differences of the participants.

All of the incidents brought forward by the grade 11 students were similar to those collected from the grade 10 students. It is also noted that there were no new incidents collected late in the study that had not already been encountered in earlier interviews. It was determined by the researcher in conjunction with the committee that the point of saturation had been reached after 31 interviews.

3.2.3 The setting

The research was conducted in School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan), which serves approximately 22,000 students in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. At the time of data collection, the middle schools in the school district serve students in grades 7 - 9 and the senior secondary schools serve students in grades 10 - 12. For each of the interviews, the researcher interviewed the participants at the school that they attended in a room or office location that afforded them privacy and freedom from interruption for the duration of the interview, or in some instances as free from interruption as a school setting

will allow. In two of the interviews, the school bells to signal class changes sounded while the interview was still taking place, and in one interview there was a phone that rang several times until I was able to disconnect it. There were three occasions in which school announcements caused a momentary disruption in a particular interview. These disruptions were minor and aside from a brief pause in the interview there were no other effects observed or noted.

3.2.4 Selection of participants

Participants for this research project were recruited from each of the schools with the assistance of school counsellors. The counsellors were known to me through a network that I had developed over many years of working in the school district. During the research, the position I held in the school district was middle school principal, which involved coordinating transition activities for students from my school with the counsellors and administrators from a senior secondary school. Information about the study was provided to each of the school counsellors, who were then asked to make grade 10 students at their schools aware of the study. The counsellors advertised in a number of ways, including bulletin board messages, announcements to classes, and personal invitations. Students who expressed an interest in participating in the study were given an information package which contained an information sheet about the study and consent forms to take home to their parents (see Appendix 2). In order to participate in the study, each student had to meet all of the following five criteria: (a) they had to have come from middle school grade 9 and have moved to senior secondary school grade 10; (b) they had to be able to remember the

transition; (c) they had to be able to articulate the events clearly in the English language; (d) they had to agree to participate; and (e) they had to have their parents' permission to participate. In one instance, a potential participant was excluded because the parent permission form had not been returned, even though the informed consent form had been completed and returned. The school counsellor followed up with the student, but the form never materialized and so the student did not participate in this study.

Shortly after the recruitment of participants had begun in schools, the study was expanded to include some grade 11 students. A piece of research that I had previously overlooked revealed subtle differences in school adjustment between grades 10 and 11 for students who had transitioned to senior secondary school at grade 10 (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998). A discussion with my committee provided me with support for including grade 11 students in an effort to ensure that the coverage of the transition experience was as complete as possible. To address this change, the senior secondary school counsellors were asked to assist with recruiting some grade 11 students. The grade 11 students had to meet all of the requirements outlined previously for grade 10 students. The counsellors distributed information packages and collected the consent and permission forms from the students at their schools. Interviews were scheduled for all participants after the researcher was notified that the documentation was complete at each school.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, there were 31 participants in this study. Of these, three were First Nations students who lived on reserve very close to the school they attended: two grade 10 males and one grade 10 female. The

other 28 participants in this study would best be described as being of Western European heritage. Each of the participants attended schools in a single school district encompassing a small number of tightly linked urban and semi-urban communities. The furthest any student would have to travel to school in this district would be a 30 minute bus ride. The distance to between the middle school and senior secondary school would be at most a 15 minute bus ride for transitioning students in this school district. Although in no way intended in the design of the study, the cultural make-up of the participants can be seen as consistent with the school community serviced by this School District where the vast majority of students are of Western European decent, 9% of the students are First Nations and a very small Asian new immigrant population exists.

3.2.5 Ethics approval

This research had to be reviewed and approved by the university ethics review committee. To obtain approval, I had to outline the process for recruiting participants, provide an overview of the methodology and research plan, and explain how I would meet the obligations concomitant with research that adheres to the highest ethical standards. There were additional requirements for this research, given that the participants were minors and the research was to be conducted in schools. Parent or guardian consent was required in order for students to participate. I was required to obtain approval from the school district and from each of the senior secondary schools prior to seeking ethical approval. The research was approved by the ethics review committee as submitted (see

Appendix 1). In addition, the appropriate participant information, consent, and feedback forms were developed for the study as part of the approval process (see Appendix 2).

3.2.6 Data collection: Critical incident interview

In this study, the critical incident interview involved two parts an orientation and an elicitation of incidents. The orientation clarified the nature of the study and provided time for the researcher to establish a rapport with the subjects. This phase of the study also provided the opportunity for the researcher to re-emphasize the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point and to explain that strict confidentiality would be maintained, that the subjects would not be identified in any way either during data collection or in the research write-up. The orientation was undertaken in order to communicate the aim of the study and focus the nature of events to be reported as per Woolsey (1986). Care was taken to ensure that the aim was phrased in such a way that students in grades 10 and 11 would readily understand what was being asked for.

The second part of the interview attempted to elicit events that helped or hindered the transition to senior secondary school grade 10. Participants were encouraged to describe events clearly and completely. This approach to data collection is supported by Flanagan (1954) and Woolsey (1986), who explain that if the information is clear and detailed, then the information is thought to be accurate. Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005) state that 'the criterion for accuracy of retrospective self-report is based on the quality of the

incidents recounted. . . If the reports are general and less specific, then the information may not be useful' (p. 481).

3.2.7 Orientation

Participants were oriented to the study through information provided by me about the purpose of the study. I included in my overview information about the confidential nature of the study and the participants' option to withdraw from the study. The following script was used by me at the beginning of each interview:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I am meeting with students from across the school district to find out about the transition from middle school grade 9 to senior secondary school grade 10. The purpose of the study is to find out what helps students with this transition and what makes it more difficult for them. I am meeting with you today to find out what helped you with your transition and what things caused the transition to be more difficult. I want to remind you that the information that you share with me is confidential: you will not be identified in any way. I also want to remind you that you can withdraw from the study at any time. Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns?

3.2.8 Elicitation of events

This portion of the interviews was recorded with an audio tape recorder. The interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes and 60 minutes, with the

shortest interview being 20 minutes and the longest being 75 minutes. In each case, this portion of the interview commenced with the researcher asking the question: 'I want you to think back to the last few months of grade 9 and the first few months of grade 10. What are the things that helped you with this transition?'

Time was allowed for the participants to think back and remember what was happening during this time. I clarified and extracted detail through careful non-leading questioning, such as: 'Could you tell me more about this?'; and 'How was this helpful to you?' This process continued until the participant could not think of any new events. I then asked: 'Again, think back to the last few months of grade 9 and the first few months of grade 10. What are the things that made this transition more difficult?'

The process as described above continued until the participant could not think of any new events. The researcher then thanked the subject for participating in the study and explained that the tapes would be destroyed as soon as they were transcribed. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then the tapes were destroyed.

3.3 Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed the events were extracted and then categorized according to the procedures developed by Flanagan (1954) and refined by Woolsey (1986). Analysis of the incidents involved four basic steps, a brief overview of which follows. First, the tapes, each of which contained a single interview, were transcribed verbatim by a trained court reporter. Second, the

interviews were read and re-read: anything that resembled an incident was extracted and then recorded on an index card. This was done through a cut-and-paste process using a computer word processing program, resulting in one incident per card. Third, incident cards were grouped according to similarity between participant experiences in order to form categories. The incidents were grouped and re-grouped several times to form clusters that made intuitive sense to me. These became the categories and sub-categories. Fourth, the categories were subjected to several tests to determine their reliability and validity. I used multiple measures for this process to meet the standard of recent studies using the Critical Incident Technique (Butterfield, Borger, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; McCormick, 1994; Woolsey, 1986). Further detail on each of the four steps is provided in subsequent sections.

The extraction of incidents, formation of categories, and categorization of incidents were conducted with the involvement of my research committee. In the early stages of developing the incidents, I required advice and instruction from a committee member as to how it would be best to approach this process. Initially, anything that resembled an incident was extracted from the transcripts. Each potential incident was then reviewed in order to establish that there were three basic components to each incident as per Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005). First, that there was a source for the incident; second, that the action taken or the experience could be stated with reasonable completeness; and third, that there was an outcome that had a bearing on what was being studied. Using these criteria, each potential incident was examined along with the original transcript in order to confirm and refine the incident or cast it aside as

not meeting the standard. My research supervisor provided additional instruction, clarification, and guidance as I worked through this process.

Preliminary category formation utilized 21 incidents and was performed under the guidance of and in collaboration with my research supervisor. The incidents were sorted and grouped based on similarity of the second component of each incident – the action taken or experience. I was trained on how to conduct the categorization by my research supervisor during this preliminary work. I continued on with the process of category formation using the remaining incidents, building on and refining the preliminary work. Several different revisions were required in order to achieve stability of placement.

Once stability of placement was obtained, I consulted with the supervisory committee on the categories, component subcategories, and representative incidents. Through a collaborative process which examined individual incidents and their placement into categories, I was able to finalize the category system. In one instance, this collaboration precipitated the renaming of a category to better reflect the incidents that the category represented, and in one other instance resulted in the elevation of a sub-category to a full category in order to better reflect nature of the incidents. Once the supervisory committee and I were satisfied with the category formation, it was necessary to conduct a series of reliability and validity checks on the category system. In order to accomplish this, the categories were subjected to the five measures which follow as per McCormick (1994) and Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005).

3.3.1 Category comprehensiveness

As recommended by Andersson and Nilsson (1964) and supported by McCormick (1994), 21 of the incidents, representing approximately 10% of the total number of incidents, were withdrawn and not examined until the categories were formed. This was a test to see if the incidents could be placed within the category system. If difficulties were encountered, new categories would have to be formed.

When category formation was completed, these incidents were examined and classified. I was able to place the 21 incidents comfortably into the category system without difficulty. The fact that the incidents were able to be placed into the existing categories supports the notion that the category system is a comprehensive representation of the incidents.

3.3.2 Independent judges

Three independent judges, education doctoral students (two in leadership programs and one in a curriculum program), were each asked to assist in the study by placing a sample of incidents into appropriate categories. The judges were given a brief description of each of the categories and asked to place the incidents provided into the most appropriate category. By comparing the judges' placement of incidents into categories with my original placement of incidents into categories, a percentage of agreement could be calculated. Flanagan (1954) recommends a 75% level of agreement or more to consider a category system to be sufficiently reliable for use. A high level of agreement supports the

reliability of the categories and indicates that different persons can use the categories to categorize incidents in a consistent way (McCormick, 1994).

Each of the judges was given a different sample of incidents to categorize and a concise summary of categories in order to facilitate the placement of incidents. Each of the doctoral students was provided with a different sample of 25 incidents to categorize. In these samples, there were two, three, or four incidents from each category in order to ensure that there was not an emergent pattern during categorization. The first two judges were able to categorize the incidents in approximately 30 minutes. I then spent additional time with each of them, discussing items which were either difficult to place or differently placed in an effort to assess whether changes needed to be made to the category system. This discussion was very helpful and provided me with different perspectives to consider. One of the judges incorrectly placed three incidents. One of these was determined to be simply a misreading of the incident. The other two incidents were placed differently due to a focus on one aspect of the incident and not the incident as a whole. The second judge incorrectly placed one incident. It was determined that this incident was placed differently due to a focus on one specific aspect of the incident and not the entire incident. Given that the errors in placement were likely due to the limited time that the judges spent examining each incident and their admitted focus on one particular aspect of these incidents, they would not dictate a change in the category system.

However, the discussions with the first two doctoral student judges did bring to light the fact that the name of one of the categories, 'existing peer connections' was causing some minor confusion given that there were other sub-

category titles of 'pre-existing connections' and 'developing connections'. In conversation with the senior supervisor, it was determined that it would be appropriate to address this by making a change to the category name. A descriptor used in the category summary, 'existing peer relationships', was thus used as the category name to reduce any confusion. It was necessary to involve the third doctoral student judge as a further reliability check given this category change.

Table 2: Category System Inter-rater Reliability

| Judges | Agreement % |
|--|-------------|
| Judge #1 | 88 |
| Judge #2 | 96 |
| Judge #3 | 92 |
| Average inter-rater reliability | 92 |

The third judge was given 25 incidents to categorize, resulting in two errors made by placing incidents into incorrect categories. In discussion with this judge, it was determined that the first error was made because the judge had speculated about the emotions and feelings of the participant and made a category choice on this basis. The second error occurred when the judge keyed in on a phrase that did not represent the whole of the incident.

The average inter-rater reliability using three independent judges was 92 percent as shown in Table 2. The high level of agreement between the

independent judges regarding the category system suggests that other people will be able to use it to categorize incidents in a consistent and reliable way.

3.3.3 Expert opinions

The soundness of categories can also be assessed using judgments from individuals who are highly qualified to judge the relevance and usefulness of a category of event in facilitating or hindering a particular aim (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Flanagan, 1954; McCormick, 1994). In this instance, two senior secondary school administrators and one middle school administrator were involved in assessing the categories as to their utility and completeness. These experts are different people than the independent judges in the earlier section. The experience of these individuals in managing the transition process as administrators, and in supporting students through the structures that they have put in place across the transition from middle school to senior secondary school, makes them eminently qualified for this task.

I introduced the study to each administrator and then provided them with the category system and a brief summary of each category. Each was then asked as an expert to review the category system for comprehensiveness and to comment on the relevance and utility of the categories with respect to their own understanding of the student transition from middle school to senior secondary school. The three administrators all provided encouraging comments about the comprehensiveness of the categories. Comments such as: 'I have not been able to think of a student who could 'slide' through the categories and not have his or her needs addressed' or 'The categories would assist us in developing transition

activities that would be responsive to student needs' resonated support for the category system as a comprehensive, and useful tool to support students. The review of the categories and the category system by these experts has provided corroborative support for their validity.

3.3.4 Theoretical agreement

The soundness of a category can also be assessed regarding its agreement and alignment with previous research (McCormick, 1994; Woolsey, 1986). If a category does not align with previous research or informed opinion, questions should be raised about its validity. This inconsistency would not automatically invalidate the category, but it would certainly be cause for further examination. If there is agreement between a category and previous research, there is reason to be more confident that the category is valid. In order to assess the agreement and alignment between the categories and previous research, it was necessary to examine the literature for constructs that were encompassed by each of the categories. What follows is a short description of the constructs which overlap between each category and the research body.

Category 1: Middle school and senior secondary school curricular continuity.

This category covers a range of responses at both the middle school and senior secondary school levels concerning the curricular articulation and educational expectations between the schools. The sub-categories are supported in the literature, which provides strength to the overall category.

(a) Curricular articulation. This sub-category consists of incidents that highlight the effects of continuity of content between teachers as students move between schools. There are numerous references to curricular issues across transitions. Students sometimes have difficulty across the transition to high school because they are not academically prepared (Queen, 2002). Mizelle and Irvin (2000) suggest that creating a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at the middle school and high school levels will help educators to do a better job of supporting students across the transition.

(b) Educational expectations. This sub-category is focused on incidents that highlight changes in teacher expectations as students move to high school. A number of constructs related to expectations have been examined in the literature. Teacher pressure on students is more intense at the high school level, and there are increased expectations and standards (Rice, 2001).

Category 2: Middle school and senior secondary school structural differences.

This category consists of incidents that highlight the contrast between various structures at middle school and senior secondary school. These incidents are systemic in nature and have been broken into two sub-categories. There is support in the research body for the sub-categories and this supports the category as whole.

(a) Instruction and assessment differences. The incidents focus on instruction and assessment across the transition. These have been well supported in the literature by researchers such as Queen (2002), who reports

that grading and instructional practices differ at the high school level and can have a considerable effect on motivation and achievement.

(b) School organization. The incidents focus on characteristics of the school. Several factors have been reported in the literature as presenting challenges across the transition, including: school facility, organization of classes, length of periods, and number of students (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000).

Category 3: Teacher-student relationships.

This category contains incidents focused on teacher- student relationships which are a frequent feature of the literature. Feldlaufer, Midgley and Eccles (1988) report that trained observers as well as students of a change in student-teacher relationships post-transition. The relationships are generally characterized as less caring, warm, friendly, and supportive than those experienced pre-transition. Teachers need to realize that they can be an important source of academic and personal support in their students' lives (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000).

Category 4: School connectedness.

This category contains incidents that reflect connectedness to the school and is often referenced as belonging within the literature. A student's feelings of belonging are associated with success in school (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982). The following two sub-categories are supported in the research and this supports the category as a whole.

(a) Pre-existing connections. The incidents in this sub-category focus on school connections that pre-date the transition to high school. These are supported in the literature as important factors in successful adjustment to a new school. Students felt that just talking to older friends and siblings helped them in high school (Letrello & Miles, 2003).

(b) Developing connections. The incidents in this sub-category showcase the building of new relationships and the development of new connections. The necessity of establishing new connections is well supported in the research. Successful transition into high school implies forming social networks (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Adolescents commonly mention having to make new friends as a substantial readjustment that they had to make during transition (Aneshensel & Gore, 1991).

Category 5: Existing peer relationships.

The incidents that make up this category reflect the continuity of peer relationships across the transition. The literature is replete with references to the dimensions of peer relations and the importance of continuity across transitions. Support from friends is a common factor in successful transitions (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Social interaction with peers is another important factor in transition to high school (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Aneshensel and Gore (1991) suggest that a major stressor across transitions is the dissolution of existing friendships. In some instances, the group moves together across the transition, but it does not survive in the new school.

Category 6: Personal outlook.

This category consists of incidents involving how students handle the challenge of moving to a new school. Several constructs that are related to personal outlook are well documented in the literature on transition. Students who were doing well across the transition saw high achievement as possible if they focused, put forth the effort, and made this a goal (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman & Smith, 2000). The student's personality and attitude will determine whether the transition is a challenge to be overcome or an overwhelming experience (Queen, 2002).

Category 7: Supportive adult.

This category contains incidents that reflect on-going relationships with supportive adults. There are frequent references in the literature to the importance of parental support as well as support from coaches or other significant adults (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Rice, 2001). Stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults are fundamental to intellectual development (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994).

Category 8: School practices.

This category consists of incidents related to deliberate practices at the school level. There is a small research base on the actions schools can take to support students as they enter new academic environments. The research

suggests that transition programs are effective in supporting students' transition to high school. In fact, those schools that had a full transition program were less likely to have students drop out of school and the students tended to perform better in high school (Smith, 1997).

Category 9: Prior experiences with the new school.

This category consists of incidents which have a great deal of anxiety attached to them. The research makes frequent reference to experiences or anticipated experiences that weigh on student minds as they prepare to move to a new school. Measor and Woods (1984) found that secondary students were greatly influenced by the horror stories and myths communicated to them by their peers. The kinds of fears and anxieties that students bring forward have persisted for nearly 20 years, which suggests that there are features of this transition which are unchanging (Lucey & Reay, 2000).

Each of the nine categories and the six sub-categories is supported by previous research. The fact that each of the categories has some support in the literature strengthens the validity of the individual categories and the entire category system.

3.3.5 Participation rate

The number of participants who cite incidents in a specific category determines the participation rate. Flanagan (1954) suggests that the greater the number of independent observers who report the same incident, the more likely it

is that the incident is important to the area being studied. This test of validity is supported as a credibility check by Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005). Participation rate is calculated by dividing the number of participants who cite a specific category by the total number of participants in the study.

Participation rate signifies the agreement among the participants that a particular category of incident is an important factor. The number of participants who cite incidents in a given category and the participation rates for each category are shown in Table 3. Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005) assert that a participation rate of 25% is acceptable for a category to be considered valid. Validity in this instance means that the category is likely to be important to the aim of the study. This does not in and of itself mean that a category with a participation rate of 25% or more is valid or that a category with a participation rate of less than 25% is not valid, but in the latter case it may dictate a closer examination to determine if the category is valid.

In this study the participation rates ranged from a low of 19% for Category 9: Prior Experiences to a high of 68% for Category 3: School Connectedness. Category 9: Prior Experiences, with a 19% participation rate, is the only category which did not meet the 25% level suggested for validation. Given the low level of participation in this category, the incidents were examined further by the researcher in consultation with the research committee to determine if the category should stand or if the incidents could be reasonably placed in another category. Although the number of incidents is small, they are particularly vivid in their emotion, clear in their description of the effect and distinct from any other

category. These factors were deemed to be sufficient to have the category remain.

Table 3: Category Participation

| Category Name Sub-category Name | Number of Participants | Participation Rate |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Curricular continuity | 19 | 61% |
| Curricular articulation | 12 | 39% |
| Educational expectations | 13 | 42% |
| Structural differences | 16 | 52% |
| Instruction and assessment | 6 | 19% |
| School organization | 14 | 45% |
| Student-teacher relationships | 8 | 26% |
| School connectedness | 21 | 68% |
| Pre-existing connections | 19 | 61% |
| Developing connections | 7 | 23% |
| Existing peer relationships | 13 | 42% |
| Personal outlook | 14 | 45% |
| Supportive adult | 13 | 42% |
| School practices | 8 | 26% |
| Prior experiences | 6 | 19% |

Number of participants in the study: n = 31

Two other categories Student-Teacher Relationships and School Practices, each had a participation rate of 26%. These categories meet the confidence level suggested by Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005). However, given that these participation rates were so close to the 25% minimum, it was important to examine each one to ensure that they were valid. Category 3: Student-Teacher Relationships was previously separated into a category because of the unique nature of the incidents, which possess a structural component that differs across the transition, but also a personal component regarding the quality of the relationship. Category 8: School Practices was separated out because the incidents consisted of intentional actions by school personnel that have intended or unintended outcomes across the transition. These incidents were determined to be distinct from any other category, so the category was allowed to stand. Two sub-categories with lower participation rates, Instruction and Assessment at 19%, and Developing Connections at 23% were also re-examined. They had been separated out from their main categories to provide further clarity within that category. The incidents contained within these sub-categories encompass a different facet of the effects presented in the major category and therefore remain as sub-categories.

Overall, the participation rates in the categories are quite high, with the noted exceptions as discussed. This high level of agreement strengthens the validity of the individual categories and the overall category system.

3.3.6 Summary.

The validation and reliability measures built into the design of this study have supported the category system in a total of seven ways. First, the interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim, thus ensuring the accuracy of the account. Second, the collection of incidents continued until the point of saturation. Third, 10% of the incidents were held back and placed after category formation to support the comprehensiveness of the category map. Fourth, independent judges were used to ensure that the category system was reliable and could be used by others to categorize incidents. Fifth, the categories were subjected to review by experts to ensure their comprehensiveness and utility. This established the validity of the category system as a tool to support improved practice. Sixth, categories were assessed for agreement with the research: in each case, the category and sub-category was supported as a factor in student transition to high school. This test supported the construct validity of each category and sub-category, and therefore the category system as a whole. Seventh, the categories were assessed for level of participation. The observed participation rates observed reinforced the validity of the categories and the category system.

Overall, the seven reliability and validity checks built into the design of this study suggest that each of the categories and the category system as a whole are valid, reliable and reasonably comprehensive. This means that the category system can be used with confidence. This endorsement of the category system suggests that this system should help to meet the goal of gaining a better

understanding of the process of transition to senior secondary school. Having completed the preceding steps it is appropriate to report the results of this study and then to discuss these results with a focus on how to facilitate a process which will better meet the needs of the students as they transition to senior secondary school.

4: CHAPTER FOUR - RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

Through interviews with 31 senior secondary school student participants (16 males and 15 females), of whom, 27 were grade 10 students and four were grade 11 students. I obtained a total of 203 critical incidents with regard to what helped and what hindered their transitions from middle school grade 9 to senior secondary school grade 10. I developed 137 discrete incidents from the Grade 10 and 11 females, and I developed 66 discrete incidents from the Grade 10 and 11 males. Of these incidents, 127 referred to some type of helping experience and 76 referred to some type of hindering experience during the transition to senior secondary school.

4.2 Description of Categories

The 203 critical incidents were organized into nine categories. Each of the categories will be presented with a description of the category, exemplars of incidents contained within the category, and a discussion of the range of incidents within each category. The categories are presented in no specific order, as there has been no attempt to rate them based on any perception of their relative importance. All of the incidents describe factors that have helped or

hindered the participants during their transition from middle school grade 9 into senior secondary school grade 10.

4.2.1 Category 1: Middle school and senior secondary school curricular continuity. (42 incidents – 17 helping and 25 hindering)

This category consists of a range of responses at both the middle school and senior secondary school levels concerning the curricular articulation and educational expectations between the schools. These incidents tend to reflect individual teacher decisions and the efforts made on both sides of the transition to ensure continuity of content and expectations. This category has been divided into two sub-categories: (a) curricular articulation and (b) educational expectations.

(a) Curricular articulation. (17 incidents – 9 helping and 8 hindering)

This sub-category encompasses incidents of curricular articulation or the lack of articulation. Incidents of helping experiences included the following descriptors in their outcomes: confidence, understanding, prepared, ease, less stressed, supported, helped and expected. Incidents of hindering experiences conveyed the following descriptors in their outcomes: frustration, difficulty, stressful, struggling, and unprepared. An example of an action at the middle school is the effort made to adjust the curriculum to reflect the realities of secondary school. Some examples at the secondary level include the efforts to review curriculum in order to ensure that students are prepared to move forward, or the efforts to accommodate students with learning gaps, ensuring that they had a solid

foundation for future learning. The range of incidents that represented some form of helping or guidance in the transition were expressed by participants citing actions such as: [the high school teachers] really prepared us for the next level; the high school teachers did some review from the grade before; and the middle school teachers adjusted the work towards the end of the year to make it more like high school. Incidents which represented hindering experiences across the transition included: I don't think that I was prepared for the level of difficulty; there are things that we didn't do that the teachers expect us to have done; the teacher at high school didn't do any review; and we get to high school and the teacher says we don't do it this way here, we don't know why you were taught that at middle school.

Hindering Events.

Source: High school teachers

There are some things that we didn't do in grade 8 or 9 that the [high school] teachers expect us to have done. They [the high school teachers] are like, you should have taken this before [in middle school], I'm not going over it and it is up to you to check – you should know it. I had that in French, Socials and Math. Some of the stuff, we honestly never covered and they [these high school teachers] are like no, you are expected to know this at grade 10.

Outcome: It is very frustrating.

Source: High school teacher

My grades really dropped in some courses because I didn't know what we were doing. In math, the [High school] teacher didn't do any review. He just went into it right away with no review, no nothing. So we come back from summer break and we don't really know the stuff and our brains aren't working as good as they are now.

Outcome: So my grade dropped and I was struggling to pass. I am like oh my God, I used to be good at math.

Source: Middle school teacher

My [middle school] English teacher didn't do much essay work and that has been a real problem. It sort of comes back and gets you. It made it a pretty big jump [to high school English] and it would just be good to get like an early start, to have the background.

Outcome: I have a lot of homework and stuff, so it is pretty stressful.

Helping Events.

Source: Middle and High school teachers

The high school [teachers] did some review from the grade before and they made the work slowly get harder and harder until you're used to it.

The middle school [teachers] made the work slowly get harder so that we would be ready for high school.

Outcome: Everyone [all the teachers at middle school and high school] made it very easy for the transition between schools.

Source: Middle school teachers

The work is pretty much the same level and we were prepared for it. The middle school teachers did a great job of getting us ready. I thought that the course work would be more difficult and I was concerned.

Outcome: Once I got here and found that it was easy to understand I didn't have to worry about it.

Source: Middle school teachers

The [middle school] teachers really prepared us for the move. We did the basic stuff that we would be doing in grade 10, but the teachers made sure that by the end of grade 9 we were doing some grade 10 stuff and that we had finished grade 9 stuff to make sure that we didn't have a problem with it in grade 10.

Outcome: I am doing well, but if they hadn't done this I would have been totally lost – they move very fast in grade 10.

(b) Educational expectations. (25 incidents – 8 helping and 17 hindering)

This sub-category consists of incidents that refer to the continuity or discontinuity of educational expectations across the transition. Incidents of helping conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: confident, ready, prepared, skilled, helped, supported, and aware. Incidents of hindering conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: inconsistent, challenging, not ready, tough, unfair, stressful,

overwhelmed, crashing, unexpected, surprised, shocking, failing, and angry. Examples of actions from the middle school include efforts to adjust classroom educational expectations to more closely align with those of the high school. Examples of actions from high school include increased homework, or late assignment penalties. The range of incidents that represent helping across the transition included the citation of incidents by participants such as: the middle school teachers told us what it was going to be like; the high school teachers were really consistent; the teachers in grade 9 pushed us to do our best and focused on good study habits; the teachers at middle school really prepared us for what the high school teachers were expecting; and I was ready for the amount of work that we have to do [at high school]. Incidents that represented hindering experiences across the transition included: It is so different at high school, we needed to be made familiar with the expectations and workload; you have to figure everything out, the rules for each teacher are different at high school; there is no flexibility from teachers at high school; the expectations are so much higher, more homework and no tolerance for anything; the middle school teachers were too easy on us and at high school you have to be so much more responsible; middle school teachers would put pressure on you to get stuff done, but high school teachers don't chase you if you miss class or an assignment – it is up to you to make it right.

Hindering Events.

Source: Middle school teachers

We needed to be made familiar with the workload, and the expectations in the high school. It is important [that middle school teachers] give students a better idea of what high school is really like because it would make it a lot easier to come over if we were more familiar with everything.

Outcome: I was just shocked, I was like wow! It is really different over here [at high school]. It was a huge surprise in so many ways.

Source: Middle school teachers

The teachers at the middle school would help you out a lot. If you didn't have an assignment done they would let you hand it in late. At the high school you either lose a lot of percent or just get zero. That was a real adjustment. I am a good student, but I know students that are failing because they don't get things in on time. It is just so different [at high school] and it doesn't seem right.

Outcome: I wasn't prepared for the differences.

Source: Middle school teachers

It is a big shock coming to high school. In grade 9 the [middle school] teachers are so supportive of us and are pretty easy on us which is good at the time, but when you come here [to high school] it is a total shock. The expectations of [high school] teachers are so much higher, more homework and no tolerance for anything. I think that something has to be done maybe grade 9 needs to be stepped up a bit or something to get you ready.

Outcome: Lots of my friends are failing, but they are working just as hard as they did last year.

Helping Events.

Source: Middle school teachers

The [middle school] teachers really did prepare you for grade 10. They told us what it was going to be like. They would tell us what the teachers were expecting from you and everything. They told your responsibilities and that kind of thing to prepare you. It could hit you, grade 10 is quite different from grade 9 with homework and responsibilities.

Outcome: There were no big surprises for me.

Source: Middle school teachers

Our [middle school] teachers helped, they taught us how to be prepared for anything to come up, like pop quizzes and stuff – there is a lot of them here. You just have to be prepared for that kind of stuff. They [middle school teachers] made us work hard, and here it is a lot more work. I remember the teachers telling us what it was going to be like and saying that is why they were being hard on us.

Outcome: I have done okay because I was ready.

Source: Middle school teachers

Lots of the [middle school] teachers were really prepping us for the move. They would tell us what to expect and they started to grade a bit harder and were less flexible – they really stepped it up.

Outcome: That made us think about what we had to do and it made it easier once we got here. We were ready.

4.2.2 Category 2: Middle school and senior secondary school structural differences. (28 incidents – 7 helping and 21 hindering)

This category consists of incidents which highlight the contrasts between various structures at middle school and at senior secondary school. These incidents tend to reflect the structural or systemic differences between middle school and senior secondary school. This category was divided into two sub-categories: (a) instruction and assessment differences and (b) school organization.

(a) Instruction and assessment differences. (7 incidents – 1 helping and 6 hindering)

This sub-category consists of incidents specifically focused on instruction and assessment. These incidents highlight general differences between instruction and assessment practices at the middle school and the senior secondary school. The incident of helping experience had the following descriptor in the outcome: positive. Incidents of hindering experiences conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: boring, dry, suffering, not ready, dislike, and difficult. The range of incidents representing actions across the transition included the citation by participants of helping incidents such as: the teaching at high school is

different, we don't have to do all of those projects that we had to do in the middle – it is straight forward and I prefer tests. Incidents that represent hindering experiences across the transition included: everything at high school is focused on the final exam and it is straight from the text; teachers at high school just make us take notes, lots of notes; and at middle school they tried to make it fun and interesting and here at high school it is just lecture after lecture.

Hindering Events.

Source: High school teachers

It was really hard to get used to the different teaching style here [at high school]. Before [at middle school] the teachers incorporated a lot of different things into courses - they made it interesting. Here most courses aren't like that at all. You'll find it is dead boring, it is straight from the text. Read page so and so and do this page or that page.

Outcome: Everything is focused on the final exam which I really wasn't used to and it is hard to stay motivated.

Source: High school teachers

I have a short attention span and here [at high school] classes are so dry and boring. Here [at high school] it is writing notes and at the middle school they tried to make it fun and more interesting. Here it is just lecture after lecture. They [high school teachers] move so fast and I am not good at learning things like that. If you don't get it the first time then you're behind and you're going to fail the exams.

Outcome: I can't handle it. This has been a big change and it is really hard to get used to things. I am not doing well.

Source: High school teachers

Here [at high school] you get more notes, more lectures and the tests are harder. I don't understand the way that they [high school teachers] explain stuff. Last year [at middle school] they tried to teach taking notes from lectures to you to try to get you ready, but it is just so different. It is so much more focused on tests and not projects and stuff.

Outcome: My grades are suffering because of a few things including different teaching techniques at high school. I wasn't ready for this.

Helping Event.

Source: High school teachers

All the classes here [at high school] are really focused on tests, the teachers put a lot of weight on them, which is great for me. At middle school we did all the project stuff and the classes were pretty much the same. I didn't like that.

Outcome: It is way better with tests and so it has been really positive for me.

(b)School organization. (21 incidents – 6 helping and 15 hindering)

This sub-category consists of incidents in which the experience described has to do with school characteristics such as: school size, school organization, opportunities, school rules, and number of students. The incidents highlight the

differences between middle school and senior secondary school. Incidents of helping experiences conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: excited, positive, adjusted, familiar, ease, better, respected, and responsible. Incidents of hindering experiences conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: unknown, unsettled, difficult, stressful, scared, frustrating, intense, disoriented, let down, lost, uncomfortable, dislike, unexpected, upsetting, shock, and insecure. The range of incidents representing assistance across the transition saw participants citing incidents such as: having the freedom at high school to be able to leave because it is an open campus; we had eight subjects at a time in middle school, at high school we only have four; the classes and schedule, the honour roll and work ethic were all the same at the middle school and high school; and I came from middle school with the same sort of timetable structure with the long blocks. The incidents representing hindering experiences across the transition included: there are just so many people at high school it is hard to get used to; they have four terms in high school and we only had three in middle school so they started collecting marks from the very first day; the [high] school is too big – I had trouble finding my way around; it was a huge change going to the semester system at high school, they go so fast with the long blocks; and at high school you go to your first class and it starts, I was used to having TA every morning in middle school to sort things out.

Hindering Events.

Source: High school size

Some things were just hard to get used to. One thing was how big this high school is – it is too big. I had trouble finding my way around for the first few days and it took me weeks to get used to so many people. Just the size of how many kids there were. I mean it is good that you meet a lot of kids and everything, but there are just too many.

Outcome: It is uncomfortable, the halls are crowded and you get bumped all the time. I don't like it.

Source: High school structure

It was a huge change going to the semester system [at high school]. They [middle school teachers] said it would be easier, but it is a lot harder for me. My grades have gone down quite a bit, I have had to adjust a lot. They [high school teachers] teach a lot more here, faster with the longer blocks.

Outcome: I am still adjusting to it – it is really hard.

Source: High school classes

I am finding it really difficult to adjust to two and a half hour classes [at high school]. We had short classes at the middle school. I like having less courses to worry about being on semester, but the long classes are just so intense.

Outcome: It is hard to focus on one thing for so long and I am having trouble with it.

Helping Events.

Source: High school system

The fact the system is the same here [at high school] as in middle school made a big difference to me. The classes and schedule, the honour roll and work ethic, and that type of stuff was all the same. The attendance and expectations we were familiar with all of it because it was the same as middle school.

Outcome: This made it really easy to come to this school.

Source: High school rules

Having the freedom to come and go in an open campus at high school has made it really easy for me to adjust. I feel like they [high school staff] trust us and that I have the responsibility for my life. The flexibility to make my own choices has really helped.

Outcome: I feel good about myself. I can go get a coffee or go out for lunch– it makes me feel more relaxed.

Source: High school timetable

I came from a middle school that had sort of the same timetable structure as the high school. We had semester courses and some longer blocks.

Outcome: It was easy to adjust to the schedule here [at high school]. It was almost the same for me.

4.2.3 **Category 3: Teacher-student relationships.** (11 incidents – 5 helping and 6 hindering)

This category consists of incidents in which the experiences have to do with the relationships between students and their classroom teachers at the middle school or senior secondary school. This category is defined by the dual nature of the incidents that it represents –changes due to the structural differences between middle and senior secondary schools, and also the quality of the relationship that exists between the student and the teacher when the student is in the teacher’s class. Incidents of helping experiences conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: understanding, helped, accommodating, special, closeness, knowing, willing, and comfortable. Incidents of hindering experiences conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: hard, uncaring, frustrated, distanced, clueless, put off, unknown, and disconnected. The range of incidents that represent helping experiences across the transition saw participants citing incidents such as: at high school you get to know your teachers better because they spend a longer time with you; the high school teachers tried to build rapport with you and make you comfortable; and the teachers that I have at high school actually talk to me. Incidents that represent hindering experiences across the transition included: high school teachers have too many students to worry about and to give you much personal attention; high school teachers don’t have a clue, I miss the closeness that we had with our middle school teachers; and at high school the teachers seem like they don’t really care about us.

Hindering Events.

Source: High school teachers

The [middle school] teachers cared about us and helped us get through stuff. Here [at high school] there are so many more students that I guess they [high school teachers] just can't be close with their students. It is harder to feel at home here, it takes some time to get used to it. They [middle school teachers] were there if you needed to talk to them and it is harder to feel that way here [at high school] because there are so many more students and teachers have a lot more work to do and stuff.

Outcome: It has been really hard for me here. It is really hard not being close to them [high school teachers].

Source: High school teachers

Maybe the teachers at middle school were a little bit lenient, but it was nice because they helped us, they cared about us. At high school, the teachers, they almost, seem like some of them don't really care about us. They may care about us but, if we get our work in or not is our own problem.

Outcome: They just don't seem to care about us and that makes it hard.

Source: High school teachers

I really miss the closeness we had with our [middle school] teachers – like they adapted to our personalities and they knew who we were. Like there

is a whole bunch of brand new teachers – these [high school] teachers don't have a clue.

Outcome: It has been really hard because sometimes you just need to know that they actually care.

Helping Events.

Source: High school teachers

The teachers that I have at high school have really helped me. Coming to this school you get a better relationship with your teachers because they spend a longer time with you, they are able to help you more. My teachers are willing to spend their breaks and their lunch to help more than my other [middle school] teachers did.

Outcome: I am doing really good at this school with their [high school teachers'] help.

Source: High school teachers

I think that a huge thing, especially at a new place is that the [high school] teachers tried to build rapport and make you comfortable. It is like moving into a new town, you don't know many people, but the first day they really establish a kind of friendship. So that by the end of class you are saying oh, I've known this person for a while, even though you haven't.

Outcome: Things just build from there until you really are comfortable.

Source: Middle school teacher

I was always freaked out about coming here. I remember I was so nervous. I had close relationships with my old [middle school] teachers. I could come in and just talk to them. Sometimes they would give up their lunch hour just to sit down with me and talk through what I was facing. It really helped me having them there. Close relationships between students and teachers are a really important thing because sometimes you don't want to talk to your friends about issues, or your parents.

Outcome: I felt special that they'd do this to help me to come here.

4.2.4 Category 4: School connectedness. (41 incidents – 39 helping and 2 hindering)

This category consists of incidents that involve connections between students and people outside of their peer group that help to reinforce a sense of belonging. These connections are typically established relationships with older students. These incidents can involve connections with siblings, older friends, friends of siblings, older teammates or community connections. This category also includes incidents that represent the development of connections or an openness to developing connections within the school. This category includes two sub-categories: (a) pre-existing connections and (b) developing connections.

(a) Pre-existing connections. (30 incidents – 28 helping and 2 hindering)

This sub-category consists of incidents in which the experience involves a connectedness to the school. This can include the student knowing people, feeling part of a supportive group, or feeling a sense of belonging or attachment

to the school community. The connectedness in these incidents is typically due to the association with an older student or, teammate, or to having an older sibling connected to the school. Incidents of helping experiences included descriptors in their outcomes such as: connected, supported, helped, ease, comfortable, better, nicer, fun, important, secure, confident, trusting, safe, looked after, protected, adjusted, accepted, and relaxed. Incidents of hindering experiences conveyed the following descriptors in their outcomes: hard, scared, and disconnected. The range of incidents representing helping experiences across the transition included the citation by participants of incidents such as: I have met a lot of people through sports and that is really helpful now that I am at high school; my older cousin is here and I know a lot of people through him; my best friend is in grade 11 and she hung out with me; my older brother was here last year and I know some of his friends who are still here; and my sister went to this school and she told me what to expect and how to get around. Incidents that representing hindering experiences across the transition included: there are lots of students who do not have a connection with older students and the school; and my older brothers went here and they weren't the smartest, good kids in school and so mostly it has been really hard for me if teachers know them.

Hindering Events.

Source: Older brothers

In ways having brothers go here before me has been good, but mostly it has been really hard for me. My brothers weren't well the smartest, good kids in school. They were more low down and hung out all the time. They

[high school teachers] just say like, oh you're related to them and I don't know if they think that there is something there. I have really noticed a difference with my other teachers who don't know my brothers.

Outcome: Some of the teachers are pretty hard on me.

Source: Older students

I know lots of my friends were scared to ask for help and had a hard time especially when we first got here. I didn't have any trouble, but my other friends didn't have any connection with the older students.

Outcome: It was really hard for them at first.

Helping Events.

Source: Older brother

I knew I would be alright if I could hang out with my [older] brother and his friends. I guess he is setting the example. I look up to him and his friends.

I asked them about choices and stuff, and they really helped me.

Outcome: They tell you what it is really like and what you have to do and that has really helped me to adjust.

Source: Older friend

It would be really good if there was more interaction between the middle school and the high school. There needs to be more connection with the students like I had, maybe a buddy system or something. I had a friend

already at the school and when I came here I felt more accepted. I think that socially it would make it a lot easier.

Outcome: I felt more accepted.

Source: High school team members

There were a lot of things that helped me to come here. I am really involved in sports and our basketball team and the high school team sometimes played together last year and so did the rugby teams. We got to know a bunch of the kids on the high school teams and all that. It was a lot of fun and you made connections with them.

Outcome: It totally made it easier this year, just knowing some of them.

(b) Developing connections. (11 incidents – 11 helpful)

This sub-category includes incidents that reflect, openness to developing new relationships and connections, or the drive to establish new relationships. All of the incidents are of helping experiences and included descriptors in their outcomes such as: good, comfortable, ease, friendly, positive, fun, exciting, adjusted, mature, calm, together, and supported. All of the incidents represented helping experiences across the transition and saw participants cite a range of incidents such as: there are so many people so it is easy to find people with similar interests; I hung out with my older cousin and her friends all summer and so coming to high school where the students are more mature I know how to be calm, how to act and to fit in; I kept thinking of new opportunities and the people that I could meet; people at high school just find who they are comfortable with

and hang out with them; and there are so many kinds of people at high school – you don't have to be afraid to be yourself.

Helping Events.

Source: High school students

I have made so many new friends – there are so many new people here. I hung out with one group last year and this year I probably hang out with five or six now. So there is a lot of new social circles and new friends which really makes me feel good.

Outcome: It has been really easy for me to be here. I like being here.

Source: High school students

There are so many different kids here [at high school]. It is not like middle school where everyone is like in their little groups. Here [at high school], everyone is so welcoming that it makes it okay. It is fun to meet new people here. It is exciting to have a bunch of new students, everyone mingles nicely. It is not just one age group. I was in a foods class with grade 11 students and I got to know older people.

Outcome: Getting to know different people has made it easy to be here.

Source: High school students

One of the things that helped me was knowing that everyone else was new and was going through the same things as me. I think it made it

easier because we were all new and everyone was going to make new friends.

Outcome: It was okay because we were all like that and we weren't alone.

4.2.5 **Category 5: Existing peer relationships.** (24 incidents – 17 helping and 7 hindering)

This category includes incidents involving experiences with pre-existing peer relationships and continuity or discontinuity involving peers or peer groups across the transition. These incidents represent the reality that, for some students, the peer support network remains intact, while for others it is completely disrupted as a result of the transition. Incidents of helping experiences included descriptors in their outcomes such as: supported, accepted, helped, together, ease, relaxed, comfortable, secure, known, cared for, history, dependable, shared, and close. Incidents of hindering experiences included descriptors in their outcomes such as: stressed, worried, difficult, alone, disconnected, overwhelming, and detached. The range of incidents representing helping experiences across the transition included citation by participants of incidents such as: you have your friends and other people to be with and it just helps you; friends are a big part of it, we were all going through the same things and so we worked together and stuck together; my friends and me we just found a place where we would go everyday and we would meet each other; and knowing that I was going to high school with all of my friends with me. Incidents that represent hindering experiences across the transition included: They didn't know anybody and everything was new; it has

really changed at high school, my old friends only hang around with really popular people; I was having my own problems and I had to help a friend; and I lost track of most of the people that I hung out with at middle school.

Hindering Events.

Source: Former peer group

It was hard coming here. I am one the punks, I guess you would call them. I sometimes hang with other punks, but most of time the people from middle school that I hung out with won't even bother with you here. They ignore you, ditch you and stuff like that. It was better in middle school it was just easier to be me and to just hang out with people. I didn't have a problem fitting in [at middle school].

Outcome: [At high school] I don't seem to fit in anywhere.

Source: Friends

It has been difficult here [at high school], it is like you don't know anybody. You're disconnected from your friends and it's like not knowing anybody and having to prove yourself as a as a certain person.

Outcome: It's really overwhelming.

Source: Friends

It has sucked here [at high school]. I lost track of most of the people I hung out with at middle school. Since I hit here it has been really hard – I lost a lot of friends coming here. You know they went with really snobby

people and started hanging out with them and stuff like that. I was hanging out with the sort of friends, popular people at middle school and now I don't really talk to them anymore, they just sort of snub you.

Outcome: Since I hit here it has been really hard – I lost a lot of friends coming here.

Helping Events.

Source: Friends

The biggest thing for me was staying together in a group of friends and just helping each other. If we have the same courses, but different blocks we can still help each other out with homework and stuff like that.

Outcome: It just makes it easier to be here. Working together really made a big difference.

Source: Friends

Knowing that I am going to school with all of my friends with me and having moral support from everybody really made a difference. You know that things are not going to be all bad because you have your friends.

Outcome: My friends helped me a lot.

Source: Friends

To help us get used to high school my little group of friends decided we would meet. We picked a space that was more open, more comfortable. There are people standing in front of the office and other places. We

picked the stage and so we sit over by the stage. We still go there pretty much all the time. Everybody comes to the same spot every break and every lunch.

Outcome: This has been really supportive to just have a place to go with really good friends.

4.2.6 **Category 6: Personal outlook.** (23 incidents – 20 helping and 3 hindering)

This category consists of incidents of personal response to the challenges of transition. The personal actions associated with this category are organization, visioning, goal setting, and responsibility. This category consists of incidents that reflect how individual students approach the challenge of the move to a new school. Incidents of helping experiences included descriptors in their outcomes such as: responsible, self confident, organized, changed, comfortable, prepared, committed, excited, fun, positive, respected, goals, smiling, decisive, focused, adaptable, and friendly. Incidents of hindering experiences included descriptors in their outcomes such as: negative attitude, goofed off, and uncaring. The range of incidents representing helping experiences across the transition included citation by participants of incidents such as: I have moved so many times that I am able to adapt to the surroundings and deal with lots of new people; sports have made a big difference in that they keep us focused and help in setting goals; I made a decision to get to know as many people as I could; watching other people it is pretty clear that if you don't work, you're not going to achieve anything and it is important for me to do well; I think that having a positive

attitude really helps; and It is up to you to keep on going and taking responsibility for what you want to achieve. Incidents that represent hindering experiences across the transition included: what made the transition tough for me was my own attitude, I goofed off and didn't care; and you have more freedom at high school, but it is your responsibility.

Hindering Events.

Source: Self

It took me a really long time to get really comfortable. I would say it was January. I just slowly came to see why I wasn't doing that good. I had to figure it out and so did everybody else.

Outcome: We had to figure it out, take responsibility I guess and I wasn't doing what I needed to.

Source: Self

It is really hard to adjust. I think that it will take me up to at least to the end of the year to get it. It is tough because you have more freedom, and it's basically your responsibility.

Outcome: I had pretty good intentions, but now it's up to you and I didn't do it.

Source: Self

What made the transition tough for me was my own attitude. It's a big change. The work was like hard and easy. Some parts were easy cause most of it was from grade 9 and then we went on to new stuff, I goofed off

and I didn't care, but I was still doing some of it and now it is hard to do now. I got my report card and I realized that I better start doing my work.
Outcome: Well, I chose not to and I am not doing too good.

Helping Events.

Source: Self

I liked being in grade 9. I was really comfortable and I was thinking I just didn't want to leave my friends behind and I'm never going to adjust and I was afraid of going to a new place and not knowing people and the high school is so big. I got all worked up into the summer, but then I started thinking about everything and I sort of got excited about things and convincing myself it would be fun and that there would be new people, and new friends.

Outcome: It has been mostly great – it has been fun here.

Source: Self

You just can't let yourself give up, and you have to smile a lot. For the first little while it is like whoa, there is too much home work, I can't do this and I'm not smart enough. I would just think back to how well I did before at middle school and all the positives with the teachers and my friends and that would get me through.

Outcome: That really helped me.

Source: Self

You have to really adjust to the level of responsibility that you have. Here, you have to look out for yourself. It is probably the hardest thing that you will have to do and it takes at least a couple of months not just a couple of weeks. There is no one looking out for you, except your friends so you have to make yourself more responsible.

Outcome: I think that it is a really big thing and it took me a while to realize that I had to change, but I did.

4.2.7 Category 7: Supportive adult. (18 incidents – 18 helping)

This category consists of incidents that reflect supportive relationships between the student and an adult. These relationships are likely to pre-date the transition to senior secondary school. This is someone that the adolescent trusts and can share issues with. All incidents were of helping experiences and they conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: helped, relaxed, supported, comforting, pushed, happy, reassured, available, and settled. Some examples of these adults might be family members, coaches, and former teachers. All of these incidents represent helping experiences across the transition and included citation by participants of incidents such as: my mom made sure that I was settled and that I had everything; my coach was always there for me; my mom forced me to do to an hour of study every day; my middle school teachers have really supported me, one in particular has been there for me and pushed me to do well in high school; my parents have been really supportive they helped me

set goals and pushed to help get me there; and my mom is a teacher and she was able to tell me lots of stuff about high school.

Helping Events:

Source: Parents

Parents are a real help as well, pushing you along. My parents have really helped me. They supported me and told me to set goals and pushed me to get there. I have learned that most of the time you can get there if you actually want to be there and you have help.

Outcome: I was able to handle all the changes here [in high school] because of my parents' help.

Source: Previous middle school teachers

I know that I am still in contact with some of my [middle school] teachers and I can go back and talk to them and to get help. There are a couple of them that I am still really close to. Some of my friends have been going back for help and stuff as well. These teachers are really good about helping us.

Outcome: It makes it easier to go from middle to high school if you have that support.

Source: Parents

My family was really supportive. My parents put some pressure on me to get my homework done and do well. My mom is involved in the school

helping out and stuff so she knows what is going on. They stay on top of things making sure that I am doing well.

Outcome: They have really helped me this year.

4.2.8 **Category 8: School practices** (10 incidents – 3 helping and 7 hindering)

This category includes incidents in which students' experiences of the transition are helped or hindered by school practices or procedures. These are intentional practices that may have unintentional results. Incidents of helping experiences include descriptors in their outcomes such as: helpful, eased tension, connected, and informed. Incidents of hindering experiences conveyed descriptors in their outcomes such as: failing, scared, messed up, confusing, stressful, hard, mixed messages, frustrated, frightened, unimportant, nervous, and unsure. Examples include experiences with transition program activities such as school tours, mentoring programs, the registration process or the course selection process. The range of incidents representing helping experiences across the transition saw participants citing incidents such as: I am glad that they had high school students come over to talk to us; there were older students, TAs in our classes to help us; and they had older students, peer tutors to help show us around and answer questions. Incidents representing hindering experiences included: if students from high school are going to talk to students then they should at least give everyone the same information; you are sitting in class sorting out your teacher's personality, the rules and catching up on some homework and they move you to another class.

Hindering Events.

Source: High school counsellors and administrators

I will be completely honest – I was scared of almost every teacher I had. I went through the first month of school and my timetable got changed eight times. I had different teachers, so you are totally lost and you are all nervous. That didn't really help me, it was really confusing. There was a state of overload in the classes here [at high school], they [high school counsellors and principals] were just switching people.

Outcome: I seemed to get chosen a lot and that really made me feel like I wasn't important. I didn't know what to do.

Source: High school staff

I was in a special class at middle school. I didn't do well in grade 8 or grade 9 and so they put me in a special program over there [at the middle school]. I don't know what happened, but I am in normal classes here [at high school] – it is a lot better because I would rather go to regular classes than a special program. Outcome: I have been messed up a bit. I am pretty much failing everything, but it is a lot better being in regular classes.

Source: High school students

The different messages we got from the different students that came [to the middle school] for orientation really made things confusing. Also, some of the messages were wrong, like you can skip school and nobody will care. If students from the high school are going to come and talk to

students at the middle school then they should at least give the same information.

Outcome: We were thinking it is going to be so easy, I won't have to be there, but it's not easy and we weren't ready.

Helping Events.

Source: High school students

I am really glad that they [the high school] had students come over to talk with us. It is a lot better having students talk to you instead of teachers because there is a very different perspective. It at least gave you a vague idea of what to expect.

Outcome: It just kind of eased the tension having student stalk to you about what it is like. That was really helpful to me.

Source: High school students

I was really scared, but they had older students, peer tutors, to help us. They showed us around and answered questions. It was good because we had just grade 10 students. We had a teacher with us and they [high school students] toured us around and then we went to all of our classes. They [high school students] did like a scavenger hunt with us. They [high school students] would give you hints so we got to know the school really well.

Outcome: It made it easy to come over with all of the other students – it was really helpful.

Source: Older students

Another thing that really made a big difference was the older students in our classes. I don't really know what it is called, TAs I think. They are older kids and they just help out in your classes. They helped us to make connections with the school. Just from talking to them, seeing them in the hallways, you don't have to be like oh my God they're in grade twelve, watch out! It is totally not like that at all.

Outcome: You know them. It does help you to feel like a part of the school.

4.2.9 Category 9: Prior experiences with the new school. (6 incidents – 6 hindering)

This category includes incidents that relate to anxiety provoking experiences with the secondary school. These incidents can reflect situations that are experienced, imagined, or anticipated by the student. Incidents were all of hindering experiences and included descriptors in their outcomes such as: scared, worried, nervous, intimidating, and concerned. Common examples were stories told to the student, urban myths. All of the incidents have elements of helplessness attached to them. Participants cited a range of incidents, such as: you hear about kids who are trouble makers that have guns or knives; there were so many rumours going around about initiation and stuff; we didn't know what to expect and so over the summer we were all over-exaggerating and getting all worked up.

Hindering Events.

Source: High school students

Me and my friend were nervous coming here [to secondary school]. We had a really bad experience. We were riding bikes and we came here, even though we didn't come to this school yet. Most people just stared at us and we went like, oh and we started to bike away. Some of them [high school students] chased us and hollered at us. It is okay now, but it was a long time before I felt okay here.

Outcome: It was really scary. That was the first time I had ever come here and it made it really hard to come back this year.

Source: Rumours

There are so many rumours about high school that I was scared to come here. I was really worried. There are stories about teachers being like super mean, kids getting shoved into lockers, duct taped and beaten up. There are stories about 'international beating on a grade 10 day' and so on. More needs to be done to cut down the rumours.

Outcome: I was scared and it took me a while to figure it out. It was an awful summer.

Source: The unknown

We didn't know what to expect so throughout the summer it was pretty scary. We were all over-exaggerating or getting ourselves too excited and

worked up about going to high school. We all thought that it was going to be big and scary and all that.

Outcome: That made it really hard to come to high school.

5: CHAPTER FIVE - DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Results

Through interviews with 31 participants, I developed 203 discrete incidents from retrospective self-report interviews examining helping and hindering experiences related to the transition from middle school to senior secondary school. The 203 critical incidents were categorized into nine categories developed from the analysis of the data. These categories included: (a) Category 1: middle school and senior secondary school curricular continuity which included the subcategories: curricular articulation, and educational expectations; (b) Category 2: middle school and senior secondary school structural differences which included the sub-categories: instruction and assessment differences, and school organization; (c) Category 3: teacher – student relationships; (d) Category 4: school connectedness which included the sub-categories: pre-existing connections, and developing connections; (e) Category 5: existing peer relationships; (f) Category 6: personal outlook; (g) Category 7: supportive adult; (h) Category 8: school practices; and (i) Category 9: prior experiences with the new school.

5.2 Discussion of Results

I was able to develop 127 discrete incidents of helping experiences and 76 of hindering experiences. The incidents that I developed in the course of this study can be divided into four themes identified in the literature: personal, academic, social, and organizational factors (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Rice, 2001; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). These themes will be used in the discussion to provide a broader perspective on the transition process.

5.2.1 Personal factors.

There were a variety of incidents from four different categories that emphasized personal factors. In experiences that participants found helpful, there tended to be recognition of the relative maturity of the participants as they made the transition to secondary school. This recognition took the form of greater freedom, increased opportunities, and more responsibility. These findings are consistent with those reported by Letrallo and Miles (2003) where students enjoyed their new found freedom at high school. Participants expressed a need to know that their teachers were interested in them and that they genuinely cared about them as individual people. These concepts are consistent with the description of Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) who reflect that the move through adolescence is an ongoing struggle between the conflicting desire for autonomy and the need for support. Helping behaviours identified by

the participants included goal setting, having a positive attitude, and taking responsibility for themselves. This positive outlook is consistent with previous findings indicating that students' expectations of high school can influence how they experience the transition. Students who had positive expectations about high school generally experienced it as positive (Stein & Hussong, 2007). Participants also identified that it was helpful to work together with an adult to solve problems, set goals, and to help the participants to be accountable.

A number of hindering experiences are encompassed within this theme. For example, when teachers did not make efforts to develop relationships, the participants were hindered in their transitions. A previous study noted that many students experience a decline in their relationships with teachers following the transition into high school and that this negatively affects their adjustment (Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996). Several participants also acknowledged that they had hindering experiences that were a direct result of their own inaction or their inability to respond to the increased personal responsibility that accompanied the move to secondary school.

5.2.2 Academic factors.

Two categories included incidents that reflected academic factors. Those incidents that described helping experiences for the participants involved student realization that their teachers were cognizant of the curriculum and the

expectations on each side of the transition. These teachers acknowledged that there were differences and made some adjustments to assist the participants through the transition. Mizelle and Irvin (2000) suggest that creating a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at the middle school and high school levels will assist educators in doing a better job of supporting students' transition. It was also helpful to participants when teachers were explicit in their instructions, to ensure that students were aware of the differences in order that participants were prepared.

Hindering experiences were characterized by the absence of these actions and also by the shift at the secondary school to a stronger focus on examinations for assessment and to instruction dominated by lectures and note taking. When teachers on either side of the transition were unaware of, or did not address, participant need for continuity of content and expectations, then participants were hindered in their transitions. Queen (2002) reported that grading and instructional practices can have a considerable effect on motivation and achievement. While instruction and assessment differences between middle school and high school have been explored in previous research (Benner & Graham, 2009; Seidman, Aber, Allen, and French, 1996), there has been no mention of the poor practices that were evident in some of the hindering experiences reported in this study. This is certainly worth exploring in future research in order to determine the prevalence of poor practice and the degree to which this impacts student performance.

5.2.3 Social factors.

Participants related experiences of personal connections helping them through the transition during incidents that fell into three different categories. Incidents of helping involved an established connection with an older person somehow connected to the school. Staying connected to peers through the transition was also seen as helpful to the participants. Participants appreciated it when teachers made the effort to build rapport with them and made time for them. Participants felt that having at least one caring, trusting relationship with an adult was helpful. These descriptions are consistent with the discussion regarding the fact that being open to meeting people and establishing new relationships was also seen as a behaviour that was helpful to participants. Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) noted that school attachment was associated with academic motivation and that perceived teacher support was associated with positive perceptions of the school climate and also academic motivation.

Hindering experiences were incidents characterized by a lack of connection, and by isolation, so that participants felt alone and unsupported. This is consistent with Benner and Graham (2009), who found that adolescents were both lonelier and more anxious following the transition to high school. Some participants experienced a disconnection from their peers as they moved to a new school and this hindered their transition. According to Mizelle (2005),

transition into high school often disrupts friendship networks and this can interfere with students' adjustments to high school. Other participants had no prior connections with the school and they found it difficult to feel as though they belonged to the school community.

5.2.4 Organizational factors.

In a variety of incidents from three categories, participants emphasized that there were organizational or structural factors that helped them make the transition. Participants recognized that it was helpful to have continuity in school organization between middle school and the senior secondary school. Participants found it helpful to be able to take over a space where their group could get together to support each other at various points during the day. Having school staff, counsellors, teachers, and administrators provide information and answer questions was helpful to participants. Helping experiences were characterized as such by participants when older students were involved in transition activities and also as teacher assistants in their classes.

A number of incidents reflected hindering experiences for the participants. These experiences involved not knowing or not understanding what to expect creating adjustment issues for several of the participants. For some participants, the changes in school organization, including moving to a completely different school schedule or a different timetable structure, hindered them as they

transitioned to senior secondary school. Some participants found that their experiences with the increased physical size and complexity of the secondary school hindered their transition. These hindering experiences are consistent with reports in the literature of transition challenges related to changes in: school facility; organization of classes; length of periods; and number of students (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000).

5.2.5 Extreme experiences

One group of incidents extended the literature, in that they reflect incidents of real, imagined, or anticipated prior experience with the senior secondary school. The level of distress, helplessness, and anxiety represented in the outcomes of these incidents suggests that for these students, these prior experiences had a tremendously negative impact on their transition. While some of these incidents have similarity to other experiences in the literature (see: Lucey & Reay, 2000; Measor & Woods, 1984), the level of anxiety and helplessness expressed is to my knowledge unique. The number of participants recounting extreme incidents of this nature is only six, but as previously discussed in the validation, they relayed six vivid and detailed incidents. The fact that six participants had such negative prior experiences with their new school invites further examination in future studies in order to determine the extent to which these types of incidents are experienced outside of this study, and if they

are, what can be done to mitigate these negative experiences for students as they transition to senior secondary school.

5.2.6 Summary

Those experiences identified by participants as helping or hindering are presented as personal, academic, social and organizational factors in the discussion. This research confirmed much of the previous literature on student transitions. In addition, this study developed a comprehensive category system encompassing the transition experience from student participants' perspectives. This study also re-confirmed that transition to senior secondary school needs to be recognized as a process and not an event by school staffs. There were also two novel findings in the results of this study that extend the literature.

The first of these findings is that the experiences of distress that were reflected in six of the incidents developed during this study each contained elements of anxiety and helplessness at a level that I have not seen described in the literature. The second novel finding pertains to the instances of poor teacher practices reported as hindering experiences by several participants, which to my knowledge has not previously been discussed in this literature body. The factors uncovered in this study and discussed in this chapter have implications for practice, because it is through their consideration that we may be better able to support students as they make this transition.

5.3 Implications and Recommendations

In the literature review the case for developing a better understanding of student experience as they transition to senior secondary school was advanced. It is clear from the literature that transition programming continues to be developed and altered without a significant understanding of the factors that help or hinder students as they make this move (Smith, 2006a). In this study, a comprehensive category system was developed to assist in the understanding of the transition to senior secondary school. It is clear from the examination of the helping and hindering experiences of the participants in this study that there are a number of possible interventions that would likely help facilitate this transition for students. Overall, this research provides the foundations for the development of assessment tools that could be used to evaluate what is being done in the system in order to help determine what needs to be done to better meet the needs of students. The comprehensive understanding of the factors which have helped and hindered students through their transition provides the basis for program development and the development of workshops for practicing or prospective counsellors, school administrators, and teachers. Various implications and recommendations for school administrators, teachers and counsellors follow.

5.3.1 Implications and recommendations for school administrators.

Participant metaphor.

Our group decided that we were going to have a meeting place and so we picked a spot to get together at breaks and lunch and stuff. We all go there to support each other. It is sort of like having this safe harbour or shelter where we are protected from all of the craziness that is going on in the high school.

This quote from one of the participants in this study emphasizes the need for students to belong, to have support, and to feel safe. These are critical points for school administrators to consider as they work with other staff to help their students to transition.

The results of this research suggest that school administrators need to treat transition as a process rather than an event. It is very clear from the participants' accounts of their experiences that, for some, the adjustment to their new school is easy and fast. For others, however it is extended and difficult.

To mitigate the hindering experiences described by students, the findings from this research emphasized the importance of school administrators coordinating the efforts between the middle school and the senior secondary school. It is clear from the experiences related by the participants in this study that they experienced minimal transition programs. There were multiple descriptions from participants of one-time information sessions or a tour of the new school. This clearly does not meet the standards of a transition program striving to recognize transition as a process.

The results clearly indicate a need for school administrators to engage counsellors in the design and operation of a transition program that will reflect the ongoing needs of students. Multiple opportunities should exist for students to

connect with, and to receive complete and accurate information about, the senior secondary school. These opportunities should begin early in grade 9 and continue until the time of the transition. After the transition, there should be ongoing support for students in place at the senior secondary school. The opportunities to obtain information, to connect with the school, and to access support, would likely mitigate or eliminate many of the hindering experiences described by participants in this study.

The results of this research indicate that there are continuity issues between school levels, a lack of continuity of curriculum, expectations, and support. School administrators are advised to arrange for teachers to meet with their counterparts at the respective schools in order to ensure that there is a continuity of curriculum and expectation. Administrators should also make it possible for counsellors and other professionals to meet to plan for the continuity of support and to provide programming for students who need extra support. One of the participants in this study described a hindering experience in which this coordination was noticeably absent.

The findings of this research support the efforts of school administrators to facilitate and encourage older students to connect with new students and to assist them in their classes. Several participants described helping experiences in which the school facilitated the opportunity to connect with older students who were in the role of teacher assistants or tour guides.

Several participants described helping experiences in which they had found a meeting place early in their transitions to connect with their peers, and that they continued meeting well into the year. This research finding suggests

that school administrators must make it easy and comfortable for students to meet and connect in common areas throughout the school.

5.3.2 Implications for teachers.

Participant metaphor.

At middle school you could go and talk to a teacher as if they were your best friend and all buddy, buddy. Here [at high school] it is kind of like there is a distinct barrier where there is an electric fence and if you get too close, you are going to get zapped by it.

This quote from one of the participants reflects a commonly expressed sentiment regarding the differences in student experience between middle school and senior secondary school. Participants frequently described the lack of closeness and perceived uncaring of their secondary school teachers.

The results of this research suggest that teachers need to be more aware of the importance of establishing positive rapport and entering into supportive relationships with students. The helping experiences reported by a number of participants referenced the efforts of teachers to get to know students at the outset of their courses. It is likely then, that a more concerted effort to connect with every student at the beginning of a course would mitigate some of the hindering experiences described by other participants.

A number of participants described helping experiences in which teachers on both sides of the transition followed what would be widely considered to be good practice. Teachers were familiar with the curriculum and expectations inherent to both grade 9 and 10, and made use of this knowledge to support

students. Middle school teachers made efforts to prepare students for the next year by introducing grade 10 concepts. Senior secondary teachers reviewed grade 9 concepts in order to check for understanding, and adjusted their teaching to meet students where they were prior to moving into a new curriculum.

Several participants described experiences in which they were hindered because good practice was not being followed. This should serve as a reminder to teachers at both levels that some basic strategies can make a positive difference for student learning and adjustment to the next level. The results of this research indicate that a focus on quality instruction (Wagner, et al., 2006), when combined with quality assessment practices (Popham, 2008), instituted on both sides of the transition, would likely mitigate the hindering experiences that participants described regarding their course work.

5.3.3 Implications for school counsellors.

Participant metaphor.

As far as teachers go they help you by trying to push you. I guess, like when you are learning to ride a bike, you get somebody to hold your seat while you are just starting, and eventually they will let go, and you do it by yourself, well that is sort of what grade 9 was like. They were holding on wanting to let go and then, they would let go and then you are sort of on your own for high school.

This quote from one of the participants in this study highlights the extent of the support that students receive in middle school and the subsequent move to high school, where students feel that they are largely on their own. This is an

important element for counsellors and school staff to consider. It is very clear from the participants in this study that they needed support before, during, and after their transition.

It is my experience that counsellors generally take a lead role in any type of transition planning between schools. It is unfortunate that there has not been very much support for anything beyond a quick tour, a visit to talk about secondary school and course selection, and perhaps a welcoming event at the new school. Transition has been treated as an event rather than a process. Counsellors deal with student transition issues everyday and should recognize that transition is a complex process that is more difficult to manage for some students and than for others.

The results of this research indicate that there are needs that are unmet as students transition to senior secondary school. Given this situation, it is suggested that counsellors take ownership of this process in order to ensure that student needs are addressed through a transition program designed to connect, inform, orient, and support them as they experience the transition to senior secondary school. This recommendation is consistent with the discussion by Sumarah & Lehr (2002) regarding the importance and potential gain for counsellors in moving from crisis oriented models to more proactive programs and models of service. By confronting the complex issues associated with the transition in a comprehensive manner, counsellors would be able to establish a program that would mitigate or eliminate, many of the hindering experiences described in this study. As evidenced from this research, taking a more proactive approach should reduce the number of transition related crises that counsellors

would find it necessary to deal with. For program suggestions counsellors are referred to the following as a starting point: Allen (2001); DeMott (1999); Dillon (2008); Hertzog and Morgan (1998a); Koizumi (2000); and Pantleo (1999).

As a part of this process counsellors would need to involve other staff and students in order to be consistent with the helping experiences described in results of this study. Counsellors would also need to ensure that students and others involved in the process provide complete and accurate information, as several of the participants described hindering experiences that involved incomplete, misleading, or non-existent information.

The results of this study also suggest that it is important for counsellors to spend considerable time with students, reassuring and connecting with them when they find it necessary to disrupt their class schedules. It is inevitable that counsellors will need to move students from one class to another in the process of balancing and reorganizing classes at the beginning of the school year or a new semester, at some point. Several participants in this study described hindering experiences in which they felt unimportant or disconnected from the school as they were shuffled from one class to another.

5.4 Limitations

There are a number of factors limiting this research study. Several of these limitations were addressed as delimitations in the first chapter of this work because it was known from the outset that this research would only produce a preliminary category system serving to describe the helping and hindering

experiences of participants during this transition. For example, all of the participants in the study were from a single school district. This may be limiting in that there could be differences between different jurisdictions that would influence the type of incidents, and therefore, the subsequent category formation in that jurisdiction. Additionally, this research only focuses on the transition from middle school to senior secondary school which occurs between grades 9 and grade 10. The grade configuration in this study may not be the same in other jurisdictions, and may result in different types of incidents.

All of the participants self-selected to be a part of this research, and there is the possibility that some of them opted to participate because of a prior involvement with the counsellor who recruited them. This may have influenced the results, making them overly positive or overly negative, depending on their relationship with the counsellor. However, this limitation may also be looked upon as a strength, given that these students were engaged enough in school and felt safe enough to come forward and voice their positive and negative experiences.

Another limitation of this study is that it relied upon retrospective self-reports of the participants. The critical incidents that are obtained through self-reporting are limited to those incidents that are remembered and that the participants feel comfortable talking about. Given these two constraints to self-reporting, there exists the very real possibility that some incidents may not have

been revealed during the interviews. Further research will need to be conducted in order to either confirm the category system or to refine, revise, or extend it according to the data that are collected.

5.5 Future Research

Future research could involve the production of a survey instrument derived from the categories and the category system that were developed in this study for use across multiple school systems in order to examine students' experiences and the types of support that they received through the transition. Future research could focus on the quality of teaching through an examination of student experiences. The results of the current study suggest that there would be some interesting revelations from such a study. Future research could have students maintain a journal or a blog of their experiences in real time, as they happen, in order to develop a better understanding of what happens and when it happens for students as they go through the process of transition. Future research could examine the pre-transition experiences of middle school students in order to learn more about, and determine how prevalent the hindering experiences seen in this study are. Future research could include multiple interviews with the same participants over a period covering the preparation for the transition, the actual transition, and the adjustment to the transition. This longitudinal approach would ensure that experiences of each phase of the

process were current rather than retrospective. This would reduce the possibility of missing data, which was a limitation to this study.

Additional research also needs to be done in order for other jurisdictions to utilize the category system developed in this study. This additional work would need to be done to ensure completeness for use in their particular situation. This might involve replicating the study in other school systems to confirm, refine, extend, or revise the categories and the category system.

5.6 Conclusion

This study examined the factors that helped or hindered participants as they transitioned from middle school to senior secondary school. The research method involved interviews with students, who had experienced the move from middle to senior secondary school. The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) was utilized to elicit 203 incidents from 31 participants. The incidents were analyzed and then grouped together to form nine categories and six sub-categories. Several tests were conducted to examine the validity and reliability of the categories and the category system. The categories were determined to be reasonably reliable and valid while, the category system as a whole was determined to be reasonably comprehensive and able to be used reliably by others. The process of conducting this research, namely asking participants about the transition, seemed useful and validating to the participants.

The participant accounts of their move from middle school to secondary school confirmed the findings in much of the research literature. Individual students experienced the transition differently, and both positive and negative experiences existed. Students described experiences comprised of four themes: personal, academic, social, and organizational. Some students adjusted very quickly, while others took several semesters. One somewhat novel finding that came to light in this study was the high level of anxiety and distress that certain students experienced as a result of their interactions with their new school prior to their transition. These prior experiences reflect situations that students experienced, anticipated or imagined as a result of an interaction with the school or information about the school. For these students this negative prior experience hindered their transition to the new school. The other novel finding that came forward in this research highlights poor teacher practices. Intuitively we know that these exist in the system, but they had not shown up in this research body previously. It is very clear that poor teacher practices were related to experiences that hindered participants transition in this research. Further analysis of the factors that helped and hindered students as they moved between schools allowed me to develop various recommendations for practice.

The purpose of the study was to develop a more complete understanding of this transition in order to provide some guidance to the schools as to how their staff can better meet the needs of students as they move between middle school

and senior secondary school. The development of a comprehensive category system highlighting student experiences through the transition and providing recommendations for school administrators, teachers, and counsellors meets the objective of this study. The implementation of these recommendations would likely mitigate the vast majority of hindering experiences that were evident in the participants' stories in this study. The findings of this study contribute to the field of educational leadership by focusing on the perspective of students who have experienced the transition from middle school to senior secondary school. Furthermore, this study suggests promising developments for educational leadership, given that it models changing educational practices based upon students' perspectives of their own needs.

Participant metaphor.

Coming here [to high school], it is like if you have a big sports tournament, you are going to be nervous about winning or losing the game, but you still have to go out and play the game and see what happens. There really is no way to get rid of the nervousness and tension, it just eventually goes away.

This quote from one of the participants in the study is representative of the degree of emotion that is present during the build-up to the move: 'you are going to be nervous'; the move itself, 'you have to go out and play the game'; and then the adjustment to the move, 'it just eventually goes away'. This quote portrays

the transition to high school as a process. All too often, the transition from middle school to senior secondary school is viewed as an event, 'the game', but the reality is that there are experiences both before and after the event that need to be considered in order to adequately support students.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH



BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone: (604) 291-4370
FAX: (604) 291-4860

July 28, 2000

Mr. Richard Lawrence Oliver
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University

Dear Mr. Oliver:

**Re: What helps and What Hinders Student Transition from
Middle School to Senior Secondary School**

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research has been approved on behalf of the University Research Ethics Review Committee. This approval is in effect for twenty-four months from the above date. Any changes in the procedures affecting interaction with human subjects should be reported to the University Research Ethics Review Committee. Significant changes will require the submission of a revised Request for Ethical Approval of Research. This approval is in effect only while you are a registered SFU student.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Dr. James, R.P. Ogloff, Chair
University Research Ethics Review Committee

c: D. Paterson, Supervisor

/bjr

Appendix 2 – Forms

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF EDUCATION



8888 UNIVERSITY DRIVE
BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone: (604) 291-3395
Fax: (604) 291-3203

INFORMATION FOR SUBJECTS AND PARENTS

A Study of Student Transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School

This form describes the proposed tests involving physical, psychological, or any other invasive testing.

Title of Project: What Helps and What Hinders Student Transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School.

Description of the procedures to be followed and a statement of the risks to the subjects and benefits of the research:

Each subject will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will consist of a rapport building phase which will describe the study and re-emphasize the subject's right to withdraw from the study at any point. Then the subjects will be asked "To describe any events or actions which helped in their transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School." At this point the tape recorder will be turned on. After the subjects have discussed as many events as they can recall they will be asked "To describe any events or actions which made it more difficult for you to transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School." The interview will conclude when the subjects have discussed as many events as they can recall.

They will then be thanked for their participation in the study and informed again that the tape will be destroyed once the incidents have been extracted from it. The tape will be kept in a safe place until it is destroyed and will not identify the subject in any way.

The benefits of the study are an understanding from the students' perspective of what is happening during this critical juncture in their education. It will provide details of what helps and what hinders their transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School. This will have programmatic implications for schools in terms of what they do to assist students with this transition. The study should provide schools with some concrete suggestions and direction to make the transition more supportive and effective for students.

For more information please contact:

Rick Oliver,
Principal
Dr. Knox Middle School
School District #23 (Central Okanagan)
(W) 762-8177
(H) 768-2215

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CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone: (604) 291-3395
Fax: (604) 291-3203

INFORMED CONSENT FOR MINORS AND CAPTIVE AND DEPENDENT POPULATIONS BY PARENT, GUARDIAN AND/OR OTHER APPROPRIATE AUTHORITY TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT OR EXPERIMENT

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures, risks of the proposed research. Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

As (parent/guardian) _____ of (name of child) _____, I consent to the above-named engaging in the procedures specified in the document titled: Information for Subjects and Parents: A Study of Student Transition from Middle School to Secondary School to be carried out in my Child's School.

This research project supervised by: Mr. Rick Oliver, Principal, Dr. Knox Middle School, School District #23 (Central Okanagan), who is also a Graduate Student of Simon Fraser University and Dr. David Paterson, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University.

I certify that I understand the procedures to be used and have fully explained them to (name of the child): _____

In particular, the subject knows the risks involved in taking part. The subject also knows that he/she has the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Any complaint about the experiment may be brought to the chief researcher named above or to Dr. Robin Barrow, Dean of Education Faculty, Simon Fraser University (604)-291-3148.

I may obtain a copy of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting: The Martin Education Centre, Curriculum Resources Department, (250)-763-4432.

NAME (please print): _____

ADDRESS: _____

SIGNATURE: _____ WITNESS: _____

DATE: _____

ONCE SIGNED, A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND A SUBJECT FEEDBACK FORM SHOULD BE PROVIDED TO YOU.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone: (604) 291-3395
Fax: (604) 291-3203

INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT OR EXPERIMENT

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures. Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on the research materials. Materials will be held in a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study. However, it is possible that, as a result of legal action, the researcher may be required to divulge information obtained in the course of this research to a court or other legal body.

Having been asked by Mr. Rick Oliver of the Education Faculty of Simon Fraser University to participate in a research project experiment, I have read the procedures specified in the document.

I understand the procedures to be used in this experiment and the personal risks to me in taking part.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this experiment at any time.

I also understand that I may register any complaint I might have about the experiment with the researcher named above or with Dr. Robin Barrow, Dean of the Education Faculty, Simon Fraser University (604)-291-3148.

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting: The Martin Education Centre , Curriculum Resources Department, (250)-763-4432

I have been informed that the research material will be held confidential by the Principal Investigator.

I agree to participate by:

Allowing the researcher to interview me and tape record my experiences of transition from Middle School to Secondary School as described in the document referred to above, at my school.

NAME (please type or print legibly): _____

ADDRESS: _____

SIGNATURE: _____ WITNESS: _____

DATE: _____ ONCE SIGNED, A COPY OF THIS
CONSENT FORM AND
A SUBJECT FEEDBACK FORM SHOULD
BE PROVIDED TO THE SUBJECT.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone: (604) 291-3395
Fax: (604) 291-3203

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

SUBJECT FEEDBACK FORM

Completion of this form is **OPTIONAL**, and is not a requirement of participation in the project. However, if you have served as a subject in a project and would care to comment on the procedures involved, you may complete the following form and send it to the Chair, University Research Ethics Review Committee. All information received will be treated in a strictly confidential manner.

Name of Principal Investigator: Mr. Rick Oliver

Title of Project: What Helps and What Hinders in Student Transition from Middle School to Senior Secondary School.

Dept./School/Faculty: Education

Did you sign an Informed Consent Form before participating in the project? _____

Were there significant deviations from the originally stated procedures? _____

I wish to comment on my involvement in the above project which took place:

(Date) (Place) (Time)

Comments: _____

Completion of this section is optional

Your name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: (w) _____ (h) _____

This form should be sent to the Chair, University Research Ethics Review Committee, c/o Office of the Vice-President, Research, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6.

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