PEER INTERACTIONS AMONG STUDENTS WITH AUTISM AND THE EFFECTS ON TRANSITIONING TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

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Abstract

Many students, parents, and educators today are concerned about the climate in school environments, especially during times of transitioning from one environment to another. Besides having to adjust to a new environment and meet new people, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) continue to be affected by various social and behavioral issues, such as bullying and transgressions that disrupt the ease of all students to be accepted in middle school. This report responds to these difficulties by identifying middle school student and staff perceptions of inclusion of students with ASD and what needs to be done to ease the anxiety these students have transitioning to middle school. This paper addresses the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to inclusive middle school settings on their relationships and interactions with peers. The goal for the research was to find out the feelings and attitudes of staff and students (grades 6 through 8) regarding incorporating more of a collaborative environment that encourages students to work together to prepare for middle school. This investigation, based on the data analysis, indicated that current middle school students believed the transition programs either did not help them or there were no programs in place. However, students expressed the need for and interest in peer support groups and programs available in 5th grade to help prepare them to adjust to new settings more effectively and successfully.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), peer mentor groups, transitioning, inclusion
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Transitioning from one environment to another can be a very challenging adjustment in one’s life, especially at a young age. Students enter middle school between 11 and 12 years old, which is considered to be a pivotal time in an adolescent’s life when many developmental changes occur, physically, emotionally, and socially. Students at this age are also becoming more independent and exposed to a new setting and new academics, which can cause an increase in students’ difficulty adjusting to middle school. Having a peer support group or knowing there are other students going through the same experience and have the same feelings, can help alleviate these stresses. Middle school students are still developing and gaining these skills, which causes many students to face numerous social challenges, such as being able to adjust to and develop new social groups or being able to find their place in society. This can be detrimental when dealing with the various transition stages entering middle school, which can cause behavioral challenges and difficulties interacting with peers and teachers (Anderman, Missall, Hojnoski, Patrick, Drake, & Jarvis, 2009). Students, especially students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, do not adapt and adjust well to changes, so having a program in place with peer support and easy to use resources would be a crucial step to advancing inclusion effectively.

Statement of Problem

The significance of the problem addressed in this research study is that middle school students on the autism spectrum may not have access to the necessary supports to fully and effectively transition from elementary to middle school. These resources include peer and teacher support groups, aids and tools for understanding the middle school setting, and time to effectively process the transition period prior to the start of school. Without such resources, these students may not have the full opportunity to build positive relationships and prevent any
challenging interactions with peers in the future. Best practice should evolve from what is currently known about integrating and including students receiving special education services into general education settings, especially when the routines and structures are changing and transitioning from one environment to another. Having open lines of communication and conversations, promoting acceptance of others through instructional lessons and social events, and having student-led forums would be a great start of preventing stereotypes and discrimination in the educational setting. Providing opportunities for clubs and student-led organizations is one option schools can use to incorporate disability awareness and help students who do not have disabilities understand and learn about each other, which can then promote more acceptance of each other. Throughout the research study, the specific focus was on the effects peer support groups have on relationships, interactions, and social connections of students with ASD, such as bullying or friendships, and how that helped alleviate the issues many students with ASD have when transitioning into middle school. The purpose of this study was to assess these challenges of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) entering middle school and identify how these students can more effectively transition with the help of peer mentoring groups.

**Significance of the Problem**

A substantial number of studies have been conducted to improve social awareness and experiences for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder during the transition period from elementary to middle school. Tobin et al. (2012) asserted that without the anxiety of transitioning, these students can focus on building their social awareness. Experiences of transition were more stressful and anxiety-provoking for the students rather than beneficial. With the lack of support and guidance during the transition period, many of the students with ASD
come into the secondary schools further behind their peers socially and academically and then stand out rather than fit in (Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam, Williams, 2008). Dann (2011) found that there were several factors that helped or hindered the transition of students with ASD into mainstream secondary schools, but mostly related to the structure and organization of the school itself. Dann explored the views and experiences of students with ASD transitioning from primary to secondary inclusive academic environments. Tobin et al. (2012) expressed in the results of another study that parents reported there was not enough guidance and information prior to transitioning, leaving a lot of guessing work to the students about what to expect. An abundance of benefits has been shown from various studies that examined using peer-led interventions during transitioning. Regardless of how these groups were organized demographically, according to Schlieder, Maldonado, & Baltes (2014), peer-led interventions seemed to be even more successful for students with ASD being included in the inclusive environment than interventions led by teachers and staff. Chapter two provides a more detailed review of the various research studies and information regarding students with ASD and transitions to middle school.

**Definition of Terms**

Educational language today encompasses a variety of terms and vocabulary, which can easily be misinterpreted to those who are not in the education field. The following definitions of terms used throughout the research project are provided to allow for a clear understanding of concepts as intended:

*Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*. The DSM-5 requires an individual to meet a specific number of criteria from two major categories. To be diagnosed with ASD, a person must have difficulty with social communication and interaction, and display restricted repetitive behaviors,
interests and activities. The diagnostician will rank the characteristics based on level of severity and describe the support the individual needs.

*Middle school.* Within the context of this study, the middle school structure contains students in grades 6, 7, and 8.

*Peer support groups.* A group of students designed with the purpose of providing support, guidance, and mentoring to incoming students to help make the transition to middle school easier.

*Transition strategies.* For the purposes of this study, transition strategies are referred to as programs, resources, or practices that are specifically used to support students in the transition from elementary to middle school.

**Purpose/Aims of the Research**

Throughout the research study, the specific focus was the effects peer support groups have on relationships, interactions, and social connections of students with ASD, along with investigating the academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties these students have during the transition from elementary to middle school. The research question to be answered and the goal of the research is: What are the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to inclusive middle school settings on their relationships and interactions with peers, such as bullying or friendships? The research was conducted to determine what resources and activities middle school students would like to have available during their introductory days prior to school starting. This was a qualitative research study where data was carefully examined from the use of surveys and questionnaires. More specifically, a phenomenological qualitative research design was used to gather data. The research method of inquiry included the use of structured interviews of middle school students from a middle school in a North-Central state.
The research study was based on data generated from the notes taken during and after the interviews, a synthesis of key findings, and an interpretation of their meanings. In addition, the researcher also used audio recordings, member checks, and a second coder to help establish inter-rater reliability. The results from this study are used to assist the school’s staff to identify how students with Autism Spectrum Disorder could benefit from additional resources and peer support groups during the transition period and what the school could do in the future to provide more tools and aids to be available at earlier times rather than during the summer just before 6th grade. Chapter three provides additional detailed information to describe the methods used for understanding the research findings and analysis process.

**Results and Discussion**

Research has shown that the transition to middle school comes at a very challenging point in the child’s life. Students transitioning from elementary to middle school often suffer negative impacts on their academic performance and self-esteem. The research took into consideration the perspectives of the students experiencing the transition which indicated that the student’s concerns were primarily over procedures, social issues, and academics. These areas of concern were taken seriously and shared with building principals as a way to help prepare students in the future and develop programs that students could find beneficial for their success in middle school.

It was anticipated that the results of this study would support previous research that found students who are supported and exposed to various forms of preparatory programs prior to transitioning would experience a more positive transition into middle school. The data provided valuable insight from the students’ perspectives of the lack of such programs or the effectiveness of the transition programs that are currently in place. The feedback allowed educators at the
schools to gain a clear picture of what they have been doing well to meet the needs of the students while easing their transition into middle school, as well as what needs to change or be improved upon to better meet the needs of the students in transition. Chapter four presents more detailed information on the results of the interviews. Chapter five gives more insight into future recommendations and suggestions for future research based on those results.

Summary

In order to have an effective transition period for students who are on the autism spectrum, parents, staff, and students need to participate in planning the most effective route to take. Although parents and staff have the authoritative role in making sure transitions are done effectively, gathering and preparing resources, organizing peer mentoring groups, and creating tools/aids to help alleviate the stresses for these students ultimately starts with gaining information from the students themselves on what is needed and would be useful. The goal for the research is to find out the feelings and attitudes of staff and students regarding how they feel about incorporating a more collaborative environment that encourages students to work together to prepare for middle school.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Middle school is a time of a student’s life where social interactions with peers can play just as pivotal of a role as do academic learning and daily functional living skill development. Students need social interactions as part of their development in social skills to be successful in society by gaining social competence and connections. Unfortunately, according to Hassan, Hassan, Adhabi, & Wright-Jones (2017) students with intellectual disabilities, and more specifically to this research, Autism Spectrum Disorder, have limited social interactions with peers (including peers with and without disabilities), which shows substantial limitations that cause difficulties with social skills and adapting to social environments since they have not learned the various social cues and circumstances in these environments. In addition, although students with ASD are included in the general education environment and there are many benefits behind this inclusion, if there is no peer support for these students, adapting to this change in the environment will not be successful. According to Carter (2005), students with intellectual disabilities may experience difficulty adequately performing an array of important social skills, including engaging in reciprocal interactions, elaborating social exchanges, adapting to novel social circumstances, and discerning and interpreting relevant social cues. Carter (2005) also stated that students with ASD who do not have the proper resources and ability to understand social cues and interactions with peers experience higher rates of bullying and lower rates of building friendships and quality support groups.

In public schools today, bullying occurs more frequently than it is being prevented (Begeer, Fink, Meijden, Goossens, Olthof, 2016). There is increasing awareness and advocacy in the public eye for bullying, but when it happens in classrooms and other school settings, it appears that teachers and staff are held accountable for prevention, reporting, and continual
monitoring. Bullying occurs everywhere, but when it happens with students who have disabilities, concerns arise regarding what is being done to prevent this injustice. In mainstream schools, where the population of special education students and non-special education students are within the same classrooms and environment, learning the same curriculum, and having the same opportunities and access to educational needs, students tend to treat each other the same no matter the disability (Begeer et al., 2016). Students with special needs, more specifically, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), are at a higher risk of being bullied, mainly because a lot of these students are unaware of what the disability entails. ASD is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior, specifically social communication difficulties (Begeer et al., 2016; Wainscot et al., 2008). Raising awareness about students with ASD and providing peer groups to lead these discussions, paired with a focus on cultural awareness, may help prevent future social issues. Preparing students with ASD for transitioning between primary and secondary schools may prevent the anxiety and negative behaviors that are commonly observed in these students, which could help them fit in socially as well. Because these transitions can lead to anxiety issues, difficulties with transitions may affect students’ abilities to build friendships and peer relationships initially in mainstream schools. Without the anxiety of transitioning, these students can focus on building their social awareness.

**Transitioning from Primary to Secondary Schools**

Conducting research in the area of bullying and students with ASD, one needs to understand the vulnerability these students have when transitioning from primary schools to secondary schools. Students with ASD need guidance and support to help them build independence and confidence when starting something new, such as entering the secondary school environment. Due to a change of schools as well as a change in school models from a
single, main teacher to a set of different teachers with different expectations also leads to a lot of anxiety. Because these transitions lead to anxiety issues, these students’ ability to build friendships and peer relationships suffers initially in mainstream schools (Dann, 2011; Begeer et al., 2016). Tobin et al. (2012) asserted that without the anxiety of transitioning, these students can focus on building their social awareness. Students with ASD who come into a new school with these abundances of pressures and stress tend to stand out and cause others to prejudge and make fun, which then leads to additional negative behaviors. These students are expected to keep up at the same pace as their peers academically and to cope with their anxieties and frustrations more independently. With the lack of support and guidance during the transition period, many students with ASD come into secondary schools further behind their peers socially and academically and then stand out rather than fit in (Wainscot et al., 2008). Experiences of transition were more stressful and anxiety-provoking for the students rather than beneficial. Tobin et al. (2012) expressed in the results of the study that parents reported there was not enough guidance and information prior to transitioning, leaving a lot of guessing work to the students regarding what to expect.

A substantial number of researchers have identified themes such as providing the parents and students with essential information about the school, programs, curriculum, and expectations help alleviate issues and also help build confidence for students on the autism spectrum (Al Quraini & Gut, 2012; Dann, 2011; Hacibrahimoglu & Kargin, 2016; Mandy et al., 2016; Tobin et al., 2012). Such themes are providing parents and students with essential information about the school, programs, curriculum, and expectations to help alleviate issues and help build confidence for these students. Also noted in the research studies were some strategies for teachers and staff to provide more ongoing support as students with ASD enter secondary
PEER INTERACTIONS AMONG STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

schools (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Since the students are mainstreamed into the curriculum and social networks throughout, additional guidance and support provided by staff are needed so the students with ASD can learn coping skills, learning strategies, and social support.

Several factors helped or hindered the transition of students with ASD into inclusive classroom settings mostly related to the structure and organization of the school itself (Dann, 2011). Dann explored the views and experiences of students with ASD transitioning from primary to secondary inclusive academic environments. Participants included six students (five boys and one girl), six parents, and 18 staff members (working in schools from 1-20 years). A qualitative methodology was used more specifically, a phenomenological and inductive approach to collect these views and experiences before and after transitions. Interviews were conducted and transcribed for data, which was analyzed with a thematic analysis form. The data were collected at two separate times, summer and then at the end of the first semester, to allow for comparison of themes discussed for the primary school and experiences at the secondary school. Categories and themes provided indicators of what good practices would be for transitioning these students better. Dann (2011) delineated these common themes in his research:

1. Important for pupils to know their environment.
2. To be supported to engage in learning (motivation and pedagogy).
3. To be prepared for change: the need to be proactive.
4. Anxiety around transition.
5. A need for home/school liaison and communication
6. Generally positive about the move
7. The emotional impact on adults
8. Factors which support transition and inclusion in mainstream secondary schools
9. The benefits of having a specialist provision
10. Early days: ongoing targets and challenges
11. People with ASD are individuals first
12. Support for mainstream subject teachers
13. The issue of social interaction

The results suggest that the experience of transition for these students may not be “qualitatively” different from the students without ASD and that students with ASD just need more advanced preparation due to their difficulties in dealing with anxiety and changes in routine (Dann, 2011).

Similarly, Tobin et al. (2012) also found that the experiences were typically negative for students with ASD when transitioning from primary to secondary schools. Using a focus group, Tobin et al. looked at student preparedness and whether students with ASD would be ready to attend an inclusive secondary school and fit in. In addition, Tobin et al. were able to explore a variety of themes brought up by participants throughout the study as well. In all, there were seven participants (five mothers, two fathers) and six children with ASD (one girl and five boys). Each of the children had an IQ of 70 and above and was between 10 and 11 years old. Five of the children had diagnosed Asperger’s syndrome, two had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and one had a diagnosis of autism, dyspraxia, and speech and language impairment. The study involved a focus group participating during the summer months, before the transition, for about 1 hour and 40 minutes. Four of the parents consented to half-hour interviews on the phone 18 months later to discuss the experiences after the transition period.

The results indicated that the goal of a successful inclusive environment in mainstream schools is unrealistic, according to the participants, and needs further investigation of what
actually helps students once they enter school. Participants commonly reported that providing students with ASD with additional resources and guidance post-transition was essential for easing anxieties and preventing social awkwardness due to those anxieties (Tobin et al., 2012).

**Continual Support Provided by Educators Post-transitioning**

Landor and Perepa (2017) investigated what practices were in place to promote the social inclusion of students with ASD following transitioning. The research addressed how the social experience of schooling for these students was perceived by members of the school staff and how the parents of these children perceive their child’s schooling experience in terms of social adaptation and acceptance. The research design was a case study approach using multiple sources of evidence to understand the different perspectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of this focus. Participants were from a secondary school that provides resources for students with ASD when transitioning and consisted of seven staff members, and eight parents of students attending the school. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions so the parents could express their opinions as well (the assumption was made that these kinds of questions would lead to more honest responses from the parents). The findings were inconsistent regarding the perceptions of the success of inclusion. The teachers’ attitudes varied on the issue and focused more on academic achievement than social inclusion; not all teachers felt that inclusion was the best approach for students with ASD.

Moreover, a study was done by Mandy et al. (2016) on ways to ease the transition to secondary education for children with autism spectrum disorder. They evaluated an education program, especially for students with ASD, called the Systemic Transition in Education Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorder (STEP-ASD). STEP-ASD was developed on the basis of clinical experience, focus group work with parents in consultation with educators and charity
workers (Tobin et al., 2012). STEP-ASD seeks to reduce emotional and behavioral maladaptation by modifying the school environment before, during, and after the transition to improve the fit between the individual with ASD and their educational environment (Mandy et al., 2016). The study was a nonrandomized (quasi-experimental) controlled trial, measuring outcomes before and after transitioning to a secondary school of students who received the intervention STEP-ASD and a group of students who did not. A total of 37 students comprised the sample. No two participants attended the same school. There were two groups that made up this sample, a control group of 20 participants who were transitioning but did not receive any additional support or interventions, and an intervention group of 17 participants who started the STEP-ASD and were transitioning. Baseline assessments took place in the last year of primary and a follow-up assessment took place in the second semester of the first year in secondary school. The study investigated its feasibility and efficacy for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (N = 37; mean age = 11.47 years; mean IQ = 85.24) using an unblinded, non-randomized, controlled design. According to Mandy and colleagues (2012), children receiving STEP-ASD showed a large reduction in school-reported emotional and behavioral difficulties, whereas controls showed a slight increase. There were trends throughout the study that showed the improvement in emotional and behavioral problems for the students with the STEP-ASD intervention and the other students showed worsening symptoms. These findings suggest the value of STEP-ASD as a low-intensity intervention for reducing problem behaviors and distress in children with autism spectrum disorder as they transition to mainstream secondary school (Mandy et al., 2016).

Similarly, according to Schlieder et al. (2014), peer-led interventions seemed to be even more successful for students with ASD being included in the inclusive environment than
Interventions led by teachers and staff. Schlieder did a study on a program called “Circle of Friends” (CoF). A collective case study was used to investigate the experiences of students in this program. The themes that emerged from the analysis were: the influence a CoF partnership initiative has on inclusion, social skills improvement, empowerment, and sense of wellbeing (Schlieder et al., 2014). For the purposes of this review, the focus is primarily on the inclusion influence. The results indicated that CoF peers developed empathy and a deeper understanding of the students with ASD. Schlieder exemplified from the study that peer acceptance generalized outside the school setting, even in the absence of CoF adult facilitators, and fostered long-term, genuine friendships. With programs such as CoF in place, teachers are able to educate general education students more about disabilities, which also leads to more awareness and acceptance of these students.

**Educating the Community of Special Needs**

Wainscot et al. (2008) did a review of various studies on the relationships students with ASD have with peers and what needs to be implemented in the classroom to help educate all about the disability. The focus was to examine how all students spend their day socially. The method was a case-control design where the participants were interviewed at the end of the school day, using a structured interview schedule, about their social interactions with their peers throughout the school day. They chose this qualitative method because of the limited population of students with ASD in mainstream schools. The participants were selected by sending invitations to 32 mainstream secondary schools in order to find students with Asperger’s Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism (AS/HFA) and students without the disorder. Ninety students were selected and were categorized based on their age, gender, academic ability, lessons attended throughout the school day, and if possible, socio-economic background and ethnicity.
Results indicated that students with ASD spent less time with friends and engaged in fewer social interactions throughout the school day. This is in comparison with students without the disorder, to examine the difficulties they experience in communication and social impairments, which makes it difficult for peers to relate to these students, resulting in them being socially excluded. It also suggested that students with ASD do not have as large of a social network and that they have more peers who verbally and physically abuse or bully because of this, which then causes them to be socially excluded.

**Benefits of Pre-Transition Preparation and Peer Support for Students with ASD**

The key findings of the works reviewed focused on the experiences students with ASD faced when transitioning from primary to secondary schools. Many of these experiences were negative. The student would be ready to attend a mainstream secondary school and fit in, but there is not as much support as there is in the primary setting. These students are expected to keep up at the same pace as their peers academically and cope with their anxieties and frustrations more independently. With the lack of support and guidance during the transition period, many of the students with ASD come into the secondary schools further behind their peers socially and academically and then stand out rather than fit in. Although many of the works did not talk directly about bullying, it seems that when students of any background do not fit in or understand where to be socially or academically in a mainstream setting, it makes them a target for others to treat them poorly. Thus, improved transition services may reduce bullying toward this population of students.

The topic of how social support by teachers for mainstream secondary school students with ASD affects their relationships and interactions with peers helps focus on issues such as bullying or friendships. According to Nuske et al. (2018), children transitioning to secondary
school faced additional challenges with their mental health; sensory, behavioral, and adaptive functioning; academics, peer relations, and social skills; engagement in transition and disorientation; and transportation challenges in their new schools. These challenges disrupted their adjustment and learning. Throughout this research, additional works provided ways for students with ASD to build self-confidence and assurance, considering that they are provided the necessary support by staff, and for those students to be successful and as independent as possible in order to fit in the mainstream/inclusive environment. They provide various strategies that effectively support these students. One example of effective strategies would be peer support and what it looks like when implemented. According to Nuske et al. (2018), student strategies from studies with the highest evidence ratings include social support; a peer buddy system gave students social support to help navigate the new setting. If these students get the support they need, they are able to avoid standing out socially and academically, which will alleviate the social pressures by their peers. Prevention is key for students with ASD to be successful in a mainstream learning environment and reduce bullying.

**Field Report Research**

The focus of this research study was the effects peer support groups have on relationships, interactions, and social connections of students with ASD and whether that helped alleviate the issues many students with ASD have when transitioning into middle school. The research purpose was to determine the feelings and attitudes of staff and students (in 4th and 5th grade) about incorporating a collaborative environment that encourages students to work together to prepare for middle school. The specific research question being asked was, “What are the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to inclusive middle
school settings on their relationships and interactions with peers?” The research methods and detailed information on procedures and analysis are addressed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to address the question, “What are the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to an inclusive middle school setting on their relationships and interactions with peers, such as bullying or friendships?” This question was addressed by measuring, examining, and identifying how the use of peer support groups affects the transition period of middle school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Throughout the research study, the specific focus was on the effects peer support groups have on relationships, interactions, and social connections of students with ASD, and how that helped alleviate the issues, such as bullying or lack of friendships, many students with ASD have when transitioning to middle school. It was hypothesized that having open lines of communication and conversations, promoting acceptance of others through instructional lessons and social events, and having student-led forums, would be a great start of preventing stereotypes and discrimination in the educational setting. Providing opportunities for clubs and student-led organizations may be one option schools can incorporate to address disability awareness and help students who do not have disabilities understand and learn about each other, which can then promote greater acceptance. This chapter explains the research design, process of data collection, and procedures used to analyze the results.

Research Design

The researcher exercised a qualitative approach to determine the students’ attitudes and perceptions of peer support groups offered at school. A qualitative approach was more appropriate for this particular study compared to a quantitative approach because information cannot be obtained about students’ attitudes and perceptions of the availability and format of peer support groups through quantitative methods. Qualitative researchers venture into
unexplored territory, make sense of participants’ language and behaviors, make assertions based on findings, compare those with what exists in the literature, and suggest applications and new research directions (Peterson, 2019). In addition, a qualitative approach allows students’ words and actions to be well-described in the results whereas quantitative research would have limited participant response options. The results from qualitative research provide a more complete description of the students’ experiences because of the more personal format in which the students participate.

Specifically, a phenomenological qualitative approach was used for this study since this type of approach investigated an experience and how the person interprets that experience, which was the focus of the researcher. Phenomenological interviewing involves an informal interactive process that aims to elicit a personal comprehensive description of a lived experience of a phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it (Cypress, 2018). In addition, the focus of the interview is the direct description of a particular situation or event as it is lived without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations (Cypress, 2018). A phenomenological approach allowed the participants to explain their experiences during their transition and was, therefore, the most appropriate design for the particular research questions that this study investigated. In addition, this study examined students with Autism Spectrum Disorder during their transition period from elementary to middle school as well as the peers who volunteered to help mentor the transition into the new setting.

**Participants and Setting**

Administrators and staff at a middle school in a north-central state requested research to be conducted to provide information regarding a plan for improvement for these peer support groups for students with disabilities when transitioning from elementary to middle school.
Convenience sampling was used to select students who are in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Convenience sampling is a type of sampling where the first available primary data source will be used for the research without additional requirements (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). In addition, according to Etikan et al. (2016), the main objective of convenience sampling is to collect information from participants who are easily accessible to the researcher like recruiting providers attending a staff meeting for study participation. Although the sampling was easily accessible, in order for the students to participate, an informed consent form was sent home to their parents for review and a signature. See Appendix A for a copy of the consent form. According to Cypress (2018), permission should be obtained to gain access to the research site, participants should sign the informed consent, the type of observation is determined, and care should be undertaken in recording and storing of data to protect the privacy and confidentiality of information. Informed consent forms were sent home with the students prior to research. Students who had the informed consent form signed by their parents and returned within a week were included in the study. In addition, an email was sent informing the students of the study being conducted and an assent form was also utilized with the students participating in the research, so they were able to provide agreement to volunteer for the study. See Appendix B for a copy of the assent form and Appendix C for a copy of the email that was sent to the students.

In order for students to participate in this study, the participants were required to be able to communicate verbally and capable to comprehend what was being asked of them, as well as be 80% or more included in the general education classroom environment. Students who did not meet this criterion were excluded from the study. There were 11 participants selected, ranging in age from 11 to 15 years old, consisting of students with and without disabilities (see Table 3.1). This age range was used as this is the age of students who attend middle school. The following
information is the general demographics of the school district and middle school used during this research. The school district served 7,400 students, K-12, throughout 15 school buildings. The middle school was one of 3 middle schools in the district. Enrollment was roughly 500 students, 52% female, and 48% male, with about 5.5% open enrolled. The ethnic diversity was as follows: White 79%, Hispanic 13%, Asian 1%, two or more races 2%, Black or African American 5%, American Indian or Alaskan Native 0.3%. Within the student population, student groups were as follows: students with disabilities 11.1%, economically disadvantaged 12.3%, English learners 2.8%.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>ASD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>EBD</td>
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<td>ASD</td>
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<td>ASD</td>
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<td>Participant H</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>SLD</td>
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<td>Participant I</td>
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<td>SLD</td>
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<td>Participant J</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>EBD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant K</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ASD</td>
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Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

The main form and most useful way of collecting data for this qualitative study was done through one-on-one interviews of qualified participants in a regular school setting. According to Cypress, (2018) qualitative interviewing is motivated by the aim of eliciting information useful to a study. In addition, the interviewer in a qualitative research study enters the person’s world and perspectives and will want respondents to talk about their internal states and tell their stories, including obtaining here-and-now constructions of persons, events, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, and other entities. In addition, Cypress (2018) also stated that the researcher should prepare for the interview, take initial steps, and pace the interview according to how the interviewees respond and to keep the process productive. Due to the COVID-19 school closure mandate, the researcher had to change the setting to do all interviews virtually. No preparations were needed for setting up the environment, however the researcher did have to make sure audio and video were set up on the computer and make sure the participants were aware of their computer’s settings. The researcher made sure to introduce themself (if the student is not familiar) and explained the assent form. If the student chose to sign the assent form, then the interviews began.

Interviews took place at the participating middle school with sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students. The researcher of this study conducted 11 interviews between two days. During the interviews, the researcher asked 13 interview questions and documented the participants’ responses on a computer. The participant’s responses were recorded using the record feature of Zoom, using only the audio feature so the researcher can listen and analyze the answers following the interview. The video feature was not used to protect the identity of the interviewees. The consent and assent forms informed the participants of the fact that they were
recorded. The researcher asked the participants the 13 interview questions in order and were able to have the chance to return to a question if necessary. After the 13 questions were asked, the participants had the opportunity to ask the researcher questions about the study. Once the responses were transcribed, the researcher used “member checks.” Following the interview, the researcher printed out the transcripts and provided them to the students for them to add notes or clarification as needed to ensure the accuracy of their responses. Only two participants were engaged in the process and carefully looked over the responses and made some changes. Those changes were adding details to their answers. One participant wanted to be more specific about the activities to be offered to the open house and the other participant wanted to add specific names of teachers and students who they thought were helpful to their transition to middle school. That information was not added to the research since names and identities were kept secure.

**Survey Development**

The 13 interview questions were based on informal staff and student observations and opinions about their experience with transitioning from elementary to middle school and the open house days provided by the school prior to the start of the school year (see Appendix D for a copy of the full survey). When creating the interview questions, the researcher determined the trustworthiness of the questions. Are the questions reliable, consistent, and trustworthy to the researcher and relevant to the research being conducted? Do the questions make sense and have a valid reason to be asked? With these questions in mind, the researcher investigated the research done thus far on the topic to ensure the interview questions met the criteria (see Chapter 2). In order for the researcher to provide justification and inclusion for the questions being asked in the interview, many of the questions were created using the literature researched in Chapter 2.
method used to construct these questions is based on a semi-structured format where many of the questions are open-ended, which helps guide the participants to reflect on their experience with as much detail as possible. According to Baumbusch (2010), in the semi-structured interview, the researcher has planned a series of open-ended questions focusing on different parts of the particular research issue. The following provides justification and explanation of each question, showing the researcher is using questions that help the respondent give tangible answers along with leaving things open for the respondent to list effects that are positive, negative, or both.

The following interview questions were created to allow respondents to reflect on their middle school experience thus far and have more of an open-ended conversation with the researcher to provide some background of the student. The questions were also created to identify any barriers or limitations, allowing for a more in-depth discussion about specific factors within the student and school environment, which may have helped or hindered the students settling into middle school. The article Secondary Transition Experiences for Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Conditions by Rachel Dann (2011), helped the researcher build these questions based on how the article addressed the importance of transitioning from elementary to middle school and how those experiences reflect in middle school student’s academic and social achievement. Dann (2011) stated that “Perhaps pupils with ASD need more preparation due to their difficulties and may experience a greater intensity of worry and difficulty” (p. 305).

Understanding these difficulties and experiences is important to this research so that programs can be developed to alleviate issues such as these.

*What do you like best about middle school so far?*

*What were some of your concerns coming into middle school?*

*What difficulties have you experienced so far in middle school?*
What is something you wish you would have known before coming to middle school?

What advice would you give to incoming 6th graders?

What was one thing that caused you the most anxiety leaving elementary school and starting at middle school?

What are some expectations and procedures that surprised you at the start of middle school?

The research question is primarily based on the effects of incorporating peer support/mentor groups during open house and transition periods for students with ASD. This alone was the basis for creating the following interview questions. Since there really isn’t a program like that in place at the middle school in the research study, this allows the researcher to gain more information from the student’s point of view and provide the middle school principal feedback to incorporate this type of support.

Was the peer support group helpful in your transition from elementary to middle school?

What do you think about having a peer mentor (in 7th or 8th grade) or a buddy (in your grade) throughout your 6th-grade year to help you transition into school?

If you had a mentor or buddy, would you like this led by teachers and meet monthly?

The following questions were developed based on information provided by the district’s website and middle school principal, who was able to describe in great detail what the programs look like for transitioning. By asking the respondents these questions, the researcher can
compare the principal’s and student’s perceptions and what needs to be changed for more effective transitions.

What are some changes you would make to the open house or locker day events?

What kinds of activities should the open house have to make your transition to middle school easier/less scary? Is there a program in 5th grade that introduces you to middle school expectations? If so, what is it like? If not, what would be something that your elementary school should provide?

**Data Analysis**

A total of 11 participants were interviewed out of the initial 20 targeted participants, which constitutes a 55% rate for the study. Of the 11 participants, nine were male and two were female. The demographics of the group, when categorized by disability, are as follows: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - 5, Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD) - 3, Significant Learning Disability (SLD) - 3. The process used to analyze transcripts from the 11 individual interviews conducted to uncover codes and themes is described in detail in chapter 4. After the researcher conducts the interviews with participants, they will make a copy of the recorded interview transcripts to be used through the analysis process. The researcher will then read through the field notes, recording and categorizing the data in order to share on an organized table of responses, this form of analysis is referred to as content analysis. Content analysis refers to the process of categorizing verbal or behavioral data to classify, summarize, and tabulate the data (Mayring, 2004). After the researcher reads through and notates any important information, the researcher will consolidate the information into labels and codes to organize the data. This will be done through open coding which is used to determine themes and similar concepts of the data. In reference to the process and benefits of open coding, according to Khandkar (2009), “the
concepts emerge from the raw data and are later grouped into conceptual categories. The goal is to build a descriptive, multi-dimensional preliminary framework for later analysis. As it builds directly from the raw data, it processes itself and ensures the validity of the work” (p. 4). As the data was being transcribed and translated, identifying patterns of expressions alerted the researcher to be aware of similar or conflicting themes as more data unfolded.

The study’s data were first organized into an excel sheet comparing the responses of all participants. The data collection method that was implemented was a combination of interviews and researcher observation notes based on those interviews. The interviews conducted during this research study were conducted separately in order to keep their opinions separate from one another. The notes will help the researcher categorize the information gained from the interviews and determine what methods of communication should be used at the middle school with the elementary schools prior to students transitioning as well as to inform the middle school of some concerns students have when starting a new school. Along with the researcher’s notes and recordings for analysis, the researcher will also have an additional interpreter read through the results to provide additional trustworthiness. During the analysis and coding phase, the researcher will have a university professor use the codes to code the data sets from the results, which allows for inter-rater reliability that will greatly strengthen the results of the research. This data will help the district reorganize support and provide additional resources if needed, that are required to be available for students with disabilities, in order to prevent future anxieties and traumatic experiences. The researcher will share this data with the principals so that decisions can be made collaboratively and be consistent throughout the district.
Conclusion

To address the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to an inclusive middle school setting on their relationships and interactions with peers, the researcher will conduct a phenomenological qualitative study focusing on the students’ attitudes and perspectives about having peer mentor groups available for students with disabilities during the transition period from elementary to middle school. Eleven interviews will be conducted between two days. A number of techniques will be employed by the researcher to increase the trustworthiness of this study. For example, having an additional reader of the interview transcripts, will increase trustworthiness and prevent bias or missed interpretations of the results. Chapter 4 will reveal the results of the study in more detail and how the data was collected and analyzed for future research and recommendations.
Chapter 4: Results

The study conducted was to answer the research question: What are the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to inclusive middle school settings on their relationships and interactions with peers, such as bullying or friendships? The qualitative approach to this study, through the use of a semi-structured interview, allowed the researcher to describe in-depth the perceptions and thoughts expressed firsthand by the participants allowing the results from this study to have more meaning towards any changes and adjustments to existing programs. This chapter presents the data collected and summarizes the findings from individual interviews. Chapter 5 will present the final discussion of this study in which the researcher attempts to summarize the overall findings from these interviews.

Presentation of Interview Data

Question 1: What do you like best about middle school so far?

The first question starts the interview process by allowing the participant to feel comfortable and prepare them for answering questions. This is a very open-ended, general question for the purpose of promoting discussion.

In response to this question, three out of the 11 participants said they thought the teachers were the best part of middle school so far. Participant A said, “Meeting the teachers was the best part of starting middle school.” Participant B said, “the teachers were so nice and helpful and making the start of the school year fun.” Participant C emphasized, “The best part of middle school was meeting new kids and joining a sport.” This participant was focused more on the social aspect of middle school. Two of the participants, D & E, said respectively “I love that I can ride my bike to school every day” and “living by the school I am now able to walk to school is the best part of middle school” was the highlight of going to a new school. Friends constituted
the reason for two other participants’ enjoyment of their middle school experience, F & G said respectively, “I get to see my friends that go to other elementary schools” and “having classes and my locker by my friends was the most exciting.” In addition, lunch was also tied with two additional participants for importance, Participant H said, “the lunches are way more better [sic.] than the food at the elementary school,” and Participant I said, “We get so many more choices at lunch.” There was no mention of academics or learning in any of the responses. The last participants were not very engaged in this question. Participant J said, “I don’t know, I don’t really like school that much” and Participant K said, “I don’t know, I guess the shorter schedule is nice.”

**Question 2: What were some of your concerns coming into middle school?**

This question explores the challenges, socially and academically, that middle school-aged children face when starting middle school. The researcher’s purpose of this question is to use this as a preventative solution, to come up with suggestions and resolutions to the various issues that middle school students experience. The issue of integrating all students from various skills and backgrounds appears to be crucial for educators to combat the concerns students have when transitioning to a new school.

Six of the 11 participants indicated that meeting new people, not seeing friends as much, the kids in school, not having classes with friends, not knowing anybody, and making new friends were the main concerns of starting Middle School. Participant A said, “I was so nervous about meeting new people and not having any classes with my friends.” Participant B was more concerned about, “...not knowing anybody but it was nice going to the locker day, even though I hated it at first. My parents made me go.” Participant C said that “I like to meet new people but I worry that they will make fun of me or bully me if they don’t like me.” Participant F was a bit
apprehensive when answering this question because they do not like middle school still to this
day, “I do not like middle school since I don’t have many friends and I don’t like meeting new
kids, most kids aren’t nice and they bully me. I just like hanging out with my friends.”
Participant G was excited to, “...meet the teachers and see kids from other schools. I wanted to
have classes with a couple of friends but didn’t care either.” Participant H said, “I was afraid that
I wouldn’t have classes with anyone I knew and that I would get lost a lot.”

Three of the participants said that opening their locker and remembering or forgetting
their combination was scary for starting Middle School. Participant D said that “I hated that I had
to have a locker and remember a combination.” Participant E said, “It was scary having to open
my locker in between classes and worry about being late to class, I did not like that at all.”
Participant J said that “my locker got stuck every time I opened it before school even started so
that was annoying but I figured it out.” For Participant K, a major concern was eating lunch in
the cafeteria, and said: “I didn’t want to eat in the cafeteria where there were a lot of people I
didn’t know.” When the researcher asked if it was due to friends or feeling overwhelmed by the
change, the participant responded that it was because they did not like to eat in front of people
and at their previous school they were allowed to eat in the classroom. This caused a lot of
anxiety for the student starting Middle School. Participant I did not respond, they said: “I don’t
know.”

Question 3: What difficulties have you experienced so far in middle school?

Aside from the beginning-of-the-school-year challenges and anxieties, this question is
exploring what issues students dealt with at school that were not taken care of right away. This
question is searching for preventative strategies for both students and educators.
In answering this question in addressing the difficulties one may have faced during middle school thus far, six out of the 11 responded with academic issues, the rest were socially-based. Homework, remembering books and pencils, long class blocks, and being on time were given by participants who found these challenges as a hindrance to their relationship with their teachers and towards the school itself. Participant A said that “My ADHD and my friends and I being distracting when we should be learning” was a difficulty they were facing. Not one other student brought up their disability as an issue. The rest of the participants who responded with social issues commented that being in the cafeteria and making new friends was the most challenging. Participant B said, “Meeting new people was difficult since I’m very shy, but the teachers really helped me feel comfortable.” Participant C said, “Since I was part of the volleyball team already, I knew a lot of kids but the most difficult part of middle school was the homework and remembering stuff for class.” Participant D said, “Being on time for class was hard since we only get 4 minutes between classes and that’s not enough time to go to the bathroom and go to your locker.” Participant E said, “The most difficult part of middle school is the locker and remembering the combination or when it gets stuck and finding a teacher to open it.” Participant F said “Making new friends was hard at first and I was really nervous about the teachers and hoping they were not mean.” Participant G said “I don’t know” and even with more prompting, they did not respond and said, “I can’t think of anything.” Participant H said, “The difficult part was not having enough time at lunch to eat and go outside.” Participant I also said, “Lunch was too short and I didn’t have enough time during recess.” Participant J said, “Going to school is the most difficult because I don’t like it and it’s too hard for me, but my parents make me go.” Participant K said that “It was hard walking into the cafeteria on the first day. I ended up in the counselor’s office for the first week because I hated it. I don’t like to eat in front of
everyone.” Reasons for this ranged from not enough time to there was not enough time for recess and talking with friends, which caused many to find outlets elsewhere such as the classroom or skipping class.

**Question 4: What was one thing that caused you the most anxiety leaving elementary school and starting at middle school?**

Along with the initial concerns and the ongoing challenges and difficulties throughout middle school, this question focused on the most internal struggle these students faced when transitioning to a new school. Many of the responses were repeated answers from the last question, so these questions could be combined.

Academic anxieties topped the responses of the participant’s anxiety in coming to middle school. Ranging from having to do lengthy homework and classroom assignments, finding/remembering where the classroom is, arriving to class on time, and being able to focus in classes that were 86 minutes were among the majority of the responses.

Participant A said, “Keeping up on my homework was hard because my parents said if I don’t then I can’t play basketball and there was a lot of work to do.” Participant B commented on the last question saying, “Isn’t this the same as the last question? I guess making new friends.” Participant C said “I think having to bring different notebooks and books to 4 different classes and especially in the beginning of school having to remember my schedule. It was nice that my teachers put my schedule in my planner and were really nice if I forgot something.” Participant D made the comment that “finding all the different classrooms for each of my classes was scary because in elementary school you only have one teacher and one classroom.” Participant E also commented that “This is the same question as the one before. I hated my locker, it always got stuck and I was late to class a lot.” Participant F said, “The school is much bigger than my
elementary school and I didn’t know a lot of people from the other schools.” Participant G asked, “What does anxiety mean?” The researcher then had to clarify what this meant. The participant then said, “I guess it’s kinda [sic.] the same as before, I’m not really sure. I wasn’t that worried about anything I guess.” Participant H said, “I didn’t like that we didn’t have extra time for recess and breaks. That was the best part of 5th grade.” Participant I said, “I really liked a lot of stuff about middle school. I guess the only thing that I worried about was not having enough time to eat.” Participant J said, “I don’t like school so everything was bad.” Participant K said, “Lunchtime and going to the cafeteria was the worst.”

**Question 5: What are some expectations and procedures that surprised you at the start of middle school?**

The question posed helps educators, both in elementary and middle school, understand what student’s expectations are when moving from one school to the next. This was a difficult question to answer for students at this level in that they had to reflect back to what they expected before coming to middle school and what changed once they got there. The participant’s responses to this question indicated a strong feeling of confusion about the terms “expectations” and “procedures.” The researcher had to clarify what those terms meant, however, it seems that some of these participants still were not sure how to answer this question.

Three of the participants (A, D, E) answered, “I don’t know.” The rest of the participants' answers varied based on their understanding and interpretation of these terms. Two participants (H & I) answered that having recess after lunch was surprising. Participant B said, “I was surprised that the 4 minute passing time between classes was actually enough time to go to the bathroom and talk to friends.” The rest of the responses were either not clear or did not answer the question correctly. Answers such as having fun, having a lot of teachers, and getting done
with school early are among some of those answers. Participant C said, “I was excited that we

got to leave school at 2:00 a lot for volleyball, we never got to leave school early at the
elementary school.” This question should have been phrased differently based on vocabulary
middle school students know. Participant F said, “I had a lot of fun in middle school. All the
teachers were nice and I had a lot of classes with my friends.” Participant G said, “I thought it
was neat that we had so many teachers. I really liked changing classes, even though the classes
were really long.” Participants J & K had a hard time answering a lot of questions since many of
their responses were “I don’t know” or “I hate school.” Participant J answered this question as
“All of it was surprising since I was never in middle school before.” Participant K said, “I don’t
know, I wasn’t happy with anything when school started.”

**Question 6: Was the peer support group helpful in your transition from elementary to middle
school?**

This question helped the researcher formulate the rest of the questions to guide the study
and help answer the research question. Unfortunately, the way the question was posed, most
answers ended up being “yes” or “no” responses, even with a follow-up clarification to the
question. Out of the 11 participants, six answered “yes,” four answered “no,” and one answered,
“I don’t know.” Two of the participants elaborated on the response, Participant A said “I thought
the peer support group was great because they were older kids and it was fun getting to know
them and then be able to see them at school when school started” and Participant C said, “I had a
lot of older peers from volleyball help me in the beginning of the year so it was easier to start
middle school.” One participant said they couldn’t remember much about the group since they
were too nervous and there was so much going on.
Question 7: What do you think about having a peer mentor (in 7th or 8th grade) or a buddy (in your grade) throughout your 6th-grade year to help you transition into school?

As with the last question, the answers the participants provided helped the researcher answer the research question and conduct further analysis and research. Participants A, D, and F all answered that this would be a good idea and that they would find it helpful. A said, “I love having friends and older kids helping me out, then I don’t feel so lost and scared.” D said, “It would be nice so that if I had questions about something and the teachers were busy or I was scared to ask, I would have someone my age to ask.” F said, “I think having older kids as helpers would be nice so I knew what to expect for the classes I should take and what the teachers were like.” Participant B said that “It would be ok, but it would be better if you were in a group with your friends so it’s not as scary.” Participant C answered, “yes, then I can meet a lot of new friends and learn to talk to people.” Participant E and G were hesitant and answered “maybe” or “I don’t know” respectively. The four remaining (participants H, I, J, K) answered “no.” When asked why they wouldn’t want a peer mentor, one participant answered that “I already have buddies in my grade to help me with my transition into school. They were my basketball buddies.”

Question 8: If you had a mentor or buddy, would you like this led by teachers and meet monthly?

This question branches off the last question to see if a peer mentor program would be beneficial and accepted by the participants, especially those that didn’t experience a peer mentor during the summer program. Because this is something they had not experienced prior to middle
school, this open-ended question allowed for a variety of responses. The majority of the participants answered yes for a teacher-led mentor/buddy program (see Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1 Graph of student responses of having a peer mentor**

![Graph of student responses of having a peer mentor](image)

**Question 9: What are some changes you would make to the open house or locker day events?**

This question assumed that all the students participated in the open house days, however since it is voluntary, many students did not attend, resulting in many of these participants not able to answer this question. Six of the participants (participants B, C, E, F, G, K) answered with “I don’t know,” “I didn’t go,” or “nothing.” This shows that the open house event does not have the positive impact that is intended. Participant A said, “No I would not change anything, both those days were very helpful and made me feel comfortable going into middle school.” This particular participant expressed their excitement in attending all middle school functions and was very involved in 5th grade. Unlike the rest of the participants, this participant answered all interview questions with in-depth responses and focused on the positives of transitioning to middle school. Participant D said, “I was really bored at the open house since they broke us up by last name and I didn’t have any friends with me.” Participant H said, “The open house could
have been more fun like have more activities and let you choose what group you wanted to be in.” Participant I said, “I didn’t like the open house but my parents made me go. My sister was one of the tour guides so it was really annoying.”

**Question 10: What kinds of activities should the open house have to make your transition to middle school easier/less scary?**

The researcher adjusted this question in a way that participants, even those that did not attend the open house in the summer, could answer this question. The researcher posed the question in a hypothetical way, so all the participants were able to answer. The question was, “What kinds of activities would you participate in IF you attended the open house during the summer to make the transition to Middle School easier, more fun and less scary?”

As with the question above, Participant A answered, “Maybe do a 7th grade and/or 8th-grade basketball game against teachers. Basketball players from last year vs. teachers and have the new 6th graders watch and any other students/teachers watch. So that way students that have been to this middle school already know who the teachers are can play them and the new 6th graders can see how comfortable it is.” This participant expressed how important it was to be involved in anything you can when starting middle school to build that comfort level once school starts. Participants B, G, and K all answered with “I don’t know, I didn’t go.” Even when the researcher rephrases the questions as if you went they still responded with those answers. Participant C said, “I guess maybe have more games besides the scavenger hunt.” Participant D and E both said respectively, “have more food available” and “it would have been nice to have lunch there, I was really hungry.” Participant F said, “I would have had more fun if my friends were there. We were split into groups by our last name and I didn’t know that many people.” Participant H said, “More teachers available would have been helpful because I didn’t get to
meet many of them until school started.” Participant I said, “More activities outside would have been nice.” Participant J said, “It wasn’t my choice to go to the open house so I don’t know, maybe allow us to be on our phones for part of it.”

**Question 11: Is there a program in 5th grade that introduces you to middle school expectations? If so, what is it like? If not, what would be something that your elementary school should provide?**

This question allows the researcher to explore options students would find helpful so middle school administrators and staff could provide to elementary schools to prepare students in transition. It is interesting to note the variance between the responses of the participants considering they all attended elementary schools in the same district. Participants B, J, and K surprisingly responded with “I don’t think so.” Participants D, G, I said “no.” Participants E and F said, “I don’t remember.” Participant A said, “My elementary school didn’t have programs to prepare us for middle school expectations but something they could do as a program could be having each kid buy a lock and have them practice in a program for those who need help or want practice.” Participant C said, “Yes, the principals had us choose our music classes, which was really fun but I don’t remember anything else that we did.” When the researcher asked the administrator about this, they said that “this day is always very overwhelming for the students since we pack all 5th-grade students into the library and go over lengthy expectations and procedures middle school students are expected to know. Then we all together schedule their first class and do a Question/Answer discussion. It tends to be very busy and fast-paced.”
Question 12: What is something you wish you would have known before coming to middle school?

Along with the last question, the next question opened up the conversation and allowed the participant to provide an opinion about how teachers could prepare them better while in 5th grade so that it is not so overwhelming.

It seems that the participants were more engaged in this question. Participant A said, “Nothing, I really like middle school and I’m glad that we moved so I was able to go to ‘__’ instead of ‘___.’” Participant B answered that “the classes are really long, the homework is harder and you get a lot more work to do in class.” Participant C said “I really liked the anti-bullying program we have and that would have been nice to know before I came here. I always worry about bullying.” Participant D said, “I would have liked to practice my locker and knowing how to open a lock.” Participant E answered that “The teachers, the lockers, and how long lunch and recess is.” Participant F said, “It is really cool to have snacks available to buy after school and also there are a lot of fun activities throughout the school year, I wish they would have talked about that stuff more at open house.” Participant G said, “They should have told us what kind of classes we were going to be able to take, like tech ed and FACE, I really had fun in those classes.” Participant H said, “You don’t have as much free time and recess and the classes are really long.” Participant I said, “The choices at school lunch are so much better and would have been nice to know about ahead of time, I brought cold lunch for a while until my friends said the school food was really good.” Participant J said, “No one said that school started later than elementary school.” Participant K said, “It would have been nice if the teachers would have talked about the school clubs we were able to join so I had something to look forward to.”
Question 13: What advice would you give to incoming 6th graders?

This question allowed the participants to have more autonomy in the interview and help wrap up the conversation. The responses of this question did not contribute to the study, moreover, they provided more background to the experience elementary students have when transitioning from one school to another.

The responses from this question provided the researcher with additional information to share with the administrators of the Elementary and Middle schools for the benefit of student well-being. The participants seemed to open up more with this question. Participant A said, “Advice I would give to incoming 6th graders would be if you are struggling with your locker combination or have any questions about anything, don’t be afraid to ask any teacher/staff. They are very helpful and don’t give your locker combination to any of your friends.” Both participant C and F said, “Always do your homework and don’t be late to class.” Participant B said, “Don’t bring your phone to school, you can’t use it and it will get taken away.” Participant D said, “Skipping class doesn’t help you, you will get caught and it’s not good.” Participant E said, “Don’t be afraid to ask your teachers for help, they are really nice and easy to talk to.” Participant G said, “Middle school is a lot of fun, especially when you meet new people.” Participants H, I, and J all said respectively, “The school food is so much better than elementary,” “don’t bring cold lunch, the hot lunch is way much better, you get pizza every day,” and “If you eat and not talk you can get outside much faster.” Participant K said, “I don’t know, probably nothing.”

Themes and Findings of Data

There are some clear findings and patterns observed as to the categories that appeared in the answers from these interviews. This chapter focused on the following interview questions
(Table 4.2) to help guide and answer the research question. For this study, the findings from Questions 7, 8, 11, and 12 were the focus that provided the following themes. The major themes that emerged during the 11 interviews with students currently in middle school on whether peer support groups and mentors would help students with disabilities with transitioning to middle school better: keeping old friends to making new friends, preparing 5th graders with more information, more opportunities for peer support groups during the school year. Chapter 5 will explain and summarize these themes and examine any connections that were made to prior research discussed in Chapter 2.

Table 2

**Research questions key findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think about having a peer mentor (in 7th or 8th grade) or a buddy (in your grade) throughout your 6th-grade year to help you transition into school?</td>
<td>• Provides a “friend” when school starts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Opens up/expands new relationships and social circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 6th graders get first-hand experience, advice, and tips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 7th/8th graders get training in leadership skills (communication, collaboration, empathy, organization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had a mentor or buddy, would you like this led by teachers and meet monthly?</td>
<td>• Time constraints and limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Accountability and having a teacher present helps students stay on track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers can provide feedback and assistance as mentors get stuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a program in 5th grade that introduces you to middle school expectations? If so, what</td>
<td>• Gets students to reflect on 5th-grade preparations and also 6th-grade expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provides insight into student’s values and goals for middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is it like? If not, what would be something that your elementary school should provide?

What is something you wish you would have known before coming to middle school?

• Students provide feedback for transitioning experience
• Students learn reflective practices for future experiences
Chapter 5: Discussion

The primary objective of this qualitative research was to identify the effects peer support/mentor groups have on students with disabilities’ relationships, interactions, and social connections, along with investigating the academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties these students have during the transition from elementary to middle school. More specifically, children with ASD face more challenges transitioning to school, particularly with social interaction. Further development and implementation of specific school-based interventions are needed in order to assist children with autism to maximize their success in starting school. One fundamental question framed this research: What are the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to inclusive middle school settings on their relationships and interactions with peers, such as bullying or friendships?

This study took into consideration the perspectives of the students on what processes and programs are/are not in place for elementary school students moving from 5th to 6th grade. To fulfill the objective of the study, a purposeful sample of eleven 6th-grade students with disabilities from a middle school were interviewed to determine their experiences transitioning from elementary school. They were asked 13 open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed. Reactions and opinions from current 6th-grade students on the transition from elementary to middle school helped guide this research study in the development of the interview questions and what is needed for a more successful turnout.

The literature review in Chapter 2 focused on what other middle school programs entail and provide for the incoming 6th graders, how well each is prepared, and what they find necessary in the transition process. A review of these studies showed that children with ASD are
less school ready emotionally than their peers and those children with ASD appear to have more
eXternalizing behaviors and self-regulation difficulties that affect their school engagement and
their relationships with their teachers. There was an absence of research looking at interventions
targeting school readiness. However, school-based behavioral interventions appear to improve
cognitive, language, and daily living skills but have less impact on socialization and peer
inclusion. This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings detailed in Chapter 4. In
addition, the chapter includes a discussion of the limitations and recommendations for future
research and implications of the findings for future researchers and practitioners.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study are organized into two themes consistent with the literature
review in Chapter 2. These themes consisted of (a) preparing 5th graders with more information
and (b) more opportunities for peer support groups during the school year. The section
Discussion and Interpretation of Findings is divided into two subsections concerning the areas of
theme and providing an interpretation of the study’s findings in relation to prior research.

Preparing 5th graders with more information

Based on these results in question 2, it seems that comfort and safety, socially and
physically, are more at the forefront of students’ concerns when moving to a new environment.
The preconceived notions of middle school (from questions 2 and 4) seem to be legitimate
concerns that students hear from other students and ways to combat these notions have not been
acted upon enough to reduce these students’ anxieties, especially students with disabilities.
Outside of having a new routine and overcoming new struggles and challenges, students with
disabilities face enormous internal struggles that enhance these anxiety levels. In addition, a
majority of the responses from question 10 revolved around the participants’ comfort and confidence levels when talking about their transition experience.

This has been found to be true in previous studies. As stated in the literature review of Chapter 2, preparing parents and students prior to transitions with essential information about the school, programs, curriculum, and expectations help alleviate issues (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Dann, 2011; Hacibrahimoglu & Kargin, 2016; Mandy et al., 2016; Tobin et al., 2012). It seems that there was not a lot of difference or correlation between the students with ASD, EBD, or SLD. Since there were no students without disabilities interviewed, data does not allow for comparison between those groups, but from looking at the research done by previous researchers and the data of this study, middle school students all seem to have similar experiences and anxieties when it comes to new environments and routines, especially transitioning to a new school.

**More opportunities for peer support groups during the school year**

Based on the answers of the participants in question 6 and 7, it seems that the peer support provided by the middle school was only present to those that attended the voluntary back to school day during the summer. If you did not attend this day, then there wasn’t much available or support in transitioning from Elementary to Middle School. It seems that since it was a one-day program, the students didn’t have enough time to make connections and participate in the peer support group activities. The students who had connections already, those in sports, were the most confident in their answers. Based on question 11, this seems to be a not-so-memorable experience for students, especially if it is out of their routine schedule and brand new. In addition, it is speculated that many students are hesitant to go outside of their social comfort zone and expand their connections, even if it were to make transitioning easier. Although there
were no other studies that stated this exactly as a result of transitioning anxiety for students, many of the studies addressed this issue indirectly. For example, Dann (2011) stated, “physical space was an important factor for pupils with ASC in affecting their attitude to school. The participants in this study were clear that they believed a large benefit of the specialist provisions (ASC and the later identified SEN bases) was the availability of a specifically assigned space for pupils. This was valued most when the mainstream classroom became too loud or busy for the pupils to focus, or they became overwhelmed by that social context.” Although she talked about students with Autism, this can be applied to students without disabilities in that they experience similar reactions to transition. There were also a lot of misunderstandings of what was being asked. Based on the answers from question 8, from the discussion notes that the participants who were not supportive of a mentor were unsure of what a mentor was or what role this person played with them. It was also hypothesized that having a program that is teacher-led provides more accountability as well as safety for the students.

Incorporating peer support/mentor groups provide students more assurance that they will be successful and also have the support they need and can relate to when transitioning from one environment to the next. This finding agrees with those of other studies indicating that having peer mentor groups eases the transition period for students with disabilities. These include studies by Schlieder et al. (2014), Nuske et al. (2018), and Mandy et al. (2016). In relation to this research, the researcher identified that there were no significant differences between students with ASD and students of other disabilities or even students without disabilities. All the participants shared similar experiences and anxieties when transitioning to middle school and their opinions about having peer support groups available.
Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for further research can be made based on this study and its findings. First, it is recommended that similar studies be carried out in other middle schools state-wide. Studies done in other regions throughout the state might yield different results and findings. It is also recommended that the study be repeated in a variety of rural to suburban schools, such as the school in this study which was in a city population of approximately 45,000 residents. The peer mentor groups and transition process might be different in schools located in similar size rural areas. It is also recommended that the study be repeated in urban area middle schools located in areas with different population densities for further comparison.

Second, it is recommended that more in-depth studies be conducted on the negative effects of peer mentor groups and the impact this has on students with disabilities transition to middle school. Previous studies have indicated that students who struggled with transitioning to middle school and the anxieties they had was because of either a lack of support by elementary teachers and peers or there was too much entailed in the process, and several of the participants in this study also indicated feeling considerable anxiety transitioning to middle school because of the lack of support in elementary school. Because research indicates that social anxiety is one of the main causes of poor transitioning (Tobin, 2012), it is important to learn more about preventions and preparations teachers and peer groups can do ahead of time to alleviate these issues.

Strengths and Limitations

During the study, the researcher discovered and identified strengths and benefits as well as limitations or risks. Keeping these in mind, the researcher is able to address these as the study proceeded in order to combat any issues that could arise and prevent the study to continue. The
strengths of the study were able to outweigh the risks, which allowed the research to proceed. Based on results, the strengths of the study was that the researcher was able to adjust the setting due to the COVID-19 closure of schools. The interviews were still able to take place as planned but the setting had to change. Everything about the procedure was easy to maneuver and fit according to the situation at hand, all individually based since some participants were not as available as they would be in the original setting. In addition, the benefits of the research revealed that transition programs will either be enhanced/adjusted or created to help students with and without disabilities feel more at ease when going from one academic building to another. Transition programs will be able to address all aspects of the transition, academic and social so that the students have the greatest opportunity to succeed. Because these students are already in middle school, much of this information will be related to their transition to high school since many of these same issues are prevalent at that level as well. This study also allows for elementary and middle schools to adopt new peer/mentor transition programs for students with ASD. The literature that was researched prior to the study do not have specific programs created by students based on what they need for transitioning to middle school. Also, if there was a program developed for these students, schools could require these programs to be adopted into their open house days so all students could benefit from the program.

The limitations, or risks, of the program, revolved around the participants’ engagement in the study. For example, the risks included were some participants not feeling comfortable answering truthfully in their response because of being too negative or critical of the current programs of their school. Some of the participants felt that their responses were not helpful based on their own experiences in the future and will not see why their contribution will be beneficial to future students transitioning to middle school. In order to address this, the researcher had to...
explain to the students that their answers are helping other students experience transitioning to middle school and may even help them when transitioning to high school. These risks are believed to be no greater than minimal because this is a topic that relies on student’s perceptions and experiences. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. In addition, the answers pose no risk to the student or the school involved in the research.

Although the 13 interview questions were well designed and thoughtfully presented, there are only 13 questions - which means there was not a lot of information to go through for future recommendations. When developing the interview questions, the researcher made sure they were relatable and easy to understand, however, some of the questions were too vague or just required a “yes” “no” answer, which is not sufficient data for analysis. In addition, when creating the questions, the researcher also made sure that none of the questions were too personal or posed risk to making the participant feel uncomfortable. The questions were left open-ended so that the participant would feel they could give as much or as little to their response and not feel pressured in giving false information. Along with the questions, the sampling size of participants limited the researcher’s data. Although the sampling size is convenient and small enough for the researcher to conduct in a limited amount of time, this also can be considered a limitation of the study. According to Oppong (2013), convenience sampling is less demanding in terms of costs, time and effort, but, there is a risk of gathering poor quality data, resulting in poor research outcomes and as such, difficult to convince others to accept the findings of research based on a poor foundation. This factor has to be taken into consideration when doing the analysis of results for further determination and suggestions for change. The interview questions need to be created based on this so there is an adequate amount of information since the sampling size is confined.
The role of the researcher was to minimize risks and limitations to determine what adequate provisions are in place for monitoring the data collected and if the participants are exposed to any vulnerable situations during the study. Since the participants are underage, safeguards, such as parental and school district consent, are in place to protect the welfare and rights of the students. If any adverse events occur during the study, the researcher would discontinue the interview. The researcher followed up with the participants to ensure no adverse reactions occurred to alleviate any further negative reactions. The risks were essential to the study so that the researcher understood all the various outcomes that may occur for students.

**Conclusion**

As students transition into middle school, it is important for students to be well-prepared to address the upcoming challenges of middle school. Fortunately, many students experience a smooth transition into middle school and are successful in adapting to their new surroundings, whether prepared or not. For many sixth-grade students, especially students with disabilities, transitioning to middle school can be full of anxiety and stress as they adjust to their new surroundings. However, by analyzing the impact of elementary classroom structures on students with disabilities and their perceptions of transition, school leaders may be better informed to create positive learning environments for fifth-grade students which can help promote a successful transition to middle school.

The purpose of this study was to understand the benefits of incorporating peer mentor groups into the transition period from elementary school to middle school. This study also sought to explore how parents and administrators can contribute to successful transitions of students with disabilities. It was essential for the researcher to comprehend and co-construct the participants' perspectives as to why students with disabilities struggle to transition from
elementary to middle school. The participants provided useful information regarding their transition experience, and that data may help middle school leaders develop a more encompassing and comprehensive transition program that promotes a successful transition into middle school. The overall study provided insight into student perceptions of their transition experience, and data may allow school administrators to better understand the process of middle school transition and the effects of peer support groups on students with disabilities.
References


Appendix A

Parental or Guardian Permission Form
for Research Involving a Minor

Department of Special and Early Childhood Education

Title of Project: An Investigation of Peer Interactions among Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Classroom Settings: Effects of Transitioning from Elementary to Middle School

Researcher(s): Sonja Rosencrans

Your permission is being sought to have your child participate in this study. Please read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not to give your permission.

Purpose of the research: The purpose of this study was to identify middle school student perceptions of inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. With this, I also want to be able to address what are the effects of peer support/mentor groups for students with ASD transitioning to inclusive middle school settings on their relationships and interactions with peers, such as bullying or friendships?

Procedure to be followed: During testing, your child will be interviewed one-on-one with the researcher, face-to-face, in a classroom setting where there are no distractions and the student can feel comfortable answering questions honestly without judgment or pressure. They will be asked 13 questions regarding their perceptions of peer support groups provided to students with disabilities when they transition to middle school. The answers will be documents on a computer, however, their identity will remain anonymous.

Discomforts/risks: There are no foreseeable discomforts or dangers to either you or your child in this study.

Incentives/benefits for participation: There are no direct benefits to your child, but your child will receive Tiger Tickets for participating. The results of this study, however, will increase our knowledge of the various peer mentoring supports provided for all incoming middle school students and what needs to be changed to make transitions less stressful for 5th graders.

Time duration of participation: Participation in the study will not exceed 20 minutes.

Statement of confidentiality: All records are kept confidential and will be available only to professional researchers and staff. If the results of this study are published, the data will be presented in group form and individual children will not be identified.

Voluntary Participation: Your child’s participation is voluntary. If you feel your child has in any way been coerced into participation, please inform the faculty advisor. We also ask that you read this letter to your child (if age-appropriate) and inform your child that participation is voluntary. At the time of the study, your child will once again be reminded of this by the researcher.

Termination of participation: If at any point during the study you or your child wishes to terminate the session, we will do so.

Questions or concerns regarding the research and participation in this research should be directed to Mrs. Sonja Rosencrans. If you have additional questions, you may reach out to my University research advisor.
Independent Contact for Reporting Concerns about Research:
If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the Institutional Review Board Office.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board. If at any time before, during or after the experiment your child experiences any physical or emotional discomfort that is a result of his/her participation, or if you have any questions about the study or its outcomes, please feel free to contact us.

SIGNING THE FORM BELOW WILL ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY DURING SCHOOL HOURS WITHOUT YOUR PRESENCE. Please return by Friday, INSERT DATE HERE. If you do not sign and return this form, the researchers will understand that you do not wish to allow your child to participate.

Parental Signature

I, the parent or guardian of ____________________________, a minor _____ years of age, permit his/her participation in a program of research named above and being conducted by Mrs Sonja Rosencrans.

_____________________________  __________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian             Date

Please print your name here

Student Signature

I, ____________________________, agree to participate in the program of research named above and understand that my participation is voluntary.

_____________________________  __________________________
Signature of Student              Date

Please print your name here

_____________________________  __________________________
Signature of Investigator             Date
Appendix B
Peer Support Groups and Transitioning to Middle School
Child Assent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to join a research study by Sonja Rosencrans. This project is to understand the transition period from elementary to middle school and if having peer support/mentor groups would help alleviate stresses and anxiety for students with ASD during this time.

**Procedures:** We will provide information to your parents before you decide to join or not join this study. We will also ask your parents for permission for you to be in this study. If you join the project, you will be asked to take part in a 13-question interview, one-on-one with the researcher, Sonja Rosencrans, at the participating middle school. The interview will take place during regular school hours and through an online program, such as Google Meet or Zoom. All information and answers from the questions will remain confidential. In addition, the interviews will be recorded using a computer for the researcher to analyze and listen to after the interviews are completed. If you do not want to join the project, you will not be required to respond to any of the questions and will be asked to return to class.

**Risks/Benefits:** If you join, there may be some risks, such as feeling uncomfortable answering certain questions. There may also be some benefits, such as being able to be part of a new program or be able to give advice towards a new program for upcoming middle school students. All students participating in the interview will receive tiger tickets following participation in the interview. In addition, the results of this study will increase our knowledge of the various peer mentoring supports provided for all incoming middle school students and what needs to be changed to make transitions less stressful for 5th graders.

**Privacy/Confidentiality of Information:** Any information about you will be kept secure by the researchers by signing the informed consent form and the researcher will not put your name on any documents or recordings. Identifiers will be removed from information collected from you for this project. After identifiers are removed, the information may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers without additional informed consent from you. It is my role and responsibility to serve as a Mandatory Reporter. That means that even though I will keep information about the research confidential but am also required to report anything I hear that is a potential safety issue.

**Right to Withdraw from the Research:** You do not have to be in this study. If you do choose to be in the study, you can change your mind at any time by contacting the researcher. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You have the right to choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any time without loss of any service, benefits, or rights you would normally be entitled to. If you decide to discontinue the interview, you will still receive the compensation. As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status or class grade(s). Any information you provide using the recorded audio program, the information will be destroyed should you decide to withdraw. If
you are not following school-wide expectations as well as the expectations of the researcher, you will not be compensated and may be asked to discontinue the interview.

**Questions about Research Study:** If you have any questions at any time, please call or email Sonja Rosencrans.

**Independent Contact for Reporting Concerns about Research:** If you would like to talk to someone else, you can call the IRB Office. If you find you are having a difficult time or experiencing any discomfort with this process and need additional assistance, Mr. Williams, the school counselor, can be available as well.

**Consent:** Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have read this form, or the form was read to you, and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights as a research participant. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you, or you may save the form and print it at home.

**Participant Signature:** I agree to participate in this study.

________________________________________  ____________________________________________
Name of Child Participant                     Signature of Child Participant               Date

**Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)**

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

________________________________________  ____________________________________________
Name of Research Team Member                   Signature of Research Team Member
Appendix C

Email Recruitment Document (to participant):

Hello, my name is Mrs. Rosencrans. I am a teacher here at ___________ Middle School and also a graduate student. I am conducting research on transitions for students from elementary to middle school, and I am inviting you to participate because you have experienced this transition period and could hopefully help future students adjust to middle school.

Participation in this research includes answering some questions about your attitudes toward middle school transitioning and the peer support groups provided to help ease the change, which will take approximately 15 minutes. If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview about your view of the future of transitioning to middle school, that will take approximately 10 to 20 minutes. If you participate in both the interviews, your total time commitment will be between 25 – 35 minutes.

You don’t have to commit or give an answer at this moment. If you have any questions and/or would like to participate in the research, please let me know by the end of the week.

Thank you,

Mrs. Rosencrans
Appendix D

Interview Questions Document:

1. What do you like best about middle school so far?
2. What were some of your concerns coming into middle school?
3. What difficulties have you experienced so far in middle school?
4. What was one thing that caused you the most anxiety leaving elementary school and starting at middle school?
5. What are some expectations and procedures that surprised you at the start of middle school?
6. Was the peer support group helpful in your transition from elementary to middle school?
7. What do you think about having a peer mentor (in 7th or 8th grade) or a buddy (in your grade) throughout your 6th-grade year to help you transition into school?
8. If you had a mentor or buddy, would you like this led by teachers and meet monthly?
9. What are some changes you would make to the open house or locker day events?
10. What kinds of activities should the open house have to make your transition to middle school easier/less scary?
11. Is there a program in 5th grade that introduces you to middle school expectations? If so, what is it like? If not, what would be something that your elementary school should provide?
12. What is something you wish you would have known before coming to middle school?
13. What advice would you give to incoming 6th graders?