

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AT A FRESHMAN  
ACADEMY

by

La'Keisha D. Newsome

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama. The research questions focused on school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate. Hirschi’s social bonding theory provided a framework to understand the association between socialization and social learning by focusing on an individual’s bond to social institutions. Social bond has an impact on perception, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. Data collection included student interviews, a school connectedness survey, and focus group interviews of ninth grade students. Data were collected from 12 participants using individual interviews, a school connectedness survey, and focus group interviews. Data were analyzed to identify the following themes that contributed to the understanding of the research topic: (a) students’ perceptions of attachment, (b) students’ perceptions of commitment, (c) students’ perceptions of involvement, and (d) students’ perceptions of belief. The theoretical and empirical findings confirmed the significant impact that school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate had on students’ perceptions of school connectedness.

*Keywords:* connectedness, freshman academy, school climate, school leadership, social bond theory, teacher–student relationships.

### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my late grandmother, Bertha Mae Peterman. She transitioned to heaven on the first day of my dissertation class. Although feisty, she was the glue that held our family together. I miss her dearly, but I know that she is rejoicing in the presence of Jesus and I will see her again.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

School Connectedness Survey (SCS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Scholars have noted the high school dropout rate has plagued the United States for several years and many students are entering high school unprepared for the change and intensity of the new environment (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2011). Furthermore, students are entering high school, but are failing to make it past ninth grade. For example, Cohen, Pickeral, and McCloskey (2009) stated, “In high schools with large populations, up to 40% of students drop out after ninth grade” (p. 178). In addition, McCullumore and Sparapani (2010) reported that the ninth grade is usually the largest cohort because it is composed of current and repeating ninth graders. Therefore, due to the number of students dropping out of school, immediate action from the education community is required.

The transitional phase from middle school to high school has a significant impact on student connectedness. The lack of connectedness can affect student engagement and academic success and studies have indicated that lack of connectedness is associated with dropping out of school (Langenkamp, 2010; Peguero, Ovink, & Li, 2016).

This chapter includes explanation as to why this study was conducted and how the data can be used by the education community in identifying immediate reforms to improve educational outcomes for students in high school. In addition, the chapter topics encompass background information, situation to self, problem statement, and significance of the study, which served as an exploration of students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama.

Research is limited in areas that target school connectedness within a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. Limited qualitative research exists that targets school

leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate, all of which influence school connectedness. Lack of school connectedness may result in diminished meaning and purpose in school, increase delinquent behavior, and dropping out of school. This study highlighted awareness of school connectedness, especially in ninth grade, and the educational community as it attempted to provide necessary support to students during times of transition.

## **Background**

### **Historical**

Considerable research has been conducted that targeted school connectedness and its relation to student success. The focus of previous research was on school connectedness and the impact it had on students who drop out of school, relationships between students and adults in the school, and school climate (Jordan, Kostandi, & Mykerezi, 2012; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Scribner & Bradley-Levin, 2010; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). These studies also were focused on mental health and delinquent behaviors (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2014; Oldfield, Humphrey, & Hebron, 2016). In addition, research suggests that school connectedness serves as a protective factor across several domains, such as mental, social, and emotional fields (Gentle & Genitty, 2009; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013). One of the areas that has not been thoroughly researched is the impact of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate on school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus.

Historically, having a high school diploma was not a requirement to live a comfortable and productive life; however, that is no longer the case in today’s society. Montgomery and Hirth (2011) stated, “While the dropout rates in the United States have actually decreased over the course of the past century, the ramifications of not completing high school is more significant



than any other time in history” (p. 251). Originally, high schools were strategically designed to filter workers from scholars (Warren, Fazekas, Rennie-Hill, Fancsali, & Jaffe-Walters, 2011). Students entered high school, but only a few could meet conditions to graduate. Students who completed high school furthered their studies, while others resorted to labor in fields and factories. As society transitioned from rural towns and cities and livelihood moved from farming and factories to businesses, education became a necessity. According to Rumberger (2011), data obtained through research indicated,

The high school graduation rate is lower than the federal government reports, it is lower today than it was 40 years ago, and disparities in graduation rates among racial and ethnic minorities have not improved in the last 30 years. (p. 3)

Understanding the strain created by the effects of dropouts on society and the economy, a movement began to reduce the high school dropout rates across the nation (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

## **Social**

Reducing the number of high school dropouts has become a national policy in education at local, federal, and national levels. According to Rumberger (2011), since 1988 the federal government has spent more than \$300 million on research dedicated to dropout prevention. Research has identified several faulty areas in relation to the high school framework, including the transition from middle school to high school, the high school structure, relationships with adults in the school, and school connectedness (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Langenkamp, 2010; McFarlane, 2010). While great measures have been taken to address the issues that impact the success of high school students, school connectedness remains an area of concern (Oscar & Bamidele, 2015).

*School connectedness* is a term used to refer to students' belief that adults in the school are concerned about their learning and about them as individuals (Bolland et al., 2016; Han, Kim, & Ma, 2015; Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012). School connectedness and positive school relationships have the potential to promote healthy development and protect youth from negative psychosocial outcomes (Joyce, 2015). There is an obvious push for school connectedness in lower grades; however, it is important across all grade levels. School connectedness is most important during students' adolescent years as its negative effects are evidenced in their behavior and perceptions toward school (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). According to Eman (2013), difficulties experienced by ninth graders included "decreases in grade point average, attendance, feelings of connectedness, and co-curricular participation and increases in anxiety concerning school procedures and older students, social difficulties and changes in relationships with parents" (p. 72). These difficulties contributed to a negative perception of school connectedness in ninth graders. These students are likely to drop out of high school because school has no meaning or value (Booth & Gerard, 2012; Furlong, Sharkey, Quirk, & Dowdy, 2011).

### **Theoretical**

Based on Hirschi's (2009) social bond theory, the perception of school connectedness was key in student engagement, motivation, academic success, and overall well-being. School leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate are instrumental in creating an environment that nurtures and promotes school connectedness (Joyce, 2015; Sampsa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). The perception of school connectedness resides in the elements of social bond theory, which includes the elements of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Bryan et al., 2012; Hirschi, 1969; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015). Each element represents a

separate phase or stage of social bond theory, yet each phase builds upon the previous and works collectively to create a perception of connectedness (Hirschi, 1969; Peguero et al., 2016). For example, students who display behaviors that are indicative of the committed phase have already established a foundation in the attachment phase.

### **Situation to Self**

I have served in education for approximately 15 years, working over a decade in classrooms as a special education teacher and an intervention teacher. I have served in an administrative capacity for 5 years, two of which have been as the assistant principal for Hope Academy. Although apart from the Hope Middle School, Hope Academy was also a school within itself. During my time as the assistant principal, I was privy to all student achievement. Each year, students completed their freshman year with required credits to transition on to Hope High School.

As an assistant principal at Hope Academy, my top priority was student achievement, along with understanding the importance of relationships and creating a climate of high expectations for both students and teachers. With this set as my priority, the necessary steps were taken to connect with students at Hope Academy. I, along with teachers and staff, consistently collaborated to discuss ways to meet the emotional and academic needs of our students. These discussions led to identifying students who faced academic, emotional, or social barriers. These students were accommodated with support to decrease and/or eliminate the barriers. Due to this intervention, students were successful academically, and truancy levels were low as compared to years prior without these improvements.

While I believe that all students do not learn at the same pace, they all have the ability to experience academic success and increase their skills and knowledge base. School

connectedness is a vital component in the learning process; however, school connectedness is not acknowledged as a contributing factor or even implemented into innovative programs and strategies. School connectedness is a basic concept that can have a tremendous impact on the lives of students as well as their academic outcomes, and educators must understand the power of relationship while maintaining a consistent position of awareness to teach and meet the needs of students. An investment of commitment, dedication, and perseverance provides students with the support needed for academic success.

This study was guided by a postpositivism philosophy. My philosophical assumptions allowed me to identify my personal beliefs and biases while using them to guide the study (Creswell, 2014). This identification allowed me to bracket my opinions and beliefs to hear the voices of the participants. Postpositivists believe that “reality exists and is observable, stable, and measurable” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, knowledge was acquired through the application of research methods (Creswell, 2014). The study was guided by the constructivist–interpretive view and it allowed me to use descriptive and categorical aggregation from feedback obtained from the participants of the study. According to Creswell (2014), in an attempt to understand the setting of the participants and to interpret the findings, researchers rely heavily on participants’ views of situations. My desire was to understand the phenomenon as it was experienced by the students of the ninth-grade academy and build upon Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory. Using Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory as the theoretical lens, I sought to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama.

## **Problem Statement**

The high school dropout crisis is rooted in the lack of success a student has during his or her freshman year of high school. The problem of the study was how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama. According to Warren et al. (2011), dropout rates occur mainly during a student’s ninth grade year. There is no literature that addresses the relationship between school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school leadership and school connectedness. Romero (2015) found that students felt disconnected from their learning environment and have deemed this as a reason for leaving school. Several reasons were given in the literature that showed the relationship between the lack of connectedness and high school dropout rates (Joyce, 2015; Lester, Waters, & Cross, 2013; Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011). School connectedness is an important foundation for the success of ninth grade students. However, the transition into high school limits the opportunity for school connectedness (Jung, 2016; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015; Romero, 2015). Negative feelings and behaviors accompany the lack of connectedness. Suldo and Shaunessy-Dedrick (2013) found that for students who were disconnected, school lost its value and meaning, and student motivation and student engagement decreased. Freshman academies were designed to create environments where ninth grade students are supported during the ninth grade transition while cultivating opportunities for the establishment of school connectedness (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Jung, 2016).

Freshman academies provide students with supportive services atypical of traditional high school settings. These academies are small learning communities within large, comprehensive high schools that isolate ninth graders and establish a more intimate learning

program (Jung, 2016). In freshman academies, students are provided with a smaller, nurturing learning environment during a time when they are the most vulnerable (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). The smaller learning environments contribute to school connectedness by providing teachers and students with opportunities to establish meaningful relationships and create a positive school climate where students can thrive academically (Conner, Miles, & Pope, 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama. School connectedness was defined as “the extent to which students feel accepted, included, and close to others in the school and social environment” (Joyce, 2015, p. 185). The theory guiding this study was Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory as it targets the association between social bond theory and school connectedness.

School connectedness has a significant impact on high school dropout rates. The lack of school connectedness is a reason why students fail to successfully complete high school. Students often experience a lack of connectedness in ninth grade and it impacts their academic success (Chung-Do et al., 2013). The mission of freshman academies is to provide students with safe and secure learning environments (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). The impact of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate on school connectedness was the focus of the current study.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study conducted to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama.

### **Research Question 1**

How does school leadership impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?

This research question was used to explore the impact of leadership on school connectedness. School leadership has a significant impact on student connectedness. School leaders have influence in creating a school culture that is conducive to producing students who are “independent, self-sufficient and self-reliant” (Bloom & Owens, 2011, p. 210). According to McFarlane (2010), the climate of the school (e.g., the perception, values, and attitude) is directly and indirectly impacted by school leadership. Previous research has identified an association between school leadership and student learning (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). School leaders have the power to determine the learning quality and the quality of instruction as well as the learning experiences of the student (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

### **Research Question 2**

How do teacher–student relationships impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?

This question was focused on the impact teacher–student relationships had on school connectedness. Teacher–student relationships are foundational in learning and have an impact

on school connectedness. Bonds between teacher and students decrease as students advance in grade and become students in classrooms that have larger student-to-teacher ratios. Teachers are key in promoting academic growth through relationships (Phillippo & Stone, 2013). According to Hughes (2011), students perceive teacher–student relationships as high levels of support and low levels of conflict. It is imperative that teachers understand that emerging adolescents have unique needs at different adolescent stages (Gehlback, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012). Students benefit from teachers who invest in student achievement through devoting and energy to their engagement (Corso, Bundick, Quaglia, & Haywood, 2013). These students tend to have higher levels of academic performance (Phillippo & Stone, 2013).

### **Research Question 3**

How does school climate impact students' perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?

This question served to examine the impact of school climate on school connectedness. School climate is the learning atmosphere of a school and impacts school connectedness. Climate determined student ability to connect with adults in the school, instruction, achievement, and peers (Rich & Schachter, 2012). School climate influenced school culture and student perception. School leaders and teachers are responsible for creating a school climate that is responsive to the learning and emotional needs of students (Reyes et al., 2012). Students' perceptions of school climate decrease as they progress through middle school and on to high school (White et al., 2014). It is vital that school leaders create a school climate with clear academic and behavior expectations (Gietz & McIntosh, 2014).



## **Significance of the Study**

### **Theoretical**

This study was built upon and enhanced by an understanding of the social bond theory, the elements of the theory, and its association to the perception of school connectedness (Hirschi, 1969; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012; Peguero et al., 2016; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015). This current study provided insight into the experiences of ninth grade students attending a freshman academy on a middle school campus, along with broadening the spectrum of understanding school connectedness by expanding to the areas of school leadership, teacher–student relationships and school climate. Additionally, the results of the study produced qualitative data that described the impact of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate on the perception of school connectedness.

### **Empirical**

The empirical significance of this study exists in its support of the theoretical implications of Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory and the relationship to the perception of school connectedness (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Furlong et al., 2011). This study supports other research that identified and confirmed the connection between social bonds and student behaviors (Bao, Haas, Chen, & Pi, 2012; Donner, Maskaly, & Fridell, 2016; Oscar & Bamidale, 2015). Also, this study supports other researchers that have reported on the impact of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate on school connectedness (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Nir & Hameiri, 2014; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; White, La Salle, Ashby, & Meyers, 2014). Overall, this study represents an attempt to fill the gap in the literature regarding the impact school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate has on students’

perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014; Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011).

### **Practical**

Practical implications from the study include providing reliable data that targeted increasing student success by concentrating on students' perception of school connectedness (Bolland et al., 2016; Joyce, 2015; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Ward, Boman, & Jones, 2012). The findings of the study provide helpful information to the education community seeking to provide support to students who are in danger of failing and dropping out of school (Jacobson, 2011; Neild, 2009). Another practical implication is that the findings may also bring awareness to the key roles adults play in creating and promoting positive school climates (Phillippo & Stone, 2013; Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, & Meyers, 2013). Finally, the results of the study will serve to focus areas of professional development in school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate (Liu et al., 2016; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015).

### **Definitions**

The following terms have been identified for the purpose of this research:

1. *Freshman Academy*—Freshman academies are small learning communities that support freshman transition as well as provide the student with the skills needed to complete high school. Freshman academies can be on a school campus or an independent facility. These academies provide adolescent students with the attention and support needed to get through the transition period without the peer pressure from older students found in traditional high school settings (Styron & Peasant, 2010).

2. *School Climate*—School climate has been recognized as the standards, expectations, and policies of the school that has been implemented by stakeholders. The multidimensional construct of school climate includes organizational, instructional, and interpersonal dimensions (White et al., 2014).
3. *School Connectedness*—Adolescent feeling of belongingness; the sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others in the new setting (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Joyce (2015) defined school connectedness as “the extent to which students feel accepted included and close to others in the school and social environment” (p. 185).
4. *School Leadership*—School leadership, no longer refers only to officially designated positions. Instead, it has become a collective construct distributed among teachers and support staff through the cultivation of relationship and networks (Jacobson, 2011).
5. *Social Bond Theory*—An individual’s bonds to social institutions, such as family, friends, religion, schools, and the like, influence how that individual will behave (Peguero et al., 2016).
6. *Student Dropout Rate*—The dropout rate is measured as students enter the ninth grade. If students fail to graduate from high school, they are considered a high school dropout (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).
7. *Teacher–Student Relationship*—The teacher–student relationship is the trust established between a student and teacher. The teacher provides academic and social-emotional support to students in assigned mentoring relationships that often span multiple years (Phillippo & Stone, 2013).

8. *Transition*—School transitions are normative experiences typically occurring when students enter elementary school, middle school or junior high, and high school (Benner & Graham, 2009).

### **Summary**

This chapter included description of the influences of school connectedness of students attending a freshman academy. School connectedness is associated with high school success. Research is limited in areas that target school connectedness of a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. There is also limited qualitative research that targets school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate, all of which encourage school connectedness. Lack of school connectedness may result in diminished meaning and purpose in school, increase delinquent behavior, and dropping out of school. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama. This study was significant because it brought awareness to the significance of school connectedness, especially in ninth grade, to the educational community as it attempts to provide necessary support to students during a time of transition.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This chapter includes discussion of the guiding theoretical framework, social bond theory, and how social bond theory emphasizes the connection between relationships and behavior. Through the use of the social bond theory, the study encompassed students' perceptions of school connectedness of a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. This chapter also addresses several dynamics that impacted school connectedness including school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate.

The purpose of this chapter is also to provide a theoretical framework for the study and review of the relevant literature about school connectedness and student perceptions of school connectedness. Using Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory as a theoretical framework helped address the relationship between student social bonds and delinquent behaviors. The relevant literature provided evidence supporting the association between school connectedness and student success. Students' perspectives were examined to determine the impact of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate had on school connectedness.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The social bond theory, developed by American criminologist Travis Hirschi, has been used in research to associate student social bonds, or the lack thereof, with delinquent behaviors. In the 1960s, the social bond theory was developed to determine the association between social bond and delinquent behavior in juveniles (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory provided a framework to aid in understanding socialization and social learning by identifying a student's social bonds within an institution (Peguero et al., 2016). The social bond theory has been used in school settings to determine the association between social bond and delinquent

behavior of students. There are several words that have been used to describe school bonding, such as “attachment to school, school connectedness, student engagement, and school belonging” that have all been used interchangeably to describe the connections youth have with their schools and various parts of their academic lives (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015, p. 247).

Students spend a significant amount of their day in a school setting; their perception of school is created through their experience. According to Niehaus, Irvin, and Rogelberg (2016), “School is the primary environmental context for youth and their learning, development of positive relationships at school and feeling connected to school are critical for promoting positive academic outcomes” (p. 55). Establishment of positive school bonds have been associated with academic success (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). However, the lack of connectedness is detrimental to student success; weak bonds have a negative impact on student academic progress (Peguero et al., 2016). Previous research findings indicate that school completion is heavily connected to positive teacher–student relationships (Atkins et al., 2014). According to other research, there is a positive association between school bonding and student success (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015). Adult behavior and interaction, especially in the learning environment, can alter the dynamics in the lives of students (Conner et al., 2014). Hirshi’s (2009) conceptualization of school bonding includes four components: (a) attachment, (b) commitment, (c) involvement, and (d) belief. These components target more specific areas such as attachment to school, attachment to teachers and school personnel, school commitment, and school involvement, all of which are indicative of student success (Bryan et al., 2012; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015).

Social bond theory has been used in addressing social problems of students who choose to participate in deviant behaviors. Deviant behaviors have been identified as behaviors which

violate institutionalized expectations (Hirschi, 1969). To explain deviant behavior among juveniles, the social bond theory was examined to determine the influence of social bond. The core of social bond theory targets the association between school connectedness, student social bonds, and student decision making as related to behavior (Han et al., 2015). Strong bonds with family, school, friends, are more likely to prevent students from initiating or participating in antisocial behaviors (Donner et al., 2016).

Social bonds are important in the lives of developing adolescents as they guide the trajectory of development. It is human nature to want to belong, to be a part of something bigger than one's self. Humans strive for meaning and purpose and a lack of meaning and purpose leads to a disconnection which, in turn, leads to a life of delinquent behavior (Tillery et al., 2013). Research indicates that people become criminals when their bond to society is weakened (Donner et al., 2016). The same theory is applicable in a school setting. Other research indicates that students who lacked connectedness were more likely to have a high number of absences, higher behavior infractions, and lower grades when compared to peers who are connected to their schools (Oscar & Bamidele, 2015).

The four elements of social bond theory—attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief—serve as the foundational components of the theory. The four elements address bonding and its importance in preventing students from choosing to participate in deviant behaviors (Han et al., 2015). These components inspire school connectedness. Students who identify with social bond theory elements have stronger bonds compared to students who do not (Donner et al., 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the elements of Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory.



*Figure 1.* Elements of social bond theory.

Attachment is the first element, and according to some researchers, the most important of the four elements. According to research, the element attachment is most important during the time of adolescent development as it influences the “biological, emotional, cognitive, and social transition” (Han et al., 2015, p. 342). Research indicates that attachment has a positive association with student connectedness (Millings et al., 2012). Other research suggests that the attachment bonds individuals have with other people or institutions, such as schools and the individuals associated with those institutions, are major influencers over perceptions and behaviors (Barfield-Cottledge, 2015; Han et al., 2015). These bonds serve as a protective factor and deter students from participating in delinquent behaviors. Opinions and perspectives of others shapes one’s behavior in the attachment phase. These students will typically refrain from getting involved in behaviors that are not accepted by the norm for fear of disappointment (Donner et al., 2016).



Commitment is the second element in social bond theory, and it is motivated by attachment. The research defines commitment as the time and energy individuals invest in activities and internalization of social and institutional norms (Bao et al., 2012). Students who are committed to school are less likely to act against the rules of the institution (Han, Kim, & Lee, 2016). Students who are dedicated to school are more than likely to refrain from risky behaviors that are not aligned with the values of the school (Donner et al., 2016). Students' commitment to school also influences their personal goals; they are more likely to be academically successful than are those with a lack of commitment (Horstkötter, 2014).

The third element in social bond theory is involvement. Students who are committed are also more likely to be involved in school and school-related activities (Bao et al., 2012; Han et al., 2015). Involvement was what Hirschi (2009) referred to as “engrossment in conventional activities” (p. 22). School-related activities such as athletics, recreation, performing arts, religious activities, and community services deter students from becoming involved in delinquent and criminal behaviors (Han et al., 2015). According to research, one reason for the deterrence is that students do not have the available time; they are too busy to participate in delinquent activities (Donner et al., 2015). Research also suggests that students who participate in school activities tend to have a stronger connection with peers and peer groups (Donner et al., 2015). Involvement in activities allows students to build bonds with not only peers, but also with adults in the school. Research indicates that interaction between students and adults at the school encourages school connection, establishes mutual trust, and allows students to receive needed academic and emotional support (Han et al., 2015). The stronger the connections, the more involved students are in different events and activities.

The fourth element is belief; a shared cultural belief system. Belief is defined as students' acceptance of societal rules, values and regulations (Donner et al., 2016; Han et al., 2015). Students whose beliefs of school norms, such as rules, mission, and vision, are likely to align their behaviors and support with the guidelines and are less likely to make a practice of deviating from them (Ward, Boman, & Jones, 2012). School infractions occur when students have a weak belief system. Belief correlates with meaning and purpose (Donner et al., 2016). The lack of meaning and purpose can have a negative impact on belief.

Social bond theory, although used to gain an understanding of delinquent behaviors of students as a part of the criminal system, provides valuable meaning in understanding the importance of connectedness in a school setting. Attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief are all elements that are present in the establishment of school connectedness. School connectedness is a predictor of school success, and it also serves as a protective factor in engaging in negative behaviors (Donner et al., 2016; Furlong et al., 2011). Schools can use this valuable information to apply to school settings to create learning environments that will foster the positive development of the whole student. Formation of bonds and support from school leaders, teachers, and peers will guide them as they attempt to navigate through the adolescent developmental phase (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015). Adolescence is a vulnerable time in the lives of students and providing students with a strong emotional and academic foundation will increase the likelihood of them reaching their goals (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010).

Implementation of freshman academies is a reform method implemented to increase the graduation rate among high school students. Ninth grade is a significant and influential year on the academic journey. According to research, high truancy rate, high behavior infractions, and low grades are more common among the freshman class compared to upperclassmen (Ellerbrock

& Keifer, 2010; Eman, 2013; McCullumore & Sparapani, 2010). Research has identified an interruption in the establishment of bonds during the transition from middle school to high school (Langenkamp, 2010; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013). Many schools fail to recognize or even address this small but significant factor. Students' ability to connect and achievement of academic success has been associated with the connections with principals and teachers. The social bond theory emphasizes the importance of the establishment of social bonds with principals, teachers, and school climate.

### **Related Literature**

#### **School Connectedness**

According to Oscar and Bamidele (2015), school success is affected by school connectedness. School connectedness is defined as “the feeling that the learning climate is safe and that teachers have a genuine concern for students as individuals” (Lapan, Wells, Petersen, & McCann, 2014, p. 304). An additional definition of school connectedness is “the sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the setting” (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 381). According to research, school connectedness is a necessary element in academic achievement and is a defining influence in adolescent development (Furlong et al., 2011). Students who have a high perception of connectedness to their school have an increased probability of graduating from high school, as compared to students who had a low perception of school connectedness (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). Also, students who have a sense of belonging are more engaged in school extracurricular activities, express a greater commitment to school, and experience positive relationships with teachers (Nasir et al., 2011; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011).

Previous research indicates that students contribute positive school experience and academic success to school connectedness (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). Additional research suggests that school had a tremendous influence, both academically and socially, in the lives of students (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Students who feel connected to their learning environment are more likely to be engaged in school and involved in extracurricular activities (Joyce, 2015). Additionally, Lester et al. (2013) found that students who have a sense of belonging participate in extracurricular activities and are happy, have increased self-esteem, have improved coping skills, have social supports, and experience reduced loneliness. It is essential that schools understand the power of school connectedness and identify ways to create learning environments that nurture student development (Atkins et al., 2014). Previous studies have identified dynamics that contribute to school connectedness, including “adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education, and school environment to impact students’ ability to connect with their school, therefore making them areas of importance when creating positive learning climate to support student success” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009, p. 8).

**Attachment.** The healthy transition of social-emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical development in adolescence is found in the social bond theory (Bryan et al., 2012). The literature reveals that adolescent development—the time between childhood and adulthood—is a period of time when social bonds are critical to healthy development (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Therefore, creating healthy bonds is an important part of adolescent development. The foundation of social theory is based on student attachment to the school and school personnel as well as students’ commitment to the school (Bryan et al., 2012). School connectedness is a fundamental principle found in the elements of Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory and is

focused on the influence bonds have on behavior. Students' perceptions of attachment are solely dependent upon their interaction with and concerns of the adults in their school (Atkins et al., 2014).

Teacher–student relationships directly affect the perception of school connectedness. According to Furlong et al. (2011), school connectedness is established through attachment to teachers and social institutions. Relationships between children and parents or parent-like figures are important during early developmental stages, as they establish the foundation for future relationship formations (Furlong et al., 2011). High school students have reported the decline in relationships with teachers (De Wit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011). In some cases, high school teachers view ninth graders as grown-ups and hold them responsible for decisions regarding their schooling, providing them with little to no support (Langenkamp, 2010). Teachers are extremely valuable; they spend most of their time with students, which provides the opportunity for identifying and addressing academic and emotional needs (Duke & Jacobson, 2011). Teachers also have the power to serve as a liaison in addressing at-risk and negative behaviors (Scribner & Bradley-Levin, 2010). Also, teacher–student relationships promote healthy student development and protect youth from negative psychosocial outcomes (Joyce, 2015). Nasir et al. (2011) identified a positive relationship between teacher bonding and student performance, in which there was an identifiable positive association between teacher–student bonding among students in Grades 7 through 12 and students' grade point averages (GPA). There was also an identifiable negative relationship with teacher–student bonding and misbehavior in 12th grade (Nasir et al., 2011).

**Commitment.** Relationships with adults in school are important and necessary in the lives of student academic and social development (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). School

relationships with adults are vital in establishing a climate of school connectedness. Students positively respond when they sense adults are invested in them as individuals and have genuine concern for their academic achievement (Atkins et al., 2014). Chung-Do et al. (2013) stated, “School represents an important area where attachment among youth and school staff can be created and strengthened to enhance positive development and buffer negative experiences for youth” (p. 478). School is a place where students can connect with teachers, principals, parents, and other school personnel (Atkins et al., 2014). Teacher–student relationships have been identified as a “powerful factor in fostering or discouraging school connectedness” (Chung-Do et al., 2013, p. 482). According to Wilkinson-Lee et al. (2011), “Adolescence is a time when relationships with non-parental adults become increasingly important as they seek guidance and support from adults outside the home” (p. 223). A nurturing school climate allows students to build academic and social connections with adults within the school (Simon, 2011). School connectedness allows students to create trusting relationships with others in their school (Mahatmya, Lohman, Brown, & Conway-Turner, 2016). Schools that are committed to the well-being of students through school connectedness foster an environment that encourages mutual respect and relationship-building between its students and teachers (CDC, 2009).

**Involvement.** The third element of the social bond theory is involvement. As with attachment and commitment, involvement is an indicator of the presence of school connectedness. According to Bolland et al. (2015), student connectedness is defined as a “perception of involvement or affiliation with others or integration into social networks” (p. 613). Student involvement increases as the elements of attachment and commitment are acquired. Donner et al. (2016) stated that involvement includes prosocial activities that deter individuals from engaging in antisocial or delinquent behaviors. Involvement in positive

activities in school and community decreases the likelihood of students being involved in negative activities.

Teacher–student relationships are nurtured through the involvement phase of social bond theory. It is critical for schools to provide ample opportunities for authentic and meaningful involvement among teachers and students to be immersed in school culture through school activities (Volungis, 2016). Research indicates that the depth of student involvement is contingent upon the depth of teacher–student relationships: the stronger the relationship, the more involved is the student (Chung-Do et al., 2013). According to Langille, Asbridge, Cragg, and Rasic (2015), “collaboration and interaction between teachers and students promotes a sense of community and provides opportunities for social bonding to develop” (p. 259). Social bonding between teachers and students is enhanced when students and teachers work alongside each other and are involved in activities together (Chung-Do et al., 2013).

**Belief.** Belief is the fourth and final element in social bond theory and it is affected by the three prior elements. A lack in the development of attachment, commitment, or involvement can have damaging results on establishing of belief. Belief is defined as the “common conviction that laws should be obeyed” (Donner et al., 2015, p. 418). Students accept and behave according to the vision and mission of the school, while having an inward desire to obey school rules and policies (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). Students who exhibit behaviors of belief are less likely to engage in behaviors that will go against established rules. Students’ belief in societal norms aid in guarding students from deviant behaviors (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). For example, students will follow the school and classroom rules because that is what is expected and because other students willfully comply. Having accepted

these norms, students do not desire to engage in behaviors that would contradict values and principles of the school.

### **Lack of School Connectedness**

One of the reasons for juvenile delinquency has been attributed to the lack of school connectedness. According to Bolland et al. (2016), there is an inverse relationship between delinquency and school connectedness. Empirical evidence supports the negative association between school connectedness and delinquent behaviors (Ward et al., 2015). Students who have little to no school connectedness are more apt to participate in risky behaviors. Lack of school connectedness can have detrimental effects on students' academic, social, and physical well-being. Delinquent behaviors both may affect school performance and result in low school connectedness (Bolland et al., 2016). Students who do not experience closeness, involvement, or affiliation with others in their school have a decreased sense of belonging (Bolland et al., 2016; Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Chung-Do et al. (2013) suggested that there is "increasing evidence supporting the importance of school connectedness for healthy youth development, more efforts should be made to create strategies that promote school connectedness" (p. 20).

Oscar and Bamidele (2015) reported that students with low school connectedness ultimately have negative school experiences, which eventually become negative life experiences (Oscar & Bamidele, 2015). According to Li and Lerner (2013), "A young person's success in school, and ultimately in life, depends largely on the extent to which he or she can capitalize on knowledge and skill development opportunities" (p. 20). Research indicates that students with a negative sense of belonging rated themselves as being in poor health and having poor psychological stability, and are less likely to complete high school (Langille et al., 2015). Low school connectedness is also a predictor of future behaviors of substance abuse and criminal



activities (Liu et al., 2016). Students with low school connectedness also have a higher probability of being involved in delinquent behaviors (Langille et al., 2015; Oldfield et al., 2016). These students are also at risk of engaging in violent behaviors (Langille et al., 2015).

**Decreased mental health.** Lack of or low school connectedness has also been linked to decreased mental health in students (Oldfield et al., 2016). According to Sampasa-Kanyinga and Hamilton (2016), school connectedness has an impact on mental health and was a predictor of future mental health stability (Oldfield et al., 2016). Research suggests that students with low school connectedness battle symptoms of depression and suicidality (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). These students tend to have negative experiences in behavior as well as emotional difficulties and antisocial behaviors (Oldfield et al., 2016). On the contrary, findings from research indicate that students who reported higher levels of school connectedness had lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal ideation, and delinquent and at-risk behaviors (Volungis, 2016). Students with low school connectedness were more likely to experience anxieties and depression as compared to students with high school connectedness (Oldfield et al., 2016). School connectedness serves as a protective factor or buffer against negative behaviors and students are less likely to give in to peer pressures (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). School connectedness guards against destructive behaviors so that students do not engage in irresponsible behaviors. Oscar and Bamidele (2015) suggested that socially connected students are less likely to participate in substance abuse, staying out of school, sex, and violence. In addition, socially connected students are less likely to engage in behaviors linked to tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016).

A school that nurtures and supports school connectedness can produce a learning climate with high learning expectations, academic rigor, and positive school culture. School

connectedness is meaningful in that it promotes a sense of well-being, increased happiness, self-esteem, improved coping skills, social support, and reduced loneliness (Lester et al., 2013).

Student success is achieved in climates that endorse school connectedness (Joyce, 2015).

According to the CDC (2009), school climates that promote school connectedness are “characterized by caring and promotive interpersonal relationships, opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making and shared positive norms, goals, and values” (p. 7).

According to researchers, there are practices schools can implement to create learning climates that provide connection opportunities for students, including meaningful roles, feelings of safety, and opportunities for creative and academic engagement (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). The psychosocial climate of a school is gauged by school discipline, truancy, student involvement, and teacher classroom management practices (CDC, 2009). Research indicates that curricular opportunities to support students’ feelings of belonging and connectedness to the learning environment and how one might self-regulate social and learning potentials in these environments can be especially useful in promoting student success (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). There are practices that principals and teachers may enforce in classrooms and schools to create a school climate where school connectedness is nurtured. These practices include providing students with personal and meaningful notes and feedback, enforcing feelings of safety in school, providing opportunities for students to tap into their own creativity and engagement, as well as allowing students to contribute in class discussions and academic tasks (Joyce, 2015).

**Delinquent behavior.** Previous studies have highlighted a relationship between school connectedness and irresponsible and criminal behaviors (Chung-Do et al., 2013). For example, students in facilities for delinquent students have acknowledged reasons for infractions and taking part in careless behaviors as being due to a lack of or poor relationships with adults at

their school (Bolland et al., 2016). The literature also includes evidence of the connection between low school connectedness and several risky activities such as delinquent behaviors, grade repetition and school dropout, misbehavior, suspension and expulsion, and violence (Chapman et al., 2014; Nasir et al., 2011; Rudasill, Niehaus, Crockett, & Rakes, 2014). Additionally, Chung-Do et al. (2013) articulated that students with low school connectedness are almost twice as likely to have used marijuana and had sex (p. 482).

The middle school to high school transition is a critical, yet vulnerable time, in the lives of adolescent youth. According to Chung-Do et al. (2013), this “transitional period can be stressful as youth face more expectations to behave responsibly and independently while they begin forming their identities and beliefs that shape their behaviors” (p. 479). During the primary to secondary transition, students face many milestones, including physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional changes, and each one of these areas impact the social and academic stability in school (Benner, 2011; Lester et al., 2013; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013). Research indicates that as students experience transition, school connectedness decreases; they have reported liking school less, having lower perceptions of quality of life, experiencing a decline in academic success, and feeling a reduced sense of belonging (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Lester et al., 2013; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013). According to Chung-Do et al. (2013), as school and class sizes grow larger, and interactions become less centralized, it is more difficult to create opportunities to build consistent relationships among teachers and students.

It is important that educators are aware of student vulnerability when transitioning into a new phase of life. Oscar and Bamidele (2015) recommended creating an environment of connectedness through providing caring environments, increasing interactions with caring adults

in the school, establishing and maintaining high expectations, and creating multiple opportunities for students to participate. According to Sampasa-Kanyinga and Hamilton (2016), patterns of behavior are learned from social environments, and when there is consistency in the socializing process, a social bond is formed among individuals within the social environment. A positive school climate nurtures school connectedness, which produces positive behaviors that support students in positive decision-making. Students mimic established patterns in school; they reflect the behaviors, beliefs, expectations, and standards that are projected in the school (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016).

**High school dropout rate.** According to research, ninth grade can be a problematic year for incoming freshman students. Ninth grade is a milestone; it is the first year of high school. Ninth grade makes up the largest cohort, yet these students represent the largest amount of absenteeism, behavioral infractions, and failure of core classes (Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2010; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Romero, 2015). This stage is a hypersensitive time as students are navigating through impressionable periods in their lives developmentally (Nichols, Loper, & Meyer, 2016). According to Neild (2009), some students “experience turbulence” as they enter the ninth grade (p. 63). The transition from middle school to high school creates a climate of “disorganization and chaos” and it has a negative impact on the social adjustment and well-being of ninth grade students (Neild, 2009, p. 63). Such a transition may influence a student’s ability to adjust to the new school environment (Neild, 2009). As students transition into ninth grade, they face obstacles that can have a negative impact on their school experience with lasting effects. Research indicates that students were vulnerable to dropping out of school if they fail a course their ninth-grade year (Langenkamp, 2010). It is essential that students have school environments that serve to support students as they encounter emotional and academic

barriers that are associated with high school transition (Simon, 2011). One cause for the barrier includes differences in the organization of middle schools and high schools (Neild, 2009). The structure of high school is different from middle school and the change of environment can cause a degree of anxiety as students attempt to adjust (Styron & Peasant, 2010; Warren et al., 2011).

The high school dropout rate is not a local issue; rather, it is a national issue. The nation's high school dropout crisis requires immediate attention and response. Risk factors identify students who will most likely fail, but do not provide the answers to how and why (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Comprehending and targeting the dropout rate requires a significant amount of research and planning. School reform has been implemented to address the learning barriers that may affect the academic achievement of students (Jacobson, 2011; White-Smith & White, 2009). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law by former President Barack Obama with the goal of eliminating the dropout rate by "closing the achievement gaps and ensuring all students enter the workforce ready for its many challenges" (Corry, Dardick, & Stella, 2017, p. 2003). Meeting those proficiency levels includes addressing high school dropout rates across the nation (Neild, 2009). According to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Baltaz (2009), the focus of education reform includes "increasing the graduation rates, creating strong support among teachers, raising low academic expectations, placing responsibility on educators and schools, increasing parental engagement, and keeping students interested and engaged in coursework" (p. 22).

The high school dropout rate is an academic issue that has transformed into a societal issue. Dropping out of school has damaging consequences in the life a person. Students who drop out of school are more likely to experience low wage jobs, unemployment, incarceration, dependence on public assistance, and early death (Jordan et al., 2012). In some cases, high

schools have been labeled as “dropout factories” because students begin high school, but drop out in droves during or after the ninth grade year (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012, p. 709). There is no one instrument to measure dropout rates; however, research suggests that graduation rates vary between 50% and 85% (Jordan et al., 2012). An estimated 4.9 million 18- to 24-year-olds lack a high school diploma and at least one in five students drops out of high school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Previous studies have identified several reasons why students drop out of high school (Jordan et al., 2012; Tillery et al., 2013). Reasons for premature completion included demographics, regions, race, and gender (Jacobson, 2011; McCullumore & Sparapani, 2010; Warren et al., 2011). Jordan et al. (2012) suggested that individual and family characteristics, high school structure, school discipline, and community and risk factors were also dynamics that affected successful completion of high school. According to Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012), minority status, economic marginality, distressed families, and human social capital deficits have been strongly used as predictors of identifying students who are likely to drop out. Research also indicates a disparity in the number of students who drop out in rural and urban area schools, as compared to suburban schools (Jordan et al., 2012). Montgomery and Hirth (2011) suggested additional reasons that included “low-income households, parents or siblings who did not finish school, do not speak English well, have repeated one or more grades, have behavioral problems in school and are absent frequently” (p. 3). High school work expectations, teachers showing less interest, lack of connection to school, and feelings of alienation are also contributory to why students leave high school before finishing (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). Regardless of impending risk factors, if identified early, and proper intervention is implemented, student trajectory can change (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Schools that effectively meet the needs of

students entering ninth grade have greater success as compared to schools that lacked freshman support (Jordan et al., 2012).

**High school structure.** Traditional high school structure has been determined to be a barrier for students entering the ninth grade. When transferring to a bigger high school, students are lonelier, more anxious, and tend to struggle academically (Benner & Graham, 2009). The structural organization of traditional high schools is not academically or developmentally supportive of ninth grade students (Jacobson, 2011). Depending on the size of the high school, students may have several teachers over several subject areas, all with different expectations and standards (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). According to Ganeson and Ehrich (2009), high school is arranged in “a compartmentalization style” (p. 63). Compartmentalization may act as an obstacle when students perceived the school environment as “disconnected” (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009, p. 63). Also, fast-paced context in high school, student expectations, and workload are often overwhelming for some freshman students (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Due to the number of students dropping out of high school, ninth grade has become the area of target grade in looking for a resolution to the dropout crisis (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Habeeb, 2013; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011). Freshman academies have been implemented to identify possible negative influences that are common to ninth grade students (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Reform is focused on supporting ninth grade students by preparing them for the academic and social demands of high school. Identification of the negative influences provides schools with the capability to provide needed support during transition. When there is a lack of commitment and support from administration, school-wide plans that are not developed and implemented sufficiently do more harm than good (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2009). Identifying at-risk students requires collaboration among school leaders and teachers.

Students entering the ninth grade who have already been identified as at-risk tend to face greater barriers than do their peers (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Research suggests that analyzing student achievement data, identifying students in need of assistance, and developing new approaches to critical academic content allows teachers to take a proactive approach in addressing the diverse needs of the freshman students (Duke & Jacobson, 2011).

### **Transition**

Transition into high school is a sensitive time in the life of adolescent students. Approximately 80% of students in the United States physically transition into a new school (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Transition is a point at which students move from one segment of the education process to another and is a time filled with an abundance of emotions and expectations (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). The transition to high school creates academic and social challenges, which may have an influence on mental well-being and academic success (Styron & Peasant, 2010).

It is important that students have a nurturing and risk-free learning environment as the transition can impact the stability of the environment. Research findings indicate that schools are “hemorrhaging adolescents at alarming rates with the greatest loss during or immediately following their first year of high school” (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009, p. 177). Chung-Do et al. (2013) suggested that students transitioning into high school are expected to project responsibility as an adult, during a time in their lives when they are seeking to form their identities. Transition occurs during a time when social, emotional, and academic identities of students are influenced by the environmental change to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). According to Ganeson and Ehrich (2009), transition to ninth grade aligns with “physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological changes” (p. 157). The movement from what is known



into the unknown, from what is familiar to a situation that is unfamiliar triggers stress and anxieties for students who are already in a state of vulnerability (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013).

**Transitional barriers.** Barriers created during the transition to high school can have a lasting impact on student performance. Proactive measures are necessary in addressing transitional issues before the transition process takes place (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). It is not unusual for students who have performed at average to high-level achievement to drop to at-risk status after transition (Langenkamp, 2010). Students entering ninth grade who struggled academically in eighth grade may experience at least one of the following: “high absenteeism, several course failures, and difficulty accumulating enough credit to advance past the ninth grade” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 177). Therefore, identifying at-risk students who struggle before transition is critical. Research suggests that it is crucial for secondary schools’ administration to identify warning signs of potential dropouts and provide support through programs, counseling, and other strategies that cater to the identified need (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Academic intervention can support students in overcoming barriers. Students can overcome at-risk influences through strong interventions focused on attendance, discipline referrals, teacher expectations, and multiple options for when students fall behind in the credits they need for graduation (Samel et al., 2011). Research indicates that transition into a new school has an enormous impact on student perspective and ability to adjust. Results from the pressures of adjustment include a “decrease in grade point average, attendance, and co-curricular participation, and increases in anxiety concerning school procedures and older students” (Eman, 2013, p. 72).

Compared to their peers, students who are at-risk experience more difficulty transitioning into high school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Poor academic preparation is a major contributor to unsuccessful transition to high school (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Furthermore, students' transition experiences impact their academic achievement, student involvement in extracurricular activities, and social-emotional health (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Suldo & Shaunessey-Dedrick, 2013). However, research suggests that “students who experience low levels of stress earn high grades, advance further than peers with higher levels of perceived stress, and have a more positive school experience” (Suldo & Shaunessey-Dedrick, 2013, p. 196).

**Emotional impact of transition.** Transition may trigger anxieties that influence the ninth grade experience of freshman students (Benner & Graham, 2009). Transition takes place during the adolescent stage, a time of instability and unpredictability (Benner, 2011). The emotional and developmental influence of transition can be a traumatic experience for new high schoolers. Change in relationships, new location, new expectations and anticipation of what lies ahead may cause apprehension and anguish. Gentle-Genitty (2009) found that freshman students tend to experience feelings of loneliness and disconnectedness as student move from supportive elementary and middle schools to fragmented and departmentalized high schools. According to Benner and Graham (2009), the adolescent development stage and transition from middle school to high school do not align, therefore creating a likelihood of emotional instability. The transition into ninth grade presents new challenges in the unfamiliar environment such as teasing and bullying from older students (Suldo & Shaunessey-Dedrick, 2013). To control the emotional and academic stress of transition, it is imperative that schools implement strategies, programs, and plans to support the successful transition of freshman students (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). According to Ganeson and Ehrich (2009), schools without transition plans tend to have higher

failure and dropout rates among their high schools as compared to schools with specific programs that target transition.

### **Freshman Academy**

Freshman year is an important year in high school. The ninth grade year is when many students decide if they are going to complete high school. According to Neild (2009), “Approximately 1/3 of the nations’ recent dropouts were not promoted beyond ninth grade” (p. 55). Johns Hopkins University found that “up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates, repeat the ninth grade, but only 10-15% of those repeaters graduate from high school” (as cited in McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 60). Understanding the dynamics of the issue and increasing the graduation rate requires a review of ninth grade and the factors that create barriers (Hazel, Pfaff, Albanes, & Gallagher, 2014; Neild, 2009). Measures have been taken to address the barriers and ways to support students as they enter ninth grade (Styron & Peasant, 2010). The major concern over dropout rates has caused a ripple effect in educational, mainly a reform movement that focuses on providing essential support during the transition into high school (Neild, 2009). For years, schools have been reactive in addressing the academic barriers that students face their freshman year of high school (Warren et al., 2011). Eliminating barriers requires a stakeholder commitment to change. School districts and state departments of education monitor student performance through accountability indicators which are used to guide ninth graders through their freshman year (Neild, 2009). Doing so allows schools to identify struggling students and quickly intervene before students fall through the cracks.

According to researchers, ninth grade traditionally served to filter out students who were unable or unwilling to meet the demand and expectation of high school education (Warren et al.,

2011). Those students left school and went directly into the workforce. Students who are unable to meet the academic and social requirements during their freshman year are less likely to earn a high school diploma (Nield, 2009). Students are expected to be independent young adults and to take ownership in their education. However, students tend to get lost in the “autonomy of class choices, socialization, and the overall high school experience; they forget the importance of graduating and receiving a high school diploma” (Styron & Peasant, 2010, p. 3).

Freshman academies are academically responsive to the needs of growing adolescent students and provide students with a learning environment that supports adolescent changes and developing needs. The mission of freshman academies is to increase academic achievement for students during the critical transitional year from middle school to high school (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Creating and providing learning environments that promote caring relationships and a deep sense of belonging is difficult, mainly due to the organization of a traditional high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). According to research, freshman academies provide a climate wherein students are learning in a more personalized and responsive high school environment (Warren et al., 2011). Freshman academies implement transitional programs and activities to prepare ninth grade students for the new school and new curriculum demands as well as to provide organizational and coping skills (Nield, 2009). Academies are a blend of reforms and efforts with the aim of transforming high schools into nurturing productive places where students learn, grow, and prepare for careers in an economy that demand education, social skills, and adaptability.

There are approximately 1,500 uniquely designed academies throughout the United States; school districts format a framework that accommodates the needs of their community (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Schools seeking to ease the middle to high school transition

suggested providing more personalized and responsive high school learning environments that targeted transition and sense of belonging (Warren et al., 2011). Compared to traditional high schools, freshman academies are uniquely structured to meet the social, emotional, physical, and academic needs of students at the adolescent stage without facing competition and peer pressure from older students (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Students benefit from freshman academies because they tend to have a lower student enrollment that resulted in smaller class sizes. Schools with lower student enrollment have greater academic success as compared to schools with a higher teacher-to-student ratio (Styron & Peasant, 2010). The “school within a school” approach has been the typical framework that freshman academies implement (Styron & Peasant, 2010, p. 5). The smaller, more personal environment provides students with the support they would not receive in larger schools (Romero, 2015). Students in “segregated freshman ninth grade” become better acquainted with rigors in the high school curriculum and become more mature in the process (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 62). Also, students had a more successful transition and outcome when grouped together in a cohort (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Overall, the yearlong, uniquely designed school program provides ninth graders with the resources and support they will need to be academically and emotionally successful.

### **School Leadership**

School leadership is the catalyst for learning and has a major influence on student achievement. School leadership, also referred to as principalship, includes the responsibility of shaping a vision for academic success, creating a climate hospitable to education, and cultivating leadership in others (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2013). There is a significant correlation between school leadership and student achievement as well as an indirect association of principal leadership on instruction (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

**Principals and academic achievement.** The principal is a chief contributor to student achievement; school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors in influencing student learning (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). School leadership or principalship is “characterized by the relationships between the personal authenticity of the Principal, the school’s ethos and culture, the leadership context as defined by the school’s strategic direction and the principal’s key roles of operational, educational and community leadership” (Teyes, 2016, p. 59). The total—direct and indirect—effects of leadership’s influence on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects (NASSP, 2013). Leadership is the key variable in determining school performance and success as leaders develop change and influence others to share their vision (McFarlane, 2010). Research findings indicated principals have indirect influence over school effectiveness, mainly through teachers’ perceptions of principals’ professional conduct and leadership style (Nir & Hameiri, 2014). Principals with strong leadership skills are aware of the contributing influences of creating an atmosphere where students can become independent, self-sufficient, and self-reliant (Bloom & Owens, 2011). Academic achievement of a school is directly associated with a committed and dedicated principal. As Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) stated, “There is no such thing as a high-performing school without a great principal” (p. 627). Three specific roles of principals include the following:

- (a) committing time, energy, and attention to activities that advance the education of children;
- (b) identifying the equipped and qualified people to lead and support activities;
- and (c) understanding that developing proper relationships to effectiveness and success of all student personnel and students. (McFarlane, 2010, p. 57)

The NASSP (2013) reported a survey of 40,000 teachers sponsored by the Scholastic and Bill

and Melinda Gates Foundation. The study results indicated that “supportive leadership is the standout top ranked item” (p. 4). The power of leadership affects outcomes through the ability of leaders to directly and indirectly influence perception, behaviors, attitudes, and values (McFarlane, 2010). Great leaders support teachers by providing them with meaningful professional development, allowing them to learn from each other and trusting them to teach students (McFarlane, 2010). “Great principals unlock the power for teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost” (NASSP, 2013, p. 3). Empowering teachers allows them to create rich learning environments (Bloom & Owens, 2012). School leadership is the center of creating an environment of successful learning; it influences teacher instruction and student achievement (Nir & Hameiri, 2013). Leadership is vital because it is directly associated with the quality of professional development and training, teacher instructional practices, and ultimately, student achievement (NASSP, 2013).

**Principals and school climate.** Principals have the responsibility of creating a positive climate beneficial for learning; positive learning climates are created when principals nurture the skills and knowledge of staff and students. According Bloom and Owens (2012), in creating positive school climates, principals nurture the environment by taking measures that include accountability of teachers and being active in the learning process of students in their schools. Schools are academically successful and have a positive school culture when the learning climate is positive, resources are effective, and principals are responsive (Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014). Principals maintain a positive learning climate by being supportive of their teachers through effectively communicating, collaborating, and providing them with an opportunity to perform without giving overbearing orders (Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014). Principals are more than building managers, they establish and maintain a continuous cycle of teaching and learning. Principals

who make the learning climate their main focus understand its influence on student achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Principals seeking to create a positive learning climate acknowledge that perceptions of school personnel can either build or destroy a school climate; therefore, fulfilling the needs of the adults will, in turn, allow them to fulfill the needs of students (McFarlane, 2010).

### **Teacher–Student Relationships**

Relationships are fundamental in establishing and nurturing school connectedness and are sought by students from their teachers (Gehlback et al., 2012). Teacher–student relationships are the building blocks to student achievement and these relationships empower teachers to have significant influence on student learning and performance (Kiefer, Ellerbrock, & Alley, 2014). Trust and bonds built from teacher–student relationships have a direct impact on school outcomes and student well-being (Romero, 2015). A blend of school connectedness and positive student–teacher relationships have the potential to promote healthy development and protect youth from negative behavior outcomes (Joyce, 2015).

Teachers have the power to promote academic growth of students through safe and quality relationships (Phillippo & Stone, 2013). Positive relationships and interactions between teachers and students are critical in creating learning climates that promote connectedness and student achievement. Relationship development is one of the most important acts of establishing a secure foundation for school connectedness. Research indicates a positive association between teacher–student relationships and school connectedness that is evidenced through involvement in extracurricular activities, student outcomes, and positive school experiences (Conner et al., 2014). Adult relationships, such as teacher–student relationships, are absolutely necessary for adolescent students as they pursue their identities through self-expression and autonomy (Tillery



et al., 2013). Relationships also aid in establishing sense of belonging and strengthen school experience (Tillery et al., 2013). Students who have positive relationships with their teachers are motivated, involved in instruction, and possess a stronger academic foundation than do peers who do not have relationships with their teachers (Tillery et al., 2013).

Teacher–student relationships are especially important in adolescent years because it is a reflective of relationships between parents and children (Tillery et al., 2013). Students look to teachers as a resource and major source of support. Teacher–student relationships provide a foundation for students’ social, emotional, and cognitive relationships at school (Hughes, Wu, Kwok, Villarreal, & Johnson, 2012; Tillery et al., 2013). Conner et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of relationships in that teacher–student relationships have been associated with decreases in health risk behaviors and higher rates of subjective well-being, as well as increased mental health, quality-of-life satisfaction, and increased happiness. “Social capital” is developed through relationship development, which serves as a protective factor for social and academic barriers (Tillery et al., 2013, p. 724). Students who have established relationships with teachers and who have a sense of belonging feel more accepted, are more engaged, and perform better academically (Tillery et al., 2013).

**Lack of teacher–student relationships.** As students transition from middle school to high school, teacher–student relationships dramatically decrease. A decrease in relationships during this development stage in their lives can have damaging effects. As students move into the secondary level, the high school culture creates social and academic obstacles for incoming freshman students (Coffey, 2013). High school structure and culture create physical barriers that prevent relationship-building (Coffey, 2013). Also, social obstacles hinder students from establishing a sense of school connectedness (Furlong et al., 2011). School leaders must

understand the importance of purposefully building close, high-quality relationships with students (Kiefer, Ellerbrock, & Alley, 2014). According to research, developmentally, social belonging has long been considered a fundamental human motivation representing an innate desire for relatedness with others (Tillery et al., 2013). As in the case of students, their attachment to their teachers increases their desire to participate in learning and activities (Hughes et al., 2012). Teacher–student relationships are one of the most influential components of the learning process in that it has the power to promote or impede school connectedness (Coffey, 2013). According to research, students suggested that their level of school involvement depended on their relationship with their teachers (Chung-Do et al., 2013). Additionally, students who believed that their teachers are supportive had an easier time adjusting to psychological and physical changes during transition from middle to high school (Hughes, 2011). Research findings also indicated students’ degree of perception of support was contingent upon their depth of connectedness to their school and learning experience (Federici & Skaalvik, 2014). Teachers who know students on a personal level create unique opportunities for emotional and academic stability that extends into self-regulated learning (Corso et al., 2013; Federici & Skaalvik, 2014). However, if bonds are not established, students are inclined to display negative academic and social behaviors such as grade repetition, dropping out of school, and being suspended and/or expelled (Nasir et al., 2011).

**Teacher–student relationships and emotional well-being.** Teacher–student relationships have an influence on students’ emotional well-being, stability, and adjustment. As students advance in grade, time spent with teachers becomes less frequent, and meaningful and valuable relationships with teachers decline (Gehlback et al., 2012; Li & Lerner, 2013). This decline is disadvantageous for students because bonds shared in teacher–student relationships are

powerful protective factors in students' mental health (Conner et al., 2014; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). Research indicates that students who perceive teachers as being available, concerned, impartial, and respectful are inclined to have a greater perception of connectedness (Corso et al., 2013). Teachers who praise students for their academic accomplishments lift students' self-perceptions and build their self-esteem which, in turn, empowers the students to complete assignments and feel successful (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Additionally, knowing students on a personal level has the power to create opportunities for emotional and academic reinforcement that will expand into self-regulated learning strategies (Corso et al., 2013; Federici & Skaalvik, 2014).

Teacher–student relationships affect the learning dynamics in classrooms. Previous studies that targeted teacher–student relationships suggest a positive association with student achievement and motivational outcomes (Federici & Skaalvik, 2014; Gehlback et al., 2012; Phillippo & Stone, 2013). According to Corso et al. (2013), teachers who devote time and energy to improve students' engagement, receive a return on investment of student success. In turn, teachers are conscious of academic needs of students and provide constructive feedback, intervention, and support (Kiefer et al., 2014). Romero (2015) found that establishing trusting relationships with teachers can alter the trajectory of 10th grade students' academics and behaviors, and careers (Romero, 2015). Additionally, Federici and Skaalvik (2014) reported that students who have relationships with their teachers are more inclined to be academically and socially active in open classrooms. Teacher–student relationships establish a foundation of a “responsive teaching” classroom, one where students “expand the effort, ask for help, and use self-regulated learning strategies” (Federici & Skaalvik, 2014; Kiefer et al., 2014, p. 2). Responsive teachers promote and cultivate a culture of responsive learners (Hughes, 2011).

According to Kiefer et al. (2014), teachers play a key role in supporting young adolescents' academic motivation and in fostering responsive middle school levels (Phillippo & Stone, 2013). Creating a culture of relationships is significant in establishing and maintaining an atmosphere of purposeful learning, which is accomplished through challenging students by holding high expectations (Kiefer et al., 2014).

Although teacher–student relationships are powerful influences in launching the learning process, they are often disregarded (Sakiz et al., 2012). According to Kiefer et al. (2014), teachers reported that they did not know that developing relationships with their students was their responsibility and they were unaware of the impact these relationships had on student achievement and emotional stability. After identifying the academic and social success that has been associated with teacher–student relationships, schools across the country are now providing professional development and trainings targeted at teachers' building relationships with students (Hughes et al., 2015, Kiefer et al., 2014).

### **School Climate**

School climate has been identified as a contributing influence in students' perception of connection and ultimately their academic success. School climate is defined as “the quality of life perceived communication at school” (Boulifa & Kaadouachi, 2014, p. 100). In another definition, climate is described as a “multidimensional construct that includes multiorganizational, instructional, and interpersonal dimensions” (White et al., 2014, p. 349). School climate also had a major influence on the quality of school experience and academic success (Rich & Schachter, 2012). According to Gülşen and Gülenay (2014), every aspect of school culture fosters student perceptions of school climate, whether positive or negative. As students advance into secondary school, the changes associated with the new environment causes

the perception of school climate to deteriorate (Booth & Gerard, 2012; White et al., 2014). Students' perceptions are gauged by the existing psychological, academic, and environmental influences and these perceptions have an impact on student learning, engagement, and success (Conner et al., 2014; Li & Lerner, 2013). Research that targeted school climate results showed a positive association between school climate and student perception of connectedness (Bear, Yang, Pell, & Gaskins, 2014). In addition, Gülşen and Gülenay (2014) determined that school climates impact behaviors, perspectives, and standards of the school. Perception of school climate dominates the motivation and engagement and can have important implications on their psychosocial development (White et al., 2014).

Positive learning climate increases the probability of school connectedness, and it drives the learning process (Allodi, 2010). Cohen et al. (2009) suggested that creating a high-quality learning environment requires a team effort of all stakeholders pursuing a common goal. Gietz and McIntosh (2014) stated that meeting goals of a successful school climate requires that students are taught schools' expectations, relationships are established, appropriate behavior is recognized, and consequences for breaking the rules are enforced and consistent. In addition, Gietz and McIntosh (2014) suggested implementing several key factors when seeking to build and maintain a healthy learning climate, including "discipline climate, academic press, clear expectations of behavior, feeling safe in school, and teacher-rated social skills" (p. 62).

Creating a positive school climate requires implementing a school-wide strategic plan (Cohen et al., 2009). One method implemented to create a healthy learning climate is using climate data as a complementary form of assessment, one that may not measure learning, but does measure support in the school (Cohen et al., 2009). Data gathered will provide leaders with valuable information needed to promote meaningful staff, family, and student engagement, as

well as to support social, emotional, civic, and intellectual skills of students in the school (Cohen et al., 2009).

The attitude of teachers, their communication, expectations, and academic values have considerable influence on school climate. In healthy learning climates, teachers provide positive interactions and mental space and confidence for learning to occur (Freeman & Simonsen., 2015). Positive school climates promote feelings of confidence and assurance. Allodi (2010) reported that the relationship between teachers and students is directly connected to the school climate. Relationships established in healthy learning climates promote students' capabilities in developing one's self-image, motivation, and performance (Gelback et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2015).

**Healthy school climate.** Relationships, in conjunction with a healthy school climate, promote school connectedness, thus "facilitating student academic success" (Barile et al., 2012, p. 258). According to White et al. (2014), healthy school climates produce students' healthy relationships with their peers and other adults within the school. In healthy school climates, student also feel supported and are encouraged to seek help from teachers and peers (White et al., 2014). An additional benefit of a healthy school climate is that teachers are attentive and cognizant of the academic and emotional needs of their students (Kenny, Dooley, & Fitzgerald, 2013; Reyes et al., 2012). According to Allodi, (2010), students from at-risk backgrounds appear to have the strongest and most favorable response to relationships and healthy school climate. Additional research indicates that quality relationships with teachers, along with healthy school climate, empowers students to become academically aware and to be "three times more engaged than students who have poor relationships" (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 701). An additional benefit of a healthy school climate is teacher satisfaction: "teacher retention increases, which

trickles down to student achievement” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 45). Teachers perform better and are most effective if they are satisfied with their positions. Also, a healthy school climate decreases bullying, bullying behaviors, and their negative effects (White et al., 2014). The established expectations and tolerances of a healthy school climate build an environment where negative behavior is discouraged.

**Poor school climate.** Poor school climate is detrimental to student success and overall well-being; it affects everyone involved in the school. School climates that fail to provide academic and emotional supports create frustration for both teachers and students. Students who are in “emotionally unresponsive” school climates are at higher risk of becoming academically unproductive (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 701). Teachers who are emotionally and academically unavailable for student support “share a little emotional connection and regularly disregard, disrespect, taunt, humiliate, threaten, or even physically lash out at one another” (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 701). Elements of poor school climate include “ineffective educational settings, low teacher commitment in teaching, poor individual monitoring and follow-up, lack of adaptations to diverse pupils, teaching only to the standard and for the average pupil” (Allodi, 2010, p. 91).

### **Summary**

School connectedness has been identified as a major influence in students’ perceptions of meaningful relationships and sense of belonging. Understanding the power of school connectedness and its impact on student achievement and well-being is important as it influences students’ commitment to school. Students have an innate desire to feel a sense of belonging, especially during adolescent years (Nichols et al., 2016). School connectedness has a positive association with student learning, well-being, and overall perception of school (Kenny et al., 2013; Nasir et al., 2011). Perception of school connectedness, or the lack of connectedness, can

have long-lasting effects in students' lives. In cases when there is a lack of connectedness, students are more likely to have a negative school experience, which can impact students in multiple ways. For example, students who lack school connectedness have difficulty adjusting to the transition into high school, establishing relationships with adults in their schools, performing, and experiencing an identifiable decrease in engagement in instruction and extracurricular activities (Simon, 2011). Also, students with low perceptions of connectedness are more likely to engage in risky and delinquent behaviors (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016).

A great number of students drop out of school each year, and considerable research and funding have been dedicated to addressing this epidemic that plagues schools across the nation. Although the graduation rate has increased, according to some statistics, students continue to leave school without graduating (Jordan et al., 2012). Research has identified a connection between high school dropout rates and students' perceptions of school connectedness (Nichols et al., 2016; Simon, 2011). Further, a lack of perceived connectedness is one of the reasons why these students leave school prematurely (Langille et al., 2015).

Ninth grade is a significant year because this is when students determine if they will complete high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). It also is during this developmentally vulnerable time that students are placed in an unfamiliar environment where establishing relationships is critical. Academic achievement and emotional stability typically decrease during the ninth grade year, with the lack of school connectedness being an underlying reason (Styron & Peasant, 2010). The transition process can have a direct impact on students' perception of connectedness. The middle-to-high school transition is an arduous process for some students and controls academic and social adjustment (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Suldo & Shaunessy-



Dedrick, 2013). Some students experience anxieties, lack of connectedness, and feelings of isolation. For some students, the impact is so overwhelming that without intervention, students begin to mentally and socially disassociate from school and eventually drop out (Benner, 2011).

This chapter included identification of the framework of social bond theory, which guided this study. This chapter contained discussions about significant factors that influence school connectedness. Factors that were investigated in this research are school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate. Studies are present in the literature that focus on influences that impact perception of connectedness, such as school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school connectedness. However, there has been no research conducted on school connectedness of students attending a freshman academy located on a middle school campus.

Eliminating the high school dropout rate is a priority of the education community, however, in attempting to address the dropout crisis, school connectedness is rarely considered as a possible influence. This research provides awareness of the necessity of creating a school culture where students experience a sense of belonging and contributes to the literature as an attempt to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impact students' perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama.

Chapter Three includes a detailed discussion of the methodology used to conduct this qualitative study as well as an explanation of the research design, the research questions, setting and participants, procedures, details regarding data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of Chapter Three is to describe the methods utilized in this qualitative case study to investigate perceptions of connectedness of students attending a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. This chapter also includes a thorough discussion of the components of the study design, research questions, setting, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a detailed summary.

### **Design**

This was a single instrumental case study. A qualitative research design was applied in this study because it is a “logical plan for getting from here to there” (Yin, 2014, p. 28). Qualitative research begins with a social problem and case study design is especially helpful for answering questions of how and why (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2014). In the case of this research, a case study design was used to investigate students' perceptions of school connectedness of students attending a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. Previous research revealed a gap in research regarding the impact of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate on school connectedness (Niehaus et al., 2016).

The case study design allows for an intensive investigation of a phenomenon within a bounded system (Yin, 2014). This current case study allowed me to understand the real-life phenomenon that encompassed perceptions of connectedness of students attending a freshman academy on a middle school campus (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2010). Participants included 12 sophomore students. Data were collected from three different data sources, including individual interviews (see Appendix F), data from the School Connectedness Scale (SCS, Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews (see Appendix H). The participants initially participated in an

individual interview. Participants were provided with individual interview protocols (see Appendix E). According to Yin (2014), the “interview is the most important source in case studies” (p. 110). The participants also completed a 54-item SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) immediately after completing the individual interview. Lastly, the participants took part in a focus group interview of approximately six students. I conducted at least two focus group interviews to limit the number of participants per group to four to six students. I read the focus group protocol to the participants (see Appendix G) and then allowed time for them to answer interview questions. According to Merriam (2009), focus group participants hear the responses of others in the group and may add to their original response. The questions were open-ended and directed in a conversational style (Yin, 2014). Data from interviews, both individual and focus groups, were recorded and transcribed. There was no opportunity to influence the facts or the phenomenon or context being studied (Yin, 2014).

## **Research Questions**

### **Research Question 1**

How does school leadership impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?

### **Research Question 2**

How do teacher–student relationships impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?

### **Research Question 3**

How does school climate impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?

### Setting

Hope Academy is located on the campus of Hope Middle School in the southeastern region of Alabama in Hopetown. Hopetown has a community of approximately 4,700 individuals. As of 2012, the median house income for the city is \$51,277 and the median income for the state is \$41,574 (DataUSA, n.d.). The student population for the 2013–2014 school year encompassed .03% Asian, 19% African American, .09% Multi-race, 76% Caucasian, and 4% Hispanic; 283 males and 250 females; and 18% of the students were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch.

Hope Academy is located on the campus of Hope Middle School. Hope Middle School serves Grades 6 through 9. The freshman students only interact with other students during lunch and extracurricular activities. Hope Academy was also chosen because of its location. I live approximately 25 miles from Hope Academy. The school district where Hope Academy is established has five schools, two elementary schools, one middle school, and two high schools. There is also an alternative learning facility for students who are academically at-risk and for nontraditional students.

The leadership of Hope Academy includes a principal, an assistant principal, and a freshman guidance counselor. In previous years, the administration included one principal and two assistant principals. The assistant principal's office is located within the freshman academy. The administrators work closely together to create an atmosphere of high expectations, both academically and behaviorally. The principal and assistant principal are consistently present in the hallways, classrooms, and lunchroom. They purposefully interact with students by knowing them by their names and holding meaningful conversations.

Hope Academy's teachers only provide instruction for ninth grade students. The

freshman academy has six classrooms used to provide core, elective, intervention, and special education instruction for approximately 150 students. The teachers work closely together and meet monthly with the guidance counselor to monitor student progress. Students are required to complete and submit all classroom assignments; students are held accountable academically through the “no-zero” tolerance policy of the school, under which students do not receive a zero for incomplete assignments. For students who are struggling academically, certain provisions are implemented to address students’ needs through parent contact, student conferences, and through before- and after-school tutoring. Teachers work closely with all stakeholders, especially parents. The small community allows for the establishment of relationships between school and community and many of the parents and teachers are on a first-name basis. The established relationships create a foundation of support for both the teachers and students (Hughes et al., 2012).

### **Participants**

Typically, purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. Merriam (2009) stated that “purposeful sampling reflects the purpose of the study” (p. 77). I deliberately chose sophomore students who attended Hope Academy the previous year to participate in the study in order to target perceptions of connectedness of students who had attended a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. I chose 12 students to participate in the study. According to Yin (2014), purposeful sampling means that the participants are “chosen in a deliberate manner” and it “yields the most relevant and plentiful data” (p. 52). In the case of this study, the participants were former students who were selected because of their enrollment and completion of their freshman year at Hope Academy. Using purposeful sampling to select sophomore students for the research allowed the case to illuminate the theoretical propositions of the social

bond theory. I also employed convenience sampling, as it is a type of purposeful sampling. According to Merriam (2007), “convenience sampling is typically used when sample size is based on time, money, location, availability of sites, or respondents” (p. 79). Hope Academy was chosen because of the convenience of the location, which is approximately 25 miles from Abbeville, Alabama, where I live. The students were also chosen because they were available to participate in the study. A short description of participants is included Table 1. The names provided are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this study.

Table 1

*Participants’ Demographic Information*

Name	Age	Sex	Race	Grade
Anna Kate	15	F	C	10
April	15	F	C	10
Carlos	17	M	H	10
Charity	15	F	AA	10
Denesha	15	F	AA	10
Elizabeth	15	F	C	10
Gabriella	15	F	H	10
Hosea	15	M	H	10
Jazzmyn	15	F	AA	10
Khaleb	15	M	AA	10
Malik	15	M	AA	10
Nakia	15	F	AA	10

*Note.* AA = African American; H = Hispanic; and C = Caucasian

## Procedures

Upon successful defense of the proposal, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University (see Appendix A). I also provided information about the research (see Appendix B) and secured permission to progress with the research from the superintendent of the school district where Hope Academy is located. The research information, along with invitation flyer, and consent form that included parent and student signatures (see Appendix C) were presented to the superintendent and principal of Hope High School. I worked with the principals and counselors to distribute flyers to the entire sophomore class. The flyers served to invite students to participate in the study and the consent form included a summary of the study including the purpose, potential risks, and a place for the parents and students to sign. The first 12–15 students who showed interest in the study by making contact through the contact information listed on the flyer were selected to participate in the study.

Data were collected from three different data sources, including individual interviews (see Appendix F), the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) (see Appendix I), and focus group interviews (see Appendix H). The participants initially participated in an individual interview, for which students were provided the individual interview protocol (see Appendix E). The purpose of the interviews was to gain students' perspectives of their experience at Hope Academy, as associated with school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate. The interviews were held at Hope High School. According to Yin (2014), the “interview is the most important source in case studies” (p. 110). Upon completion of the interview, the participants completed the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), which consisted of a Likert scale survey focused on school connectedness from the perspective of the student. Participants answered 54 questions and rated them from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*).

Lastly, the participants participated in a focus group interview of approximately six participants. I conducted two focus group interviews to maintain the number of participants per group at four to six students. Participants in the focus group read the focus group protocol (see Appendix G) and then verbally answered interview questions. According to Merriam (2009), focus group participants hear the responses of others in the group and may add to their original response. The questions were open-ended and directed in a conversational style and the focus groups lasted approximately 45–60 minutes each (Yin, 2014). Data from interviews, both individual and focus group, were recorded and transcribed. There was no opportunity for influence of the facts or the phenomenon or context being studied (Yin, 2014).

To ensure reliability and validity of data, responses to the interviews were recorded using audio recorders and through journaling. Audio recording data during research maintained the accuracy of responses from participants (Stake, 2010). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), maintaining a reflective journal allows researchers to “explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research” (p. 219). Additionally, answers from individual interviews and focus group interviews were transcribed (Stake, 2010). After transcribing the data, I formulated codes from data gathered from individual interviews, SCSs (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews. I sorted through the data to identify similar patterns and themes. After identifying common patterns, I began the next phase of data analysis. I focused on classifying consistent generalizations present in the data and further examined those generalizations to formalize a body of knowledge.

### **The Researcher’s Role**

I served as the assistant principal of Hope Academy for two consecutive school terms before moving into my current position as the At-Risk Coordinator and Alternative School



Director for the same school system. During my time as an assistant principal at the freshman academy, student success was a part of the school culture. Other methods of reform were attempted prior to implementation of the freshman academy; however, none of the other methods produced desired graduation results.

My career background includes serving as the administrator of Hope Academy. Due to the dropout rate of Hope High School, Hope Academy was implemented to support the academic and social needs of freshman students. Prior to restructuring the middle school to include the freshman academy, the high school faced multiple infractions due to the graduation rate and failure to meet the requirements of adequate yearly progress (AYP). Therefore, the school was placed in school improvement. After 5 consecutive years of no meaningful change, the Alabama State Department of Education provided the local board of education with a restructuring plan that included the establishment of a freshman academy. The school board approved an addition to the middle school library that would serve as the freshman annex. The constructed annex included six classrooms which provided accommodations for core, elective, special education, and intervention classes.

During my time as an assistant principal, students in the freshman academy were completing ninth grade with required credits with little to no remediation. Before the establishment of the freshman academy, students were struggling academically and dropping out of school at an alarming rate. The number of students dropping out of school required an intervention plan. After establishing the freshman academy model on a middle school campus, the number of students failing core courses began to decline dramatically. Students were academically successful and were on track for graduation. There were several years in which 100% of the freshman class obtained all the required courses to move on to the 10th grade.

The administrators work closely with the parents, students, and teachers of Hope Academy to provide an environment that supports the academic and developmental demands of ninth grade students. The smaller learning environment allows the teachers and students to build and maintain relationships that foster academic success. Students are the priority and the motivation behind the mission of the freshman academy. The freshman academy is vision-driven and one of continuous learning, support, and preparation.

### **Data Collection**

Three different types of data were collected to address the research questions of this study. When conducting a case study research, data collection relies on written or verbal data from individuals. Merriam (2009) stated that qualitative research relies on “direct quotations from people about their experience” (p. 90). In order to gain data based on their experience, I used individual interviews, the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews. Using methods others have used in previous research “saves time and increases the meaningfulness of the data” (Stake, 2010, p. 90). According to Merriam (2009), “Data are ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (p. 85). Data gathered using the three methods resulted in an in-depth understanding of school connectedness.

### **Interviews**

The interview process is a major component of case study research (Yin, 2014). Participants of the study took part in individual face-to-face interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain data on students’ perceptions of school connectedness at the freshman academy. Interviews are important in a study to hear first-hand accounts of an individual’s real-life experience (Stake, 2010). Interviews allowed me to obtain data from another individual’s point of view. The questions were focused on the case study topic, and I facilitated the flow of

the guided questions (Yin, 2014).

The questions were focused on the impact school leadership, teacher–student relationships and school climate had on students’ perceptions of school connectedness. The purpose of the questions pertaining to the perception of school connectedness was to gather information from the participants about their individual, yet shared, experiences as students attending a freshman academy on a middle school campus. Table 2 includes the interview questions, which were grouped into three areas: (a) school leadership, (b) teacher–student relationships, and (c) school climate.

#### Standardized Open-Ended Questions

##### School Leadership Questions

1. Explain how your principals were committed to your education.
2. How were your principals involved in creating a positive school culture?
3. Were your principals fair in decision making?
4. Were you comfortable talking to your principal about problems? Why or Why not?

##### Teacher-Student Relationship Questions

1. Who was your favorite teacher? Why?
2. How did your teacher make learning fun?
3. In what ways did your teacher motivate you?
4. Did you enjoy coming to school? Why or Why not?

##### School Climate Questions

1. Did you feel safe in school? Why?
2. In general, did you feel that the school rules are fair? Why?
3. Did your school have a positive school climate? Why?

Leadership Questions 1 through 4 were focused on the leadership of Hope Academy. Leadership is a significant and imperative part of goal setting. Bloom and Owens (2011) stated that principals have an influential presence as they have an impact on “curriculum, staffing and environmental issues” (p. 215). The school environment will reflect the leadership style of the principal. Establishing an environment that nurtures student connectedness must first begin with school leadership. According to Bloom and Owens (2011), “Principals hold the key in establishing and maintaining a productive learning environment” (p. 219).

Teacher–student relationship Questions 1 through 4 targeted teacher–student relationships. Teacher–student relationships are powerful influences in the lives of students. According to Hughes et al. (2012), “teacher–student relationships in early grades predict long term achievement” (p. 39). Phillippo and Stone (2013) advocated “regular personal contact with an advisor to build relationships” (p. 359). Teacher–student relationships are important in that they serve as protective factors. Teacher–student relationships have also been associated with decrease participation in delinquent behavior (Conner et al., 2014).

School climate Questions 1 through 3 targeted school climate. The learning climate is an important source of school connectedness. Gietz and McIntosh (2014) emphasized identification of influences that affects school climate. Establishing a positive school climate is more important in upper grades because “student perception of school climate decreases as they progress throughout middle school” (White et al., 2014, p. 358). School climate must be built to encourage the “social, emotional, ethical, and intellectual abilities” of students (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 46). In creating a nurturing school climate, it is important that the learning climate aligns and supports with the developmental needs of students (Rey & Brackett, 2012, p. 701).

### **School Connectedness Scale**

Data were collected through participant's responses to the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). Permission to use the survey was granted by Dr. Jill Lohmier (see Appendix I). The participants completed the 54-item Likert survey. The students answered each question to reflect their personal experiences or feelings while students at the freshman academy. The statements were focused on school connectedness through different school-based areas such as adults in the school, school climate, and relationships at the school. Students also completed special codes on race and/or ethnicity and extracurricular activities participation. According to Stake (2010), "a social research survey is a set of questions or statements or scales" participants complete to provide feedback on a specific topic (p. 99). Yin (2014) suggested that the implementation of a survey can "produce quantitative data" (p. 112). That data can then be used to compile "totals, medians, percentages, comparisons, and correlations" (Stake, 2010, p. 99).

The SCS was designed by Lohmeier and Lee (2011) and originally implemented in an after-school program at a junior high school to assess school connectedness of the students. Due to the limited population, Lohmeier and Lee decided that more data were needed to assess the reliability and validity of the instrument. Lohmeier and Lee (2011) stated that the instrument was administered to two different Northeastern school districts. The survey was focused on three distinct areas to measure school connectedness: "belonging is measured through general support, relatedness is measured through specific support, and connectedness through engagement" (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011, p. 90).

The SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) is a 54-item instrument with a 5-point Likert scale. Lohmeier and Lee (2011) stated that "participants must choose from one referring to not at all true to five, completely true" (p. 90). The levels of connectedness are measured through the

items which are arranged in a 3 X 3 matrix that is used to inquire about “observable behaviors” and “feelings or values” (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011, p. 90).

### **Focus Group Interview**

The focus group interview is another method used in case study research to obtain data about a specific topic. A focus group is an interview on a predetermined topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic and are socially constructed to gather targeted data (Merriam, 2009). (Merriam, 2009). I served as the moderator of the interview (Yin, 2014). The focus group for the study consisted of two groups, a group of four and a group of six participants. After completion of the individual interviews and SCSs (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), each focus group met one time to complete interviews in the library of the high school. The participants consisted of sophomore students who attended Hope Academy the previous school year. I began the interviews with an explanation of the interview process as well as the purpose of the study.

Participants were informed of the recording of the interviews. The participants were asked a set of interview questions in a group setting. As with individual interviews, the focus group questions targeted school leadership, teacher–student relationships and school climate. Data obtained from interviews and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings assist researchers with capturing and maintaining an accurate rendition of interviews (Yin, 2014). Recording interviews allowed me to focus more on the nonverbal behaviors of interviewees (Merriam, 2009). The following four questions were used in the focus group interviews:

1. How were your principals involved in your education?
2. What did you like most about the freshman academy teachers?
3. Describe your school climate at the freshman academy.

4. What steps or procedures were in place to ensure your safety as a student?

Questions 1 through 3 targeted relationships and climate of the freshman academy. A positive school experience is dictated by the school climate. According to Oscar and Bamidele (2015), school climate has an impact on student connectedness. Questions 1 and 2 were focused on principal and teacher involvement in school and school activities. Relationships are essential during the adolescent development phase (Conner et al., 2014; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015). A strong relationship with an adult in the school could mean the difference between success and failure (Li & Lenner, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Question 4 referred to school safety which, according to research, is strongly associated with feelings of safety. Creating a learning environment that allows students to feel secure and protected is highly important (Cohen et al., 2009; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013; Reyes et al., 2012). Students who feel safe at school are more attentive and efficient in classrooms (Cote-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016). Feeling unsafe in school can have a negative impact the emotional and social well-being of students as they experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Matthews, Kilgour, Christian, More, & Hill, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis can be the challenging part of the research process. In some cases, the amount of data that must be analyzed is voluminous (Patton, 2002). Data analysis begins with data collection and is the process to support findings that are “substantiated, revised, and reconfigured” (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). I transcribed both the individual interviews and focus group interviews. Reading and memoing is the practice of totally immersing oneself in the data (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2014); therefore, I read individual and focus group interviews and data obtained from the SCSs (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011).

Creswell (2014) stated that data analysis “begins with the development of the codes, the formation of themes from the codes, and then the organization of themes into larger meaning of the data” (p. 187). While reading through the transcript, I created notes in the margins of the data that I considered to be important or relevant to the study. This step is what Creswell (2014) referred to as open coding, “coding the data for its major categories of information” (p. 86). Merriam (2009) stated that this step is “having a conversation with the data” (p. 178). Assigning codes is the initial step in categorizing and gathering meaning from the data. I reviewed the open codes and grouped similar data together into axial codes to create “coding that comes from interpretation and reflection of the meaning of data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). I repeated the process with the remaining transcribed interviews. After completing coding of all transcribed interviews, I merged all master codes into one master list. I looked for present patterns and regularities that became the themes of the study. I looked for preestablished codes that were identified in the review of the literature to channel important data into meaningful themes. Specifically, codes derived from the study’s theoretical propositions related to Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory were applied to the data. The theory allowed me to focus my attention on specific data, by providing me a framework for applying significance to it (Yin, 2009). I looked for the four elements of the social bond theory: (a) attachment, (b) commitment, (c) involvement, and (d) belief. Additionally, I gathered the themes together and began the process of fleshing out the data. Fleshing out the data is what Merriam (2009) referred to as “searching through the data for better units of relevant information” (p. 180).

Synthesis is the final stage of the analysis phase that involves putting everything back together for a final report. I used a graphic plan to aid in assembling, sorting, and organizing data from the study. The plan included the research questions of the study, the elements of the



social bond theory, and emergent themes. I categorized the themes. Working with the themes in this manner allowed me to have a sense of developing the final product. This process also provided me with the ability to review and reorganize as needed as I transitioned into the final stage of the analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an essential component of the qualitative research process.

Trustworthiness encompasses examining the accuracy of the findings and has also been referred to as the “authenticity” or “validity” of the research (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). To ensure the validity of the research, the credibility, transferability dependability, and confirmability of the data are essential (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Addressing each of the four areas during the research process ensured that the data obtained during the research were credible and trustworthy.

### **Credibility**

To obtain credibility of the research of this study, the study was reviewed by another educator with an Ed.D, who reviewed the emergent themes and interpretations of data obtained through the research process. Peer review allows for validation and accuracy of transcription and interpretation while limiting biases and partiality of the researcher during the research study process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Confirmability and Dependability**

Confirmability is a method used to increase the trustworthiness of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that confirmability is the ability of another person to attest and verify the work of the researcher. I utilized an audit trail by keeping records of every step of the research process from the beginning to the ending of the study. This step was taken so that readers can understand how I obtained the final results.

To ensure dependability of the study, data were collected through multiple measures, interviews, the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews. I tested the quality of the evidence by looking for commonalities among all three data sources (Merriam, 2009). Identifying triangulation among the three data sources provides confirmation and validation of the data (Stake, 2010). Triangulation is commonly pursued in research because it strengthens the data (Patton, 2002). Triangulation also ensures that the data gathered are “good” (Stake, 2010, p. 123). Validating the data by way of triangulation requires the researcher to “cross check” data across multiple sources (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). I searched for commonalities in the data that allowed me to validate the findings. I investigated all three sources of data, including transcripts of the interview questions and feedback from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) to identify the elements of the social bond theory. I searched for the four elements of the social bond theory. As Donner et al. (2016) suggested, by working through the theoretical framework of social bond theory, I was able to identify the four elements of the social bond theory (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) in the three sources of data. I also provided the participants with a transcribed copy of their responses to the interview, so that they had the opportunity to review the content and revise the transcripts as necessary.

### **Transferability**

Applying the findings from a study to another setting or study is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). To obtain transferability of the research, I provided thick, rich descriptions of the details of the research study. According to Stake (2010), a description is rich if it “provides abundant, interconnected details” of the study; it becomes thick once a direct connection to cultural theory and scientist knowledge has been established (p. 49).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Considering the nature of this research study, precautions were taken to protect the rights of the participants. Prior to beginning the research, formal approval from Liberty University's IRB was obtained. Formal permission from the superintendent of the school district where Hope Academy is located was secured and a statement approving the research on district letterhead was sent to the principal of Hope Academy. I met with the principal to discuss the purpose and data collection methods of the research, as well as to provide copies of all pertinent documentation. I obtained formal parental consent and student assent forms before beginning the research study. Participants were notified of the purpose of the research study and data collection methods in addition to the opportunity to opt out of the research anytime during the research study.

Confidentiality is essential in research and I was committed to ensuring that identities of participants were and are protected and remain confidential throughout and after the research process. I also explained procedures taken to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used for the name of the city, names of schools, and names of all participants of the study. I used codes to identify the participants on documents. All paper documents that may have associated codes with actual identities were locked in a file cabinet. Computerized information is kept on a locked device that requires an access code to gain access. After three years of completion all data will be destroyed. I am the only individual with access to the key and access code. After individual and focus group interviews were transcribed, the participants had the opportunity to conduct a member check by reviewing transcripts and revising any data collected.

## Summary

This case study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding into how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impact the perceptions of students attending a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. After IRB approval, parental consent, and (student) participants’ consent, data were gathered through individual interviews, the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus groups. Participants included 12 students who consented to participate in this study. To capture the essence of participants’ lived experiences, purposeful sampling was used to select participants who attended the freshman academy the 2016-2017 school year. Through data analysis, four main themes emerged, and understanding of participants’ perceptions was filtered through the lens of Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory. Triangulation, member checks, and bracking also were used to ensure triangulation. Ethical considerations for this study were addressed by using pseudonyms for participants and a laptop with password-protected access. Chapter Four includes description of the data from the research study, data analysis, and the results in more detail.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative, single instrumental case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. Chapter Four serves to document the data collection procedures, description of the participants, and the results of the data. The study included 12 sophomore students who attended the freshman academy during the 2016–2017 school year. This research study was focused on participants’ shared experiences at the freshman academy and their perception of school connectedness. Data collection included individual interviews, administration of the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) and focus group interviews. The findings from these data collection methods and developed themes are also be presented in this chapter. The data were collected and analyzed according to the data analysis procedures outlined in Chapter Three. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

### **Participants**

Hope Academy is a diversely populated freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeastern Alabama. The participants were current 10th grade students attending Hope High School who completed their previous year in Grade 9 at Hope Academy. There were 12 participants, including two African American males, four African American females, three Caucasian females, two Hispanic males, and one Hispanic female.

### **Hosea**

Hosea is a Hispanic male. He was indifferent about the Hope Academy. He felt that the unity and community of the school allowed him to establish friendships with students outside of

his normal social group. Hosea articulated, “We were like a family, we looked out for each other.” He also verbalized that the consistency and expectations of the teachers effectively prepared him for his 10th grade year.

### **Jazzmyn**

Jazzmyn is a African American female attending Hope High School. She played volleyball while at Hope Academy; and at the time of the study, was waiting for basketball season to arrive so she could try out. She enjoyed the closeness of teachers and friends at the freshman academy. Jazzmyn stated, “The freshman year was a good experience because my principals and teachers really cared about me.”

### **April**

April is a Caucasian female who did not like the organization of the freshman academy. She had a difficult time transitioning from the middle school to the freshman academy. She received several office referrals her freshman year and she spent 45 days of her freshman year at an alternative school. April did not like the segregation of the freshman academy. She said, “I didn’t like the freshman academy because we could not see anybody.”

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is a Caucasian female who was quite active in several extracurricular activities. She treasured the relationships established with teachers and students of Hope Academy. She stated, “I knew that my principals and teachers wanted me to succeed.” Elizabeth continues to maintain those relationships established during her freshman year.

### **Khaleb**

Khaleb is an African American male and is an exceptional athlete in football and basketball. He enjoys socializing with his teachers and explained that his favorite part of being

at the academy is knowing that his teachers monitored his academic growth. Khaleb expressed that he loves the constant encouragement he receives to do his work and strive for more. He articulated, “My teachers understood me and helped me make good decisions about my work.”

### **Gabriella**

Gabriella is a Hispanic female who excels academically. She managed her time well during her freshman year and enrolled in courses at the local community college. One thing she loved about her freshman year was the out-of-the-box learning activities provided by her teachers in the classrooms. Gabrielle stated, “The freshman academy was fun because we got to work together on fun projects.”

### **Charity**

Charity is an African American female student. She expressed that she was cautious when it comes to adults, but was able to establish a life-changing relationship with a teacher at the ninth grade academy. She verbalized, “I liked the freshman academy because I could be myself.”

### **Denesha**

Denesha is an African American female and although she was quiet and reserved, she exhibited signs of controlling her temperament. She did not like the separation of the academy and the middle school because she was not being able to interact with younger relatives who were also students at the school. Although Denesha did not like the separation, she stated that her teachers made sure that she was emotionally stable. She said, “My teachers knew when I was having a bad day and they helped me through it.”

### **Carlos**

Carlos is a Hispanic male student who is active in sports and several clubs. He

articulated that he enjoyed his freshman year; however, extracurricular options were limited at Hope Academy. He felt that freshman students needed more opportunities to get involved in school culture. Carlos stated, “I wanted to get involved more, but I had to wait until I got to 10th grade.”

### **NaKia**

NaKia is an African American female student who had a difficult year in the eighth grade. She stated that in the beginning she struggled academically, but the academic support she received from her teachers helped her make good grades. Although she had several behavioral infractions at the beginning of her freshman year, she was able to get back on track and successfully complete her freshman year. Her input about the freshman academy was, “I am doing good in high school because the freshman academy prepared me for it.”

### **Malik**

Malik is an African American male who participated in several clubs and extracurricular activities during his freshman year of high school. Although a self-described introvert, his experience at Hope Academy was positive because his principals and teachers were attentive to his needs and concerns. He said, “I knew that my principals cared because they would stay after school and tutor me for free.”

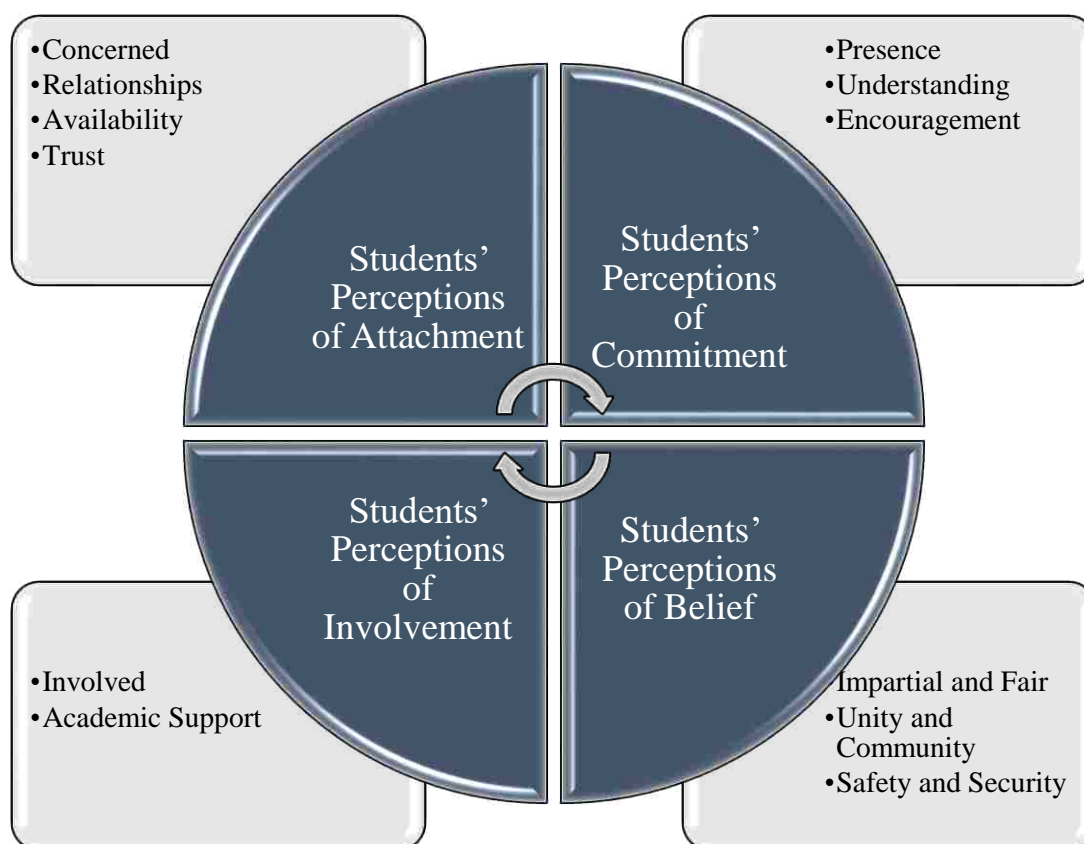
### **Anna Kate**

Anna Kate is a Caucasian female who is an avid athlete. She is a popular student, involved in many clubs and sports. She expressed her love of the freshman academy, but she thought that the space was too small for the number of students enrolled. She stated, “The freshman academy was good because we were not lost in the middle of the high school. Even though it was a small space, at least we didn’t have the older kids to worry about.”



## Results

Four major themes emerged during data analysis of participants' unique and individualized experiences at Hope Academy. The major themes included students' perceptions of attachment, students' perceptions of commitment, students' perceptions of involvement, and students' perceptions of belief. Each major theme also revealed several subthemes. Figure 2 illustrates the four major themes along with their representative subthemes.



*Figure 2.* Themes and subthemes.

Individual interviews, administration of the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews allowed participants to voice their genuine experiences that included their perception of school connectedness through personal experiences with principals, teacher–

student relationships, and school climate. While analyzing the data collected from the individual interviews, transcriptions were read to help develop meaningful thoughts and statements.

The SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) was also a source of data collection used to measure three distinct areas of school connectedness: connectedness to adults in the school, connectedness to peers, and connectedness to school. Participants completed the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) immediately after completion of the individual interview. The 54-question survey allowed students to rate their perceptions of school connectedness and to express their thoughts on the perception of their school and the people in the school through an additional source of feedback. The results from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) are represented on the table below.

Table 2

*SCS Results*

Item	Not at all true				Completely true
	1	2	3	4	5
I help my friends at school with their problems.	0%	0%	42%	8%	50%
When I have a problem, there is at least one adult at school I can trust.	0%	17%	8%	17%	58%
I would feel upset if someone said bad things about my school.	25%	17%	0%	50%	8%
I care what my classmates think of me.	50%	17%	17%	8%	8%
I try to make my teachers happy.	0%	0%	25%	42%	33%
I think my school is a safe place to be.	0%	0%	25%	42%	50%
I think my classmates are stupid.	67%	25%	0%	0%	8%
My teachers only notice me when I do something wrong.	58%	17%	17%	0%	8%
I always try to do my best in school.	0%	0%	18%	27%	55%
I often talk with an adult at my school about things that are important to me.	0%	17%	33%	33%	17%

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Item	Not at all true				Completely true
	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers care about me.	0%	0%	25%	25%	50%
Adults at my school care more about punishing students than helping them.	67%	17%	17%	0%	0%
I think the things I learn at school are useless.	58%	25%	8%	8%	0%
I encourage other students to get involved in school activities.	17%	8%	17%	42%	17%
My classmates ignore me.	58%	33%	8%	0%	0%
Sometimes, I skip class.	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Adults at my school are friendly to me.	0%	8%	8%	42%	42%
I do things that support my school.	0%	0%	25%	42%	33%
I can always find a friend to sit with at lunch.	0%	0%	0%	8%	92%
I talk to my friends at school about how I am feeling.	25%	8%	0%	8%	58%
I feel like this school is the right place for me.	0%	8%	8%	33%	50%
I think my teachers are stupid.	83%	17%	0%	0%	0%
I usually get along with the other students at my school.	17%	8%	17%	17%	42%
When I have a problem, I ask my friends at school for help.	0%	25%	17%	25%	33%
I think school is important.	0%	0%	0%	25%	75%
I usually feel bored in class.	0%	33%	33%	17%	17%
Students at my school usually help each other.	8%	8%	8%	42%	33%
I wish my classmates would just leave me alone.	58%	25%	8%	8%	0%
I only go to school because I have to.	67%	25%	0%	8%	42%
I am very involved in activities at my school, like clubs or teams.	25%	8%	17%	8%	42%
Adults at my school ask students how they are doing.	8%	17%	8%	17%	50%
I feel stupid cheering for my school.	58%	33%	8%	0%	0%

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Item	Not at all true				Completely true
	1	2	3	4	5
I talk back to my teachers.	42%	33%	25%	0%	0%
People I care about say bad things about my school.	58%	33%	8%	0%	0%
My teachers give me extra help when I need it.	0%	8%	25%	17%	50%
I like to make my teachers happy.	0%	0%	25%	33%	42%
I think my classmates like me.	0%	0%	50%	17%	33%
I like spending time with my classmates.	0%	17%	25%	33%	25%
Students at my school bully each other.	25%	25%	25%	0%	25%
I argue a lot with my teachers.	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
I feel lonely at school.	75%	17%	8%	0%	0%
I feel comfortable around other students.	8%	17%	17%	25%	33%
Teachers at my school care about their students.	0%	0%	17%	25%	58%
I fight with my classmates.	67%	8%	25%	0%	0%
I wish my teachers would leave me alone.	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
I often daydream or goof off in class.	33%	33%	8%	25%	0%
I would rather go to a different school.	50%	17%	17%	8%	8%
I feel like I fit in with the other students at my school.	9%	9%	45%	0%	36%
People I care about tell me that school is important.	17%	0%	0%	17%	67%
I would feel comfortable asking most of my classmates for help with a problem.	8%	0%	8%	42%	42%
I like going to school events, like sports events and dances.	0%	0%	8%	0%	92%
Adults at my school are interested in how students are doing.	0%	8%	17%	33%	42%
I care about my teachers' opinion of me.	17%	8%	25%	0%	50%
Teachers at my school are unfair to students.	58%	8%	25%	8%	0%

*Note.* The SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) was used with permission (see Appendix I).

Focus group interviews yielded additional sources of data. Two focus group interviews were conducted, with four participants in the first group and six present in the second group. Participants were asked a series of questions that targeted school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate. Participants took turns answering questions, while occasionally offering additional information to each other’s responses.

Table 3

*Focus Group Interview Codes*

Codes and phrases	Subthemes	Themes
Saw me as a person	Concerned	Attachment
Checked on me	Relationships	
Confide	Trust	
Office visits to talk	Availability	
Kept my secrets		
Trust		
Sort through disagreements		
Emotional support	Presence	Commitment
Principals in hallways	Understanding	
Teachers in hallways and doors	Encouragement	
Told me I could do it		
Pushed me to do better		
Always around (principals and teachers)		
Made an effort to understand me		
Talked to me		

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Codes and phrases	Subthemes	Themes
Tutoring	Academic support	Involvement
Learning was fun	Involved	
Helped me with my work		
Fun projects		
Played academic games		Belief
Everyone got along	Impartial and fair	
Reasonable	Safety and security	
Togetherness	Unity and community	
Locked doors		
School resource officer		
Cameras		

### **Theme 1: Attachment**

Attachment is the first element of social bond theory and has been defined by scholars as “an individuals’ bond with significant others” (Han et al., 2015, p. 2925; Hirschi, 1969).

Attachment was also the first major theme to emerge from the present study, based on participant perceptions. Four additional subthemes eventually emerged from the major theme of attachment. The subthemes that emerged were concerned, relationships, availability, and trust.

Figure 3 is a diagram of the second main theme, students’ perceptions of attachment. The diagram also includes the four subthemes outlined in this section.



*Figure 3.* Students' perceptions of attachment.

**Concerned.** Concern was the first subtheme that emerged from the major theme of attachment. In the study, attachment was exhibited through behaviors that are initiated in relationships or bonding (Hirschi, 1969). As evidenced in the interview responses, participants were open to forming relationships with principals and teachers because of the positive interaction among them. First, participants felt like the principals and teachers were genuinely concerned about their education and overall well-being. Participants' perceptions of concern from principals and teachers were rooted in attachment (Bao et al., 2012).

In regard to principals, participants frequently mentioned that principals consistently monitored their grades. As principals monitored the hallways, they would make a point to connect with participants to check on their grades, well-being, and possible personal issues. Carlos commented, "Principals would ask us if we need any help or if we have any problems, and to come and see them." In addition, Malik expressed,

The things they [principals] did when we were in school was if you got in trouble, were troubled, or had a problem, they [principals and teachers] tried to talk to you to reason with you about it, to see if they could help you take care of the problem. And if you were failing grades, they [principals] would try their best to help you. If you were failing, they [principals] would give you offerings of tutoring with the principals.

Participants also remarked that teachers contacted them daily about their grades and monitored their progress on assignments and projects. Teachers also knew when they were having a bad day or that something was bothering them. When asked to elaborate on teacher concern, NaKia added, “They [teachers] told me to stop getting in trouble and have a positive attitude. They [teachers] made an extra effort to help when needed.”

A statement on the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) related to teacher concern, more specifically addressing student well-being is represented on Table 3. Of the participants, 92% indicated that the adults in the school attempted to connect by asking students how they are doing.

**Relationships.** The second subtheme that emerged from the major theme of attachment was relationships. Researchers have suggested that formation of relationships is an essential part of connectedness (Joyce, 2015; Sampsa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). Many of the participants valued the relationships they had with the principals and teachers of Hope Academy (Gehlback et al., 2012). As with the first subtheme of concern, interview responses supported social bond theory’s element of attachment. In connection with the theme of attachment, participants’ responses accentuated relationships and bonds shared between principals, teachers, and participants.



Participants were not nameless and unknown; principals always addressed participants by name and purposefully attempted to connect on a personal level. Elsa mentioned that her principal “would try to help me to see the good side and bad side of it, I guess.” Each participant, at one point in time, had spent one-on-one time with one or both principals.

Participants also provided examples of teacher–student relationships. For example, Elsa had a relationship outside of school with one of her freshman teachers and the relationship carried over into the classroom. She explained, “She knew my cousin and they [teacher and cousin] were really good friends. We [participant and teacher] got together outside of school sometimes, like at the church or at the movies.” Charity expressed the following about her teachers: “They would listen and stuff like that.” In some cases, participants preferred speaking with the teacher over the principals. Carlos expressed, “I think it would be better to talk to a teacher than a principal, you interact more with the teacher than you do the principal, most of the time.”

**Availability.** The third subtheme that emerged from the first major theme of attachment was availability. Availability was a key term used by participants to describe dealings with principals and teachers at Hope Academy. The focus group responses and SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) results indicated that availability was a significant part in the attachment process (Tillery et al., 2013).

Most participants felt that the principals would make time to address any concerns they had as students. Participants stated that conversations always yielded good advice and that principals only wanted what was best for them. Elizabeth illustrated the overall participant views of availability when she expressed, “First they [principals] would ask me what the issue was and then they would discuss several different ways to help me. They would find the best

way to help me with it rather than just sticking to one way.”

As with principals, teachers also were available for students. Most participants stated that they would arrive to class early or stay late to talk to or receive help from their teachers. Gabriella stated, “My teachers would talk to me about some of my problems.” Charity said, “My teacher helped keep me out of trouble and if I ever needed any help, I could always go to her class.”

**Trust.** The fourth subtheme that emerged from the major theme of attachment during the analysis process was trust. According to individual interviews and the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) responses, trust encouraged relationship-building among principals, teachers, and students (Atkins et al., 2014). Participants stated that they trusted the principals of the freshman academy. A few favored the male principal over the female principal and vice-versa. Information shared with principals was shared in confidence and did not go beyond principals’ offices. Trust was highlighted in the Malik’s response when asked about his principals:

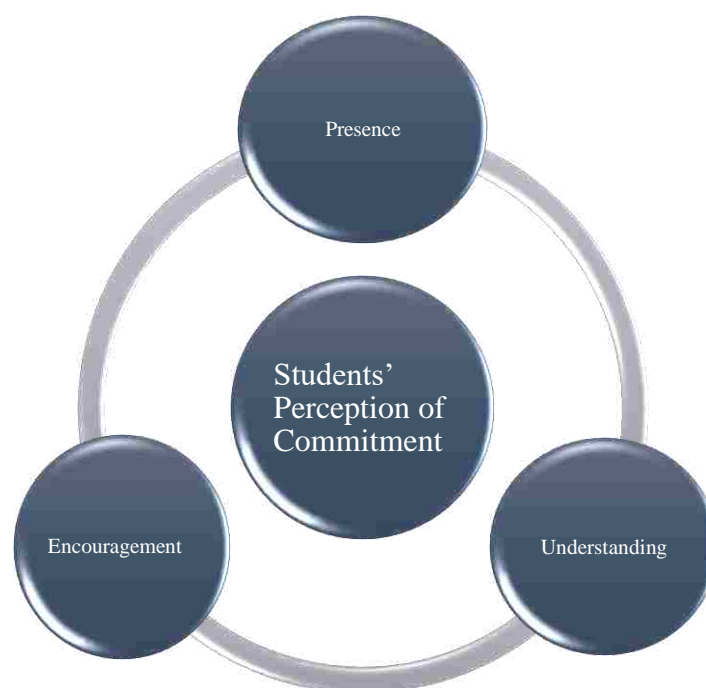
They [principals] gave me a sense of someone I could truly trust with a problem, and they always helped me, if I did have a problem, they helped me with it. They would find a way to take care of the problem.

Sometimes participants simply wanted to talk and vent about different things going on their lives. Jazzmyn mentioned that her teachers “were always there and I could talk to them when I needed to. The principals listened, and they viewed situations from a different perspective.” Additionally, in support of the subtheme trust, results from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) indicated that at least 50% of the participants felt that they had at least one adult in the school they could trust.

## Theme 2: Commitment

Commitment is the second element of the social bond theory and has been defined as “the time and energy invested in activities” (Han et al., 2015, p. 29, Hirschi, 1969). Commitment was the second major theme to emerge from the present study, based on participant perceptions. Three additional subthemes eventually emerged from the major theme of commitment, including presence, understanding, and encouragement.

Figure 4 is a diagram of the second main theme, students’ perceptions of commitment. The diagram also includes the three subthemes outlined in this section.



*Figure 4.* Students’ perceptions of commitment.

**Presence.** The first subtheme of students’ perceptions of commitment that emerged was of physical presence of both principals and teachers. Findings indicated that, in conjunction with the element of commitment, participant responses emphasized principal and teacher commitment to them through their presence.

Findings indicated that participants often referred to adult presence as a factor in identifying commitment to their success at Hope Academy. Hosea remembered this about principals: “They [principals] would walk into classes to observe the teachers and students. They [principals] would ask us questions every once and a while when they walked in there.” Participants also stated that it was hard to get into trouble because they were always supervised. Elizabeth stated, “Principals were always around, every day, and everywhere.” NaKia said, “I saw my principals during the day walking into and checking on classes.”

Participants voiced that teachers were visible in the mornings and at the end of the day. According to participants, teachers had a practice of standing outside the classroom to greet students. According to Khaleb, “Teachers would ask how are you doing. They were visible during instructional time and during the changing of classes. Principals also walked students out the building at the end of the day.” Also, Jazzmyn declared that her teachers “were always there and I could talk to them when I needed to.”

**Understanding.** Understanding was the second subtheme that emerged during the analysis process. Understanding was an area of significant value for the participants of this study. Findings indicated that participants appreciated having adults who sacrificed time to listen and “talk to us, not at us.” Participants recognized this gesture from adults as being from those who understood obstacles they faced as freshman students. They often felt that because they are young, they could be perceived as children who are uniformed. They expressed that they appreciated the teachers and principals listening to them. Many students at this age may feel misunderstood and appreciate having someone who understands how they feel during their teenage years. It is important to them that the principals and teachers do not overreact to their situations and help them adjust and do well at the academy.

Understanding was extremely significant to the participants of this study. It was important to them that the principals helped them adjust and do well at the Academy by not overreacting to situations. Participants stated that when they were in trouble, principals gave them an opportunity to explain the reasoning for their inappropriate behavior. Malik voiced, “Things were not as always as they appeared. They listened and took other things into consideration.” Principals did not immediately issue a punishment without conferencing with the student. During the conference, principals discussed infractions and consequences. Several participants explained that this deterred them from getting in trouble and to make better decisions.

There was more interaction with teachers as compared with principals. Participants stated that teachers knew them better than principals did and could detect when something was wrong. For example, Jazzmyn said, “Sometimes I was having a bad day and they [teachers] would give me a time to cool off.” An academic example of understanding was from Meridia who stated, “After failing a test, [teacher] asked me what was going on with me. She said ok and told me that I could retake the test on Wednesday.”

**Encouraging.** Encouraging was the last and final subtheme that emerged from the analysis process of students’ perceptions of commitment. Encouragement from principals and teachers had a great influence on the freshman academy experience.

Responses from participants revealed that encouragement received from teachers and principals provided them with the motivation they needed to effectively transition from middle school to high school. For example, Malik revealed,

For some reason, she always inspired me to keep going on ‘cause every time I did something she’d, like, she always said that she saw something good in me. And, like, she

always brought me up when I felt bad or I felt like I didn't want to talk to anybody, she would talk to me and make me feel better.

Participants articulated that teachers consistently encouraged them to do their best during their freshman year. Gabriella stated, "The freshman academy teachers worked hard at getting us ready for the high school." April stated, "My teachers would just push me harder so that I could achieve it and the work was a lot harder and it was way more work than middle school."

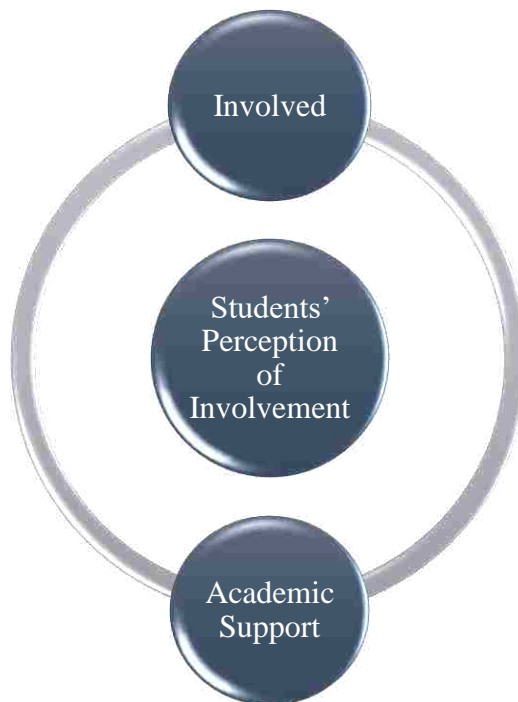
Participants perceived encouragement as a method used by teachers to support them in striving to meet their goals. More specifically, participants stated that teachers encouraged them on assignments and encouraged them to make better choices in their behavior. Khaleb reminisced about an encounter with his favorite teacher:

One day when playing around in class, she always watched me when I would do my work. She expected me to do more. Like when I had other teachers' classes, I said that I am going to play a lot, but she always watched me. She would always tell me that I could do it. If I didn't know the answer, she would give you little hints. I don't care what you do in other classes, but you are going to do great in my class.

### **Theme 3: Involvement**

Involvement is the third element of the social bond theory and has been defined as "the time and energy an individual spends participating in conventional activities" (Han et al., 2015, p. 29, Hirschi, 1969). Involvement was the third major theme to emerge from the present study, based on participant perceptions. Two additional subthemes eventually emerged from the major theme of involvement, including involved and academic support.

Figure 5 is a diagram of the second main theme, students' perceptions of involvement. The diagram also includes the two subthemes outlined in this section.



*Figure 5.* Students' perceptions of involvement.

**Involved.** Involved was the first subtheme that developed during data analysis under students' perceptions of involvement. Involvement was also the third component of the social bond theory and was highlighted in the findings of this research.

Involvement was an emphasized trait that was present in participants' responses. Principals were deeply involved in school culture and student life. For instance, Charity recounted about principals, "They were not just visible, but they [principals] were involved in daily activities and school programs." Principals also participated in student activities. Several of the participants recounted a faculty versus students dodgeball game. Charity expressed, "We had so much fun playing with our principals. They actually know how to have fun." Principals were deeply involved in the academic progress of students. NaKia articulated, "They were always checking on our grades. If we made bad on an assignment, they would pull us to the side

and talk to us.” Elizabeth stated, “We had meetings as a ninth grade group and principals told us that if we needed any help with our work or tutoring to come to them.”

Teachers were also involved in school activities and community projects. Teachers worked closely with students in classrooms and in school-sponsored clubs and organizations. Participants articulated examples of teachers being involved outside of the classroom. Elsa reflected on working with her teacher at the football games: “We worked to cook, bag, and sell peanuts to raise money for our club.” Other participants stated that they worked with their teachers to compete and win the National Peanut Festival Contest.

Also, teachers played outside games such as softball and kickball. Gabriella expressed, “It was fun watching them play with us. They laughed with us, we had a good time.”

**Academic help.** Academic help was the second subtheme that emerged from the analysis process and its connection to students’ perceptions of involvement was indicated in the responses provided in the interviews and the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). Students are more likely to successfully complete freshman year when safeguards are in place to address academic barriers (Oscar & Bamidale, 2015). At Hope Academy, principals and teachers created an academically responsive learning environment focused on immediately addressing academic struggles.

Principals were instrumental in creating a school where student achievement was a priority. Participants stated that principals were a huge part of the tutoring program for Hope Academy. Constant monitoring of grades provided principals with the ability to immediately identify struggling students and create a plan of action to provide needed support. Elsa verbalized, “They [principals] were serious about our work. I remember seeing the principals stand in the hallways giving out make-up work slips.” According to participants, principals



would tutor during the day or stay after school and tutor students. Hosea stated, “I really appreciate the extra help from our principals. I don’t think I would have done as well as I did.”

Bell declared,

Principals really cared about our education and would do whatever it took to help us make good grades. They were always trying to get you to do better in your classes. They would ask me what was going on and that I needed to go to tutoring.

According to participants, teachers created an academically responsive learning environment focused on immediately addressing academic struggles. Charity expressed, “If you did everything the teachers told you to do, it was impossible to fail.”

Teachers consistently checked assignments and grades. Participants stated that they would receive weekly printouts of incomplete or failed assignments. Khaleb stated,

Once a week we would get a print out of assignments that we needed to make up. We had a couple of days to get the work in or she would call our parents. I didn’t want her calling my mama, so I always did my work.

Teachers also provided extra help and tutoring for students. April explained, “I could always come in early to class to get help with something I didn’t understand. I could stay after class, if it was their planning period.”

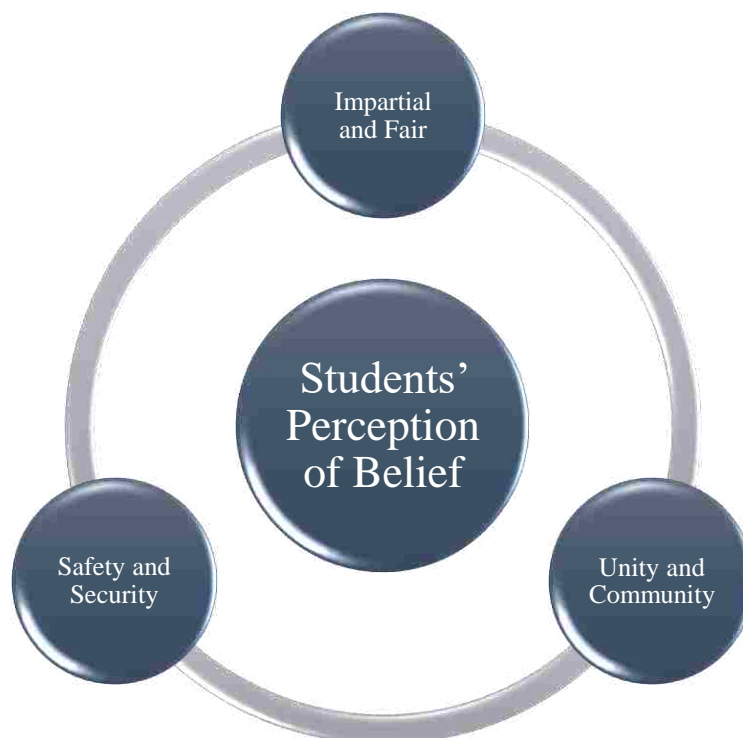
In support of the subtheme of academic help, results from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) supported students’ receiving extra help. Participants selected a 4 or 5 on the survey, indicating that 67% of participants received extra help from teachers when needed.

#### **Theme 4: Belief**

Belief is the fourth element of the social bond theory and has been defined as “acceptance of rules and values” (Han et al., 2015, p. 29, Hirschi, 1969). Belief was the fourth major theme

to emerge from the present study, based on participant perceptions. Three additional subthemes eventually emerged from the major theme of belief, including impartial and fair, unity and community, and safety and security.

Figure 6 is a diagram of the second main theme, students' perceptions of belief. The diagram also includes the three subthemes outlined in this section.



*Figure 6.* Students' perceptions of belief.

**Impartial and fair.** Impartial and fair was the first subtheme that emerged during the analysis process. Impartial and fair were two words that were used to describe the principals, teachers, and school climate in regard to the school rules of Hope Academy. Participants' responses to interviews and/or the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) highlighted social bond theory's belief component.

Principals were key in creating an impartial and fair learning environment. Several of the participants emphasized that fairness depended on the situation. According to participants, when participants were in trouble for breaking the rules, an explanation of rules and policies, along with the reason for the consequence were provided. Participants felt valued when their feelings and voices were heard and taken into consideration. In some cases, after hearing participants' accounts, principals revised consequences. Participants stated that this made them feel like they had a voice in the matter, like their opinions mattered. Anna Kate stated, "Principals did not play favorites among the students, everyone received the same punishment." NaKia articulated, "It didn't matter where you came from or what your last name was, everybody got the same punishment."

Participants reflected on the impartiality and fairness of teachers of Hope Academy. According to participants, teachers held all students accountable for their work and behavior. April stated, "Teachers helped everybody. They acted the same with everybody." Also, Jazzmyn recounted, "I am not from here, but I was treated just like the other kids. I wasn't treated like an outsider."

In support of the subtheme of impartial and fair, results from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) indicated the fairness of the teachers. Participants selected a 1 or 2 on the question, "Teachers at my school are unfair." The results revealed that 67% of participants reported that teachers were fair.

**Unity and community.** The second subtheme that emerged was unity and community. Most participants expressed that the isolation of Hope Academy allowed the students to develop a feeling of community. The freshman academy model is successful for ninth graders because it allows students the opportunity to grow and mature together as a group (Styron & Peasant, 2010;

Warren et al., 2011). Hope Academy was a place where they were able to socialize and interact with their teachers and friends. The majority of the participants loved the freshman academy structure.

Principals worked vigorously to build a school culture that was facilitated by unity and community. According to participants, although they did not have a freshman team on campus, principals created opportunities for freshman students to attend pep rallies. Elsa recounted, “We were left out of the high school events, so our principals allowed us to have a ninth grade formal. It was like a prom for ninth graders, it was really nice.” An additional example of unity was provided by Anna Kate: “We all came together to raise money for cancer research. It made us feel like we were working for a cause.”

Teachers created classrooms that were a direct reflection of school culture. Participants stated that teachers often provided opportunities for students and teachers to work together. Hosea stated, “I liked the freshman academy because I did not have the pressures of dealing with the older kids.” Participants verbalized that the school climate was positive and that, for the most part, everyone got along. Charity stated, “Although there were different groups of students from different backgrounds and experiences, we all came together to be helpful to one another.” Many assignments were completed by working together in groups. Students often encouraged and tutored each other. As Elizabeth stated, “Everybody wanted everybody to be happy and succeed.”

**Safety and security.** Safety and security was the third and last subtheme that developed during the analysis process. Safety and security was a reoccurring theme and was articulated by all participants of the study. A sense of safety in a school has an indirect impact on school

experience and academic success (CDC, 2009; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). According to participants, the freshman academy was a safe place for several different reasons.

Participants stated that principals of Hope Academy purposefully created a safe and secure learning environment for students. Principals implemented several procedures and safeguards to ensure students' safety. Elsa declared, "It was like being in a protective bubble." The gates around the school always remain locked and the only people with keys are principals and custodians. Safety measures also contributed to the limited access outsiders had to the school. As witnessed through my employment, all activity was monitored by a security camera. People without keys to the building had to gain access to the school from office personnel by pressing a doorbell. The freshman academy share a resource officer with two other schools that are less than a mile away. If a situation required immediate action, the response time is quick. The resource officer also periodically monitor the halls, check locked doors, and monitor school games and other student activities.

Teachers were proactive in creating a safe learning environment in classrooms. Participants collectively stated that classroom doors remained locked, teachers always stood in the hallways, fire and severe weather drills were practiced, and unannounced searches for drugs and weapons helped keep them safe. Carlos also stated, "Teacher presence made me feel safe." Elsa stated, "I felt like the teachers had our back if anything ever went down."

Results from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) indicated that 75% of the participants chose a 4 or 5 on the question asking if students in the school usually help each other. Additional data from the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) suggested that 83% of the participants felt like Hope Academy was the best school for them.

## Research Question Responses

**Research Question 1: How does school leadership impact students' perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?** The findings of the study revealed students' perceptions of school connectedness were critically impacted by the Hope Academy principals, who were instrumental in shaping the learning environment and creating a positive school culture. Student success was indirectly impacted by the principals' influence. Participants observed principals actively involved in the school culture, by being always "visible" and "available" to the students of the freshman academy. Malik stated, "Principals were always around ready to help anyone who needed it." According to NAASP (2013), principals have the power to provide academic and emotional stability. Participants felt that principals valued them as students and went out of their way to connect with them and build relationships. Elsa said, "Principals would call us into the office to ask about our grades and asked if we needed tutoring." Principals were not perceived as the enforcers of discipline, but they demonstrated a genuine interest in students' academic and emotional well-being. According to Charity, "Principals did not always jump to conclusions, they would give us a chance to talk before making a decision." Participants expressed that principals knew them by name and would often interact with them in the hallways and in classrooms to promote positive academics and behaviors. Carlos articulated, "Principals were the first people we saw in the mornings and the last people we saw at the end of the school day."

Learning expectations were set by principals of the freshman academy and they continuously monitored participants' grades. Principals also supervised classroom instruction and student engagement. They interacted with the students in the classroom and questioned participants about the lesson, such as what they were learning and why it was important. If

principals noticed a student struggling with content, they immediately worked with the student and suggested afterschool tutoring.

Perceptions of school leadership were impacted by principals' ability to fulfill emotional and academic needs (MacFarlane, 2010). Participants respected their school leaders because they trusted them and perceived them as being fair and supportive to all students. Several of the participants stated that they confided in their principals about personal issues, and whatever discussed was safe with them. Denesha said, "I didn't have to worry about hearing it across the school." Occasionally, principals also helped students find a solution to the problem. Most participants stated that the principals were impartial and fair. If a situation occurred that required principal intervention, an explanation was provided along with an opportunity for the students to voice their opinions. Although consequences for infractions were implemented, participants understood and accepted it. Also, as it relates to discipline, participants felt like everyone received the same punishment. Malik proclaimed, "They didn't show any favoritism." Anna Kate stated, "It did not matter where you were from or what your last name was, we were all treated the same."

**Research Question 2: How do teacher–student relationships impact students' perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?** Findings from this study indicated that students' perceptions of school connectedness were definitely impacted by the relationships and bonds established with the teachers of Hope Academy. The subthemes of concerned, relationships, availability, trust, presence, understanding, encouragement, academic help, and involved developed from the findings of this study. According to research, relationships with teachers are especially important and necessary during freshman year (Hughes et al., 2012). The freshman year

experience impacts the students' academic trajectory (Coffey, 2013). Relationships and bonds participants shared with their freshman academy teachers were valued and treasured. Teachers purposefully made themselves available for their students. Teachers told students from the first day of school and throughout the year that they were there if students ever needed them. Several of the participants expressed gratitude for the adults at Hope Academy because teachers helped them with personal problems and to overcome barriers faced during their freshman year. A participant revealed that one of her teachers knew when something was bothering her before anyone else did, even her friends. Another participant voiced that her teacher would take her outside to remove her from the situation in the classroom and help her refocus by telling her that "it wasn't worth it."

Kiefer et al. (2014) reported that teacher–student relationships are powerful influences in and out of the classroom. Relationships and bonds are strengthened between students and teachers through socializing after school hours. Hope Academy is located in a small community and many people gathered in some of the same locations. For example, teachers and students worked together on community and civic projects, and some participants attended events at a teacher's local church. Participants expressed that they unquestionably trusted the teachers of the freshman academy. All participants articulated that they had at least one teacher they trusted and could confide in. One participant expressed preferring to discuss situations over with her teachers rather than her friends because she knew that she would receive good advice.

Participants perceived that Hope Academy teachers were proactive in supporting them in their academic success. Teachers would always encourage their students to do better and to work harder. Khaleb expressed, "Our teachers would not allow us to get lazy or play in class." Teachers also monitored grades and distributed weekly slips for makeup work on a weekly basis.



If a student struggled academically, teachers offered to tutor and, in some cases, allowed the student to retake the assignment. Teachers of the freshman academy also established and supervised behavioral expectations in the school. Teachers often intervened to deescalate disagreements between students, which minimized disputes and fights.

**Research Question 3: How does school climate impact students' perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?** Findings from this study indicated that students' perceptions of school connectedness were greatly impacted by the school climate of Hope Academy. Themes that emerged that were associated with climate were unity, community, and safety. Gülşen and Gülenay (2014) found that perception of climate impacts school connectedness and the overall school experience. Most participants stated that the climate of the freshman academy had a feeling of community. Principals, teachers, and students worked together to fulfill the school's mission of adequately preparing freshman students for high school. Collaboration provided the opportunity for students to communicate with students outside of their usual peer group. Nakia made this statement about the students of Hope Academy: "Everyone supported each other." Students often worked together to complete classroom assignments and projects. Students of Hope Academy also spent the majority of the day together and built bonds and friendships.

Participants of this study expressed their appreciation and gratitude for Hope Academy. They liked being able to academically prepare for the expectations of high school before physically moving to a high school campus. Although technically high school students, these students were not pressured by barriers that exist in traditional high school settings. According to McCallumore and Sparapani (2010), the freshman academy model typically provides a learning climate that nurtures the development of adolescent students. Students were able to

physically and developmentally transition through the freshman year without outside negative influences (Warren et al., 2011). Hope Academy academically and socially equipped students to meet the rigor and demand of high school; students received high school treatment with middle school support.

According to Wilkinson-Lee et al. (2011), feelings of safety, security, and protection are necessary for students to establish a feeling of school connectedness. Implemented safety measures included various drills and procedures, and school personnel contributed to students' perceptions of safety and security. Principals and teachers consistently monitored the classrooms, halls, and lunchrooms. They remained conscious and aware of students' movements and activities. Elizabeth stated, "They were always watching." Visitors are required to wear a visitor's badge issued by office personnel. If someone is noticed walking the halls without a badge, the administration is immediately notified. The entire middle school campus remains locked, and access is only obtained by individuals with keys or through office authorization. The freshman academy also shares a resource officer with the other schools in the city. The schools are less than a mile apart. If a situation required law enforcement, the process time was minimal.

### **Summary**

This chapter included detailed description of the findings from the analysis of data from individual interviews, the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews. The study results were presented, and the study themes were identified. Four main themes emerged, including students' perception of attachment, students' perceptions of commitment, students' perceptions of involvement, and students' perceptions of belief representing the expressed meanings and influences obtained from statements made by participants.

The first theme, students' perceptions of attachment, was associated with four subthemes, including concerned, relationships, availability, and trust. Students' perceptions of attachment were shaped by the relationships and bonds constructed between principals and teachers during their ninth grade year at Hope Academy (Bryan et al., 2012; Hirschi, 1969). The second theme was students' perceptions of commitment, which was identified through participants' self-motivated obligation to their academic success at Hope Academy (Bao et al., 2012; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). The subthemes that accompanied this theme were presence, understanding, and encouragement. The third theme was students' perceptions of involvement and subthemes that supported this theme were academic help and involved. Participants consistently referred to principal and teacher support and involvement in academic support and school culture (Donner et al., 2015; Joyce, 2015). The fourth theme that emerged was students' perceptions of belief and the subthemes that supported this theme were impartial and fair, unity and community, and safety and security. Interactions and connections with adults and peers allowed participants to have a positive freshman year experience (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). Participants expressed their appreciation and gratitude for Hope Academy.

The findings of the study in regard to the research questions of the study revealed that all participants believed school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted their perceptions of school connectedness. Most participants revealed that their positive experience was based largely on relationships with adults at Hope Academy. Negative freshman experiences were associated with negative relationships with adults and peers.

All participants emphasized that school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate had an impact on their perception of school connectedness. The findings reported in Chapter Four are consistent and aligned with the literature findings discussed in Chapter Two.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The high school dropout rate is impacted by students' perceptions of school connectedness (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Habeeb, 2013; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). School connectedness impacts students' sense of belonging as well as their academic success (Atkins et al., 2014; Chung-Do et al., 2013; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015). According to White et al. (2014), school connectedness dramatically decreases as students advance into high school. This decrease led to many school districts restructuring school to include freshman academies with the purpose of providing nurturing and developmentally responsive learning environments (McCullumore & Sparapani, 2010; Styron & Peasant, 2010).

This study represents an effort to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students' perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. The foundation of the study came from understanding the perceptions and experiences of students who attended the freshman academy during the 2016–2017 school year. Chapter Five includes the summary of the findings; discussion of the study; implications, delimitations, limitations of the study; and recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

This case study served to explore students' perceptions of school connectedness and how that perception was impacted by school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate. Through the analysis process, four main themes and 12 subthemes emerged. These themes and subthemes provided valuable insight to better understand and answer the research questions. Interview analysis from individual and focus group interviews and the SCS

(Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) results revealed students' perceptions of school connectedness at the freshman academy. The research questions targeted school leadership, teacher student relationships, and school climate and the impact each had on school connectedness. Most participants consistently and uniformly spoke favorably of their school experience while they were ninth grade students at Hope Academy. School leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate had an immense impact on their perceptions of school connectedness.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question was, “How does school leadership impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?” School leadership at the freshman academy was described as the driving force for Hope Academy. According to Nir and Hameiri (2014), principals have both direct and indirect influence over the learning climate in schools. Principals laid the foundation of academic excellence and positive behavior expectations a Hope Academy by inspecting what was expected. Student achievement was fostered by expectations established by school principals. Previous research revealed that schools with principals who vigorously motivate and inspire students to work toward academic excellence have higher rates of success (Cohen et al., 2009).

Regarding academic expectations, principals were active and hands-on in making sure students were and remained on track. Actions were taken to connect with students, identify problems, and provide necessary academic support. All participants expressed that principals and teachers frequently met about their grades and observed classrooms during instructional time. Participants expressed gratitude for their principals and their involvement during their freshman year. The continuous support acted as a safe guard to prevent them from slipping

through the cracks and failing. Principals created a learning environment that participants perceived as a secure place. Not only was the freshman academy physically safe, but it was emotionally safe as well. Participants felt they could confide in principals about difficulties or barriers that affected them. Additionally, participants felt that their principals acknowledged them as individuals and valued them as young adults. Simple conversations with the principals of Hope Academy curtailed disagreements and disputes.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question was, “How do teacher–student relationships impact students’ perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?” Teachers of the freshman academy were effective in the overall mission of preparing ninth grade students for high school. Failing was not an option for students of Hope Academy. Participants articulated the overwhelming support received from their teachers during their freshman year. They especially enjoyed Hope Academy because teachers made learning fun. Teachers incorporated unique teaching methods along with adding hands-on learning activities and projects. Participants explained that project-based learning activities, group activities, and role-playing helped them relate to and comprehend instruction. For students who needed extra help, teachers would be before and after school as well as during breaktime and planning periods.

Teachers provided an emotionally responsive environment for the students of Hope Academy. Freshman year is a developmentally sensitive year for students and adult relationships promote healthy development (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013; Tillery et al., 2013). Also, relationships and bonds between teachers and students support the physical, emotional, and academic transition of adolescent students (Montgomery & Hirth,

2011). Just as with the principals, participants felt like they could trust their teachers. Participants felt that certain teachers could relate to them better than others, but they were all there for the students when and if they needed them. Participants' descriptions of the school climate of the freshman academy was positive and encouraging. Findings from this study supported previous research that indicates a healthy school climate is built upon healthy relationships with adults and peers (White et al., 2014). Participants enjoyed attending school and participating in school events. Principals and teachers established learning expectations and students were provided with the required support to reach academic success. Participants used the words *community* and *unity* to describe the school climate. Participants got along and worked well together, and said that everyone looked out for each other.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question was, "How does school climate impact students' perceptions of school connectedness of ninth grade students in a freshman academy located on a middle school campus?" Feelings of safety in a school has a great influence on students' perception of connectedness (Joyce, 2015). Participants also perceived the freshman academy's climate as being safe from the outside as well as safe inside. There are several procedures in place to ensure student safety. The freshman academy is separated from younger students of the middle school, and only those permitted are allowed access. Doors of the freshman academy remain locked at all times. Participants said that they are protected by locked doors and locked gates as well as school personnel and a resource officer. Students worked together and got along. The freshman academy did not have many fights, and there were no reported incidents of bullying.

School climate is a significant and influential force in a school as it shapes the perception of school connectedness. In this study, positive school climate contributed to the academic

stability of the students of Hope Academy. Participants articulated several times that the adults in the school were proactive in providing academic and emotional support. Continual monitoring of assignments and grades, and providing extra help and extraordinary instruction provided them with the sturdy foundation they needed to be successful as freshman students.

The overall positive school climate of Hope Academy contributes to the standards and expectations established by principals and teachers who were motivated to create a learning environment that fosters safety and allows for the building of caring relationships. The positive school climate has contributed to the decrease in negative behaviors among students. After the implementation of Hope Academy, student absenteeism and office referrals significantly decreased. Most participants enjoyed attending freshman academy and interacting with principals, teachers, and peers.

Data analysis of participants' responses indicated participants' perceptions of school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate significantly impacted student's perception of connectedness. Students' perceptions of school connectedness directly impacted participants' freshman year experience. Hope Academy had a 100% promotion rate during the 2016–2017 school year, a decrease in truancy, and a decrease in office referrals. Participants experienced a connection to their school and to the people of the school. Connections with teachers allowed students to form bonds and build trusting relationships. Bonds that participants shared with principals and teachers were meaningful and valuable. Principals knew participants on personal levels and were attentive to and active in the school culture. Participants treasured the relationships established with Hope Academy's principals and teachers and many of these relationships have grown beyond freshman year.



## **Discussion**

School systems across the United States are working to decrease the nation's high school dropout rate. According to research, one reason students are dropping out of school is because there is lack of connectedness or sense of belonging in the high school setting (Chapman et al., 2014; Chung-Do et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students' perception of school connectedness. The study included 12 sophomore participants ranging in ages from 15–17 years old. The common themes that emerged from the study were students' perceptions of attachments, students' perceptions of commitment, students' perceptions of involvement, and students' perceptions of belief. This discussion addresses the relationship between the findings of the study, the empirical research, and the guiding theoretical framework.

In this qualitative study, participants participated in individual interviews, the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), and focus group interviews. This process allowed insight into the shared experiences of the participants while students at the freshman academy. Contained in this section is a presentation of the theoretical framework which supported understanding the implications of the research study.

### **Empirical Discussion**

The results of this study extended knowledge of social bond theory with respect to students' perceptions of school connectedness of students attending a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. All four of the components of the social bond theory were evidenced as described by the participants of the middle school freshman academy (Hirschi, 1969). Descriptions of the social bond theory components were expressed when participants recounted school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate at the freshman

academy. Participants described their time at the freshman academy and how it had an impact on their high school experience. Participants described school leadership and teachers as supportive, concerned for their education, available, and trustworthy, traits that describe attachment. Participants also felt that principals sacrificed their personal time to help them. Elizabeth mentioned that “They have their own families, but they stayed after to tutor us when we needed it.” After participants observed the commitment of principals and teachers, they became committed to their education. They indicated that they understood what was required of them in the ninth grade because it had been explained by their principals and teachers. They took the initiative to seek tutoring with teachers, peers, or principals. When working together on group projects, they worked hard because the group was depending on them. Participants said that they obeyed the rules of the school because they were necessary and, for the most part, fair. Carlos stated that the rules of the school “kept us safe and kept the school running smoothly.” Participants expressed their involvement in the different school activities at the freshman academy and they also stated that they wished they could have had more options of extracurricular activities.

### **Theoretical Discussion**

Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory was the theoretical framework used to support the current study. The findings of the study have been associated with school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate and the impact they have on school connectedness. Hirschi (2009) described social bond theory as the belief that relationships are significant in human development and that negative or deviant behaviors occur when social bonds are broken (Helfgott, 2008; Vito & Maahs, 2017). The social bond theory had a substantial role in the study of the cognitive, social, emotional adjustment of students in a school setting (Free, 2013;

Peguero et al., 2016). Attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief are the fundamental principles of the social bond theory (Hirschi, 1969). Students benefit from relationships with adults in a school setting (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Langille et al., 2015). These students tend to perform better academically and have a better overall school experience than do those who do not have relationships (Rich & Schachter, 2012; Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015).

Attachment was the first main theme and first element of social bond theory. Attachment was defined as an emotional connection to a person or institution (Bryan et al., 2012). In the case of Hope Academy, participants felt that the adults in the school were concerned and valued them as students (Phillippo & Stone, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). According to Bryan et al. (2012), attachment also indicates students' satisfaction and approval with their school, as well as their perception of fairness and safety.

Concern, relationships, availability, and trust were the subthemes that formed the main theme of attachment. Participants articulated that relationships with the adults of Hope Academy were important to them, as were principals' and teachers' availability, trust, and concern for participants' academic and emotional well-being. According to the results of the SCS (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011), most participants indicated a satisfaction with Hope Academy and that the school was the best fit for them.

Commitment was the second main theme and second element of social bond theory. Commitment was defined as "investment an individual has in conventional activities" (Hart & Mueller, 2012, p. 117). According to Han et al. (2015), student commitment is evidenced by behaviors of internalizing the norms and values of their school. Commitment is apparent when students take ownership of their education through taking initiative by adhering to all academic

obligations (Styron & Peasant, 2010).

Commitment was supported by the subthemes presence, understanding, and encourage. Participants' perceptions were shaped by the level of commitment exhibited by the adults of Hope Academy. Participants indicated that adults demonstrated commitment by their presence and through understanding and encouragement.

Involvement was the third theme and third level of social bond theory. According to Hart and Mueller (2012) involvement is defined as "proportion of time spent on conventional activities" (p. 117). Involvement in various activities allowed students to establish relationships and bond with adults and peers in their school (Han et al., 2015). Participation in extracurricular and school activities serves as a safeguard against negative and delinquent behaviors (Han et al., 2015).

Two subthemes that supported involvement were academic support and involved. Findings indicated that academic support and the level of involvement of the adults of Hope Academy shaped participants' perceptions of school connectedness. Participants who were involved in teacher-sponsored extracurricular activities and clubs expressed satisfaction and fulfillment with those same teachers in the classroom.

The fourth and final component of the social bond theory was belief, "an individual's level of belief in the moral validity of shared social values and norms" (Hart & Mueller, 2012, p. 117). According to research, once students have reached this level in social bond theory, they were less likely to violate social values and norms (Han et al., 2015).

Impartial and fair, unity and community, and safety and security were the three subthemes that formed the main theme of belief. Participants' acceptance of all three subthemes was instrumental in impacting the perception of school connectedness.

## **Implications**

The purpose of this case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students’ perceptions of school connectedness. The findings revealed several implications for school leaders, teachers, and the entire education community. The theoretical, empirical, and practical aspects of the data analysis highlighted measures that can be used to close the gap in research targeting administrators and teachers in the high school setting, specifically ninth grade. This study has also added to the body of literature highlighting the impact that school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate has on school connectedness.

### **Empirical Implications**

The perception of school connectedness is an undeniable power in the learning process. Students who have a sense of belonging perform better academically, have an increased sense of self-worth, and have a better overall school experience (Joyce, 2015; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015). School leaders have the power to have an impact on student achievement (Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014; Nir & Hameiri, 2014; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Principals of Hope Academy were devoted to establishing high learning and behavior expectations. Participants within this research confirmed that their principals had high expectations and were actively involved in ensuring that everyone worked toward reaching those expectations. Meaningful relationships with teachers act as a motivator, as well as a safeguard against negative behaviors for students (Conner et al., 2014; Corso et al., 2013). This was evident during the research process, as participants confirmed that teachers were, in fact, influential in their academic performance, as well as in encouraging them in making positive decisions. A positive school climate is a crucial factor in educating students and promotes academic engagement, success, and school safety

(Phillippo & Stone, 2013; White et al., 2014). Participants affirmed that the climate of Hope Academy promoted academic excellence in an environment where they felt safe.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Findings of this study have important theoretical implications by adding support to the existing social bond theory. The analysis process illuminated the four components that serve as the fundamental principles of Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. The findings of the study have been associated with school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate and the impact they have on school connectedness. Hirschi (1969) described social bond theory as the belief that relationships are significant in human development and that negative or deviant behaviors occur when social bonds are broken (Helfgott, 2008; Vito & Maahs, 2017). According to research, students benefit from relationships with adults in a school setting (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Langille et al., 2015). These students tend to perform better academically and have a better overall school experience than do those who do not have relationships (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016; Oscar & Bamidele, 2015; Rich & Schachter, 2012).

### **Practical Implications**

Hope Academy is the only freshman academy housed on a middle school campus that is located in southeast Alabama. Therefore, it could serve as a freshman academy model for districts seeking to implement a middle school freshman academy in their school systems. The structure and operation of Hope Academy can provide valuable information on its success. With the possibility of implementing a freshman academy, professional development that targets school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and positive school climate is essential. The most important outcome of this research was to bring awareness to school connectedness and the

impact it has on student well-being. Participants' responses consistently attributed their freshman year success to their sense of belonging at the freshman academy. Participants also noted that their current success as sophomore students was mainly due to the foundation established in ninth grade.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

This study was focused on the impact school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate has on students' perception of school connectedness. Each research study has delimitations as factors that impact the study, but are controlled by researcher (Moustakas, 2010). This study was delimited to include the use of 10th grade students to share details about their experience at the freshman academy the previous school year. Also, Hope Academy was selected because of its uniqueness of being the only freshman academy located on a middle school campus in the southeast Alabama region. The study consisted of 12 participants who provided a deep and descriptive, firsthand account of their experience at the freshman academy. All descriptions provided by the participants were solely based upon their perceptions of the freshman academy. Each description was unique and was shaped by personal experiences.

A few limitations existed in this research study. Limitations are the potential weaknesses within a study (Moustakas, 2010). There were limitations in relation to the participants of the study. Recruitment for the study was difficult. After four attempts, the minimal number of 12 participants was reached. Another limitation was the responses of several of the participants who were not forthcoming with details, even when prompted to provide more in-depth responses. Although every effort was made to include current freshman students, the timing of the study required a focus on sophomore students to obtain the necessary data. Therefore, the study included students who were freshman students during the 2016–2017 school year.

Additionally, the participants of one of the focus groups were close friends. At times the responses were not related to the research and were constantly redirected back to the focus of the study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impacted students’ perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama. Given the findings of this research, I have several recommendations for future research. Future research should include replicating the study to focus on principals and teachers. This study targeted students’ perspectives, so creating a study to include principals’ and teachers’ perspectives may provide a different perception of school connectedness. It is further recommended that this study be replicated using current freshman students who can provide real-time experiences and yield current and reliable data.

An additional recommendation for future research is conducting the study to compare and contrast perceptions of school connectedness of students attending freshman academies with those attending traditional high schools. These studies may offer additional data that could be helpful in making sound decisions to provide necessary support for freshman students. An additional future research recommendation is to target a specific race and/or gender. Perceptions of specific groups may offer different insights and viewpoints on perceptions of student connectedness.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this case study was to understand how school leadership, teacher–student relationships, and school climate impact students’ perception of school connectedness of students



attending a freshman academy located on a middle school campus. This qualitative, single instrumental case study addressed the gap in literature that targets school connectedness. This study was centered around the lived experiences of 12 participants as they described their year as ninth grade students at the freshman academy. Participants' accounts were analyzed and four themes emerged: students' perceptions of attachment, students' perceptions of commitment, students' perceptions of involvement, and students' perceptions of belief. Experiences were also described through the lens of Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory.

Educators, especially in middle and high schools, must understand the impact of school connectedness on student success. School connectedness, although frequently experienced in younger grades, is vital in middle and high schools. Perceptions of school connectedness motivated student achievement and served as a protector factor against delinquent behaviors (Atkins et al., 2014; Han et al., 2015). Participants in this study consistently recounted their experiences as being positive and successful because of the relationships established with principals and teachers. Additionally, participants confirmed that they experienced a greater sense of belonging, sense of unity, and desire to succeed. The findings from this case study may contribute to the awareness and necessity of creating school climates that support nurturing environments during a critical time of development.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 25, 2017

La'Keisha Newsome

IRB Approval 2967.082517: The Impact of School Leadership, Teacher-Student Relationships, and School Climate on Students' Perceptions of School Connectedness at a Freshman Academy on a Middle School Campus

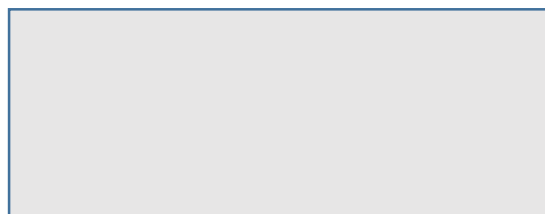
Dear La'Keisha Newsome,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB.

This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM**

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
8/25/2017 to 8/24/2018  
Protocol # 2967.082517

**THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS, AND  
SCHOOL CLIMATE ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS  
AT A FRESHMAN ACADEMY ON A MIDDLE SCHOOL CAMPUS**

La'Keisha Newsome  
Liberty University  
School of Education

Your child/student has been invited to participate in a research study that targets experiences of students at the freshman academy. He or she was selected as a possible participant because he or she can provide valuable information about his or her experience in the middle school freshman academy. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him or her to be in the study.

La'Keisha Newsome, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand how school leadership, teacher-student relationships, and school climate impact students' perceptions of school connectedness at a freshman academy located on a middle school campus in southeast Alabama.

**Procedures:** If you agree to allow your child/student to be in this study, I would ask him or her to do the following things:

**1.) Individual interview.** I will conduct individual interviews with students that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. I will record the interview to transcribe verbal responses into

written responses. After the transcription of the interviews, students will have an opportunity to review the information to ensure that the data is accurate according to their perspective.

**2.) *School Connectedness Survey.*** Students will be asked to complete a school connectedness survey. No identifying markers will be completed on the survey. It will take the students approximately 15-30 minutes to complete the survey.

**3.) *Focus Group Interview.*** Students will be asked to participate in a focus group interview. The students will come together in one location to answer questions in a group setting. The setting will be much like the individual interview; however, it will be in a group setting. The focus group interview will last approximately 45minutes.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:** The risks involved in this study are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. The benefits of participation are that the data obtained through the case study will add empirical evidence to the education community in addressing the needs of students. The data will assist stakeholders in the education community in understanding the value of students' perceptions of connectedness in a school environment.

**Compensation:** Your child/student will receive a \$10.00 gift card for taking part in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Data resulting from the study will not contain students' names; names will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child/student to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child/student to participate, he or she is free to refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If your child/student chooses to withdraw from the study, you or he/she should contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the

next paragraph. Should your child/student choose to withdraw, data collected from him or her, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but his or her contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if he or she chooses to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is La'Keisha Newsome. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [lnewsome@liberty.edu](mailto:lnewsome@liberty.edu)/334-798-5535. You may also contact the research's faculty advisor, Dr. Vivian O. Jones, at [vjones2@liberty.edu](mailto:vjones2@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall Suite 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD/STUDENT TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child/student as part of his or her participation in this study.

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Signature of Minor

Date

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Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

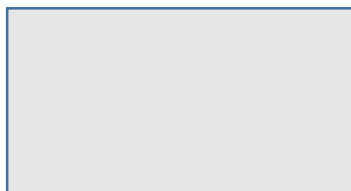
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Signature of Investigator


Date

**APPENDIX C: LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENT**

August 7, 2017



As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The title of my research project is The Impact of School Leadership, Teacher-student Relationships and School Climate on Students' Perceptions of School Connectedness at a Freshman Academy Located on a Middle School Campus. The purpose of my research is to collect and analyze qualitative data about the perceptions of students about school connectedness and its association with school leadership, teacher-student relationships, and school climate. The findings from the case study will provide education community with valuable insights and information as they strive to create positive learning environments that support student success.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at , in your district. I am also requesting your permission to contact the building administrators, parents, and past students, current 10<sup>th</sup> graders, of the freshman academy.

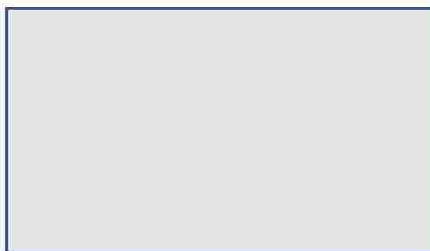
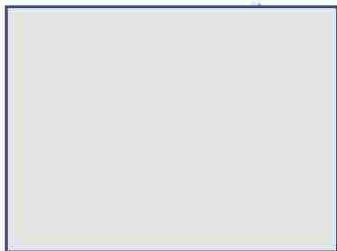
Participants will be asked to attend an individual interview session and focus group session. The students will also be asked to complete a Student Connectedness Survey. The study will not need any documents that contain private and confidential student or student information. The data will be used to gain a deeper understanding of how participants perceive school leadership, teacher-student relationships, and school climate and its influence on school connectedness. Participants will be presented with informed consent and assent information before participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [lnewsome@liberty.edu](mailto:lnewsome@liberty.edu). In your response, please attach a district permission statement for the middle school to participate in educational research on official school system letterhead.

Sincerely,

La'Keisha Newsome, Graduate Student  
Liberty University  
[lnewsome@liberty.edu](mailto:lnewsome@liberty.edu)

### APPENDIX D: SUPERINTENDENT PERMISSION LETTER

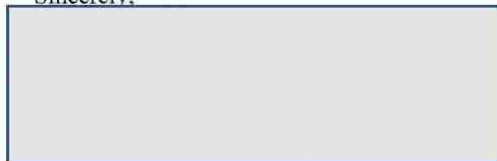


August 7, 2017

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give La'Keisha Newsome permission to conduct the research titled The Impact of School Leadership, Teacher-student Relationships and School Climate on Students' Perceptions of School Connectedness at a Freshman Academy Located on Middle School Campus at [redacted]. This also serves as assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me at [redacted].

Sincerely,



**APPENDIX E: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Interview Protocol Form

School: Hope High School

Interviewee:

Interviewer: La'Keisha Newsome

**THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AT A FRESHMAN ACADEMY ON A MIDDLE SCHOOL CAMPUS**

Are there any questions before we begin? If it is OK with you, I will turn on the recorder and start now.

Interview Beginning Data: Today is \_\_\_\_\_, 2017. It is \_\_\_\_\_ am/pm. This interview is with \_\_\_\_\_ (Student 1A) at \_\_\_\_\_ Middle School.

I. Interviewee Background 1. How old are you? 2. Did you attend the freshman academy?  
3. how long have you been in this school system?

II. Begin Open-Ended Interview Questions

## APPENDIX F: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Standardized Open-Ended Questions

#### School Leadership Questions

*These questions are about your time at the freshman academy.*

1. Explain how your principals were committed to your education at the freshman academy.
2. How were your principals involved in creating a positive school culture at the freshman academy?
3. At the freshman academy, were your principals fair in decision making?
4. Were you comfortable talking to your principal about problems at the freshman academy? Why or Why not?

#### Teacher-Student Relationship Questions

*These questions are about your time at the freshman academy.*

1. Who was your favorite teacher? Why?
2. How did your teachers make learning fun?
3. In what ways did your teacher motivate you?
4. Did you enjoy coming to school? Why or Why not?
5. How did your teachers react to problems or issues?

#### School Climate Questions

*These questions are about your time at the freshman academy.*

1. Did you feel safe in school? Why?
2. In general, did you feel that the school rules are fair? Why?
3. Did your school have a positive school climate? Why?



## APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### Focus Group Protocol Form

School: Hope High School

Interviewee (Title and Name):

Interviewer: La'Keisha Newsome

#### THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AT A FRESHMAN ACADEMY ON A MIDDLE SCHOOL CAMPUS

My name is La'Keisha Newsome. I am a doctoral candidate with Liberty University. I am conducting a case study to explore students' perceptions on how school leadership, teacher-student relationships, and school climate impact school connectedness at the freshman academy. Your superintendent and principal have been gracious enough to grant me permission to conduct my case study at your school.

I'm here to learn from you and I want to hear from everyone. (Informal) Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Because our discussion will be recorded it is important that you speak up and that you only speak one at a time. I don't want to miss any of your comments. Please feel free to respond to each other and to speak directly to others in the group. Are there any questions before we begin? If it is OK with you, I will turn on the recorder and start now.

Interview Beginning Data: Today is \_\_\_\_\_, 2017. It is \_\_\_\_\_ am/pm. This focus group session is with Focus Group \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ Middle School. There are \_\_\_\_\_ (#) participants.

#### I. Interviewee Background

1. Did you attend the freshman academy last year?
2. How long have you been in the school system?
3. Did you attend the middle school from 6<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> grade?

#### II. Begin Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

## **APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW**

### Focus Group Interview

#### Focus Group Interview Questions

1. How were your principals involved in your education at the freshman academy?
2. What did you like most about the freshman academy teachers?
3. Describe the school culture at the freshman academy?
4. What steps or procedures were in place to ensure your safety as a student at the freshman academy?

**APPENDIX I: PERMISSION TO USE STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS SURVEY**

University of

525 O'Leary Library

Jill H. Lohmeier, Ph.D.

61 Wilder Street

Associate Professor

Lowell, MA 01854-3051

Director, Center for Program Evaluation

tel: 978.934.4617

fax: 978 934 3005

January 14, 2016

To Lakeisha Newsome's committee,

I am happy to give my permission for Ms. Newsome to use the School Connectedness Scale in her research. Please be sure to forward me any papers that result from the use of the scale and to cite the original source when using it or referring to it in any paper. I will be anxious to learn what you find.

Regards,

Jill H. Lohmeier

## APPENDIX J: RESPONSES FROM SCS

### *Participant Responses to School Connectedness Survey*

Question	Responses	No
Q2      When I have a problem, there is least one adult in the school I trust	1 (least likely)	0
	2	2
	3	1
	4	2
	5 (most likely)	7
Q11     My teacher cares about me	1 (least likely)	0
	2	1
	3	2
	4	3
	5 (most likely)	6
Q17     Adults in my school are friendly to me	1 (least likely)	0
	2	1
	3	1
	4	5
	5 (most likely)	5
Q35     Teachers give me extra help when needed	1 (least likely)	0
	2	1
	3	3
	4	2
	5 (most likely)	6
Q43     Teachers care about their students	1 (least likely)	0
	2	0
	3	2
	4	3
	5 (most likely)	7
Q52     Adults at my school are interested in how students are doing	1 (least likely)	0
	2	1

		3	2
		4	4
		5 (most likely)	5
Q21	I feel like this school is the right place for me	1 (least likely)	0
		2	1
		3	1
		4	4
		5 (most likely)	6
Q29	I go to school because I have to	1 (least likely)	8
		2	3
		3	0
		4	1
		5 (most likely)	0
Q3	I feel upset when someone says something bad about my school	1 (least likely)	3
		2	2
		3	0
		4	6
		5 (most likely)	1
Q36	I like to make my teachers happy	1 (least likely)	0
		2	0
		3	3
		4	4
		5 (most likely)	5
Q31	Adults in my school ask student how they are doing	1 (least likely)	1
		2	2
		3	1
		4	2
		5 (most likely)	6
Q48	I feel like I fit in with the other students in my school.	1 (least likely)	1
		2	1
		3	5

		4	0
		5 (most likely)	4
Q54	Teachers at my school are unfair to students	1 (least likely)	7
		2	1
		3	3
		4	1
		5 (most likely)	0
Q25	I think that school is important	1 (least likely)	0
		2	0
		3	0
		4	3
		5 (most likely)	9

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