

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A NINTH GRADE TRANSITION PROGRAM ON A SMALL  
RURAL SCHOOL IN EAST TENNESSEE

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Benjamin H. Thacker  
March 17, 2017

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my wife April Thacker, the driving force for me to succeed every day. Without her love and support, this document would not have the ability to be published. I would also like to dedicate this project to my son Caden Thacker, for never giving up on me I will always love you forever and for always, no matter what.

## **Abstract**

The Effectiveness of a Ninth Grade Transition Program on a Small Rural School in East Tennessee

The ninth grade year is the most vital when determining the success or failure of a high school student. This study focused solely on creating a transition program that led to the improvement of the educational environment in an ongoing effort to improve performance and the successful transition of ninth grade students to high school. The Transition Program was implemented and gave ninth grade students the opportunity to make connections with high school faculty members and upperclassmen so that students felt included in a new and unfamiliar situation. The transition program provided students with additional opportunities for grade improvement. The transition program also included a rewards system. This study implemented and measured the effectiveness of the Transition Program to promote student learning and retention. This was a mixed methods study using both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data was collected via report card data and a Two-Tailed T-Test was used to validate the data. Qualitative data were obtained via the ACES surveys.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

Currently, at a rural school in east Tennessee, the graduation rate is at 78 percent, which is a two-year average (TNDOE 2014). The students are tracked for graduation beginning the first day of their ninth grade year. The school in east Tennessee needs to increase the graduation rate by approximately four percent every year for the next four years to meet federal Race to the Top requirements (TNDOE 2014). Downey (2009) and Reents (2002) showed that many students drop out of school as a result of a bad experience during the initial year. This study implemented and measured the effectiveness of the school's transition program to promote student learning and retention.

The study focused solely on creating a transition program that led to the improvement of the educational environment in an ongoing effort to improve performance and the successful transition of ninth grade students to high school. The school implemented and gave ninth grade students the opportunity to make connections with high school faculty members and upperclassmen so that students felt included in a new and unfamiliar situation. The transition program provided these students with additional opportunities for grade improvement. The transition program also included a rewards system.

### Background and Context

Each year schools in Tennessee receive a report card from the Tennessee Department of Education, indicating strengths and weaknesses. The school's report card revealed some significant gaps in the drop-out category. The school system was notified that there was a

problem maintaining ninth graders for four years. The administration began delving into research to help alleviate a problem that had been in existence for so many years.

To better understand the problem, leaders went to workshops dealing with Freshmen transition. Scott Habeeb and Ray Moore of the Salem, VA school district became unofficial national experts on the matter. The administrators and faculty began an intense study on the book entitled, *The Ninth Grade Opportunity* (2008). Along with the book by Habeeb and Moore (2008), this and many other books and articles were adopted as must-reads by the faculty and support staff.

The literature conveyed all of the same key messages, such as prevention of dropouts and fostering mentor relationships. All children need to feel they are accepted by peers and teachers. The literature showed that ninth graders should feel comfortable in a climate with their successes celebrated and a chance to correct their failures.

Regarding systems theory, the ninth grade student is simply an input into an organization of caring others, both students and teachers alike. The job of the school is to give the student the skills successfully both academically and in life, the skills to be successful for the remainder of high school. Therefore, the output is a well-rounded student who is ready to graduate from high school in four years. The goal of systems thinking is to have a better product when it comes out than when it enters.

The school began the implementation of a ninth grade academy in 2016. The academy was a cluster of classrooms in the same wing of the school that housed ninth graders for most of the day. There was no joint planning for teachers or goals for faculty and students. Furthermore, there was no vision or purpose and most notably, no programs to keep the students in school.

Upon implementation of the ninth grade academy concept in 2016, the ninth grade academy at the school was run using a Model I or authoritarian theory regarding the action research (Argyris & Schon, 1996). It appeared to be a defense mechanism by the principal in response to the significant dropout rate in ninth grade.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), state departments of education are scrutinized more than ever. In fact, the law required a 100% graduation rate by 2013. Students are mandated to graduate in a four-year period. If students fail to graduate within the period, schools are put on the "targeted list." It is important that all schools do all that can be done to ensure that students succeed in all facets of education. The graduation rate is of utmost importance for schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the NCLB law.

According to parent survey data collected from the 2015 Tennessee SACS/CASI Plan for School Improvement, less than 20% of the respondents had ever enrolled in a postsecondary school. In the same survey, parents indicated that education is more important than once viewed, but still not of paramount importance. As long as students "walk across the stage" most are regarded successful in this low socioeconomic rural east Tennessee school.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Downey (2009) noted that only 70% of ninth-graders made it to grade 10 across six states in 2004-2005. The states studied were: Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Downey reported that 90,000 students from the six states repeated ninth grade. A low socioeconomic rural east Tennessee school has struggled with ninth-grade retention rates. The school data reported that the dropout rate in the 2014 academic year was 15% of students dropped out of high school from grades 9 to 10. According to the data in 2014

and the 2015 10% of students never made it to their Sophomore year. The problem stems from the number of ninth grade students who fail to earn the number of credits necessary to begin their 10th-grade year to be on track to graduate high school.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this study was to improve the educational environment for these students in ninth grade so that they are college and career ready. The ninth grade academy is set up in such a way as to resemble a school within a school. All entering freshman are kept together throughout the year and somewhat separated from the rest of the school. The current practice of only keeping ninth graders together with the general population for most of the day without a purpose or plan is not working.

### **Research Questions**

**This study was driven by the following research questions:**

#### ***Research Question 1***

Is there a significant difference in the number of ninth-graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year?

#### ***H<sub>1</sub>***

There will be a significant difference in the number of ninth-graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

There will be no significant difference in the number of ninth-graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

***Research Question 2***

Is there a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

***Research Question 3***

Is there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders involved in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders involved in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

**Significance**

The school began the implementation of a ninth grade academy in 2016. It was a cluster of classrooms in the same wing of the school that housed ninth graders for most of the day. There was no joint planning for teachers or goals for faculty and students. Furthermore, there was no vision or purpose and most notably, no programs to keep the students in school. Upon implementation of the ninth grade academy concept in 2016 the ninth grade academy was modeled on an authoritarian theory. (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was developed upon Albert Bandura's (1989) theory of efficacy. Bandura conceived that initial success creates prolonged successes. By ensuring that students have a strong beginning to high school, then they have a greater chance to achieve the goal of graduation. Additionally, those students who experience failure in the transition from middle school to high school, are at an increased risk to face prolonged failures throughout their academic careers (Bandura, 1989). Based on Bandura's theory of efficacy, success in the ninth grade year is the greatest predictor to ensuring continuing success throughout

high school. Ninth grade failure can breed further failures for the students (Bandura, 1989). The school must adequately transition students to ensure peak success for upcoming ninth graders. Regarding systems theory, the ninth grade student is simply an input into an organization of caring others, both students and teachers alike. The job of the school is to give the student opportunities for success academically and in life. Therefore, the output is a well-rounded student who is ready to graduate from high school in four years. The goal of systems thinking is to have a better product when it comes out than when it enters.

### **Definition of Terms**

Definitions of terms used throughout this study are provided to allow for understanding and clarity.

**Adequate Yearly Progress-** The measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

**Bridges Program -** Program based to help incoming freshman acclimate to their new school community and have a positive effect on change in existing culture relating to stress and academic achievement, and help students develop positive self-images.

**Common Core State Standards-** The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy.

**No Child Left Behind Act-** The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a United States Act of Congress that is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which included Title I, the government's flagship aid program for disadvantaged students. NCLB supports standards-based education reform based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. The Act requires states to develop assessments in basic skills. To receive federal school funding, States must give these assessments to all students at select grade levels. The Act does not assert a national achievement standard. Each state develops its standards and roles in public education through annual testing, annual academic progress, report cards, teacher qualifications, and funding changes.

**Race to the Top -** Authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the Race to the Top Assessment Program provides funding to consortia of States to develop assessments that are valid, support and inform instruction, provide accurate information about what students know and can do, and measure student achievement against standards designed to ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace. These assessments are intended to play a critical role in educational systems; provide administrators, educators, parents, and students with the data and information needed to improve teaching and learning continuously; and help meet the President's goal of restoring, by 2020, the nation's position as the world leader in college graduates.

**Transition Program -** A comprehensive school reform model developed by the Center for Research on Students Placed at Risk, based at Johns Hopkins and Howard University.

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

### **Assumptions.**

Students involved in the transition program will have a better sense of belonging within the school and will have higher grades. Reents (2002) found that students who participated in the "Bridges Program" (an intensive learning program for ninth graders), developed closer relationships with teachers, enjoyed learning more and felt safer. Students in this program will have their homework/ tests made up or caught up on a more consistent basis.

More students will see a promotion to the next grade because of the extra time at school to complete work. Students in the transition program will have higher test scores due to the myriad interventions. They will obtain higher order thinking skills to equip them with the tools necessary to succeed at the next grade level. Students' home lives will be a factor in this study. Students who come from economically disadvantaged homes are less likely to be academically successful. Jensen (2009) wrote, "A strong reliable caregiver who provides constant and unconditional love guidance and support is crucial to a child's education."

### **Limitations.**

The ninth grade class, populated with 95 students, was used for the sample size, which ensured a representative distribution of the population for generalizability results. The study was limited to a low socioeconomic rural school in east Tennessee. Because there are few ways to improve students' home lives, each student's domestic influence could affect the study. Fifty percent of adults in the school community have less than a high school diploma. Because the town is small and rural with no large employers, workers drive long distances for jobs. Because the researcher is a member of the faculty and grew up in the community, he may influence the

studies validity with unintended and unknown bias. The researcher may have an unintended or unknown bias which would inhibit the study's validity.

### **Delimitations.**

A delimitation is the study only focus on one school and one grade. The researcher could include the participants in the design of the study, and requesting the interpretation of both the qualitative and quantitative results by the District Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness department to reduce bias on the part of the researcher.

### **Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

The first chapter of the study introduces the research questions, its purpose, scope, and relevance to the field through an overview of the problem. This chapter describes the background of the school, states the problem, and provides an overview of the study's purpose. The research questions address how important the study is to the school community. The scope of the study is also included as well as a list of terms and their definitions. Lastly, the limitations and delimitations are mentioned. The remainder of the dissertation will be organized as follows:

Chapter 2 presents the justification and theoretical framework for the study. The literature reviewed, which focused on the best practices and approaches to creating and maintaining a ninth grade transition program from an already established academy concept. The literature reviewed conveyed how the adolescent brain works regarding new environments. It showed how ninth graders should relish each moment in a positive atmosphere with caring mentors. Finally, the existing research used for the study will contribute to the field by providing the researcher a

roadmap on how to set up an effective transition program that will be suitable for the students involved, but also effective for their teachers as well.

Chapter 3 explains in detail how the study will be conducted and will include the sources of data, characteristics of the participants, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques. The results of the data collection for this study will be reported in Chapter 4 and will conclude with a summary of the findings of the intervention in Chapter 5. Implications for future professional development and future research are also discussed in Chapter 5, along with the significance of the study.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction to the Literature Review

#### Mentors

The transition from middle to high school is both a scary and uncertain time for students. Educators are charged, now more than ever, to get students test-ready for the purpose of accountability especially in the state of Tennessee in the high school environment. Teenagers that are transitioning into high school are growing up in a radically different world than only a few years ago. Today's students require a different approach to learning. Teachers are charged to reinvent their styles of teaching and reach every child on his or her academic ability level.

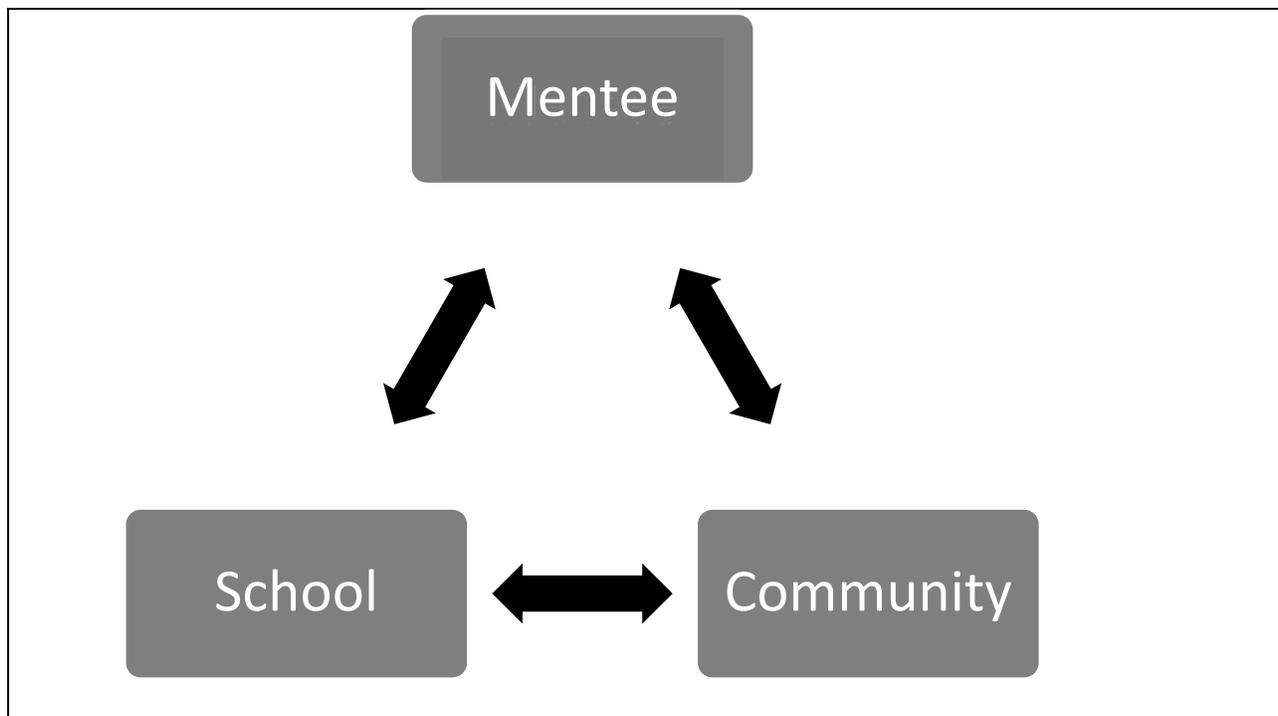
A vital part of the ninth grade student experience is one of a mentor. A mentor (Rose 2008) is one dedicated to helping someone by guiding them in a direction to ensure success in whatever realm is deemed appropriate by superiors. Ninth grade students need mentors. It is an essential part of fitting in and learning about high school life. In a small rural town in Tennessee, the majority of people work or are disabled. With little to no parental involvement, ninth grade teachers must also serve as mentors. The 30-minute Transition Program (Rose 2008) allows teachers to have ongoing communication with assigned students.

There are some advantages to teachers filling the role of mentor. They are paid, which means that they are doing what is directed by the school principal and are outcome driven. This means that they are expecting results from their hard work with each student. Teachers who have the students in the class can decide for themselves what specifically their mentoring role should be. Should they be a coach, tutor, or listener? If they have the student in class, they are more in

tune to where the student difficulties lie. In addition, with the background in human behavior in teacher preparation programs, teachers have had some essential training.

All teachers at the school were trained by former administration to mentor both students and apprentice teachers as an approach that has three distinct realms. This "model of support" is also found in Kyffin, Doveston, and Rose (2008).

**Figure 2.1: Model of Support**



The first realm in the cycle specifically relates to the mentee, whether it be a student or apprentice teacher. Ninth grade teachers placed a majority of their focus on the mentee and less on the other two realms. After all, if the mentee's problems are addressed such as fear, loneliness, and particular challenges; he or she will likely do better in school to do better in school and find a fitting place in the community. This is an attempt to view the ninth grader as not only a student

but also person who has much more to do than just come to school and to think about than only homework.

Much of what the teacher-mentors are charged with during the mentoring time will come from the school counselor. At the school, only one school counselor is spanning all four grade levels. To reach these students during the designated Transition Time, she provided the necessary materials and guidance for the teachers. Failing core academic courses and excessive absenteeism are major factors of why many ninth graders get behind, but there are multiple social indicators as well. A student's socioeconomic status, high mobility, and family background are signs for falling behind in school (Blount 2012). The school counselor had access to income and family history records that can be of high importance to the ninth grade faculty as they make plans to provide intervention.

### **Different Society**

Foster (2009), aimed the message at teenagers growing up in this different kind of high stakes world and society. He presented interesting and entertaining stories about various famous people. Some notes in the book include pursuing dreams, integrity in today's world, and preparing for work and career in early life. Foster's book contained candid conversation about himself as a child growing up without really being ready to face the adult world. He wrote of the skills needed for survival as a teen, before mentioning the future (39). Possibly the chapter with the most impact is entitled to Take it or Leave It.

Foster (2009) wrote lastly about having a second chance. Teens cannot relate to many of these concepts that include furthering education and learning a second language. The book, though, gives students a glimpse of what Foster believes children should know when

transitioning into ninth grade. Building an extensive vocabulary, having a life of balance, reading more, and learning how to speak publicly, are some of the concepts discussed. He ends by writing, "...the more prepared you are for your first chances, the less need you will have for second chances" (87).

### **Student Failures**

A Research Brief by Education Partners, INC. (2012), revealed that more students fail the ninth grade than any other grade level, and suggested lending support to these at-risk students. Some of the ideas offered were tours while students are in middle school, high school teachers trading places with eighth-grade teachers for one day, and supervised attendance for eighth-grade students at ninth grade functions. The article also suggested a support class that addresses transition issues and mentoring.

At the school, the suggestions mentioned in the previous paragraph are not feasible to do beyond the confines of the school day. Limited human capital and financial woes inhibited the school and its faculty from doing what was most appropriate for new ninth graders. Additionally, the high stakes testing environment has created an isolated atmosphere in which working with the middle school has become almost impossible. For example, switching teachers for one day or tours while students are in middle school are simply out of the question. That time is valued for instruction and preparing for the standardized test at the end of the year. This is another reason that the intervention must take place during the school day in the school.

Making ninth graders successful in an accountable time was a tough task for educators. The transition program was modeled from the inspirational words of Scott Habeeb. Habeeb (2008) provided insight into reaching these untraditional and special students. The writer pointed

out the alarming ninth grade statistics regarding failure, discipline, and truancy. This book was meant for educators to read for the purpose of enhancing ninth grade success stories at any school. The reading gave a team of teachers the knowledge to have a framework to implement a successful transition program.

Habeeb and Moore (2008) hold faithful to specific principles in the book. Teaming is vital, and the two explain how that an excellent ninth grade program cannot occur without a common planning time. The writers liken teaming to ongoing marriage counseling (4); "For husbands and wives, those first few years of marriage are the foundation..." just as the ninth grade year is a foundation to a successful high school career.

It also shared unique perspectives in words labeled personal voices. These sections were comprised of real stories from the writers and their experiences. Habeeb and Moore wrote about recognizing ninth graders and making them each feel important. Some of the ideas are Students of the Week and Classroom Halls of Fame.

### **Common Core and Instructional Strategies**

Keeping the rigor in the ninth grade accountable classroom, is not easy, especially in the age of Common Core State Standards. The goal at the school and across the state of Tennessee was to create and maintain high academic standards which were an issue that every administrator faced. In light of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), the increased demand or rigor was especially popular and demanded. The authors of this text, (Habeeb, 2008) though, take into consideration the students that are somewhat untraditional. They provided strategies to connect each child, no matter the learning style or level, and meaningful ways to meet each goal.

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) revealed specific strategies no matter the learning style. The authors have been very successful for years in helping school administrators and teachers alike discuss and apply information about school change. McTighe and Tomlinson asked in the initial chapters about what matters, which in this case are ninth grade students. The writers then asked the same question about what is important in learning. The research suggested that content is what matters most.

Standards are guideposts (25), and ninth grade students and teachers must be clear about what was expected from each of them. Strategies to connect each child to someone who cares was especially hard with a limited staff. Diversity was last in the research presented in the book (McTighe, 2006). The following questions asked of educators in chapter 5: "Did the student learn it?" "To what extent does the student understand it (32)?" The questions as mentioned earlier asked ninth grade teachers to consider various ways to assess students for the understanding of the big picture. The book concluded by asking teachers to differentiate their instruction and assessment techniques to ensure maximum student growth.

### **Ninth Grade Students Physics**

The brain of a ninth grade student is still growing (Willis, 2006). A goal at the school was to study the best solution while also being the most impactful to increase students' learning. After reading Willis (2006), the administration learned and conveyed to the faculty and staff that the fewer changes during the day and the more guidance, the better the results should be (Willis 2006). It was also important from the literature that educators must seek to understand the unmet needs of students cognitively, if students are going to be engaged and interested in learning. Once researchers have that information, only then can educators provide rigorous content to the

developing ninth grade brain. What was rigorous to one student may not be so for the next. Assessing students in a formative manner must happen during the week multiple times (McCollister and Sayler, 2010).

Willis (2006) went on to explain how stress and emotion affect student learning (56). Dr. Willis stated that many students no longer enjoy learning. She believed that the nervousness of standardized testing had taken the place of successful learning. In medical terminology, Dr. Willis explained that PET scans and fMRI scans reveal "significant disturbances" when subjects are studied in stressful environments.

Stress, emotions and the actions of the brain coupled with standardized testing are of particular interest in these high stakes times of testing. In the state of Tennessee, students take a writing assessment in the ninth grade. Freshmen students also take an End of Course (EOC) exam in both Algebra I and English I. Willis argued that a separate assessment conference with each student is needed to show specific discrepancies in a gentle and caring way. This practice is the exact opposite of what is now occurring in the state of Tennessee.

### **School Climate**

McLeskey and Waldron (2000) drilled that collaborative reform considers the attitudes and beliefs of school professionals and recognizes barriers to reaching that particular student and perhaps entire family units. Through personal experiences, the authors have developed this book as a helpful tool to all who read it. The book explored creating an inclusive school for students with special needs and the students that are not traditional which would include ninth graders.

The climate is an umbrella in which many things fall into. Creating a positive environment involved keeping students in courses where the teacher modeled the positivity and

trust. In the ninth grade concept environment, it was important to make students feel as included as they can be. Each student was assigned a mentor. The mentor, during the transition time, had the opportunity to follow the student throughout their ninth grade year and intervene on his or her behalf when necessary.

### **Career and Technical Education**

One way that schools are embracing these communities is by asking students to take courses such as Career Technical Education classes that interest them (Oxley 2010). If a student gets engaged in learning about a possible career choice then they are more likely to stay involved in their studies through the high school years. Students are given a chance to create closer student-teacher interactions, have a greater introduction to classes that interest them beyond secondary education and are equipped to handle the challenges and opportunities that post-secondary education has. To change the schools today educators, have to find a way to make them cater to each individual student's needs and interests (Oxley, 2010).

In America, today many occupations are requiring some type of college education in addition to a high school diploma. However, of the students who are trying to obtain their goals of graduating college only fifty percent actually complete graduation requirements. The standards for college admission are continuing to rise. This has caused career and technical education programs to shrink and has caused core academic areas to rise. Schools that have put small learning communities into operation have seen a rise in students' grasp of the concepts, purpose and goals for achieving success after they graduate. In a small learning community, taking ideas and relating them to the working world is obtained and incorporated. In a traditional classroom, students are required to develop them on their own (Oxley, 2010).

Research implies that small learning communities are helpful when trying to correct a school wide problem such as graduation rate. Implementing small learning communities gives educators a chance to improve and create more achievements. It also allows the administration to see that time and supplies are being used effectively and thoroughly at a time when they are becoming scarcer. The research showed that enhancement is better correlated with applying and following the strategies that are already being used rather than looking for the newest and best idea being introduced. Educators recently have seen small learning communities as just a change in everyday scheduling and application. On the other hand, when a driven goal is approached and lacks reorganization, then districts are turning away from the idea (Oxley, 2010).

### **Superior Instruction**

Hyslop (2009) identified some concepts used to create a logical plan for superior instruction.

- Be specific on which research based curriculum ideas that the faculty will implement;
- Create goals for student success, use common vocabulary and standards for areas where all faculty members can be successful;
- Encourage all students to excel in accelerated courses, cut out remedial class and have special needs students be a part of standard classes;
- Develop thorough, lasting connections between students and teachers by having them serve them through advisement and serving on a collaboration team;
- Utilize the same planning time to develop new ideas more efficiently;

- Allows not only students, but also faculty members a way to encourage their own individual learning as well as the educators;
- Create a common and reoccurring goal for student success in different learning styles and learning areas;
- The mixture of catering the school to each individual learning goals and creating common instruction standards have been successful in raising graduation rates; and,
- Failure to do so has created a drop in student success numbers and student attendance (Hyslop, 2009).

### **Small Learning Communities**

In 2010, the United States Department of Education spent fifty –two million dollars to create Small Learning Communities in twenty-eight states. Classmates were teamed with other classmates that have related interests and career goals. Educators partnered with each other on common standards and ideas that are being taught so that everyone appears to be uniform. The reasoning for implementing small learning communities was that students are achieving academic success and creating their own ideas that can be used in more than one core subject (USDOE, 2010).

Field trips are to focus on everyday situations (Dayton & Stern, 2010). An example would be if students are learning about principles of a business, they could go to an office complex and see the very principles they are studying being used in context. Standards are more thoroughly recalled when the student sees them in multiple fashions and different contexts. Educators want students to strive to be lifelong learners. Being a lifelong learner means that the

researcher takes the concepts and skills that are being introduced and uses them throughout the college and workforce years. (Dayton & Stern, 2010).

The research specified that small learning communities encouraged student beliefs toward their own individual academic success. This type of achievement can be recreated in schools that have large enrollment numbers and those that have smaller ones. The research also implied that small learning communities will not solve all the problems a school has but it is a way to devote effort into making the school better. This research could be implemented to improve graduation rate and year-to-year carryover. The research mentioned that having all teachers involved in the small learning communities would present a united front to the students. Without this involvement programs would not be able to continue for an extended period of time (Dayton & Stern, 2010).

Another question the research asked was how many students have to be effected for it to be successful? The point was made to illustrate that successful small learning communities can have various levels of success. These levels include parents whose child may be struggling. This keeps them in school and those students are usually overjoyed. However, schools need to see graduation rates going up year after year (Dayton & Stern, 2010).

Small learning communities that continue to run the same schedule and class size, find it challenging to categorize all faculty and students into groups that have the same planning time and schedule (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). This makes it difficult to create a well-built and sound community. The research stated that it would be difficult to meet the needs of the general population of students while trying to maintain the reliability of the learning community. An idea that the research proposed was to make sure that all students had a firm grasp of the standards and techniques that are being taught in the core subjects. It suggested getting rid of remedial

courses and having those students who are not proficient in core courses take two classes to ensure that they understand the concepts and strategies that are being implemented (Lee & Friedrich 2007).

Another thought was to make tutoring and one on one advisement available to those that are struggling in a particular area. It also suggested that if a particular graduating class was struggling in an area then they would make it a part of each class and discuss areas where they can strengthen it. These methods are used with an idea that they will improve state achievement levels. Creating a precise, applicable, and logical core curriculum makes small learning communities and educators adapt their teaching and develop new roles. Educators need all-embracing opportunities to work together to create ways to advance instruction and to develop new tasks (Lee & Friedrich 2007).

Leaders who excel in improving educator ownership of enhancement incentives improved working arrangements to make this challenging job manageable (Driscoll 2003). Educators especially well received more class time and decreased class size. Decisions were necessary when it came to assigning supplies among the classes and services. Administrators chose a mixture of ideas to move more supplies to the core subjects, such as getting rid of electives and using a cooperative with community colleges to make Advanced Placement classes available. Leaders have to face the decision of equality. A study of supply allocation patterns show that core courses such as Algebra are given fewer funds than classes that only upper level students take, such as Advanced Placement with a smaller class size and longer tenured, higher paid educators. Administrators must present a uniformed image to investors or risk a debate about where funds and supplies are needed (Driscoll 2003).

A misconception about small learning communities is that it requires multiple school years to fully put into place because it engages the entire school to change. Many people believe that a cultural change and re-evaluating the entire classroom changes are required as well. A probable pattern that other districts have used is a school year of planning, pursued by developing a ninth grade academy, then finally taking the small learning communities to the upper grades to replace many electives and paths of study. Regardless of the multiple obstacles that stall putting the full system in place, some districts manage to rapidly start the small learning community structures (Driscoll 2003).

Their objective is to create the changes in one year and execute them the following school year so that the faculty can rapidly start to advance teaching styles that will be helped by innovative organization. These districts also benefit from sturdy leadership and collect support from developed outside stakeholders. Districts that turn schools around rapidly have been acknowledged and those that have changed under achieving schools have been praised. When a strategy is put into place but does not take off like it should then the faculty possession is not where it should be and can be a deterrent to the system. The basis of leadership is to develop a vision that presents a following year process for putting small learning communities into action (Driscoll 2003).

The research suggested standards to maintain and sustain introducing the small learning communities and small school districts (Metzger 2006).

- Match accessible supplies with the requests for making the instructional core better;
- Drop class roster size, particularly at the freshman class;
- Diminish faculty instructional burden and increase class time;

- Improve faculty value by taking more tenured teachers to the freshman and sophomore classes;
- Have each school district take a small learning community as the secondary levels best strategy and watch over it and advise leaders; and,
- Follow the beginning year of collaborating with building wide achievement of standards in the second year (Metzger 2006).

### **Graduation Rates**

The graduation rate for ninth graders that attended public high school on time is seventy-three percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). This measure is of vital care because studies have shown that freshman completion is a good measuring stick for retention and graduation. On the other hand, reduced academic performance and a void of proper social interaction raise the chances of a student dropping out before graduation. Annual household income is also a main component when talking about high school retention. The dropout rate of students who reside in poverty-stricken homes was near ten times larger than those that came from wealthy homes. This means that the freshmen that come from poverty-stricken homes are the most crucial ones to target before they reach the tenth grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

### **District Strategies**

Districts need to have strategies and ideas to target these students that will produce quick short-term success. Some ideas of activities that can be used are service learning classes or projects, debates, using the arts and theater experiences. The National Dropout Prevention Center suggested that service learning is a useful goal for raising students' self-esteem, helping social

improvement. This is because it gives them a chance to collaborate in teams and problem solve with others by increasing their sense of accountability. Mentoring, which is pairing up a teacher or older adult with a troubled student, is an effective strategy as well. The advantage of mentoring is that it raises student retention; fewer students miss class, decreased conduct and discipline problems, and increased academic success. This can be used as a release and a safe haven for public help and be used as ways for students to be involved in student improvement, public engagement and academic accomplishment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

The research showed that small schools or small learning communities accomplish elevated achievement, smaller dropout rates, increased graduation rates and raised likelihood of student pursuing some type of college education. Secondary education students, particularly ones who are labeled as at risk, perform or score greater on achievement measures in small schools. Those that attend smaller schools are described as doing far greater, since the academic achievement that is presented is more genuine and pertinent to the student. Most small learning communities center their attention on the ongoing achievement of individual students, particularly those students who have been over looked or fallen through the cracks at a large more populous school. Small learning communities approach each student as a relevant component of the school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

For this area to be successful a board was created that comprised both secondary educators and students (Sims 2010). The committee laid out their ideas and concerns for the service learning mentoring program and the service learning training requirements of teachers. It is vital to hear the students' ideas and vision of the mentoring programs. Students and teachers collaborated on ideas that the incoming freshman would like to research to better help them with

the transition to high school. Possible ideas discussed were getting to know their teachers' personalities and classroom rules and expectations, best possible courses to enroll in, what after school activities are the more highly attended, and what is the best way to find their way around school (Sims 2010).

On the other hand, mentors should be familiar with students' interests and what actions that they could participate in together. Ideas brought up were; what they enjoyed about the campus, which social events seem to be the best received, and what other hobbies or activities that they enjoyed, playing sports together and watching a movie with each other. The teachers were required to attend a professional development seminar on defining service learning, the accomplishments and struggles of service learning, how to incorporate it into the curriculum while still meeting and covering their standards, and how to assess learning results (Sims 2010).

Educators talked about which courses would be best utilized for the mentoring program, what time they would present opportunities for combining upper grade students with ninth graders, and what would be the best way to assess the educational progress. They also were prompted to put the service learning programs into practice during the following school year. One idea that was presented was to have the upcoming freshmen ask any question they wanted. These questions were placed on a piece of paper that was sent to the upcoming seniors' homerooms. The junior teachers then used this activity to have the junior students reflect about the impact that they were making and if they found it fulfilling or not (Sims 2010).

Service-learning mentoring programs have unlimited possibilities for reducing freshman dropouts by increasing the freshman transition program (Styron & Peasant 2010). Leadership advancement, raised social accountability and individual expansion are just some of the rewards for contributors. The best possible outcome for this program would be that advisees develop the

desire to one day become mentors as well. This vision could provide as an individual incentive for students to remain in school and develop into senior leaders and reach and help their classmates. (Styron & Peasant 2010).

These programs can be used as a means to cover the required state standards, especially the Career Development Standards, along with social and emotional development. Both the mentors and the advisees used their interpersonal ability to create rewarding relationships and they increased their own personal awareness to reach academic accomplishment. Even though these programs can be rewarding there are still struggles (Styron & Peasant 2010).

One major struggle is time restraint. Time restraint is a factor because educators are forced to develop concepts and ideas to meet their state and national standards. Turnout is a problem when sports are in season. One recommendation the teachers had after implementing the program was to possibly have college students, such as education majors, serve as advisors to aid in the program. Educators oversee the program but college students would be required to initiate jobs such as; advertising the activities and events, persuading other freshman to join and get involved, and make rides available for the after school mentoring activities (Styron & Peasant 2010).

### **Larger School Model**

In larger schools' students perceive their educators as uncaring for student well-being and achievement (Lee 2011). The small school model pushes an accommodating community where students can get personal advisement and consideration from their educators (Lee 2011). A common misconception is when larger school are converted into smaller ones, that the learning cracks will be fixed or corrected (Lee 2011). This model:

- Gives educators a chance to create more thorough relationships between home and school;
- Allows for a better appreciation of students' strengths and weaknesses; and,
- Offers increased support for both and educates more from each other that produces a more exhilarating and energetic tenure (Lee 2011).

This small school idea is breached from the notion smaller class size and population creates more involvement from students, educators, faculty, and parents. This gives way to a greater perception of community where all groups involved collaborate for the increased good of their learning community. In general, attending a smaller school no matter what grade one is in, seems to allow the students to collect greater rewards than larger ones, despite income level or of which minority one belongs to. Research has shown that changing a larger school into a smaller one has some drawbacks. Most schools have a restricted number of teachers due to budget needs and may not be able to provide a broad selection of classes (Lee 2011).

There are also instances where a school has changed in population physically, but it keeps still keep the notion of instruction and knowledge that it used in the larger one. Although there may be greater chances to associate and get involved in numerous activities at a larger school, participation is greater at a smaller school. Smaller schools can offer the advantage of increased parental participation and more committed students to learning and growth. Students who attend larger schools are also at greater risk for truancy. A great number of students leave school early since their parents do not hold education in high regard. Some drop out because they perceive the electives and course offerings at their school as too narrow or restricted. Research showed that if these problems were handled more properly then the school's graduation rate would increase (Lee 2011).

The literature presented should be a basis for anyone studying ninth grade students and entertaining the thought of an academy program. The research has served as a basis on which to begin the transition time in the low socioeconomic school. The results of the program are to be determined. However, the groundwork has been laid for a successful program to begin. The purpose of this study is to improve the educational environment for ninth grade students to graduate.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### Introduction to Chapter 3

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what improvements could be made to the educational environment to encourage ninth graders to graduate. The ninth grade academy was setup to resemble a school within a school. All entering freshman were kept together throughout the year and somewhat separated from the rest of the school. The current practice of only keeping ninth graders together for most of the day without a purpose or plan was not working as test scores and a negative culture showed.

### Research Questions

**This study was driven by the following research questions:**

#### *Research Question 1*

Is there a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year?

#### *H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

***Research Question 2***

Is there a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

***Research Question 3***

Is there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in rural school in east Tennessee Transition program?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

### **Research Design**

The transition program was implemented at a rural school in east Tennessee in the Beginning of Fall and the beginning of the winter trimester. The transition program for ninth graders included an inclusive wing of classrooms and lunch. All ninth grade teachers had a common planning period to meet and discuss ninth graders and the problems they were having in all classes. Students from the previous year that did not go through the program was treated as the control group.

### **Target Population and Sampling Method**

#### **Sample Size.**

The ninth grade class, populated with 95 students, was used for the sample size, which ensured a representative distribution of the population for generalizability results. Next, the teachers and school administrators were an integral part by supporting the students and teachers throughout the study. During the 30-minute transition time, teachers taught life skills and provided educational guidance. They also acted as academic mentors.

**Setting.**

The setting is in a small rural school in east Tennessee. The school has a student population of less than four hundred. The population consisted of males and females from the graduating class of 2019 and 2020. These two ninth grade classes were chosen because they were freshman for the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years. All students in the population were lower middle class as it relates to socioeconomic state. There were 190 students total with 95 representing each school year. There were 48 males and 47 females in the class of 2019. There were 46 males and 49 females in the class of 2020. The racial disparity in both class was ninety-nine percent Caucasian and one percent African American. The age disparity in both classes was ninety-five percent are age 15, four percent are age 14 and one percent was age 16.

**Recruitment.**

Students were selected based upon enrollment school district zones and parent's choosing to bring their students to this school. Thus the 95 student class of 2020 made up the sample size. The researcher compared it to the entire ninth grade of the previous year which served as the control group and did not go through the program, the class of 2019. The sampling method chosen was convenience sampling.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection.****1. Report Cards**

Report cards were collected to analyze the differences in credit attainment in the test group in the Fall trimester of 2016. Each report card included the name of the student as well as each student's grade for all classes. Data on report cards contained grades for each class the

student was taking or has taken. Report cards were content analyzed to ensure validity. All of the content represented on the report cards will showed validity as it is representative of all classes taken and it is a universal representation. Report cards were deemed reliable for their internal consistency, as they all measure the same items. The researcher used the data type of overall grades of 70(D) or better to gage success in completing required courses for freshman year. They were compared to the previous trimester of the control group in Fall 2015 in order to test for statistical significance in credit attainment between the treatment group and the non-treatment group. Report card data was collected at the end of the trimester.

## **2. Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES©)**

This survey was utilized to gather information about the perception of ninth grade students that participated in the treatment as it pertains to their sense of belongingness to the school. It was given twice. Once at the beginning of the trimester and once at the end of the trimester. Each ninth grade teacher that had students participating in the treatment administered the questionnaire. The results were scored by the researcher.

This evaluation instrument measured academic enablers such as motivation, study skills, engagement within the school, and interpersonal skills. The same survey was also used to gather data about the level of confidence in academic competence of each ninth grade student that participates in the treatment. Students were given this survey twice during the trimester. Once at the beginning of the nine weeks and once at the end. The ninth grade teachers administered the survey for each participating student. The results were scored by the researcher. This evaluation instrument also measured academic skills in English, Mathematics, and critical thinking.

The assessment was created by James C. DiPerna. The ACES© takes 10-15 minutes to complete and published by PsychCorp, A brand of Harcourt Assessment. Inc. The researcher used the assessment for grades 6-12. The researcher used the ACES© to measure the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that have often been identified in the research literature as important for academic success. The ACES© reported three academic skills scores and a total Academic Skills score, and four academic enablers scores (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The review of Academic Competence Evaluation Scales is by Ronald K. Hambleton, School of Education, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, MA.

The assessment instrument was distributed to students via their ninth grade teachers. ACES© included questions ranging from measurements of academic skills in English, Mathematics, and critical thinking skills to academic enablers such as motivation, study skills, engagement, and interpersonal skills. According to Burrows© Test Review, score reliability is very high for all reported scores. Standard errors of measurement are low.

Both teacher (N=188) and student (N=37) test-retest reliability is reported for the nine scale and subscale scores. A considerable amount of construct validity was offered. First, a factor analysis reveals two factors- the Academic skills and the Academic Enablers. Norms for the ACES© were developed in 1999 in conjunction with the norming of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test-Second Edition. Four academic enablers measured belongingness (research question 2) and the three academic skills scores and the total academic skills score measured academic confidence (research question 3).

## **Operationalization of Variables**

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## Detailed Analysis

Three instruments provided the researcher with all data to be analyzed: Report cards from 2015, Report cards from 2016, and the ACES© survey.

Report cards were collected to analyze the differences in credit attainment in the test group in the Fall trimester of 2016 versus the control group of 2015. Report cards (2016) were gathered after the grading period to ensure all grades are correct, while the report cards from the previous class were collected at the beginning of the trimester in August.

The ACES survey was utilized to gather information about the perception of ninth grade students who participated in the intervention on their sense of belongingness to the school. It was given twice, in August 2016 and in November of 2016. The same survey was used to gather data about the level of confidence in academic competence of each ninth grade student who participates in the treatment.

## Data Analysis Procedures

**The following steps were taken from the analyses of each data source from above:**

### **Pre- and Post- Surveys and Report Cards**

**Step 1: Report cards** for each student were collected from the administrative offices of the school after the November grading period for thorough analysis of credit attainment. Student scores (sampling) will be compared to those who completed the courses the previous year (control) for comparison using the Chi Square Test ( $X^2$ ), analyzed in crossbreak form. In each category, the expected frequencies ( $f_e$ ), as contrasted to the observed frequencies ( $f_o$ ), is the number of cases that would appear if there were no systematic relationships between the

variables, a pure chance relationship.

The researcher compiled the results and presented them in a chart to showcase achievement whether it be higher or lower between the treatment and control group. A narrative was written concerning the outcome along with the tabulated data. The data remains in the possession of the researcher for storage.

**Step 2: Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES©)** were collected from students and sent to the researcher for scoring. The ACES© reports three academic skills scores and a total academic skills score, and four academic enablers scores (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The data was analyzed and scored by the researcher. The researcher disaggregated the data and used a dependent T-test analysis in order to identify whether there was a significant difference in the pre survey versus post survey results within the 9th grade treatment group in the areas of competence of academic skills and belongingness to the high school culture. The data collected from this survey answered both Research Question 2 and Research Question 3. The belongingness question will be answered by the raw data of the enablers provided by ACES© (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The confidence question was answered by the raw data of the skills scores and the total academic skills score provided by ACES©.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

1. Sample size, the ninth grade class has 95 students, so it ensured a representative distribution of the population so the results can be generalized.
2. The study was limited to only a rural school in east Tennessee so the results only reflect the student body of a small, rural high poverty school and community.

3. There was a lack of a prior extensive researcher on my research area and therefore difficulty in solidifying the proper literature arose the need for my study
4. There was no way to improve the home lives of children in the study. Each student's domestic influence could affect the study. 50% of adults in the school community have less than a high school diploma. The city is small and rural with no large employers so many drive long distances to work.
5. There is little public educators can do to improve the out of school environments of the students in my study. Each student's may be influenced by the impact that only 50% of adults in the school community obtained less than a high school diploma or GED.
6. The researcher is the teacher at the school and is from the high poverty rural community. The researcher may have an unintended or unknown bias, which would inhibit the study's validity.

### **Expected Findings**

In public education, use initiatives, policies, and ideas come and go. This study determined if this Tiger transition program was effective for the academic success of students in the school. In an economically disadvantaged community, in a very rural part of the south, teachers and administrators care just as much about the students walking their halls as anyone else. Stakeholders want the best for their students and experiencing this transition program was only one way the community is looking to improve.

Using action science was the only research method that engaged all stakeholders and provides a bit of ownership to all involved. The field of education could be forever changed by this study by adding support to other previous studies that early intervention to build a positive

academic culture is a better way to keep students on track to graduate. The study involved a demographic of students that is rarely studied. One group of poor students were put in the hands of five dedicated teachers who implemented a program never dreamed of in such a small rural school and system. The results of the study of such an exclusive student in such a vulnerable year, at a critical time in the life of that student, with such odds facing each, proved to be life surprising.

A t-test is an analysis of two populations' means through the use of statistical examination. A t-test with two samples is commonly used with small sample sizes, testing the difference between the samples when the variances of two normal distributions are not known. A t-test looks at the t-statistic, the t-distribution and degrees of freedom to determine the probability of difference between populations; the test statistic in the test is known as the t-statistic. A form of hypothesis testing, the t-test is just one of many tests used for this purpose. Statisticians must use tests other than the t-test to examine more variables, as well as for test with larger sample sizes.

The formula used to calculate the test is a ratio. The top portion of the ratio is the easiest portion to calculate and understand, as it is simply the difference between the means or averages of the two samples. The lower half of the ratio is a measurement of the dispersion, or variability, of the scores. The bottom part of this ratio is known as the standard error of the difference. To compute this part of the ratio, the variance for each sample is determined and is then divided by the number of individuals the compose the sample, or group. These two values are then added together, and a square root is taken of the result.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests the hypothesis that the means of two or more populations are equal. ANOVA assess the importance of one or more factors by comparing the response variable means at the different factor levels. The null hypothesis states that all population means are equal while the alternative hypothesis states that at least one is different. To perform an ANOVA, you must have a continuous response variable and at least one categorical factor with two or more levels. ANOVA require data from approximately normally distributed populations with equal variances between factor levels.

However, ANOVA procedures work quite well even if the normality assumption has been violated, unless one or more of the distributions are highly skewed or if the variances are quite different. Transformations of the original dataset may correct these violations. The name analysis of variance is based on the approach in which the procedure uses variances to determine whether the means are different. The procedure works by comparing the variance between group means versus the variance within groups as a way of determining whether the groups are all part of one larger population or separate populations with different characteristics.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

The research design for this dissertation was defined as an action science research study utilizing the mixed method design known as triangulation. This method allowed for the use of both quantitative and qualitative studies to be used to find valid results to the research questions posed.

Quantitative data was collected from the administrative offices the school after the November grading period for thorough analysis of credit attainment. Student scores (sampling) was compared to those who completed the courses the previous year (control) for comparison

using the Chi Square Test ( $X^2$ ), analyzed in crossbreak form. In each category, the expected frequencies ( $f_e$ ), as contrasted to the observed frequencies ( $f_o$ ), is the number of cases that would appear if there were no systematic relationships between the variables, a pure chance relationship. The researcher compiled the results and presented them in a chart to showcase achievement whether it be higher or lower between the treatment and control group. A narrative was written concerning the outcome along with the tabulated data.

Qualitative data was collected from students through the ACES© surveys. The ACES© reports three academic skills scores and a total Academic Skills score, and four academic enablers scores (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The data was analyzed and scored by the researcher. The researcher disaggregated the data and used a dependent T-test analysis in order to identify whether there was a significant difference in the pre-survey versus post survey results within the 9th grade treatment group in the areas of competence of academic skills and belongingness to the high school culture. The data collected from this survey answers both Research Question 2 and Research Question 3. The belongingness question was answered by the raw data of the enablers provided by ACES© (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The achievement question was answered by the raw data of the skills scores and the total academic score provided by ACES©.

This chapter confirmed alignment between the research questions, methodology, types of data collected, and analysis of the data. Additionally, data analysis procedures for this and future iterations of the study are clearly listed and all ethical issues have been addressed. Although the study is meant to improve the ninth grade experience for the students, the design of the program could potentially be meaningful to students in other grades.

## **Chapter 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

The goal of this study was to improve the educational environment for students in ninth grade so that they will graduate. The ninth-grade academy is set up in such a way as to resemble a school within a school. All entering freshman are kept together throughout the year and somewhat separated from the rest of the school. The current practice of only keeping ninth graders together with the general population for most of the day without a purpose or plan is not working due to low test scores and a significant number of dropouts.

### **Description of the Sample**

Key stakeholders in this study were the ninth-grade students who were the participants. There were 95 ninth grade students involved in the study. Next, the teachers and school administrators were an integral part by supporting the students and teachers throughout the study. The teachers taught as they always had, however it is what happened during the 30-minute time period each day that defined the success of both students and teachers. During the 30-minute Tiger Transition Program, teachers taught life skills and provided educational guidance. They also acted as academic mentors.

Parents added the last piece to this puzzle. Parental perception is something that school administration rarely noticed. In most instances, parental perception is something that is overlooked because state lawmakers who construct mandates care nothing about the way parents perceive the public education system and they are never consulted when changes are made.

In this study however, the researcher sought parental input. Since students may talk freely to their parent(s), it was a great opportunity for the researcher to truly notice what both the student and parent(s) thought or believed.

## Summary of Findings

### *Research Question 1*

#### *Part 1- Report Cards.*

Report cards for each student were populated and stored securely from the administrative offices of the school after the November marking period for thorough analysis of credit attainment. Student scores were compared to those who completed the courses the previous year (control) for comparison using the Chi Square Test ( $\chi^2$ ) in crossbreak form. In each category, the expected frequencies ( $f_e$ ), as contrasted to the observed frequencies ( $f_o$ ), is the number of cases that would appear if there were no systematic relationships between the variables, a pure chance relationship. The results compared achievement between the treatment and control groups. A narrative is included concerning the outcome along with the tabulated data.

**Table 4.1 Chi Squared Table, Observed vs. Expected**

Observed	114.26
Expected	109.35
Degree of Freedom	1
Probability	0.05
$\chi^2$	3.841

Degree of freedom is  $n-1$  which is 1. From Chi Square chart, with 5% probability, the number was 3.841.  $X^2 = \frac{(\text{observed} - \text{expected})^2}{\text{expected}}$ .  $\frac{(14-31)^2}{14} \approx 20.6$ , thus the  $H_0$  is rejected and the  $H_1$  is accepted. Therefore, there was a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group, Class of 2019, which earned the necessary number of credits to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from the Class of 2020. However, the results are in direct opposition of what the researcher had expected.

### ***Part 2- ACES© Surveys.***

Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES©) were collected from students and scored by the researcher. The ACES© reports three academic skills scores and a total Academic Skills score, and four academic enablers scores (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The data was analyzed, scored and disaggregated using a dependent T-test analysis to identify whether there was a significant difference in the pre-survey versus post survey results within the 9th grade treatment group in competence in academic skills and belongingness to the high school culture.

The collection of data from this survey answered both Research Question 2 and Research Question 3. The belongingness question is answered by the raw data of the enablers provided by ACES© (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The confidence question is answered by the raw data of the skills scores and the total Academic score provided by ACES©. The results are in Chart 4.2 to compare achievement between the treatment and control groups. A narrative is included concerning the outcomes along with the tabulated data and answers to Research Questions 2 and 3.

**Research Question 2****Table 4.2 T-Test significance difference between pre-and posttest for academic enablers.**

From T-Chart:	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	109.3473684	114.2631579
Variance	318.5482643	311.4087346
Observations	95	95
Pearson Correlation	0.748066537	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	4.92	5.59
Df	94	94
t Stat	-7.609064051	
P(T<=t) two-tail	$p<.001$	
t Critical two-tail	1.985523442	
Degree of Freedom =	12.71	
Probability	95%	

128.65<m<171.35= H0 is accepted. Therefore, there was no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the Tiger Transition Program.

### Research Question 3

**Table 4.3 T-Test significance difference between pre-and posttest for academic skills.**

From T-chart:	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	109.3473684	114.2631579
Variance	318.5482643	311.4087346
Observations	95	95
Pearson Correlation	0.748066537	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	4.92	5.59
Df	94	94
t Stat	-7.609064051	
P(T<=t) two-tail	p<.001	
t Critical two-tail	1.985523442	
Degree of Freedom	12.71	95% probability

89.17<m<128.83= H0 is accepted. There was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in the Tiger Transition Program.

### Chapter 4 Summary

According to the Chi Square Test that was performed, there was a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earned the necessary number of credits to remain on track to graduate and the number of ninth graders on track to graduate from the class of 2020. The difference is not what was expected however.

It was actually in a negative manner. In the Fall trimester of 2015 when treatment was present, 31 students failed courses compared to only 14 students in the Fall trimester of 2016 when treatment was not present. Many factors may have contributed to the phenomenon. First, the State of Tennessee implemented new testing criteria.

**Table 4.4 Comparison of Cohort Failures.**

School Year	2015-2016	2016-2017
Number of Student Failures	17	31
Number of Classes Failed	19	55

In terms of the ACES© Survey, the researcher found that there is no difference based on the results of the t-test between the test for both academic skills, which represents confidence, and academic enablers, which represents belongingness compared to the control group

### **Outcome of ACES© Skills Survey**

The qualitative part of this study was the ACES survey. Ninety-Five students in the ninth grade (SY 15-16) were invited to participate in the ACES© survey. Ninety-Five students were granted the appropriate permissions and completed the surveys. Those 95 students were given both a pretreatment ACES survey and a post treatment survey of the same kind. The sample was selected out of necessity as only ninth graders were studied.

Quantitatively, report cards of the 95 students that took the ACES survey were accessed from the administrative offices at the school and compared to the previous ninth grade class (SY 15-16) of 98 students. The researcher compared courses passed and failed to conclude if there was a significant difference post-treatment academically. The next chapter will review the results and finding of both the qualitative and quantitative data outlined in the chapter.

Recommendations will be presented in the next chapter along with implications of the study and its impact on the school and the administration.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Introduction

Action research, as discussed by Stringer (2007), is a complex process of iterative cycle of observation, reflection, and action. For many years, the educators at the small high school in east Tennessee searched for a way to ease the transition of ninth graders to a less complex and strict environment. After many years of searching for a solution, it was time to take action. The primary purpose of this study was to work in collaboration with both the ninth-grade teachers and students to determine if the Tiger Transition program would be effective in terms of belongingness and academic inspiration so that grades would improve and students would stay in school.

The primary research data were collected from the administrative offices at the school. The surveys included only qualitative information, while the student report cards held the quantitative data needed. The disseminated survey reported three academic skills scores and a total Academic Skills score, and four academic enablers scores (motivation, engagement, interpersonal skills, and study skills.) The surveys were given both prior to the treatment and following the treatment. The ninth grade teachers were charged with giving these surveys and collecting them as well. Report cards were collected to analyze the differences in credit attainment in the test group in the Fall trimester of 2016. They were compared to the previous trimester of the control group in Fall trimester of 2015 to test for statistical significance in credit attainment between the treatment group and the non-treatment group. Report card data were collected at the end of the trimester. As mentioned prior, student scores (sampling) were compared to those who completed the courses the previous year (control) for comparison.

This chapter provides a summary and discussion of the findings of this study as presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 3. Insight into limitations of the study are discussed as well as the implication and significance of the research findings. Lastly, recommendations for application of the Tiger Transition Program's future will be prescribed.

### **Summary of Results and Findings**

*This study was driven by the following research questions:*

#### *Research Question 1*

Is there a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

***Research Question 2***

Is there a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

***Research Question 3***

Is there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in rural school in east Tennessee Transition program?

*H<sub>1</sub>*

There will be a significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

*H<sub>0</sub>*

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in rural school in east Tennessee Transition program.

### **Part 1- Report Card Comparisons**

When comparing the two distinct groups and their pass/fail rate or course credit attainment, the difference was not even close. More than twice the number of students in the treatment group failed core courses compared to the control group in the Spring (31>14) and were thus considered "off track." The report cards also showed evidence of 15 courses failed for the control group, compared to 55 in the treatment group.

### **Part 2- ACES© Survey Comparisons**

The ACES© survey was conducted twice and the results were not what was expected. An independent T-test was used for measurement. The survey has two parts: academic skills and academic enablers. Four academic enablers will measure belongingness (research question 2) and the three academic skills scores and the total Academic Skills score will measure academic confidence (research question 3).

### **Discussion of the Results and Findings**

The chi square goodness to fit test was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Tiger Transition Program as it relates to grades reported to the students and parents. The result of the quantitative report card data as revealed by the test was that there was a significant difference in the report card results of both groups. In fact, it was the extreme opposite of what was expected.

Degree of freedom is  $n-1$  which is 1. From Chi Square chart, with 5% probability, the number was 3.841.  $\chi^2 = \frac{(\text{observed} - \text{expected})^2}{\text{expected}}$ .  $\frac{(14-31)^2}{14} \approx 20.6$ , thus  $H_1$  is accepted and is restated below, however the significant difference is in the extreme opposite direction. There will be a significant difference in the number of ninth graders in the treatment group that earn the necessary number of credits in order to remain on track to graduate and the number of on track ninth graders from last year.

A dependent T-test was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Tiger Transition Program. The academic enablers portion of the ACES© revealed that there was no significant difference in the feeling of belongingness of Freshmen students, thus there was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores for ninth graders participating in the Tiger Transition Program and the null hypothesis was proven.

T-Test significance difference between pre-and posttest for academic enablers.

From T-chart: Degree of Freedom= 12.71

95% probability

$128.65 < m < 171.35 = H_0$  is accepted.

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest perception feeling of belongingness scores for ninth graders participating in the Tiger Transition Program.

The academic skills portion of the ACES© revealed that there was no significant difference in the confidence of Freshmen students, thus there was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest academic skills scores for ninth graders participating in the Tiger Transition Program and the null hypothesis was proven.

T-Test significance difference between pre-and posttest for academic skills.

From T-chart: Degree of Freedom= 12.71

95% probability

$89.17 < m < 128.83 = H_0$  is accepted.

There will be no significant difference between the pretest and posttest confidence scores for ninth graders participating in the Tiger Transition Program.

### **Limitations**

As stated in Chapter 1, the sample for the study was limited to only ninth grade students at one school in the Fall trimester of 2016. The researcher was unable to begin gathering data until the Institutional Review Board approval was received. Thus, course offerings were very different from the comparison trimester from before Spring 2017. The Fall trimester brought different course offerings and newly mandated Tennessee State testing procedures. Adversely, the results will only affect schools that are small, rural, and economically disadvantaged.

A huge obstacle of this study was lack of data and prior research. The idea of the specific Tiger Transition Program was new and innovative. There was much research about adolescents, the brain during the adolescent age, and teenagers in high school, but so much less on transitioning from an intermediate to high school atmosphere. The home lives of children were also a severe limitation with most households having less than a high school diploma.

### **Implications of the Results and Findings for Practice**

The transition from the eighth to the ninth grade is a process of transformation for each student and family represented. Each year the faculty at the school approach each class differently with the goal of getting them both comfortable and confident in their new role at the school. The findings from the Fall trimester indicated that the administration should try a new approach in order to make students feel as if they belong and are valued. The results indicated there was no difference in the belongingness or confidence in ninth grade students. However, there was a distinct difference in the number of courses failed and the number of students that were not on track for graduation.

### **Conclusion**

The ninth-grade year is the foundation to a meaningful high school career. It is evident that the Tiger Transition Program did not improve the educational environment for these students in ninth grade. There is still a great deal of work to be done in this area and that includes a constant vigil over the mandated ninth grade academy concept. The current practice of only keeping ninth graders together for most of the day without a purpose or plan is not meeting the intended goals.

**Recommendations**

Some recommendations that the researcher would use for future or further reference would be to have the program in place in a younger setting such as middle school. This would give the students exposure to the program in place for more than one year to get a more extensive set of useful data. This allows various internal and external factors to be during the process. It also allows the faculty and staff more familiarity with the material and resources to use instead of having to change to new ones. Another theory is to have families, the community and stakeholders more involved in the process to achieve greater results.

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Appendix A:  
Permission Letter

## Appendix A:



## Whitwell High School

200 Tiger Trail  
Whitwell, TN 37397

Telephone 423-658-5141  
Fax 658-0313

Teena T. Casseday  
Principal

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Teena Casseday give Benjamin H. Thacker permission to use student report card data from Whitwell High School. The information will be stored on a password protected computer. No student names will be used in the report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Teena Casseday'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T' and a long, sweeping underline.

Teena Casseday

Principal

Whitwell High School

Appendix B:

ACES Survey

## Appendix B:

Statement	Strong. Agree	Agree	Middle	Disagree	Strong. Disagree
English is easy for me.					
Science is easy for me.					
History is easy for me.					
Math is easy for me.					
My teachers understands what I tell them.					
I hate school and do not wish to be here.					
My teacher is easy for me to understand					
In school, the harder the problem the harder I try.					
I have a hard time making friends.					
Most other kids get along with me.					
All schoolwork is easy for me.					
Praise from my teachers when I do well is important.					
I feel safe at school each and every day.					
I feel like I am a part of the school environment.					
I feel intimidate by the older students.					
I like middle school better than the high school.					
I understand the work the teacher presents.					
I like going to extracurricular events.					
It is important for me to pass all my classes.					
I worry each day when I come to school.					

Appendix C:

Student Data

## Appendix C:

Student 1	128	129
Student 2	111	88
Student 3	109	96
Student 4	125	111
Student 5	119	119
Student 6	89	79
Student 7	112	124
Student 8	114	111
Student 9	141	150
Student 10	109	94
Student 11	129	124
Student 12	118	115
Student 13	113	120
Student 14	93	114
Student 15	112	126
Student 16	136	136

Student 17	97	101
Student 18	95	102
Student 19	140	150
Student 20	77	96
Student 21	108	128
Student 22	125	123
Student 23	136	141
Student 24	145	141
Student 25	98	114
Student 26	108	121
Student 27	126	114
Student 28	109	114
Student 29	109	114
Student 30	107	110
Student 31	108	96
Student 32	131	127

Student 33	111	113
Student 34	134	150
Student 35	109	124
Student 36	109	127
Student 37	96	99
Student 38	115	134
Student 39	100	101
Student 40	126	134
Student 41	131	119
Student 42	75	89
Student 43	105	110
Student 44	103	105
Student 45	109	121
Student 46	118	125
Student 47	100	113
Student 48	120	122

Student 49	96	104
Student 50	145	143
Student 51	80	90
Student 52	107	113
Student 53	67	85
Student 54	82	116
Student 55	85	69
Student 56	134	115
Student 57	129	109
Student 58	118	109
Student 59	80	85
Student 60	109	110
Student 61	109	118
Student 62	78	74
Student 63	82	90
Student 64	107	144

Student 65	140	143
Student 66	136	135
Student 67	96	123
Student 68	109	111
Student 69	93	103
Student 70	89	105
Student 71	123	140
Student 72	112	104
Student 73	134	142
Student 74	103	93
Student 75	105	96
Student 76	122	111
Student 77	110	110
Student 78	109	110
Student 79	103	108
Student 80	109	109

Student 81	92	96
Student 82	96	122
Student 83	109	106
Student 84	94	133
Student 85	105	120
Student 86	109	111
Student 87	67	112
Student 88	120	116
Student 89	133	134
Student 90	77	80
Student 91	108	124
Student 92	110	124
Student 93	132	144
Student 94	94	99
Student 95	103	103