

Article

Supporting a Responsive Transition to High School through a Summer Transition Camp

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Abstract: In this qualitative case study ($n = 32$), researchers sought to understand the ways a multi-day summer transition camp may help incoming ninth-grade students experience a developmentally responsive transition into high school. The findings revealed camp helped support students' procedural, social, and academic-related needs and concerns. Learning the school layout and policies helped support students' procedural-related needs and concerns. Promoting student–student, educator–student, and school–student relationships helped support students' social-related needs and concerns. Attending academic classes and communicating expectations for academic success helped support students' academic-related needs and concerns. A summer camp may foster a responsive transition and mitigate school failure, but must be developed and delivered based on students' developmental and transition-related needs and concerns. Furthermore, students must perceive camp activities as actually supporting their needs and concerns.

Keywords: middle-to-high-school transition; transition program; developmental responsiveness; school success; adolescent development



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1. Introduction

The middle-to-high-school transition, which typically occurs between Grades 8 and 9 in the United States, is noted to be the most difficult transition in K-12 education. Cohen and Smerdon [1] state, “Secondary schools are hemorrhaging adolescents at an alarming rate, with the greatest loss during and immediately following the first year of high school” (p. 117). Students who struggle with this transition often exhibit issues with attendance, behavior, and/or grades, making it difficult to remain in school [1,2]. Most students who drop out have trouble moving beyond ninth grade and end up dropping out by tenth grade [1,2]. Transition programs—programs that aim to help students make a successful transition from one level of schooling to another—are a way high schools can support students at this critical time [1]. Such programs include activities during the last year of middle school, over the summer, and/or during the first year of high school. This study seeks to understand the ways one transition activity, a summer transition camp, may support a developmentally responsive transition to high school for incoming ninth-grade students.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in self-determination theory [3,4], stage–environment fit theory [5,6], and Akos and Galassi’s [7] aspects of school transitions. A developmentally responsive transition is defined as one where incoming students’ basic and developmental needs, as well as their transition-related concerns, are supported. Supporting young adolescents’ needs within the school environment is essential for student success, especially during school transitions.

Self-determination theory identifies the psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy as necessary for developmental growth and motivation [3,4]. Competence is one's ability to act effectively in a given environment, relatedness includes making connections and belonging to a social group, and autonomy is acting in accordance with one's sense of self [3,4].

Stage–environment fit theory suggests students' needs evolve over time and school environments should afford opportunities in line with their developmental needs to best support student success in school [8]. Often, the needs of adolescents and the structure of secondary school environments are often incongruent [5,6,9]. Ways in which school contexts can nurture student development must be considered [8]. While stage–environment fit theory has been primarily been applied to the elementary-to-middle-school transition, Eccles and Roeser [6] along with other scholars [10–16] have applied this theory to the transition to high school. Akos and Galassi [7] discussed the procedural, social, and academic aspects of the middle-to-high-school transition that cause concern for students, teachers, and parents, as well as how each can be supported. The psychological wellbeing of students is critical for fostering a true sense of school belonging [17], which helps to ease the social aspect of school transitions [7]. Secondary schools that implement support to address these aspects of the transition and nurture adolescents' basic and developmental needs may ease this transition [3,4,6,7,18].

1.2. Procedural Aspects

Often overlooked or briefly addressed during a back-to-school event, procedural aspects of the transition can be intimidating to incoming ninth-grade students. Getting lost is a top procedural concern of incoming students and their parents [7], eliciting concerns about locating and operating lockers and being tardy to class [19]. Students are also concerned about school policies and consequences [20]. These concerns are great during the first few weeks, but soon dissipate [7].

1.3. Social Aspects

While some social aspects of the transition are positive and welcomed, others bear a heavy toll on students. Positive changes include opportunities for new friendships, extracurricular involvement, and new adult mentors [7]. Other changes such as a heightened sense of social hierarchy, shifts in friendships, and an increase in peer pressure can lead to negative outcomes such as absenteeism, isolation, low self-esteem, aggression, bullying, and school dropout [17,21,22].

In general, adolescents have a deep need for acceptance from their peers and this is especially true during the middle-to-high-school transition [19]. This need to belong can be a determining factor in whether a student stays in school or drops out [17]. Positive peer relationships can lead to higher self-esteem and an increase in personal well-being, especially during the transition process [23–25]. Furthermore, upperclassmen can serve as mentors to support the transition process [26].

Connections to middle and high school teachers are critically important during this time [17,19]. Low teacher support can have a negative impact on student performance during the transition [14,19], while supportive, caring teachers can boost student performance and aid the transition [27]. Teachers help foster positive student–teacher relationships through effortful engagement with students on an interpersonal level [28]. Overall, positive relationships with peers, older classmates, and adults at school are critically important to young adolescents, especially those who feel socially disconnected and those who are at risk for school failure and drop out [17,22].

1.4. Academic Aspects

Academics are a top concern for both students and parents during the transition to high school [7]. The high school environment has been described as large, impersonal, competitive, and grade oriented with an increase in courses, amplified academic expecta-

tions, and a larger workload than in middle school [1,2,17,25]. Many ninth-grade students are unprepared for high school coursework, resulting in a decline in grades for many and not completing high school for some [2]. Vasquez-Salgado and Chavira [29] found most minority students' grades, while relatively stable in middle school, declined after entering high school, even those with relatively high grades in middle school. While preparedness is a significant concern, Ganeson and Ehrich [19] found the large high school workload, rather than the work itself, was the major academic issue affecting adjustment.

A primary goal of high school is to prepare students for postsecondary success, yet incoming ninth-grade students are largely unaware of what courses may support their goals. A fundamental academic concern is making sure all students are adequately informed about high school credits, graduation requirements, and requirements for college and career preparation [27,30,31]. Academic decisions made during the ninth-grade year can determine whether a student advances to college [1], as many students do not realize the significance of credits and the negative impact of poor grades on their overall grade point average until it is too late [2]. Students rely on adults for this guidance [8].

1.5. Transition Programs

The transition from one school to the next is a process that unfolds over time and not a single event [7,30]. Research calls for specialized transition support, including transition programs and courses, where incoming high school students are gradually introduced to the various procedural, social, and academic aspects of high school life [1,16,27,32]. Comprehensive transition programs are ongoing and thorough and include various activities before and after the transition. Such programs begin during students' last year in middle school and continue through the summer into the first year of high school [18,30,32]. A summer transition camp is one type of transition activity.

The middle-to-high-school transition is understudied [33] and most studies are quantitative or mixed method designs, with few investigating the complex nature of this move [34]. Studies that include student and other key stakeholder perspectives are particularly limited (for noteworthy examples see [7,18,35,36]). However, none of these studies investigated in what ways transition programs with various transition activities, such as a summer transition camp, may help incoming ninth-grade students experience a developmentally responsive transition into high school. This type of data are missing in the current literature base. Furthermore, the present study includes the voices of those most intimately involved in the transition process, who are possibly best positioned to attest to the complex nature of this move [34].

2. Methods

This study utilized a qualitative case study design [37,38] to deeply study a single entity to produce a theme-based description of the case [39]. A qualitative case study design allows researchers to study the phenomenon of the transition camp in a natural setting in real time. In addition, this method encourages a rich description of participant perceptions that can help unpack the complexity of this period of schooling. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university and school district.

2.1. Context

Held at Acosta High School (name is a pseudonym), a large urban high school in the Southeastern United States, TOPS Camp is a voluntary four-day program implemented through Acosta's AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program. One of the camp goals was to aid the transition to high school for incoming ninth-grade students. All incoming ninth-grade students were invited.

Eighty students attended camp and were split into five teams, each led by an upperclassman AVID student who served as a camp counselor. Students attended seven sessions daily: a morning session, five academic sessions, and a closing session. Morning sessions included team building activities, information about school activities/clubs, col-

lege admissions information, and staff introductions. Daily, each team rotated between academic sessions (language arts, AP human geography, math, AP world history, and science). Students also attended one half-day guidance session in lieu of classes. Closing sessions provided opportunities for team building.

2.2. Participants

Thirty-two individuals participated (20 students, 5 camp counselors, 5 teachers, 1 guidance counselor, and 1 coordinator). The 20 students representing 25% of total enrollment (6 male/14 female, 35% minority) were randomly selected using the rand feature in excel and invitations were sent to solicit their involvement. Those who returned signed informed consent forms participated in the study. All upperclassmen camp counselors, teaching staff, and camp coordinators were invited.

2.3. Data Collection

Prior to data collection, all six researchers were engaged in a training on the protocol for this study, administered by the lead researcher. This study included data from 11 focus group interviews, one individual interview, four days of camp observations, and document data from camp.

2.3.1. Focus Group Interviews

There were 11 focus group interviews: nine student groups, one upperclassmen camp counselor group, and one teacher/guidance counselor group. Student participants were divided into three focus groups and interviewed at three time points by a primary and secondary interviewer who were members of the research team. The same two members interviewed the same group of students at each time point. The first student focus group interview took place on the last day of camp. The second took place on the Thursday of students' third week of school to capture students' transition-related experience during the first weeks of school. The last took place on the Tuesday of the students' last week of January after the conclusion of their first semester of ninth grade in an effort to unpack students' experiences adjusting to high school over the course of their first semester.

All five upperclassmen camp counselors participated in one focus group interview after camp on day four, conducted by the lead researcher and another member of the research team. Additionally, all teachers and the school counselor participated in one focus group interview after camp on day three, conducted by the lead researcher and another member of the research team.

2.3.2. Individual Interview

In addition to focus group interviews, one individual interview with the camp coordinator took place after camp on day two. This interview was conducted by the lead researcher. All of the interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) and lasted no more than 60 min. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by a research team member, and checked for accuracy by another research team member. This resulted in 239 pages of single-spaced typed interview transcriptions.

2.3.3. Observations and Document Data

The camp coordinator organized all students into one of five teams. Students in this study were spread out across all five teams, resulting in one member of the research team shadowing each of the five teams and the lead researcher floating between teams throughout camp. Participants were observed throughout the day as they engaged in various activities during camp. A total of 59 h of observations were conducted to record the full camp experience. Researchers observed all camp activities such as the school tour, academic classes, community-building events, and guest presentations, resulting in 182 pages of single-spaced typed observation data. Document data were also collected (e.g., camp schedule).

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Hatch's [40] inductive approach based on its ability to focus deeply on a particular entity, allowing the relational aspect of people's stories to emerge from the data [40]. Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, was utilized. The analysis began by conducting multiple readings of the data and separating the data into analyzable parts. Researchers independently coded all data into frames of analysis and discussed each until consensus was reached. Researchers then formed domains with cover and included terms critical to Hatch's approach that reflect a means–end semantic relationship (X [included term] is a way to do Y [cover term]) [40]. Each included and cover term were further investigated and verified, disconfirming evidence discussed, and a master outline formed (See Figure 1).

Procedural Aspect

Learning the school layout is a way to support students' procedural-related needs and concerns

- Taking a school tour
- Receiving their class schedule

Learning school policies is a way to support students' procedural-related needs and concerns

- Talking to educators and upperclassmen camp counselors about the locker policy
- Talking to educators and upperclassmen camp counselors about the dress code policy
- Talking to educators and upperclassmen camp counselors about the tardy policy

Social Aspect

Promoting student–student relationships is a way to support students' social-related needs and concerns

- Meeting other campers
- Meeting upperclassmen camp counselors

Promoting educator–student relationships is a way to support students' social-related needs and concerns

- Meeting administrators and guidance counselor
- Meeting high school teachers
- Meeting coaches and club sponsors

Promoting school–student relationships is a way to support students' social related needs and concerns

- Becoming involved in extracurricular activities
- Learning about traditions and rumors

Academic Aspect

Attending academic classes is a way to support students' academic-related needs and concerns

- Participating in authentic high school lessons

Communicating expectations for academic success is a way to support students' academic-related needs and concerns

- Learning about high school academic expectations
 - Learning about academic expectations for postsecondary opportunities
-

Figure 1. Master Outline.

Multiple measures were taken to enhance trustworthiness and limit bias [35]. To protect the identity of the participants, all identifiable information was washed from all

data, and participants and the school were given pseudonyms. It was made clear to the participants that their thoughts and perceptions were valued and they should feel free to respond however they wanted to. Interview questions were written with participants' ages in mind to ensure participants would comprehend each question and be able to effectively answer them. Regarding triangulation, multiple forms of data were collected and analyzed, including semi-structured focus group and individual interviews, observations, and documents. Additionally, multiple researchers were involved in data collection and analysis. Data from all interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents were examined for convergence of information. Multiple forms of data supported each key finding to aid triangulation. Furthermore, peers who are experts in qualitative research reviewed the research process to ensure the research process was rigorous and findings from the study reflective of the dataset. Last, study participants engaged in member checking after data collection, where they reviewed and confirmed the interview transcripts were reflective of their perspective.

3. Results

In this study, the researchers sought to gain a detailed understanding of the ways a specific transition activity—a summer transition camp may support a developmentally responsive transition to high school for incoming ninth-grade students. The master outline below summarizes key findings from this study, and each are elaborated on in the paragraphs that follow.

3.1. Procedural Aspect

I'm kinda nervous about high school, just because it's obviously not what I'm used to. It's so much bigger. I'm scared I'm going to get lost and I heard a lot of people are late. I don't want that to be against me because they say you get detentions.—Lena, Student

Participants reported that activities such as learning the school layout and school policies have the potential to support students' procedural-related needs and concerns and may help incoming ninth-grade students experience a developmentally responsive transition into high school.

3.1.1. Learning the School Layout

On the first day of TOPS Camp, students took a tour of the school and, upon the conclusion of the last day of camp, received their class schedule. For students, the tour was unimpressive and did not fully address their concerns. Furthermore, all students were excited to receive their schedule, but wanted it before the last day of camp.

School Tour. On day one of camp, students engaged in a school tour. Researchers observed participants on the tour as they walked around campus. Observers noted participants towards the back of the group had difficulty keeping up with and hearing the counselors as they led the tour. Participants were also observed wanting to stop for longer at certain classrooms and the cafeteria and the counselors rushing them along in order to finish the tour. Students, such as Mykayla, commented on the large size of the school (over 0.25 miles in length), "It feels like I'm walking in a giant circle". Students did not find the tour helpful (i.e., too brief, lacked detailed information, could not hear camp counselors, could not remember where things were located). For example, Elizabeth complained the school tour was "rushed" and felt like "a speed tour". Students, such as Violet, mentioned they could not hear the counselors during the tour due to the large size of each group (about 14–16 students per group), "There's a clump of people in the front and then there's some people walking in the back so you could not really hear what they were saying". Other students, such as Charlotte, reported having trouble keeping all the information straight, "I couldn't remember which building is which".

Class Schedule. For students, one of the major reasons for attending camp was to receive their ninth-grade schedule earlier than other incoming students. Camp counselors told students that receiving their schedules early was "giving [them] an edge". Students,

such as Alyssa, expressed appreciation, “It helped me with getting around the school”. Other students, such as Evan, were only motivated to attend camp because of this opportunity, “Like, the only reason why I came today was to get my schedule”. While Ms. Matthews, the camp coordinator, stated getting your schedule at the end of camp was “the carrot that keeps the kids coming back”, every student remarked they wanted to receive their schedule earlier to have time to find their classrooms.

3.1.2. Learning School Policies

Throughout TOPS Camp, students learned about various school policies that would affect them as ninth-grade students, especially policies regarding lockers, dress code, and tardiness. Camp counselors spent much time discussing the locker policy and locker locations, as well as the dress code policy. Researchers observed counselors and the camp leader discussing various policies with students. However, the reality of the school size and large population did not truly set in until the first days of school. During the first weeks of ninth grade, students realized which policies were enforced and adjusted their practices accordingly.

Locker Policy. Much student concern centered on policies related to navigating the large school campus and their ability to get to class on time. Observation reports confirmed that locker location was stressed often throughout camp, with a focus on purchasing a locker close to one’s classrooms or two lockers in different locations. Once the school year started, students, such as Stephanie, were appreciative to receive the “insider’s scoop” on the locker policy and felt they were at an advantage, “It’s nice to have a locker right in the middle because you’d always pass by it when walking”. However, other students, such as Michelle, chose a locker closer to the busses and said, “It wasn’t the best decision. It was furthest from everything”.

Dress Code Policy. During camp, students were educated on Acosta’s dress code policy. Upperclassmen put on a dress code fashion show and spoke bluntly about the policy, “Standard rule is no boobs, no belly, no butt”, expressed Nina, a camp counselor. Within the first weeks of school, students, such as Lena, discovered ways to skirt the policy, “They said that you can’t wear certain things, but people still wear them, and you can get away with it as long as there’s no parts showing”.

Tardy Policy. During a morning session at camp, the principal covered the tardy “lockout” policy, warning students it could result in in-school suspension. Students, such as Lena, found this policy strictly enforced, “They don’t play with tardiness at all. There aren’t exceptions for tardiness”. The school’s size and population affected how students responded to the tardy policy. From the beginning of camp, students were informed the large size of the campus poses difficulty getting to classes, especially if the classrooms are on opposite ends of campus. Michelle, an incoming ninth-grader, recounted hustling on the first day:

“I thought I’d be late to my classes in the 900 building because they’re all the way over there and I have to go from 300 to 900 and then 900 to 600 which is like across the school. I was running the first day”.

After the school year started, students discussed how the tardy policy at Acosta was more severe than what they were used to in middle school. For example, Elizabeth stated, “If I’m late I get a tardy, and if I get two tardies I have detention, so that does not look good. I couldn’t get a detention last year and now I could”.

3.2. Social Aspect

I liked going to TOPS Camp ‘cause of the counselors. My counselor, I see her around and she’ll stop and check-in on me and see how I’m doing and ask me if I need any help.—Lena, Student

Promoting student–student relationships, educator–student relationships, and school–student relationships have the potential to support students’ social-related needs and

concerns, and may help incoming ninth-grade students experience a responsive transition into high school.

3.2.1. Promoting Student–Student Relationships

Students perceived TOPS Camp gave them the opportunity to meet and foster relationships with other incoming ninth-grade students and upperclassmen. Students reported camp helped reduce anxiety associated with the transition by meeting and developing friendships with other campers and upperclassmen.

Meeting Other Campers. Acosta High School has three main feeder middle schools. Students excitedly talked about meeting and developing friendships with students from other middle schools, yet, as Mykayla expressed, they were also concerned and cautious, “I’m not gonna have any friends except the ones from middle school”. To assist, daily students engaged in activities to aid relationship development. Researchers observed participants engaging in ice breakers, counselor-led discussions, and given opportunities to talk to other campers in order to foster social relationships. According to Christina, an incoming ninth-grade student, engaging in these activities “makes you talk to each other and get to know each other”.

In some cases, lasting friendships developed. Six months into the school year, Michelle and Stephanie, who attended different middle schools, credited their friendship to meeting at camp. Michelle explained, “Camp got me to meet new people. I met Stephanie. She’s in my first period so we talk and are friends now”. In other cases, merely recognizing fellow camp attendees in classes at the beginning of the school year brought comfort. Elizabeth shared her experience meeting Violet, another incoming ninth-grade student who attended camp, “... when I had a class and I really didn’t recognize anybody I was like, ‘Oh, I saw you at camp’ so we have something in common to break the ice”.

Meeting Upperclassmen Camp Counselors. Students initially expressed being apprehensive and fearful of upperclassmen due to their physical size, the potential of embarrassment, social rejection, and bullying. For example, an incoming ninth-grade student, Charlotte, stated, “I’m so short and they’re really tall, especially the guys. They’re big and buff”. Mykayla agreed, fearing upperclassmen would say, “I don’t talk to freshmen”. However, not all students expressed apprehension. Heather stated, “I usually hang out with the bigger kids and everything, so I’m not going to be like intimidate[d] and all that kind of stuff”.

Student fears decreased as camp progressed and students interacted with upperclassmen. Researchers observed camp counselors making an effort to engage with students throughout camp, answering questions, asking about their interests and schedules, and alleviating concerns about the upcoming school year. Camp counselors, such as Tina, understood their role in supporting students, “... I feel like we’re [counselors] role models and freshmen they’re scared and if they ever need help around, like they see one of us, I want them to feel comfortable coming up to us and asking us questions”. During the first semester of school, camp counselors actively checked up on students, as Lena expressed above. Camp also helped foster long-lasting friendships between upperclassmen and incoming ninth-grade students. For example, Lena became friends with her camp counselor and six months into the school year she shared, “I’m really close with her now”.

3.2.2. Promoting Educator–Student Relationships

Students perceived TOPS Camp provided an opportunity to interact with adults from the high school. Meeting these educators reduced students’ social transition-related concerns; however, they wanted to meet more ninth-grade teachers, as well as coaches and club sponsors.

Meeting Administrators and Guidance Counselor. Researchers observed students meeting administrators and the guidance counselor at various points during camp. Administrators and the counselor answered student questions regarding policies and grades and encouraged students to become involved in school activities. Students noted meet-

ing administrators and Mrs. Rogers, the guidance counselor, helped appease their need for belonging and ease social concerns. For example, Nellie referred to Mrs. Rogers as a second parent, “I liked getting to know the guidance counselor because when I have lots of problems, I go to her, and I feel like she is my go-to mom that I can just go to her and tell her everything”. Administrators spoke of Acosta as a “supportive family”. However, students, such as Lena, expressed a desire to meet more of Acosta’s administration, “I think we [students] should be able to meet all the assistant principals”.

Meeting High School Teachers. When students were asked what they liked most about camp, a vast majority responded they appreciated the chance to meet high school teachers. Researchers observed students had multiple opportunities to meet and interact with high school teachers throughout the camp. For example, Lisa replied, “The opportunity to meet all the faculty here”. Meeting teachers fostered a sense of comfort as they were able to get to know their personalities and connect on a more personal level. Michael, an incoming ninth-grade student, shared, “I thought the teachers, in all honesty, would be all crusty old farts, but they’re not”. To appear more approachable to the incoming ninth-grade students, several teachers shared stories about their interests and lives, including where they attended college. During the first weeks of school, teachers were perceived as resources, mentors, and even secondary parents. Nellie stated, “... it was nice knowing the teachers from the camp because if I need any help with something, I can go to them”. In a later interview, she expressed seeking help from the math teacher from camp instead of her ninth-grade math teacher because of the connection fostered at camp.

Students, such as Nellie, expressed a preference for meeting ninth-grade teachers versus upper-level teachers, “... most teachers I’ve met teach eleventh and twelfth grade and it would’ve been nicer to get to know the ninth-grade teachers so I could know the people I could go to”. Stephanie agreed, “They could have introduced all of them [ninth-grade teachers]. At least shown pictures of them. So, you’re like ‘Okay, that’s coach’”.

Meeting Coaches and Club Sponsors. During camp, select coaches spoke with students about athletics teams, requirements for involvement, and the importance of academics. Club sponsors also spoke to students and a list of extracurriculars along with information on how to become involved was provided. Researchers observed these adults engaged with students and encouraged them to become involved in various activities. Students, such as Michelle, enjoyed being able to talk coaches and club sponsors but wanted to meet all of them, “I wish we met all the coaches not just two of them”.

3.2.3. Promoting School–Student Relationships

Students and educators alike perceived engaging in extracurricular activities and learning about Acosta traditions helped satisfy students’ transition-related concerns and need for relatedness. Time management and managing extracurricular activities with school responsibilities were not thoroughly addressed. Furthermore, rumors associated with Acosta caused students’ fear and concern, despite camp counselors’ efforts to demystify these rumors.

Becoming Involved in Extracurricular Activities. Researchers observed coaches and club sponsors, as well as administrators and the guidance counselor, encouraging students to become involved in a variety of extracurricular activities. After meeting coaches and club sponsors, students, such as Lena, exhibited an interest in becoming involved, “I think that clubs, sports, and the people mostly stood out to me from my camp experience”. All 20 students attested to wanting to join an extracurricular activity discussed at camp, such as Mykayla’s interest in spirit club and Alejandro and Charlotte’s interest in fall sports.

Before and during students’ first semester of high school, students were concerned about ways to balance academic responsibilities with extracurricular obligations. Students expressed anxiety about how to be successful in both due to a lack of time. Evan stated, “... football takes up too much of your time!”. Andre was concerned about balancing extracurriculars with higher-level academic classes, “I’m just a little worried with time

management ‘cause I do want to join clubs and stuff but, I’m doing a few honors classes and stuff so it’s going to take me time, it’s time-consuming”. While time management was discussed at camp, strategies to assist with time and organizational management were not addressed.

Learning About Traditions and Rumors. Students were told about many school traditions at camp, as the researchers observed. Mrs. Rogers, the guidance counselor, and camp counselors were observed discussing pep rallies, a school tradition, and the importance of school spirit. Ms. Matthews, the camp coordinator, shared information about picture day and associated traditions (i.e., teacher flash mob). She also explained Homecoming is “a big deal” and shared details about the event.

Students were very concerned about rumors they were told about Acosta (i.e., third-floor pool, upperclassmen stuffing freshmen into trash cans/lockers, paper thrown at them), and some of these rumors were associated with school traditions (i.e., batteries thrown at them during pep rallies). Students, such as Michael, shared examples of rumors they heard, “This one guy, who’s a sophomore, was telling me there’s Freshmen Fridays where some of the Seniors will take a freshman and toss him in a trash can”. Even the camp counselors, such as Kori, shared stories told to them during their camp experience, “I don’t want to scare them ‘cause I know for my camp experience a couple of counselors had come up to me and told me that as a freshman I would get paper thrown at me and whatnot”. Even during the school tour, students saw evidence of rumors, such as a “third floor pool” drawn on a school map posted on one of the school buildings.

During camp, educators were observed taking part in furthering such rumors. For example, Mr. Brown laughingly admitted to starting the rumor about the pool on the third floor, stating “That was me!”. Carolyn, a camp counselor, shared teachers encouraged the camp counselors to spread school rumors, “Some of the teachers told us to tell them [incoming students] about myths that we heard when we were coming into ninth grade”. Camp counselors, such as Kori, made attempts to lessen concerns, “They [students] asked a lot of questions so I tried to answer those questions the best I could”. Nina, another camp counselor, elaborated:

Like, the pool on top of the gym, they were like, “How do you get there?” and I’m like, “You don’t, There’s not really anything there”. Then they asked, “Do people really throw batteries at you at pep rallies?” and I’m like, “I’ve never gotten a battery thrown at me”.

3.3. Academic Aspect

We want to make sure they’re learning about the content area and the different choices, not just as ninth grader, but as a sophomore, junior, and senior. We also want them in situations they’re going to actually experience in the classroom.—Ms. Matthews, Camp Coordinator

Attending academic classes and communicating expectations for academic success have the potential to support students’ academic-related needs and concerns, and may help incoming ninth-grade students experience a developmentally responsive transition into high school.

3.3.1. Attending Academic Classes

One of the major aims of TOPS Camp was to prepare students for the academic aspect of high school. Camp was divided into “periods” where students attended academic classes and engaged in authentic high school lessons taught by teachers. While high school lessons were perceived as helpful to aiding their understanding of what high school classes involved, all students wanted to experience more ninth-grade classes during camp.

Participating in Authentic High School Lessons. During camp, researchers observed students participating in authentic high school lessons typically taught during the school year. Mrs. Tomlin explained the benefits of engaging students in lessons where they learned tools for high school success:

What would be beneficial for them to take away are the tools learned in our lessons for how to be successful . . . If they could take the tools away with them, they could probably go back and refer to it later on. "Oh, I learned this strategy" or "I did this at camp. Where can I apply it now?"

Although Mr. Brown noted the importance of showing incoming ninth-grade students authentic lessons, he admitted his lessons were not what they would experience daily in science:

The taste they are seeing is a little bit more glorious than what they are going to do day in and day out, sadly. By that I mean the labs and stuff that we do this week are not necessarily what they are going to do day in and day out once they get into high school.

Student perceptions of the helpfulness of the lessons were mixed. Students, such as Calvin, viewed the lessons as helpful in preparing for high school, "Camp was a great experience because you could meet some teachers and you already get a gist of how their classes will be like". Mykayla elaborated, "It's teaching us how to do it so when you actually start school, you'll know how to do it. You'll be like, 'Oh I remember this! This is easy.' And so you'll actually know and be prepared". Similarly, Elizabeth explained an experience during her first semester of high school where she engaged in the same lesson she experienced during camp, "We did the same thing last week so I knew exactly how to do it . . . I was one of the first people done and she was like 'Oh, it's good' and I'm like, 'Oh yea, well, I did it before.'".

However, other students, such as Alejandro, did not agree, as he thought the lessons did not reflect the lecture-based lessons he was now experiencing as a ninth-grade student, "During the classes we didn't really do anything to help us . . . They could maybe do something that would help prepare us for ninth-grade like lectures". Students wanted to experience actual ninth-grade classes and lessons during. Ignado's statement is reflective of what other students shared, "They gave us classes that we're not going to take as a ninth graders, so it wasn't that helpful".

3.3.2. Communicating Expectations for Academic Success

At TOPS Camp, academic expectations for success in high school and beyond were communicated during both academic and general sessions. While academic expectations and the amount of coursework were discussed, students struggled with conceptualizing the workload and some attested the workload was greater than what was communicated.

Learning about High School Academic Expectations. Teachers and upperclassmen camp counselors attested to the importance of helping students understand high school academic expectations. During camp, all teachers were observed discussing these expectations. For example, Mr. Claudin exposed students to his academic expectations during one of his academic sessions, "Ok, most of you guys are going to be in Geometry. Here is what to expect on a daily basis. Homework, tests, and quizzes. Everything is going to be weighted". Mrs. Wickers stressed the importance of explaining academic expectations to ninth graders, "I think that expectations, especially academically, are higher. Especially in AP classes . . . I don't think they have any idea about the kind of work that is expected when they sign up for an AP class as freshmen".

Camp counselors, such as Lorita, also discussed academic expectations, "Get all your stuff organized to make sure you have everything you need because some people just think freshman year is a joke, that it's just your first year of high school". Others, such as Nina, offered advice on how to handle increased expectations, "I told my group not to be overwhelmed because if you have good time management and you're organized it should be, not too easy, but easy enough".

Students, such as Michelle, agreed academic expectations intensified in high school:

"Middle school was easy. I didn't have to study for tests and I would pass. I would get A's every single time, but now I have to study at least an hour every night to take the tests and the tests are a lot harder".

Despite discussing academic expectations, students expressed difficulty fully comprehending the magnitude and rigor of work expected until they started classes. After the school year started, Michelle noted, “The teachers talked about how much more work we were going to have, but I didn’t think exactly how much. Now I understand what they were actually meaning”. Some, such as Alejandro, attested to having more work than the teachers expressed, “He [Mr. Claudin] said, ‘You’re going to have an hour and a half of homework every day.’ No, it’s more!”.

Learning About Academic Expectations for Postsecondary Opportunities. During camp, researchers observed educators outlining academic expectations for postsecondary opportunities. Teachers, such as Mr. Brown, believed it is important to show how academic expectations set students up for postsecondary opportunities, “Showing college and university GPA and what is needed to get into those colleges and the importance of setting goals. That helps prepare them and not just prepare them for college, but future life too”. In academic classes, teachers spoke about how high school is the start of their future and the seriousness of doing well in courses as it pertains to postsecondary opportunities. For example, Mrs. Pockert shared her own high school experience and how it played a pivotal role in determining what college she attended and her career path. Further, Mrs. Rogers, the guidance counselor, held a half-day session with students to talk about high school, including courses, scheduling, course credits, grade point average, college entry exams, AP courses, and postsecondary opportunities. Students engaged in various activities (e.g., computing grade point average). They were given information about academic guidance services (e.g., college/career counseling). Despite these efforts, students attested to wanting more time during camp to discuss academic expectations for life beyond high school, and how their academics in high school would influence their future life.

4. Discussion

The middle-to-high-school-transition is a critical period in one’s school career. When moving from one school to the next, if the new school environment does not support the needs and concerns of incoming students, this mismatch may result in negative, often life altering outcomes [9,25]. Effective integration into the school environment and culture can factor into whether a student will graduate [21]. The findings reveal a summer transition camp has the potential to foster a responsive transition by supporting students’ procedural, social, and academic-related needs and concerns, but such camps must be developed and delivered with students’ developmental and transition-related concerns in mind. Students must perceive the camp as actually supporting their developmental needs and satisfying their transition-related procedural, social, and academic concerns to foster a responsive transition. This research adds to the field regarding procedural, social, and academic needs and concerns, as well as adds student voice.

Procedurally, students who attended TOPS Camp engaged in activities that helped them learn the school layout and policies. Consistent with prior research, students in this study were concerned about procedural-related aspects of the transition to high school [7]. The findings suggest a campus tour, a customary component of transition programs [30], helped students gain a baseline understanding of the school’s layout, but personalizing tours is necessary to ease concerns about getting lost and being tardy [7,19]. While much excitement centered on receiving their ninth-grade schedule during camp [30], students wanted their schedule prior to the conclusion of camp when there would be adequate time to explore the campus. Educators who seek to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways a more personalized school tour, where students can explore the campus with their schedule in hand, can take place before school starts to help support students’ developmental needs and procedural-related concerns [7,30].

As school policies are another concern weighing heavy on students early in the transition process [7], students in this study reported they appreciated learning about Acosta’s policies while at camp. Having “insider information” regarding school policies and their enforcement eased concerns and fears [20]. However, students did not consistently

receive accurate information. Educators seeking to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways they can accurately communicate and enforce school policies before and/or during the first days of school to aid the adjustment process.

Socially, students who attended TOPS Camp were given an opportunity to connect with peers (student–student relationships), faculty and staff (educator–student relationships), and learn about extracurricular activities and high school traditions (school–student relationships). These opportunities help support students' need for connectedness and belonging, a human psychological need [3,4]. Social connectedness at school is critically important, especially as students adjust to a new school environment, as connectedness supports school success [17,22,23]. Camp supported students' need to form peer relationships with both incoming ninth-grade students and upperclassmen, many of which lasted beyond camp. Educators who seek to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways they can provide students with the opportunity to form peer relationships with other incoming ninth-grade students and upperclassmen to enhance personal well-being and foster relatedness [3,41] during the weeks before and after the transition [23,24].

Adolescents also have a developmental need for relationships with their teachers [9], especially during the transition to high school [19]. Positive perceptions of relationships with teachers have a strong influence on student academic motivation, engagement in the classroom, and academic achievement [6,16]. The camp attempted to fulfill this need by having students meet teachers and other educators. The findings illustrate getting to know these educators was deemed valuable and may have reduced social concerns. Teachers interacted with students on an interpersonal level, which was appreciated. Research suggests this effortful engagement promotes positive teacher–student relationships [28]. However, unanimously, students longed to meet more ninth-grade teachers to form relationships before school and felt camp fell short of this desire (only two teachers taught ninth grade). This was one of the most mentioned issues associated with camp. Furthermore, students wanted to meet more coaches and club sponsors to help ease their fears of becoming involved. Educators who seek to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways they can connect incoming ninth-grade students with ninth-grade teachers, coaches, and club sponsors prior to the start of school.

High schools that offer an array of extracurricular opportunities (e.g., athletics, drama, service clubs, and academic clubs) where ninth-grade student participation is encouraged can help foster a successful transition to high school [25,26,42]. A variety of extracurricular opportunities offer students a sense of freedom of choice, promotes the feeling of being connected to their school, and fosters stronger relationships with students and staff [25,31]. As student participation in extracurricular activities can greatly alleviate social concerns during the transition process [25,26,30,42], gaining valuable information about extracurricular activities and how to get involved is a good first step. Camp attempted to meet this aim and students valued this opportunity. However, students expressed concern regarding time management and how to manage extracurricular activities with other high school responsibilities, a topic not directly or fully addressed at camp. Furthermore, students valued the opportunity at camp to learn about school traditions and discuss rumors; however, many rumors were initiated and perpetrated by educators themselves. Educators who seek to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways they can explicitly teach incoming ninth-grade students time and organizational management and work to actively demystify negative rumors before school starts.

Academically, TOPS Camp provided students experiences attending academic classes and participating in authentic high school lessons, as well as learning about expectations for academic success in high school and beyond. Experiencing academic success is a necessary component of feeling a sense of competence as a high school student [32] and competence is a psychological need of all humans [3,4]. Because two of the camp's goals focused on academics, camp was designed to prepare students for the academic rigor of high school coursework. While the authentic lessons were deemed helpful, students struggled with the relevance of experiencing lessons associated with upperclassmen courses. Educators who

seek to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways they can expose students to ninth-grade courses and lessons prior to the transition to ease students' academic transition-related concerns.

Consistent with prior research (e.g., [2,19]), students struggled with the increase in academic expectations, even though educators and upperclassmen camp counselors tried to address this topic at camp. Students did not attest to an increase in academic expectations as it pertains to the complexity of their coursework; the increase they referred to pertained to the amount of coursework assigned. The large workload, rather than the work itself, has been found to be a major academic issue affecting high school adjustment [19,23]. Important to note, an increase in academic expectations does not always equate with an increase in complexity [6]. Academic work should increase in cognitive demand as students advance in their schooling, but the workload should match their development [6,25]. Educators who seek to support a responsive transition may reflect on their academic expectations of ninth-grade students and to what degree the amount of coursework associated with their course is warranted.

Students must also consider their long-term academic objectives early in their high school career, so they may exhibit autonomy in shaping their trajectory [1]. Understanding credits and graduation requirements is fundamental to achieve this aim [27,31]. Camp did meet students' needs in this area. However, no activities focused on time management or organization. Educators who seek to support a responsive transition may consider in what ways they can place an increased focus on helping incoming ninth-grade students understand how academics influence postsecondary opportunities.

This study is not without limitations. Despite the longitudinal design, this study does not report on the ways the camp may support students beyond the first semester of high school. In addition, this study does not include all students who attended camp and may not include all perspectives. Practitioners should consider these limitations as they process the findings and suggestions.

5. Conclusions

This study extends current research on the transition to high school by suggesting a summer transition camp may have the potential to support incoming ninth-grade students' developmental needs and their procedural, social, and academic transition-related concerns. Supporting the middle-to-high-school transition through the implementation of a highly developed transition support program is noted in the literature as a promising approach to prevent a host of issues, including school failure and drop out [1]. However, transition programs and their activities, such as a summer transition camp, may be most beneficial when students perceive such activities as actually supporting their developmental needs and satisfying their transition-related procedural, social, and academic concerns.

This study can benefit high school educators who are interested in implementing a transition program, specifically a summer camp, to support student success. Educators who seek to replicate a similar program may want to consider the findings and suggestions made above, paying particular attention to students' needs and their perceived strengths and weaknesses of this camp, and take actionable steps to design a transition camp with these findings in mind. Additional research is needed on summer transition camps as there is currently a dearth of research on this topic. Additional studies that include voices of educators, students, and parents are needed to provide a more complete understanding of the issues and concerns associated with this transition. In agreement with Cohen and Smerdon [1], all secondary school reform efforts should incorporate a concerted effort to ease the transition into high school to mitigate school failure and support student success in school. As students make this move, it is imperative they are armed with the skills and tools necessary to be successful in high school and beyond. A summer transition camp designed to be responsive to students' developmental needs and transition-related concerns may be one possible way to support this aim.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guides

Initial Student Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Describe what you think high school will be like. What excites you? What are your concerns?

What do you think of the high school you will be attending? School itself? Teachers and other school personnel? Upperclassmen? Academics? Extracurricular activities?

What do you know about being a high school student? How do you know this?

Describe TOPS camp? Why are you attending TOPS camp? Who told you about TOPS Camp?

Describe one experience that you had during TOPS Camp that stands out. Why did it stand out?

What do you think you need to help make the move to high school easier for you?

What aspects of TOS Camp did you find the most interesting/helpful?

What aspects of TOPS Camp did you not feel was helpful/not helpful in preparing you for high school?

If you had to describe TOPS Camp to someone who was considering attending the camp, how would you describe it? What advice would you give them?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions/comments?

Second Student Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Describe the highlights of your first week of ninth grade. What was the best experience? What was the worst experience? What, if any, concerns do you still have?

Describe any instances, if any, where you may have felt ill-prepared for high school. What did you do?

Describe any instances, if any, where you may have felt really prepared for high school. How did you prepare?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions/comments?

Third Student Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Describe your experiences this semester adjusting to high school.

What was the hardest thing to adjust to in high school? Easiest?

Elaborate on what helped you with the hard adjustments.

Now that you have completed a full semester in high school, what advice would you give to a middle school student going to high school next year?

If you could help create next year's TOPS Camp, what would you want to make sure was part of the schedule in order to best help incoming ninth-grade students with the transition into high school?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions/comments?

Camp Counselor Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Describe how you became involved with TOPS Camp this summer.

Describe your role as a TOPS Camp counselor.

What did you already know about TOPS Camp before becoming a counselor? Did you attend TOPS Camp as an incoming ninth grader? If so, describe your experiences at TOPS Camp as a camper.

What did you share about being a high school student with this summer's campers? How do you share this? What was the most important thing you shared? What do you wish you would have shared?

Will you volunteer to be a counselor at TOPS camp next summer? Why/why not?

Describe one experience that you had during TOPS camp that stands out. Why does it stand out?

What do you think freshmen need to help make the move to high school easier?

What aspects of TOPS Camp did you find the most interesting/helpful?

What aspects of TOPS Camp did you not feel was helpful/not helpful in preparing freshmen for high school?

If you had to describe TOPS Camp to someone who was considering attending the camp, how would you describe it? What advice would you give them?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions/comments?

School Teacher/Staff Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Guide

What do you believe is the easiest thing for students to adjust to when making the move to high school? The hardest?

What do you feel is purpose of TOPS Camp?

In what ways, if any, do you believe TOPS Camp may help prepare students for high school? Explain.

In what ways, if any, do you think high school faculty and staff help students adjust to high school?

Do you feel that relationships are built between teachers and TOPS Camp students? If so, how are those relationships developed and fostered? If not, why? What would you do to rectify this?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions/comments?

Camp Coordinator Semi-Structured Interview Guide

What do you believe is the easiest thing for students to adjust to when making the move to high school? Hardest?

How does your school currently assist students with the transition into high school?

Does your faculty, leadership, and staff helped to prepare students to make the transition into high school? If so, how? If not, why?

What do you believe the purpose of TOPS Camp to be?

Why does your school offer TOPS Camp?

How did you decide what to offer students during TOPS Camp?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions/comments?

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