

Mental Health in Pre-Adolescents: The Impact of Transitioning Periods

By
Shadee Attaran

A THESIS

Submitted to
Oregon State University
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(Honors Associate)

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Transitioning periods throughout an individual's life are inevitable, and can be a traumatic experience if a person is not equipped with necessary skills to cope with them. No matter where one is from or what language they speak, every person will have a transitioning experience, whether it be negative or positive. The goal of this research is to examine the impact of elementary to middle school, and middle to high school transition periods on pre-adolescent mental health, and to explore how various factors may lead to either a more positive or negative transition experience. This thesis aims to focus on targeting strategies to ensure positive mental health development of pre-adolescents as they move through transitioning periods. It will explore the significance of pre-adolescence and how the children develop and adapt across transitioning periods, and will provide evidence for factors that may preempt negative behaviors or declines throughout the transition phases. This study provides suggestions adapted from previous research and focuses on social and mental health factors that may help pre-adolescent children to successfully cope with transitional challenges.

Key Words: Transition, Pre-Adolescent, Depression, Anxiety, Coping, Resilience, Mental Health

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Mental Health in Pre-Adolescents: The Impact of Transitioning Periods

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Transitioning periods in all areas of life are known to create stress or anxiety for the individual who is undergoing the transition. The transitions through educational institutions during pre-adolescence (in this thesis focusing on the transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school) can create an environment of more extreme stress and anxiety for the young students based on evidence that preadolescents are undergoing multiple changes in one time period. These changes make them more highly vulnerable to developing mental health problems, especially for the pre-adolescent age group which tend to exhibit signs of depression and anxiety through these two transitioning phases (Newman et al., 2007). The transitioning periods throughout a young person's life are complicated to address; it is not so simple to say we are able to "fix" transitioning phases to correct them in educational institutions. Each student is affected by them in a different way, and has a personalized experience with various personal factors that affect the way they perceive and cope with their school transitions. While some prosper from the transition experience, others are greatly challenged by it. In order to take any action, we must try to understand the various factors that play a role in the transitioning periods, and how these factors can affect the young adolescents undergoing the transition.

There are many factors that can effect a pre-adolescent's mental health during the transition periods from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school. The transitioning child may be stressed in multiple dimensions, as they are going through many changes at one time. Children of this age (in this thesis "pre-adolescence" is defined as children ages 10-14 years) are beginning to experience physical changes with puberty. They also experience new environmental stressors such as changing schools and not being in a familiar environment as they were before. In the new school environment, there are new demands placed on the student

that they must fulfill. They experience a change in their daily demands at school (both academic and social), and are undergoing rapid physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes. The students also experience a change in peer groups, and tend to seek approval and support from their new peers. All of these changes are occurring at a time when the students are trying to create an entirely new identity and receive validation for it, and are simultaneously striving to gain a sense of independence and greater autonomy from their parents.

School transitions during pre-adolescence play a role in the developmental trajectory of students. A successful transition through middle and high school creates the potential for a more successful future, as well as future transitions that the individual will undergo. Transitioning successfully builds coping skills and resilience for the student, which are invaluable assets to build as they move through multiple dimensions of life. Non-successful transitions are more likely to lead to student drop-outs, increased depression and anxiety, social anxiety and withdrawal, and lower academic motivation and involvement in school (Cohen, 2009). An individual who does not transition successfully is more likely to exhibit a decline in self-esteem and self-efficacy during or after the transition phase, and is more likely to partake in risk-taking and exhibit risky behaviors such as involvement with drugs, alcohol, and unsafe sex or self-harm (Veronneau & Dishion, 2010). Negative transitions involving social acceptance and domain competence have even been linked with poorer physical health such as obesity (Franklin et al., 2006).

There are many challenges that pre-adolescents face through school transitions, including periods of anxiety or psychological problems, which may develop into disorders such as depression (Grills-Taquechel, 2010). Other factors that affect students through their school transitions are peer exclusion (Booth-LaForce, 2012), physical and cognitive development, as well as the shift in social environment (Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006). Cauley and Jovanovich also suggest ways in which developing effective transition programs for students entering middle and high school can ease the challenges that they may face.

Research has shown that students report specific worries about their first school transition to middle school (Akos, 2006). They report concerns about failure, keeping up with homework assignments, and the newer demands of the school (academic adjustment). They fear being victimized, bullied and teased (especially by the older students), and have some fear of organizational aspects of the school (such as knowing where their multiple classrooms or restrooms are, or how to work their lockers). A.D. Pellegrini (2002) suggests that bullying and other forms of victimization are often seen in the transition to middle school, and stresses the importance of exploring new social environments and finding status among their peers. Further, middle schools are typically much larger than elementary schools (as are high schools compared to middle schools). Even after the transition, some students have reported feeling alone, isolated, or that they had experienced the most difficulty with making new friends. These factors and concerns vary for each child, but each provides a difficult barrier for every young student to overcome through their school transitions.

The development of young adolescents is a complex process. Transitions can be a traumatic time in an individual's life, especially during pre-adolescence when a child is developing as a person and is simultaneously undergoing various shifts and changes in their school environment. The research available on pre-adolescent school transitions and mental health is important to address because of the negative outcomes that have been associated with the transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school. Many problems have been reported during the first year of these two transitions, and it is important that they are acknowledged. Although each student experiences their transition differently than their peers, many strategies can be employed to alleviate the stress and negative outcomes that may occur. This theoretical research will add to the body of literature as an analysis of multiple studies and investigations that examine different variables in the transition process, and how each are able to affect pre-adolescents' mental health.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations of this study are based upon the literature that the author presented and selected. The perceptions and conclusions given in this thesis are influenced by the scope of the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental health is a complex and multidimensional concept. To understand how pre-adolescents' psychological development can be affected by school transition periods, it is important to gain a general knowledge of the mental health problems that young students tend to express through the transition period, and which factors in school transition may play a role.

Common mental health issues expressed among pre-adolescents transitioning from elementary school to middle school, or middle to high school:

There are many common mental health concerns in pre-adolescents that arise from school transitions. Many concerns are expressed by the young students' families in regards to their psychological well-being at school, and often times the cause for psychological or emotional downfall remains unknown. The transitions through educational institutions during pre-adolescence can create an environment of more extreme stress and anxiety for the young students because they are undergoing multiple changes at once. These changes make them more highly vulnerable to developing mental health complications, the two most common issues being depression and anxiety (Newman et al., 2007). Anxiety and depression can create much adversity through the process of a school transition, especially during pre-adolescence since the young children's sense of self is highly malleable during this time. These two obstacles can influence a student's success and outcome through school transitions, and many factors can combine to affect the children's development of positive mental health by expression of anxiety or depression. Although anxiety and depression are not the only mental health issues plaguing young students through transition periods, this portion of the literature review will discuss the extent to which separate factors can influence the development of these mental health challenges, and how they can affect pre-adolescents' success and psychological development through their educational transitions.

Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are one of the most common mental health disorders collectively affecting all ages, from childhood to adulthood (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). Although anxiety is typically experienced by all individuals on occasion, it should only be a temporary obstacle. For those who develop an anxiety disorder, each day is plagued with worries, tension, and internal chaos. Anxiety affects its victims in their daily lives, and is often comorbid with other mental health problems such as depression. Pre-adolescent students who develop anxiety often experience disruptions in their academics, familial and social relationships, as well as their performance of other tasks and activities of daily living.

Anxiety is a serious issue that is becoming increasingly common among younger and younger generations, especially through periods of major change in their lives. Early-onset anxiety is categorized by the onset of the disorder before age 21 (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). School transitions are stressful events that may trigger the onset of anxious episodes. However, the stress caused by the onset of anxiety may easily be confused with the stress of trying to adapt to the various environmental changes that the student is experiencing while in the transition period. It is important for school staff and parents to be aware of when a child may be exhibiting signs of an anxiety disorder outside of the stress of daily adjustment to their new school, and to provide those at-risk children with appropriate resources to get them the help they need. It is also important to give students resources and information to self-recognize when they may be having a more serious problem with anxiety versus day-to-day stressors.

Stressors Present Throughout a Transition

Pre-adolescents are undergoing simultaneous changes throughout their school transitions. They experience a shift in social groups, school environment, and personal development. They are undergoing rapid physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes, and some struggle more than others in the process. The young students must learn to adjust to a new school and its organizational elements (such as learning where classes and restrooms are), learn to adapt to a rotating schedule with

different teachers and peers, and quickly become familiar with the new academic demands and responsibilities placed on their shoulders. These stressors often make it difficult for a child to assimilate into their new environment, and are all factors in triggering higher levels of stress and anxiety for the student.

How Perceived Support Influences Anxiety

The amount of support a child feels that they have from their parents and peers can predict how the child will adjust to the overall transition, and can influence the anxiety they feel while assimilating into their new school (Cantin & Boivin, 2004). Parents tend to remain the main source of support for the students, but their peer relationships are more important to them during this time. Pre-adolescents transitioning to a new school are trying to create a new identity and social status, and want to be accepted and supported by their new peers. The unstable nature of pre-adolescent relationships within their peer groups make young children more vulnerable to anxiety through transitions. Martinez et al. (2011) examined changes in perceived social support and socio-emotional adjustment across a one-year transition from elementary to middle school, and their results indicated that the students perceived a decrease in total support from both peers and teachers. Having positive support from other peers and adults can shape pre-adolescents' experiences and mental health outcomes through their school transitions.

Anxiety for Student Subgroups

Knesting, Hokanson and Waldron (2008) found that young students with mild disabilities had increased anxiety because navigating the new school environment is demanding. It typically takes longer for them to master navigation of the school and their class schedules than their counterparts. These students need more guidance and support than their peers, and in different ways to accommodate their individual disabilities. Students with mild to severe disabilities may be at higher risk for anxiety throughout the transition period because their new environment is less stable in multiple domains. The new school is typically much more impersonal than their previous school, and the demands on the students are different. Undergoing these

changes while also desiring peer acceptance and support makes it difficult for this student subgroup to appropriately adjust, and places them at risk for development of mental health complications.

Walker and Lee (1998) found that children of alcoholic parents (COAs) tend to show negative mental health outcomes in pre-adolescence such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts, as well as substance abuse and interpersonal or social difficulties. A number of COAs grow up in unstable home environments, and many have a more difficult time forming intimate relationships with peers and adults throughout their formal schooling years. Likewise, offspring of depressed parents may experience various challenges attaining positive mental health in pre-adolescence. Jaser et al. (2011) found that children of depressed mothers are at a higher risk for depression and either internalizing or externalizing their problems. Both COAs and children of depressed parents are at higher risk for maladjustment to their new school, and for negative mental health development. It is important to have resources available for these students such as counselors that they feel they can confide in, and mitigate the risk for the progression of anxiety or depressive symptoms.

How Building Resilience Can Mitigate Anxiety

Building resilience in pre-adolescence may be one of the most prominent factors in mitigating the risk for mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Newman (2002) defined resilience as *“a positive adaptation where difficulties (personal, familial or environmental) are so extreme that the society would otherwise expect a person’s cognitive or functional abilities to be impaired”*. A child who has some level of resilience is able to work through challenges, and typically has a more positive outcome through adversities than their non-resilient peers. Resilience can be grown in multiple domains, to aid the child in progressing through school transitions. Identifying with a mentor may aid pre-adolescents in developing resilience. Southwick et al. (2007) illustrate that mentors teach their mentee valuable life coping skills, and promote a level of resilience that may extend beyond pre-adolescence and into adulthood, especially for children at risk for

developing negative mental health. Southwick et al. (2007) explain that mentees typically exhibit fewer problem behaviors, a more positive attitude, greater school efficacy and motivation to do well in school, less delinquent behavior (including drugs, smoking and alcohol), and many have overall better mental health. Pre-adolescents with a mentor exhibit lower levels of anxiety and depression because their mentors act as a buffer between issues with depression, support, and their social environment.

Depression

Depressive disorders are serious mental illnesses that pose long-term consequences to the individual experiencing it, including intense unhappiness and physical or emotional pain (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). Similarly to anxiety disorders, it is not uncommon for a person to feel emotional, sad or upset. However, these feelings should not be prolonged. More often than not, depression is caused by a combination of factors that are either genetic, biological, environmental, or psychological (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). This disorder can range from mild to extremely severe, and will impact its victims in various ways. The depressed individual may feel anxious, upset, hopeless, irritable, and may have trouble focusing on their daily tasks. Depression can run in families, but can impact children with *or* without a family history of depressive disorders. Most often, depression is also triggered by environmental stimuli that are comorbid with other factors.

Depression is an especially important issue to focus on in pre-adolescence because the effects of the illness can be devastating. A child with a severe case of depression may experience so many interruptions in their daily life that they have trouble functioning normally (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015). Many young children do not understand the illness and the degree to which it is able to affect them, and many choose not to seek help for fear of the unknown. A high number of students struggle through school with depression without being aware of it. It is important for young students to be able to distinguish between the normative stress of the adjustment process to a new school, and whether they may be suffering

from a more serious depressive disorder. It is imperative that parents and staff are aware that *persisting* symptoms that are seemingly caused by the typical stressors of a school transition may point to a more serious problem for the child. Vulnerable students need to understand the options for resources available to them, and should feel safe and comfortable expressing their concerns to parents or other adults that may be able to help direct them to the proper resource. More severe cases of depression may lead to self-harming actions or suicidal ideation.

Instability and Depression

Minority students, or those from a lower socio-economical background, may be at higher risk for developing depression through transition periods. This student subgroup may have a more difficult time adjusting to a new school environment if they were not provided with the cognitive or social resources necessary to prepare for the transition. Roeser et al. (2000) proposed that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at particular risk for engaging in high-risk behaviors, and having decreased or more unrealistic aspirations about their future. The instability that this subgroup may face at home because of their socio-economic background can make it difficult to feel stabilized through newer, more difficult experiences like transitions through schooling. Roybal, Thornton and Usinger (2014) found that feelings of connectedness and belonging aid in promoting positive psychological development through pre-adolescence, and decreasing risk for depression and other mental health complications. Forming positive relationships with teachers and peers can increase the child's sense of stability and mitigate the risks for depression through the middle and high school transitions. A strong sense of connectedness and belonging can help develop their competence and reduce feelings of helplessness through difficult situations.

How Self-Esteem Can Affect Expression of Depressive Symptoms

Pre-adolescents in particular are more vulnerable to stressful events at their age because of the simultaneous adversities that they are facing, and a healthy sense of self-esteem is a large factor that can mitigate the risk for depression. New (2012)

explains the concept of self-esteem as the extent to which one values him or herself, and to which they experience feelings of being capable, loved, and their sense of belonging. Self-esteem influences a young person's psychological well-being and mental health, and is highly malleable in pre-adolescence. The formation of accurate, healthy self-perceptions is essential to positive mental functioning for young students through school transitions. Esteem is multi-dimensional, encompassing how an individual perceives themselves and how they feel that others perceive them. It is highly significant for pre-adolescent mental health because self-esteem is a predictor of feelings of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal ideation (Travis, 2012). Lewandowski et al. (2014) examined predictors of positive outcomes on offspring of depressed and non-depressed parents over 20 years. They explain the need to understand factors that lead to a positive outcome for high-risk offspring (children of depressed parents) versus low-risk offspring (children of non-depressed parents) in order to take preventative action. They investigated families in which one, both or neither parent had major depressive disorder. Pre-adolescent resilience was defined by the absence of psychiatric diagnosis, and consistent high functioning at the years of follow-up. They found that higher self-esteem was associated with greater odds of resilient outcome and absence of psychiatric diagnosis. Child self-esteem was the best predictor of positive outcome for both high and low-risk offspring. This suggests an importance to target self-esteem for youth preventative intervention to promote positive mental health development in pre-adolescents.

Peer Connectedness and Depression

Students who are in their first year of transitioning to a new school typically have fewer relationships with peers and teachers, creating a decreased sense of school connectedness. The formation of peer relationships is increasingly important to students of this age, and often takes precedence over academics in their new school. Difficulty in forming meaningful peer relationships can result in loss of social competence and increased risk for depression. Akos (2006) suggested that participation in extra-curricular activities positively influences a student's sense of belonging and connectedness with their new school and peers, and mitigates risk for

mental health problems like stress, anxiety, and feelings of social isolation or depression. A sense of connectedness through these activities can promote academic achievement, greater participation in school, and positive social adjustment. These students are more likely to establish positive social networks and better connect to their school (Holloway, 2002). Nangle (2003) found a negative correlation between peer acceptance, number of friends, and friendship quality with loneliness. The results showed that the effect of peer variables on children's depression are mediated through loneliness, and that peer variables may have an indirect effect on the child's depressive symptomology. A sense of connectedness with peers can greatly help mitigate the risk for the development of pre-adolescent depression. Positive, healthy, meaningful relationships with peer groups and others in their lives provides a sense of security, belonging, and psychological well-being.

Kingery, Erdley and Marshall (2011) examined peer acceptance and friendship as factors predicting pre-adolescent adjustment to middle school. Students tended to report concerns in three domains: (1) academic (new demands, larger homework load, and classroom difficulty), (2) procedural (navigating around the school, knowing where the classrooms and bathrooms are), and (3) social (fitting in, making new friends, getting along with their new peers and classmates). The students were assessed in spring of 5th grade and fall of 6th grade, and were measured on both pre-transition variables (peer acceptance, number of friends, and quality of specific mutual friendships) and post transition variables (loneliness, depression, self-esteem and school involvement). Their results suggested that pre-transition peer variables predicted post-transition school involvement, academic achievement, and mental health through feelings of self-esteem and loneliness. Kingery and Erdley (2007) similarly found that peer acceptance or rejection were unique predictors for feelings of loneliness and depression during this time period for pre-adolescent students.

Williford, Boulton and Jenson (2013) examined the effects that bullying can have on a child's mental health in their transition to middle or high school. Defined, bullying is "*an act of peer aggression in which a more powerful child repeatedly exerts actual or perceived power over a weaker victim*" (Olweus, 1993). Two

subclasses of bullying have been identified: overt bullying (name-calling, physical violence, physical intimidation and threats to another with intent of physical harm) and relational bullying (gossip, spreading rumors, or ignoring another person). Victims of bullying tend to report feelings of loneliness, depression, social anxiety, peer rejection, low self-esteem, and lower social competence (Williford, Boulton & Jenson, 2013). They tend to internalize difficulties, typically struggle with adjusting to the new school, and have poorer academic performance than their non-victimized peers. Williford, Boulton and Jenson (2013) found that being a victim in the early years of middle school had a residual effect on the affected students. These students were more likely to remain victimized, felt less safe at school, and exhibited more social anxiety and higher levels of depression from 6-8th grade than their non-victimized peers. Bullying and peer victimization can greatly harm a young child's psychological well-being, and often is one of the environmental stimuli contributing to the expression of depressive symptoms.

Personal Factors Predicting Depressive Symptomology

Vandele, Little and Card (2006) examined how action-control beliefs and behaviors may predict change in pre-adolescents' adjustment from elementary to middle school. They defined action-control beliefs as "*self-perceptions about the means and competence one has to reach their goals*". They measured the children's affect, emotional well-being and depression, and level of aggression through the transition to middle school. They found that negative coping behaviors (antisocial coping versus pro-social coping) predicted greater depression, expression of aggressive behaviors, and negative affect through the transition. Positive action-control beliefs predicted positive affect and minimized expression of depressive symptoms.

Literature Review in Summary

Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health downfalls appearing through pre-adolescence. Their mental health is fragile throughout this time period, and many tend to exhibit signs of psychological distress through the first year

after transitioning to a new school. There are many factors that strongly influence children's success through transition periods. Pre-adolescents from a lower socioeconomic background or minority group may experience more difficulties than their other peers while undergoing school transition phases, including lower academic competence and mental health functioning. They may have a greater struggle building self-esteem and competence in their new school environment, especially if they feel isolated from their other peers because of their ethnicity or family background. This excess stress can harm the young students' academic and social competence, as well as their development of a positive self-image and mental health. Resilience, defined as "*the process of negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma,*" is a strong mechanism for success throughout pre-adolescence, since the children's social and cognitive development is highly vulnerable (Windle et al., 2011). Emphasis should be placed on identifiable at-risk students who exhibit difficulties forming peer relationships through the middle and high school transitions, and resources should be available to them for counseling and opportunities for peer engagement. Students tended to report concerns in academic, procedural and social domains, and whether an individual believes they have social support from others in their life is a large factor related to their overall success and psychological well-being through a transition period. Young students experience various disruptions in their social support systems during their transition to middle or high school, and social support from peers and parents during this time can predict the expression of anxious and depressive symptoms. Quality friendships provide the child with a sense of security, higher self-esteem and emotional support, all of which are associated with pre-adolescents' overall school adjustment and positive mental health development. Pre-adolescents who experience peer rejection or who do not have as many peers to rely on for social and emotional support through the stress of a school transition are deprived of social intimacy, and are more likely than their other peers to experience depression or anxiety. Schools that develop transition programs for their incoming students may help lower rates for failure and dropouts, as well as anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. Providing students with resources to help build resilience toward adversities and cope with the difficulties that they may face is the

most tangible way to make a positive impact on pre-adolescent mental health development throughout transitioning periods.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions have been designed to address important issues related to transitions that pre-adolescents experience as they move toward adulthood:

1. To what extent does a child's socio-economic status contribute to a positive or negative transition?
2. To what extent does self-esteem affect pre-adolescents as they transition into adulthood?
3. To what extent do peer groups contribute to a positive or negative transition during pre-adolescence?
4. How do parents and educators play a role in the child's transitioning experience?
5. What interactions occur between mental health and negative transition experiences?

Discussion of Research Questions

1. To What Extent Does a Child's Socio-Economic Status Contribute to a Positive or Negative Transition?

It is becoming increasingly important for children to receive an education through post-secondary institutions and beyond to have a more comfortable and successful future. Considering a child's personal background and family socio-economic status as a factor for student success through school transitions may provide evidence as to why the transition periods may be so difficult for some. The effects that a transition can have on any young person can be very dynamic. It is important to view the transition process holistically, and consider every variable that could play a role in the child's success through middle and high school transitions. It is imperative that more than just the structure and function of the new school environment is taken into account. The politics of the family, historical and cultural factors to the child and their family, the level of parental education, and family values are essential factors in the process (Cote & Nightingale, 2012). These are some of many variables that relate to a child's socio-economic status, many of which affect the success of their school transitions and mental health development. However, due to issues of privacy and confidentiality, examining underlying issues can be extremely challenging.

Restricted Opportunities

Roeser et al. (2000) estimated that 25 to 50 percent of all children in the United States ages 10-17 are at risk for restricted educational, emotional, economic and social opportunities due to their engagement in high-risk behaviors and activities (including violence or vandalism, unsafe sex, abuse of drugs or alcohol, skipping school, and academic failure). They proposed that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at particular risk for engaging in these behaviors, and have decreased or more unrealistic aspirations about their future. Vaz et al. (2014) examined the impact that both personal background and school factors may have on the child's academic competence and mental health functioning across the transition from elementary to middle school. They explain that certain children from varying

socio-economic subgroups may need more support than their [more affluent] peers. Higher socio-economic households may be able to afford deeper investments in their children's development, while more disadvantaged families may have to focus more on their immediate needs. Families from a lower socio-economic background may not be able to provide as much stability, attention and supervision, or appropriate cognitive stimulation for their children. The instability for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds can make it difficult for their children to feel stabilized through newer, more difficult experiences like transitions through schooling.

It may be particularly important to focus on building students' sense of connectedness and belonging in pre-adolescence if they come from a more socially-disadvantaged background. Roybal, Thornton and Usinger (2014) explained that facilitating student connections and belonging to their school can promote positive mental health, academic competence, average GPA, and can lower student absences in school. Forming positive relationships with teachers and peers is a large factor in mitigating the negative mental health risks that are posed to young children through the middle and high school transitions. A strong sense of connectedness and belonging fulfills a basic need for the child, and can help develop their competence through adverse situations. Feelings of connectedness and belonging aid in promoting positive psychological development through pre-adolescence, and decreasing risk for depression and other mental health complications.

Student Minority Groups

Vaz et al. (2014) focused on the academic competence and mental health functioning of 266 students, 69 of which had some sort of disability, six months before and after their transition to middle school. At both measurement points, students with a disability or from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds had poorer academic competence and mental health functioning scores than their counterparts. Personal background factors accounted for the majority of the variability seen between these groups of children before and after the school transition. These factors included gender, the presence of a disability, household socio-economic status, and

school contextual factors such as the school size, organization, and average student socio-economic status. The results suggested that males may be more negatively affected by issues of self-confidence regarding academic competence, which can lead to declines in self-esteem and problems in the adjustment stage of the transition phase. They found that students with a disability had lower academic competence than their peers, at least throughout the first year of the school transition. The lowered academic competence in those students may be caused by negative social comparison to their peers. Vaz et al. recognized that poorer mental health functioning in the disability subgroup may have been caused by deficits in cognition, learning and communication, social skills, or the psychological distress of being aware of their disability. Because of this, young children living with a disability may have a constant fear that they are being negatively perceived by other peers in their school setting.

Hirsch and Rapkin (1987) examined the psychological well-being between ethnic minority students through their transition to middle school. They explored how the domains of self-esteem, depressive symptoms, quality of school life, peer social support, and trust of the environment were effected through the transition by analyzing 159 white and black students over the first year of middle school. They found that the adjustment process for students of a minority ethnicity is challenging, complex, and can pose a risk to the students' mental health development. Through their study, they found that student self-esteem declines drastically throughout the initial transition from 6th to 7th grade, especially for students from the minority group. Minority students who also come from a low socio-economic background have an added disadvantage over their peer counterparts. Hirsch and Rapkin also found that females reported an increase in depressive symptoms over the first year compared to males, suggesting a higher vulnerability in females toward environmental stressors in pre-adolescence. Grills-Taquechel, (2010) similarly suggests that there is a gender difference in anxiety level experienced during transition, and that females are more likely to interpret greater stressors in the new school environment. Quality of school life decreased with the transition for black students regardless of their academic competence. Black students reported higher satisfaction with school as well as a

higher commitment to schoolwork than their white peers. Peer social support only increased for black students with high academic competence, perhaps because a greater emphasis on academics in middle school may provide valued social identity to grow their social network, especially with new peers. There is high importance for building these social networks because of the strong association between peer support and psychological well-being. Black and minority student groups experienced a greater distrust of environment (fears or worries about their school setting) than negative internal states such as depression, and their student counterparts experienced the opposite throughout the first year of transition to middle school.

In view of the above discussion, the literature available suggests that a pre-adolescent's socio-economic status can have a large effect on their success through the middle and high school transition periods. Since socio-economic status varies at a high degree, the factors reviewed above will not affect every student in the same way. Pre-adolescents from a lower socio-economic background may experience more difficulties than their other peers while undergoing school transition phases, including lower academic competence and mental health functioning. Pre-adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at particular risk for engaging in high-risk behaviors and activities, and having decreased or more unrealistic aspirations about their future. Because of this, these children are at higher risk for restricted educational, emotional, economic and social opportunities, all of which are essential to building success through a school transition. Being of low socio-economic or minority status in a new school can place a pre-adolescent at risk for psychological downfall if they cannot adjust accordingly. They may struggle more with building self-esteem and competence in the new environment, especially if they feel isolated from their other peers because of their ethnicity or family background. Social isolation can create excess stress on the young student that may harm their academic and social competence, as well as their development of a positive self-image and mental health. To understand ways in which these issues can be mitigated, the entire developmental context of the young children must be taken into account. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994) expresses this view by stating that "*In order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth*

occurs.” The socio-economic status of a pre-adolescent contributes to a positive or negative transition experience in multiple ways, and by building their confidence throughout this stressful time, the risks of a negative experience can be minimized.

Discussion of Research Questions

2. To What Extent Does Self-Esteem Affect Pre-Adolescents as They Transition into Adulthood?

Developing Self-Esteem

New (2012) explains the concept of self-esteem as the extent to which one values him or herself, and to which they experience feelings of being capable, loved, and their sense of belonging. Self-esteem develops from infancy to adulthood, and the involvement of parents or caretakers is extremely important. It can influence a young person's psychological well-being and mental health. Adults can help children form accurate, healthy self-perceptions of themselves, which is essential to positive functioning and managing difficult stages in their lives such as school transition phases. Self-esteem is able to fluctuate, and is directly influenced by the child's experiences and perceptions of themselves. These perceptions are highly flexible in pre-adolescence, and account for some of the negative effects that appear through educational transitions for young students.

Pre-adolescents in particular are more vulnerable to stressful events at their age because of the simultaneous adversities that they may face. Having a healthy sense of self-esteem can mitigate some of the negative effects seen through transitions. New (2012) explains some of the differences between children with low versus higher self-esteem. Children with a sense of low self-esteem typically have less motivation to undertake novel tasks, are more likely to talk negatively about and exhibit overly-critical thoughts about themselves, and are more easily disappointed in themselves. They show a lower tolerance for frustration, tend to give up easily, and may see temporary, smaller setbacks as much larger or permanent setbacks. Children with lower self-esteem generally show more pessimism, have a higher risk for stress, and for developing mental health problems.

On the other hand, children with a healthier sense of self-esteem are more comfortable in various social settings and can adapt accordingly. These students are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and are able to *accept* them, and ultimately

have a greater sense of optimism and more positive mental health (New, 2012). Self-esteem is able to affect pre-adolescents to a high extent, and can interfere with their daily activities in a negative way if not developed appropriately. A healthy sense of self-esteem is important for pre-adolescents to build resilience to social, academic and environmental stressors that school transitions can present. It is an essential factor in developing positive mental health. Building a sense of self-determination through pre-adolescence is also a factor in the formation of a healthy sense of self-esteem and positive psychological outcomes. Owens, Mortimer and Finch (1996) provided evidence that perception of self-direction in school promotes academic achievement (i.e. higher grades) by the young students who view their schoolwork as an opportunity to grow, think and problem-solve.

Self-efficacy, in conjunction with self-esteem, has an effect on a pre-adolescent's mental health outcome through school transitions. A child who believes that they are capable of performing a task, and persevering in the face of adversity or failure, exhibits a healthy sense of self-efficacy (Desrochers, 2009). Higher self-efficacy is associated with children's ability to think more productively, and the ability to apply greater positive thinking skills when presented with an obstacle or challenge. Desrochers explains that a child with a healthy sense of self-efficacy encompasses higher motivation, perseverance and resilience, and as an effect the young child is less vulnerable to stress, depression and anxiety. A young person with a lower sense of self-efficacy exhibits avoidance of difficult or novel tasks, a more pessimistic attitude toward challenges, as well as lower aspirations and poorer commitment to their personal goals. These pre-adolescents are more vulnerable to stress and depression compared to those with a healthy sense of self-efficacy. Observing others, especially seeing someone similar to themselves work hard to achieve a goal or overcome an obstacle, reinforces the child's belief that they can do the same. The more similar they feel to the other person, the stronger the effect will be for the child. Through school transitions, students need these role models such as other peers or educators to show them that success is possible, and to allow them to build confidence in the tasks they are undertaking in their new environment.

Social Inclusion

Pre-adolescents experience constant changes that influence how they perceive themselves. They are undergoing physical and emotional development, as well as the adjustment to their new school environment. A student's perceptions of their educational and social contexts can impact their academic achievement and competence, motivation in school, and peer relationships (Parker, 2010). Ryan, Shim and Makara (2013) found that GPA and intrinsic value for schoolwork tended to decline over the first year of middle school because students are often focused more heavily on creating a new identity and forming new peer relationships, so less emphasis is placed on academic performance the first year through the transition.

Sinclair and Lentz (2009) found that individuals with high self-esteem (HSEs) and low self-esteem (LSEs) differed in their response toward rejection versus belonging situations. HSEs inhibited thoughts of rejection and could ignore thoughts of rejection. LSEs could equally focus on both acceptance and rejection, as if they were watching for signs related to how their peers viewed them regardless of the situation. This result suggests a paranoia for LSEs that others do not see them as good enough, or that they are being rejected by their peer groups. Sinclair and Lentz express that a key aspect to success through self-esteem is that rather than feeling accepted, it is more about avoiding feeling rejected. It is important to focus on building a child's self-esteem to enhance social resilience, since middle and high school transitions come with some of the most difficult social adjustments for pre-adolescents. Building social resilience will ease the adjustment to new peer groups and a new school, as well as threats to a child's feelings of belonging through a school transition.

One element of society that is taking over the pre-adolescent world is social media. Social media in all forms has become a method of being indirectly accepted or rejected. "Likes" on Facebook and Instagram, followers and favorites on Twitter, and other forms of online socializing are all ways in which a young person indirectly verifies whether they are accepted or rejected by their peers, by comparing themselves with others that they see and follow online. Younger children every year

are tapping into social media, and have smart devices that allow them to be socially active every hour of the day where they can evaluate their perceived self-worth to others. Whether their perceptions are accurate or not cannot be validated. Whether social media involvement is a healthy or unhealthy habit will depend on how the individual perceives their status among their peer groups, and the effects that their perception has on their psychological well-being.

Extra-Curricular Activities

By participating in extra-curricular activities, students can positively influence their sense of belonging and connectedness with their new school and peers, and mitigate the negative outcomes associated with the transition through schools. Akos (2006) examined the effect that extra-curricular participation has on pre-adolescent transition from elementary to middle school. These activities give the child an opportunity to express identity and passion, and can heighten their sense of belonging. When the activity aligns with the student's passion or interest, their feelings of connectedness are far greater. This acts as a resilience factor to adversities through their transition. Gerber (1996) suggested that extra-curricular participation was also associated with an increase in GPA. There has also been evidence for extra-curricular involvement having a positive influence even beyond formal schooling years: "Consistent participation in extra-curricular activities across adolescence was positively linked to educational status in young adulthood" (Mahoney, Cairns & Farmer, 2003).

Students who are in their first year of transitioning to a new school typically have fewer relationships with peers and teachers, creating a decreased sense of school connectedness. A sense of connectedness through these activities can promote academic achievement, greater participation in school, and positive social adjustment. Extra-curricular participation takes time away from risky opportunities, and the young student is more likely to establish positive social networks. They encourage peer interaction, appeal to the individual's interests, promote cooperation, build relationships between students and adults, provide structure and challenge, and better connect students to their school (Holloway, 2002). These factors help the child adjust

successfully through their school transitions, and decrease the risk for mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation or depression.

Physical Health

Obesity is one of the main health issues plaguing youth in the United States. It impacts the affected child's self-perception, and makes it especially difficult for some students to gain peer acceptance moving through school if they have low self-confidence. Young children struggling with obesity have a higher risk of low self-perception and perceived competence in various domains, including sports, physical appearance and peer engagement (Cohen, 2009). Cohen found that obese children were two to four times more likely than their normal-weight peers to have low domain competence in athletics, physical appearance and global self-worth. Obese children who participated in after-school programs resulting in weight loss (a summer weight loss camp in Cohen's study), had an increase in the three areas of domain competence. However, some domain scores were still below that of their non-obese peers. He suggests here that there is a residual effect of low domain competence for overweight or obese children compared to their normal-weight peers, and that this residing effect may have an impact on the young student's psychological well-being.

Part of why obesity affects pre-adolescents across these domains may be cultural. Many forms of media typically portray skewed body ideals. The physical standards that are portrayed and reinforced through media and other mediums affects how young people feel about their bodies when they compare themselves to others. There is a stigma associated with obesity in the United States, and body shapes are "rated" and oftentimes socially rejected. This can create a sense of embarrassment, shame or humiliation if a pre-adolescent's body, or performance based on their body in sports or extra-curriculars, is seen as poor by their surrounding peers. Obese children may experience reduced social acceptance by their normal-weight peers and teachers, whether it be a conscious decision or not (Cohen, 2009). Cohen suggests that obesity has a measurable impact on self-esteem, even at age 11. It is possible that it has an impact even before that age as body image ideals continue to evolve. The transition period is especially hard for pre-adolescents in the domain of self-image

because of the tendency to compare themselves to other peers, simultaneous with their vulnerable sense of self-esteem. Not all children struggling with obesity are affected, but the reasons for their resilience is unclear.

Building Resilience

Transition is a period of stress and anxiety for any young person. Resilience is an important factor in pre-adolescents' success through middle and high school transitions, since they occur at a time in their life where social and cognitive development is highly vulnerable. Resilience, defined as "*the process of negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma,*" is a strong mechanism for success throughout this time for young students (Windle et al., 2011). Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) argue that there should be a heavier focus on the social and personal concerns of the child, rather than the organizational and administrative procedures of the school to help ease the transition periods and promote positive mental health development. They provide examples of some of the natural protective influences that aid in building resilience for pre-adolescents through adversities. External factors such as support from family, peers, and community may play a role, as well as internal protective factors such as the individual's ideas about their personal worth and competence.

It can be especially difficult to build resilience and positive mental health in looked-after children because they typically have had a lack of nurturing relationships in their early life (Woodier, 2011). Woodier suggests that in order to maximize the success of a young student, they must be able to identify their positive values and strengths, and learn to become self-aware. He argues that both self-efficacy and self-esteem are important protective factors to the child's moral identity, resilience, and mental health. For students struggling with transition periods, finding a mentor is helpful. The mentor becomes someone that the child can express thoughts about their lives with no fear or shame, and connect with someone who can be sensitive to their fears and anxieties about what they are experiencing. Having a relationship with an "other" adult (such as a teacher, caregiver or mentor) can be extremely helpful in mitigating the negative effects that a transition period can have on a young child.

Bumann and Younkin (2012) suggest that self and group efficacy are able to influence each other, as well as help build resilience for struggling pre-adolescents. They hold the holistic view that “self and group efficacy in any domain are achievable through attention to personal culture, emotions and beliefs. It is important to remember that self and group efficacy both require believing that success in *any* domain is possible, which reinforces resilience to continue in the face of failures and obstacles.” Through transition periods, one key to success for students is having support and encouragement from others to meet their goals and aspirations. This support can be from family, but may be more effective through their peer groups because of their social focus. Using a group of peers as support for a troubled individual may be helpful in scaffolding their resilience through difficult situations in their educational settings, and may decrease their risk for problematic behaviors or negative mental health functioning.

Music as Empowerment Therapy

It has long been debated what therapies and remedies are available for individuals with an unhealthy sense of self-esteem. Travis (2012) examined the dimensions of self-esteem, resilience, and empowerment in rap lyrics as therapy for children with low self-esteem. Travis explains empowerment as “*the process in which adolescents develop the consciousness, skills and power necessary to envision personal or collective well-being and understand their role within opportunities to transform social conditions to achieve that well-being.*” An individual with a sense of empowerment is less likely to feel victimized or continuously perceive adversity. They work more actively to fulfill their perceived potential by using existing knowledge, positive attitude and interpersonal skills, which in turn builds their self-esteem. Rap music is a form of communication that conveys an individual’s development over the lifespan, and may aid in promoting resilience. Music is associated with emotional reactions, whether it be incidental or intentional by the artist to regulate the listeners’ affect. Both children and adults may use music for emotional regulation to promote a more positive mood, reduce negative mood, create

feelings of nostalgia, or to create comfort or consolation during stressful times and events.

Esteem is multi-dimensional, encompassing how an individual perceives themselves and how they feel that others perceive them. Self-esteem is highly significant for pre-adolescent mental health because self-esteem is a predictor of feelings of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal ideation (Travis, 2012). Travis proposes that there are messages embedded into rap lyrics about self-image, and stories about the artist's experiences. These messages include strategies for overcoming obstacles or challenges, and may help young adolescents build resilience toward adversities. However, one must use caution when exercising the messages conveyed. A large percentage of music media has evolved over time, and has become less personal than when the genre first emerged. Travis explains that the community of youth and adults that initially created rap lived in societies that dealt with much difficulty and misfortune, and used music as an outlet to rise above the challenges they faced every day. Rap was (and sometimes still is) a narrative of an actual lived experience by the artist that helped shape who they became. The genre can provide a "blueprint for success" in some areas of life for struggling individuals, which can be translated to educational transitions for young students to alleviate risk for depreciated mental health (Travis, 2012).

Social Networks

Pre-adolescents' experience many changes in social networks through their school transitions, as the needs of the child are maturing and changing. Peers are an increasingly important source of social support to young students at this age. They are striving for independence from their parents, and need social support to cope with difficulties in their new school. Cantin and Boivin (2004) suggest that parent and peer support are predictors of how the child will adjust to the overall transition. They suggest that the unstable nature of preadolescent relationships, especially within peer groups, can make children more vulnerable to stressors through the transition period. Students have the opportunity to form new peer groups and new relationships, as well as establish a new identity and social status. Cantin and Boivin reinforce the idea that

parents remain the main support to the children at this age, but they are less satisfied with the time spent with parents because they are highly focused on building relationships with their new peers. Emphasis should be placed on children who exhibit difficulties forming peer relationships. These are identifiable at-risk pre-adolescents through the middle and high school transitions. Many factors could account for their difficulty in forming peer relationships, such as a lack of social skills, trouble coping with simultaneous challenges, social anxiety, or aggressive or socially withdrawn behavior. These factors all play a role in hindering the child's ability to form satisfying peer relationships and leverage social support through adversities.

In view of the above discussion, the literature suggests that a healthy sense of self-esteem can positively influence a pre-adolescent's mental health through their school transitions. The challenges of adapting to new school environments can take heavy tolls on their psychological well-being, and a healthy sense of self-esteem has a positive effect in many ways for the student, all of which contribute to a more successful outcome through their transition. Children with a healthier sense of self-esteem are able to adjust more appropriately to their school, the new academic demands, and the various social modulations that they will encounter through the process. They tend to have better physical and psychological well-being and stability, and are more likely to experience positive outcomes through developing feelings of connectedness to their new school and peers. By developing a child's self-esteem, adults, peer groups and even some forms of music and activities are able to mitigate the risks that the child will face throughout pre-adolescence. By advancing their skills to think positively about themselves through their sense of self-esteem, the child is able to stabilize a healthier self-perception. These skills ultimately contribute to a more successful transition through the dimensions of academic and social competence, physical health, social inclusionary status, and resilience despite the simultaneous adversities that they may face.

Discussion of Research Questions

3. To What Extent Do Peer Groups Contribute to a Positive or Negative Transition during Pre-Adolescence?

Peer Acceptance

Throughout school transitions, pre-adolescents are undergoing multiple changes at once (physical, cognitive, emotional, and social). Student outcomes tend to show declines in academic achievement, self-esteem, interest and motivation in school, as well as an increase in psychological distress (Kingery & Erdley, 2007). The child's individual perception of stressors throughout this time can influence their ability to adjust appropriately to the new school environment. There is a high emphasis on the importance of peer relationships during this age. Kingery and Erdley suggest that a student's perceptions of their social support may predict the trajectory of self-worth and symptoms of psychopathology across educational transitions. Having fewer, higher-quality friendships creates resilience to adversities that young students may face during their transition to middle or high school. Quality friendships provide a sense of security, higher self-esteem, and emotional support. The number of mutual friendships and friendship quality through school has been associated with students' overall school adjustment and positive mental health development. Peer acceptance in particular provides them with emotional support, and promotes a greater sense of belonging at school.

Kingery, Erdley and Marshall (2011) examined peer acceptance and friendship as factors predicting pre-adolescent adjustment to middle school. Students tended to report concerns in three domains: (1) academic (new demands, larger homework load, and classroom difficulty), (2) procedural (navigating around the school, knowing where the classrooms and bathrooms are), and (3) social (fitting in, making new friends, getting along with their new peers and classmates). Kingery and Erdley (2007) found peer acceptance or rejection to be unique predictors for feelings of loneliness and depression during this time period for pre-adolescents. Children who attain low levels of peer acceptance and low-quality friendships express more

loneliness and less school involvement prior to transitioning. These students are at higher risk for experiencing continuous difficulties after they transition, and are more likely to experience behavioral, emotional, academic and social difficulties.

Popularity and social status is increasingly important and prioritized during pre-adolescence. Pellegrini (2002) identifies the importance of creating and maintaining a social status in the new environment. While transitioning to a new school, students have to attain or maintain their existing social standing among their peers. Bellmore, Villareal and Ho (2011) studied the importance of fitting in and creating social status with the new peer group throughout a child's transition, and the malleability of social status during the first year after transitioning to a new school. Their study focused on the extent to which the maintenance, attainment or loss of "cool" status over the course of 6th grade was associated with levels of physical, verbal, and relational aggression in the student. The results indicated that children who maintained or attained a "cool" status over the first year of their school transition were more likely to exhibit higher levels of all three subcategories of aggression than the students who never attained a "cool" status. Following Bandura's Social Learning Theory, McLeod (2011) explains that children will encode behaviors via observational learning from their surrounding environment. Young adolescents tend to pay special attention to the behaviors they see from other individuals they identify with or feel more similar to, and many may adopt aggressive behaviors if they feel it will earn peer approval.

Nangle (2003) found a negative correlation between peer acceptance, number of friends, and friendship quality with loneliness. The results showed that the effect of peer variables on children's depression are mediated through loneliness, and that peer variables may have an indirect effect on the child's depressive symptomology. Peer rejection has been associated with difficulty in school, specifically poorer academic achievement and poor mental health (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Pre-adolescents who do not have as many peers to rely on for social and emotional support through the stress of a school transition are more likely than their other peers to experience depression or anxiety.

Bullying

Transitions are a time of personal and social insecurity, and some students are more vulnerable than others to changes such as reforming their social identities and peer groups. Williford, Boulton and Jenson (2013) examined the effects that bullying can have on a child's transition to middle or high school. Bullies believe they benefit by gaining power and status among their peers. Williford, Boulton and Jenson (2013) suggested that bullies are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior, have less overall empathy and less school commitment than their peers, have lower friendship quality, and exhibit antisocial or aggressive behaviors. They found that pre-adolescent children exhibiting higher levels of depression were more likely to be in one of the bullying subclasses than a victim, contrary to what many would think. They suggest that children engaging in more indirect forms of aggression are at higher risk for internalizing problems, which may lead to social anxiety or depression.

Victims of bullying tend to report feelings of loneliness, depression, social anxiety, peer rejection, low self-esteem, and lower social competence. They tend to internalize difficulties, typically struggle with adjusting to the new school, and have poorer academic performance than their non-victimized peers. Williford, Boulton and Jenson (2013) found that students who were victimized early on in middle school had were more likely to remain victimized, felt less safe at school, and exhibited more social anxiety and higher levels of depression from 6-8th grade than their counterparts. To take preventative action, it is important to develop a sense of empathy in youth as a source of prevention for these circumstances. The negative effects that bullying can have on a young student (both the bully and the victim) can be mitigated through gaining skills in effective peer negotiation (encouraging positive relationships), conflict management, and empathy (social and cognitive skills to aid in recognizing norms about aggressive behavior).

Problematic Behaviors

The transition to middle and high school is a risky time for pre-adolescents because they are vulnerable to many different stressors at once. Peer groups, social

status, parental monitoring and many other factors can influence their development of problem behaviors through this time. Veronneau and Dishion (2010) used a mesosystemic approach to examine how peer and parental factors can interact to predict changes in a child's problem behavior through the course of transitioning to a new school. Harmful peer factors may include antisocial behavior, peer rejection, and controversial peer experience (being liked by some and not by others). Parental factors may include parental support, encouragement, and monitoring. They found that a child is less likely to exhibit problem behavior if they have a high-achieving peer group, and appropriate parental monitoring. Having high-achieving friends may promote less problem behavior and greater mental health because the children are more focused on their academics, and have less time for risky or delinquent behavior. Parental monitoring in the same way provides a buffer for young students who are liked by some peers and disliked by others, and are therefore at higher risk for developing problem behaviors or mental health problems. They are not afraid of the consequences they may face for performing deviant acts to fit in with the group they want support from, and may try to establish a level of dominance through these acts. For example, a young adolescent may take up smoking to create peer interaction and be accepted by that group.

Joining a deviant peer group such as a gang is also a common factor for expression of student problem behaviors. It is important for young children to feel that they belong, and they tend to congregate in groups that influence their self-concept. The way a child thinks about themselves and constructs their identity can be strongly influenced by their peer group affiliations. Joining a gang may be one of the ways in which they feel they can cement their identity and find belonging with others. Gang affiliation may be risky for the pre-adolescent academically, emotionally, and psychologically. Many youngsters who choose to join a gang are dealing with interpersonal and developmental obstacles, many of which may present themselves through school transition periods (Gitterman, 2002).

Acceptance is increasingly important to students transitioning through middle and high school, as is their perceived popularity. Throughout this time period, young

students are more prone to social conformity, as they are seeking peer acceptance and are attempting to fulfill their need for belonging. Peers can provide learning opportunities for coping, adjusting, and social competence. Peer rejection creates risk for increased problem behavior by reducing the developing child's access to peers who they can learn from. Children deprived of this social intimacy may feel angry, resentful, become more aggressive, or may try to become friends with other less-adjusted peers who model deviant or delinquent behaviors which may promote negative social learning. Veronneau & Dishion (2010) show that interpersonal rejection elicits reactions from areas of the brain that are also associated with *physical* pain, verifying that peer rejection is a very real pain to the child experiencing it, and that it creates an adversity that is difficult to overcome while transitioning to a new school with a new group of peers.

In view of the above discussion, the literature suggests that peer groups are vital to a pre-adolescent's development and success through middle and high school transitions. Whether an individual believes they have social support from others is a large factor related to their psychological well-being. Their mental health is fragile throughout this time period, and many tend to exhibit signs of psychological distress. Pre-adolescent mental health can be positively or negatively influenced by educational transitions in many ways. Peer acceptance, bullying, and expression of problematic behaviors strongly influence a child's success or failure through transition periods. Peers provide numerous learning opportunities for coping, adjusting, and social competence. Though social status is highly malleable throughout this time period, being accepted by their peers provides young students with emotional support, and promotes a greater sense of belonging at school. Struggling students may find themselves affiliating with deviant peer groups or gangs to attain a sense of belonging and social identity. Quality friendships provide the child with a sense of security, higher self-esteem and emotional support, all of which promote positive mental health development. Pre-adolescents who experience peer rejection or who do not have as many peers to rely on for social and emotional support through the stress of a school transition are deprived of social intimacy, and are more likely than their other peers to experience depression or anxiety.

Discussion of Research Questions

4. How Do Parents and Educators Play a Role in the Child's Transitioning Experience?

Mentors

Resiliency is a large factor that can help young children mitigate the stress caused by adversities such as school transitions. When children who had overcome large adversities were interviewed about what helped them “succeed against the odds”, the most frequent response was that they had help and support from informal networks (extended family, peers, neighbors and mentors), rather than paid professionals or therapists (Day, 2006). Day illustrates some of the building blocks of resiliency including warmth, nurturance, stability, empathy, support, and a sense of belonging, all of which can be provided by a mentor/mentee relationship. The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is similar to a friendship, but also encompasses adult qualities. The mentor plays parental roles by teaching, caring, criticizing, helping, or offering constructive suggestions in personal areas. A mentor can provide emotional support and promote social development for the young child, and can focus on their strengths. If a young person is struggling to recover from an early traumatic experience, a mentor can provide a sense of safety and nurturance. A child with a mentor is better able to develop a sense of trust, and may better learn to remain open to new experiences, including emotional experiences and emotional risks (Day, 2006). Through their interactions, mentors are able to teach the child social skills, model appropriate behaviors, provide reinforcement, introduce their mentee to diverse social environments, as well as provide advice, emotional support, companionship, and opportunities for socialization that the individual may not have outside of that relationship.

A mentor can help a young child develop a higher sense of optimism by teaching them how to reframe a negative experience into a more positive one, and to be an active thinker instead of passive. The child ultimately learns how to influence their own future by taking positive action and reframing negative mind sets. Young students may learn to internalize a positive self-image, as well as develop positive

cognitive coping strategies to build confidence and reduce anxiety. The child also learns social coping strategies (forming or maintaining supportive relationships), and behavioral coping strategies (engaging in actions to successfully cope with stress). Southwick et al. (2007) illustrate that because the child learns these valuable life coping skills, mentors promote resilience that may extend through pre-adolescence into adulthood, especially for children at risk.

Perceptual Variations

There are many variations in the ways that students, parents, and educators perceive the transition periods from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school. These transitions are difficult shifts associated with decreased mental health, achievement loss, increased behavior problems, and student dropouts. These environmental shifts involve personal and environmental change, new rules and new expectations. A mutual understanding between students, parents and educators about their concerns may help alleviate some of the challenges that students experience through their first year of transition. Since the needs of each child are unique and each child has different coping abilities, helping children through their educational transitions is not a one-size-fits-all process (Akos, 2002). Smith, Feldwisch and Abell (2006) found that parents are typically concerned about social and safety issues, negative peer pressure, and their children being bullied or not being accepted by their new peers. In contrast, the students were more concerned with homework, classroom difficulty, and getting lost. Elias, Gara and Ubriaco (1985) found that school staff viewed academic concerns as the most severe stressors for the students, including the increasingly difficult schoolwork and higher expectations for student performance.

A student's perception versus the reality of their transition to high school can impact their ultimate achievement and mental health throughout the first year of school. Often, pre-adolescents receive mixed messages from peers, teachers and parents that set unrealistic expectations for the transition, and unmet expectations have been associated with academic difficulties (Smith, Feldwisch & Abell, 2006). Though academics tend to be lower priority than social concerns for some students while transitioning to high school, those who experience lower grades or fail their

first test construct a lower academic self-efficacy. The same happens with students who were active in activities like athletics or band, thinking they will get a starting or first chair position and do not, because those positions are typically given to older students (Smith, Feldwisch & Abell, 2006). These young students experience a loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy if they experience a depressed social or academic domain. Both students and parents typically expect similar or better academic achievement than the child had in middle school, when in reality academic loss is normal through the transition until the student becomes accustomed to the new school and its processes. This shift may cause a decrease in student confidence, as well as psychological well-being.

Morgan and Hertzog (2001) found that dropout rates were significantly lower in schools that had explicit transition programs, suggesting that such programs could offer a solution to the mental health stability of pre-adolescents through school transitions. Student programs may provide details about standard curriculum and responsibilities, organizational aspects, safety and discipline, cracking myths or rumors, and other elements that may increase the confidence for the young students' transition to a new school. Higher confidence prior to a school transition may help ease student concerns and mitigate the risks posed by potential adversities throughout the first year after transitioning. Alleviating concerns and giving young students a pre-cursor for academic demands would allow the student to focus their energy appropriately during the first year, and lessen psychological distress and student drop-out. There is always a population of students that have a harder time adjusting, and therefore suffer more serious problems during and after the transition period (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Transition Programs

A child is at higher risk for psychological distress if they have difficulty in the transition from childhood to early adolescence. Throughout these years, the rates for juvenile crime, suicide, drug abuse and adolescent pregnancy increase (Lipsitz, 1980). These rates tend to peak during high school, but difficulties are thought to come from unresolved issues during middle school (Rutter, 1980). The children are undergoing

many simultaneous changes, physically, psychologically, and socially. Effective 9th grade transition programs can promote student success, while an unsuccessful transition may impair the young student's performance and/or social adjustment (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) explain the need to make sure that students' basic and developmental needs are being met throughout their school transition, to create a developmentally-responsive school environment and ultimately foster a more positive outcome.

Educators are able to aid their students in healthy mental development by monitoring their classes (especially incoming students) to recognize if a child is exhibiting signs of academic or psychological decline. They can then work to understand the individual needs of that student to create a developmental pathway for success. Orientation programming is a useful tactic for developing positive mental health while undergoing school transitions. Having older students as tour guides, a day just for incoming students, seminars to address questions or worries and meet some of the teachers, and teaching homework and study skills are all ways in which educators can help to build student enthusiasm and excitement about attending their new school. Educators should be aware of how they are able to both positively and negatively impact their students' self-concepts through multiple domains (Parker, 2010).

Support through educators and the school system is a large element in minimizing risk for poor mental health in pre-adolescents. Kruczek, Alexander and Harris (2005) described a free after-school counseling program for high-risk middle school students which was designed to promote healthy identity, personal choices and behaviors, and to help meet the personal and social development needs of this group of students. The goals were to develop healthy self-esteem, healthy identity, adaptive peer relationships, and positive conflict resolution in order to reduce the likelihood of future high-risk behavior. Having students identify personal goals for development with their counselor, develop problem-solving and anger management skills, conflict resolution strategies, and strategies to avoid negative peer pressure may all aid in the development of positive mental health. Greene and Ollendick (1993) found that at

risk students who had a poor transition experience but had “full treatment” with heightened support from both parents and teachers showed a dramatic improvement in average GPA, as can be seen in Figure 1. Participants in this group also showed minimized depressive symptoms and teacher-reported problem behaviors compared to the “partial treatment” group (heightened support from only teachers), as can be seen in Figure 2. Students in the full treatment group received training for problem solving, social skills, and goal setting, all of which promote a healthier mental development for pre-adolescents transitioning through school.

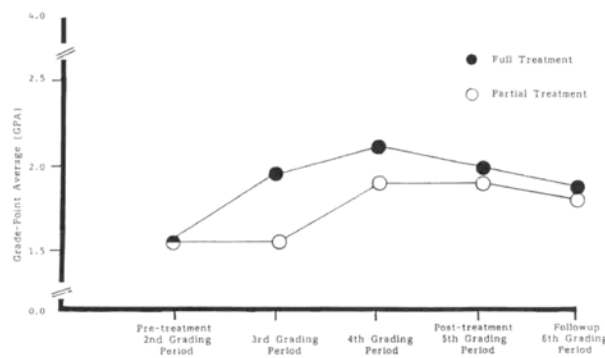


FIGURE 1. Mean Grade Point Average (GPA) for Full-Treatment and Partial-Treatment Groups at the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th Grading Periods.

Figure 1: Evaluation of a multidimensional program for sixth-graders in transition from elementary to middle school.

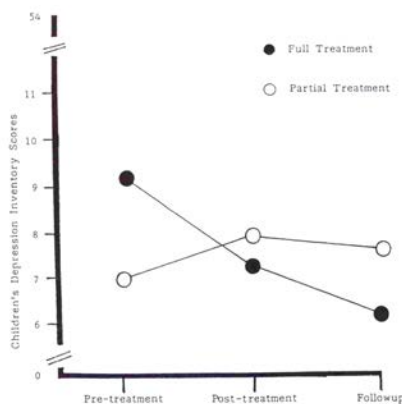


FIGURE 2. Mean Scores on the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) for Full-Treatment and Partial-Treatment Groups at Pretreatment, Posttreatment, and Follow-up.

Figure 2: Evaluation of a multidimensional program for sixth-graders in transition from elementary to middle school.

A student's perception of their social environment is highly influenced by their feelings of connectedness to their school. Mental health and academic performance can decrease if a student feels no sense of connectedness with their school or peers. A sense of connection is especially important for minority students, who may have more difficulty adjusting to the new environment. Those who are socio-economically disadvantaged may experience greater mental and academic benefits if their belonging needs are met through their school or peers. Programs to facilitate student connections through forming positive relationships with teachers and peers can raise student mental health, academic competence, average GPA, and can lower student absences (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). When a student feels a sense of engagement in their school, they view themselves and their education as more meaningful. Likewise, when young children are given opportunities for social networking, they are more likely to build supportive social connections, do well in school, and support a positive mental development than students who experience alienation, lack of support, or social isolation.

Smith, Feldwisch and Abell (2006) state that "*The transition to High School receives the bulk of attention because failure and dropout rates exceed rates at all other grade levels*". Cohen and Smerdon (2009) explain the need to focus on preventing high school drop-outs by easing the transition from middle to high school. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) also observed that minority students are twice as likely to be retained as other students. Incoming high school freshmen have no familiarity or connection to their new environment, tend to have more frequent course failures, and their attendance tends to drop by the end of the first year (Roybal, Thornton & Usinger, 2014). These students have difficulties accumulating enough course credit to pass and advance to the next grade or graduation. As can be seen in Figure 3, students who are on track have a much higher likelihood that they will graduate successfully. Some students feel that their best option is to drop out if they are struggling with getting back on track. There are psychological disadvantages for the young student if they feel they are unable to keep up with their well-adjusted peers, or feel incapable of high performance. Some students blame leaving school on disliking classes or being disinterested in what they are learning. Others say that they had no motivation

to do school work. A large percentage say they dropped out because they were failing, and it was too difficult to get back on track.

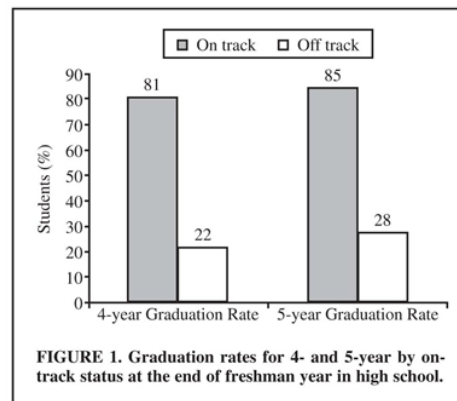


Figure 3: Tightening the Dropout Tourniquet: Easing the Transition from Middle to High School.

Schools with extensive transition programs may help lower the rates for failure and dropouts, as well as anxiety and depression. They may help improve problem-solving skills, student attendance and retention, academic achievement, and may positively impact young students' adjustment, success, and overall mental health. Educators can encourage positive mental health by providing summer courses for students who need extra support. Summer classes may not be as stressful with a majority of the other students gone, may help at-risk children get back on track, and could decrease frequency of course failures and dropout rates. Peer rejection has also been associated with student drop-outs. It is important to give students resources to stay on track to graduate, as this can lower the rate for student drop-out. *Education Week* (2010) reported: "Each year, about 1.3 million students fail to graduate from high school". The child's level of stress and psychological well-being is an important factor in their school retention and overall success.

The ability to regulate emotion is a factor for influencing risk of maladjustment for the individual. Externalizing behaviors during adolescence has been related to risk for developing mental health problems such as conduct disorder. Externalizing behaviors include academic failure, school dropout, substance use, and

affiliation with delinquent peers or exhibiting delinquent behavior. Shortt et al. (2010) displays the importance of developing a child's emotional regulation strategies into adolescence by maternal emotion coaching of anger. They define maternal emotion coaching as a socialization process where parents provide guidance about the nature of emotions and how to appropriately express them, set behavioral limits, and discuss goals and strategies for how to cope with emotionally-challenging situations. Appropriate emotional coaching was associated with healthy mental and emotional development, appropriate regulation of anger, and minimized externalizing behaviors.

Divorce and Mental Health

Hines (2007) examined the impact that parental divorce can have on adolescents' adjustment to the middle school transition. Divorce is a traumatic experience for many children, and can alter the way they view themselves, their family, and various parts of their life. Many adults are not aware of the difficulties that divorce can cause for students. Family structure is a determining aspect of their children's success in school. Children learn to navigate through school and into adulthood by using their parents as models. Divorce can be a barrier to success, and creates a higher vulnerability to poor adjustment. The process can alter the progression of happy and healthy relationships for a child, although not all circumstances elicit identical outcomes.

Hines found that there are gender differences between children of divorced families and how they are affected by school transitions. Females tended to be better adjusted to the academic and social transition than males, but were less adjusted to making friends and forming new relationships. Males showed higher vulnerability to divorce than females and were more negatively affected by it. They tended to express lower self-esteem and show more frequent negative or aggressive behaviors in school and at home. Males were also more likely to quit school, show signs of depression, maintain fewer friendships and smaller support systems, experiment with drugs or alcohol to cope, and tended to have lower academic performance, specifically in reading and math (Amato and Keith, 2001).

Young and Hoffman (2004) give insight into solutions that parents can offer for healthy developmental trajectory through adverse transition periods. What a child thinks and feels about themselves (self-evaluation, sense of self-worth and global self-esteem) is multidimensional, and can vary across different domains (e.g. a child with high academic but low social self-esteem). For a child experiencing parental divorce in conjunction with a school transition, it is especially important to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem in order to minimize risk of psychological distress. New (2012) explains that identifying children's irrational beliefs about themselves and redirecting them to set accurate standards within the domain (perfection, attractiveness, ability, etc.) as well as showing affection through pride in a task undertaken, can aid in building their confidence. Morin (2014) demonstrates that a child benefits if they have an adult who helps them discover and value their personal strengths, keeps academics in balance and perspective, and learn to reframe negative statements that they might make about themselves.

Educational institutions should consider offering a counseling program for students who are struggling through a family divorce, to help them in their adjustment process. Williford, Boulton and Jenson (2013) suggest prevention programs for developing coping strategies, and that offer student support for depression or social anxiety. Parents and school staff should be educated concerning the difficulties divorce may cause for students, and how they may be able to help, without crossing confidential or ethical boundaries. Teachers may be able to include classroom content relevant to mental health, targeting health education in middle and high school. Educational programs and curricula developed to support healthy and positive pre-adolescent development may minimize the risk for poor mental health, and would support a healthy trajectory for young students through school.

Discussion of Research Questions

5. What Interactions Occur Between Mental Health and Negative Transition Experiences?

Positive mental health is important for pre-adolescents in successfully adapting through school transition periods. Many changes are occurring at once, and young children must learn to use various coping strategies to adapt to the stressors present through the environmental shift. Each child will adopt individual strategies to cope with the adversities of a transition. Vandele, Little and Card (2006) examined how action-control beliefs and behaviors may predict change in pre-adolescents' adjustment from elementary to middle school, and found that negative coping behaviors (antisocial coping versus pro-social coping) predicted greater depression, expression of aggressive behaviors, and negative affect through the transition. Positive action-control beliefs predicted positive affect and minimized expression of depressive symptoms. Vandele, Little and Card explained that the influence of a child's action-control beliefs is mediated by their coping behaviors. Adaptive action-control beliefs are protective factors that can reduce potentially harmful effects of stress on the individual, promote a more effective adaptation through school transitions, and promote positive mental health. Maladaptive action-control beliefs (antisocial coping) puts the child at risk for negative adjustment, negative affect, and poor psychological health.

Students with Disabilities

Facilitating transition for young students with disabilities can be especially challenging. The educational transitions during pre-adolescence is challenging enough with simultaneous environmental, biological and social changes. Students with disabilities tend to struggle more with skill development and adjustment than their counterparts, including social, cognitive and organizational skills. They have the added difficulty of being aware that they have a disability, while also trying to build a new network and social identity. Knesting, Hokanson and Waldron (2008) found that

young students with mild disabilities had increased anxiety because navigating the new school environment is demanding, and it typically takes longer for them to master navigation of the school and their class schedules. Addressing the need for belonging for students with disabilities is important. The sooner connections can be made for them, the more likely it is that their sense of belonging will develop and allow easier adjustment to the new environment. It is important to create opportunities for students to make peer connections that are having trouble doing so. Knesting, Hokanson and Waldron also found that choice-making is empowering to young students with disabilities. They liked having the opportunity to choose whether they received special education services, and many wanted different amounts of support as they moved through the school year. When these children are allowed to be active and informed decision-makers in their lives, they experience an increase in competence, self-esteem, and psychological health.

Creating a smooth transition and promoting positive mental health development for students with *severe* disabilities is even more of a challenge. The young students are typically transitioning to a school environment that is less personal than their previous school. Rotating classrooms and teachers are even more stressful for this student subgroup than their counterparts. In the realm of academia, classes are more academically demanding, and there is a heavier emphasis on grades. There is an assumed increase in responsibility for these students, yet they are also given less individualized attention in general education classes. It is more difficult for them to navigate the school and their schedule than their peers, and they may have more difficulty making friends. Peer relationships are becoming increasingly important during this time in pre-adolescence, but young students with severe disabilities may rely on family or staff to provide them with their individual needs at home or during the school day. Students with severe disabilities typically have more social deficits compared to their peers, and are more likely to experience feelings of isolation. During pre-adolescence, peer acceptance is increasingly important to students. General-education students may be less inclined to create stable friendships with disabled students for fear of becoming excluded from their other peer groups.

Children of Alcoholic and Depressed Parents

It is especially difficult for children of alcoholic parents (COAs) to keep positive mental health through the pre-adolescent years. Being a COA is not a diagnosis for a child, but rather an identification of their parent's alcohol use (or other substances abuse issue) which directly affects their children. A variety of factors combine to create diverse individual outcomes that can impact the child's experiences. There are multiple risk and protective factors that could positively or negatively affect the development of a COA (Park & Schepp, 2014). Walker and Lee (1998) found that COAs tend to show negative outcomes in pre-adolescence such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, and interpersonal and social difficulties. Resilient COAs tended to express higher levels of self-esteem, lack of personal substance abuse, and higher capability for adaptation. Well-adjusted COAs were more apt to reframe negative experiences in a more positive way, sought out emotional support from peer groups during their childhood, and reported less depression.

Family is a source of resilience for pre-adolescents, and can help the child learn to cope with and adapt to trying situations or crises. Young children who coped effectively with the stress of growing up in an alcoholic family (who became competent adults) relied on more sources of support in their childhood, and exhibited less coping problems than their counterparts (Werner & Johnson, 2004). Caring adults are extremely important in the lives of pre-adolescent COAs as sources of emotional support. Siblings can be a strong, built-in resource to cope with the stress of an alcoholic parent. They are consistently emotionally available and stable because they can empathize with the situations their siblings are going through at home or at school, and play a protective role in preventing substance abuse and antisocial behaviors by the other sibling. Having one non-alcoholic parent may help the child in overcoming some adversities of being a COA. The non-alcoholic parent's attitude, self-esteem and self-efficacy may likewise have an impact on their child's outcome through modeling and social learning. Having positive encouragement in the family and a reliable social network may help COAs develop positive mental health, self-

esteem, and adaptive capability through other adverse situations such as pre-adolescent transition periods (Walker & Lee, 1998).

Just as COA's are affected by their parents' habits, offspring of depressed parents may also experience challenges with positive mental health in pre-adolescence. Children of depressed mothers are at a higher risk for depression and either internalizing or externalizing their problems (Jaser et al., 2011). They explain that the maintenance of positive affect in stressful family contexts is important, and that coping is a protective factor related to positive affect and lower expression of depressive symptoms. Lewandowski et al. (2014) examined predictors of positive outcomes on offspring of depressed and non-depressed parents over a span of 20 years. They found that higher self-esteem was associated with greater odds of resilient outcome and absence of psychiatric diagnoses. Child self-esteem was the best predictor of a positive outcome for both high and low-risk offspring. This suggests the importance of targeting self-esteem as a preventative intervention for youth in promoting positive mental health development.

Support Systems

Social support is one of the largest factors in the development of positive mental health for pre-adolescents. Martinez et al. (2011) examined changes in perceived social support and socio-emotional adjustment across a one-year transition from elementary to middle school, and found that the students perceived a decrease in total support from both peers and teachers. This perceptual decrease may occur over the first year because of a large shift in social groups, having to create a new network of peers, and because middle school is typically less personalized than elementary school. The children did not feel they had as much support over the first year through transitioning, which may create feelings of helplessness if they are struggling but do not know who or how to ask for help. Having positive support from other peers and adults can shape pre-adolescent's experiences and mental health outcomes through their school transitions.

Through each educational transition, young students experience disruptions in their social support systems. Disruptions in parental and peer support are associated with and can even predict increased expression of depressive symptoms through the middle and high school transitions (Newman et al., 2007). There are many risks for internalizing problems in pre-adolescence, which may translate to expression of depressive symptoms and a negative mental health development. Pre-adolescent students strive to create meaningful relationships and group identity to satisfy their need to belong, and success in these areas is associated with positive psychological outcomes. Deprivation or disruption in forming relationships is associated with negative outcomes in mental health, physical health, and academic achievement. Newman et al. (2007) found that 9th graders experienced more depressive symptoms and lower levels of school belonging compared to 8th graders, reinforcing the idea that transitioning to a new school and a decrease in feelings of school belonging can greatly influence a young student's psychological well-being. There is evidence that pre-adolescent depression is comorbid with other risky health behaviors, poorer school performance, and social isolation. Young students who struggle to attain a sense of belonging are at risk for long-term mental health consequences, especially depression, in early adolescence.

The literature available suggests many factors which strongly influence children's success through transition periods. Young students experience various disruptions in their social support systems during their transition to middle or high school. Social support from peers and parents during this time can predict expression of depressive symptoms exhibited by pre-adolescents. High emphasis should be placed on creating opportunities for students to develop supportive, meaningful relationships with their peers to stimulate their mental health through adverse situations. Students with mild to severe disabilities, as well as children of alcoholic parents (COAs) are two unique subgroups which should receive specific skill development training to ensure ease through their transition. There are many opportunities to develop interventions and programs to aid in positive mental health development for these pre-adolescent subgroups. Developing children's self-esteem, and creating opportunities to develop supportive relationship with a mentor or other

peers is a protective factor for students with disabilities, COAs, and children with a family history of depression. The availability of emotional support through counseling is an element in school systems that may also greatly influence a student's success through transition periods. By teaching skill development and having support systems available to all students, the likelihood that a student will successfully adapt to their new environment increases substantially. They are more likely to experience reduced vulnerability to stressors, enhanced resilience and protective factors, improved quality of life and emotional well-being, and minimized consequences. Mentoring a child's talents and interests, especially those in public care systems, can also greatly enhance their development and resilience (Gilligan, 1998). Mentoring also helps alleviate some of the pessimism that comes with the idea of being in public care. One must take a holistic approach when examining an at-risk pre-adolescent, and must take into account all aspects of their lives to positively influence their developmental trajectory through middle and high school transitions.

CONCLUSIONS

The transition process from elementary to middle school and high school is a significant challenge for pre-adolescents. Transition phases are experienced differently by each child, so it is important that the potential risks are understood and addressed appropriately. According to Cauley (2006), research addressing the challenges facing pre-adolescents during transition is limited. Developing strategies and approaches to address the risks posed to a young child through school transitions, and supporting the mental health and well-being of this population is extremely important. It is imperative that families and educators are aware of the developmental needs of pre-adolescent students to direct them toward appropriate resources and to promote their psychological well-being.

Transitions create adaptation challenges for young children, and test their coping skills. There is a shift in role definition, expected behavior, and shift in membership and status within a student's social groups and networks. The young student must focus on create new networks and must reorganize their personal and social resources. The transition to middle or high school is ultimately a restructuring in their cognitive appraisal of their surrounding environment. The interpretation and perception of their situations may change with the management of new sources of stress, or uncertainty about new expectations and goals. During transition phases, there is increased potential for conflict with adults and peers, as well as reduced availability of old friendships. There is a large shift in structure of the curriculum, learning environment, and the teaching process, typically placing a more serious emphasis on academic success. The young students are expected to self-monitor for task performance and completion and gain a higher sense of autonomy both at school and at home. These factors place a high amount of stress on the child, and in some cases can be extremely overwhelming if they do not have proper resources or resilience to cope with the adversities that they face.

There are many ways in which the issues facing pre-adolescents in transition can be addressed to mitigate the risk of negative outcome. Building confidence for incoming students can help minimize stress about their new environment. Many

strategies can be employed to boost student confidence, such as having the opportunity to shadow peers in the next grade level, presentations by teachers at the new school to relay expectations for the students, and holding panels to address myths and concerns that incoming students may have. To minimize student concern while transitioning to a new school environment, it is important to address organizational aspects of the new school. Issues such as opening lockers, finding classes and bathrooms, and keeping track of assignments can create anxiety for a new student. Addressing their concerns can help ease the stress felt through the first year, and can help mitigate psychological risks.

Providing young students with resources to stimulate the forming of healthy relationships can help minimize risk for depression and feelings of isolation. Student seminars that advise students about friends, problem solving, and social situations, as well as develop skills to foster healthy social networks and self-perceptions play a large role in the positive mental health outcomes of pre-adolescents during school transitions. Supporting student involvement with the school and informing them of the many opportunities that are available in their new school creates a more comfortable environment for the children. It fosters a stronger sense of belonging and connectedness with the school and their peers, and provides opportunities to develop skills, competence, and establish meaningful social relationships. It is also important to scaffold student independence, since middle and high schools require greater independence with each increase in grade level. There is a higher expectation for academic and social performance, and it is important to teach time and self-management strategies (managing their own academic and social behavior) to foster student independence. Teaching a young student how to advocate for themselves regarding accommodations or support, or for inclusion, are invaluable skills as they move through future transitions.

The literature given has provided evidence toward the idea that a child with a healthy sense of self-esteem is more likely to successfully adjust to their new school, and is more likely to exhibit positive mental health. A healthy sense of self-esteem has been associated with higher school success, feeling happier and more satisfied,

healthier lifestyle choices, more rewarding social relationships, and the formation of effective coping skills. In contrast, a low sense of self-esteem has been associated with physical and mental health disorders such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. A low sense of self-esteem has also been correlated with maladaptive behaviors through school transitioning periods. Pre-adolescents tend to have less supportive relationships and therefore less resilience to the adversities that they face through the first year of the transition. To minimize these risks, it is imperative to focus on building a healthy sense of self-esteem during pre-adolescence. Educational programs should aim to include curricula in their health programs for mental health development and strategies to overcome difficult situations. The curriculum would be highly beneficial if it included resources for social support, and should address factors that may help the children build resilience through schooling such as building positive peer and adult relationships. To mitigate the negative effects of an unhealthy sense of self-esteem, parents and educators need to help children gather, understand and comprehend their capabilities and competence in multiple domains.

Facilitating a successful transition to middle or high school is difficult on any level, but even more-so with young students with a disability. The changes they face may be overwhelming, and familiarizing them with the new environment early will create greater excitement and comfort about the next step in their education. Carter et al. (2005) believe that educators are able to help facilitate smoother transitions for these students by supporting both the children and their families through the transition. It is important to cater to the needs of the individual, as well as their family, to ease the overall concern about the new environment. Many strategies can be employed to create a smooth transition for this pre-adolescent subgroup. Giving accurate information to students and their parents about the transition process and expectations of the incoming student is useful in mitigating negative responses to the new school. It is important to start planning early to prepare for the transition, to identify the sources of support the child will need to be successful, and to gather information that prior educators know about the student that would be helpful to them in their next school. Creating an education plan for students with disabilities and providing them with an individualized education program or routine can be greatly

helpful in decreasing stress and anxiety as they transition. It is important to give this student sub-group more time to develop the skills they will need to be successful in their next school to minimize psychological stress. Educational institutions should provide opportunities for disabled students to interact with their general education peers, to address their social needs and provide access to academic support. These opportunities can help develop a more inclusive education community, and provide this student sub-group with resources that will help facilitate a positive transition and greater mental health.

Enhancing the mental health development of pre-adolescents and providing them with strategies to take individual action can positively influence their outcome through school transitions. Middle and high schools can provide students with resources such as orientation activities, open houses to provide information and demonstrations for academic and extra-curricular activities, or sending experienced students to talk to younger, incoming classes about the excitement of a new school. Being able to shadow an older student for a few days to experience the life of the new school and navigate through classes with a fellow peer can also be helpful in establishing a level of comfort with a transition. It is important to involve the family through the transition process and make sure parents understand the school's programs, procedures, and expectations so they can be a positive support system for their student and maintain communication to help their child work through the difficulties they are facing. Communication should be encouraged throughout the process to understand a student's experiences and to identify problems early to avoid ongoing difficulty. Many children are hesitant to talk about difficult issues such as bullying, loneliness, peer pressure, or depression and anxiety, so it is important to give resources to the young students and reassure them that it is an open and caring environment. Many students, especially those with a disability, have deficits in communication skills. Staff and parents need to be alert for external signs that a child is struggling, and should be able to collaborate to understand the underlying issue and take appropriate action to ensure a positive developmental trajectory.

Many students who struggle with adjusting to a new school tend to exhibit risky behaviors, and many drop out of school if they feel there is no other option for them. There are more academic failures and drop-outs in the 9th grade than any other grade level, and this issue should be addressed with high importance. Students who struggle with keeping on track academically tend to feel inadequate when compared to their peers, which places them at risk for negative mental health development. Giving students useful resources to stay on track for graduation can minimize stress and increase psychological well-being. Summer courses where the environment is less stressful and the student can focus their attention more directly on fewer topics may help to minimize risk for drop-out if a student is struggling. Taking action to familiarize and promote student connections with their new environment may also help to alleviate some of the stress that they face moving from one school to another, and can help develop peer connections to minimize risk for peer rejection. Student transition programs may also help lower failure and dropout rates, as well as anxiety and depression. They can aid students in improving their problem-solving skills and academic achievement, and can positively impact their success and mental health. Parents and educators can preempt risky behaviors in young students by addressing their concerns, directing them to the proper resources, and by being social support systems to help build their resilience through difficult situations.

There are many public health implications as to why it is important to focus on the pre-adolescent age group through school transitions. Many young students tend to exhibit signs of anxiety and depression, and in some extreme cases suicidal ideation. These psychological downfalls are associated with negative mental health development, and maladjustment or low resilience to adversities. Acknowledgement must be given to the idea that some instances of anxiety and depression are genetic. However, the risks posed to young children and the extent to which anxiety and depression affects them throughout middle and high school are able to be mitigated. Many actions can be taken to prevent the development of anxiety, depression and suicide in pre-adolescent students. Making sure the child has sources of social support, as well as school support (such as counseling resources) can alleviate some sources of stress, and will help the child feel that they do not have to bear the stress

alone. Having both peer and adult support can minimize the risk that the student will feel isolated through their transition. Providing resources to help the young students adjust to the new demands of their school is also particularly helpful in minimizing stress about safety, academic and organizational concerns. Helping the child build and secure a healthy sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy can reduce negative feelings and thoughts they have about themselves, and can positively influence their perspective about their transition process. The inclusion of curricula addressing positive mental health development and strategies to promote psychological well-being may be one of the most effective ways in which educators can help their students. Teaching strategies to overcome and build resilience through adversities gives the child invaluable life coping skills, and can reduce the risk for anxiety, depression and suicide.

As illustrated above, many strategies can be employed to provide a positive outcome for pre-adolescents' mental health development through the transition to middle or high school. The impact of a transitioning period affects each student individually, and their outcomes are varied across wide-spread domains. A child's socio-economic status, self-esteem and peer groups each contribute to a positive or negative transition experience through educational systems and into adulthood. Parents and educators can play a large role in mitigating some of the negative effects that are commonly seen in pre-adolescents through transition periods by intervention and pre-transition approaches. The mental health of a young child entering a transition plays a significant role in their ultimate outcome and success. Conversely, their adjustment and success through a transition is able to affect their mental health development to a large extent. Through the utilization of programs, mentors, stable friendships and even music, the mental health of pre-adolescents can be positively influenced across times of adversity, and provides them with invaluable coping strategies to move through the rest of their lives.

“The species *Homo sapiens* appears to be unique in its capability to adapt to, tolerate, and especially to create the ecologies in which it lives and grows” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The following statements summarize mental health factors and suggestions that may help pre-adolescent children to successfully cope with transitional challenges.

- Pre-adolescents cope with a variety of challenges in multiple domains when experiencing a school transition.
- Pre-adolescents tend to place a heavier emphasis on their social relationships than other elements of their new school.
- Environmental, cognitive and emotional shifts influence a pre-adolescents' cognitive appraisal of their new environment.
- A sense of connectedness and belonging with their school and peers can positively influence young students' mental health development.
- A healthy sense of self-esteem and accurate self-concept can mitigate the negative effects of a school transition.
- Peer groups and relationships can strongly influence a student's outcome through a school transition.
- Heightened support from multiple sources (parents, teachers, mentors) can minimize the risk for negative outcome through a transition period.
- Orientation programming can be extremely beneficial in promoting resilience against risk factors in pre-adolescence.
- The ability to maintain positive affect and positive coping skills through difficult situations is related to lower expression of depressive symptomology.
- A positive transition experience minimizes the risk for mental health complications.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

This topic applies to me on a very personal level. I have had experience firsthand with transitioning periods and mental health challenges. I had one friend throughout middle and high school who I had known since we were very young, but had never really conversed with. In seventh grade we made a connection, and it quickly became a situation in which I became her support for every problem she had that she didn't have anyone to talk to about. She shared with me her diagnosis of clinical depression, anxiety, and that she often had suicidal ideations (as well as two attempts over the time that I knew her, one which resulted in a hospitalization). She was diagnosed after our class had transitioned to middle school. Unfortunately part of the diagnosis was genetic, passed down from her mother who had also been diagnosed with depression when she was young. She had never liked going to school and making new friends because it made her extremely anxious. She never quite figured out how to talk to other classmates without feeling upset when they didn't support her. After some time, it seemed to me that she altogether stopped trying to create friendships or any meaningful relationship.

Looking back, I see what my friend meant when she tried to explain all of this to me. No one stuck around for her, no one talked to her, and no one was a real friend for her. She already had social anxiety, and the way every other student acted toward her didn't help. They avoided her, never even tried to be a friend, and ultimately made her feel that no one cared about her. In her head, she wasn't worth anything to anyone. She went through a downward spiral in high school. Her significant others left her and turned who she thought were her closer friends away from her by telling them she had a mental disorder. She never wanted to go to school, didn't care about herself or many other people, and never participated in any sort of extra-curriculars because she developed a high social anxiety and did not want to deal with other people. Animals were her go-to confidants, and in some ways I believe they saved her life because. She graduated high school but never went on to college. To this day, she still doesn't quite want to go and is trying to find path to follow.

I'm happy that after getting some of the therapy she needed, my friend is able to talk with other people a little more easily and even has a few close friends now.

Looking back, it makes me wonder if her whole situation could have been avoided if things had been different through her schooling experience. It is understandable that an individual with depression (especially one who hasn't been diagnosed and is confused why they feel the way they do while no one else seems to identify with them) has a more difficult time with a massive environment shift. I have always wondered what would have made the transitions easier for someone going through that sort of hardship, especially at a younger age. Going through that experience with that friend was what originally peaked my interest in the psychological sciences, and my knowledge at this point is so much vaster than I ever thought it would be. Psychology and the science of the brain and its emotional processes are not concentrated on enough. The mental health of children is an element that needs to be placed with higher importance through education programs in order to ensure their psychological well-being throughout the rest of their lives. Many young children experience hardships that are difficult to talk about, and sometimes their issues are missed or ignored. It is important that young children realize that they are not alone in how they feel, or in the adversities that they face.

Focusing attention on the mental health trajectories of young children has so many implications in the realm of public health. I strongly believe that developing psychological well-being and giving children skills to overcome adversities will help them in all stages of their lives, and through adulthood. One of the most prominent reasons that I have a passion for young children's mental health is that the psychology of the brain fascinates me. I have always been approached by my friends, family and others as someone to give advice and input about difficult situations. Growing up, my dream was to become a psychologist. To be able to help someone or a family overcome their struggles and ultimately lead a happier life and minimize the risks they would face with negative mental health was the shining light on my career path. After receiving my education in Human Development and Family Sciences, with a minor in Psychology, I am working to expand and apply my knowledge to the corporate world. My goal is to improve the workplace, and increase the happiness at work, where oftentimes it is forgotten that sometimes one smile can mean more to another person than is recognized.

The completion of this thesis is something that I've worked toward, and never thought I was going to be able to do successfully. I had to overcome many roadblocks along the way. Completing a thesis is an accomplishment that I never thought I'd be taking part in, and looking back on the experience, it is one that was more than worth it. The journey along was difficult at times, but pushing through to get to this point is more than I could have asked for. I feel accomplished, determined, strong, and like I have added something important to the world of research literature. I have always felt that if I can help at least one person with my work, no matter how well I know them, that I have been successful as an author and as a friend. With that said, it is with sincerest heart that I say "thank you".

"Making one person smile can change the world. Maybe not the whole world, but their world."

~Unknown

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Appendices

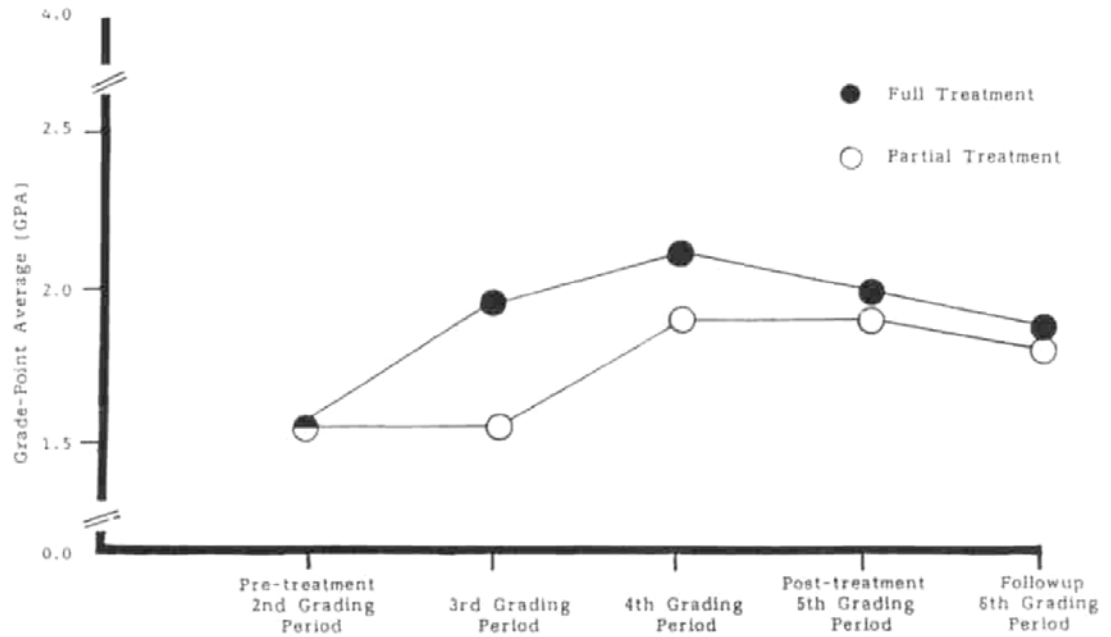


FIGURE 1. Mean Grade Point Average (GPA) for Full-Treatment and Partial-Treatment Groups at the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th Grading Periods.

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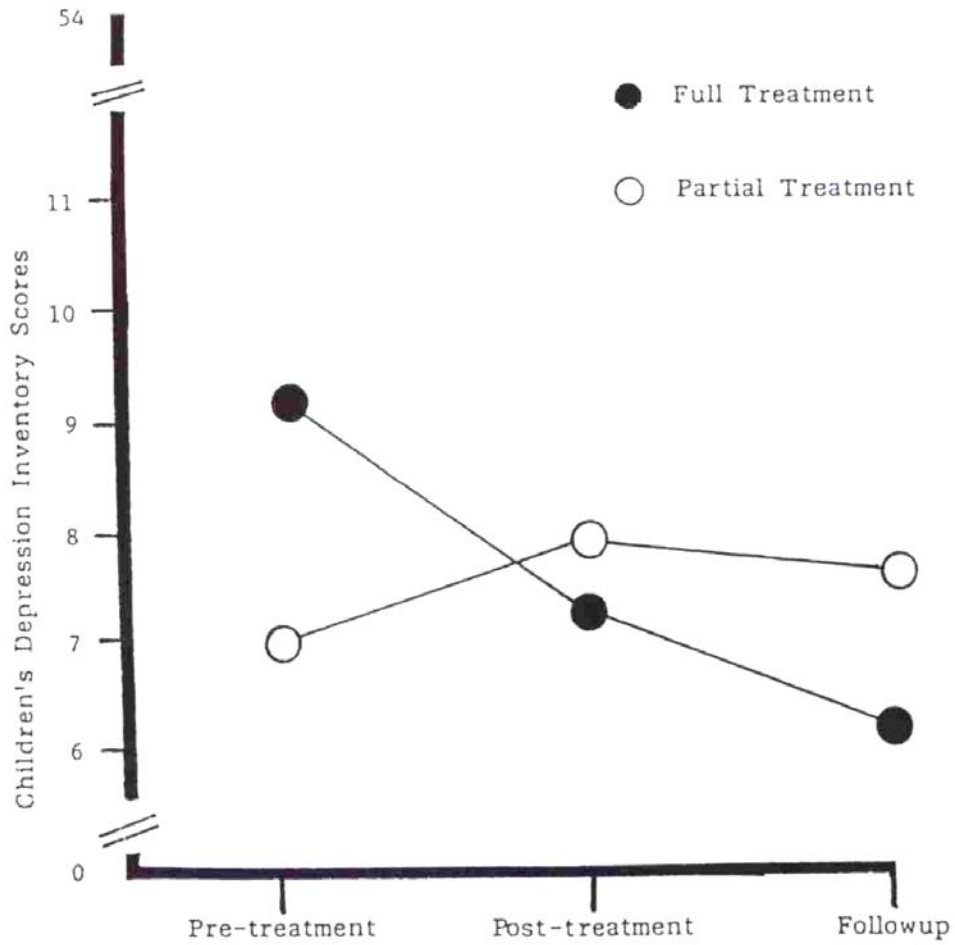


FIGURE 2. Mean Scores on the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) for Full-Treatment and Partial-Treatment Groups at Pretreatment, Posttreatment, and Follow-up.

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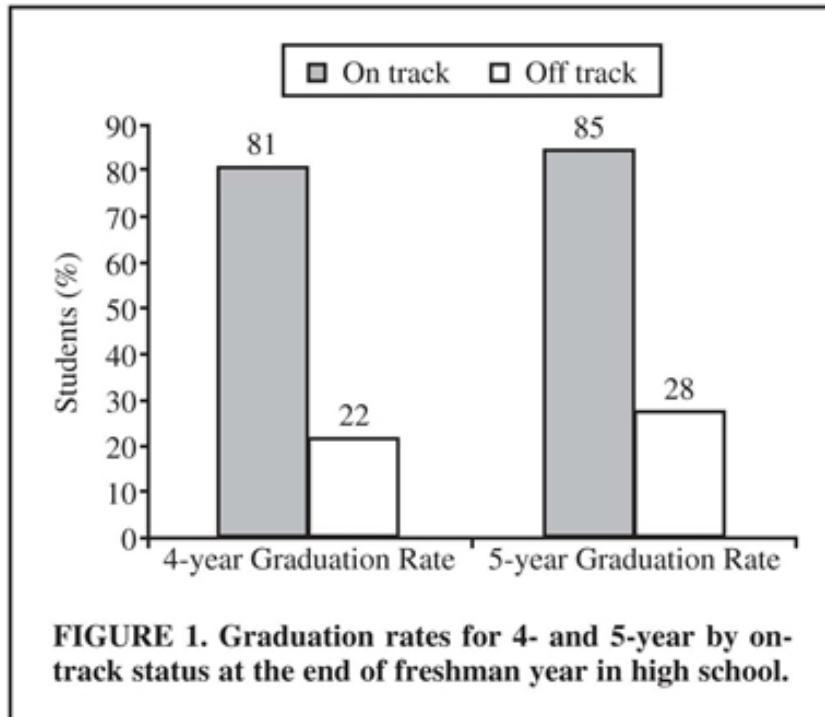


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