THE IMPACT OF A FRESHMAN ACADEMY

IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the benefits of a freshman academy and the perceived factors that lead to the success of a freshman academy through the lens of teachers. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and freshman academy team meeting observations. The participants for this study included five classroom teachers, an exceptional education teacher, a school counselor, and the administrative team of an urban high school in the southern part of the United States. The two major findings of this study that had a positive impact on the freshman academy experience were the importance of keeping freshman students isolated from the remainder of the school, as well as the value of common collaborative planning for curriculum and student interventions. A need to define common student expectations for behavior and academic progress was identified. However, though block scheduling is a common attribute of freshmen academy initiatives, participants in this study did not perceive that it was needed to achieve the desired outcomes of the freshmen academy experience and student success.
Dedication

There is not a day that goes by that I do not think about you. Every major step in my life you were there. For my baptism, you were the first person to greet me when I came out of the water. Furthermore, for my high school graduation, you were not able to walk up and down the steps of the Pyramid; however your house was the first place I went after graduation. And then for my college graduation, you passed seven months before, but graduation was on your birthday, and I wore your picture on my graduation cap. As for my Master’s degree, I kept a miniature picture of you in my pocket, so you could make the walk with me. My wife was never able to meet you; however she knows how important you are to me and decided to be creative for our wedding. On the back of my tie she had your name embroidered, so you could take the walk with me. As I complete this last leg of my educational career, I cannot think of a better way to continue your honor than by dedicating this study to you. I will always remember and love you, as I cherish each moment we had together. This study is dedicated to you, Era Mae Gilland, my grandmother.
Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge my wife, as you have been my backbone and support through this entire process. I truly appreciate having you as my number one cheerleader, encouraging me to finish this journey. Thank you love and I love you so much.

Next, I would like to acknowledge my parents, who have played a major role in my educational journey. I thank you for instilling in my brother and me the characteristics needed to be successful in life. Additionally, I thank you for valuing my education, and always supporting me regardless of your understanding. Love you mom and dad.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my brother. Thank you for setting a high bar for me to follow. It is because of you that I set out on this journey, because you know we have always been in competition with one another. I had to go higher than you in something, so I chose education. Love you brother.

Then, I would now like to acknowledge my family members in the Gilland and Mells families. Because of your consistent prayers and unwavering support, I am able to complete this journey in life. I thank you all for your love and concern you have shown during these last couple of years.

To my close knit group of friends I thank you all for not allowing me to quit this journey. I have spoken with a couple of you about not finishing this journey and you each encouraged me to finish. Due to your love shown, I have finished this journey. Thank you all and I love you all.

Last, but not least, is my son. Some people may question how I have a son so old in age, however we know the bond that we have is truly a father/son bond. My prayer is to continue to be a positive example for you, and that you continue to grow into the man we know you are. I love you son.
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Chapter I

Introduction

Introduction and Background of the Study

One of the largest challenges a high school student will face is the transition from middle school to high school. The ninth grade year is often referred to as the make it or break year (MacIver, Epstein, Sheldon, and Fonseca, 2015). An essential component of a student’s success during his/her freshman year is having a smooth transition into high school (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Freshman academies, often described as freshman transition programs, across the country are being put in place to help students with this transition (Habeeb, 2013). The purpose of a freshman academy is to provide ninth-graders with the resources and skills needed to achieve and grow in a year-long, purposefully designed school program (Osler and Waden, 2012). The goals of the academy are to help eighth-graders transition to high school smoothly while integrating academic content, closing the communication gap between teachers and parents, and helping the students find a sense of belonging, all while providing the structure needed for the students to succeed in high school (Clark and Hunley, 2007).

A freshman academy is also described as transitional program for students during their first year of high school that places them on a team of four core content area teachers who share the same 150 to 180 students (Partland, 2012). The freshman academy is often physically separate from the rest of the school. It usually lies in its own separate part of the building with its own leadership team, academy principal, and academy instructional leader (Partland, 2012).
Most freshman academies have it where their students spend all or the majority of their time in or on a separate part of the building designated for the freshman academy (Habeeb, 2013).

The major purpose of a freshman academy is to assess data points of student attendance, student discipline, and student performance results in teacher teams to be able to develop interventions to increase student retention (Partland, 2012). Students who have struggled to keep with the increasing higher expectations being set each day of high school are the reason for the creation of freshman academies (Osler and Waden, 2012). Engagement, motivating students, and building academic skills of ninth-graders are the foundations being laid by the freshman academy to secure promotion to the 10th grade leading towards graduation from high school (Kemple, Connell, Klem, Legters, and Eccles, 2015). The philosophy of student engagement and student motivation is in place to help students reach the ultimate goal of graduating from high school.

One of the major reasons students struggle with the transition to high school is the lack of academic skills developed in middle school. Students are coming to the high school level not ready for the high and demanding expectations being set for them. Students who fail to make academic progress during their first year of high school have a direct correlation to the number of advanced academic classes that can be offered at various high schools (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Freshman academies are designed to help students deal with the demands of high school in a manner conducive to fit their learning needs (Osler and Waden, 2012). A guiding principle in the freshman academy is to offer targeted remediation for students who come to high school behind academically, which hampers the progress of their success in high school (Emmett & McGee, 2012).
There is a need for creating a safe zone for students transitioning to secondary education, and the implementation of a freshman academy is a safe zone used for first-time freshman students (Osler and Waden, 2012). One of the major foci of the freshman academy is to provide the personalized support that freshman students need in the areas of social and emotional stability as they transition from middle school to high school (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

There is a need to redesign the way high schools are currently functioning to help see true school reform (Donegan, 2008). There is a genuine national concern about the vast numbers of high school students failing to meet the basic educational standards needed for a diploma, however a student’s completion of the ninth grade can be an early indicator of their adjustment to high school and academic success for the remainder of their time in high school (Mac Iver et. al., 2015). Research suggests as eighth graders move to the ninth grade they need an effective transition program to successfully navigate their passage through high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Additionally, research has been found to support the idea that success in high school correlates with a student’s success during his/her ninth grade year (Emmett & McGee, 2012). A study of freshman transition programs determined that high schools with students in transition programs performed better and were more likely to graduate than those students in schools that did not have transition programs (Smith, 1997). According to a study conducted by Allensworth and Easton (2005), 81% of students who earned enough credits to be promoted to the tenth grade, as determined by the state board of education graduated in four years as opposed to 22% of students who did not earn enough credits to be promoted and subsequently did not graduate in four years.

Ninth graders typically have the lowest grade point average, skip the most classes, miss
the most days from school, have the majority of failing grades, and receive more discipline referrals than any other high school grade level (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). With the implementation of freshman academies there have been some positive outcomes such as improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parental contact (McIntosh and White, 2006). Student growth and achievement during the freshman year of high school are affected by the structure of the freshman academy, interventions in place in a freshman academy, and the effectiveness of the relationships between teachers and students, teachers and administration, and administration and students.

Another critical variable in the transition from middle school to high school is the need to belong or be connected to the school (Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger, 2014). Quite a few students experience the hardship of transitioning to high school because of the developmentally unresponsive operations including the lack of caring relationships and a sense of belonging in high school (Roybal et.al., 2014). There is now a need for educators to address the social and emotional needs of students along with assisting students with their academics.

**Purpose and Significance of Study**

Many schools and school districts have invested time, effort, and money into the idea of and belief in freshman academies. Research supports the idea that the freshman year is an important year, as some researchers refer to it as the crucial year of high school; therefore it is pertinent to know if the implementation of a freshman academy in an urban high school is a wise and viable strategy (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). As the call to increase graduation rates across the nation continues to be heard, educators need to know if the implementation of freshman academies is the correct way to devote federal/state/local funds. Also, it becomes important to know if isolation of freshmen students, collaboration of teachers, and interventions
or incentives for students are the right pieces of the puzzle needed for an effective freshman academy.

**Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study is Maslow’s Motivational Theory. In 1943, Maslow began a journey to determine what motivates an individual to do things, and then after they have reached this satisfaction what motivates someone to do more (McLeod, 2014). Maslow determined that there were five stages in his motivation model (McLeod, 2014):

1. **Biological and Physiological Needs**: the necessities of life such as air, food, water, shelter, etc.
2. **Safety Needs**: the sense of security from all harm.
3. **Love and Belongingness Needs**: the connection to a group, whether it is family, friends, etc.
4. **Esteem Needs**: the idea of self-confidence summarizes this section, as it includes self-respect and respect from others as well.
5. **Self-Actualization Needs**: this section includes realizing and achieving full potential in all aspects of a situation.

Maslow’s model connects to the effectiveness of freshman academies by helping freshmen with their transition to high school through the ability to assist students with finding their sense of belonging. Academic performance may falter if students do not feel connected to their school through positive and effective relationships with fellow students and school personnel (Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014). An effective freshman academy integrates and supports all of the levels of Maslow’s Motivational Theory.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework supporting this research is the theory of Smaller Learning Communities. The assertion behind the Smaller Learning Communities theory is that they provide a nurturing environment for students, decentralize the typical large comprehensive high school into small central units in one school, increase personalized learning, create relevance and rigor for student coursework, and create an environment for teachers to collaborate (David, 2008).

Research Questions

The essential research questions addressed during this qualitative study through the lens of teachers were:

1. What do teachers perceive as the benefits of a smaller learning community—the freshman academy?
2. What do teachers perceive as the factors that contribute to the success of a smaller learning community—the freshman academy?

Hypotheses

(a) A benefit of the freshman academy will be a high-functioning, collaborative team.

(b) Common planning contributes to the success of the freshman academy.

(c) Student interventions/incentives contribute to the success of the freshman academy.

(d) Common expectations contribute to the success of the freshman academy.

(e) Engaging and relevant instructional lessons contribute to the success of the freshman academy.

(f) Structure and location of the freshman academy contributes to the success of the freshman academy.
The Researcher

The researcher for this study is a high school assistant principal in an urban school district. The researcher has worked in education for eleven years, six as a high school mathematics teacher and five as a high school assistant principal. Of those eleven years, the researcher has been a part of a freshman academy for eight years. The researcher has served as a freshman academy lead teacher for three years and served as a freshman academy principal for four years. The need for a successful transition from middle school to high school is a core belief of the researcher.

Limitations and Delimitations

First, the interview guide will only have face validity as it was created specifically for this study. Additionally, the administrative team in this freshman academy has experienced changes in personnel from the previous school year. Also, due to teacher turnover, the number of experienced teachers remaining from previous years has affected the dynamics of the team. The questionnaires and focus group study will only contain core content teachers—math, English, science, and wellness teachers—as other classes outside of the core have students in them who are not first-time freshmen students.

The delimitation of this study is that it only includes present teachers and administrators in the freshman academy.

Assumptions and Definition of Terms

Attendance Rate: The Tennessee Department of Education defines attendance rate by dividing the number of days present by the numbers of days taught (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015).
Promotion Rate: The promotion rate in this school district is calculated based upon the number of students who attain enough credits to be promoted to the 10th grade divided by the total number of students in the Freshman Academy. In this school district, students must attain seven out of the eight possible credits, along with passing math and English to be promoted (Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, 2011).

Achievement Rate: The Tennessee Department of Education defines achievement rate as the number of students scoring proficient and advanced on a state performance assessment divided by the total number of students assessed in that subject area (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015).

Small Learning Communities: Oxley (2005) defines small learning communities as small schools within secondary schools that focus on rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction, inclusive programs and practices, and continuous program improvement. A Freshman Academy is an example of a small learning community.

Block Scheduling: Deuel (1999) defines block scheduling as the restructuring of instructional time to longer classes so that the focus is on a more in-depth study of subjects, increase instructional flexibility, and allow for a varied study of subjects.

Common Planning: Common planning is defined as a time where teachers who share the same students regularly collaborate for instructional planning, student concerns, and parent communication during the regularly scheduled school day (Kellough & Kellough, 2008).

Growth Rate: The Tennessee Department of Education measures the growth rate as the overall growth of a student from year to the next year in a specific subject area through a value-added model (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015).

Administrative Team: The administrative team for this study is the assistant principal, academy
lead teacher/instructional leader, and school counselor (Partland, 2012).

**Organization of the Study**

This study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is about the purpose and organization of the study. Included in this chapter is background information of the study, research questions, theoretical foundation, and definition of terms. The second chapter is the review of relevant material. In this chapter a comprehensive literature review is presented and an analysis of various theories. Next is chapter three, which includes the research methodology. Found in this chapter is the population and sample of the study, research procedures, explanation of how data will be analyzed, and a description of the instruments being used to analyze data found in the study. Chapter four is the results of the data analysis. Included in this chapter are the results regarding the hypotheses, finding interactions, and relevant results and findings. The final chapter, chapter five, is conclusions, implications, and recommendations. In this final chapter there is a discussion of conclusions drawn and recommendations made for future studies and/or policy issues.

**Summary**

This study is based on the conceptual framework provided by Maslow’s Motivational Theory and the Smaller Learning Communities Theory as described by David (2008). Research has suggested the pivotal role of ninth grade success to high school graduation rate. In response to the need for higher graduation rates to prepare students for work and life, many schools and districts have implemented a ninth grade academy. This study will capture the voice of the teachers and administrators who are part of a smaller learning community in an urban context to identify their perceptions of the benefits of the ninth grade academy and what factors of the initiative produce positive results.
Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

The review of literature for this study was organized into nine sections. The review of literature examined the following topics: the ninth grade experience and the need for the freshmen academy, at-risk high school freshmen students, a background on urban high schools, the practice of isolation of ninth grade students from other grade levels, block scheduling, common planning time, positive potential outcomes of freshman academies, characteristics of effective freshmen academies, and school-home communications.

Ninth Grade Transition

The ninth grade year, often considered the make it or break it year, is a focal point for most educators as they try to assist students in their education matriculation (Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, and Fonseca, 2015). Styron and Peasant (2010) found that ninth grade students were placed in situations in high school that they were not prepared to handle yet. Neild (2009) found that ninth grade students were not prepared for the academic challenges of high school. Even though students may have succeeded in middle school, they were normally not prepared to take on the raised academic expectations brought on by high school teachers (Neild, 2009). School administrators have been focused on finding solutions to assisting with a smooth transition from middle school to high school for students (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Neild (2009) described t
The ninth-grade year as a social marker for students, as this informs parents that their student deserves greater independence. Even more, it is a social marker with peers as they need to be included in social activities for older adolescents. Research has found evidence that there are low odds for students to graduate from high school if they fall off track during their freshman year of high school (Neild, 2009). Another essential element for ninth grade students during their transition to high school is finding the right extracurricular activity to join. It has been concluded that students who engaged in various school activities became more aligned with the mission and culture of their new school (Fulk, 2003).

Additionally, ninth grade students struggle with the raised expectations from teachers in high school as well as struggle with the freedom to choose curriculum and activities to participate in during their high school tenure (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Ninth grade students have communicated the need for more preparation for high school in areas such as knowing more information about the high school they are going to attend, the classes they are going to take, and how to navigate the school building (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Not only do ninth grade students need additional preparation for high school, but they need to become aware of the various resources offered to them at the high school level that would assist with their transition (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Neild (2009) stated there are four reasons that ninth graders struggle during the transition to high school: 1) high school organization and culture, 2) inadequate preparation for high school, 3) transition to a new school, and 4) life-course changes. Furthermore, ninth graders who get off track in a large urban school district have a higher risk of dropping out of high school (Neild, 2009).
At-Risk Student

The purpose of the freshman academy is to assist students with their transition to high school, as well as supporting students who are at risk. When identifying at-risk students in high school, there has not been a clear absolute way to determine these students however, there are early warning signs that all educators should closely monitor in their building (Baker & Sansone, 1990). Creech (2000) determined that most students who do not finish high school often lived in single-parent homes, lived in low-income households, had family members who did not finish high school, had attendance and behavior issues, had repeated one or more grades, or did not speak English as a first language or at all. The more of the above-listed factors that students have in their life, the higher the chance of the student dropping out of school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) discovered that middle school students who have one of the following four flags often do not complete high school:

- Failed mathematics
- Failed English
- Have an attendance rate of below 80% for the school year
- Have an “unsatisfactory” behavior mark in at least one class

In urban schools there are additional at-risk factors that are critical when addressing high school students. When urban schools are trying to tackle the phenomenon of high school dropouts, they usually must address high poverty, high student mobility, the size of the school, and teacher retention (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Students who move frequently must consistently make adjustments to new rules and regulations in place at their new school as well as conquer the social phenomenon that exists at the new school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Often times if a student is already struggling with school, this new phenomenon will lead to
student dropout (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Felter (1989) found that for the most part, urban schools are usually larger than others, and this is not ideal when dealing with discipline, safety, and other effective dropout prevention initiatives.

**Urban Schools**

Often times urban schools are described as schools that are pervaded by high concentrations of poverty, a diversity of racial, cultural, and language backgrounds, and over-crowdedness (Knapp, Feldman, & Yeh, 2013). Schools are identified as urban schools based upon norms and expectations set by the European American culture (Friend & Caruthers, 2012). Additionally, teaching and learning in an urban school setting typically produces less than other schools, leading to low level student performance on various accountability assessments (Knapp, Feldman, & Yeh, 2013). Furthermore, educators in urban schools must also learn to maneuver around the various circumstances that students in urban schools bring to school with them (Friend & Caruthers, 2012).

Typically in urban schools there is little to no parental involvement. Administrators are consistently looking for ways to increase parental involvement. Even though research supports the notion that parental involvement increases student achievement regardless of the child’s race, grade level, and/or socioeconomic class, parents of color who are poor were found to less likely participate in school sponsored activities (Mapp, 2004). Despite what many administrators may believe, when parents perceive their child and their child’s administrators wants them to be involved, then they will be involved (Anderson & Minke, 2007). It is up to the school’s administrative team to make an extra effort to create an environment where parents/guardians feel welcomed in the building, so they would in turn assist with their child’s education.

**Structure/Location**
Research supports the idea that Freshman Academies must be structured in a way that separates first-time freshmen away from the rest of the high school students. In a typical Freshman Academy, all of the freshmen are located in a designated location separate from the rest of the school that includes a location for the Freshman Academy principal (Banner and Myers, 2015). McIntosh and White (2006) identified that creating a teaming concept on a separate wing of the building for a freshman academy promotes an easier transition for first-year students. Most Freshman Academies use a school-in-a-school model to isolate freshmen (Clark and Hunley, 2007). The purpose of this isolation is to increase the number of successful ninth-grade students and to help with the transition to high school (McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010). It is also believed that this structure of Freshman Academies has a positive impact on the entire high school (Habeeb, 2013). There is also research that states ninth-grade only schools do not have the same effect as schools with Freshman Academies.

Not only is it important to develop the physical structure and location of the Freshman Academy, but it is just as important to structure the Freshman Academy in a manner that is more conducive to producing positive student outcomes. McIntosh and White (2006) determined through research that effective Freshman Academy structures are ones that include a Freshman Academy administrator, instructional specialist, and a counselor. An integral key to the success of the transition for students is a supportive administrator. It has been determined that very few programs have had positive outcomes in an unsupportive work environment (Hermann et al., 2002). The counselor also has an important role in the structure of the Freshman Academy as it is essential for the counselor to work closely with the middle school team to help make the transition to high school as smooth as possible (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Also, it was
determined that a team of teachers would who have common planning is needed in the Freshman Academy (McIntosh and White, 2006).

Additionally, in a typical urban high school the case load for teachers is extremely heavy, which in turn makes it difficult for teachers and students to build quality, useful relationships (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Using the smaller learning community concept, freshman academies are able to develop smaller teams of students for teachers to allow for more personalized approach to education (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Also, following along with the smaller learning community approach is the need for orientation meetings for parents and students during their eighth grade year to prepare them for the transition to high school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

**Block Scheduling**

Block scheduling is defined as reorganizing the school into classes that are longer than the usual 50-minute class period (Gruber and Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Schools all across the United States have increased the usage of block schedules, as roughly 40% of high schools in the nation have adopted block scheduling (Gruber and Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Additionally, through the use of longer class periods schools are trying to improve student test scores, reduce discipline problems, and enhance learning (The Oregon Department of Education, 1996). Also, by implementing block scheduling schools are able to address current accountability demands, simplify school structure, improve educational outcomes among all students, and provide flexibility and organization needed to produce the best schools possible (Edwards, 1993).

According to Carroll (1990) structuring the school into blocks of 90 minutes helps alleviate the feeling of being overwhelmed from students by the various academic materials, numerous sets of classroom rules, multiple homework assignments, and disjointed curricula.
Student and teacher perspectives of various educational initiatives are important to determine the true effectiveness of initiatives. Teachers who teach on a 4 x 4 block schedule feel they have fewer class preparations, more time to undertake their current duties, less students per semester, and less paper work to complete (Gruber and Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Additionally, a study completed by Stader and DeSpain (1999) comparing block scheduling to traditional scheduling revealed that teachers and administrators perceive block scheduling to have contributed to student achievement. Also, it was determined that there was improvement in the quality of student work, depth of subject matter taught, student retention of material, as well as an increase in student enrollment in advanced courses (Stader and DeSpain, 1999).

As for students, they favor block scheduling because they have less homework (Gruber and Onwuegbuzie, 2001). McCoy (1998) completed a study analyzing the effects of block scheduling in secondary schools and found that students expressed a belief that they were more empowered in regards to their learning. McCoy also found that more homework was being completed, and that overall all students benefited equally regardless of ability level, attitude toward school, and degree of school success. Furthermore, Corley (2003) found that the students believed the benefits of block scheduling were more total learning time, more time to learn concepts better, ample opportunities to work with other students, more one-on-one help from teachers, time to finish homework in class more often, better academic grades, additional time to prepare for tests, and simply liking the schedule altogether. Not only has block scheduling had an impact on academic achievement for schools, but Williams (2011) found that it has increased attendance rates and decreased discipline rates in secondary schools.

Most Freshman Academies in the United States have adopted some form of block scheduling for students. Block scheduling is put in place to help give more support to students in
their beginning classes to make sure the foundation is laid correctly for them. Block scheduling also allows for flexibility for Freshman Academies to be able to operate in their own manner. A high school in Greeneville, KY was not able to fully implement a Freshman Academy in their building however they were able to flex some of their schedule to allow for some freshman isolation from the rest of the school due to block scheduling (Clark and Hunley, 2007). They manipulated their freshman schedules so that all freshmen would have their core classes—Math, English, Science, and Social Studies—for an entire year instead of following the typical 4 x 4 block schedule that the rest of the school was following, (Clark and Hunley, 2007).

**Collaborative Teacher Planning**

It has been found that collaborative planning is one of the most valuable assets to increased teacher learning (Rimpola, 2014). Research has found that collaborative teams create momentum needed for creating action plans for school improvement (Rimpola, 2014). Collaborative planning offers teachers the opportunity to be reflective about their practices while also being able to provide feedback to one another about various practices (Clarke et al., 1996). The purpose of lesson planning as defined by Tyler (2013) is to identify the school’s goal, selecting methods and learning experiences to meet those goals, organizing instructional experiences, and assessing how effectively goals were met. The idea of teachers being reflective around this concept provides a growth area needed for all instructors to provide the best instruction possible for their students. Collaborative planning also provides teachers a safe space to share knowledge with one another about various teaching strategies that they have found to be effective, and the opportunity to learn new strategies from one another that better their practices in a continuous learning format (Putnam and Borko, 2000).
One of the biggest components for implementing a successful Freshman Academy is teacher collaboration. It is critical for the teachers collaborating with one another to commit to the process and focus on the needs of the student body as a whole, as collaborative planning does not just occur by forming a group of teachers (Rimpola, 2014). Getting teachers to collaborate with one another and to come up with common language and common goals helps run and maintain a successful Freshman Academy. Teachers with collaborative planning come together to develop common expectations for all classrooms in the Freshman Academy (Banner and Myers, 2015). The common expectations then become adopted by the administration, so that they will use the same language in discipline situations with students (Banner and Myers, 2015). The idea of working together collaboratively with one set of norms/expectations allows for students to be able to adhere to the guidelines set forth in all classrooms without confusion. During the collaborative planning process it becomes essential to make sure all parties involved in the collaborative planning process have the same vested ownership (Rimpola, 2014).

Not only does collaborative planning offer teachers the opportunity to create common systems and expectations and share student concerns, but it also allows teachers to be able to have discussions geared to the academic needs of students in the Freshman Academy. Teachers being able to share ideas about best practices with common struggling students allowed for the creation of a collective unit to address the challenges presented by at-risk students (Emmett & McGee, 2012). During these collaborative meetings teachers were able to share effective strategies they were using to increase student achievement and growth (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

“A nurturing and supportive environment is created when a team of at least four teachers, representing at least the four core subject areas, shares a group of students and meets
regularly to discuss ways to meet their students’ needs” (Habeeb, 2013, p. 20). Teachers in teams of four are able to profit from one another’s strengths to increase their effectiveness as a teacher team (Habeeb, 2013). Flexibility is created inside of the teacher teams due to the teams having the same students and teachers having the same schedule (Clark and Hunley, 2007).

Educators at Salem High School implemented several critical success strategies that contributed to the academic success of students in Salem, VA that are listed below (Osler and Waden, 2012):

- First, they created a team of teachers representing the core curriculum in areas such as English, Math, Science, and World History. Teachers met daily during a common planning period to standardized expectations, develop possible cross curriculum assignments, and when necessary, conference with students and/or parents.
- Each student had the same four classes with the same four teachers, but not necessarily in the same order, ensuring that the student’s peer interactions were varied from class to class.
- Next, the team established a common system of class rules, procedures, and expectations.
- Finally, the team worked to identify common problems and to discuss solutions.

**Positive Outcomes**

The goal of the Freshman Academy is not just for first-time freshmen to succeed, but also to see the overall school climate, culture, and achievement positively change. The entire school population will reap the benefits of separating freshmen from the remainder of the school (Habeeb, 2013). Ninth grade students get more acclimated to the expectations of high school and become more mature and ready for high school with they are segregated from the rest of the
Research supports that ninth graders can easily become bewildered in a large traditional high school environment and end up failing the ninth-grade (McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010).

A study completed in North Carolina measured the success of Freshman Academies and their role in decreasing student dropouts. Data yielded the following results (Osler and Waden, 2012).

- Ninth grade academies or similar models have indeed made a positive impact upon ninth grade student achievement in North Carolina.
- Large percentages of respondents overwhelmingly agreed that ninth grade academy models have contributed to reduced retention rates, attendance rates, and made a difference on student academic outcomes in the schools identified in the study.
- Ninth grade models also contributed to the decline in the dropout rates of at-risk ninth-grade students in the school identified in the study.

Not only are Freshman Academies created to help with positive student outcomes, but they are also created to help with teacher morale and increased parental involvement. Teachers no longer feel as if they are working by themselves, and parents feel as if they have a voice in their child’s education, which sometimes is lost during high school. Successful Freshman Academies have contributed some positive outcomes such as improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parental contact (McIntosh & White, 2006).

Patterson et al (2007) conducted a study of the implementation of a Freshman Academy in a Midwestern school, and positive gains were found at this school. This school did a comparison of students in a freshman academy versus the other students in the building who were not in the freshman academy. The students who were in the Freshman Academy found themselves
drastically less bored in classes, and believed their teachers were treating them all fairly and respectfully (Patterson et al., 2007). Patterson et al. (2007) also found that the relationships between teachers and students in the Freshman Academy were much stronger than the relationships with the students who were not in the Freshman Academy. Lastly, for the cohort of students who were in the Freshman Academy data revealed that suspensions were significantly fewer, the attendance rate was higher, and the promotion rate to the tenth grade was better (Patterson et al. 2007).

**Characteristics of an Effective Academy**

The communication gap between middle school and high school must be mended in order to begin a smooth transition for students (McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010). Scott Habeeb (2013) studied freshmen transition programs across the country and found several key components that must be present to maximize the impact of freshman transitions programs. The key components are (Habeeb, 2013):

- Make the high school a more nurturing environment where it is difficult for students to slip through the cracks.
- Standardize expectations so that students know what they should do and teachers know what they should look for so that outcomes can improve.
- Equip students with the belief systems they need to learn and be successful.
- Create classroom cultures where excellence occurs.
- Teach students organizational and time-management strategies.
- Foster effective parent-teacher contact.
- Ensure that the teachers of freshmen grow professionally and use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology.
• Recognize freshmen for their accomplishments and make them feel at home within high school.

• Preemptively and proactively provide support services for students who fall behind.

Habeeb identified six characteristics of effective programs (Habeeb, 2013): be flexible, be thrifty, be positive, be effectual, be empowering, and be efficacious. Alongside these characteristics Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger (2014) determined that the following interventions have been effective with the implementation of freshman transition programs:

• Collaborative planning amongst the middle and high school teachers.

• Development of parental involvement with various high school activities.

• Supports that provide aide for students with their homework.

• Incentive plans for attendance, academics, and behaviors.

• A grade system for earning credits either each quarter or semester

• Developing a master schedule that allows for block scheduling for all core classes (math, English, science, and social studies).

• Implementation of this plan should be on a closed campus using the small learning communities’ model.

• Create a plan for ongoing celebrations of student successes.

Incentives to help cultivate a nurturing environment in a Freshman Academy are a distinct characteristic of a freshman transition program. Various academy award days are initiated to increase student ownership and participation in academy activities. Schools have used holiday parties and other incentives to help student increase their attendance rate and behavior in the school building (Clark and Hunley, 2007). Teachers also try to incorporate time during their common planning time to assess the student recognition process (Banner and Myers, 2015).
Furthermore, in order for school leaders to create the nurturing environment needed in the Freshman Academy there must be a shift in focus that allows for a culture of care to be created. Cushman (2003) discovered that students respond in a more positive manner when they are being educated in an environment with teachers that do the following:

- Care about connecting with them.
- Provide family-like relationships.
- Care about the subject they teach.

Additionally, Schussler and Collins (2006) determined there are five types of caring relationships on which students focus:

- Teacher-Student Care: this relationship happens when the teacher shows care through academic, personal, and social interactions with students.
- Student-Student Care: this relationship is categorized by having positive peer interactions and usually found through unity and acceptance.
- School-Student Care: this relationship is organized in a manner where the school creates a culture of care with opportunities for students to express their actions in caring ways.
- Student-School Care: this relationship, which is the reverse of the aforementioned relationship, creates the opportunity for students to demonstrate their care for their school.
- Student-Teacher Care: this relationship is best described as a student’s desire to protect and demonstrate care towards their teachers.

Another characteristic of an effective freshman academy is one that allows students to develop a sense of connection. The sense of connection extends far beyond a student just
socializing in a school, but towards actual student engagement in the school which in turn contributes to improved graduation rates and increased student achievement (Nitzas and Dobias, 2015). As educators continue to look for ways to increase student achievement, there has been an increased focus on the concept of school connectedness, or the extent to which students feel engaged with and a part of their schools (Nitzas and Dobias, 2015). Decreasing negative student behaviors and increasing student attendance are both concerns that educators across the nation are trying to address however it has been found that student connection to the school has had a positive impact in these areas (Manning, 2005). Manning (2005) found in a comprehensive review of research on improving graduation rates and student achievement that student connectedness to the school is the key to engaging students and keeping them in school.

There is not one answer for implementing a freshman academy for students to transition to high school. There should be a multifaceted approach when trying to develop an effective approach, as research supports the concept that freshmen need effective transition programs to successfully move from the eighth grade to the ninth grade and then from the ninth grade to the tenth grade (Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger, 2014). Roybal, Thornton, and Usinger (2014) developed six key points that should be addressed when implementing effective transition programs:

- A sense of belonging for the students should be created by the schools.
- Despite what most people may think and believe, parents should have an active role in the high school education of their students.
- The transition program should be multi-layered to address all of the barriers to success for all students.
• The implementation of the Continuous Improvement Cycle is needed with the continuous professional development for teachers, as well as the hiring of caring teachers who are highly effective.

• There must be a reliable evaluation of programs used to conduct an assessment of the transition program as a whole.

• There should be formative checkpoints along the way for continuous improvements of the transition program.

Parental Contact

One of the largest contributors for success in high school is parental engagement (Eccles, 2007). Family engagement is a crucial aspect of a student’s educational support system that cannot be ignored, (Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, & Fonseca, 2015). Supportive family members and social networks can positively impact the number of student dropouts (Strom & Boster, 2007). Active and supportive communication to families is an integral part to increasing student achievement (Flaxman & Inger, 1992). Ouellette and Wilkerson (2008) found that student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement can be impacted by parent/guardian attitudes. Additionally, a correlation was found between a student’s academic performance and later school achievement to parental expectations set for students (Fan and Chen, 2001).

Many secondary schools across the country have struggled with the concept of engaging families in their child’s education, (Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon, Simon, and Salinas, 2008). As freshmen progress throughout high school, parental involvement tends to decrease; however, at the beginning of high school when expectations are at their greatest for students, parents tend to be more involved in the learning process (Shumow and Schmidt, 2014). Parents are more likely to come to school when their student is a freshman; they are less likely to come as they did when
their child was in elementary school or middle school due to the unfamiliarity of high school (Shumow and Schmidt, 2014).

Shumow and Schmidt completed a study published in 2014 about the effects parent engagement has on ninth grade students versus other grade levels in the building. Some of the findings are listed below (Shumow and Schmidt, 2014):

- Parent engagement contributed to students’ motivation and performance in science.
- Parent engagement at school contributed to ninth graders’ valuing of what they were learning in science class but did not impact students in higher grades.
- Freshmen reported greater parent engagement at home and lower parent engagement at school relative to students in the higher grades.
- Parent engagement at home was associated positively with student’s engagement (perception that class was interesting and important) but negatively with GPA.
- Parent engagement at school was associated positively with sense of skillfulness and GPA but negatively with time spent doing homework.
- Ninth grade students whose parents were more engaged at home felt considerably more skillful during science class than students whose parents were less involved, whereas there was little difference in how skillful students in older grades felt relative to their parents’ engagement at home.

Hoover-Dempsey, Ice, & Whitaker (2009) found that increased parental involvement tends to support student learning, modeled expected student behavior, reinforced the importance of school learning tasks, and increased success in school. It has also been found that family and community involvement has improved student daily attendance and decreased chronic absenteeism (Mac Iver et.al., 2015). Sheldon (2003) found a correlation of high student
performance on state assessments to schools that have strong parent and community relationships. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) determined that schools that worked to improve quality parent partnerships from year to year decreased the number of disciplinary actions with students. Additionally, schools that implemented various parent initiatives linked to attendance saw an increase in attendance rate and a decrease in chronic absenteeism (Sheldon and Epstein, 2004).

At this point in time there is still not enough research evidence that supports the idea that parental involvement improves student outcomes at the high school level (Agronick, Clark, O’Donnell, & Stueve, 2009). Moreover, there are several ways for schools to encourage parental participation in the freshman year, but many schools have not been able to find a way to implement a program that is successful (Shumow and Schmidt, 2014). Furthermore, there is little research that points directly to the effect parental involvement has on a student’s transition to high school (Mac Iver et.al., 2015).

**Summary**

This review of literature focuses on nine concepts around freshman academies and the at-risk student in an urban high school setting. The first part of this chapter addresses the background information surrounding the need for the implementation of freshman academies. The researcher was able to address the problems that arise for students as they transition from middle school to high school. Additionally, the researcher focused on the characteristics of an at-risk students and the elements that define an urban high school.

For the second part of this literature review, the researcher focused on various characteristics of a successful freshman academy. Structure and location of the Freshman Academy was determined as an essential element in setting the foundation for a freshman
academy. Furthermore, the researcher was able to find background information about collaborative planning and block scheduling, as they have integral role in the day-to-day operations of a freshman academy. Next, the researcher was able to provide various characteristics of a successful freshman academy as well as positive outcomes from current freshman academies that have been implemented across the country. Lastly, the literature review was concluded with a section about the importance of family engagement during the transition from middle school to high school.
Chapter III

Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter includes a description of the population, data collection and techniques, data analysis techniques and instruments, the time period of the study, and the research procedures for the study. The purpose of this study was to determine the essential elements for having an effective freshman academy through the lens of teachers and administrators. This study describes the needs for a transition program for ninth graders as they navigate their way through high school, and it helps to determine what factors are needed in order for students to be successful during this transition.

Research Questions

The essential research questions addressed during this qualitative study through the lens of teachers were:

1. What do teachers perceive as the benefits of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy?

2. What do teachers perceive as the factors that contribute to the success of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy?

Population

The population for this study was the Freshman Academy teachers and administrative team of a high school in an urban school district in the southern United States. The Freshman Academy consists of ten core teachers, including one special education teacher, one Freshman
Academy principal, one Freshman Academy lead teacher, and one Freshman Academy counselor. The teachers in the Freshman Academy and the administrative team leading the school and the academy were asked to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. To allow for the comfort of each participant the interviews took place at the school. Triangulation of data occurred through classroom observations and observations of team meetings.

The teacher participants chosen for this study were six teachers: math, English, science, reading, wellness, and exceptional education. The entire administrative team of the Freshman Academy was chosen to participate in this study, which consisted of a Freshman Academy principal, a Freshman Academy counselor, and a Freshman Academy lead teacher. The experience of the participants varied from first year teacher and first year in the Freshman Academy to fifteen year teacher and fifth year in the Freshman Academy.

**Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is defined as the researcher being the primary data collection tool in a flexible design with an inductive approach used to examine a phenomenon (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, & Walker, 2014). This type of research is focused on the understanding of a social phenomenon through the viewpoint of human participants in their natural settings (Ary, et.al., 2014). The results from a qualitative research study are usually more descriptive than predictive (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, 2016). Additionally, to be able to extend beyond the surface layer of questions/responses during qualitative research, the researcher may go more in-depth with participants during interviews (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, 2016).

Qualitative research is more aligned to this study’s examination of the effectiveness of freshman academies in an urban setting. The researcher collected all data, as well as analyzed the
data in a self-contained setting. The semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions and to probe for clarification. Data collected in the interviews were triangulated by observations of classrooms and freshmen academy team meetings. The teacher interview guide for this study is in Appendix A. Using this type of research allowed the researcher the opportunity to make adjustments during the interviews with teachers and administrators as patterns arose. At the end of this study the researcher was able to draw a conclusion versus only making a prediction.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory research is where a theory of social phenomena is established based upon data found in the study (Ary, et.al., 2014). Also, grounded theory is a research method that enables the researcher to develop a theory that explains the main concerns of the research population, and how those concerns are resolved or handled (Scott, 2009). From the interviews, classroom observations, and the observations of the Freshmen Academy team meetings, the researcher was able to develop a grounded theory of attributes that contribute to the effectiveness of a freshman academy. From the interviews that took place during the methods portion of this research, the researcher was able to form a theory of perception from all who were interviewed.

Data Collection & Techniques

Data were collected in several ways to determine the benefits of freshman academies and the factors needed to contribute to the overall success of freshman academies. For this study data were gathered through teacher and administrative interviews. Additionally, the characteristics of effective freshmen academies were collected and verified through classroom observations and the observation of team meetings.
Administrative interviews were the first form of qualitative data collected during this study. The administrative interviews were conducted with the Freshman Academy principal, the Freshman Academy lead teacher, and the Freshman Academy counselor. The responses were pertinent to the understanding of the functionality of freshman academies, in particular this urban Freshman Academy. The questions on the interview guide revolved around the structures and strategies put in place for freshman academies to thrive and flourish. Furthermore, the administrative team was asked the same questions as the teacher participant to be able to compare data found between the two groups of educators. The administrative team also was interviewed through a semi-structured interview format, allowing the researcher to probe with follow-up questions.

The teacher interviews served as one of the most invaluable artifacts of the entire study, as teachers are the people who are on the ground working to making sure that the vision and mission of the freshman academies are helping create positive learning outcomes for students. There was at least one teacher interviewed from each of the content areas—mathematics, English, science, reading, and wellness. Selecting teachers with multiple years of experience working in an urban school with a freshmen academy. The questions revolved around the supports needed to provide the highest quality of instruction for all students. Also, questions included those concerning systems and structures needed to support student behavior. The questions were open-ended to allow the researcher to capture the full voice of the teachers and administrators, while allowing the researcher to probe for justifications of the answers and to gain greater clarity.

The classroom and team meeting observations allowed the researcher to gain understanding of the statements made during the interviews. Also, the observations allowed the
researcher the opportunity to see the interview answers in a practical setting. The researcher recorded conversations held in the classroom, and took notes of all visible objects in the classrooms. The researcher went into the classrooms looking to answer the questions from the interview guide to be able to compare data from the teacher responses.

Additionally, through the team meeting observation the researcher was able to see the interactions of all the participants in one setting at the same time. Furthermore, this observation allowed the researcher to observe the interactions of the other members in the Freshman Academy who did not participate in this study. This qualitative study is pertinent to determine what is truly needed for a freshman academy to be considered impactful.

**Data Analysis Techniques & Instruments**

The interview questions were created by the researcher. Some of the questions were reflective of the findings and research which compose the literature review of this study. The questions were designed to enlighten the researcher on what is effective in the Freshman Academy, as well as initiatives that have not been as successful in the Freshman Academy. The interviews were analyzed by the use of Maxwell’s Qualitative Research Design (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell’s (2005) design is based upon five essential elements: goals, conceptual framework, research questions, methods, and validity. All of the essential elements go hand-in-hand with one another, as one cannot be completed without the other.

The first step of the research methods was to gain permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Carson-Newman University and the Director of Schools of this school district. The permission letter from the Director of Schools is located in Appendix B. Next, an informed consent from all participants was collected, which is located in Appendix C. Then, interviews were conducted and audiotaped with the permission of the participants. The
researcher also took field notes during the interviews. The researcher kept the audiotapes and field notes in a secured location, and will destroy all materials one year after the conclusion of the study. Immediately following the interviews the researcher listened to the audiotape, reviewed the field notes, and made any additions or corrections to them.

Following this step the researcher began coding the raw data. Coding is a key element of the qualitative research process, as they set the foundation for the conclusion of the overall study. The next step was to categorize the responses from the teacher and administrative interviews in various groups. This step is for the researcher to find various patterns in the research that was expected or not expected (Ary, et.al., 2014). During this coding portion of the methodology, the researcher reviewed data from the interviews, classroom observations, and team meeting observations over and over again until themes were found. This helped organize data in a manner that is understandable for all readers of the reports (Ary, et.al., 2014). As data were collected and reviewed the researcher was able to notice patterns, which helped narrow the focus of the data analysis. A sample item from the coding completed by the researcher is located in Appendix D.

The key point of the analysis section was to find alignment or misalignment with administration, teachers, and observations of classrooms and team meetings. The purpose is to determine what is needed from all stakeholders for a freshman academy to be successful. Also, this information was used to guide the matriculation of the study. This information created a more in-depth understanding of the value of freshman academies, and the significance to sustain them in a traditional high school setting. Finding the essential element of the Freshman Academy allowed for one to determine what area to focus on to keep students engaged in their academic progress throughout their high school tenure.

Also, there were observations of Freshman Academy team meetings. This helped
determine the impact of teacher planning and teacher collaboration has on the effectiveness of the overall academy, and to verify the statements made by the participants in the interviews. The responses from the interviews helped guide the points of emphasis for the observation of the meetings. From the information gathered during the semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and observation of team meetings the researcher was able to explain the effectiveness of a smaller learning community that results in improved student outcomes. Additionally, freshmen classrooms were observed to assist in triangulation.

**Research Procedures and Time Period of the Study**

The first step in this timeline was to obtain approval from the IRB of Carson-Newman University, since the methodology contains human subjects. The research proposal must be submitted to the IRB before any part of the methodology can be completed. Once the approval has been received from the IRB the researcher must then obtain approval from the Director of Schools of this school district. The school district required the researcher to submit an in-depth proposal for this study to be conducted. Once this approval was received the researcher was able to move forward with the methodology part of this research experiment.

This study took place at the beginning of the second semester of the school year in the Freshman Academy. The interviews, classroom observations and team meeting observations all took place in the period of one month. The purpose for completing the study during this timeframe was to allow those teachers with less experience in an urban freshman academy ample opportunity to be able to determine the root causes of effectiveness in the Freshman Academy. This time period also allowed for a true observation of the Freshman Academy meetings, as at this point in time there should be enough school data and interventions in place for the researcher to be able to observe. Additionally, this timeframe allowed for various initiatives implemented in
the Freshman Academy to be in place with confidence.

As for research procedures, teachers were asked individually to participate in this study. All participants were required to complete an informed consent in order to participate in this study. The informed consent gives the researcher the permission needed to conduct the study with the participants as well as the permission to publish the information attained during this study. Teacher selection was based upon diversifying the participant pool to have a variety of teachers with experience versus novice teachers. The administrative team interviews took place first, followed by teacher interviews. Both sets of interviews were aligned to the hypotheses of the study. The concluding part of the procedures was observations of Freshman Academy team meetings. After all of these key elements have been completed the researcher was able to complete the triangulation part of the study.

**Summary**

The methodology portion of this study begins with an introduction to the purpose of the methods used in this study, followed by the population of the participants. Next, there is the explanation of the usefulness of qualitative research and grounded research theory as it aligns with this study. The data collection techniques and analysis are the next portions of this section. This is the area that provides a detailed explanation of how the research was conducted as well as how the information was analyzed to make conclusions. The last portion of the methodology section is the research timeline for the conducting the methods portion of the study.

In conclusion the following steps were followed to examine the qualitative data found in this study:

1. An audio recording of each interview with the nine participants.
2. Each interview was additionally recorded by the researcher typing the responses on an
electronic copy of the interview guide.

3. The researcher then reviewed the recordings to verify all responses were recorded in the electronic copy correctly.

4. The researcher visited the Freshman Academy to observe classrooms and team meetings.

5. During the classroom observations and team meetings the researcher scribed notes the entire time.

6. The researcher then completed a first round of coding of interviews, chunking data into various themes.

7. The researcher completed a second round of coding to chunk themes into various patterns found.

8. The researcher then looked for data connections between the interviews, classroom observations, and team meeting observations.

9. The researcher then reviewed the final themes found to finalize the final set of qualitative data.
Chapter IV

Results of Data Findings

Introduction

In this chapter there is an analysis of data collected during this case study. Data were collected in a freshman academy in an urban school district in the southern part of the United States of America. The participants for this case study were six freshman academy teachers and three members of the freshman academy administrative team. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, and academy meeting observations. The results of these data were reported by each of the hypotheses, and in response to the research questions. Additionally, any other findings that were not outliers as part of the study were reported in this chapter as well. This case study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What do teachers perceive as the benefits of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy?

2. What do teachers perceive as the factors that contribute to the success of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy?

   Interview Guide with Teachers and the Administrative Team

In this case study there were six teacher interviews conducted with each having a total of (11) questions, and there were three administrative team interviews conducted with each having a total of (13) questions. The teacher interview guide is included as Appendix A. The
administrative interview guide is included as Appendix E. The questions for the teacher interviews and the administrative team interviews were the same except for two additional questions that were asked to members of the administrative team. The interviews with the participants lasted between (20) minutes and (45) minutes. All of the questions were the same; however some follow-up questions were asked when more clarification was needed.

**Role in the Freshman Academy**

The first questioned asked to each participant was about their role in the Freshman Academy. Table 4.1 has a breakdown of each person’s role in the Freshman Academy.

Table 4.1

*Participants in the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Roles</th>
<th>Administrative Team Roles</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Teacher</td>
<td>Freshman Academy Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Teacher</td>
<td>Freshman Academy Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellness Teacher</td>
<td>Freshman Academy Team Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academy Event Coordinator</td>
<td>Wellness Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Teacher/Interventionist</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Science Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exceptional Education Teacher</td>
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**Role of Parent/Guardians**

All of the teacher participants stated that there was a need to increase parental involvement in the Freshman Academy; however, the Freshman Academy principal stated that
parents are easily accessible by phone or if needed to come to the building to assist with various initiatives. The Freshman Academy principal stated that parents were extremely active with athletics, as they provided snacks for students before and after games and assisted with transportation to games.

Additionally, five out of six of the teacher participants stated there is a Freshman Academy Night event held at the beginning of the school year for parents to get to know their child’s teachers. During this night parents were given their student’s report card; and were able to have conferences with teachers on site if they had concerns. Furthermore, the Freshman Academy principal and the Freshman Academy counselor mentioned there was a freshman orientation; however, not many parents attend this event.

Impact Factors

During each of the interviews the participants were asked what do they believe are the key factors that make an impact in the Freshman Academy. The administrative team reported that the quality of teachers was the major factor that had an impact on the Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy counselor stated, “Our teachers make a huge impact, because they care about the students, and they do what it takes to support them.” Also, the Freshman Academy counselor and Freshman Academy team leader both believed the fact Freshman Academy counselor mentioned, “On the third floor students are able to work together as well as socialize with one another.”

Three out of the six teachers interviewed believe that student seclusion from the rest of the students allowed for an impact to be made in the Freshman Academy. One teacher stated, “Being on the third floor together allows us to build better relationships with our students. It also helps students understand their teachers better.” One teacher believed that the impact is being
made through block scheduling, due to students being able to receive English one block and reading another block. The teacher believed that this double blocked time allowed the teachers to be able to go more in-depth with the content taught. Two teachers believed that teacher collaboration with one another does make an impact. One teacher stated, “We have a close knit relationship with each other. This makes it were students are not able to get away with things, because we are constantly communicating with one another.”

**Additional Implementation of Initiative to Make an Impact**

The administrative team were asked if they could implement one additional thing that would make an impact in the Freshman Academy what would it be and why. The Freshman Academy principal and team leader both stated that some type of summer bridge/transition program would be extremely beneficial for the Freshman Academy. During this time teachers and students would have the opportunity to build relationships with one another before the school year begins. The Freshman Academy counselor believed that there needs to be a connection built for students to understand the importance of their freshman year. The counselor stated, “We need our students to know that the decisions they are making now have an impact on their college choices in their senior year. We have to do a better job of making sure our students understand this.”

Teachers were asked the same question, and this question received several responses with only two of the responses being the same among the six teachers. Two teachers believed the addition of a peer mentoring program between senior students and freshman students would assist freshman students with their transition to high school. One teacher believed the addition of a study hall during the school day would be more beneficial for students, as it would allow more time for remediation and enrichment for students. Similar to this idea, another teacher believed
that less time on social-emotional learning during the advisory period with a shift to academics would assist students. Another teacher mentioned the idea that increased college exposure would benefit the students in the Freshman Academy. Finally, the other teacher believed that creating a place for students to go who are struggling with behavior during the instructional period was needed.

**Mission Statement**

The mission statement question was only asked to the administrative team in the Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy principal was able to breakdown the statement of the Freshman Academy C.A.R.E.S.

- C – Creating a dynamic culture of learning
- A – Applying real-world knowledge
- R – Respecting others and self
- E – Empowering one another to impact our community
- S – Supporting one another through our words and actions

The Freshman Academy counselor and team leader were able to state “The Freshman Academy C.A.R.E.S.” however, they were not able to breakdown the mission statement like the Freshman Academy principal. Furthermore, the academy recites the mission statement at the beginning of each academy team meeting.

**Decision-Making Process**

Each member of the administrative team was asked what factors were used in making decisions in the Freshman Academy. Each member of the administrative team had a different response to this question. The Freshman Academy principal stated that the decisions were made based upon various data sources and from things seen throughout daily and weekly walkthroughs
conducted by the Freshman Academy principal. Additionally, decisions were also made based upon survey data from teachers. The Freshman Academy counselor believed that all decisions were made by the Freshman Academy principal; however, the Freshman Academy principal does consult with the counselor and teachers before decisions were made. The Freshman Academy team leader mentioned that all decisions were made based upon doing what is best for students.

**Hypothesis Results**

The research questions for this case study were centered on teacher perceptions; as they asked (1) what do teachers perceive are the benefits of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy, and (2) what do teachers perceive are the factors that contribute to the success of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy? Due to the creation of these questions the researcher created hypotheses that evolved around teacher perceptions of the following:

(a) A benefit of the Freshman Academy will be a high-functioning, collaborative team.
(b) Common planning contributes to the success of the Freshman Academy.
(c) Student interventions/incentives contribute to the success of the Freshman Academy.
(d) Common expectations contribute to the success of the Freshman Academy.
(e) Engaging and relevant instructional lessons contribute to the success of the Freshman Academy.
(f) Structure and location of the Freshman Academy contributes to the success of the Freshman Academy.
**High-Functioning, Collaborative Team**

Collaboration in the Freshman Academy was happening on a regular basis. The teachers were seen collaborating with one another during the observation of the Freshman Academy during class transitions. Teachers also collaborated with one another during the Freshman Academy team meeting however, the collaboration with one another was not all positive. Also, the collaboration during the team meeting was not seen as valuable by all parties involved in the meeting as some of the members of the Freshman Academy were busy doing other tasks versus giving their entire attention and focus to the matters at hand. Additionally, the tone used to speak with one another during the academy meeting sometimes was borderline unprofessional. During a meeting one teacher stated, “I do not have the same issues you all are having, as I am doing my own policy. I am just going to allow the students to stay in my room versus following the school policy.”

**Common Planning**

Based upon the interviews with the staff members common planning is valued, and plays a major role in the success of the Freshman Academy. Teachers stated that giving the opportunity to plan with other Freshman Academy teachers allowed for them to be able to discuss various student needs. Additionally, this allowed the group to remain on one accord with various initiatives in the Freshman Academy. Furthermore, the math and English teachers found the common planning more valuable than the other teachers as it allowed them time to collaborate regarding curriculum with the other math and English teachers in the Freshman Academy. The math teacher in the Freshman Academy stated, “Our collaborative meetings gives us the opportunity to make sure each math class is teaching the same thing at the same time.” After observing a Freshman Academy meeting, there was alignment to the concept spoken about in the
interviews as there was a place to discuss student concerns on the agenda. However, this part of the academy was not structured in a manner to be able to determine solutions to various student concerns. This collaborative time did not have the focus teachers stated was needed to be effective with addressing student concerns.

**Student Interventions**

Student interventions were in place in this Freshman Academy. During the teacher interviews and the administrative team interviews, there was a clear focus on academic and behavior interventions. One of the major academic interventions that was mentioned by each member of the Freshman Academy was Lunch and Learn. This was described as a period of time where English and math teachers would pull students during lunch to remediate various subject matters with students. This was an academic intervention that was used during the school day, as there was an issue with getting students to come after school for tutoring. Even though there was an issue with students coming to after school tutoring, it was still offered as an option to all students in every subject. For behavior, the main intervention was teaming. Teaming as described by the team leader of the Freshman Academy is a group of teachers who have a common student coming together with that student to set goals around behavior and academics for a short period of time. At the end of that period of time the team comes back together to see if the student has made progress toward meeting the goals set. The Freshman Academy counselor stated, “This has been a successful intervention for us; however, the key is there must be someone on the team who already has a positive relationship with the student.” During the Freshman Academy meeting, the idea of teaming a student was mentioned, as a group of teachers were discussing an ongoing issue they were having with a student.
**Student Incentives**

Student incentives were mentioned as something that has a major role in the Freshman Academy. The wellness teacher stated, “We try to make sure we have something for our students every month. I am the event planner for our academy, and it is my job to make sure all of our events go over well for our students.” Each of the teachers and the administrative team mentioned that student incentives is an integral part of the operations in the Freshman Academy. The teachers mentioned how students were rewarded for academic achievements and growth as well as behavioral success. One of the incentives used by the Freshman Academy principal is for students who do not have any behavior referrals during a certain period of time. If a student did not receive a behavior referral during that time period, then he/she would receive a reward for displaying good citizenship. Additionally, all parties involved mentioned students receiving ‘Firebird Feathers’ for positive behavior reinforcements. One teacher described a ‘Firebird Feather’ as a positive behavior referral. The Freshman Academy principal stated that this was an opportunity to recognize students for doing the right thing versus always reinforcing negative behaviors through attention. ‘Firebird Feathers’ were displayed through the Freshman Academy hallway. Additionally, during the Freshman Academy team meeting teachers were encouraged by the Freshman Academy principal to write ‘Firebird Feathers.’

**Common Student Expectations**

According to various research common expectations across the freshman academy is a key success factor; however, in this Freshman Academy it was not understood what the student expectations were supposed to be. According to the Freshman Academy principal, the student expectations revolved around the overall school’s five non-negotiables:

1. No Back & Forth (with teacher or staff member when given a directive)
(2) SSA (school dress code)

(3) No Profanity (to other students, peers, or staff)

(4) No Disrespect (towards students or staff)

(5) No Cellphones (may not be seen or heard)

During each of the six classroom observations, there was a classroom poster visible that displayed each of the five non-negotiables. This was found in various locations in the classrooms. When the other members of the Freshman Academy’s administrative team were asked about the expectations of the Freshman Academy, neither the counselor nor team leader mentioned anything about the non-negotiables. Furthermore, during the teacher interviews, only two of the six teachers mentioned the non-negotiables, and the other four teachers had various responses about what they believed the student expectations to be.

**Common Instructional Strategies**

During all of the teacher interviews, except one, the common instructional strategy discussed that is used in the Freshman Academy classrooms is the idea of a discussion-based classroom. In each of the classrooms, sentence stems were located on the wall. The sentences were on the walls to assist students with discussing various concepts in the classroom. When attending the Freshman Academy team meeting, there was not any mention of this instructional strategy being used in classrooms, nor was there any visible representations of this strategy as there was in each of the classrooms. Additionally, the Freshman Academy principal stated there is a literacy focus in the school for all students to be able to show growth in their ability to read, write, and think. Furthermore, the Freshman Academy team meeting began with the entire team reading the mission statement and then citing the school’s literacy focus together. During the
classroom visits there was not any visible evidence of this focus with the exception of the discussion stems however, there was a reading task in every single classroom.

**Structure and Location**

As for the structure and location of the Freshman Academy in this urban school setting, it is known that the Freshman Academy is isolated on the third floor of the three-story high school building. Additionally, each of the teachers, except for one, expressed belief that the separation of the Freshman Academy from the rest of the school is a positive factor of the Freshman Academy. Also, teachers acknowledged that being on the same hallway with one another allowed for them to become more of a family, as they were able to speak to one another in between classes. Teachers also believed that being on the same hallway with one another allowed their students to be able to transition smoothly to high school from middle school. One teacher stated, “This gives students the time to get some of their energy out and make mistakes during the first year of high school without upperclassmen harassing them.” Another teacher stated, “Students are not able to get away from us since we are located on one floor. We become one big family, the students and the faculty.”

**Hypothesis Connection to Research Questions**

Each of the hypothesis statements was derived from the research questions and was analyzed from the teacher’s perspective. Additionally, each of the hypotheses was a piece of the puzzle needed for a Freshman Academy to be successful as described by the research found in the literature review. The idea of the Freshman Academy being located on the third floor of the building created its own smaller learning community in the building. This functionality allowed for the Freshman Academy to create its own identity, with a Freshman Academy principal, team leader, counselor, and team of teachers.
Other Findings

While conducting the coding for this study, the researcher discovered a couple of things not expected to be found during this study. According to the research found during the literature review, there should be some type of intervention in place for increasing student attendance. When teachers were asked about an attendance intervention, each of the teachers responded by stating that they were not aware of any intervention in place for attendance. The Freshman Academy counselor stated that she would call students and set-up various systems with students; however, there was not an academy-wide plan for intervening with student attendance. Additionally, each teacher stated they believed there was a school-wide incentive for attendance, but no teacher was able to state what the plan was for this.

Another interesting finding during the completion of this study was that teachers were split 50/50 on the idea of block scheduling. All parties interviewed were asked to speak about the impact block scheduling had on the Freshman Academy, and each of the English and math teachers found great value in the use of block scheduling as students at this school are all double-blocked in each of these subjects; therefore every student is able to have English and math every day. This was not the same for all of the other subjects, which led some of the other teachers to not appreciate the usage of block scheduling as much.

Research Questions Response

For this case study there were two research questions. The first research question for this case study was, what do teachers perceive as the benefits of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy? Through this case study it was found that teachers perceive the relationships built with students as a benefit, as this was mentioned several times by the teachers during their interviews. An additional benefit was the location of the Freshman Academy. The
Freshman Academy at this school was located on the third floor, separated from the rest of the students in the building. Teachers expressed during their interviews that being located away from the rest of the building allowed for them to build a more in-depth relationship with their students, as well as it helped their students with the transition from middle school to high school. The final benefit of a smaller learning community found in this case study was the use of common planning. Teachers perceived that common planning allowed time for them to instructionally plan together, in addition to giving them the opportunity to collaborate regarding various student concerns.

The second research question was what do teachers perceive as the factors that contribute to the success of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy? Teachers believed that setting common student expectations would be a factor to success of the Freshman Academy. Additionally, teachers perceived that more parental involvement would assist with becoming a successful Freshman Academy. Another factor believed to contribute to the success of the Freshman Academy was to develop a plan for addressing various student attendance concerns, as there was not a current plan in place in this Freshman Academy. A final factor that teachers perceived would contribute to the success of the Freshman Academy, would be to develop a consistent behavior plan. This behavior plan must be one that addressed minor behavior infractions, while still allowing time for freshman students to transition into the high school environment.

Summary

This chapter delivered information that was found in the case study. Additionally, there was an analysis of each question from the interview guide. Then there was a breakdown of each hypothesis with information from the interviews, classroom observations, and academy team
meeting observations. Furthermore, there was an explanation of the connection of the hypothesis to the research questions. This was followed by findings from the case study that were not expected to be found.
Chapter V

Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

In order to address the findings of this study, this chapter is divided into five sections. The first section addresses the findings as they relate to the two research questions. The second section provides the conclusions drawn during this case study. The third section discusses the limitations found during this study. The fourth section addresses the recommendations for future research based upon the information found in this study. The last section of this chapter summarizes the chapter and the study.

Research Questions

The researcher examined the following questions from a teacher’s perception, as they pertained to a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy:

1. What do teachers perceive as the benefits of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy?

2. What do teachers perceive as the factors that contribute to the success of a smaller learning community—the Freshman Academy?

Findings

The research questions were answered through semi-structured interviews of six teacher participants in the Freshman Academy and three members of the administrative team, the
Freshman Academy principal, the Freshman Academy counselor, and the Freshman Academy team leader. Additionally, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. All of the answers were coded by the researcher twice, as the researcher was looking for common themes among the participants in the study. Below is a brief synopsis of the findings related to each of the interview questions.

**Common Student Expectations**

The first question asked in the interview guide to the participants pertained to student expectations in the Freshman Academy. The responses received were the most interesting responses of all the interview questions. It was found that there was not a common expectation for student behavior or academic performance held by teachers in the freshmen academy; however, there were student expectations in place for students in the entire school. The teachers’ student expectations, Figure 5.1, were visible in each classroom; however, no teacher referenced the posted expectations during the classroom observation portion of the study. Furthermore, there was no any common ground among members of the administrative team as it pertained to student expectations.

*Figure 5.1*

*School-Wide Student Behavior Expectations*
Common Instructional Strategies

The common instructional strategy used in the Freshman Academy was discussion-based classroom. During each of the interviews, all participants identified this instructional strategy as the common strategy used school-wide. In each of the classrooms, there were discussion-based anchor stems posted on the walls for students to use when answering various questions during classroom discussions. Additionally, the sentence stems were displayed to allow for commonality across the entire Freshman Academy, regardless of the subject area. The math classroom used a different set of discussion-based stems; however, the stems were more aligned to math content and math discussions. It was observed that students had few opportunities to use the academic skills of reading and writing to the content of the classroom discussion, allowing the teacher to gather formative data on student progress.

Student Incentives

Considering student incentives, there was a common theme found among the participants, and incentives were in place for students academically and behaviorally. The incentives were used to incentivize positive reactions from students. Furthermore, it was found that there was at least one student incentive every month. The incentives ranged from movie and popcorn during the school day to days out of standard school attire, often referred to as the school’s dress code. An interesting finding was the philosophy behind student incentives. The idea to have student incentives was agreed upon by the teachers in the Freshman Academy; however, the teacher participants expressed belief that there was a need to hold students accountable for their various actions. In this area some participants felt as if students were being rewarded for everything without being held accountable in a consequential manner.
Student Interventions

For this study, the researcher considered student interventions in three categories: academics, behavior, and attendance. These were the categories revealed in the literature review as best practices in a Freshman Academy, due to the belief that they have an impact on the outcomes in the Freshman Academy.

Academics

The researcher found that there were a couple of academic interventions in place in the Freshman Academy. The one academic intervention mentioned by all of the participants was Lunch and Learn. As defined by the teachers in the Freshman Academy, Lunch and Learn is a time for English and math teachers to remediate with students during the school day who have not mastered a certain standard or who have a poor attendance rate. Teachers found that this academic intervention allowed teachers the opportunity to re-teach materials to students based upon the student’s level of understanding or simply based upon student attendance. Other academic interventions were mentioned, but this was the only common theme found in the Freshman Academy.

Behavior

As for behavior, the clear intervention was the use of the teaming process. The teaming process, as described by members of the Freshman Academy, was bringing together a group of teachers who share a common student. The teachers work with the student to set goals around academics, behavior, and/or attendance that can be monitored in a short period of time. The team then comes back together with the student to see if the goals have been met. This was evidenced during the academy team meeting that was observed, as the team of teachers discussed if a certain student needed to be “teamed” for the upcoming week.
**Attendance**

An interesting finding in the student interventions section was that there was not a clear intervention for student attendance. Some teachers believed there was not an intervention in place at all for students, while some of the other teachers believed there was a school-wide attendance intervention. However, they did not know what it was. Also, the administrative team was not able to communicate a common attendance intervention. Each member of the administrative team had their version of attendance intervention, but none of them were common. This leads one to believe that no operational intervention for student absenteeism is in place.

**Block Scheduling**

There was not a major theme found with block scheduling. This urban high school functions on a standard ‘A/B’ block schedule. This means teachers see their students every other day; however in the Freshman Academy math teachers see their students every day. Teachers did not express a common belief that block scheduling would provide a positive impact in the Freshman Academy, or that moving to a traditional schedule would have a negative impact. Each of the participants had their various belief about block scheduling, so much there was not enough evidence to create a theme with the information.

**Collaborative Teacher Planning**

Regarding collaborative teacher planning, two common themes were found. One common theme was the use of collaborative planning to assess and discuss concerns about students during academy team meetings. All participants found this time useful, as it allowed teachers the opportunity to come together and resolve various student situations. Additionally, this time allowed teachers to see if another teacher on the team was experiencing some of the
same problems with a common student. One teacher stated, “Collaborative planning allows time for us to be on one accord with one another.”

The other common theme came from the English and math teacher. Both teachers expressed an appreciation for collaborative teacher planning based upon their department’s wellbeing. This allowed for them to meet with their other content teachers to plan content collaboratively. One teacher stated, “Content planning allows us to plan the same lessons, so when you go from one math classroom to another math classroom you will see the same thing.”

Another positive for this collaborative planning was being able to have collegial support in times of struggle with content, lesson planning, assessment design and understanding the intent of standards.

**Freshman Student Separation**

Three themes emerged regarding the physical separation of freshmen students from upper classmen. One of the themes found was the importance of separating freshman students from the rest of school population, allowing freshmen students to transition to the high school experience at a nurtured and supported pace. Allowing students the opportunity to adjust to high school without the influence of upper classmen promoted an increased level of comfort in the new school setting. This was observed during hallway transitions, as students were located on third floor in isolation from the rest of the school’s population.

Teachers also found it positive to be able to monitor their students on one floor in the school versus having to locate students in various parts of the school building. Teachers stated the idea of being able to see their students in between each block was valuable, as this allowed them the chance to speak with students about various academic concerns without them being late
to the next class. It also provided the students with the opportunity to go see their teachers in between classes if they were absent the previous day.

The other positive found was that teachers forged a stronger relationship with one another and with their students. Teachers believed being on the same hallway with one another allowed them the opportunity to speak with one another about student concerns versus always waiting for the weekly academy meeting. Additionally, these conversations promoted a more personal relationship with one another due to frequent interactions on a regular basis during class transitions. Furthermore, teachers were able to build relationships with their students due to the location of the Freshman Academy and frequent opportunities during the school day. These interactions were observed during the visit to the Freshman Academy, as well as stated during the teacher and administrative team interviews.

**Perceived Factors**

As for the interview question that pertained to perceived factors that have an impact on student achievement, no common theme was discovered. Each of the participants believed there was something in the Freshman Academy that made an impact. The most common response by two of the participants was the location of the Freshman Academy; however, that was not close to the majority of the participants. Additionally, the order in which the questions were asked may have influenced the responses of the two teachers who identified the isolation of the academy as the greatest impact on student achievement, as the question about location was asked immediately before the question on student achievement impact.

**Role of Parents/Guardians**

The question about the role of the parents and/or guardians in the Freshman Academy produced an interesting finding. Each of the participants believed that parents and/or guardians
should play an integral role in the Freshman Academy however, they all believed that they do not play enough of a role currently in the Freshman Academy. Parent and/or guardians are contacted by various members in the Freshman Academy for various reasons; however, there is not a regular open-line of communication in place in the Freshman Academy. Parents and/or guardians were only contacted if there was a reason for the contact.

**Impact on Student Achievement**

Concerning teachers’ perceptions of what one thing would make an impact on the Freshman Academy, there was not a consensus found among the participants. Each participant was asked if you could add one additional thing to the Freshman Academy that would impact student achievement, what would it be? To this regard there was no consensus among the participants in the case study. Even though each member stated something different, the Freshman Academy principal stated that having an extensive summer transition program would be beneficial for freshman students as they transition to high school.

**Administrative Only Questions**

The researcher asked the members of the administrative team two additional questions during their semi-structured interview. The members of the administrative team in the Freshman Academy are the Freshman Academy principal, the Freshman Academy counselor, and the Freshman Academy lead teacher. The questions for the administrative team were about the mission statement of the Freshman Academy and how decisions were made in the Freshman Academy.

**Mission Statement**

One of the questions was what is the mission statement of the Freshman Academy? Each member of the administrative team was able to state the mission statement. Furthermore, the
Freshman Academy principal was able to breakdown the mission statement in actionable terms. Additionally, to begin the weekly academy team meetings the entire Freshman Academy recites the mission statement. Also, the mission statement, Figure 5.2, is located on the walls of each classroom in the Freshman Academy. Finally, it is also located on the agenda for the weekly team meetings.

*Figure 5.2*

*Freshman Academy Mission Statement*

![Mission Statement Diagram](image)

**Decision-Making**

The other question was how are decisions made in the Freshman Academy? There was no consensus found among the three members of the administrative team. The members of the administrative team each stated various rationales for how decisions are made for the team and
students in the Freshman Academy. One thing the researcher found about the decision-making process was that data was a clear factor in the Freshman Academy. It was seen in the Freshman Academy team meetings and classrooms, as well as the Freshman Academy principal mentioned the use of data to make decisions for the staff and students in the Freshman Academy. In the academy meeting there was an English and math teacher who presented the most recent English and math data to the entire team, and each teacher had some type of classroom data posted in their classroom.

Conclusions

Common Student Expectations

Setting common student expectations for the Freshman Academy is fundamental in setting the foundation of the academy. Without clear expectations for students, there is not a true standard for students to follow. There is benefit in students being able to go from one class to another class having the exact same expectations in each class. This brings a system of consistency to students as they transition from middle school to high school. The Freshman Academy at this urban high school should spend more time developing academy student expectations that incorporate the current school-wide expectations.

Common Instructional Strategies

The use of a common instructional strategy can be seen as valuable if done with fidelity. It was clear from the teachers and the administrative team what the common instructional strategy was supposed to be in the Freshman Academy. Additionally, it was visibly clear in the classrooms through all of the discussion-based stems placed on the walls of each classroom. Even though the team members were able to speak about the common instructional strategy and have it visible in their classrooms, the use of the actual strategy in the classrooms was not
observed. A common instructional strategy is only effective if it is being used consistently in all classrooms, and this was not observed in practice. Furthermore, during the academy meetings there was an opportunity to provide professional development around the strategy to ensure all participants used the strategy during their instructional time.

**Student Incentives**

Student incentives were prevalent in the Freshman Academy. Many times in education the focus is on correcting the problem at hand, instead of acknowledging what is already working well. Student incentives seemed to be a positive structure in the Freshman Academy, as many of the teachers spoke to how the students truly enjoyed them. It was clear how students would be able to determine if they qualify for various incentives. Additionally, students knew exactly what the incentive would be for the month.

**Student Interventions**

One of the key components in a small learning community is to have various interventions in place to assist students with their academics. For this case study, the researcher broke down interventions into three categories: academics, behavior, and attendance. Listed below are the conclusions drawn based upon the findings from the participant interviews, classroom observations, and academy team meeting observations.

**Academics**

There was a true understanding of the academic interventions in place in the Freshman Academy. There was a focus on remediation and enrichment in the subjects of English and math. It is clear for students and staff members the interventions needed to assist students in English and math however, there is not a clear plan for how to intervene with students in the other
subjects. In order for students to be successful in all classes there should be some type of academic intervention in place.

Behavior

There was a clear structure planned for behavior interventions for students. Additionally, interventions also connect to some of the incentives being used in the Freshman Academy. Based upon classroom observations and teacher interviews the interventions are working in the Freshman Academy versus the rest of the school building. A team must have a clear plan for addressing behavior, and this is displayed in the Freshman Academy. The use of teaming as a behavior strategy has made a qualitative impact in the Freshman Academy. Teachers have seen enhanced teacher-student relationships, as well as, a more sense of student ownership for their actions.

Attendance

It was clear here that there needs to be added focus on attendance interventions in this urban Freshman Academy. Not one member of the participant pool could state what the attendance intervention was for the academy or the school. Attendance is an important factor in education, especially with an at-risk population. There must be a plan to address the attendance for students, as attendance is linked to academic progress and graduation rate.

Block Scheduling

The teacher team in the Freshman Academy does not see block scheduling as a clear benefit in the Freshman Academy. The team believed students would perform better if they were able to see them every day. Currently, in this structure only the math teachers were able to see their students every day. This caused some dissention in the Freshman Academy, as teachers who do not see their students every day were not pleased with the value being placed on their
subject versus math. Additionally, it was seen through classroom observations that not all teachers were using the block scheduling time as an essential asset to helping students achieve. This presents opportunities for the educational leaders to provide professional development on effective strategies for teaching in the block. Many schools provided faculty professional development when the initial transition from the traditional schedule to a block schedule occurred. However, faculty changes have occurred over the subsequent years without the needed professional development and induction.

**Collaborative Teacher Planning**

From observation of the academy team meeting and the review of previous meeting agendas, the meetings were structured in a manner to allow teachers to collaborate regarding their students, discuss academy data, plan academy incentives, and structure academy interventions. All of these elements were essential elements of having an effective academy. There was no evidence of an existence of formalized norms for the team. If the academy team were to develop norms and adhere to the norms of the academy team, then there would be an increased measure of effectiveness that would come from the team meetings.

The manner in which the math and English teachers structured their collaborative planning time allowed teachers to plan quality instruction together. Additionally, pacing at the same rate allowed students to move from one teacher to the other without gaps in the material, if schedule changes were required. Furthermore, the teachers were able to give common assessments, which gave them another comparable data point. This structure was able to create data to inform interventions for student remediation and enrichment.
**Freshman Student Separation**

The freshman students’ separation from the remainder of the school in this school has definitely created a sense of belonging and family in the Freshman Academy. Allowing students to find a sense of belonging so early in high school allows the student to build connectedness to the high school early in their transition period. The connection students were able to make in the Freshman Academy was a relationship with their teachers, as they see their teachers frequently due to the location of the Freshman Academy. Furthermore, students were able to go to their teachers in between classes to check to see if they missed any work from previous days.

**Perceived Factors**

Due to not being able to find a common theme during coding, the researcher was not able to draw a conclusion for perceived factors in the Freshman Academy. The researcher was able to make the conclusion that if the freshman team took the ideas found during this case study, and then weighed the pros and cons of each they would be able to determine what the true perceived factors were for an effective Freshman Academy.

**Role of Parents/Guardians**

Due to the limited role parents and/or guardians have in the Freshman Academy, the researcher concluded that parents were not of primary value. Parents were only being contacted when needed, instead in a more proactive manner to increase the integral role of the parents in the Freshman Academy. Additionally, there needs to be a shift to increase parental support during this transition year for students. Research supports the idea that parents being involved in their child’s education increases the likeliness of students graduating on time.
**Impact on Student Achievement**

Considering student achievement, the researcher determined that the isolation of the freshman students had the greatest perceived impact on student achievement. Furthermore, it clearly echoed Maslow’s Motivational Theory of creating a sense of belonging for students. As shown below in Figure 5.3, as an educator is trying to determine how to motivate a student they must help them find a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging and connectedness allows the student to be motivated to complete the necessary steps to succeed in the Freshman Academy.

*Figure 5.3*

*Maslow’s Hierarchy of Motivational Theory*

(Simply Psychology, McLeod, 2016)
Administrative Only Questions

In the following sections the researcher made conclusions based upon additional questions that were asked to the administrative team and through observations of the academy setting and academy team meetings.

Mission Statement

Due to the mission statement being clearly displayed in all of the classrooms in the Freshman Academy, the researcher was able to conclude that there is a mission statement in place. Additionally, the mission statement was recited at the beginning of the academy meeting, which led the researcher to believe that everyone in the academy knows the mission statement. The mission statement was also displayed in the academy meeting room, as well as on all of the agendas. The Freshman Academy principal has an in-depth understanding of what the mission statement means and what it should look like in practical applications. There is a need to convey this understanding to the rest of the administrative team, as well as the teachers in the building. In order for the mission to go from a dream to reality, the rest of the members of the academy will need to have the same belief in the mission.

Decision-Making

Based upon the information found during the administrative team interviews, there is not a clear plan for how decisions are made in the Freshman Academy. There should be a clear plan in place for how decisions are being developed and delivered in the Freshman Academy. Doing this will allow the administrative team to work with a spirit of transparency before the rest of the academy members. Creating transparency with decisions allows for all members of the Freshman Academy to feel as though they have a great understanding of the inner workings needed for a successful academy.
Connections to Theoretical Framework

Maslow’s Motivational Theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this case study, and various connection to four of the five levels were found throughout this study. The first level of Maslow’s Motivational Theory is physiological needs, and this was provided to freshmen students by the creation of the Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy helped students feel comfortable with their transition from middle school to high school. The next level is safety. Isolating the freshmen students on one floor away from the other students protects them from being bullied or manipulated by the upperclassmen. The third level of Maslow’s Motivational Theory is belongingness, and this Freshman Academy addressed this through their mission statement. The ‘S’ in the mission statement represents supporting one another, and this was displayed in the Freshman Academy through the various instructional strategies used in the classroom as well as the supports developed during the academy meetings. The next level addresses esteem needs, and this is described as a feeling of accomplishment. For this level the Freshman Academy had several student incentives in place to allow students to feel accomplished. Additionally, there were various awards ceremonies used to recognize students for their accomplishments throughout the school year. The last level of self-actualization was not found in practice in this Freshman Academy.

Limitations

There were limitations in this research. First, the participant population served as a limitation. The population of this study was limited to six teachers and three members of the Freshman Academy administrative team. Only using these six teachers could have potentially affected the overall perception of the various initiatives and structures in the Freshman Academy. Second, the interview guide created by the researcher limited this study. There were eleven open-
ended questions asked to the teachers and thirteen questions asked to the administrative team. Finally, the time of the year that the interviews took place could have limited the responses received from members of the Freshman Academy.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In order to truly move the work in the Freshman Academy, there must be more research around quality parent engagement in high school. There is research surrounding the theme that parents have a vital role in their child’s education; however, there is not much research on the effective strategies used to increase parental involvement in high school. An effective strategy here would allow a Freshman Academy to go to the next level.

Furthermore, it would be good to determine what intervention strategies are quality and effective strategies. This should be done as a quantitative study, so there is data created to support the claims found during the study. Most instructional leaders are always looking for effective strategies based upon the data.

**Summary**

The use of a freshmen academy is a common occurrence across the nation in high schools, because the smaller learning community is linked to increased student achievement, higher graduation rates, and an easier transition to the high school experience. Isolation of students in one part of a high school building is not enough to achieve the desired results. Effective freshmen academies understand the reasons for their creations, develop a clear mission and vision, formulate clear procedures for interventions, develop open two-way communications between the school and family, and are implemented with fidelity. These efforts are most critical in an urban school serving students who are at-risk of underachieving or not graduating.
References


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http://www.csos.jhu.edu/talent/high.html


Appendix A

Teacher Interview Guide
Appendix A

**Teacher Interview Guide**

1) Describe your role in the Freshman Academy.

2) What are the common student expectations in the Freshman Academy?

3) What common instructional strategies are being used to engage students in the Freshman Academy?

4) What student incentives are in place in the Freshman Academy?

5) What student interventions are in place in the Freshman Academy for academics? Behavior? Attendance?

6) What role does block scheduling have in the Freshman Academy?

7) What role does teacher collaborative planning have in the Freshman Academy?

8) How does separation of freshman students from the rest of the students in the school building have an impact?

9) What do you perceive are the factors that make an impact in the Freshman Academy?

10) What role do parents/guardians have in the Freshman Academy?

11) If there is one additional thing that could be implemented in the Freshman Academic that will have an impact on student achievement what would it be? Why?
Appendix B

District Approval for Research
March 15, 2017

Brian J. Mells
201 Valley Bend Drive
Nashville, TN 37214

Re: The Impact of a Freshman Academy in an Urban High School Setting

Dear Mr. Mells:

Your research proposal has been reviewed by MNPS and I am pleased to inform you that it has been approved with the following conditions.

- Change your language to case study
- Recruit all Freshman Academy teachers, not just the 5
- Principal cannot be the one to select the teachers.

We hope that your investigation proceeds smoothly and that your research questions are answered conclusively. We encourage you to amend your principal, teacher, student and parent consent forms and communications to include a notification of MNPS central office approval of your study. As a reminder, participation within external research projects is always optional for students, parents, and teachers. Additionally, the school principal has complete discretion to allow or disallow research projects to occur within his or her school.

MNPS is pleased to approve proposals that are protective of MNPS instructional time, attentive to privacy issues, and aligned with current district instructional efforts. The district is partially motivated by the desire to have results from real-time, externally valid research available to district administrators and policy-makers. Toward this goal, you will be required to submit a two-to-four page research brief summarizing your research method, process and results. This document will be shared with appropriate district staff and potentially be posted on our website. Submit this research brief by email to our departmental email address, MNPS-RAE@mnps.org.

Please include reference code 7_3_8_Mells in future correspondence with us regarding this study.

Respectfully,

[Signature]
Christine M. Stenson

CS\cb
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form
Appendix C
Carson-Newman University
The Impact of a Freshman Academy in an Urban School Setting

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to determine what the benefits are of a freshman academy as well as determine what is contributing to the success of a freshman academy.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

Following a brief 5 minute introduction you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured one-on-one interview. These will be open-ended questions allowing for time to ask follow-up questions. Additionally, your classroom will be observed as part of the triangulation process to see overall alignment of freshman academy philosophies and expectations.

Time required:

30 minutes for the interview

30 minutes for classroom observation

Risks and Benefits:

The risks of the study are finding misalignment within the Freshman Academy. The potential benefits of the study include providing the school and school district information to guide implementation of future Freshman Academies. If you are younger than 18, you will be excluded from the study.

Incentive or Compensation:

There is no extra credit or other incentive for participating; therefore, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned locked and stored away. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the information will be destroyed after one year. Your name will not be used in any report or publication.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. There is no penalty or loss of benefit for choosing not to participate.

**Right to withdraw from the study:**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

**Agreement:**

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will indicate agreement to participate.

Participant’s Name: (Print) _______________________________

Signature __________________________ (Date) _________________
Appendix D

Sample Coding
Teacher Interview Guide

1) Describe your role in the Freshman Academy.
   a. 9th Grade English Teacher

2) What are the common student expectations in the Freshman Academy?
   a. The 5 non-negotiables
      i. SSA
      ii. No Profanity
      iii. No Back & Forth
      iv. No Disrespect
      v. No Cellphones
   b. No Bathroom Passes
   c. No Sleeping in Class. Call campus supervisor for students sleeping

3) What common instructional strategies are being used to engage students in the Freshman Academy?
   a. CHAMPS
      i. Acronym for setting expectations
      ii. C – conversations H – how students get help A – explains the activity M
          – movement P – how students participate S – how are the students
          successful
   b. Discussion Based Classroom Theory
      i. Not specific instructional strategy expected to use
      ii. Shared Instructional strategy

4) What student incentives are in place in the Freshman Academy?
   a. Firebird Feathers in the hallway – general acknowledgement of good student performance
   b. Sparks – specifically aligns to the Core Values
1) Describe your role in the Freshman Academy. I am a Math Teacher. I also organize the data for data walls. We talk about data during our weekly meetings. I am in charge of all of this.

2) What are the common student expectations in the Freshman Academy? Mostly around behavior expectations. They are around the 5 non-negotiables — No Cellphones, No Profanity, No Disrespect, No Back and Forth, Always in Standard School Attire. These are five of the big expectations. The disrespect we enforce this as being respectful to the other students and classroom environments. How it affects your learning and others learning.

3) What common instructional strategies are being used to engage students in the Freshman Academy? A couple of them would be Discussion Based Classrooms. We all have specific sentence stems to engage our students in specific discussions. We have had PD around this. As a math team we have different discussion stems, but the focus is around respectfully talking to one another. This is big school-wide and in the Freshman Academy. Scaffolding materials so that we can best support our students needs as in their reading levels from middle school and before. The English Department is doing a very scaffolded argument essay.

4) What student incentives are in place in the Freshman Academy? Specific to the Freshman Academy we do incentives every one to two months. We do behavior based on no referrals or no tardies. We also have Firebird Feathers which we can award to students if we see them doing well. We have postcards that we can send home to let
Appendix E

Administrative Team Interview Guide
Appendix E

Administration Interview Guide

1) Describe your role in the Freshman Academy.

2) What is the mission/vision of the Freshman Academy?

3) What are the common student expectations in the Freshman Academy?

4) What common instructional strategies are being used to engage students in the Freshman Academy?

5) What student incentives are in place in the Freshman Academy?

6) What student interventions are in place in the Freshman Academy for academics? Behavior? Attendance?

7) What role does block scheduling have in the Freshman Academy?

8) What role does teacher collaborative planning have in the Freshman Academy?

9) How does separation of freshman students from the rest of the students in the school building have an impact?

10) What do you perceive are the factors that make an impact in the Freshman Academy?

11) What role do parents/guardians have in the Freshman Academy?

12) What factors are used in making decisions in the Freshman Academy?

13) If there is one additional thing that could be implemented in the Freshman Academic that will have an impact on student achievement what would it be? Why?