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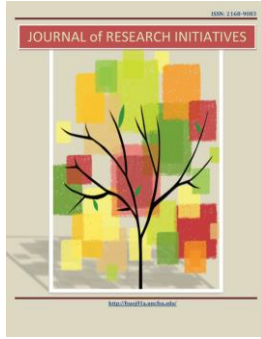
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A Narrative Study on High School Transition Programs and Student Attendance in Rural North Carolina

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A NARRATIVE STUDY ON HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION PROGRAMS AND STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN RURAL NORTH CAROLINA

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Abstract

The move from eighth to ninth grade can be an emotional time. Students experience feelings of isolation and the fear of the unknown. In the transition, grade nine students experience a number of first times that challenge their abilities to manage their time wisely and stay focused. These first times include: (a) taking a class that counts towards graduation, (b) choosing their own classes, (c) less parental supervision, (d) increased peer influence, and (e) other freedoms that high school students enjoy (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

To combat the “freshman problem” districts across the United States work in an effort to build strategies that assist in support of the transition from middle to high school. Grade nine transition programs or “freshman academies” have become a vital role in supporting grade nine students. These programs are small learning communities within large comprehensive high schools wherein grade nine students are separated from the total school population in an effort to create a more intimate setting (Fulco, 2009).

Introduction

High school reform is at the top of the agenda for government, policymakers, and school leaders. The following top the list of priorities for school leaders: (a) students entering grade nine, (b) high schools receiving first-time grade nine students, and (c) curricula to mirror the needs of grade nine-students (Black, 2004). For this reason, it is important for school districts to be proactive in implementing strategies that are tailored specifically for grade nine students. Research-based knowledge on dropout prevention reveals that programs that focus on preparing students while in middle school for the high school transition have proven to be valuable strategies.

Mizelle (2005) described the grade nine transition as treacherous and personally disastrous. Mizelle explained the fundamental functions of the middle school articulation movement using the framework as described in a landmark study by Gruhn and Douglass in 1947. Gruhn and Douglass elaborated on the importance of how transitional programs address specific needs for grade nine students. According to Gruhn and Douglass, effective grade nine transition programs build on strategies that focus on a positive transition from middle school to high school. High schools that direct special energies on the grade nine transition are more likely to lay a solid foundation for both the school and the students. It takes several years to build a solid grade nine transition program. High schools that effectively build successful grade nine transition programs at the same time are able to build a culture of empowerment for their entire student population. An effective grade nine transition program can transform a school from the bottom to the top (Habeeb, 2009).

Attendance is a strong predictor of whether or not a student graduates from high school. Therefore, it becomes essential for school administrators to monitor and develop policy to ensure

that students are present in the classroom. Although, it is a state requirement that high school students maintain a 95% attendance rate, administrators continue to experience challenges with retention and consistency in attendance. There are numerous out the school factors that influence attendance are beyond the school administrators' control; however, there are policies and guidelines that administrators work to enforce that could have an impact on student attendance. Attendance is clearly a part of graduating from high school, but beyond this we show evidence for identifying students for early interventions. Based on school reports, the majority of students who do not graduate from high school can be identified early in the ninth grade using the absentee or standardized test failure rates.

The purpose of this narrative study was to identify the strategies implemented by administrators of ninth grade transition programs in rural North Carolina, as it relates to student attendance. The following research question guided this study: What strategies do rural administrators implement for ninth grade transition programs in relation to student attendance? This study was limited to seven high schools in four rural North Carolina school districts. The study was also limited to eight administrators who were employed in the seven rural high schools.

Freshman Academies

In the past, the traditional high school setting provided little support for incoming grade nine students (Kerr & Legters, 2004). For this reason, schools find it necessary to seek reform for grade nine programs. According to Hertzog and Morgan (1999) grade nine students experience difficulties transitioning into the high school in the areas of: grade point averages, attendance, discipline, social relationships, teacher connections, and social skills of grade nine students. Evidence of this problem identifies grade nine as a pivotal deciding factor for whether a student will graduate from high school. This transitional year is when grade nine students experience a number of "first times." For example, grade nine is the first time some students will change schools or be required to earn a passing grade (Fulk, 2003). It is the first time some students enroll in a class that will count towards graduation. Some students find assignments challenging for the first time. Others find an increase in rigor for core classes required for graduation (Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008).

As a result of a variety of challenges, grade nine students tend to have the lowest grade point averages, the worst attendance, and the most discipline issues (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). This is a national problem across states and school districts in preparing students with 21st-century skills and for global competition. Many researchers and experts recommend freshman transition programs as a foundational strategy for grade nine-student success (Fulco, 2009).

Graduation Rates

Graduation rates and freshman students are at the height of concern for schools. Building a solid foundation for grade nine students is the key to securing solid graduation rates. Educators target grade nine as the "make or break" year for completing high school. High school graduation is based on the number of credits a student has earned within four years. For many grade nine students high school is the first time they experience having to receive a specific score to gain credit for a class (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Grade nine students are often unfamiliar with requirements for graduation and typically have a difficult time with the concept of how credits are earned. Another problem for freshmen is the rigor of academic classes within high school curricula (Smith, et al, 2008). States continue to feel the pressure to compete globally and to raise graduation rates for students. Many districts have state-mandated graduation requirements (Fulk, 2003). In North Carolina and in most other states, grade nine

students are required to complete four credits of math and English, and three credits of science and social studies (NCDPI, 2014).

Allensworth and Easton (2007) created an on-track indicator as a predictor for high school graduation. The on-track indicator identifies students as on track that have earned five full credits and no more than one failing grade within an academic school year. On-track students are 3.5 times more likely to graduate from high school within four years than students off-track students. The study also revealed that students who experience academic failure within the first year of high school are less likely to graduate.

Attendance

The transition from middle to high school is a challenge for students and often finds students faced with the problems of poor grade and attendance. For this reason, it is important that school districts support the needs of first-year high school students to increase their chances for success (NCDPI, 2014). According to the findings, grade nine student experiences include the following: (a) students who are 15 years old or older when they enter high school for the first time are at a higher risk for failure even if their grades improve, (b) course attendance is eight times more predictive in relation to retention than 8th grade scores, and (c) each additional day absent in 9th grade decreases the student's chances for promotion by five percent (Christie & Zinth, 2008).

Neild (2009) examines four theories about the problems surrounding transition to ninth grade. The researcher stated that as grade nine students begin to experience more freedom from their parents' supervision they experience an increase in peer pressure. Second, when transitioning to a new school, grade nine students are forced to break ties with the teachers and friends they had in middle school. Third, many grade nine students are inadequately prepared for high school, and fourth the overall organization of high school is difficult for many grade nine students (Neild, 2009). The strongest of Neild's observations was that grade nine students tended to be inadequately prepared for high school and its organizational structure. The transition to a new school for many meant poor grades, discipline issues, and weak attendance. The study revealed that 30 percent of the students did not have academic or attendance problems in eighth grade, but became so disengaged in ninth grade that they attended school less than 70 percent of the time.

Poiner (2014) focused on the Third-Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG) and revealed that students who are unable to read on grade level by third grade as four times less likely to graduate high school. These numbers are even higher for students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. According to McIntosh and White (2006) there are a number of positives to the concept of freshman transition programs such as, improved student achievement, behavior, and attendance. Their study compared students within a freshman academy to students who had not been enrolled and found that students housed in a separated wing had fewer expulsions and better attendance.

Planning and Scheduling

Srofe (2009) researched scheduling and found that administrators and teachers found it beneficial to create flexible schedules that create extra time for students to master rigorous content. The extra time provided additional opportunities for collaboration and that students appreciated the additional time to complete assignments. Students expressed that they experienced an increase in individualized assistance from their teachers. Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) revealed that academic achievement is increased when teachers show flexibility and ability to connect with students through motivation and encouragement. They

further argued that small learning communities provide flexibility that allows grade nine students to be a part of the high school environment and at the same time have a separate setting where they can feel comfortable with a sense of belonging.

District leaders in Wake County, North Carolina attribute the 94.7% graduation rate at one of their high schools partly to the implementation of SMART (Students Maximizing Achievement Relationships and Time) Lunch. SMART Lunch was created to assist with tutoring, remediation, and enrichment activities. The program provides an extra 30-45 minutes of lunchtime. During this time students eat lunch, receive tutoring, participate in enrichment activities, catch up on assignments, makeup tests, attend career conversations, meet with counselors, and participate in clubs and organization activities. In some schools, SMART Lunch is referred to as Power Lunch, Power Block, or Power (Panther Creek High, 2016).

Administrative Support

Ratliff (2009) noted that administrators and counselors perceived high absence rates as a common problem associated with grade nine students. Teachers who taught in small learning communities felt at a disadvantage because of lack of professional development in the area of freshman transition programs. Ratliff further noted that school administrators and counselors are essential to the success of the implementation of freshman academies and the teaching and learning of freshman students. Finally, with administrators and counselors working together they can help to eliminate some of the behavioral and academic issues associated with the freshman transitional year. Moreover, researchers have noted that grade nine students have the highest number of discipline referrals, lowest grade point averages, lowest attendance, and highest tardy rates (Black, 2004; Reents, 2002; Walsh, 2002).

Methods

The research design for this study was based on a qualitative approach and used purposeful sampling to create an information-rich study. Principals, assistant principals, and teachers from five selected districts in North Carolina public schools participated in telephone interviews. The criteria strategy for the selection was as follows: 1) Schools were selected based upon the implementation of some form of a freshman academy or freshmen orientation program, 2) Principals, assistant principals, and teachers currently worked directly with grade-nine students and 3) High schools in rural North Carolina. The telephone interviews were conducted using NoNotes communication software. NoNotes offers a wide variety of call recording and transcription services that are designed to make it easy and convenient to record and document interview data. The interviews were transcribed in Word documents. A copy of each transcript was submitted to participants for approval.

The basic characteristics of a qualitative study include: natural setting, researcher as the key instrument, use of multiple forms of data, inductive and deductive data analysis, participant explanations, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic accounts (Creswell, 2014). The researcher typically collects data in the field where the participant experiences the problem. This may include the researcher visiting with the participants to conduct face-to-face interviews. The data is organized, gathered, and categorized by the researcher. A major component of qualitative research is participant's meaning; this means that it is important for the researcher to focus on what the participant brings to the study (Creswell, 2014). Also, qualitative research involves holistic accountability of a study and requires that the researcher reveals different perspectives and identifies a variety of factors to a study.

The interview protocol was designed for the administrators to obtain a rich data collection from each interview. The interviews were conducted over the telephone. Participants

were reminded that the study was strictly voluntary and that they could refuse to participate at any time during the interview. Participants were informed prior to the interviews that their responses were being recorded. The interviews were conducted via telephone using NoNotes recording/transcribing software. The length of interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Each participant answered questions about strategies they implemented within their freshman transitional programs in relation to student attendance. NoNotes software was used to record and notate the changes. The necessary corrections and edits were made before beginning the data analysis to categorize the responses into recurring patterns and themes.

The narrative data from the interviews were transcribed by NoNotes. Through analyzing the narrative responses of each interview, the data were categorized and coded into recurring themes. The recurring themes identified the strategies that related to student attendance within freshman transition programs.

Results

Administrators were asked to identify strategies from within their grade nine transitional programs that they felt improved student attendance. The recurring themes that emerged in reference to attendance were as follows: (a) fostering collaboration among stakeholders. (b) communicating school and policy expectations. (c) implementing intervention programs.

Fostering Collaboration among Stakeholders

Developing mentoring programs of grade nine students was a steady recurring theme. Administrators shared that grade nine students were mentored on a continuous base by teachers, counselors, administrators, and upperclassman. Mentoring focused on the relationship between academics and attendance. Social workers, student advocates, and attendance clerks also played vital roles in maintaining attendance policies, sending letters, and making phone calls to parents. Administrators shared the importance of collaboration between the middle schools and high schools. Especially, concerning red flags with discipline issues. This supports the Maryland Department of Education 2015 report that continuous collaboration between the middle and high schools promotes a healthy transition (Kerr, 2002).

Administrator A-A1 stated:

Our Career Development Coordinator and Student Advocate have a system for informing parents of student attendance status. Also, I think that one of the things that it helps is giving the students a sense of belonging. They want to be in school. They do not want to miss. They are really nervous at the very beginning and one of the things that we have incorporated into our camp is information on attendance and how it works. I think team building, relationship building, and just getting acquainted with some of the staff and upperclassmen is the key. I think this in itself has been a catalyst to helping our students to feel more comfortable and accepted in our school. We try to help them find a place where they belong, so I think that this in itself helped with attendance.

Administrator B-A2:

Our students are exposed to the senior leaders in the summer. The senior leaders are trained to drive home the importance of being present. The senior students talk to grade nine students about their experiences with tardiness and absences. They talk about how to avoid missing class and the consequences if they do miss. So, I believe it is the relationships with other students that help. Not just teachers talking to them but students their own age. It gives them a role model and that is where the relationship starts. I think that is one of our strongest strengths. When we find that students have high numbers with tardiness or absences we try to talk with them and find out what the problem

is. Guidance also keeps an eye on attendance. They are good about letting us [administration and teachers] know if a student has extenuating circumstances.

Communicating School and Policy Expectations

Administrators explained that attendance and structure went hand in hand. Administrators referred to Board of Education or district policy when asked about attendance. They felt written policies helped students to understand the seriousness of attendance. High schools are expected to meet a 95% attendance rate. Teachers explained the necessity to be firm and strict with grade nine students about attendance policies to decrease dropout and failure rates. This supports Christie & Zinth's (2008) study that each additional day absent in 9th grade decreases the students' chances for promotion by 5%.

One administrator mentioned:

Our district sets our system and it is pretty tight. The students only get seven absences per six weeks and that is excused or unexcused. The students have to work hard not to go over the seven. Our social worker is very active about going to homes for visits. When teachers bring it to our attention that there are students missing a lot of days, we start calling the home to identify the problem. If we cannot get parents on the phone that is when we begin the home visit process. Being focused on attendance is our top priority and we run weekly attendance reports.

Administrator C-A3:

We have a Board of Education policy in our district that governs student attendance. Students cannot get credit for a class if they have not attended for 90 percent of the term. Parking passes are taken from students who go over the limit if they drive to school. This is really effective because students take pride in being able to drive to school. We cannot do this with most of our grade nine until the second semester; some of them are able to drive.

Implementing Intervention Programs

Administrators shared how the role of teachers, guidance counselors, and others played a part in attendance. Each school had a plan to provide students and parents notice of attendance policies and student daily attendance. Parents were encouraged by administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers to sign up for online monitoring through Home Base (PowerSchool). Administrators shared that holding to high expectations about attendance provided positive reputations in the community about strict policies concerning attendance. Administrators expressed that students took the threats of not receiving credit for classes seriously. Grade nine students are informed of their expectation to graduate within four years. Administrators explained that intervention programs were tailored to meet a variety of needs. This supports Karcher's (2008) findings that suggest that there is an "additive" effect when mentoring is combined with other interventions.

Administrator A-A1:

As an intervention, so that students will not fail classes once they hit seven days without real extensive circumstances like medical issues or something very severe, they would have to complete a portfolio for each class that they had excessive absences.

Another administrator replied:

We have a reputation in the community for having high expectations for attendance. So giving students the criteria early and sticking to policies have been effective. We let students know that courses passed and graduation dates go hand-in-hand. See, even if a student passes a class and misses too many days of class they are in serious jeopardy for

not getting any credit for that class and receiving the FF (Failure). Of course, those students who have very high grades are likely to pass the class but they still may have to jump through hoops to get the credit. We are letting students know that even if they are an excellent student, they are not allowed to push the envelope when it comes to attendance. The policy is the policy. Yes, I think the important part is cultivating and fostering a reputation where students take notice to the attendance policy.

Discussion and Implications

The eight administrators shared their personal experiences in relation to strategies they implemented to support ninth grade transition programs in the area of student attendance. The data will help district and school administrators identify strategies to support grade nine students in the transition from middle to high school. The administrators shared their experiences freely on the subject of grade nine-transition programs and the strategies they implemented to support grade nine students. The following recurring themes emerged: (a) implementing intervention programs, (b) communicating school and policy expectations, and (c) fostering parental involvement.

They shared that student mentoring was the key factor to the success of the freshman transition. The administrators revealed that mentoring was a contributing factor to the success of grade nine daily attendance. Student leaders, teachers, guidance counselors, and community members were used to mentor grade nine students during summer orientation camps before the start of a school year and throughout the school year. Strong emphases were placed on programs of study, grade point averages, commitment to graduate, building positive relationships. Valuable opportunities for relationship building occurred between grade nine students and mentors during the grade nine orientation camps, intervention programs, and teaming time.

Implementing Intervention Programs

The administrators explained that intervention programs were tailored to meet a variety of needs. The findings from this study revealed that administrators utilized such intervention programs to customize time for tutoring, remediation, mentoring, club meetings, intramural sports, online classes, workshops, and make-up time for those students with excessive absences and who were behind. Intervention programs were needs based and customized to assist students in mastering core content concepts. The administrators shared that intervention created opportunities for personalized learning to remediate and accommodate individualized student needs. Intervention time was also used for make-up work, test corrections, attendance, and attending club meetings. This strategy is congruent with a 2011 study of summer bridge programs by Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2011) who revealed the need for additional interventions to increase the academic demands of grade nine students.

Communicating School and Policy Expectations

Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory contends that behavior is largely regulated through cognitive processes and that people are neither driven by inner forces nor by controlled environments but by their own motivation and behavior within a network of reciprocally interacting influences. The administrators in this study created systematic plans for negative behaviors and consequences were clearly defined; and the main objectives were for students to manage their own behaviors and follow policies and procedures.

This study found that attendance was essential to students' academic success and the administrators acknowledged that ninth graders could actually fail a course due to attendance; therefore, attendance and academics was taken seriously. The findings from this study are

congruent to the findings from a study by the Southern Regional Education Board (2002) that found a direct relationship between poor attendance and academic achievement. Administrators were strict early on about attendance.

Fostering Parental Involvement

Regarding parental involvement, administrators found that an important strategy to parental outreach was to provide information, engagement, and communication to parents, and notify them regularly about the services offered by the school and encourage parents to participate in school-related activities. When schools openly accepted and invited parents into the school environment it created a welcoming climate for parents and decreased student-related problems (Cooper, 1999; Mizelle, 2005; Neild, 2009). To reinforce helping grade nine students make the transition from middle to high school the majority of the schools included parents in grade nine summer orientation camp. In an effort to combat the problem of excessive behavior referrals, the administrators in the study developed strategies early to deter excessive discipline referrals among grade nine students by informing both students and parents of the policies, procedures, and expectations. The findings showed a vast improvement over a period of time by using this early intervention strategy.

Strategy for Improving Student Attendance

Administrators implemented strategies to monitor attendance through various intervention initiatives, such as mentoring, policy awareness, and student advocacy. The strategies implemented by these administrators are similar to the suggested strategies discovered in 2009 by McBrady and Williamson that small school models positively impacted student attendance and academic achievement. They further explained that it was important to stakeholders that students had positive attendance records early in their academic careers.

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