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Jamie North

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Jamie North

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Approved:

Carla L. Sparks

Chair, Dissertation Committee

Daniel C. Juchman

Member, Dissertation Committee

Elizabeth Minn

Dean's Representative

Harrington Gibson

Director, Doctoral Program

RMuller

Dean, National College of Education

May 14, 2020

Date Approved

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of

Doctor of Education

National Louis University

2020

ABSTRACT

The historical and current dispute on how to educate middle grade students continues to puzzle today's leaders of school systems nationwide. As a result of conflicting research on academically high performing schools, scholars and school decision makers continue the discussion on the influence of grade span configurations on academic performance. The purpose of my mixed method case study was to explore how teachers and school principals perceive the role of collective efficacy as influencing academic performance for grade eight students in the school under study. My study obtained input from school principals, district leaders, and teachers guided by the following research questions: How do faculty perceive a level of collective efficacy within the K-8 school model? How do teachers and the principal in the school acknowledge and share their efforts to establish a climate of collective efficacy in order to promote student achievement in the K-8 grade configured school? Does the school staff believe there are unique components in a K-8 school model that increase academic performance? Do teachers perceive a climate of trust among instructional staff within the K-8 school model with respect to teacher collaboration? How do eighth grade students perform academically in a K-8 school model in both reading and math from year to year over a five-year span? The findings demonstrated the school under study did not have an academic influence on grade eight students but did show a positive relationship regarding collective efficacy among faculty and staff members.

PREFACE

Prior to working in a K-8 school model, I was a teacher in the traditional grades 6-8 middle school model for over 10 years. During my time as a middle school teacher, year after year, I would inquire as to why my students were fundamentally behind in both reading and math upon entering the middle school years. It was not until I had the opportunity to work within a K-8 school model, that I was able to see the differences between the primary and secondary instructional practices. Not only were there differences in pedagogy, but there were clear social-emotional shifts within the K-8 structure that occurred as well.

While conducting research on the K-8 school model, I have been able to discover more attributes that not only make this model unique, but also complex in structure. Whereas my study did not focus on the social emotional benefits of a K-8 school model, I did seek to understand cohesive instructional relationships established within the K-8 structure as researched through instructional collective efficacy. Although the academic performance data did not align in my study like it did in prior studies, I was able to link collective efficacy among teachers and staff as a prevalent component within the K-8 school model.

As a school leader, it is imperative to collectively examine the instructional dynamics within the organization, as well as the social emotional attributes that contribute to the cultural elements that influence academic performance. Furthermore, school leaders should be well versed in the curricula within the organization as to enhance and support the pedagogy and professional collaboration among the instructional personnel.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

I dedicate my work to my four sons, husband, and family that supported this dream six years ago. Thank you for always standing by my side and pushing me to continue. To my four sons, no matter what obstacles come your way, if you dream it then make it happen. Set goals, work hard, and get after it!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Plausibly, it is not the age specific separation of the middle school model, grades sixth through eighth, that supports the academic success of students, as much as the grade level structuring within an organization that promotes the institution and learners within (Bunting, 2010). Despite the historically constructed and supported philosophy of separating primary and secondary educational institutions, the development of the K-8 school structure continues to gain attention with respect to leadership decisions in the area of education and middle grades reform (Bunting, 2010; Jacob & Rockoff, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Research has shown that school size has an influence on every person within a school, both on a personal and interpersonal level, and on a school's academic outcomes (Kulophas, Ruengtrakul, & Wongwanich, 2015).

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) completed a study on academic optimism and academic performance. Hoy et al. showed that despite the socioeconomic status of students, previous studies on academic optimism demonstrated a positive influence on student achievement. The authors' findings also showed that academic emphasis and academic optimism were vital components of academic performance and student learning. The presence of academic optimism within an organization can be defined as a cognitive and behavior efficacy present and shared within an organization (Hoy et al., 2006). Historically, patterns of organizing K-8 grade levels within a school building were based on decisions centered on financial, political, and spatial limitations (Keegan, 2010). On the other hand, educators are reconsidering the K-8 school model based on how research has shown grade span configurations to influence academic achievement, as

measured by the state's No Child Left Behind testing and student assessment process (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010). Previous school reform debates centered on the appropriate combination of school model, content curriculum standards, and best instructional practices for adolescent learners (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, D. M., 2004).

Now, as a means to increase measures of academic performance, leaders in school districts across the nation have employed various school reform tactics, including adjusting school grade-span configurations to increase or decrease the total amount of constructed grade levels within a school building (Yecke, 2006). In addition, academic optimism present within an organization can influence the academic performance for those attending students (Hoy et al., 2006; Sparks, 2011). Three aspects of academic optimism are functionally dependent on each other: collective efficacy, faculty trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis (Hoy, Hoy, & Kurz, 2008). Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lamkin & Roberts (2015) found that despite their research, the importance of both the academic and social dimensions of schooling and their symbiotic nature remained poorly understood.

Several educational leaders supported the middle school concept in the 1990s, while other school leaders chose not to reform to a 6-8 middle grades model, thus maintaining a K-8 grade school structure (Bunting, 2010). Yet, there was a lack of substantial evidence in the relevant literature to sustain the arguments that students in 6-8 middle grades model performed academically higher than students in a K-8 school structure, grounded on the levels of academic optimism present within the organization (Bunting, 2010; Hoy et al., 2006). This chapter presents the background on the topic of

study, the purpose, rationale, and significance of study, research questions under analysis, and my assumptions, along with limitations and delimitations of my study.

The problem at the time of this study was, even with schools developing a grade-level change plan, such as reconfiguring grade levels back to a 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8 model, academic statistics showed minimal proficiency gains in reading and math from middle school students based on grade level configurations (Hildreth, 2011; Meyer, 2011). It may be possible that a school's grade span configuration influenced the academic performance levels of the students within it, or the combination of academic optimism present within the K-8 school model had a stronger influence on how the learners academically performed (Hoy et al., 2006). Researchers found it difficult to define what creates an academically effective school and to attribute that to one specific area or identifiable set of traits (Meyer, 2011).

There was evidence grounded in theory that the future success of students begins in grades 5-8 (Holas & Huston, 2012; Jacob & Rockoff, 2012). Larger grade span alignment structures, like that of K-8 organizations, demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement and less behavioral issues than those of the 6-8 middle school structures, which could be influenced by higher levels of academic optimism present by students, teachers, and leaders within the K-8 organization (Hoy et al., 2006; Meyer, 2011; Yecke, 2006). Researchers on grade span configuration models have examined but have yet to determine which model is more academically effective over the other. A few researchers found 6-8 middle school students to academically fall behind K-8 middle school students that took the same standards based assessments (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008; Porter, Smithson, Blank, & Zeidner, 2007).

In contrast, some recent researchers found no direct relationship between grade span configurations and academic achievement and noted that other factors such as school transition and academic optimism did influence academic achievement scores (Dove et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006; Sparks, 2011). Much of prior research literature on the middle school configuration has gained unfavorable attention, as a few of these middle school institutions continued to fall short of the substantial academic and social achievement gains that district and state leaders assumed to occur by constructing concentrated grade levels (Keegan, 2010). On the other hand, Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) found academic decline in student populations that concentrated exclusively at 5-8 and 6-8 levels. Thus, the question continues to circulate among education professionals and scholars, as to what constitutes an effective grade level structure, while delivering a suitable combination of adolescent specific curricula and social instruction (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2004).

Through my mixed methods case study, I added an additional component to the literature on the K-8 school configuration by holistically analyzing an eighth grade student cohort's academic performance in reading and math in the K-8 school model, and the influence of academic optimism and collective efficacy present within the organization. Additionally, through my case study I collected interview data from the K-8 school principals, academic optimism survey data from 48 K-8 classroom teachers, and five years of academic performance data in reading and math to understand how academic optimism may influence academic performance in a K-8 school model. Finally, I sought to close a gap in the relevant research by providing an additional mixed method study to the existing limited studies on the academic benefits of a K-8 school model. By

collecting, analyzing, and triangulating sources of data in a school district's only K-8 school model, a mixed methods case study depicts whether the K-8 school model produced specific academic and cultural optimism outcomes, which led to amplified levels of academic performance, over five years. As an outcome, the findings of my study provide the district under study with data showing either a positive or a negative influence on academic performance in reading and math.

Problem Background

Researchers reexamined the middle school model established in the 1970's, due to the fact that leaders of several districts across the nation, implementing the 6-8 middle school model, were moving back to the older pre-established K-8 school model (Bunting, 2010). Researchers were in search for an answer regarding how effective the K-8 model was, and why it was a popular choice for school administrators (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). Arif and Sohail (2009) studied the influence of leadership on school performance and effectiveness, yet there were minimal studies conducted on how a grade configured K-8 school had an influence on the academic needs of an adolescent population.

The goal of the middle school model was to concentrate primarily on the social and developmental needs of targeted adolescent students, as a means of increasing learning and social behavior (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; National Middle School Association, 2003). As the middle school philosophy evolved with the notion of emerging and shaping adolescent learners, little research was able to conclude that the middle school model was more effective at providing a substantial certainty of achievement and social development over that of the K-8 institution. In fact, researchers found the transition from K-5 schools into middle schools to be a contributing factor to

declining levels of academic achievement for these students (Bunting, 2010; Sparks, 2011). Pellettiere (2006) stated, "70% of organizational change initiatives fail" (p. 38). In fact, Pellettiere (2006) claimed, much of the time, the lack of success was due to the fact that organizations tried to initiate quick fix solutions and did not really scrutinize the completeness of the plan.

Twentieth century school reform leaders echoed concerns as to why the middle grade model was ineffective at preparing adolescent learners, thus encouraging school leaders to return to the K-8 model (Balfanz, Spiridakis, & Neild, 2002; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). With a wide-ranging student age population and numerous instructional personnel, determining if academic optimism was higher within a K-8 school model remained a question (Hoy et al., 2006). Sparks (2011) reported that a study completed by the Program on Education Policy and Governance, through Harvard University, found a significant decline in math and reading achievement scores during the high school years, from those students who attended the 6-8 school model. If the middle grade years influenced academic performance at the high school level, examining the K-8 and 6-8 school models should be a primary focus for educational policy leaders.

The conflicting research on effective and high performing schools, has led scholars and school decision makers in a recurring debate on how grade span configurations influence academic performance. An additional debate continued with a focus on each model's ability to academically and socially prepare future learners. Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) found evidence in a K-8 school model to support the notion that grade level configuration within a school has an influence on a student's academic performance, while Byrnes and Ruby (2007) and Weiss and Kipnes (2006)

found limited evidence to support academic advantages in either the K-8 or 6-8 model. Furthermore, there was limited academic research that focused specifically on the eighth grade cohort and academic achievement within the K-8 school model (Malone, Cornell, & Shukla, 2017). The theory of action within my study was based on the gap in previous literature demonstrating whether there were other components within the K-8 school model that had an influence on academic performance for grade eight students.

Balfanz et al. (2002) found that in a high poverty K-8 school, the academic achievement of the population marked great improvements, but not significant enough to meet the state performance standards required to be effective. Patton (2005), found the K-8 structure to be effective at increasing academic achievement and decreasing behavior issues, yet in comparison to the middle school model, Weiss & Kipnes (2006) and Hildreth (2011) were unable to connect middle schools with generating a negative effect on academic and social performance. Comparatively, when there was a transition to middle or high school, researchers showed that the middle grade years may act as a final chance to assist students in academic or behavioral weaknesses that can affect future success (Sparks, 2011; Williams, Kirst, & Haertel, 2010). These inconsistencies in research left unsubstantial findings on either side of the school model debate providing areas for future research.

Opposing research continued to influence the educational reform system, which as a result, produced widespread changes throughout school districts nationwide, which may not be best suitable for the independent districts (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Hildreth, 2011). In order to meet the instructional needs of students, as well as meet the mandate set forth by the state, school leaders sought innovative ways to match class size numbers

while working within the budgetary restrictions set forth by district leaders, and they also sought innovative ways to increase academic achievement. In fact, student performance was a key identifier of school-based changes (Opfer, Henry, & Mashburn, 2008). When an organization's leaders execute rapid changes that are unexpected within the organization, change can then create turbulence or disorder (Mason, 2007). This was the case in education, as much of the new changes were quick fixes and did not result in sustained success; this was exactly what Pellettiere (2006) identified as ineffective practices that necessitate new plans of change to cover the unsuccessful plans previously executed.

If grade configuration does not identify academic performance trends in or between the K-8 and 6-8 schools, serving similar student populations, then it may be likely that grade configuration and academic optimism within the organization have minimal influence on academic performance. MacPherson and Carter (2009) found the need to generate small cultures of academic optimism: "In schools where there is a culture of academic optimism, students have the opportunity to form positive attachments" (p. 65). My case study placed a focus on the influence of academic optimism and the K-8 school model on academic performance for a cohort of eighth grade students, as the school served as the district's only K-8 school model. Furthermore, my study can guide educational leaders within the district, with current research needed to make informed decisions with respect to future school construction and grade level structuring.

To educate middle school learners effectively, institutions must begin to develop into specific grade level schools, and as a result, an increase in academic and social

performance will be gained over time (Booth, Sheehan, & Earley, 2007; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). My study cross referenced the middle school conceptual framework established by Hansen and Hearn (1971), as well as previous works on K-8 grade span configurations and academic performance by the National Middle School Association (2003), Rockoff and Lockwood (2010), Byrnes and Ruby (2007), and Weiss and Kipnes (2006) to better understand the historical influence on grade span configuration and school structuring decisions.

Problem Statement

Researchers were unclear as to how teachers and the school principal perceived the role of collective efficacy and academic optimism as influencing academic success of students in a K-8 grade configured school model. Specifically, there was a lack of empirical evidence in literature to support how academic optimism influenced academic performance within a K-8 school model. As grade level restructuring remained an area of concern when trying to identify effective school characteristics, questions continued to circulate among school leaders as to what specific grade configurations demonstrated or constituted an effective school model, as measured by state performance assessments, and if academic optimism was present within the K-8 school model (Dove et al., 2010; Hoy et al., 2006).

My case study provides a foundation for future research on how academic optimism and collective efficacy in a K-8 model influences academic performance for eighth grade students. By collecting and analyzing academic performance for five years, interview data from school principals and district leaders in a K-8 school model, and academic optimism teacher survey data in a district's only K-8 school model, a mixed

methods case study can determine if the K-8 school model produced specific academic outcomes that led to an amplified level of academic performance over that of the 6-8 school model.

The K-8 school under study was located in a rural area in the United States. The school housed around 1,300 K-8 students each year. The school under study had a mixture of student demographics with a majority of the student population being Caucasian. The findings of this study may provide the district under study with information showing a positive or negative influence from the K-8 school model in the academic areas of reading and math. Additionally, the findings of my case study can provide district leaders with current academic performance data in the K-8 model to influence decisions regarding grade span configurations in the future. Furthermore, the magnitude of my findings can enhance possible policy changes for future zoning and school construction discussions across state school leaders to develop school models that demonstrate high levels of academic achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my mixed method case study was to explore how teachers and school principals perceived the role of academic optimism and collective efficacy as influencing academic performance in the school under study. Academic optimism as defined in this study is an individual teacher belief that he or she can teach effectively, is supported by students and teachers, and sets the bar within the classroom setting to achieve high levels of academic performance (Hoy et al., 2006). As grade level configurations remained a topic of concern when examining effective school models, questions continued to circulate among school leaders as to what degree specific grade

span configuration constituted an effective school model (Dove et al., 2010; Rockoff and Lockwood, 2010).

Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) found in their study, high levels of academic performance in reading and math to support the K-8 grade configuration on academic performance, while Byrnes and Ruby (2007) and Weiss and Kipnes (2006) found limited academic evidence in reading and math proficiency scores to support neither the K-8 nor 6-8 school models' academic advantage over the other. The result of conflicting research on academically high performing schools, has led scholars and school decision makers to continue the discussion on the influence of grade span configurations on academic performance, and as a result, determine each school model's capacity to academically prepare learners for the future (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Rockoff and Lockwood, 2010; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006).

Previous qualitative research on academic optimism and academic performance in a K-8 school model was also limited in scope of study and provided inconclusive evidence to support the K-8 school model's level of increased academic performance for eighth grade students. Furthermore, there was limited academic research that focused specifically on the eighth grade cohort and academic achievement within the K-8 school model (Malone et al., 2017). My case study can add an additional analysis of a K-8 school model's academic and cultural optimism influence on academic performance to the current gaps in existing literature. Additionally, my case study may assist school leaders within the sampled district to determine if the K-8 school model's academic optimism was academically influential for eighth grade students during the years 2014-2019.

Rationale

In the 1960's middle school advocates argued that middle grade adolescent children should be in a school structure that targeted developmentally appropriate, academic, and social needs (Lounsbury, 2009; National Middle School Association, 2003; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). The transitional phases of education affected the academic and social performance levels of adolescent learners (Dove et al., 2010; Sparks, 2011). A Harvard study found that student attendance rates dropped significantly upon transitioning into middle school (Sparks, 2011). A causal reason for academic declines when entering a middle grade model, may be because, "Students making the transition from elementary to middle schools face many changes in their academic environment, as they move from self-contained classrooms to a schedule with many transitions during the day" (Patarapichayatham, Anderson & Kamata, 2013, p. 1).

Middle school students continued to enter sixth grade lacking the fundamental skills in reading and mathematics. In sixth grade, the middle school system was socially preparing learners for the remainder of their secondary school experience, yet after working in both a 6-8 and a K-8 school model as a middle school teacher, I continued to have questions as to the level of academic and social guidance occurring at the middle grades level.

Research Questions. My case study explored how the school's principal and teachers perceived the role of academic optimism as influencing academic success of students in a K-8 grade configured school. The following research questions guided my study:

- R1: How do eighth grade students perform academically in a K-8 school model in both reading and math from year to year over a five-year span?

- R2: How do faculty perceive a level of collective efficacy within the K-8 school model?

- R3: How do teachers and the principal in the school acknowledge and share their efforts to establish a climate of collective efficacy in order to promote student achievement in the K-8 grade configured school?

- R4: To what extent does the school staff believe there are unique components in a K-8 school model that increase academic performance?

- R5: To what extent do teachers perceive a climate of trust among instructional staff within the K-8 school model with respect to teacher collaboration?

By examining student academic performance levels in a district's only K-8 school model, this study can assist in closing a portion of the qualitative gap in current literature if over time the K-8 school model produces high levels of academic proficiency for eighth grade students. I used my research questions to align principal interviews and staff surveys to understand the perceived influence academic optimism had on academic performance through the 2014-2019 academic proficiency scores of eighth grade students in the K-8 school model.

K-8 school models are growing considerably in popularity across the nation, as school leaders further examine how effective K-8 schools are constructed and aligned with curricular and instructional resources to best serve the school's student population (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). Furthermore, measuring the academic performance component

of a K-8 school structure should combine an analysis of the academic emphasis a school structure places on student achievement (Hoy et al., 2006). My research questions were aligned to determine how teachers and school leaders perceived academic and cultural optimism played a role on academic performance for eighth grade students. The information found in my study can influence future decisions regarding new school construction and grade level alignments within the district under study. As an additional result, the mixed methods case study can enhance the previous works on the K-8 school model by determining if academic and culture optimism influence academic performance for eighth grade students in a K-8 model.

      Advancing Scientific Knowledge. The historical and current dispute on how to educate middle grade students, grades 5-8, remained to puzzle today's leaders of school systems nationwide. The dispute in research continued to focus on the effectiveness of the K-8 and the 6-8 school models, evaluating if either school model increased the academic and social performance levels of middle grade students (Keegan, 2010). In the 1960s, middle school advocates argued that middle grade adolescent children, should be in a school structure that targeted developmentally appropriate, academic, and social needs (Lounsbury, 2009; National Middle School Association, 2003; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Under the middle school theory and 1960s social advocate movement, the middle grades model was constructed in 1970. With the middle school concept, came the belief that the middle school age group would best be served to learn within a specific grade tier structure (Lounsbury, 2009). A variety of studies used the middle school conceptual framework to show differences between the 5-8 and 6-8 models, yet minimal research was completed to explore actual student cohort performance of a K-8 compared to a 6-8

school model, leaving gaps in existing research as to how effective each school model was at increasing academic performance over time (Carolan & Chesky, 2012).

Additionally, relevant research within the area of school configurations, with respect to academic performance outcomes, was non-conclusive and did not explain how the K-8 model was effective at developing adolescent learners (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Rockoff and Lockwood, 2010; Weiss and Kipnes, 2006). As a result, school leaders, reformers, and stakeholders continued to reexamine the middle grades 5-8 model because the educational success of these isolated student populations had yet to signify a quantifiable outcome of academic and social effectiveness over other configured models like that of the K- 8 (Gershenson, & Langbein, 2015; Hildreth, 2011). Moreover, current research, at the time of my study, the area of school configurations, academic optimism with respect to academic performance outcomes, was non-conclusive and did not explain how either model was effective at developing adolescent learners (Hildreth, 2011; Hoy et al., 2006). As a result, school leaders, reformers, and stakeholders continued to reexamine the middle grades 5-8 model because the educational success of these isolated student populations had yet to signify a quantifiable outcome of academic effectiveness over other configured models like that of the K-8 (Hildreth, 2011).

My study further expanded upon the K-8 grade configuration by examining academic performance, teacher and principal academic optimism, and collective efficacy data. This study can close a portion of the gap in the conflicting literature by providing current academic data in reading and math to determine the K-8 school model's influence on academic performance. Furthermore, my study can influence future decisions regarding new school construction, by identifying specific academic trends in a K-8

model, which in return, have an influence on academic performance and academic optimism.

Significance of the Study. The middle school model gained attention in the early 1970s, with a focus on the developmental needs of adolescent learners and the isolative nature for target specific instruction (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). The junior high school model, grades 7-8 or 7-9, was created by a strong political impulsion to develop learning centers specifically for adolescent students and began a new era of educating teens across the United States during the middle 20th century. Stakeholders and parents wanted a school model that adequately prepared students for high school (Hildreth, 2011). To shift the academic and social focus, yet retain the same conceptual foundations, the middle school model soon replaced that of the once supported junior high framework. As a result, 60% of middle school students in the United States attended a traditional 6-8 configuration, with the same preconceived notions that middle school teens required age specific emphasis of academic rigor, accompanied by a socially balanced environment that promoted social and academic transitions, over the K-8 school models that served a more diverse age population (Dillon, 2008).

Despite the historically constructed and supported philosophy of segregating primary and secondary institutions, the development of the K-8 institutional structure continued to gain much more attention with respect to making leadership decisions within the area of education and middle grades reform (Bunting, 2010; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). In fact, recent scholarly research supported the leadership decisions of returning to a K-8 configuration, as its structural purpose is to educate and target a larger population of students in an encompassing environment that is best suited to meet student needs

(Bunting, 2010; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Howley, 2002). Additionally, studies showed that the attendance rates drop among students that make a transition into sixth grade, in comparison to those students who remain in one school until the eighth grade (Sparks, 2011). Provided the fact that previous research on the middle school model was limited in scope of study, my research adds a concentrated component to previous research in the field of grade-span school configurations. Moreover, through my study, I sought to discover what academic and social trends were present within the studied K-8 and 5-8 middle grades configurations, by closing a research gap and adding additional evidence on which school model performed more effectively, academically and socially, within the studied district.

Reeves (2005) found organizational attitudes and abilities were essential factors in determining a school's effectiveness and levels of academic achievement. Respectively, the school's collaborative structure has an influence on the quality of education obtained within the organization (Cerit, 2010). There was evidence that the isolative nature of middle schools was a key component in developing middle school readiness, yet opposing evidence supporting the K-8 institution stated K-8 models develop more engaged and transitory learners, which in return, result in higher levels of academic and social performance (Booth et al., 2010). The discrepancies in previous literature justified the need for further examination and clarification in the area of grade span configurations.

Similar to the academic performance and collaboration influence findings of Cerit (2010) and Keegan (2010), the academic performance outcome in my case study can add an additional component for future research and enhance the current scope of qualitative

studies on the K-8 school model and academic performance when seeking to identify which school model increases academic performance at the middle grades level. Likewise, the findings of my study may prove significant as to determining if the isolative middle school structure, academically and socially prepares middle grades learners more effectively than that of the K-8 model.

Nature of the Research Design for the Study. The purpose of my mixed method case study was to explore how teachers and school principals perceived the role of academic optimism as influencing academic success of students at a K-8 school model. I aligned the research questions as to understand how the K-8 school model influenced academic performance through structural and instructional alignments. For this study, I collected numerical descriptive academic performance data, using the State Standards Assessment (SSA) from the K-8 school model, grade eight, along with data from semi structured principal interviews and K-8 teacher surveys. The academic data obtained to determine levels of academic performance consisted of grade 6-8 SSA standards assessment scores in reading, mathematics, science, and writing, for the years of 2014-2019.

I chose a mixed methods case study design because it allowed me to examine process and meaning within an organization or institution by collecting various types of qualitative data to understand the whole institution (Creswell, 2003). Patton (2002) stated, in regard to qualitative studies, "They capture and communicate someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words" (p. 47). The numerical data for this mixed methods case study was available from the state Department of Education website. The data collection encompassed the academic school years, beginning June of 2014 to

June of 2019. I collected State Standards Assessment reports for reading and math, grade eight, a means of assembling proficiency-based data during the years of June of 2014 to June of 2019, as an additional component to academic performance.

I began data collection procedures by generating a spreadsheet of academic performance scores for the years of 2014-2019 for students in grade eight, from the Department of Education website. Academic data collection reports consisted of SSA proficiency scores in reading and mathematics grade eight, and semi-structured interview data generated through interviews with K-8 school principals and district leaders who previously worked in a K-8 school model. All data will be securely stored for three years after final approval of the dissertation research.

Using a mixed methods case study approach, I collected and input data into the NVivo 12 software program. I used academic descriptive data to understand the academic performance trends over five years. The purpose for the case study approach was to explore how the sampled school model performed academically in order to answer the specific research questions guiding the study. Additionally, through this study I sought to identify any qualities or trends which identified specific instructional gains and techniques unique to the K-8 school model.

The findings of this study provided the local school district with target specific information showing the influence of the K-8 model on academic performance in reading, math, science, and writing, while also showing the influence of academic optimism of the K-8 school structure on instructional practices.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were important to my study and I used them throughout this work:

State Standards Assessment (SSA). State standards assessment used to measure academic performance on the State Standards Assessment (Citation withheld to protect confidentiality). For the study, grade eight reading, mathematics, and science scores.

Academic performance. Academic assessments in 8th grade reading, math, and science that demonstrate academic performance at or above grade level, as represented by a score level 3, 4, or 5 on the Standards Assessment Test (Citation withheld to protect confidentiality).

Academic optimism. Individual teacher belief that he or she can teach effectively, is supported by students and teachers, and sets the bar within the classroom setting to achieve high levels of academic performance (Hoy et al., 2006).

Collective Efficacy. A group's belief and confidence that they can reform or affect learning (Daly, Moolenaar, Liou, Tuytens, & Del Fresno, 2015).

K-8 model. The grade-span configuration of students enrolled in kindergarten through eighth grade (Citation withheld to protect confidentiality). For the study, the sampled K-8 school model is the district's only public K-8 model.

Middle school model. The middle school model is a grade-span configuration of enrolled students in fifth through eighth grade, or sixth through eighth grade (Citation withheld to protect confidentiality). The seven middle school models selected for the study are inclusive of all the middle school model variations within the sampled public school district.

Assumptions

Previous studies explored a variety of academic and social variables as a means of examining the relationship between grade span configurations and academic and social performance. This study is an additional element to existing research on grade span configurations, with the following assumptions guiding the study's outcomes:

- I assume that the examined K-8 student population is a comparable representative of other public K-8 institutions in the geographical area based on the demographic makeup of each school model's location within the district under study.

- I assume that middle school populations are similar to other middle school institutions located in districts throughout the state under study.

- I assume that the SSA used to assess academic performance is an equitable source to measuring public school levels of academic achievement across the state, as the SSA assessment is the only academic measurement source to universally determine and compare levels of academic performance throughout the state.

Limitations and Delimitations

The following limitations and delimitations are present in the study:

- While the previous studies on grade span configurations concentrated primarily on, or were limited to, a specific geographical school district, this study was also be restricted to a specific state and school district, for the studied district's future.

- Academic performance data collected during the study, was limited to

enrolled and recorded attending students during the time of the SSA

assessment period and did not include transient students before or after the

SSA period.

- Examining individual teacher and classroom instructional practices were not included within the study; therefore, I did not generalize that specific instructional practices are characteristics of all K-8 models.

- Although the collected information was publicly available, the school and teacher names, and student demographics involved with the study remained anonymous during and after the study's term.

Student names associated with the data were not be a concern within this study, as all reports generated from the state and the district were transcribed numerically, based on each school site and grade level configuration.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Concerns about the quality of middle grade education began early in the 20th century, and continues today, as school districts across the United States are again reexamining school configurations as an avenue of increasing academic and social performance for adolescent learners (Gruhn & Douglass, 1956). The middle grades model evolved in the 1970s with a strong belief that academically and socially shaping adolescent learners is a critical milestone in preparing post middle grades learners. Consequently, previous research was inconclusive in determining if a structured middle school model was more effective at providing a substantial certainty of achievement and social development over that of the K-8 institution (Bunting, 2010). Relevant research within the area of school configurations, with respect to academic and social performance

outcomes, was nonconclusive and did not explain how either model was effective at developing adolescent learners. As a result, school leaders, reformers, and stakeholders continue to reexamine the middle grades 5-8 model because the educational success of these isolated student populations has yet to signify a quantifiable outcome of academic and social effectiveness over other configured models like that of the K- 8 (Hildreth, 2011). Dove et al. (2010) stated that grade span configurations consider more than just the population of students, in actuality; schools must factor in things such as anticipated enrollments, transportation costs, school size, fiscal constraints, political tensions, geographic realities, and financial accountability of the organization. My case study adds to relevant research through exploring how a K-8 school model influenced academic performance for grade eight students over five years in reading and mathematics.

In Chapter Two, I presented a review of current research on grade span configurations and academic and social performance. In Chapter Three, I described the methodology, research design, and procedures used during the study. In Chapter Four, I detailed how the data was coded and analyzed applying a case study method and provided both a written and graphic summary of my research findings. In Chapter Five, I explained and discussed the results, as they related to the existing body of research concerning grade span configuration influence on academic and social performance.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of chapter two is to provide an analysis and synthesis of existing literature, identifying previous research supporting each model's influence on academic performance, and to establish how a K-8 school model influences academic performance for grade eight students, over five years in reading and mathematics. In chapter two, I will present a review of the historical arguments and findings on both the K-8 and middle school models by presenting identified academic and social outcomes reported on both sides of the grade span configuration debate.

A recent school reform movement created a heightened awareness for school districts across the nation to reexamine the potential benefits of merging elementary and middle school populations. What constitutes a standard grade level configuration continues to evolve within recent literature that supports grade span configurations influence academic and social performance. Studies applying an academic comparative framework, show academic and social differences between the two models, yet minimal long-term, analytical research has been completed to compare grade level student cohort performance of one school model to another over time (Carolan & Chesky, 2012).

In the first section, I discussed the cycle of school reform movements. Beginning with a movement to align core curricula to standards based assessments, researchers were unable to determine a substantial link between core alignment and academic outcomes on standards based assessments (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). With unsubstantiated findings, the school reform debate reverted to analyzing grade span configuration influence on academic and social performance. In the second section, I presented the research

conducted on the middle school model, and the findings on how the school model enhances academic and social performances. In the third section, I presented research on the K-8 school model, and the findings to support the K-8 model as more effective than the middle school model, both academically and socially. I concluded the chapter with a review of research that attempts to determine how grade span configuration influences student academic and social achievement within the K-8 and middle school models.

Background to the Problem

The historical and current argument on how to educate middle grade students, grades span 6-8, continues to plague school systems nationwide. In the early 1900s, the American public schools system began to devise an eight-year elementary, and four-year secondary plan, as a means of adapting and developing school models that met specific learning needs of the attending populations (Dhuey, 2012; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Educators believed that during the development of the K-8 structure, the school model itself did not address the specific learning needs of adolescent learners (Dhuey, 2012). Despite various modifications made to grade span configurations, I found a lack of significant research demonstrating how either the K-8 or the middle grade model is more effective at educating adolescent learners.

In the 1960s, middle school advocates argued that middle grade adolescent children should be in a school structure that targets developmentally appropriate, academic, and social needs (Lounsbury, 2009; National Middle School Association, 2003; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). William Alexander and Emmett Williams found any school structure needs a learning environment that develops cultural inclusive relationships between teachers and students, while elevating educator instructional

strengths and curricula specialties (Gottesman, 1968). The National Middle School Association was developed in support of increasing a nation-wide middle school model, which as a result, increased the number of middle schools during the 1970s (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006).

During the 1990s, the number of middle schools across the United States has increased by 41 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). As the middle school model progressed over time, the evidence of such educational advantages diminished with the findings of relevant research. In fact, Weiss and Kipnes (2006), and Simmons and Blyth (1987), identified specific complications students experienced during the middle school years, such as poor grades, behavioral problems, and low self-esteem. Weiss & Kipnes (2006) found that during the first 20 years of the middle grades school development reform, grade level alignment played an insignificant role influencing academic and social advancements.

Due to conflicting research, school districts and scholars continued to debate the effectiveness of the middle school model, arguing that converted forms of past and current research distorted the true middle school influence over time (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). This study reviewed the history and progression of school reform and presented the arguments for grade span alignment based on previous research conducted within both the K-8 and middle school models. Furthermore, this qualitative historical analysis, served to provide additional findings to the relevant literature by presenting an analysis of academic and social performance trends for a grade eight cohort, in both the K-8 and 5-8 school models.

Conceptual Framework

Over the last 20 years, school districts across the nation have undergone numerous national reform policies, as a path towards enhancing and maintaining consistent levels of academic and social performance. The High Stakes Accountability Act evolved into the Elementary and Secondary Act of (2001) and was federally adopted as the No Child Left Behind Act in (2001), creating state mandated reforms to state-wide assessments and instructional alignment to increase levels of academic achievement (Dove et al., 2010; Nash, 2010; Opfer et al., 2008). The Elementary and Secondary Act of (2001) specified that schools must show 100% academic proficiency in meeting the standards of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by 2014 (Jennings, 2010; Kaufman & Blewett, 2012). Behind the new Obama *Blueprint Plan*, reform mandates to state assessments were to take an additional form, replacing AYP standards with new core standards that moved states across the nation towards 100% graduation rates, or at least on track to graduate by 2020 (Shirvani, 2009; Jennings, 2010).

The NCLB Act of 2001 observed school configurations as a way to identify what alignment of student populations better supported instructional efficiency, which as a result, enhanced the school environment and student achievement (Dove et al., 2010; Kaufman & Blewett, 2012; Opfer et al., 2008). "During the course of the grade span debate, two conceptual frameworks have consistently been utilized. Specifically, school transition and instructional environment have been used by policy-makers, researchers, and reformers to frame aspects of adolescent education pertaining to grade span configurations" (Clark, Slate, Combs, & Moore, 2013, p. 2). The ideology behind new instructional mandates was a belief that instructional reform policies are a means of

closing the growing achievement gap in academic performance across the nation (Opfer et al., 2008). A first attempt towards curriculum reform mandated a revamping process of curriculums in the core academic areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and science to meet the instructional standards outlined by NCLB, including the students with disabilities curriculum (Porter et al., 2007).

Porter et al. (2007) examined the instructional reform concepts behind standardized assessment measures within alignment of the assessed content's standards. Porter et al. (2007) proposed that standards, tests, textbooks, and classroom instruction should align, at all grade levels and school structures, to assess student learning without the need for a conclusive assessment. When expert teachers united the curriculum, they discovered 95% of the aligned assessment and 62% aligned standards reported to be on grade level in the targeted mathematic area (Porter et al., 2007). In the science content area, the results for assessment and content area standards alignment demonstrated a percentage of 69% and 63%, contrasting a significantly lower outcome to that of the mathematics (Porter et al., 2007). The question remained as to what aligned learning activities did not assist students in learning the science content, versus that of the math instruction, which yielded different results. An established and comprehensive curriculum alignment model required teachers to develop in depth lessons that targeted specific benchmark learning, and then assessed based on those aligned standards (Porter et al., 2007). For curriculum alignment to be effective and yield desired academic results, subject area experts needed to design instructional activities and assessments to match the instructional content standards in order to assure reliability and validity to the later assessed national standards (Porter et al., 2007).

Comparable to Porter, et al. (2007), a similar study was conducted in the Mississippi Delta area school district, where 10 schools and 69 teachers examined curriculums for their effectiveness levels based on state mandated assessments during the 2007-2008 school year (Burke & Ying, 2010). For this particular study, the sample was selected based on high student success levels and chosen on students' need for effective content-based curriculum and instructional techniques to assist the lower achieving population (Burke & Ying, 2010). Cognizant of the socioeconomic backgrounds, the researchers looked to uncover what assortment of assessment methods were frequently used by teachers and aligned with the Mississippi State Test in grades three through five, reading and mathematics. Furthermore, the goal was to identify the instructional and planning assistance needed to assist teachers in developing enacted curriculums that would increase academic learning gains for those targeted grade levels (Burke & Ying, 2010).

The researchers determined that the sampled teachers all used a variety of formal and informal assessments within their curriculums to gauge student learning, prior to the restructuring of the curriculums (Burke & Ying, 2010). In contrast, many of the assessments did not reflect state mandated benchmarks and only intended to measure daily learning outcomes (Burke & Ying, 2010). In their study, Burke and Ying (2010) found the issue was not in curriculum adjustments, but in the instructional response, time constraints, and preparation for educators to be successful facilitators of the learning process. Negating the findings in the previous project, the researchers of this research assignment did not examine student gains within the targeted district that aligned with state mandated standards and did not provide data to support the learning effectiveness

within the new curricula for the Mississippi Delta district.

The leaders of a K-8 publicly funded institution were developing combination units of instruction, supporting the educational community's vision of educational excellence. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools had experienced various restrictions such as limiting class sizes as a means to increase levels of student achievement (Opfer et al., 2008). Partnerships within the organization were what made the organization foundationally strong (Reason, 2010; Reeves, 2009). As being beneficial to student learning, descriptive and outcome data tell instructional leaders what is currently happening within their individual classrooms, as it relates to student comprehension and achievement (Fox, 2006). Curriculum reform debates vary between distinguishing how students learn effectively through cohesive instruction and how students are assessed on their understanding of the content. Based on the ideology of the NCLB mandate, school leaders questioned if curriculum alignment was the answer to standards based instructional reform, and furthermore, how valid student achievement results would be by 2014 (Shirvani, 2009).

As a response and concern to the new instructional mandates, school leaders began to reexamine their own schools, in order to better optimize the learning potential of the student populations they served based on reoccurring evidence that organizational decisions directly affected student performance (Jacob & Rockoff, 2012). Instructional mandates must account for school demographics, which factor into student learning by way of school funding, structuring, and resource attainment, all of which affect academic performance (Burke & Ying, 2010). With little evidence to show enacted curriculums as a direct factor influencing student achievement, grade span configuration debates

returned to the issue of age appropriate school transition.

On top of changing schools, middle school adolescent learners face the challenges of changing teachers by class subject throughout the day, merging with students from other district area elementary schools, as well as developing new friendships and peer groups all within the first year (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010). Social anxiety greatly increases during the adolescent years (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010). According to Bellmore (2011), peer relationships and acceptance play an influential role in academic learning during the middle school years, more so than the elementary. Consequently, the discussion and research on age appropriate transitions and grade configurations continued, as Burkam, Michaels, and Lee (2007) stated grade span configurations indistinguishably connect to school transitions "because grade spans dictate to a large degree when children will move between schools" (p. 290).

The junior high school model, grades 7-9, introduced somewhere around 1910, served as a means of decreasing the overcrowding syndrome schools were facing across the nation, as well as promoting a high school feel for adolescent learners (Clark & Clark, 1993). As the junior high model continued to grow, the criticism behind the junior high model soon followed. Critics argued that the junior high model did not meet the distinct developmental needs of adolescents and ignored the puberty phase of such learners (Cuban, 1992; Hansen & Hearn, 1971; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). During the 1960s the junior high model was experiencing a decrease in enrollment while the elementary model was rapidly growing. As a means of increasing enrollment at the junior high levels, and decreasing overcrowding in elementary schools, a movement to include grade 6 within the middle grades model arose (Alexander, 1984). While critics viewed the junior high

model as being deficient in meeting student needs, the reform movement for establishing middle schools in the 1980s, grades 6-8, and 6-9 emerged (Eichhorn, 1968; Weiss and Kipnes, 2006).

Educators promoting the middle school philosophy grounded the model on establishing specific academic and developmental needs of pubescent learners (Lounsbury, 2009). On the other hand, critics claimed that the same deficiencies the junior high model had, was nothing more than transferred into the middle grades model, thus causing historical and current debates, as to what influence grade span alignment has on academic and social performance. Based on the work of Yecke (2006), the middle school model is "Where academic achievement goes to die" (p. 20). Other scholars echoed this statement by calling middle schools "The great disaster of the education system" (Jonas, 2007, p. lE). In opposition, Byrnes and Ruby (2007), Yecke (2006), and Bunting (2010) claimed that a solution to academic declines, school overcrowding, and the advancement of social development, lay within the K-8 model.

The grade-span configuration debate continues to be one of the longest, ongoing, educational debates across the United States (Clark, 2012). Due to the disagreements among past research and the lack of consistent academic outcomes during the instructional reform movement, much of the current school reform discussion has returned to grade-level alignment and school grade configurations to identify an effective school model (Bunting, 2010). Determining what attributes make an effective school is difficult to put into a specific area or well-established set of qualities. In order to gauge what deems schools instructionally effective, researchers have surveyed substantial areas of interest to uncover identifiable assets and characteristics, leaving gaps in current

research as to identifying specific entities of such schools.

Conceptual arguments remain in research as to how isolating middle grade, adolescent learners enhance academic achievement based on the middle school philosophy of age specific instruction. Grade span configuration, representing the grade levels taught within a school, remains a valid debate among scholars and school leaders, as many school districts across the nation are choosing to convert back to a K-8 from a middle school model (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Schwartz, Stiefal, Rubenstein, & Zabel, 2011; Yecke, 2006). The argument in research remains analytically grounded on the effectiveness of the K-8 and the 6-8 school models, evaluating if either school model increases the academic and social performance levels of middle grade students (Keegan, 2010).

Studies applying an academic comparative framework, showed academic and social differences between the two models, yet minimal long-term, analytical, research has been completed to compare grade level student cohort performance of one school model to another over time (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). Keegan (2010), and Rusby, Crowley, Sprague, and Biglan (2011), supported the theory of the middle school model enhancing undesired adolescent behaviors through assembling middle school teens in an environment that has shown to increase issues such as, teen isolation, bullying, and disengagement in school and the learning process.

Sparks (2011) added to the theoretical findings that attendance rates drop for middle school students who transition during the sixth grade year, affecting academic achievement. Opposing arguments by Abella (2005), Weiss and Kipnes (2006), and Carolyn and Chesky (2012) did not find significant academic performance differences

between the K-8 and middle school models as to support either model's theory of constructing higher levels of academic and social performance over time. As a result, disputes in the theoretical foundations on the effectiveness of the K-8 and the 6-8 school models remain, as current research continues to evaluate if either school model increases the academic and social performance levels of middle grade students (Keegan, 2010).

Dotterer, McHale, and Crouter (2009) supported the belief that "Junior high or middle schools alter adolescents' social ecology through changes in both the school setting and the student role" (p. 510). Previous empirical studies, conducted in both the K-8 and 6-8 middle school models, showed variations in methodology by controlling and analyzing various academic and social variables. On the other hand, further studies have been unable to determine how each model's grade span alignment enhances academic and social performance over time (Dillon, 2008). Theoretically, this leaves in question, if K-8 performance advantages appear in the beginning of the study and diminish over time, is there reason to believe the middle school model is as effective as the K-8 academically and socially? While the K-8 model serves a larger grade level population of students and creates a more cohesive learning environment by removing the aspect of school transition, the middle school model philosophy supports targeting the specific learning needs of adolescents through academically and socially preparing them for the high school level transition (Rusby et al., 2011) .

Further research on the topic of grade span alignment is needed. My study may close existing gaps in literature by providing data that demonstrates a relationship between academic and social performance and school configurations, through employing a longitudinal quantitative methodology, and may strengthen the outcomes of the current

debated research.

Middle school model. The middle school model gained attention in the early 1970s, with a focus on the developmental needs of adolescent learners with the school's isolative nature to target age specific instruction (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). The first construction of the middle grades model in 1970 incorporated grades 5-8 and grades 6-8 configurations (Dove et al., 2010). Middle grade configuration became part of a new prototype for middle grade education that moved away from the bridging concept toward a focused attention on the unique challenges faced by the adolescent age group (Anfara & Mertens, 2012; Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2007). With recurring changes in developing specific grade span models, specifically to meet the goals of school capacity and instructional quality, academic accountability focus has shifted to determine how school reform movements affect student performance (Anfara & Mertens, 2012).

The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) described 16 characteristics associated with a successful middle school model, yet Anfara and Mertens (2012) stated, "While we know much about what needs to be done, we have not been successful in implementing these recommendations with fidelity in middle grades schools across the nation" (p. 58). Reform initiatives associated with the middle school model targeted these 16 traits through interdisciplinary teaching, integrated and challenging curriculum, block scheduling heterogeneous grouping, small-group advisory programs, comprehensive guidance, shared vision, health and wellness programs, ongoing professional development, safe environment, parental and community involvement, collaborative and courageous leadership, and varied learner centered assessments (Anfara & Mertens, 2012; Reeves, 2005). The vision of the middle school model was one that promoted the

social and academic needs of adolescent learners. On the other hand, if the leadership

vision within the school does not endorse the same message, regardless of grade-span

configuration, the school overall, will not meet the learning needs of the learners (Erb,

2006; Nash, 2010; Villavicencio & Grayman, 2012).

Various studies have examined the effect of the middle school model on academic

and social performance. A Harvard study recorded data on grade configurations and

found that 6,000 schools across the United States modeled a K-8 configuration, while

8,000 were 6-8 (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). More interesting is that the K-8 school model

has increased more rapidly than the middle school model in recent years, yet since 2010,

a stagnant pace of academic growth has emerged within the K-8 model (Sparks, 2011).

Research following the middle school reform movement, has shown some advancement

in increasing or sustaining levels of student achievement, but lacks the sustainable

findings over time to support schools maintaining the middle school structure. Critics

supporting the middle school model stated that the K-8 models also lack long-term data

to support maintaining higher levels of academic performance over that of the middle

school model (Weiss, 2008).

The foundation and ideology behind the middle school model was that school

organizations required structuring to "foster purposeful learning and meaningful

relationships" (Anfara & Mertens, 2012; Carolan & Chesky, 2012, p. 32). While the

structural foundations of age specific populations were certainly of academic interest

within the middle school philosophy, the social and transitional attributes of these schools

remained a concern as to whether the model is actually more academically and socially

effective over time (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). Developmental theorists stated that the

middle school transition had one of the largest impacts on middle grade students as they moved from a phase of childhood to adolescent puberty (McGill, Hughes, Alicea, and Way, 2012). Casillas et al., (2012) found that a lack of social relationships, or inadequate relationships during the adolescent years, led to poor attendance rates. Likewise, an excess amount of school transition reduced peer relationships and sense of belonging within the school structure (Casillas et al., 2012).

Abella (2005) conducted a two-phase study in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Sampling sixth grade students in both the K-8 and middle school models, analyzing academic performance, attendance, and suspension rates, Abella (2005) discovered, during phase one, an increase in academic levels of those students who did not transition to middle school, thus remained in a K-8 configuration, over those students who made the transition into middle school. On the other hand, during phase two, Abella (2005) tracked students during their ninth grade year, 2002-2003, and discovered that the academic decline seen with the middle school cohort diminished during high school in comparison to those students in the K-8 model. Abella (2005) uncovered between the two phases, the K-8 had a short-term benefit, but upon further investigation, the academic and social benefits seemed to decline over time.

In a further analysis, completed a year later, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) conducted a longitudinal study in the school district of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia school district was one of the largest school districts in population, diversity, Title 1, low-income schools, and roughly had an equal amount of K-8 and middle school models. Using data from the school district of Philadelphia, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) employed a stratified random sampling methodology to obtain the study's cohort of eighth grade students from

38 middle and 41 K-8 school models. While the sample was equitable, based on configuration, the number of grade eight students in each model varied greatly, as the middle school configuration served 6,664 more students. The researchers discovered that there was actually little difference between middle school academic achievement levels when compared to the K-8 models. Additionally, when the researchers examined the variable of self-esteem, the variation was not significantly higher in the middle schools than in the K-8 schools. Meyer (2011) stated that middle schools were hormonal holding pens, and Simmons and Blyth (1987) found middle schools to be an originator of creating low self-esteem during adolescent years. On the other hand, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) did not find a similar outcome to support such statements, leaving to question if there were long-term negative impacts that middle schools had on adolescent learners.

Way, Reddy, and Rhodes (2007) completed a study comparing student perceptions of school climate during the middle school years. The research team projected that student perceptions would be negative during the middle school years, based on the findings of previous works. The study consisted of 1,451 middle school students, grades 6-8 configuration only, during the years of 1995-1997. Using cross-domain individual growth modeling, and covariance structure analysis, the team was able to determine whether individual changes in a particular domain related to a specific set of predictors, to determine if one domain changed, did it impact the other domain (Way, Reddy & Rhodes, 2007).

The findings of the study showed that adolescent middle school students perceived the middle school structure to be an overall negative experience. In fact, as it related to well-being, there was a significant positive slope showing an increase in

adolescent symptoms of depression, a decrease in perceived teacher support over time, and overall lack of social connectedness, thus affecting long-term adaptability to the middle school structure. While the authors' findings suggested such negative outcomes, the researchers suggested further analysis of the findings in order to determine over time how to increase student perceptions of the middle school environment. Moreover, there remained a concern for adolescent learners' academic performance and social well-being development within the middle school structure, as it "seems particularly critical when the overwhelming focus in many schools in the United States at this time is on academic standards" (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007, p. 210).

Carolan and Chesky (2012) completed a study comparing the K-8 and middle school models, using grade eight students from the K-8, 6-8, and 7-8 schools, which overall represented 80% of the grade eight public school students. Based on the previous works and findings of Byrnes and Ruby (2007), Weiss and Kipnes (2006), and Rockoff and Lockwood (2010), Carolan and Chesky (2012) conducted a further analysis on grade span configurations and academic achievement. By analyzing reading and mathematics scores and the social variables of school attachment and sense of belonging, Carolan and Chesky (2012) were able to conclude that the K-8 did not perform higher than the 6-8 or 7-8 school models. In fact, the more variables controlled throughout the study, the less significant the previous research findings became for the K-8 model. School attachment within the K-8 was not significantly different from the 6-8, or 7-8 models, leaving the transition variable of going to an isolated middle school from an independent elementary school, not as substantial as reported by previous studies (Carolyn & Chesky, 2012).

Expanding upon previous research regarding school transitions, Holas and Huston

(2012) conducted a longitudinal study examining the middle school transition at the fifth and sixth grade levels. The sample consisted of a large number of schools and geographic locations of students and compared the same grade level students who attended middle or elementary level schools. The sample size of 1,364 for the study was obtained from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD) conducted by the Early Child Care Research Network. At one month of age, participants and data collection began and continued through the third, fifth, and sixth grade years. The purpose of the study was to explore if middle schools differed on achievement, school engagement, perceived competence, classroom quality, school size, ethnic heterogeneity, school characteristics, and academic outcomes. The researchers' methods consisted of teacher and principal surveys and research observations at each enrolled school during the fifth grade year to obtain data regarding classroom climate and instructional quality.

The findings of Holas and Huston (2012) were unexpected, and only found one direct relationship difference between sixth grade in the elementary and middle school settings, to be that sixth grade middle school students reported being less involved. Based on the findings, the researchers could only generalize that school level structure did not affect student achievement as much as classroom quality and school characteristics. The longitudinal quality of the sample population strengthened the study, as the researchers monitored student demographics and assessments at various developmental stages. The results, with respect to the classroom variables within the study, suggested more of a positive relationship between instructional pedagogy and academic achievement, regardless of transition or grade span configuration. Further research can reexamine these

findings during the eighth grade year, to determine if the same outcomes occur, or if other relationship variables become present in the later years of the school model.

In a study in 2011-2012, Hannon (2013) sampled two Arizona school districts, one K-8 district and one middle school district, to analyze the impact of grade span configuration on academic achievement within a seventh and eighth grade cohort. The purpose of the study was to determine which school model best supported academic achievement. Using data from the AIMS assessment, a state measurement tool for Arizona, Hannon (2013) used a quasi ex post facto, causal comparative design, to compare seventh and eighth grade cohort data, from both school models. Academic achievement levels for the study were determined and categorized as *below*, *approached*, and *met*. Reading and mathematics scores were then interpreted using the logistic regression analysis methodology.

The findings of the study were similar to those of Holas and Huston (2012) who found the K-8 and middle school models to fluctuate within their academic achievement levels with no significant performance differences documented in reading or mathematics in grades 7 and 8. Specifically, the results showed that in reading, the junior high model showed a 1% decrease compared to the K-8. The junior high models had a higher percentage of students *approaching* and *exceeding* content standards. While the findings in the study supported a comparable relationship to academic performance within both the K-8 and middle grade models, the study included specific K-8 and 6-8 districts, where each school model was collectively applied. This left to question, if districts have specific school models, can comparable studies support the effectiveness of either model, without analyzing specific instructional practices that influence academic performance?

Malone et al. (2017) conducted a study of 573 public schools in the state of Virginia to determine if grade span configurations for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students influenced academic performance in reading and math over three consecutive years. The analysis of school configurations was broken down separately for all three grade levels. The elementary school sample size was 149, while the sample size for middle school grades 6-8, totaled 323. Schools with smaller populations and limited socioeconomic disadvantaged students were not included within either the elementary or the middle school sample size. Data collection for the study was conducted during the years 2013-2015 for grades 6-8. Academic achievement pass scores were used to determine academic proficiency in both reading and math in relation to Virginia State Standards. A scale score of 400 and above represented a student pass score. The researchers applied descriptive statistics for reading and math scores over the three-year time span. Both school size and demographics were variables accounted for within the study and correlated with student pass scores in both reading and math.

As a result, Malone et al. (2017) found that students in sixth and seventh grades had higher pass rates when the grade level was combined with the elementary model. On the other hand, eighth grade students in the traditional middle school model had a higher percentage pass rate than those eighth grade students combined in a high school setting. As a result of the findings, an explanation to the decrease in pass rates for sixth and seventh grade students when in a middle school model could be that the transition into middle school had negative effects on student achievement (Malone et al., 2017).

Possible future research direction as a result of these findings, shows potential to explore variables such as how school climate and teacher quality influence student

achievement between both the middle and K-8 grade span configurations. While the study by Malone et al. (2017) did find positive correlations to grade span configurations and academic achievement for sixth and seventh grade students, the study also notated that for eighth grade students the data collected did not correlate with the elementary setting due to the limited K-8 school configurations in the state of Virginia.

As mentioned before, the vision of the middle school model was one that promoted the social and academic needs of adolescent learners, yet if the leadership vision within the school does not endorse the same message, regardless of grade-span configuration or student population, the school overall will not meet the learning needs of the learners (Erb, 2006; Nash, 2010; Villavicencio & Grayman, 2012). Getting a team to operate under the middle school model concept required leaders who understood what those specific needs were (Erb, 2006). Middle school leaders felt that school achievement was only one factor of producing effective learners. Gulec and Balcik (2011) stated, "One of the most important factors spoiling instruction and preventing teaching in the classroom is the exhibition of undesirable behaviors" (p. 165). Furthermore, it remained to be just as instrumental to student learning and students' academic performance to analyze the institution's capabilities to socially adept learners into engaging and healthy learning environments (Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Villavicencio & Grayman, 2012).

The previous literature has shown that some middle school models across the nation were effective. As stated by Kingery, Erdley, and Marshall (2011), adolescence is a developmental period characterized by numerous biological, cognitive, and social transitions. The middle schools known to be successful were those that avoid these noted historical doctrines and typology of teaching adolescent learners (Meyer, 2011). The

foundation and ideology behind the middle school model was one that promoted, as stated previously, "purposeful learning and meaningful relationships" (Carolan & Chesky, 2012, p. 32). While the structural foundations of age specific populations are certainly of academic interest within the middle school philosophy, the social and transitional attributes of these schools remain a concern as to whether the model is academically and socially effective over time (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). Erb (2006) stated that in order for a school organization to be successful, it must be a healthy organization overall. This causes educators to question if the K-8 school model is more than just a specific grade-span alignment. Carolan and Chesky (2012) and Abella (2005) found that between the two K- 8 and middle school models, the K-8 had a short-term benefit. On the other hand, over time, the academic and social benefits decreased. Holas and Huston (2012) found the K-8 and middle school models to fluctuate within their academic achievement levels, with no significant performance differences documented in reading or mathematics in grades seven and eight.

In contrast, the junior high models showed a higher percentage of students *approaching* and *exceeding* content standards. Erb (2006) posed while grade alignment is one piece of an effective school model, school leadership is just as instrumental. Likewise, when analyzing grade-span configurations and academic performance in math and reading, Gershenson and Langbein (2015) found no relationship in their study between school size and student achievement. Gershenson and Langbein (2015) also noted in their findings that some subgroups of a school's population and size may potentially be influenced by school climate, yet noted more research is needed as a result of gaps in current statistical findings. As conflicting literature showed fluctuations within

previous findings, my study may close a gap by demonstrating the academic and social trends over 10 years, identifying academic and social fluctuation trends within each school model.

The K-8 model. Despite the historically constructed and supported philosophy of separating primary and secondary institutions, the grade span alignment of the K-8 model continues to gain vast attention in the debates on school reform. Even more unusual is the recent choice of many school districts reverting to the K-8 configuration (Byrnes & Ruby; 2007, Meyer, 2011). In a survey completed in 2000, two-thirds of surveyed school principals stated they did not feel the middle school alignment was the best option for adolescent learners (Dillon, 2008). The social relationships developed during the K-8 years, play a role on the levels of academic performance during the middle grade years. Green (2009) noted that peer interactions and relationships, developed within K-8 schools, were even higher than similar K-6 models, when examining academic and social performance.

The transitional phases of education affect the academic and social performance levels of adolescent learners (Dove et al., 2010; Sparks, 2011). A Harvard study found that student attendance rates dropped significantly upon transitioning into middle school (Sparks, 2011). A causal reason for academic declines when entering a middle grade model may be because "Students making the transition from elementary to middle schools face many changes in their academic environment, as they move from self-contained classrooms to a schedule with many transitions during the day" (Patarapichayatham et al., 2013, p. 1). Furthermore, research has shown an academic decline during the middle school years in language arts and mathematics compared to

students in a K-8 (Sparks, 2011). As a result, parents and educational leaders have begun to support what Meyer (2011) expressed, "abandoning the middle school for K-8 configurations, as current research suggests that grade configuration does matter" (p. 42). Cook et al. (2007) examined the social transition effects on a sixth grade cohort in North Carolina. Cook et.al (2007) found that behavior problems increased as academic performance decreased during the first transitional year in middle school. Prior research has shown that as students transitioned from one school to another, especially during the adolescent years, levels of social anxiety also increased (Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman, 2007). Understanding the influence of social performance on academic achievement is a correlative variable to understanding what school model is academically and socially effective. Students who undergo high levels of social anxiety may perform better academically in a K-8 school that has smaller student populations typically.

Current studies are examining how student behaviors impede the learning process, contributing to measurable declines in academic performance. Classroom management is a significant aspect to creating and sustaining classroom culture. Social behaviors that negatively influence the learning process include an absence of depicting conflict resolution skills, acts of self-advocacy, goal-setting objectives, demonstrating self-worth, and engaging in meaningful peer relationships (Casillas et al., 2012). Additionally, the method a teacher implements in managing behavioral issues greatly influences student reaction. Erath et al. (2007) conducted a study on social anxiety and adolescents, as it related to middle school transition. The sample consisted of 84 sixth and seventh grade middle school students in central Pennsylvania. To measure social anxiety, the researchers used a Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents, as well as teacher and student

questionnaires and participant surveys. The purpose of the study was to determine if social anxiety, during the middle school years inhibited peer relationships and social performance expectations. Analyses revealed correlations linking social anxiety with decreased peer acceptance and increased peer victimization. Gender differences within the study demonstrated "whereas socially anxious girls may experience considerable distress and a loss of friendship support, socially anxious boys may be more vulnerable to peer attack and potentially suffer more long-term negative life consequences" (Erath et al., 2007, p. 415).

Gulec and Balcik (2011) conducted a study in five elementary schools in the Golcuk district of the Kocaeli Province in order to understand the impact of classroom management on student discipline and behavior. Gulec and Balcik (2011) stated, "One of the most important factors spoiling instruction and preventing teaching in the classroom, is the exhibition of undesirable behaviors" (p. 165). By identifying specific classroom behaviors that obstructed learning, the researchers were then able to link undesirable behaviors to interrupted classroom instruction that led to ineffective lessons and hindered academic performance (Gulec & Balcik, 2011). The methodology within the study employed a coefficient analysis using the Pearson coefficient analysis accompanied with Shapiro-Wilks and Mann Whitney tests. The sampled population consisted of 54 teachers, 75% female and 25% male. Grade levels sampled were second through eighth grade, with a classroom population variance ranging from 11 to 44 students. To promote reliability in the study, the researchers used a 42-item teacher questionnaire, tested, and retested to ensure validity of the targeted questions on observed classroom behaviors. The results of the study identified a positive correlation to undesirable student behaviors such

as teasing other students, sleeping during instruction, rude and discourteous behaviors towards the teacher, and showing interest in other things during the lesson, to the hindrance of educational goals and lesson effectiveness. The researchers noted, to increase academic achievement and decrease undesired behaviors, appropriate and consistent responses to negative behaviors needed to be present, accompanied with classroom expectations that deflected and redirected such unwanted actions.

Elementary schools act as feeder schools for the middle school model. This collective approach to the school population creates an unknown variable for incoming students. While a degree of social anxiety during the adolescent years is expected, the impact of social phobia, social awkwardness, and the lack of consistent peer groups, influence adolescent learners more during the middle school transition period, compared to those students who remain in a K-8 structure (Erath et al., 2007). White (2007) conducted a study in two high schools, one public and one private, in the Portland and Beaverton School districts. The school sites selected were based on a large number of feeder schools configured at the K-8, 6-8, and 7-8 levels. The purpose of the study was to determine student perception of the feeder school, and the relationship it had upon academic performance at the end of the first semester of ninth grade. A quantitative analysis design employed a 32-questionnaire survey instrument, student perceptions only, using the School as a Caring Community Profile II.

In the findings, White (2007) noted that high school students from K-8 feeder schools reported greater perceived school climate outcomes over the 6-8 and 7-8 models. Additionally, the sampled students from the K-8 feeder schools reported a higher grade point average at the end of the first semester in high school with recorded ranges from 3.5

to 4.0, compared to the 6-8 and 7-8 models. Results showed a positive relationship between feeder schools, grade configuration, and academic success of transitioning students at the end of the first semester of high school (White, 2007). Although the findings of the study favored the K-8 model as a feeder school, the study did not compare a quantifiable number of high schools, both public and private, to suggest that the K-8 is undeniably more effective academically at preparing post-secondary learners. Therefore, further research can increase the sample size within the studied district and expand upon the findings by increasing longitudinal data.

Researchers have found that student perceptions about school transitions influenced student achievement. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) conducted a five-year longitudinal study in the Philadelphia School District that included a sample size of 40,883 eighth grade students from 95 schools broken into five cohorts. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) sought to determine if the established K-8 model was significantly more effective in achieving higher reading and mathematical student gains than that of 6-8 and recently formed K-8 institutions. The researchers examined attributes of K-8 schools proven effective within the social, structural, and transition aspects of education, and also expanded upon the K-8 model studies of Simmons and Blyth (1987) and Weis and Kipnes (2006). Using the Pennsylvania State Assessment as a means of academic measurement and comparison, schools underwent evaluation based on the state assessed outcomes and percentage of learning gains for a five-year period. Studies have proven that established K-8 models benefitted from the social and structural areas of smaller school demographics, cohesive instructional and school personnel, increased peer relations and involvement, a decrease in school discipline and social dysfunctions, and

increases in school attendance and sense of belonging (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). Byrnes and Ruby (2007) additionally found that established K- 8 schools had higher learning gains on the Pennsylvania State Assessment, than that of transitioning K-8 and middle school groupings.

Numerous studies have compared the K-8 and middle school models in an attempt to determine which structure enhances academic performance during the middle grade years. Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) completed an empirical study in a New York City school district in grades 3 through 8 to determine if students who transitioned into middle schools showed a greater academic decrease in academic performance compared to those students who did not transition during the middle school years. To measure the impact of the transition phase on academic performance, the researchers gathered data from 1998 through 2008, tracking five cohorts of students beginning in grade three through grade eight. Using panel data and instrumental variables, the researchers discovered that students who transferred, whether it be the sixth or seventh grade year, experienced academic declines in both reading and mathematics. Moreover, the study concluded that students with a preexisting academic deficit, decreased at a 50% higher rate than students with no identified deficits after the transition phase. The results of the study by Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) strengthened the findings of Byrnes and Ruby (2007). With diverse educational climates and student populations, the outcomes of the study may not generalize similar outcomes for school districts in other states.

Keegan (2010) conducted a study in the New Jersey school district, sampling over 1,200 schools within the district. Keegan (2010) investigated the relationship of the K-8 grade configuration and the effect on academic achievement and student discipline

outcomes in comparison to the sampled 5-8 middle school model. Using multiple linear

regression analysis, Keegan (2010) analyzed eighth grade proficiency assessment scores

in language arts, mathematics and science, student discipline, and attendance over the

course of a year, as reported through the New Jersey School Report Card. Keegan (2010)

selected the New Jersey Report Card as the state's universal assessment measurement

which directly aligned to state academic performance levels. Academic performance

levels for the study were categorized as partially proficient, proficient, and advanced

proficient in the core academic areas of the study. Keegan's (2010) study added to the

previous findings that suggested grade span configurations impacted academic and social

performance. At the sampled grade levels, those students in the K-8 model performed

higher than the sampled middle school students in mathematics, language arts, and

science, over the course of a year. Attendance rates within the K- 8 model for sixth

graders were higher than fifth graders in the 5-8 model. With respect to social

performance, the K-8 model reported fewer behavior related suspensions, yet marginally

comparable expulsion rates.

Schafer (2010) conducted a quantitative ex-post facto, non-experimental research

study that investigated the relationship between grade span configurations for middle

grade students on student achievement. During 2009, Schafer (2010) examined the

impact of school design among a sixth grade cohort, in reading and mathematics. To

measure academic achievement, the researcher obtained data from the Florida Standards

Assessment Test (FSA) located on the Florida Department of Education website, and

analyzed the data using SPSS software. The researcher examined to what extent grade

span configurations influenced academic achievement for middle school sixth graders in

reading and mathematics, and to what extent did grade span configurations influence academic achievement in reading and mathematics when socioeconomic status became a controlled variable.

Examining 826 academically high performing public schools in Florida, Schafer (2010) found that PK-6 grade configured schools performed significantly higher in reading and mathematics, than the 6-8 schools. With significantly higher mean scale scores and demonstrating a year of academic learning gains, the PK-6 configured schools in the study maintained higher levels of academic achievement. While the findings were significant for a PK-6 configured school model, school demographics can play a key role in the overall achievement level of the school. While the study analyzed one year of student learning gains data, the validity of the study may be strengthened by adding a longitudinal approach to measuring academic learning gains in the PK-6 school configuration.

Similar to the study completed on academic and social performance by Keegan (2010) and Schafer (2010), Kriznar (2011) conducted a quantitative multiple regression analysis study in the southeastern United States, analyzing academic performance indicators for both K-8 and middle school models. Kriznar (2011) selected a large urban population consisting of 32 K-8 and 32 6-8, reading and mathematics performance scores over two years. All sampled schools had comparable socioeconomic and minority categories. Kriznar (2011) analyzed two variables, academic performance following the sixth grade year, along with instructional model practices within both school models. To determine which model performed more effectively at increasing academic gains, Kriznar (2011) obtained data from the state mandated Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test

(FCAT), at the end of the academic school year. To measure instructional model practices, Kriznar (2011) implemented a 170-item educator survey to 14,000 middle school principals. Similar to Keegan (2010), Kriznar (2011) also found the K-8 model outperformed the 6-8 model on the performance assessment of FCAT in reading and mathematics. Conversely, based on the educator survey findings, there were no significant differences in the assessed instructional practices at either school model. Kriznar (2011) found the only instructional difference between the K-8 and 6-8 was an increase in teacher interdisciplinary teaming in the K-8 model.

Little research has examined the impact of each school model on academic performance during the high school years. Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) stated that with respect to academic performance, "The difficulties that students experience in the first year of high school are substantial" (p. 826). To analyze school model's influence on academic performance, specifically during the ninth grade year, Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) gathered data from a Philadelphia Educational Longitudinal Study (PELS), comparing scores from the eighth and ninth grade academic years during 1995-1996, aligned after the middle school transition period. The researchers interviewed 1,483 students and parents during phase one of the study to determine the influence school configurations had during the eighth and ninth grade years based on whether the students were in a K-8 or middle school model. Furthermore, Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) sought to uncover what additional social factors contributed to academic success from both school models, such as attendance, socioeconomic status, educational background of parents, parental marital status, and school type.

Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) found by analyzing data from an eighth grade

cohort transitioning into high school the following year, that there was a strong relationship between the type of grade span school attended at the eighth grade level and academic performance during the ninth grade year. Their findings aligned with similar findings by both Schafer (2010) and Keegan (2010). While the study found that K-8 schools performed academically higher, it may be the fact interdisciplinary teaming plays a more significant role on academic performance regardless of school structure. Jacob and Rockoff (2012) explained that the reason K-8 models tend to be more instructionally effective is the school's ability to coordinate and share academic, social, and personal student information. As a result, the instructional accessibility between elementary and middle grade levels may prove to have a direct relationship on academic achievement, within the K-8 model, over that of the middle school model, and can be an area for further scholarly research. Based on these findings, there may be other components within the K-8 school model that have an influence on academic performance for grade eight students.

West and Schwerdt (2012) expanded upon a study by Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) reanalyzing the findings that students entering a middle school model performed academically lower than K-8 students who did not make a school transition. To explore the issue of academic decline during the middle grade years, West and Schwerdt (2012) compared all schools within the Florida public educational system, grades 3 through 10, during 2000-2009. Gathering the academic assessment scores from the Florida Department of Education's PK-20 Education Data Warehouse, West and Schwerdt (2012) examined reading and mathematics test scores over the course of 10 years. To examine the influence of school transition at the middle school level, the researchers

analyzed reading and mathematics scores for students enrolled in grade 3 only, between 2001 and 2004. Sixth grade academic achievement data from 2001 to 2005 in reading and mathematics assisted the researchers to determine if the impact of school transition continued during the high school years.

West and Schwerdt's (2012) study on academic achievement and school transition found students who transferred during the sixth grade year showed significant declines in both reading and mathematics. During the seventh grade year, the drops showed significantly higher, equaling a loss of three to seven months of expected learning gains. West and Schwerdt (2012) also found in the study those students who transitioned during the sixth grade year, had a 1.4% higher chance of dropping out during high school. Furthermore, the study noted that the middle school transition impact on academic achievement was not simply an urban population epidemic. To analyze specific location impacts, whether rural or urban, on school transition and academic decline, West and Schwerdt (2012) created student cohorts based on the schools they attended geographically within Florida. The results showed that while the largest gaps were within urban areas, the declines in rural areas were just as comparable, promoting the need for further and more recent research in the area of grade span configuration, and the transition impact on academic achievement.

Clark (2012), completed a quantitative study from 2006-2011, a total of 628 schools in Texas, consisting of 314 middle school configurations, and 314 K-8 school configurations. The purpose of the study was to expand upon the previous research on middle school versus K-8 school configurations, and the impact each model had on academic achievement. Archived data for the study consisted of the state of Texas

Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in reading, mathematics, science, and writing. Clark (2012) developed nine research questions to guide the study, specifically targeted at each subject area, school model, and grade level. Clark (2012) found that in the academic areas of mathematics, reading, science, and writing, the K-8 students, overall, performed academically higher than the sampled middle school population. When examining the research questions, targeting grade level performance, and specific content area assessment scores, the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in the K-8 performed statistically higher in each subject compared to the sampled middle school cohorts. The findings in the study were similar to previous studies on the K-8 and middle school comparisons and added further evidence that the K-8 model increased or maintained higher levels of academic achievement over the middle school model. The researcher's methodology disaggregated academic performance data by grade level and academic content, providing specific grade level outcomes in each school model, and therefore, was able to statistically compare and present performance outcomes with greater statistical reliability. Likewise, the outcomes within the study added specific grade level outcomes, providing further evidence regarding the impact of grade span configurations on academic performance. As with previous studies, when geographic and ethnographic variables were included, the ability to generalize the outcomes of the study with other works on the same topic was not equivalent due to inconsistent variations in school populations across the United States.

Grade span configurations affect school policy, curriculum alignment, and the number of transitions during an educational career (Dhuey, 2012). Social performance studies discovered that social anxiety and student discipline behaviors were lower in a K-

8 model, due to the lack of school transition during the impressionable adolescent years (Gulec and Balcik, 2011). Sparks (2011), found that attendance rates of students transitioning into a middle school declined significantly based on the academic environment of the middle school model and student perceptions of the learning environment. Studies by White (2007) and Byrnes and Ruby (2007) examined academic performance and found academic and social performance levels to be higher in a K-8 model based on student perceptions of the learning environment, long-term peer relationships established within the K-8 model, and the overall cohesive school structure the K-8 model provides. Likewise, comparative studies conducted by Schafer (2010), Keegan (2010), and Kriznar (2011), all reported academic performance outcomes higher in K-8 models compared to traditional middle school settings, providing further evidence to support grade span configuration influence on academic and social performance. The variations within the findings created a need for additional research, as to determine over time, the long-term influence of the K-8 school model on academic performance.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed research on both the K-8 and middle school models' influence on academic and social performance. The chapter began by presenting the scholarly debate for the middle school model, and then counteracted with the middle school discussion by presenting research on the academic performance of the K-8 grade level configuration. As school dynamics sit at the core of understanding effective schools throughout the country, there are social changes that carry increasingly demanding instructional, structural, and leadership accountabilities upon the substance of the organization (Bunting, 2010; Cerit, 2010).

While socialization is a significant part of the middle school transition, the school's structural environment plays a pivotal role in the social and developmental gains of middle grade learners. Little research has proven that the middle school model is concurrently more effective at providing a substantial certainty of achievement and social development over that of a K-8 institution (Bunting, 2010). With respect to school model and social development, among students who demonstrated high levels of social responsibility, a connection to their school environment, and consistent, positive peer relationships, these attributes greatly influenced long-term academic achievement and decreased high school dropout rates (Casillas et al., 2012). Initially, White (2007) found that the academic performance was not only higher in the K-8 model, but student performance during the middle grade years influenced how students would perform academically during high school. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) examined attributes of K-8 schools which proved effective within the social, structural, and transition aspects of education, and expanded on the K-8 model studies of Simmons and Blyth (1987) and Weiss and Kipnes (2006). Byrnes and Ruby (2007) additionally found that established K-8 school models had higher learning gains on the Pennsylvania State Assessment than those of transitioning K-8 and middle school groupings.

Keegan (2010) and Schafer (2010) both found academic achievement in K-8 school models significantly higher than the sampled middle schools in the areas of reading and mathematics. Jacob and Rockoff (2012) contributed academic achievement advances in K-8 models as attributing to the model's ability to engage in instructionally effective academic strategies that coordinated and shared important student information. Opposing the K-8 argument, Abella (2005) found that between two research phases, the

K-8 only had a short-term academic benefit over the middle school model and continued to decrease over time. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) and Carolan and Chesky (2012) discovered that there was actually little difference between middle school academic achievement when compared to K-8 models.

While K-8 configurations are more common in particular states across the country, some states have opted to reconfigure school populations to target only middle grade adolescent learners. If K-8 studies continue to show higher levels of academic achievement over time, educational leaders and policy makers may need to reexamine current research to determine if either school model maintains higher levels of achievement and is more effective at increasing academic performance consistently, over time. Furthermore, the research conducted on grade span configurations varied in depth of analysis and methodology. Dhuey (2012) concluded that the negative effects associated with school transition might result in students experiencing a temporary decline in academic achievement when compared to students who do not transition. Dhuey (2012) added that individual student characteristics can be a possible factor to academic decline, and not the particular school model. As a result, my study can expand upon the previous findings, in order to determine if the past academic trends within these models presently exist and at what level influence academic achievement.

Previous literature demonstrated that there were academic and social performance differences within the two school models, leaving in question to what degree these differences exist. Previous research has shown that with respect to academic performance, the K-8 model shows academic gains in mathematics over time, compared to the middle school model cohort. Yet when controlling for ethnicity populations and

socioeconomic variables, the performance outcomes for the K-8 model show no direct path for academic advantage. On the other hand, there was limited academic research that focused specifically on the eighth grade cohort and academic achievement within the K-8 school model (Malone et al., 2019).

The purpose of my mixed method case study was to explore how teachers and school principals perceived the role of academic optimism as influencing academic success of students at one K-8 school in the United States. My study used a research method to explore in greater depth through principal and school district leader interviews and teacher questionnaires how the K-8 model influenced academic performance.

The outcomes rendered through my study may provide additional academic trends for further investigation on the influence of the K-8 model on academic performance over time. Additionally, my study may present current results regarding the effectiveness of the K-8 school model in the sampled district, while also providing a basis for informed decisions regarding existing school facilities, or the rearrangement of current grade configurations within the schools, for future academic and economic solutions to education reform.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my mixed methods case study was to explore how teachers and school principals perceived the role of academic optimism as influencing academic success at the school under study. The concept of what makes an effective school model is widely debated amongst educational school leaders (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Jacob & Rockoff, 2012; Rockoff and Lockwood, 2010; Weiss and Kipnes, 2006). Based on the examined literature, the influence of grade span configuration on academic achievement lacks a sufficient amount of support (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Jacob & Rockoff, 2012; Rockoff and Lockwood, 2010; Weiss and Kipnes, 2006). As a result, an investigation of how a K-8 school model influences academic achievement was necessary to identify the influence of grade span configurations, academic optimism, and collective efficacy on academic performance for grade eight students. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk (2006) completed a study on academic optimism and academic performance. This study found that despite socioeconomic status of students, academic optimism had a positive influence on student achievement. The findings of the study showed that academic emphasis and academic optimism were vital components of academic performance and student learning.

This chapter is broken into sections by (1.) the research topic and statement of problem, (2.) research questions to be analyzed during the course of the study, (3.) research methodology plan for the study, (4.) population and sample selection, (5.) the sources of data collected for the study, (6.) procedures used to ensure reliability and validity, (7.) data analysis procedures for the study, (8.) ethical considerations and

limitations present within the study, and (9.) a concise summary of the research design and methodology.

Statement of Problem

The educational research community has not yet sufficiently ascertained how teachers and school principals perceive the role of academic optimism as influencing academic performance for students in K-8 grade configured schools. Specifically, there is a lack of empirical evidence in literature to support how academic optimism influences academic performance within a K-8 school model (Jacob & Rockoff, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010).

As grade configurations remain at the core of understanding effective schools, questions continue to circulate among educational leaders as to what specific grade configurations demonstrate or constitute an effective school model (Jacob & Rockoff, 2012; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Conflicting research on effective and high performing schools has led scholars and school leaders into the reoccurring debate on how grade span configurations influence academic performance, and therefore, determine the model's ability to academically and socially prepare learners for the future (Hildreth, 2011; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) found positive evidence to support a relationship between grade configuration and academic performance, while Byrnes and Ruby (2007) and Weiss and Kipnes (2006) found limited evidence to support neither the K-8 nor middle school model's academic advantages. Balfanz et al. (2002) found that in a high poverty K-8 school, the academic achievement of the population marked great improvements, but not significant enough to meet the state performance standards required to be considered effective. Hoy, Tarter,

and Woolfolk (2006) and Hoy, Hoy, and Kurz (2007) found that academic optimism on academic performance, despite socioeconomic status of students, had a positive influence on student achievement. Patton (2005) found the K-8 structure to be effective at increasing academic achievement and decreasing behavior issues, yet in comparison to the middle school model Weiss and Kipnes (2006) and Hildreth (2011) were unable to connect middle schools with having a negative influence on academic performance. Through my study, I sought to provide a foundation for future research on grade span configurations through understanding how grade span configuration and academic optimism influenced academic performance for eighth grade students within the sampled K-8 school model.

Research Questions

My case study explored how teachers and the school principal perceive the role of academic optimism as influencing academic success of students in a K-8 grade configured school. The following research questions guided my study:

- o   R1: How do eighth grade students perform academically in a K-8 school model in both reading and math from year to year over a five-year span?

- o   R2: How do faculty perceive a level of collective efficacy within the K-8 school model?

- o   R3: How do teachers and the principal in the school acknowledge and share their efforts to establish a climate of collective efficacy in order to promote student achievement in the K-8 grade configured school?

- o   R4: To what extent does the school staff believe there are unique components in a K-8 school model that increase academic performance?

o R5: To what extent do teachers perceive a climate of trust among instructional staff within the K-8 school model with respect to teacher collaboration?

By examining student academic performance levels in the district's only K-8 school model, this study can assist in closing a portion of the qualitative gap in current literature. The designed research questions aligned principal interviews, school district leaders and staff surveys to understand the perceived influence academic and cultural optimism had on academic performance through the 2014-2019 academic proficiency scores of eighth grade students in the K-8 school model.

K-8 school models are growing in popularity across the nation, as school leaders further examine how effective K-8 schools are constructed and aligned with curricular and instructional resources to best serve the school's student population (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). Furthermore, measuring the academic performance component of a K-8 school structure should combine an analysis of the academic emphasis a school structure places on student achievement, as well as the level of academic optimism present within the organization (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006). Collective efficacy and collaboration are associated with higher levels of student academic achievement (Goddard et al., 2015).

For my study, the research questions were aligned to determine how teachers and school leaders perceived academic optimism as influencing academic performance for eighth grade students. The information found in my study can influence future decisions regarding new school construction and future grade level alignments within the schools in the sampled district. As an additional result, my study can enhance the previous works on the K-8 school model by determining if academic optimism influenced academic

performance for eighth grade students in a K-8 model.

Research Methodology

This mixed methods case study can help provide further evidence on grade span configurations and academic performance, as to address an existing gap in literature with respect to academic optimism and its influence on academic proficiency levels achieved in a K-8 school model. Previous qualitative works on grade span configurations and middle school performance aligned into two categories, (a) studies that supported the isolative middle school model as preparing and increasing levels of academic and social achievement, and (b) studies that contradicted the middle school structure by demonstrating that a K-8 configuration was more effective at developing and sustaining academically and socially adept learners (Blum, 2005; Bunting, 2010; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007).

Case study research can be quantitative or qualitative in nature (Yin, 2014). Quantitative research is grounded in relating and correlating two or more ideas to one another with an emphasis on collecting and analyzing numerical data, collecting data that measure distinct attributes of a group or individual, and applying quantitative procedures to collect, sort, analyze, and discover relatable variables to understand a specific phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Nick, 2007). Mixed methods case study research is a methodology used to explore a phenomenon, applying a variety of data collection techniques in order to gain a clear understanding of a specific situation or occurrence (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2014) and Merriam (2009) stated that case study research design should be used when a researcher is asking a question as to how or why an event or phenomenon occurs, or to illuminate a set of decisions of how and why they were

taken. Guetterman and Fetters (2018) also articulated the benefits of mixed methods case study as a design that can assist researchers in gaining a holistic view on a case.

Much of the existing literature in the area of effective school models correlates back to quantitative works in the field of education, as a source of understanding and comparing educational institutions and the relationships of the individuals and student behaviors within them (Nick, 2007). As a means of answering the research questions guiding my study, I framed principal interview questions as to answer how school grade configurations influenced academic achievement through academic optimism in the K-8 school model. By applying a mixed methods approach, my study could assess how a K-8 school model increased academic performance over a period of five years by examining how teachers and school leaders in the K-8 perceived the institution's value on academic performance. Previous qualitative studies have applied research designs to show how the K-8 school model influences school attendance, academic performance, discipline, and perception of school cultures, yet with respect to academic optimism and academic performance levels within the K-8 model for eighth grade students, the qualitative data is limited.

Qualitative studies are effective when the study can holistically examine organizational entities (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). My study analyzed an eighth grade cohort over five sequential years from the K-8 school model within the sampled school. By using the qualitative approach, I was able to gather both numerical and communicative data to understand the K-8 instructional phenomenon, possibly an innovative climate where perceptions concerning practices were shared among all members and generate new ideas and practices (Daly et al., 2015). Recent research

concluded and supported the need to continue the analysis and research quest on

academic performance and grade span configurations, as to measure how effective K-8

school models are at increasing academic proficiency over time (Keegan, 2010; Sparks,

2011). Furthermore, my study can add a component to the existing qualitative literature

with regard to the influence of the K-8 model on academic performance, while

simultaneously influencing future leadership decisions by identifying specific academic

performance trends in the district's only K-8 school model. As a result, the best research

design to understand holistically the K-8 school model is through the chosen mixed

methods case study design.

Research Design

The purpose of my mixed methods case study was to explore how teachers and

school principals perceived the role of academic optimism as influencing academic

success of K-8 students. My case study used a mixed methods case study research design

to explore and analyze the academic performance levels of grade eight students in a K-8

school model, as influenced by academic optimism. The purpose for choosing this

approach was to explore the influence academic optimism in the K-8 school model had

on academic achievement, as to answer the specific research questions guiding the study.

Additionally, my study explored five years of academic performance data, teacher

surveys, and principal interviews to determine how the district's only K-8 school eighth

grade students performed academically at the end of their eighth grade year. Case studies

seek out the descriptions of specific events that lead to a participant's individual

experiences (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Patton (2002) stated, in regard to qualitative

studies, "They capture and communicate someone else's experience of the world in his or

her own words" (p. 47). In return, those personal experiences explained how a school leader applied the K-8 school model to enhance academic achievement for middle grade students. According to Seidman (2006), "As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can be explored" (pp. 21-22). Quantitative case study research has used a comparative framework to show differences between school models; yet minimal qualitative case study research has been completed to understand how academic performance is influenced through academic optimism in a K-8 school model (Sparks, 2011).

In contrast to the quantitative case study design, qualitative research is a methodology used to explore a phenomenon, applying a variety of data collection techniques in order to gain a clear understanding of a specific situation or occurrence (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2014) and Merriam (2009) stated that case study research design should be used when a researcher is asking a question as to how or why an event or phenomenon occurs, or to illuminate a set of decisions of how and why they were taken. Research applying a qualitative case study design have identified positive influences between the K-8 school model and academic performance, yet many of those same studies have not determined conclusively how the K-8 school model effectively produces academically higher performing student cohorts (Gershenson & Langbein, 2015; Green, 2009).

The lack of qualitative data left openings in existing research as to how each school model performed at increasing academic performance over time (Carolan &

Chesky, 2012). Guetterman and Fetters (2018) stated when applying a mixed methods approach, case studies can reveal broader trends, statistical relationships, and generalizable implications as long as the study has suitable sampling and a sound design. As a result, through my study I sought to share the analysis of a district's only K-8 school model, through participant surveys, principal interview, and curricula data to close a portion of the gap in conflicting literature. Additionally, I sought to influence future leadership decisions within the sampled school district, by identifying specific academic trends in the K-8 model, which in return, may have an influence on academic performance.

Population and Sample Selection

The sampled school district consisted of a total of eight middle models and one K-8. The K-8 school had a general total student population of 1,300 students. The school chosen for this study was based on the district's configuration of only one K-8, in comparison to other surrounding school districts that had more than one K-8 school model. The sample population used in the study consisted of approximately 150 eighth grade students, both male and female and including those students with disabilities, 45 K-8 instructional staff, and two school principals in the K-8 school model, during the years of 2014-2019. According to Patton (2002) it is suggested that qualitative inquiry be reduced to small numbers, selected purposefully to understand a phenomenon in detail. The chosen sampling of eighth grade students attending the sampled school for my case study allowed me to explore the phenomenon in detail by limiting the study participants to those teachers and students who were directly involved in the academic performance levels of the middle grade students during the years of 2014-2019. Furthermore, the

principals I interviewed, both served as the primary instructional leaders during the years of 2014-2019. Unlike previous studies, in my case study I did not disaggregate gender or the ethnic makeup as a means of determining the participant sample. The purpose of using this sample was to examine the only K-8 school model in the district under study as a whole entity, rather than including other variables that might have influenced student academic performance.

I invited teachers at the school site under study to participate voluntarily in a brief survey, as well as extended an invitation for current and previous K-8 school principals and district leaders to participate in a face to face semi-structured interview. Additionally, I obtained permission from the sampled school district to use student academic performance data from the State Standards Assessment in reading and math to conduct my analysis on academic performance over the years 2014-2019. I maintained anonymity of the state, the district under study, the school under study, and individual participants throughout the evaluation process and excluded identifying information in the reporting of all results.

Teachers willing to participate in the study received an informed consent form for survey participation providing full disclosure of collection methods, data usage, and the right to abstain from the study with no negative consequences, along with a copy of the survey questionnaire. Principal participants also received an informed consent form providing full disclosure of collection methods, data usage, and the right to abstain from the study with no negative consequences. The school principal also received a consent form through which she consented to having the teachers at her school surveyed. Finally, district leader participants also received an informed consent form providing full

disclosure of collection methods, data usage, and the right to abstain from the study with no negative consequences. The five-year academic performance data obtained for the study was publicly available on the state's Department of Education website.

Sources of Data

I collected State Standards Assessment (SSA) proficiency scores in reading and mathematics grade eight from the Department of Education website, as to measure standards based performance data for eighth grade students during the years of June 2014 to June 2019. Data represented in the SSA report numerically signified grade level academic performance, categorized by achievement rating levels of one through five. Grade level achievement scores represented academic performance indicators, which represented grade level performance at or below grade level in reading and mathematics. Scores at three and above represented a percentage of the eighth grade cohort that was at or above grade level standard in reading and mathematics. The Department of Education reported SSA scores of two and below representing the percentage of eighth grade students below grade level performance in reading and mathematics, and therefore, not classified as grade level proficient. The academic performance data in my study showed how many grade eight students performed at or below grade level in the K-8 school model over a five year period, and I compared that data with teacher academic optimism surveys and principal interview questions to fully understand how academic optimism presented within the studied K-8 model.

To understand holistically the influence on the academic performance data in reading and mathematics, I aligned semi-structured interview questions with Seidman's (2006) model of the three-step interview process. To understand principal perception on

the influence of academic optimism and culture on the K-8 school model, principal interview questions aligned with how, as a leader in a K-8 school model, the K-8 school model attributes were able to influence student levels of academic performance. I implemented a semi-structured interview approach to collect data relevant to the aligned research question, as to answer how academic optimism within the K-8 model was related to academic achievement.

According to Seidman (2006), "As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can be explored" (pp. 21-22). To prevent error in reporting, the interview data used for the study was recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy in reporting. Additionally, I used teacher questionnaires to gather instructional data as they related to collaborative instruction, academic achievement, and collective efficacy. I used a Likert-type ranking scale for teachers to self-assess their instructional practices related to academic optimism and academic achievement for middle school eighth graders. Seidman (2013) stated there is a gap in educational research that involves the perspective of teachers. I designed the teacher collective efficacy survey to gather teacher perception on academic optimism within the K-8 school model, and how academic optimism and collective efficacy influenced academic achievement for eighth grade students.

For qualitative studies, Patton (2002) argued, studies that use more than one source of data, or triangulated forms of data, are less likely to accumulate researcher error compared to use of a single data source, yet the researcher must also consider that the data may yield inconsistent findings within the data. For this reason, through my study I

explored academic performance data provided from the state Department of Education

and studied the data I collected from principal interviews and teacher surveys to fully

understand the influence of academic optimism on academic performance for eighth

grade students in a K-8 school model.

Validity

The academic performance levels I examined within my study were publicly

available using school SSA reports located on the state Department of Education website.

I gathered such data for my study from the Department of Education website. I

specifically analyzed data related to the research questions that guided my study to

determine academic performance trends present in the K-8 school model over five years.

In addition, to determine the eighth grade academic performance levels I used in my case

study, I calculated and described as level three, at or above grade level performance. The

state Department of Education set all performance data indicators; I compared them with

the data I collect based on the reported academic achievement levels of 1-5 during the

course of the study. I did not manipulate or disaggregate academic performance data

during the course of the study to ensure the validity in reporting of data. I triangulated the

data through principal interviews and teacher questionnaires as an extension to the

academic performance data and provided further research on the K-8 school model and

academic performance for eighth grade students.

Patton (2002) explained that adding an open-ended interview component

strengthens the credibility of the study by potentially removing research bias and

maintaining objectivity. To ensure validity of the interview questions constructed for the

study, I measured the deigned questions against the questionnaire and survey expert

validation rubric constructed by Jacquelyn and Marilyn Simon (2014). To protect the reporting of participant responses, I recorded the interviews and transcribed interview data to ensure accuracy in recording. Once the interviews were transcribed, I met again with the participants to review the transcribed documentation. I used Survey Monkey to anonymously gather teacher questionnaire data and apply the 1-4 Likert-type scale ranking system to the respondent's answers. Data collected through Survey Monkey was automatically generated through the site, which did not require me to disaggregate or manipulate participant responses.

Reliability

I chose the mixed methods case study approach based on the ability to gather, analyze, and synthesize both descriptive and communicative data. Qualitative case study approaches have been used historically in numerous research fields, including education, and have proven a valid approach in qualitative studies when analyzing and coding large amounts of contextual data (Yin, 2014). Coding procedures for my case study consisted of aligning academic performance data to numerical academic level performance indicators, identified as level three and above, using the SPSS program. I transcribed semi-structured interview data based on the individual responses and alignment to the research questions. I input and coded questionnaire data using the 1-4 Likert-type scale ranking system. Replication of the coded data was completed applying the academic performance coding criteria based on the reported academic performance data. Data collection used for the study can then be regenerated from the state Department of Education website for future studies.

Data Collection Procedures

I began by contacting the district under study for approval to conduct research. Then, the school principal and instructional teachers received an invitation and consent letter to participate in my case study. SSA performance data for the school under study was located publicly on the state Department of Education website.

Quantitative data for the study consisted of academic SSA scores in reading and mathematics for students in grade eight and teacher academic optimism survey data obtained through the K-8 classroom teacher survey using Survey Monkey. Qualitative data consisted of semi-structured interview questions for both previous and current K-8 sampled school principals, as well as district leaders who had previously worked in a K-8 school model.

There were no direct personal identifiers to teacher responses using Survey Monkey, as to protect the respondents' personal identity to the data obtained throughout the study. Once I collected the data, I transcribed, sorted, and input the data into the NVivo 12 software coded using a relationship matrix categorized as high, moderate, and low value, compared to respondent outcome data to favorable, neutral, or antagonistic. I chose these categories for the interview and survey data based on qualitative research construction of categorical data.

Furthermore, the purpose of obtaining no identifiable respondent data was to increase the validity and reliability for questionnaire responses. All data I collect during the course of the study was securely locked and stored in my residence where it will remain for five years following the final approval of the dissertation.

Data Analysis Procedures

The following five research questions guided my case study:

- R1: How do eighth grade students perform academically in a K-8 school model in both reading and math from year to year over a five-year span?

- R2: How do faculty perceive a level of collective efficacy within the K-8 school model?

- R3: How do teachers and the principal in the school acknowledge and share their efforts to establish a climate of collective efficacy in order to promote student achievement in the K-8 grade configured school?

- R4: To what extent does the school staff believe there are unique components in a K-8 school model that increase academic performance?

- R5: To what extent do teachers perceive a climate of trust among instructional staff within the K-8 school model with respect to teacher collaboration?

I coded the teacher academic optimism survey data using the NVivo 12 software program. I chose the NVivo 12 for my study based on the program's ability to code and analyze large amounts of data which can then be used to sort and present thematic data. I transcribed the principal interviews to ensure validity and reliability

The research questions for my study aligned with one another as a means to identify how academic optimism and collective efficacy were demonstrated among principal and teachers within the K-8 school model based upon an analysis of the collected data. I gathered academic data from the state DOE website, organized it into an excel spreadsheet based on SSA achievement levels, percentage at or above grade level

performance represented by a score of three and above in reading and mathematics. Proficiency levels were determined by the state Department of Education leaders and universally applied to the sampled school district to determine each student's grade level academic proficiency (DOE, 2013). I then sorted, categorized, and input SSA data directly into SPSS by academic year. I gathered semi-structured interview data through open-ended interview questions using Seidman's (2006) model of the three-step interview process. I analyzed, coded, and input teacher survey data using a 1-4 ranking Likert- type scale (Yin, 2014). I input all achievement, interview, and questionnaire data into the SPSS software package. I input three sources of data for triangulation, reliability and validation of data.

Ethical Considerations

A few ethical considerations within this study consisted of careful storage of obtained data before the research collection and analysis period. Although the collected information was publicly available, the specific school name and student demographics involved with the study remained anonymous during and after the term of my study. Likewise, student names associated with the data were not a concern within this study, as I transcribed all reports generated from the state and the district numerically, based on the school site and grade level configuration. In order to maintain confidentiality, I did not use any teacher or student identifiers associated with classroom observations within the study. I assigned individual teacher surveys a numerical value associated with respondent answers to guarantee that no personal identifiers were present within the study. I reported the sampled school site as school A to maintain the school's anonymity throughout the study. I stored all collected data in a locked location in my residence where it will remain

for five years and then be shredded to maintain anonymity of all collected data.

Limitations

While previous research on grade span configurations have concentrated primarily on, or have been limited to, a specific geographical school district, I restricted my study to a specific state and school district for the studied district's future application and analysis for future school models. Therefore, I did not generalize the outcomes to support other school districts with decisions regarding future school configuration models. I only focused on academic variables, not specifically targeted to gender or ethnicity. Additionally, the examined school had a comparable school population and demographic makeup to surrounding schools, yet there was not a complete consistency regarding these factors which I reconsidered during the presentation of the study's outcomes. Likewise, academic performance data collected during the study was limited to enrolled and attending students during the time of the SSA assessment period and did not include transient students before or after the administration of the SSA. Finally, I included within this study, and only reported, surveys of individual teachers and classroom instructional practices as a contributing component of a greater findings set to measure academic performance outcomes.

Summary

Because of ongoing scholarly debates, educators are considering how grade span configurations influence academic achievement, measured by the state's No Child Left Behind testing and evaluation process (Dove et al., 2010). Historically, many educational leaders supported the middle school concept in the 1990s, other school administrators chose not to reform to a 6-8 middle grades model, thus maintaining the K-8 grade school

structure. Plausibly, it was not the isolative nature of the middle school model that aides in the social and academic success of students, as much as the grade level structuring within the school that promoted the institution and learners within (Bunting, 2010). The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to explore how grade span configurations influenced academic performance for middle school students in grade eight, in a district's only K-8 school model, located in the United States. Using a mixed methods case study approach, I was able to explore prior academic performance data, current semi-structured interview questions and teacher survey data in the sampled school model to understand if the K-8 school model was effective at increasing academic performance for middle grade students in the district under study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In this chapter, I presented the findings of my study on academic optimism and collective efficacy within the K-8 school model under study through both quantitative and qualitative sources of data. Based on the gap in current literature, it may be likely that there are additional components within the K-8 school model that have an influence on academic performance for grade eight students. As represented within this chapter, the K-8 grade span configuration data showed a positive relationship to the cultural elements of influence within the K-8 school model under study.

First, I presented the quantitative data on academic performance for the school under study, as well as principal and district level interview findings. Next, I presented the findings on each research question 1-5 regarding collective efficacy and academic optimism as they related to the K-8 school model. To conclude, I summarized my findings of the case study with a presentation of the components that influenced the academic performance for grade eight students over a five year span.

Restatement of the Purpose

The purpose of my mixed method case study was to explore how teachers and school principals perceived the role of academic optimism and collective efficacy as influencing academic performance of students at a K-8 school model. This mixed methods case study can help provide further evidence on grade span configurations and academic performance to address an existing gap in literature with respect to academic optimism and its influence on academic proficiency levels achieved in a K-8 school model.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings of the study answered research question one: How do grade eight students perform academically in a K-8 school model in both reading and math over a five year span? To examine academic proficiency for grade eight students in the academic areas of reading and math, I gathered SSA academic performance data for the years 2014-2019 from the state assessment website. Academic proficiency data was represented in Figures 1 and 2 as either a level 4 or level 5. Level 5 was the highest proficiency a student can receive on a reading or math state standards assessment.

Figures 1 and 2 represent the percentage of grade eight students achieving proficiency at a level 4 and 5 in reading and math for the academic years of 2014-2019. To examine reading proficiency levels for grade eight students, I gathered the percentage and charted all level 4 and level 5 proficient students over the course of five years. Over the five year span, the population of students enrolled at the school under study as grade eight students ranged from 128-180.

To uncover the trends in the data, I analyzed proficiency levels by year. In 2014-2015, grade eight students obtained a level of proficiency at 16% in reading. In 2015-2016, there was no change in proficiency for level 4 and level 5 grade eight students. In 2016-2017, grade eight students obtained a 14% proficiency level which was 2% below the previous year. In 2017-2018, there was 1% increase in proficiency for grade eight students with a combined proficiency at 15%. In 2018-2019, grade eight students reached their highest level of proficiency at 21% and a 6% increase from the previous year.

Reading proficiency scores fluctuated over the five year span with the lowest combined proficiency at 14% and the highest combined proficiency at 21%. When

disaggregating the proficiency levels by number of students, the range for student proficiency over the course of five years was 20-28 students; this was an average of 26 students proficient in reading over a five year span. Figure 1 below displays the academic year students were tested in reading, as well as the percentage of students proficient in reading at either a level 4 or level 5 during the academic year they were assessed.

Figure 1. Eighth grade reading proficiency over five consecutive years
(Source: State Department of Education, citation withheld to protect confidentiality)

To examine math proficiency levels for grade eight students, I gathered the percentage of students proficient at either a level 4 or level 5 in math. Then, I charted all level 4 and level 5 students over the course of five years. As shown in Figure 2, in 2014-2015, the school under study obtained a combined proficiency of 13% for grade eight students who achieved levels 4 and 5 in math. In 2015-2016, there was no change in proficiency levels for students earning levels 4 and 5. In 2016-2017, there was a 6% increase for levels 4 and 5 among grade eight students obtaining a combined proficiency

level of 19%. In 2017-2018, there was 11% decrease from the previous year resulting in a combined proficiency of 7%. In 2018-2019, grade eight students increased 4% from the previous year resulting in a combined proficiency of 11%.

Math proficiency scores fluctuated over the five year span with the lowest combined proficiency at 7% and the highest combined proficiency at 19%. When disaggregating the proficiency levels by number of students, the range for student proficiency over the course of five years was 14-23 students; this is an average of 22 students proficient in math over a five year span.
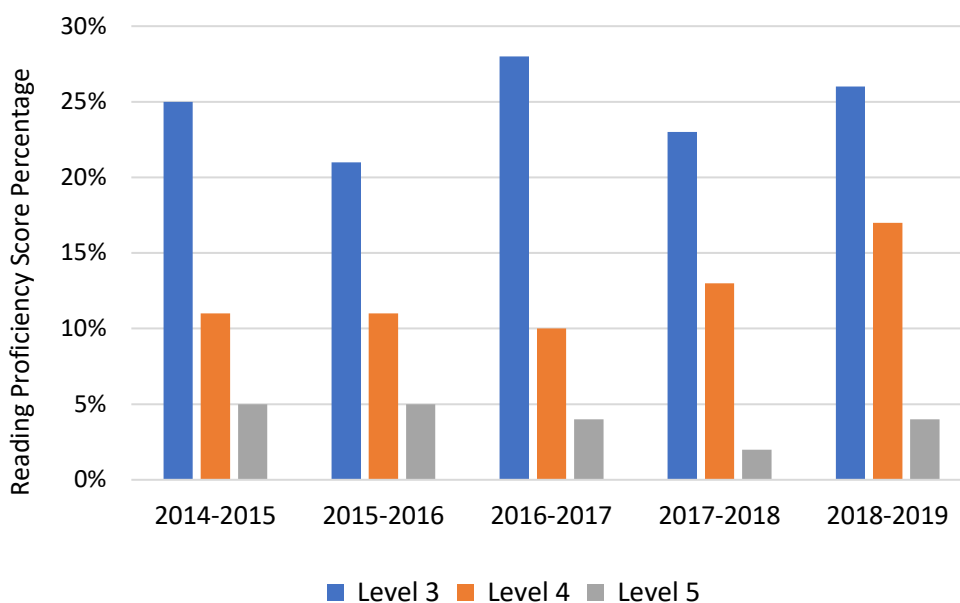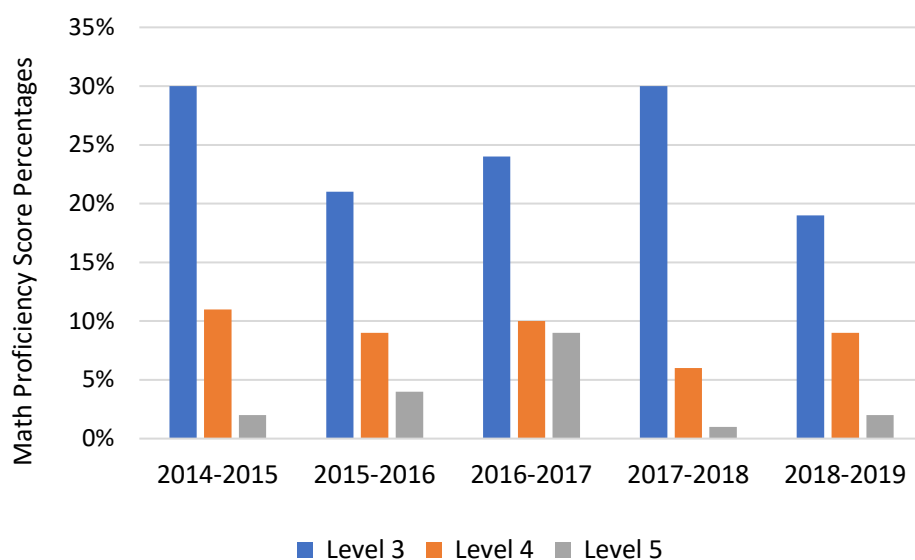

Figure 2. Eighth grade math proficiency over five consecutive years
(Source: State Department of Education, citation withheld to protect confidentiality)

Overall, when examining both reading and math proficiency levels of grade eight students, there is a consistent trend that the eighth grade cohort consistently maintains a higher percentage of students at a level 4 in reading than in math. When looking at joined proficiency levels, where combining levels 4 and 5 results in a total number of proficient grade eight students in that core academic area, the reading proficiency level was 16% and math proficiency was 13%.

In the final analysis of the five year academic data in reading and math, I examined the total number of students considered proficient each year for the eighth grade cohorts. Table 1 represents the total number of grade eight students, the academic year they tested, and the number of students achieving proficiency in both reading and math.

Table 1.

Grade Eight Student Proficiency by Year

Academic Year	N*	# of Students Proficient in Reading	# of Students Proficient in Math
2014-2015	152	24	20
2015-2016	128	24	24
2016-2017	180	25	34
2017-2018	159	24	13
2018-2019	162	34	18

*N represents total number of students enrolled.
(Source: State Department of Education, citation withheld to protect confidentiality)

Teacher Survey Results. An additional component to the quantitative data, as to answer how teachers perceived the role of academic optimism on academic performance for grade eight students, I sent a 12 question survey to faculty and staff members using a Survey Monkey web link. The Survey Monkey window was open for a month, and the school principal shared the Survey Monkey link with her staff using the school's internal email system. Out of 45 faculty and staff members, 12 faculty and staff members responded to the survey.

The teacher survey results helped me answer my second and third research questions. Research Question number 2 was: How do faculty perceive a level of collective efficacy within the K-8 school model? and research question number 3 was: How do teachers and the principal in the school acknowledge and share their efforts to establish a

climate of collective efficacy in order to promote student achievement in the K-8 grade

configured school? Figure 3 displays teacher survey responses to survey statements 1, 5,

7, and 8. Survey statement 1 was: The school staff works collectively to promote a positive

school culture of trust. Survey statement 5 was: Collaboration among instructional grade

levels in a K-8 school structure helps to promote student success. Survey statement 7 was:

The K-8 school structure is unique in that it helps promote trust among staff, students, and

parents. Survey statement 8 was: The school as a whole collaborates to promote a positive

climate in the K-8 school setting. I graphed the responses by Likert scale ranking as

represented horizontally and the Likert Scale ranking response per participant represented
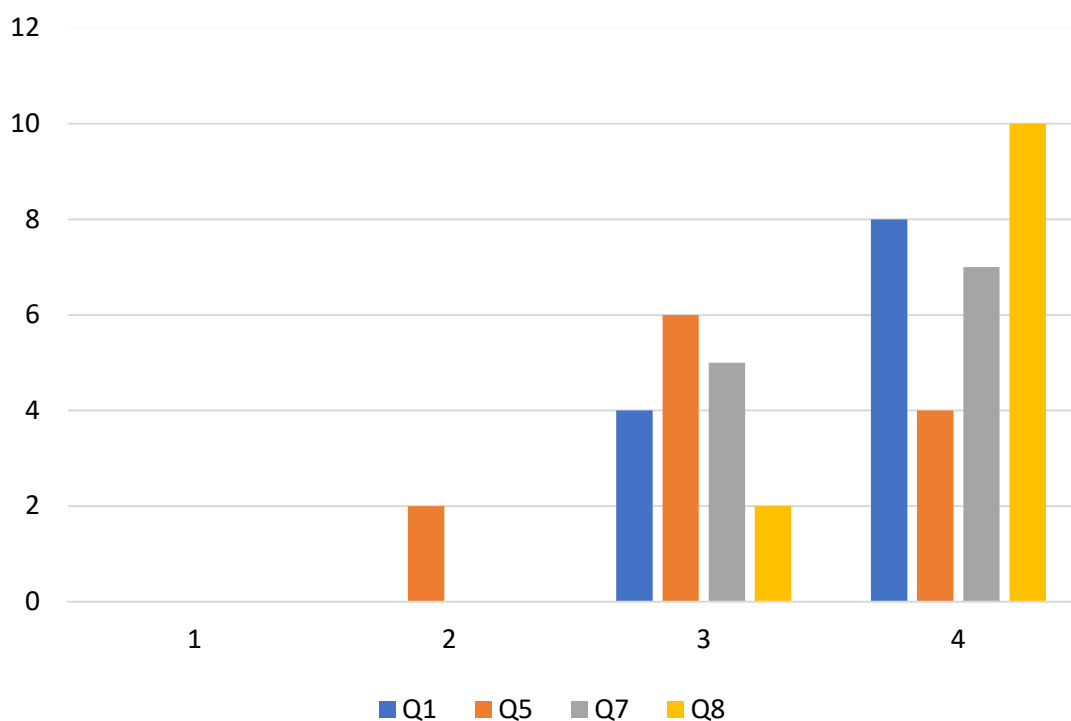
vertically in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Faculty and staff perception of trust and collaboration: questions 1, 5, 7, and 8

Three aspects of academic optimism are functionally dependent on each other: collective

efficacy, faculty trust in parents and students, and academic emphasis (Hoy, Hoy, &

Kurz, 2008). Teacher survey responses as displayed horizontally in Figure 3, show a positive relationship between working together to create a positive school culture and a climate that promotes collaboration among the faculty and staff. An interview with a district leader resonated these findings by stating, "To have collective efficacy within any school model, especially that of a K-8 school model, there must be a strong presence of trust among both the administrative team, faculty, and parents alike" (Participant 1, personal communication, January 29, 2020). As presented by teacher survey responses, the respondents at the school under study believe they collectively build and sustain a culture of collaboration and trust among one another to improve the academic performance for all students.

The survey also helped me to answer research question number four: To what extent does the school staff believe there are unique components in a K-8 school model that increase academic performance? Out of 12 respondents, all 12 either agreed or strongly agreed with survey statement number 8 indicating that the K-8 school model promotes student achievement. On the other hand, when responding to statement 9 on the teacher survey: There are specific academic challenges only found in a K-8 setting; six participants agreed with the statement, and four additional participants strongly agreed with the statement. The two remaining respondents reported that they disagreed with the statement.

Teacher survey responses also aligned to participant interview responses where all participants stated that both scheduling and professional development areas were where K-8 school models were different and had different needs than traditional sixth through eighth school models. In a district level interview, one participant stated, "K-8 schools

can feel very divided when it comes to professional development and curriculum alignment if not strategically thought out and with clear focus areas for both the elementary and middle school sides" (Participant 2, personal communication, February 7, 2020). While I defined collective efficacy in my study as a group's belief and confidence that teachers can reform or affect learning (Goddard et al., 2015), I found the approach at which influencing learning within the K-8 school model can present itself in various ways. "Common professional development opportunities can enhance how the K-8 school model implements academic structures where high levels of academic achievement occur at all grade levels" (Participant 3, personal communication, February 10, 2020) .

To answer research question number 5: To what extent do teachers perceive a climate of trust among instructional staff within the K-8 school model with respect to teacher collaboration?, I used survey statement 1: The school staff works collectively to promote a positive school culture of trust; survey statement 3: The staff of the school builds a culture of trust with parents; and survey statement 7: The K-8 school model is unique in that it helps promote trust among staff, students, and parents. The responses to these survey statements enabled me to determine the level of perceived trust as it related to efficacy and collaboration. Figure 4 displays statement numbers as represented on the teacher survey, and teacher responses are represented horizontally by a numerical Likert Scale ranking of 1-4. Based on the teacher survey responses, it is clear that the respondents within the K-8 school model under study believed that there were high levels of trust among teachers, students, and parents. One district leader participant stated, "When constructing an academically high functioning K-8 school model, trust and

communication among all stakeholders are two key components in creating and

sustaining academic success" (Participant 6, personal communication, February 28,

2020).

According to the teacher survey responses, both collective efficacy and academic

optimism rated the highest, while collaboration and instructional strategies used within

the K-8 school model ranked the lowest. When determining the influence that collective

efficacy and academic optimism have on student achievement, teacher responses ranked

highest in a positive school climate that influences academic achievement and a shared
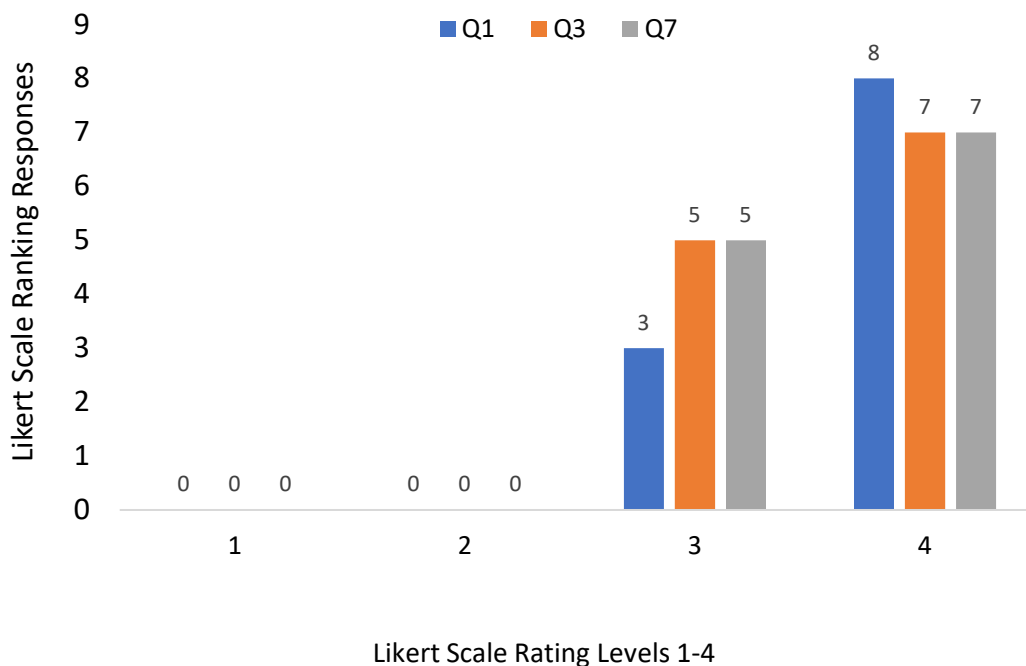
academic vision for student success.

Figure 4. Faculty and staff sense of trust and collaboration, questions 1, 3, and 7

Qualitative Findings

In this section of the study, I presented the findings of the qualitative data

obtained through district leaders and principal interviews. I asked each participant 16 questions regarding the K-8 school model. Each participant's response was transcribed and input into NVivo 12 for coding purposes. Respondent quotations were used in this section to align how collective efficacy and academic optimism influence academic performance of grade eight students in a K-8 school model.

District leaders and principal interviews. As indicated in Chapter Three, I conducted semi-structured interviews with previous and current K-8 district leaders and principals. I contacted all participants via email or telephone requesting their participation in the study. Out of the 10 interviews requested, I was able to conduct 6 interviews for my case study. All six participants signed a consent form to participate and a time was established to meet over a four week period. The participants' work experience in a K-8 school model was a prerequisite in order to participate in the study.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. I input all interview data into NVivo 12 for coding purposes. Upon coding the six transcribed interviews, I discovered recurring themes, and I reported those themes in this chapter. The themes I discovered during the thematic coding process were administrative experience, strategic planning, one school, planning and professional development, and scheduling. I described each theme and aligned the interview data with the thematic outcomes I found using NVivo 12.

Administrative experience. Interview participants reported a common theme of concerns as to how school leaders are chosen within a K-8 school model. All six participants reported a shared outlook on a K-8 school model. This outlook was stated clearly by Participant 2 who said, "The K-8 school model is a unique type of school and

can't be treated like other school models. The K-8 school model has different needs and should be treated and supported as a unique entity" (Participant 2, personal communication, February 7, 2020). All six participants expressed during their interviews an additional concern about how long school leaders stay at their assigned school. As stated by Reeves (2009), when changes occur within an organization, all changes must be strategic and sustainable in order to be considered an act of strategic change. Five out of the six participants discussed the need for a strong leadership team within the K-8 school model. One district leader stated, "The K-8 school model needs a common vision. It is hard to build a cohesive school with one vision when leadership within the school is constantly changing" (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2020). While the length of a school leader's term served at the K-8 school under study was an area of concern, another concern was expressed as to not only how long a school leader serves, but also the school leader's ability to engage in constructive content based conversations regarding instructional practice. " Leaders within the K-8 school model must be well versed at all grade levels and content areas in order to professionally grow teachers" (Participant 1, personal communication, January 29, 2020).

Previous studies found that leadership within a K-8 school model looks different from that of a 6-8 school model, stating the K-8 school model is really two schools operating as one unit (Bunting, 2010). Determining how to merge both the elementary and middle school sites into one cohesive unit takes time and strategic planning on the leader's behalf. One interview participant stated,

Leaders within a K-8 school model have to think differently than leaders in a 6-8 school model. There are more moving components in a K-8 school model and

each side has its own unique needs in order to be effective. (Participant 1,

personal communication, January 29, 2020)

Based on the participants' response, it can be assumed that the school leader's experience

and longevity within the K-8 school model, has an influence on how students will

perform academically. "Leaders in a K-8 school have an opportunity to create a family

like environment that promotes learning opportunities for all students" (Participant 2,

personal communication, February 7, 2020). Leadership within any school model must

reflect knowledge of not only what great leaders do differently, but also must have a clear

plan for the academic and social emotional structural elements alike (Jacob & Rockoff,

2012).

Strategic planning. I asked principals and district level leaders, how leadership

relates to decision making within the K-8 school model, on student academic

performance. When I asked about the instructional benefits within the K-8 school model

under study, Participant 4 said, "The K-8 school model should be aligned as to engage in

whole school collaboration that develops and supports grade level instruction.

Unfortunately, we are operating as two different schools and have two separate

professional development focus areas" (Participant 4, personal communication, February

10, 2020).

While the school under study is not engaged in cohesive professional

development for both elementary and middle school teachers, an additional concern was

stated as to creating a common vision for a one school model. "There is not a common

vision for all teachers as one school, besides to be better every day" (Participant 5,

personal communication, February 10, 2020). As it relates to professional development

and growing instructional leaders, a prior K-8 school principal explained that,

> The instructional alignment to professional development within a K-8 school
>
> model is not as one dimensional as that of a 6-8 school model. Teachers in a
>
> middle school model tend to concentrate primarily within a specific content, while
>
> elementary teachers tend to focus on all content areas. (Participant 6, personal
>
> communication, February 28, 2020)

Another K-8 school principal stated, "Determining and scheduling professional development that meet the instructional needs of both sides of the house becomes very difficult; this is where strategic planning and expertise as a K-8 school leader plays a key role" (Participant 6, personal communication, February 28, 2020).

Similar to concerns regarding strategic planning and professional development, there was a common concern among the participants interviewed as to if leaders within a K-8 school model have the instructional expertise in all content areas in order to lead a school of such diverse needs. "If leaders have only worked on the elementary side of the house, how can they possibly know the instructional needs of the middle school side?" (Participant 4, personal communication February 10, 2020). With this mindset among the school faculty, the question still presents as to how K-8 school leaders create and sustain a one school environment while simultaneously trying to meet the diverse academic needs of all grade levels.

One school. I asked participants about the academic goals within the K-8 school model and the cultural influence of the K-8 school model on academic performance. All six participants agreed that the school under study had the ability to create a one school vision and mission, but the barriers when developing and engaging in restructuring the

school environment would take time. All 6 participants agreed that the K-8 school model should be structured in a way that there is not a division between the elementary and middle school sides. Administrative teams should be well versed in primary and secondary content area standards to ensure that the instructional feedback provided aligns to the vision and academic outcomes set by the school as a whole (Participant 1, personal communication, January 29, 2020). On the other hand, if the teachers do not believe in the one school model, instructional practices will remain the same. A district level participant stated:

> Teachers have the opportunity to get to know kids better because they have them longer. They can also check with previous teachers when they have academic or social concerns about a student, so bonds between students and teachers tend to occur faster in the K-8 school model. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2020)

The one school model cannot be sustained by the leadership within the school driving the change alone. One school means every faculty and staff member within the building believes in the power and knowledge of the team. Leaders of one school models, like having the unique ability to grow and develop instructional leaders within the K-8 school. Leaders within a K-8 school model promote professional growth and collaboration by providing in house opportunities for teachers to engage in classroom observations at various grade levels (Burke & Ying, 2010). One participant stated, "What other school model can you teach an eighth grade group throughout the day and then go visit a peer to observe an elementary classroom in an area that you might be struggling in?" (Participant 2, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Designing and aligning time for teachers

to learn and collaborate within the K-8 is a critical component to growing the instructional personnel within it (Burke & Ying, 2010).

Planning and professional development. One of the most recurring themes present within my study was the topic of planning and professional development within the K-8 school model. In order to improve the instructional practice of a wide range of grade levels and subject areas, providing time to engage professionally in common ongoing professional development became an instrumental source for teacher collaboration. When asking participants about how the K-8 school model influences academic achievement, a participant stated, "It is easier for our teachers to collaborate and plan with one another in grades K-8 than it is for 6-8 middle school teachers because our kids stay right here starting from kindergarten" (Participant 5, personal communication, February 10, 2020).

On the other hand, while participants mentioned collaboration and common grade level planning as contributing components to the academic success of all students, one participant said, "The teachers feel that they don't need to change their instructional practice because administration asked them to. They feel they will far outlast the administrative team, so they keep teaching the way they always have" (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2020). Professional development with a closed mindset will slow the academic growth process of the students within the building. For curriculum alignment to be effective and yield desired academic results, subject area experts need to design instructional activities and assessments to match the instructional content standards, in order to assure reliability and validity to the later assessed national standards (Porter et al., 2007). Teachers should engage in professional development

opportunities that meet the needs of not only their content area, but also their individual pedagogy (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). One interview participant stated, "We are good at offering the middle school side professional development that meets their needs, but we don't have a whole school plan for becoming better within our practice" (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Professionally growing human capital within any school model is not only essential to student achievement, but also to sustaining a school culture where getting better means everyone within the school structure is sharing the same vision (Erb, 2006; Nash, 2010; Villavicencio & Grayman, 2012). "Once the mindset of professional development aligns with the school vision, leaders are then able to create schedules that benefit both the elementary and middle school components while creating a sustainable culture that embraces ongoing professional learning experiences" (Participant 1, personal communication, January 29, 2020).

Scheduling. Scheduling within a K-8 school model is different strategically than that of a K-5 or 6-8 school model. Determining what type of schedule to build on the secondary side begins with understanding what the students' needs are and what time frames meet those needs. In some instances, a traditional six-period day will work better for K-8 schools, yet on the other hand, many middle school leaders chose a block schedule for their students because it offered a longer period of time in a given content area. "For example, in one K-8 school model, students may need the consistency and flexibility of the six-period day, while our school implements a block schedule which has longer segments of time in each content area and students alternate content areas throughout the week" (Participant 5, personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Scheduling for common planning times can be very difficult on the middle school side. While elementary teachers can share common planning during the time their students are at special area classes, the middle grades teachers are not presented the same opportunity. At the school under study, the middle school planning time was an allocated time period before school started or after the school day ended. At most, this planning time within the K-8 under study was 20-30 minutes. One school leader stated,

In order to have whole school collaboration and a shared sense of collective efficacy, there needs to be a concentrated effort made by the administrative and district level leaders to design a schedule that strategically works for all grade levels in the K-8 school model. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 10, 2020)

Another district level participant stated,

It is difficult to build one school vision for collective efficacy and collaboration when the structure and scheduling of professional development is targeted to only one group. Teachers don't share a common time to observe other teachers' instructional practice or to share instructional best practices across the campus. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2020)

While K-8 school leaders face challenges as to how student scheduling throughout the day not only meets the instructional needs of students, it is apparent that the professional development of teachers must also be considered as well to engage K-8 teachers with collaborative learning opportunities.

Summary

I collected three forms of data throughout my study. The qualitative data I collected for the study was through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data I collected for the study was through teacher surveys and academic performance data in reading and math for grade eight students over a five year time span.

Qualitative results of the study indicated that the sampled teachers perceived there to be high levels of collective efficacy, collaboration, and academic optimism within the K-8 school model under study. I was able to identify thematic attributes to the K-8 school model under study during the coding process using NVivo 12. The attributes presented in the study were administrative experience, strategic planning, one school, planning and professional development, and scheduling.

While the academic data in reading and math showed that grade eight students were less than 50% proficient in both reading or math, most of the teacher participants reported through their survey responses that they believed that the K-8 school model's level of collective efficacy and academic optimism influenced positively the academic performance for grade eight students. While the academic data I collected did not have a positive relationship to the teacher survey findings, it did have a relationship with all thematic components I uncovered during all 6 semi-structured interviews: administrative experience, strategic planning, one school, planning and professional development, and scheduling. I found through my study, teacher collaboration and shared efficacy remained highly ranked by the participants, while the structural components of a K-8 school model were not represented within the findings of the school under study. The structural components of a K-8 school model that I found absent within the school under study

were administrative experience, strategic planning, one school, planning and professional development, and scheduling. Each of the six participants interviewed expressed administrative experience, strategic planning, one school, planning and professional development, and scheduling to be key attributes of successful K-8 school models, yet I found that each attribute was either not currently in place or was nonexistent at the time of the study.

The overall findings within the study indicated the following: faculty did perceive there to be a level of collective efficacy present within the school, sampled teachers believed they shared a common vision to promote student achievement, sampled teachers perceived high levels of trust among instructional staff, and the sampled school staff did believe there to be unique components within the K-8 school model that increased academic performance. On the other hand, less than half of the grade eight students were proficient in either reading or math, and the school was missing structural components of the K-8 school model that enhanced the climate and culture of the K-8 school setting. Additional factors that may have impacted the academic performance of grade eight students, as well as a shared sense of efficacy, were common planning and staff collaboration. I presented these factors, along with conclusions and implications for further research, in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Chapter Four, I presented the findings of the study and outlined the data analysis process which included participant surveys, interview analyses, and coding for the purpose of establishing emergent themes. In this chapter, I presented the major outcomes of my study, along with implications for theory, practice, future research, and my personal experience and reflections on this project.

Discussion

The results of this dissertation study make a contribution to the present literature on the K-8 school model and its influence on academic performance in two ways, previous research studies concentrated on the academic performance of students within the K-8 school model as to determine how grade level alignment within the K-8 model supported higher levels of academic performance, yet limited prior research examined how collective efficacy within the K-8 school model potentially has an influence on academic performance levels for grade eight students. A variety of studies used the middle school conceptual framework to show differences between the 5-8 and 6-8 models, yet minimal research was completed to explore student cohort performance in a K-8 school model over an extended amount of time, leaving gaps in existing research as to how effective each school model is at increasing academic performance over time (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). On the other hand, my study adds an additional component to existing literature and closes a gap by adding current research on the K-8 school model. Using a mixed methods case study, I examined whether collective efficacy and academic optimism within the K-8 school structure have an influence on student academic

performance over a five year span.

The problem addressed in my dissertation generated from the historical change for school grade configurations that educational leaders made on behalf of the middle school movement across the United States. As previously stated, the foundation and ideology behind the middle school model was to "foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships" (Carolan & Chesky, 2012, p. 32). Supporters of the middle school movement believed in separating students in grades 6-8 from the K-5 elementary cohort (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). During the adolescent years, the middle school theory supported institutions developing into specific grade level schools, which as a result, would increase academic and social performance over time for middle grades students (Booth et al., 2007; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007).

In opposition, twentieth century school reform leaders echoed concerns as to why the middle school model was ineffective at preparing adolescent learners, thus encouraging school leaders to return to the K-8 model (Balfanz et al., 2002; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Conflicting research continued to influence the educational reform system, which as a result, produced widespread changes throughout school districts nationwide (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Hildreth, 2011). To understand why the K-8 school model is a better option for adolescent learners, researchers who conducted studies on the K-8 school model argued that the social relationships developed during the K-8 years, played a role on the levels of academic performance during the middle grade years. Green (2009) noted that peer interactions and relationships developed within K-8 schools, were even higher than similar K-6 models, when examining academic and social performance. While research evidence for both school models was

truly inconclusive, most scholarly findings came to an agreement that the transitional

phases of education affect the academic and social performance levels of adolescent

learners (Dove et al., 2010; Sparks, 2011).

The purpose of my mixed method case study was to explore how teachers and

school principals perceived the role of collective efficacy and academic optimism as

influencing academic success of students at a K-8 school model. I collected both

quantitative and qualitative data during the research process. As to understand how the K-

8 school model influences academic performance through school model and instructional

alignment, I designed research questions aligned to these two areas. I chose a mixed

methods case study design because it allowed me to examine process and meaning within

an organization or institution by collecting various types of qualitative data to understand

the whole institution (Creswell, 2003). Collecting semi-structured interview data allowed

me to delve deeper into the questions with the participants and expand further into their

responses.

When exploring prior research on the K-8 school model, I uncovered gaps within

the literature which left me inquiring if the K-8 school model was still considered a

current viable grade configuration option for school districts across the nation. One of the

last studies completed on the K-8 school model was completed by Malone et al. (2017) in

which they examined the academic performance for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade

students from 2013-2015. The results of the study revealed that student achievement for

sixth and seventh grade students were higher when the grades were paired with

elementary grade levels. As a result of their findings, an explanation to the decrease in

pass rates for sixth and seventh grade students when in a middle school model, could be

that the transition into middle school had negative effects on student achievement (Malone et al., 2017).

On the other hand, a few years prior, a study was conducted by Gershenson and Langbein (2015) who found no relationship between school size and student achievement when analyzing grade-span configurations and academic performance in reading and math. With the variations in the research findings of both the K-8 school model versus that of the 6-8 grade span configuration, I conducted my case study with the intent to add to existing literature. Additionally, my study will add a current component to existing findings on the academic performance of grade eight students within a K-8 school model.

There were both quantitative and qualitative findings within my study. First, I examined the academic performance of grade eight students over a five year span to determine levels of academic proficiency in both reading and math. I collected academic data by academic year through the state assessment website. Once I had all the academic data collected, I then sorted by the numbers of students obtaining a level 4 or level 5 proficiency in reading and math. Finally, I analyzed and charted all the data to represent the percentage of grade eight students proficient in reading and math over the years 2014-2019. As an additional component to the quantitative data, I also surveyed 12 teachers within the K-8 school model using a Survey Monkey link to determine how collective efficacy within the K-8 school model influenced academic performance for grade eight students.

For my qualitative data, I constructed semi-structured interview questions for both school and district leaders with prior or current work experience within a K-8 school model. I conducted interviews over a month, during which I met with participants either

by phone or in person. Once I completed the interviews, I transcribed and input the data into the NVivo 12 software system.

Overall, the findings and approach of my case study are not similar to prior research on the K-8 school model. During my study, I implemented a holistic methodology to the K-8 school data and did not disaggregate the data by sub groups. I also implemented a semi-structured interview process regarding the levels of collective efficacy and academic optimism among faculty and staff to consider their impact on students' academic performance in the K-8 school model under study. Yet, the results in my study contribute to previous research findings with regard to grade span configurations not necessarily increasing academic performance for grade eight students.

I examined how the data aligned to my research questions. Research question 5 was: How do grade eight students perform academically in reading and math in a K-8 school model from year to year over a five year span? I found that far less than 50% of grade eight students were proficient in reading or math. Additionally, over the five year span, academic performance levels fluctuated from year to year resulting in a wide range of student proficiency levels. Overall, when examining both reading and math proficiency levels of grade eight students, there was a trend that the grade eight cohort consistently maintained a higher percentage of students at a level 4 in reading than in math. When looking at joined proficiency levels, where levels 4 and 5 were combined to determine a whole grade level proficiency percentage, students demonstrated an average proficiency level in reading of 16%, compared to math where students achieved an average proficiency level of 13%. Based on the academic findings alone, the K-8 school model under study, did not demonstrate a positive relationship between grade span

configuration and academic achievement for grade eight students.

In addition to students' reading and math proficiency data, when exploring school efficacy and as it relates to trust and collaboration among faculty and staff, 12 out of the 12 survey participants strongly believed there was a presence of instructional cohesiveness within the K-8 school model. Collective efficacy defined in my study is a group's belief and confidence that they can reform or affect learning (Daly et al., 2015). When analyzing the teacher responses to survey questions 1, 5, 7 and 8 (Appendix A), which focused on the K-8 school structure and the positive and collaborative environment shared within, I found that 11 out of the 12 sampled teachers agreed or strongly agreed there was a shared sense of collective efficacy and academic optimism present within the sampled K-8 school model. The other remaining participant disagreed with the statements. Additionally, when asked questions 2, 4, and 6 (Appendix A) on the teacher survey that discussed the promotion of academic success within the K-8 school model, 10 out of the 12 of the respondents strongly agreed that these attributes were present within the sampled K-8 school model. While the teacher survey rankings aligned with a positive relationship with the K-8 school model and a shared sense of efficacy among the faculty and staff, the district leaders and school principals interview data collected did not share a common product.

While inputting and coding district leaders and principals interviews, themes emerged among the interviewee responses such as, administrative experience, strategic planning, one school, planning and professional development, and scheduling. Among the five themes, planning and professional development, as well as administrative experience shared the highest percentage of concerns among the sampled participants.

Statements echoed strong apprehensions as to the experience of the leadership team leading the K-8 school, as well as a limited background in both the elementary and middle grades content. Erb (2006) stated, while grade alignment is one piece of an effective school model, school leadership is just as instrumental. How can school leaders effectively run two very unique sides of the school, if they are not conversant on both sides? (Participant 1, personal communication, January 29, 2020). If leadership within the K-8 school model is ever-changing, school leaders will continue to struggle with engaging a whole school community vision or what is referred to in the study as *one school*. Additionally, when choosing school leaders for the K-8 school model, interview participants stated that school leaders well versed on elementary and middle grades curricula can enhance instructional pedagogy across all grade levels. Five out of the six district and school level interviewees stated that leadership within the K-8 is one of the most influential components of the school model. On the other hand, if school leaders are not strategically chosen to lead a K-8 school model, it can also serve as unfavorable to the success of the school.

Conclusions

Based on the academic performance of students and the participant interview findings, it is possible that the inexperience of the school leaders within the K-8 school model under study had a negative influence on academic performance for grade eight students over the period of five years. On the other hand, based on the survey and interview findings, it is also possible that collective efficacy and collaboration among faculty and staff members is present within the school, yet does not influence academic performance levels for grade eight students.

Previous studies found leadership as a key component to establishing an effective school culture, thus a leader must also be very knowledgeable of the holistic needs of the faculty and staff within the building (Daly et al., 2015). During the participant interview process, the school principal said that the school under study was not where it needed to be with regard to professional development and peer collaboration as it related to unification of both the elementary and middle school sides. The school principal also stated that the previous vision at the school was very different than the current vision and mission being articulated to the faculty and staff. As stated by Garth-Young (2007), administrative teams need to create an open mindset within a building, sustained by a culture of trust that promotes getting better through effective feedback practices. It is apparent through the interview process that the school under study is currently adjusting their collaborative alignment structures, as well as creating a new vision for improving student achievement. Yet during the prior five years, it is not known if instructional alignment and academic expectations was an area of shared focus for all faculty and staff members.

The K-8 school model is a unique entity. K-8 school principals should be strategically chosen to lead a K-8 school model. K-8 school models require a school leader to not only have experience working with elementary and middle school content areas, but also be particularly familiar with the social emotional spectrum of students within a K-8 school model. I emphasize that the frequent turnover of administrative teams within the sampled K-8 school model over the five year time span is a component that was not an element of study within my research, but a variable that emerged throughout the research process. Five out of the six participants noted that when

leadership changes frequently within schools, it becomes more difficult for the newly appointed leader to engage in culture shift conversations with the current faculty and staff. In supposition, frequent leadership turnover not only impacts the instructional practices within a building, but also the climate of reciprocated trust and self-investment among teachers and school administrators.

Implications for Practice

During my research, themes emerged that have a strong alignment with implications for professional practice. Within the K-8 school model under study lies a division between how the current school leaders see collective efficacy within the school, compared to how teachers rank collective efficacy within the K-8 school model. The current leadership vision within the K-8 school model is to grow the instructional leaders within the building to maximize the human capital within the organization. On the other hand, the instructional faculty of the K-8 school model under study face a different challenge related to changing their pedagogy to meet the school leader's current instructional vision. The lens through which school leaders view collaboration and collective efficacy tend to differ from than that of the instructional personnel. While previous research found that the instructional capacity within the K-8 school model had a direct influence on academic performance, my research findings also contribute to the prior research on the K-8 school model in creating an awareness between the perceptions of instructional efficacy from school leaders and the perception of collective efficacy among instructional personnel as it relates to their own instructional awareness on student academic outcomes.

The outcomes within my study show a significant difference between how student

academic performance outcomes align more to the administrative lens of collective efficacy than the instructional lens. The academic performance data support the administrative belief that there is a lost sense of collective efficacy among faculty and staff on both the elementary and middle school sides. On the other hand, the faculty and staff survey data align more to a shared sense of trust and collaboration among teachers that promote academic optimism and collective efficacy within the school under study.

While academic growth was made over a five year span, there was not a significant increase in the academic performance levels in either reading or math for grade eight students. Furthermore, when looking at proficiency data for grade eight students in isolation, less than 20% of grade eight students demonstrated proficiency in reading or math over a five year span. So, while teacher efficacy and collaboration responses ranked high among K-8 teachers, the academic outcomes remain in question as to how collective efficacy and collaboration align with academic performance for grade eight students. The results from my study show that there is more work to be done with respect to instructional collaboration and collective efficacy as they relate to academic performance within the K-8 school model.

It is my recommendation that further discussions within the district under study take place with respect to school leaders and their compatibility with the type of school they are selected to lead. It should be clear to both district and school-based leadership teams as to what specific leadership traits and experiences prove to better serve in the K-8 school model and to place those leaders in the accurate setting as to have the greatest influence on academic performance for grade eight students. Based on the results of my study, I recommend that the district under study reevaluate the process at which leaders

are assigned to a school. The new decision making process should accompany

discussions around how the instructional expertise of the school leader influences and

compliments the cultural and academic performance features within the organization.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

There are a few limitations present within my K-8 case study. First, the school

under study is the only K-8 school model analyzed and represented within the study, so

comparisons and generalizations to other K-8 school models cannot be made.

Additionally, the sample of teacher respondents to the teacher survey is also limited in

number. Out of the forty-five targeted survey respondents, only twelve faculty and staff

members responded and are represented within the findings. While the teacher sample is

marginal, all faculty and staff responses aligned in ranking collective efficacy and

collaboration as high in the sampled K-8 school model.

With regard to the qualitative findings, the number of participants interviewed for

the study is also a smaller sample than projected. While the goal was to interview ten

district leader and principal participants, only six interviews were completed during the

data collection window. In addition, the current school principal within the sampled

school is a first year principal and also new to the K-8 school structure, so the responses

to the interview questions were limited with regard to experience and time within a K-8

school model.

Finally, there is a limitation to the academic performance data presented within

the study. Academic proficiency used for the study only consisted of students who scored

a level 4 or level 5 on the state standards assessment. Students who scored a level 3 on

the state standards assessment were considered satisfactory yet may needed remediation

and were not calculated in the percentage of students considered proficient for the study. While there are limitations present within the study, these limitations also provide areas for future research related to the academic performance within a K-8 school model.

With regard to future implications for further research, the literature on the topic of the K-8 school model continues to have gaps that can be filled. Based on the findings of my study alone, there are focus areas that could use additional inquiry. First, leadership within a K-8 school model related to instructional expertise is an area for further inquiry. Through my study, I found that leadership plays a significant role in the academic success of students within a K-8 school structure. If this is the case, further research could compare K-8 schools and school leaders and their length of leadership within the K-8 school model and the academic success of grade eight students. Additionally, the area of advancing professional development within a K-8 school model could use further research. Determining the forms of professional development planned for faculty and staff must be clearly aligned to the academic goals set by both school and district leaders. A K-8 school leader's skill set must bring into line the complexity of the school structure as it meets the needs of students, faculty and staff alike.

What I have learned from my study is that the K-8 school model is more complex in nature than I once thought. One of the biggest contributing factors to the K-8 school model is the leadership team within it. During the course of research, the theme of leadership continued to appear. When inquiring deeper into leadership within the K-8 school model during interviews, I found that potentially there are two key factors: leadership experience and a leader's vision for *one school* may impact student performance more than the K-8 grade level structure does.

First, the experience level of the school leader is important to consider. As a school leader, determining areas for instructional leadership as well as a defined vision and mission for the school can influence how faculty and staff perceive collective efficacy and collaboration within the K-8 school model. Additionally, the mission and vision for the school drive the types of professional development that will be offered as a means of growing the human capital within the building. While there was not a strategic plan for combined professional development for both the elementary and middle school sides within the school under study, there was a professional development plan in place to provide teachers with learning opportunities that align to their instructional needs.

Future research could examine how school leaders meet the diverse instructional needs of their staff while maintaining a unique *one school* mission and vision found within a K-8 school model. Furthermore, future research could expand upon the findings of my study by analyzing leadership experience and the length of time served within a K-8 school model. While I discovered during my study that the current principal has limited experience with a K-8 school model structure, as well as limited experience being a school principal, the literature is unclear as to what background traits and characteristics make up an effective school leader at a K-8 school model, or how leaders for the K-8 schools are chosen for their position.

Weiss and Baker-Smith (2010) found by analyzing data from an eighth grade cohort transitioning into high school the following year, there was a strong relationship between the type of grade span school attended at the eighth grade level and academic performance during the ninth grade year. While my study did not find conclusive evidence to suggest that the K-8 school model has an influence on academic performance

for grade eight students, my study does add to the existing literature with regard to how the K-8 school model has different instructional and school leadership needs than that of the 6-8 school model. Moreover, the K-8 school model under study did show a positive relationship between shared trust and positive student relationships, along with teachers and staff who have a strong belief that the school community can have a positive influence on academic performance for all students.

My research study has been an enlightening endeavor. Prior to working in a K-8 school model, I was a teacher in the traditional grades 6-8 middle school model for over ten years. During my time as a middle school teacher, year after year I inquired as to why my students were fundamentally behind in both reading and math upon entering the middle school years. I remember pondering day after day how to meet all the needs of adolescent learners without losing instructional time and momentum. It was not until I had the opportunity to work within a K-8 school model that I was able to see the differences between the primary and secondary instructional practices. Not only were there differences in pedagogy, but there were clear social-emotional shifts within the K-8 structure that took place as well.

During my course of research, one of the studies that resonated the most with me was a study conducted by Byrnes and Ruby (2007) which found that established K-8 models benefit from the social and structural areas of smaller school demographics, cohesive instructional and school personnel, increased peer relations and involvement, a decrease in school discipline and social dysfunctions, and increases in school attendance and sense of belonging. While conducting research on the K-8 school model, I was able to discover more attributes that not only make this model unique, but also complicated as

well. Whereas my study did not focus on demographics or the social emotional benefits of a K-8 school model, I did seek to understand cohesive instructional relationships established within the K-8 structure as researched through instructional collective efficacy. Although the academic performance data did not align in my study like it did in prior studies, I was able to link instructional cohesion, also referred to as collective efficacy, among teachers and staff as a prevalent component within the K-8 school model. In conclusion, I hope this study added to the body of research on the factors that truly impact student performance for grade eight students in a K-8 school model.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: K-8 Teacher Survey Questions

Appendix B: K-8 Principal Interview Questions

Appendix C: District Leader Interview Questions

APPENDIX A
Teacher Participant Survey

1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

1. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   The school staff works collectively to promote a positive school culture of trust.
2. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   The K-8 school model promotes student achievement.
3. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   The staff of this school builds a culture of trust with parents.
4. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   Specific K-8 instructional strategies are used to establish a culture of academic emphasis that promotes academic achievement for students.
5. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   Collaboration among instructional grade levels in a K-8 school structure helps to promote student success.
6. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   Academic emphasis is a primary focus for the K-8 school model.
7. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   The K-8 school structure is unique in that it helps to promote trust among staff, students, and parents.
8. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   The school as a whole collaborates to promote a positive climate in the K-8 school setting.
9. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   There are specific academic challenges only found in a K-8 setting.
10. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   There are collaboration and articulation problems in a K-8 setting when considering how to establish academic emphasis for all grade levels.
11. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   School leaders share the collaborated academic vision for the K-8 across all grade levels.
12. <u>1   2   3   4 </u>   Teachers are confident that they can motivate their students to learn.

APPENDIX B
Principal Interview Questions

1. Describe when and how you became principal of the K-8 school model?

2. How long have you served as school principal, within the sampled school?

3. Describe your previous leadership experience prior to becoming principal in the K-8 school model?

4. Prior to the K-8 school, how would you describe your role as a school leader?

5. Was the current school a K-8 school model when you became principal?

6. How would explain the process of becoming principal of the sampled K-8 school model?

7. How would you describe the instructional concept of a K-8 school model prior to becoming principal?

8. How would you define academic optimism?

9. What instructional benefits do you envision with a K-8 school model?

10. What organizational or structural support did you receive as a leader within a K-8 school model?

11. What instructional and cultural goal alignments did you set for the K-8 school when you became the school principal?

12. Based on previous experience outside of a K-8 school model, if you have had any, how would you describe the school vision and culture of a K-8 versus that of a 6-8 middle school model?

13. What academic goals are within a K-8 school model for middle grade students that you believe are different from a 6-8 school model?

14. How would you describe the influence of the K-8 school model on academic performance for grade eight students?

15. What instructional challenges does the K-8 school model face that a 6-8 school model does not?

16. How would you describe your experiences and challenges as a school leader in a K-8model, compared to a school leader in a 6-8 school model?

17. How would you describe the academic benefits students in a K-8 model gain compared to that of students in a 6-8 middle grades school model?

18. How can you describe the instructional alignment for middle grade students, grade eight, in a K-8 school model?

19. How did you recruit and hire middle grade teachers within the K-8 school model?

20. How did the academic performance goals established in the K-8 school model, align to the academic performance of your students over the time you served as principal?

21. How would you determine the academic performance level for grade eight students as the school principal?

22. What challenges have you faced as a K-8 school leader, as it relates to academic performance for grade eight students?

23. How would you describe and explain your school's academic performance, grade eight, in the K-8 school model as to other middle schools in the district?

24. What challenges have your students faced, that you believe, have influenced your school's academic performance for middle grade students?

25. What component(s) of the K-8 school model were most and least effective for you?

26. Looking back at your experiences, what would you change in the K-8 model to increase academic performance for middle grade students?

27. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that we have not yet discussed on this topic?

APPENDIX C
District Leader Interview Questions

1. What is your educational experience in a K-8 school?

2. Have you been a school leader in non-K-8 school models? If so, please describe your past school model educational experience.

3. How would describe the academic performance of students in the K-8 model at which you worked?

4. How would you describe your experiences and challenges as a school leader in a K-8 model compared to a school leader in a 6-8 school model?

5. How would you describe the influence of the K-8 school model on academic performance for grade eight students?

6. What instructional challenges does the K-8 school model face that a 6-8 school model does not?

7. How would you describe collective efficacy in the K-8 school model as it relates to teacher collaboration?

8. How would you define academic optimism?

9. What evidence of collective efficacy on student performance have you experienced within the K-8 school model?

10. What component(s) of the K-8 school model were most and least effective for you?

11. What challenges have students faced, that you believe have influenced your school's academic performance for middle grade students?

12. How would you describe the academic benefits students in a K-8 model gain compared to that of students in a 6-8 middle grades school model?

13. What academic performance trends have you personally experienced in a K-8 school model?

14. What academic and cultural influences do you believe impact student learning within the K-8 school model?

15. As a K-8 school leader, what would you describe as the most influential component of a K-8 school model's structure?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that we have not yet discussed on this topic?