

A Narrative Inquiry of How Parents Experienced Their Child's Middle School Transition in  
Select Regions of Georgia

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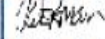
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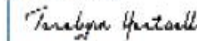


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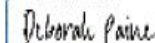


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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study chronicles the narratives of three mothers whose children transitioned from elementary to middle school. Each participant was interviewed on three occasions to capture their lived experiences in what often has been considered a tumultuous time for families. The interviews focused on the participants' experiences before, during, and after their child transitioned to middle school, created portraits of what participants felt their roles were in elementary and middle school, and identified resources the participants had available to them during the transition.

Through qualitative data analysis techniques applied to the participants' narratives, it was evident that the participants felt a lack of communication at the middle school level, experienced a sense of uncertainty regarding parental expectations in the middle school transition, and were unaware of how the middle school transition would drive their family's daily routine. Additionally, the participants offered advice to future middle school parents and to schools to potentially improve the parental transition to middle school.

The conceptual frameworks for this study were stage-environment fit theory, role exit theory, and role construction. Practical implications from this study include, but are not limited to, classroom teachers, schools, and school districts identifying the needs of their incoming middle school parents to best outfit them with the skillset needed to successfully navigate being a middle school parent.

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## DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation to two people I wish were here to see the end of this journey: my late father and role model, Everett Coker, who said “one good idea, leads to another” and to Stevie who persuaded me to start the doctoral program and taught me to always appreciate the littlest things in life. I also dedicate this dissertation to my sons, William and Leo, and my nieces and nephews, Jennifer, James, Flynn, Hadley, Gabriel, and Gianna; may you always know the power, privilege, and beauty of pursuing education.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the fall of 2021, there were 3,650,310 students in 6th grade in the United States. This means there were 3,650,310 opportunities to make the 6th-grade experience positive for the 2021-2022 school year. However, the middle school years mirror a roller coaster ride with many ups and downs and twists and turns. The biological and psychological changes experienced by middle school-aged students have been compared to the changes infants undergo as they progress to toddlers (Meyer, 2011). Students experience developmental changes in an environment that is unfamiliar to them or their parents; this complicates the middle school journey. New middle school students and parents are versed in the inner workings of elementary school but are novices in the world of middle school (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

Parents of new middle school students experience two transitions in one. First, as students enter middle school, parents encounter an academic transition. The structure of middle school does not align with the elementary school system; therefore, parents do not know how to navigate the institutional culture of middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Smith et al., 2019). For example, in middle school, parents interact with more teachers than in elementary school, which can negatively impact the quality of parent-teacher relationships (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Juvonen et al., 2014). Additionally, the academic expectations of increased curriculum difficulty and critical thinking skills in middle school are more stringent than in elementary school. However, because parents of rising middle school students are new to their school community, they have not yet

built strong parent-teacher relationships to assist their child through the new rigor of middle school academics (Juvonen et al., 2014).

The second transition parents face is the transition associated with the developmental age of their child. The developmental age of students entering middle school presents parents with situations they were not accustomed to with an elementary school-aged child (Meyer, 2011). Middle school students experience the developmental stage of adolescence. Erikson (1968) described adolescence as when youth struggle with how to be what others want them to be while simultaneously being their own person. Adolescents constantly try to balance conforming to expectations while achieving autonomy (Erikson, 1968), which challenges parents to direct less and guide more.

Combining the developmental changes of middle school-aged students and the lack of knowledge of middle school culture makes it difficult for parents to help their children have a successful elementary to middle school transition (Fite et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2016). Parental involvement positively impacts a child's success in middle school; however, new middle school parents are often unsure how to be involved with their child (Fite et al., 2018). Middle school parents tend to be uncertain of their role in their new middle schooler's academic and extra-curricular life (Bachman et al., 2021). Along with the uncertainty of how to be a middle school parent, there are not sufficient transition scaffolds or programs in place for parents of new middle schoolers (Akos et al., 2005). Without clear direction on how to be involved in their student's middle school transition, parents are less likely to be involved in their student's academics, which is counter-productive for middle school students (Hill et al., 2016).

While Akos et al. (2005) found that parents could improve the quality of the middle school transition for students, current research neglects the parental component of the elementary

to middle school transition. Consequently, Cai and Tu (2021) called for research into implementing elementary to middle school transition programs for parents. Therefore, this study will examine the parental role in transitioning from elementary to middle school. Insights gained from studying the parental perspective of the middle school transition could be applied to help create elementary to middle school transition programs for parents. These programs can increase student achievement and foster a positive perception of the middle school experience for parents.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While previous researchers have studied the transition from middle school to high school, there is a need for qualitative research targeting the elementary to middle school transition experience (Rudolph et al., 2001), and there is a general lack of middle school transition research in the last two decades (Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). The previous literature highlighted how middle schools do not know how to establish and maintain a smooth transition from elementary school to middle school for parents. As a result, parental involvement tends to decline from elementary to middle school (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Additionally, new middle school parents lacked the skills to assist their children in transitioning from elementary to middle school because their children were simultaneously experiencing developmental changes as they moved to a new educational environment (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Epstein et al., 2019). When parents looked for help with the transition to middle school and could not find it, it was often because their middle school did not offer transition support or communicate how to access assistance (Epstein et al., 2019; Van Valkenburgh et al., 2021). With that, an opportunity is missed to increase the likelihood of their child having a smooth transition from elementary to middle school as well.

## **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework answers questions about why and how a study should be completed (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This study's motivation was to understand parents' lived experiences as their children end elementary school and begin middle school to make that transition as successful as possible for parents experiencing the same transition in the future. Understanding parents' experience entering middle school also had the potential to educate middle school administrators, counselors, and teachers about how they play an integral part in making a successful transition from elementary school to middle school for parents.

One method for conceptualizing those experiences was the stage-environment fit theory. Eccles et al. (1993) presented the stage-environment fit theory to explain the conflicting nature of the developmental needs of middle school-aged students, the institutional structure of middle schools in the United States, and parenting styles. The stage-environment fit theory, developed from the person-fit theory, applies more to family structures and the educational system (Eccles et al., 1993) and has been routinely cited in the literature. The stage-environment fit theory was appropriate for the study because it relates explicitly to academic environments, parenting, and students' developmental needs. Examining participants' experiences through the lens of stage-environment fit theory helped understand what parents experienced when they encountered their child's new developmental needs in an academic setting that was new to them both.

An additional examination of participants' experiences was the role exit theory. Ebaugh (1988) explained role exit theory as when a person simultaneously begins a new role in life and has to say goodbye to their previously lived role. Role exit theory was derived from Ebaugh's experience as a nun and leaving the Church. However, it applies in any situation where an individual was in one role and then left to begin a new one (Ebaugh, 1988). Thus, the role exit

theory has been cited in various contexts because the phenomenon is not unique to a specific place or time. Therefore, role exit theory was discussed concerning the elementary school parent versus middle school parent dichotomy.

Role construction applied to participants' recollections of how they learned to be middle school parents. Parents who experienced the transition from elementary to middle school independently formed their beliefs about their role or adhered to the role their middle school prescribed (Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022). If parents do not have a solid base to construct their role in their new middle schooler's academic life, they may be disconnected or will ineptly fulfill their role as middle school parents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The middle school years are pivotal for students, developmentally and educationally, and parents want to help make their child's middle school years as successful as possible but often are not as equipped as they could be to help their middle schooler (Epstein et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to chronicle the narrative of parents who experienced having a child transition from elementary school to middle school. The study aimed to create a portrait of participants' perceived parental expectations at the elementary and middle school levels and how those expectations are similar and different. The study also provided insight into the methods, tools, and resources new middle school parents utilize to leave their role as elementary school parents and begin their roles as middle school parents. Ultimately, the knowledge gained from this study will not only fill a void of qualitative research, and more specifically, narrative inquiry, in the literature, but will potentially impact how schools address the transition from elementary to middle school for parents.

## Research Questions

The study consisted of three research questions. The research questions were:

RQ1: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia describe their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school?

RQ2: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia explain their parental roles in the elementary school environment versus their roles in the middle school environment?

RQ3: What assistance was available for parents from select regions of Georgia in their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents?

The experience of middle school parents transitioning to middle school with their children was a core factor in the study. Research Question 1 allowed participants to describe their parental experience of transitioning from elementary school to middle school in the context of their parental role before, during, and after their child entered middle school, painting a picture of what life was like for them in that role during each transition step. The transition experience was not limited to academic concerns. It addressed how the developmental age of their child played a role in the transition experience, which directly aligns with the stage-environment theory (Eccles et al., 1993). Research question 1 set the foundation for further interviews in the study.

Participants dove deeper into their transition experience in Research Question 2 by describing the similarities and differences in parental expectations in elementary and middle school. To better gather data from this question, "expectations" was operationalized to include (a) expectations at the school level and (b) their child's developmental level. Research Question

2 also identified structural differences between the elementary and middle school levels that led to institutional and cultural differences between the two education levels. Role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) paralleled Research Question 2 in that parents were leaving one set of expectations to adhere to a new set of expectations.

For Research Question 3, participants provided a narrative about how they learned to be a middle school parent. The participants' learning process included transition programs, school websites, and social media. This portion of the study supported and challenged literature that states there are insufficient transition scaffolds or programs for parents of new middle schoolers. Role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) also applied to Research Question 3 because it focuses on unlearning a role while learning a new one.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study was conducted using narrative inquiry. I completed a methods matrix (see Appendix A) to help outline the research design of my study. The completed methods matrix showed a shared focus on how participants make sense of their experiences and gathering those experiences via researcher-conducted interviews. Therefore, this study was qualitative (Patton, 2015), and more specifically, a narrative inquiry approach was used to explain participants' experiences. Narrative inquiry focuses on the participants' contextualized stories as the data source (Merriam, 2002). It supported the purpose of the study to share parents' lived experiences before, during, and after their child ends his or her elementary career and begins his or her middle school journey.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data collection method was personal interviews with parents who experienced the transition to middle school. I conducted interviews with study participants to

collect data about their experiences before, during, and after they transitioned from elementary school parents to middle school parents. I used an interview guide to help maintain structure (Patton, 2015); however, I did not want to depend on it, as Seidman (2019) warned that it could take away from the organic nature of an interview. Other data sources used for the study included notes and reflections found in researcher memos and document analyses. Examining data included interview transcripts, researcher memos, and any relevant documents.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study has the potential to positively impact the elementary to middle school transition for parents. Parents are integral to building students' successful middle school journeys (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). However, the previous literature reported that parents were not sure how to navigate the transition from elementary school to middle school and effectively fulfill the role of a middle school parent that their child and the school need (Akos, 2004; Garbacz et al., 2021; Icard, 2014; Karıbayeva & Boğar, 2014; Lerner, 2015; Marshall & Neuman, 2012; Rudolph et al., 2001). Through the participants' lived experiences in this study, elementary and middle school stakeholders can replicate reported helpful aspects of the participants' transition process, hoping to establish best practices for parental middle school transition initiatives. Additionally, this study will add to the body of literature pertaining to the parental experience in the middle school transition and potentially generate further inquiry into the middle school transition process for parents.

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to parents who have a child transitioning from elementary school to middle school in the context of the public school system in Georgia. Parents with a child in a private school in Georgia or a public or private school outside Georgia were not

included. Participants in the study shared similar experiences. However, each participant had unique aspects of their experience. While the individuality of their experiences created context-rich narratives, the findings will not be as generalizable as those in a quantitative study.

Participant selection was also a delimiting factor because participants will be selected based on contacts I have across Georgia and was be limited to 3 participants.

### **Definition of Terms**

The terms below either have multiple definitions outside of this study or are academically specific terminology. Definitions are provided below to ensure readers have the proper context for the terms in this study and to provide background knowledge.

- *Elementary School*: contains grades kindergarten through five.
- *Learning Management System (LMS)*: software used by schools to deliver content, track academic progress, and communicate with students and parents
- *Middle School*: contains grades six through eight
- *Parent*: a person over the age of 18 who has educational decision-making rights and responsibilities for their child
- *Public school*: a school that is financially supported by local, state, and federal governments and is bound to local, state, and federal laws

### **Summary**

This chapter contained an introduction, a statement of the problem, a conceptual framework, the purpose of the study, the research design, the research questions, data collection, the significance of the study, limitations, and definitions of terms. The next chapter provides a review of the literature centered around the experience of parents who have a child transitioning from elementary to middle school.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Middle school has been explained as a conflicting dichotomy of emotions that rivals the biological changes occurring from birth to the toddler years (Meyer, 2011). Balancing those opposing forces creates the middle school experience many choose to forget. However, not just the public that glosses over the middle school years. There is a void of middle school-specific research (Alverson et al., 2021; Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Kohut, 1976; Zeedyk et al., 2003). The existing limited research about middle school-aged students has centered more on the characteristics of the transition from middle school to high school. Rudolph et al. (2001) proposed that research should shift focus to the transition from elementary to middle school.

Simply stating the need to expand the current research about the elementary to middle school transition neglects to capture the individual components of the transition. Madjr and Cohen-Malayev (2016) called for research to focus on the impact of a middle school's engagement with families in the transition to middle school. Identifying family engagement best practices in middle school is part of helping make the move to middle school feel successful. Smith et al. (2019) found that maintaining systems to encourage family engagement was necessary to keep the positive momentum in the transition from elementary to middle school. Establishing a robust parental involvement plan in the transition from elementary to middle

school provided parents with tools to remain integral to their student's academic careers (Akos et al., 2005; Karibayeva & Boğar, 2014).

Therefore, this literature review focused on the role of parents in the transition from elementary to middle school. The transition seemed to be difficult for parents as they try to navigate the dissimilar structures of elementary and middle schools, the contrasting expectations of parents of elementary and middle school students, and the developmental ages of incoming middle schoolers.

### **Middle Schools in the United States**

The section provides a brief history of middle school in the United States and the interactions between parents and the school structure.

#### ***History***

Middle schools in the United States emerged in the 1960s when educators and researchers realized the junior high school model did not meet the developmental needs of junior high school students (Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Hunt et al., 2003). Educational policymakers aimed to create an academic environment that blended elementary schools' nurturing aspects and high schools' academic rigor (Hunt et al., 2003; Marshall & Neuman, 2012). Dr. William Alexander, the trailblazer of middle schools in the United States, urged middle schools to go beyond teaching rote academic knowledge (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Alexander believed middle-grades education should teach academics in the context of middle school students' developmental needs, "including physical, intellectual, moral, psychological, and social-emotional" traits (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 6).

## ***Middle School Parents and the Structure of Middle School***

Middle school parents tend to harbor feelings of disconnect perpetuated by the differences in the structures of elementary and middle schools. The middle school model in the United States began to meet preteens' educational and developmental needs (Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Hunt et al., 2003). However, while the middle school structure focuses on meeting the needs of students, the structure did not always consider parental needs (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

The structure of elementary and middle school academics tends to differ and thus results in a cultural shift for parents of middle school-aged students. Midgely et al. (1995) examined how elementary school classrooms primarily focus on task goals (such as self-improvement or rising to challenges) while middle school classes tend to implement performance goals (such as assessment scores comparable to peers). The newfound performance focus in middle school can foster previously unencountered stressors for students. However, the structure of elementary schools has taught parents to guide their students through task-based assignments. As a result, when parents are confronted with students preparing for performance assessments, they lack the skills to advise their children on how to meet performance expectations (Midgely et al., 1995).

### **Struggles for Middle School Parents**

Identifying struggles for middle school parents can help stakeholders better support future middle school parents. This section explores communication and expectation uncertainties for parents of incoming middle school students.

#### ***Communication Uncertainty***

Fite et al. (2018) noted the importance of parental support in the elementary to middle school transition. Parents need to understand how a middle school operates to support their

students. Therefore, a successful elementary-to-middle school transition involves helping families get accustomed to the logistics of middle school (Akos et al., 2005; Bishop & Harrison, 2021). A parent cannot be expected to assist their child through the transition to middle school if opportunities are not provided for them to understand the institutional structure of middle school (Bishop & Harrison, 2021)

Families want to be involved in their middle school students' academics, but their involvement techniques from elementary school do not transfer to the middle school environment (Hill et al., 2016). In middle school, students typically have more teachers than in elementary school, making it harder for parents to know whom they should contact if the need arises (Smith et al., 2019). However, the communication uncertainty felt by middle school families goes beyond parent-teacher communication. Middle schools tend to have larger student populations than elementary schools (Fite et al., 2018). Therefore, the number of school personnel also increases at the middle school level. As a result, families must decipher with whom they should communicate about issues rather than just sending information to the school office as they did in elementary school (DeSpain et al., 2018). Additionally, the familiar makeup of the elementary school student population could have changed. Not all families from elementary school might feed into the same middle school, leaving parents unsure how to establish supportive relationships and lines of communication with new middle school families (Duchesne et al., 2016).

### ***Expectation Uncertainties***

Even if parents are aware of the structural nuances of middle school and how to communicate with their child's new school, that does not automatically mean they understand what is expected of them at the middle school level. Middle school brings new routines and

expectations for students and families (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). Middle school students learn individualized rules and expectations from each of their teachers (Fite et al., 2018). Parents do not receive those same lessons even though when parents learn skills to monitor their middle school-aged students, they are more likely to meet the expectations of middle school (Garbacz et al., 2021).

As families strive to help their new middle school-aged children navigate the elementary to middle school transition, they are simultaneously learning what it means to be a middle school parent. Elementary school culture is more conducive to family involvement, and elementary schools promote family involvement throughout students' elementary school careers (Smith et al., 2019). In the years leading to middle school, parental instinct is to guide their child (Warner, 2020). That guidance could include checking homework assignments, communicating with elementary school teachers, and participating in elementary school events. However, as students enter middle school, the expectation is for them to take more ownership of their learning (Akos et al., 2005). The role of parents is thereby diminished. Consequently, parents are at a loss for how to support their children (Rudolph et al., 2001). A middle schooler's brain leads them to make decisions without familial guidance, but parents have been the source of control throughout elementary school. To act in accordance with middle school expectations, parents need help to shift their role from a managerial role in elementary school to an assistant manager role in middle school (Icard, 2014). Schools should address the fact that both middle schoolers and their parents are "looking for control in all the wrong places" (Warner, 2020, p. 127).

The lack of clear middle school parent expectations (Bachman et al., 2021), combined with the increased complexity of the middle school structure, could lead to parents detaching themselves from the elementary to middle school transition (Hill et al., 2016). Parents tend to

wade into the fear of the unknown (Zeedyk et al., 2003). The discontinuity between elementary school and middle school parent expectations is problematic. Even though middle schoolers need a sense of autonomy, they still need direction from their families. Unfortunately, that guidance is not always there for them because families lack the knowledge and skills to be involved in middle school (Henderson et al., 2020). Therefore, new middle school students lose the teacher support they became accustomed to in elementary school and their parental support at home.

Hill et al. (2016) maintained that parental involvement in middle school has the potential to positively impact students longer than parental involvement in earlier grade levels. While parental engagement in middle school is less than in elementary school, the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement has not been thoroughly examined. Cai and Tu (2021) called for further studies to address how the decline of parental involvement in middle school impacted student achievement in middle school and beyond.

### **Developmental Ages of Middle School Students**

The structure of middle school and new parental expectations are not the only new phenomena for parents transitioning to middle school. New middle school parents face challenges due to their child's developmental age. The biological changes middle schoolers experience are uniquely middle school characteristics (Akos, 2004; Lerner, 2015). Cecil Picard described middle schools as "the Bermuda Triangle of education" filled with an onslaught of hormones (Meyer, 2011). Therefore, an action plan written for a successful elementary-to-middle school transition will capsize in the sea of middle school complexities without considering middle schoolers' developmental ages. Alverson et al. (2021) argued that the developmental needs of middle schoolers should be the driving force behind any initiatives established for use in middle schools.

The brain of a middle schooler changes so frequently that parents struggle to discern how their child is making sense of the world (Learner, 2015; Warner, 2020). Parents might believe their middle schooler is misbehaving; however, the behavior could be the result of their child trying to orchestrate their middle school transition in the context of their developmental changes (Marshall & Neuman, 2012). Loke and Lowe (2014) reported that conflicts between parents and their middle school-aged child resulted from a middle schooler's desire for independence and their family's desire to be involved in their student's transition to middle school. Middle schoolers feel they are ignored and that others are constantly judging them simultaneously, and they are powered by conflicting emotions throughout their day (Fagell, 2019).

Developmentally, middle school-aged students yearn for more independence and the ability to make choices, but parents are not ready or sure how to relinquish control to their children (Icard, 2014; Marshall & Neuman, 2012). Zeedyk et al. (2003) reported parents' conflicts originating at home because they did not know how to communicate in a way their child could developmentally respond to. For example, families discussed the need to find new strategies when asking their child a question and balancing autonomy at home with exercising limits with their child.

While middle school students developmentally tend to reject support from their families and other adults, they often look to their friends for assistance (Wei, 2019), which can also cause feelings of disconnect for middle school parents. The developmental age of middle schoolers also brings an increased chance of bullying (Clark et al., 2022) and emotional stressors, which is why schools must address how parental support helps students through these changes. Consequently, parents of middle school students need tools to help them navigate the turbulence of trying to support their children who are developmentally inclined to reject their support. If a

school fails to provide these tools to have parents remain connected with their child, there is a risk of parents garnering feelings of mistrust toward the school because they feel alone in the middle school transition (Bachman et al., 2021).

To reduce parents' stress as they balance their child's developmental changes in conjunction with a new educational environment, the Association for Middle-Level Education (AMLE) recommended establishing purposeful engagement for parents of middle schoolers (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Bachman et al. (2021) described academic socialization, an example of purposeful parental engagement, as a tool parents can use to help middle school-aged students learn how to grow academically and socially. Middle school-aged students respond well to academic socialization because it appeals to their need for independence and guidance. Parents utilizing academic socialization outline techniques like study skills and time management and then allow their children to put those lessons into practice. Fite et al. (2018) found that providing parents of middle school-aged children with strategies geared to the developmental needs of their children promoted a more successful elementary school to middle school transition for both students and parents.

### **Supporting Parents in the Elementary to Middle School Transition**

Stakeholders can formulate suggestions to support parents in their transition from elementary school to middle school by addressing the identified struggles of communication and expectation uncertainties in middle school and by creating an awareness of the developmental stages of middle schoolers. Two areas to assist parents experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school include communication strategies and middle school transition programs.

### *Suggested Communication Strategies to Support Parents*

Addressing the structural differences between elementary and middle schools, educating parents about the expectations of middle school, and acknowledging the developmental needs of middle school-aged students should be the foundation of support for new middle school parents. The most confident and involved elementary school parents can quickly feel disoriented in middle school (Fagell, 2019). Middle schools should then work on communicating their support to parents. The degree of a middle school's communication with families seems to indicate how well parents understand their role in the academic and socialization of their middle schoolers.

Bullock et al. (2022) suggested that if parents can grasp the culture and expectations of middle school, they can pass that knowledge to their children to help them better acclimate to the middle school environment. To do so, middle schools must regularly communicate with families. Madjr and Cohen-Malayev (2016) indicated that a middle school can build relationships with parents and increase parental engagement by directly communicating with parents about how their students meet school expectations. Elementary schools often communicate frequently about school events and academic and behavioral expectations (Rudolph et al., 2001). The more middle schools can mimic the communication models of elementary schools, the more likely parents of middle school children will be involved in the elementary to middle school transition. This equates to better support for their students in adhering to and meeting middle school expectations (Madjr & Cohen-Malayev, 2016).

Henderson et al.'s (2020) study of home-school dissonance found that communication between families and middle schools was the most significant contributing factor to why families felt connected with their students' schools. Middle schools tend to rely on a limited number of family communication formats compared to elementary school methods, which causes a

disconnect between school and home (DeSpain et al., 2018). Increasing the variety of communication techniques can increase parental engagement and better educate parents about their role in middle school (Epstein, 2010).

Bachmann et al. (2022) suggested that middle schools identify their parents' preferred communication style and use that method. For example, if parents indicate they do not read hard copies of information sent home, send parents messages via text message or other electronic methods instead of sending home information in flyers and handouts. Middle schools could capitalize on parents' desire to be involved in their children's education if they utilize the correct outreach techniques (Epstein, 2010; Giannetti & Sagarese, 1997). By including non-traditional communication tools, schools have the possibility to reach and be more inclusive with families that have not been involved in the elementary to middle school transition (Madjr & Cohen-Malayev, 2016). Additionally, Bachmann et al. (2022) noted the importance of beginning the preferred communication method early in the elementary to middle school transition process and remaining consistent with that communication method.

Regardless of the communication method used by the school, the message should be clear and concise, include a contact person if more information is needed, and be translated into the languages spoken at the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022). However, simply because a preferred method of communication is utilized, it does not guarantee that the information will reach the audience. For example, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) produced a seven-part video series entitled "Middle School Matters" on YouTube in 2017. However, as of December 10, 2023, the video series had only been viewed approximately 1,500 times. The information from the GaDOE is available, but it has not reached its intended audience.

The subject matter of communication families receive from schools can also influence how much families become involved in middle school. DeSpain et al. (2018) explained that families tended to become disconnected from middle schools when they only heard negative information about their students. Therefore, middle schools should try contacting families regarding more than behavior infractions. Increasing positive communication from middle schools to families can increase parental engagement and the likelihood of a successful middle school transition. Epstein et al. (2019) found specific subject area communication helpful for new middle school parents but also supported Giannetti and Sagarese's (1997) caution that middle school parents tended to become uncomfortable with the increasing academic difficulties of middle school. Consequently, middle schools should include academic support for parents when contacting them regarding their child's academics.

Establishing communication between schools and families is a start, but schools should be detailed in their approach. Moorman et al. (2012) recommended creating a partnership that allowed the school or families to initiate communication versus solely school-controlled dialogue in the partnership. Relationships should be built on collaborative communication that fosters a sense of mutual trust (Davis et al., 2015). Communication supports are not limited to written and verbal communication. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) suggested schools can portray open lines of communication with parents by creating welcoming spaces in their building where parents feel safe to share their thoughts and concerns, in addition to staffing the school with personnel who embrace parental involvement and act as middle school advocates (Hill, 2022). Parents should hear *and* see the school communicating an inclusive, welcoming message.

### *Suggested Strategies for Successful Middle School Transition Programs*

Waters et al. (2014) found that family support was the most significant indicator of a successful transition to middle school for students. Subsequently, developing connections with middle school parents should be a priority for middle schools. Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) recommended that middle schools provide transition meetings for elementary parents that go beyond academics and the school day, share experiences from previous families, and provide communication tools for parents. The Georgia Department of Education (2017) suggested that middle school transition assistance for parents should include “social and emotional changes, organizational and environmental factors, academics, developmental growth, and college and career readiness” (p. 2).

Providing parents with information about all aspects of middle school nuances allows parents to fulfill their role in the transition to middle school to the best of their ability. Perkins and Gelfer (1995) noted that involving families was important because it empowered them to know how their child’s school operated and built relationships between the school, parents, and students. DeSpain et al. (2018) recognized the importance of creating a welcoming family environment for the transition environment because parents began to build trust with their middle school when they felt informed and valued as stakeholders in middle school. Building that trust is imperative; parents and middle school personnel must embrace one another to make a transition connection (Chun & Devall, 2019). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) highlighted the importance of a positive school climate displayed by all faculty and staff members because parents took on their role in the school based on their perception of their child’s school climate. Gale et al. (2022) found that parents who positively described their own experiences with their child’s school’s faculty and staff also believed their child lives the same experience. If middle

school personnel make families feel like they are being a burden, families are less likely to seek out engagement in the future, (Henderson et al., 2020) indicating that a welcoming middle school transition program is needed for parents to be more inclined to participate in their child's middle school education appropriately.

Schools can increase the effectiveness of their parents' support if they provide parents with as much proactive information as possible. School expectations should not be a surprise for middle school parents (Fagell, 2019; Mäirean et al., 2022; Musser, 2016). Providing parents with the knowledge of how their middle school works creates a collaborative transition where students can turn to their parents and the school for logistical or emotional concerns (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Parents exposed to a transition program that teaches the skillset to address and reduce feelings of uncertainty their child might be experiencing have the potential to improve their child's transition to middle school (Jindal-Snape, 2018).

Chun and Devall (2019) emphasized the need for schools to align their transition programs within the social and cultural context of their school community. Creating initiatives to foster parent transition programs taken out of their school community's social and cultural context will not be effective. Parents need to relate to the intended message. Schools can stay in tune with the needs of their parents if they involve their parents in the transition process, which Jindal-Snape et al. (2020) reported was often not the case in transition programs. Research is especially needed to help create a welcoming school transition for parents from marginalized populations (Gale et al., 2022).

Neglecting the opportunity to share site-based specific information with parents in the middle school transition process opens the door for parents to deliver a message to their children based on assumptions and can negatively skew the transition for parents and students (Musser,

2016). Schools should reflect on their transition practices to ensure they are addressing the needs of parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). If any parental needs are not being met, schools should consider if they are utilizing resources already put in place that families might be familiar with, such as the school's Parent-Teacher-Association (PTA) (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

### **Application of Conceptual Framework**

The Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions [MSALT] was conducted over two years with nearly 1,500 students who had recently transitioned from elementary to junior high school in Michigan (Eccles et al., 1993). Stage-environment fit theory was applied to MSALT's data analysis. Eccles et al. (1993) found tensions between parents and their middle school-aged children were a result of parents being unaware of how much independence their child needed upon transitioning from elementary school and the students being unaware of how to manage the independence they have. Through MSALT, Eccles et al. (1993) also noted the misalignment of the institutional structure of middle school and the developmental stage of middle school-aged students.

Breese and O'Toole (1995) studied the experience of adult female college students as they completed their academic careers and transitioned into life after college. Breese and O'Toole (1995) applied role-exit theory to explain how their participants encountered difficulties in their transitions and when they felt the transition was smooth. Their findings suggested transitional difficulties arise when one social role was completed and another must be learned without knowing how to begin the new role. Additionally, Breese and O'Toole (1995) highlighted the importance of understanding the context in which the adult students experienced their transitions because they were not isolated from other life events.

According to role construction, parents' involvement in their child's education is based on their belief about what a parent of a middle school student should be doing (Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) applied parental role construction to study the parental experience in school transitions. Parents' involvement, or lack thereof, in the transition process is related to a parent's opinion about what their role is in the transition. Therefore, if a school does not provide examples of parental involvement at the middle school level, parents are left to their own devices to construct that role themselves (Hill, 2022; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Schwandt, 2000). Parents who inadvertently construct their role without considering their child's developmental needs or the structure of middle schools can unknowingly create a negative middle school transition for their child.

## **Conclusion**

If schools are proactive, they can help parents account for the differing elementary and middle school structures, clarify the expected role of middle school parents, and equip parents with developmentally appropriate tools to support their children. To do so, middle schools should establish a transitional program encompassing all aspects of the transition to middle school (Akos, 2004; Akos et al., 2005; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Hill et al., 2016). If done successfully, the transition program will facilitate empowerment and connectivity, generating opportunities for families to pass on the same sentiments to their new middle schoolers.

The strategies outlined by Akos et al. (2005) for building a positive elementary-to-middle school transition task force followed common themes: Middle schools should be transparent, approachable, and inviting to parents. Additionally, transitional programs should be balanced with academic and behavioral concerns. As comprehensive as a middle school transitional program might be, it will not reach its full potential if it is not inclusive. Middle

school transitional programs should make every effort to forge relationships with “culturally and linguistically diverse families” (DeSpain et al., 2018, p. 239), which will require a balance of whole school and individual communications (Epstein, 2010)

Once a middle school transitional program is established, stakeholders should remember that future changes might be necessary to address the needs of all involved. Middle school transitional team members should adhere to the goal of creating a collaborative environment for all the adults and students in the transition from elementary to middle school (Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). In turn, families will better understand the developmental needs of middle schoolers, the differences in the structures of elementary and middle schools, and the expectations of parents in middle school. Middle school faculty and staff must adapt to factors out of their control, such as socioeconomic status and societal trends, to meet the needs of their students. However, middle schools do have the power to control how they shape the elementary to middle school transition for parents.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with an explanation of the study's research design, followed by a description of the study's population and sample. The chapter concludes with an outline of the data collection and procedures exercised in this study, as well as the narrative analysis methods used to generate the study's finding.

#### **Research Design**

This study aimed to capture the parents' experience as their child transitioned to middle school and then understand how middle schools could use the participants' shared experience to facilitate the transition of future middle school families. To support the purpose of the study, I needed to ensure that my methodology and research design would generate data to answer my research questions (Maxwell, 2013). I used Maxwell's (2013) methods matrix to identify the methodological approach most aligned with the purpose of the study (see Appendix A). Once I listed my research questions in my methods matrix, I identified why I needed to know the answer to my question, where the data to answer the question will be found, what kind of data I will need to collect, who can provide me with the data, and how I will analyze the data they provide.

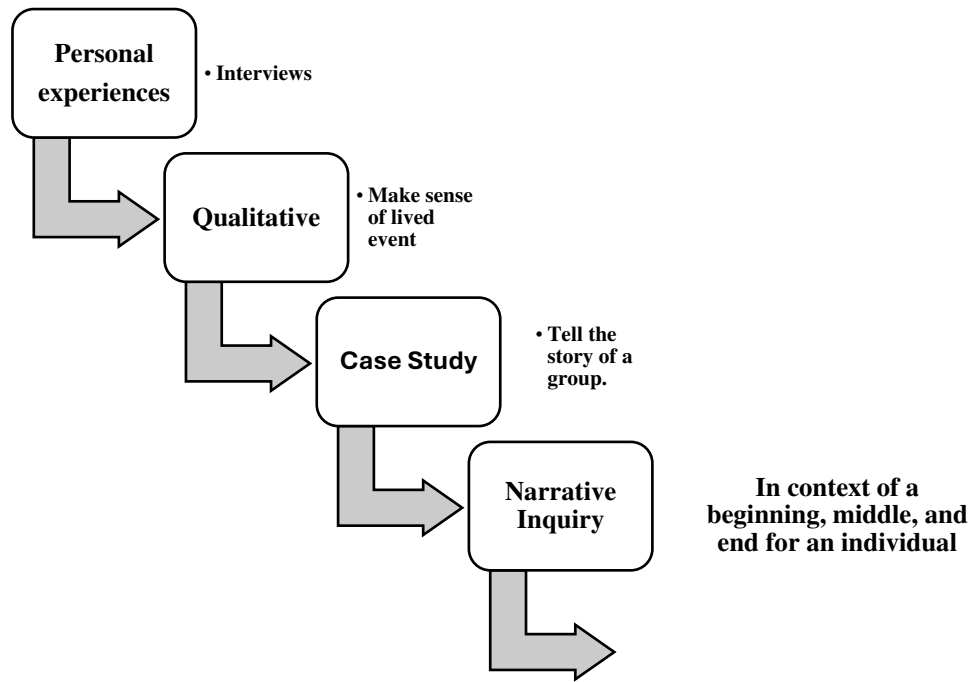
My methods matrix produced themes centered around participants' personal experiences, how participants make sense of those experiences, and why the answers to my research questions are needed. In the data collection portion of the methods matrix, each research question was

supported with researcher-conducted interviews to capture the parental experience of having a child transition from elementary to middle school. The completed methods matrix revealed that this study would be qualitative, based on the intricate personal nature of the participants' experiences and the data collection methods necessary to provide the context and perceptions of those experiences (Patton, 2015).

The first step was identifying the need for qualitative research versus quantitative research; the next step was to align my research questions with a specific qualitative method (see Figure 1). A case study was an option for the research design because my study focused on one particular group (Saldaña, 2011). However, even though a case study would tell the story (Patton, 2015) of parents transitioning from elementary school to middle school, after reflecting on the method matrix, a case study could possibly lose the individual participants' voices. Narrative inquiry is how individuals tell their stories to make sense of their life events and can include a variety of participants (Saldaña, 2021). I found narrative inquiry to fit the nature of this study because the data source will be participants' experiences and analyzed in the specific context they were given (Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, via the research questions and data collection methods, participants will recount their elementary to middle school transition experiences with an organic beginning, middle, and end narrative, which speaks to the continuity of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). Therefore, my study had a blended research design: a case study with a strong narrative approach.

**Figure 1**

*Process of Identifying Methodological Approach*



The three research questions driving this study are:

RQ1: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia describe their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school?

RQ2: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia explain their parental roles in the elementary school environment versus their roles in the middle school environment?

RQ3: What assistance was available for parents from select regions of Georgia in their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents?

While keeping these research questions at the forefront of data collection and analysis was important, I consciously did not enter the study with preconceived notions about what I would encounter from participant narratives. A well-planned research design was necessary to reduce researcher bias.

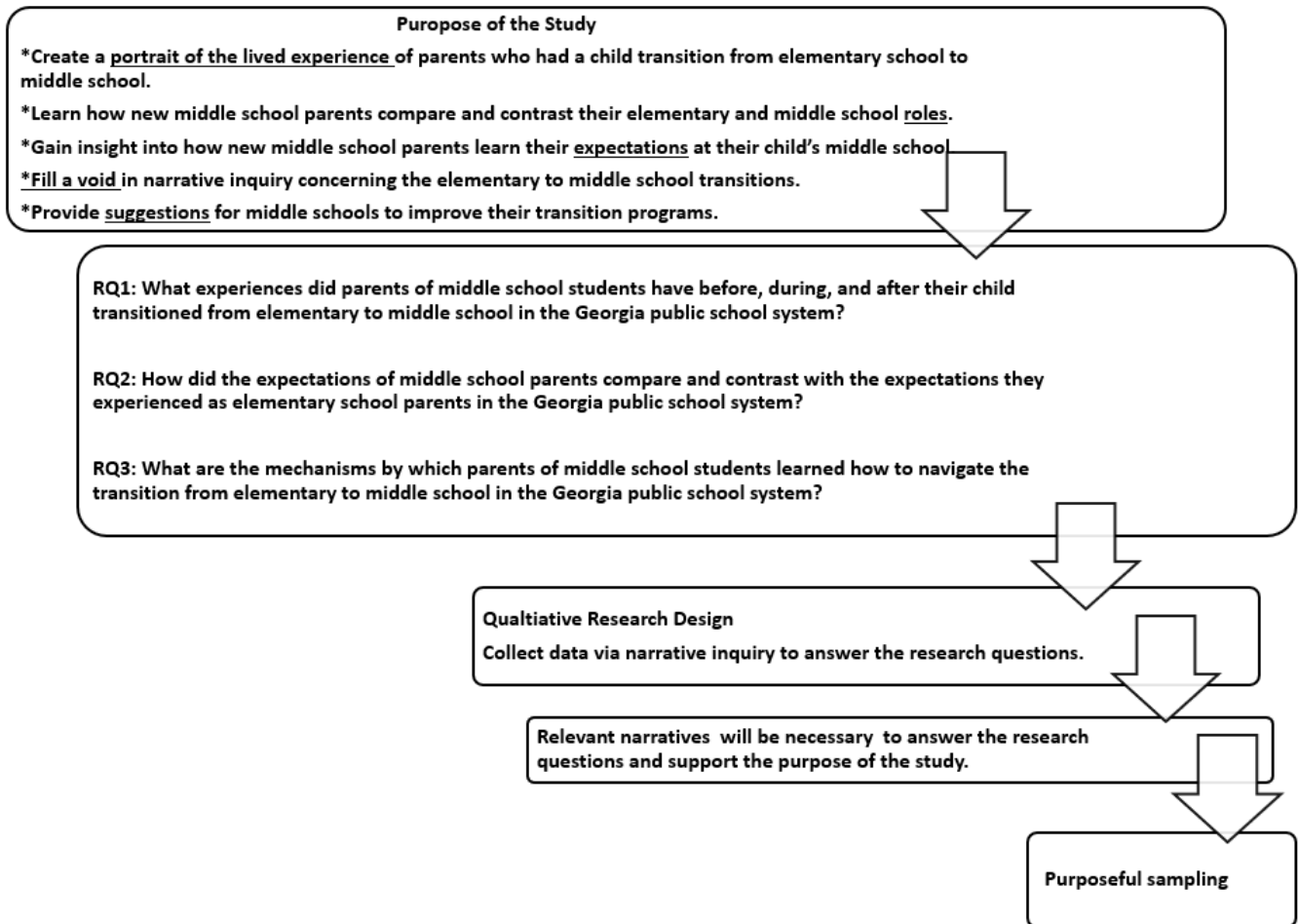
### **Population and Sample**

The study participants were from select regions in Georgia. The regions were based on the GaDOE Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) regions. The Georgia Department of Education (2024) outlined 16 RESA regions in Georgia representing each GaDOE school system (see Appendix B). Each RESA region's mission is to provide shared supportive services to public schools and students throughout school systems in their region (Georgia Code, 2024). Participants were parents with a child who attended a Georgia public elementary school and had just begun or completed their 6th grade school year at a Georgia public middle school in one of RESA's regions. The children attended the elementary schools on a K-5 structure, while the middle schools housed grades 6-8. Additionally, participants were first-time middle school parents, so the transition experience was fresh, potentially producing more detail-rich narratives.

Based on Patton's (2015) advice for selecting a sampling strategy, I constructed a visual to outline my sampling strategy choice (see Figure 2) and found purposeful sampling to be the best fit. I believed purposeful sampling, specifically snowball sampling, applied to my research because participants needed to have lived experiences that aligned with the purpose of my research and research questions to produce data relevant to the research. I sought contacts I have via professional and personal connections to those who know individuals who mirrored the participant criteria and supported the purpose of the research. Those professional and personal connections passed along my contact information to potential participants.

**Figure 2**

*Process of Purposeful Sampling Justification*



The study's sample size was 3 participants from RESA regions 1, 2, and 4 in North/Northwestern Georgia. I adhered to the Valdosta State University research protocol to match potential participants with actual study participants.

Narrative inquiry aims to bring an understanding of a lived experience to others (Clandinin, 2013). Having multiple families as participants increases the narratives to which readers can relate to themselves. Limiting the number of participants allowed me to respect the time-intensive nature of narrative inquiry needed to generate detail-rich narratives (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). The study did not include the experiences of middle school students, teachers, or administrators.

I used maximum variation sampling for the study. Maximum variation sampling allowed individual in-depth accounts of participants' experiences while providing space to identify commonalities among participants (Patton, 2015). Each participant who experienced the transition from elementary to middle school brought their own perspective and experience. However, one aspect families of new middle school students have in common, despite their unique circumstances, is that they are all newcomers in their role as middle school parents.

Although generalization is not applicable to small sample sizes, findings generated from small sample sizes still provide insights others can learn from and create an impetus for future research (Patton, 2015). Therefore, as much attention to detail as possible was given to each participant's lived experiences in an effort to gain insight into future implications and practical implications.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

The following section explains how personal interviews, researcher memos, and document analysis were used to collect data in this study.

#### ***Personal Interviews***

Based on Seidman's (2019) three-part interview structure, the participants were interviewed individually on three separate occasions. I chose Seidman's (2019) three-part interview because, through the process, participants created a narrative of their elementary to middle school transition experience with a clear beginning, middle, and end. In the first interview, participants established the context of their transition from elementary to middle school. Participants reconstructed their experience of becoming a middle school parent for the

second interview. Finally, in the third interview, participants reflected on their elementary to middle school transition experience and any meaning they gained from their transition experience (Seidman, 2019).

Each interview session lasted no more than 90 minutes to reduce participant and researcher fatigue (Seidman, 2019). There were approximately one to three days between each interview session. The time between the interview sessions provided a break for the participants and allowed them to refocus on the next interview's topic. Additionally, the break created the time and space I needed as a researcher to reflect on the progress of the interviews and to assess for and address any internal validity threats (Seidman, 2019).

I interviewed study participants using an interview guide I created for this study (see Appendix C). I developed questions for participants "to reconstruct, not to remember" (Seidman, 2019, p. 94). While some of my personal experiences of being an elementary and middle school parent and a middle school teacher were evident in the interview questions, my research questions were the guiding force in creating the interview guide. Interview questions were aligned with the research questions and the focus of each interview session. Participant responses shaped their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary to middle school, outlined the similarities and differences between parental expectations at the elementary and middle school levels, and divulged how they learned to transition from elementary to middle school.

Beyond addressing the research questions, the interview questions were grounded in previous research as they targeted the institutional makeup of elementary and middle schools and the role of parents in their children's education. Conceptually, the interview questions addressed the stages parents experience in their transition from elementary to middle school, what it was

like to exit one role and begin another, and how participants constructed the role they portrayed in elementary and middle school. Additionally, the reflective interview questions allowed participants to share insights they gained from their elementary to middle school transition that other stakeholders in educational transitions could benefit from in the future. Finally, the prewritten interview questions followed Seidman's (2019) interview progression to create the context of the experience, the state of the experience, and the discussion of the meaning of the experience.

The structure of an interview guide keeps the interviews focused on the research purpose and questions (Patton, 2015). What I needed to remember, though, is that each participant's experience was unique to their context. Therefore, I used a semi-structured approach to blend the focus-driven interview while honoring the participants' individuality. I guided the interviews in relation to the research questions; however, I did not stop the fluidity of an interview because it did not align with a particular format (Seidman, 2019). I followed up with additional questions, even if they were not in the interview guide, for further exploration or clarification sparked by the participant's recollections as needed.

The data collection came from interview recordings and transcripts. The participant interviews took place via Microsoft Teams, which produced audio and video recordings and transcriptions. Participants were informed of the research protocols and consented to recording before the interview. For each participant, I reviewed the interview recording and transcript. I made the necessary edits if there were any discrepancies between the recordings and transcripts. I adhered to the Institutional Review Board's Protocol Exemptions (see Appendix D).

### ***Researcher Memos***

Memos are a researcher's way of journaling throughout their study. More specifically, memos allow researchers to interact with their research (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008; Maxwell, 2013). I captured my thoughts, ideas, and reflections in memos regarding individual participants after their interviews, participant responses as a collective group, and throughout the analysis process. Additionally, I wrote memos to reflect on my interviewer and researcher skills so I could make changes when needed. My researcher memos aided in the data collection process because writing my thoughts helped me digest the content of a participant interview or document, which sparked further topics I might not have considered before (Maxwell, 2013). The memos also documented any emerging researcher bias I would not have recognized without creating a written record of my thoughts throughout the research process.

Most researcher memos were written digitally after each interview because, to me, digital memos facilitate analysis more than handwritten documents. However, I kept a paper journal with me as often as possible if I did not have access to a digital tool to create a memo and a thought needed to be recorded. Beyond a summarizing narrative memo style, I used graphic organizers to create a visual layout of my thoughts and takeaways from participant interviews and documents because visual literacy techniques are the most beneficial note-taking style for me. I reviewed my researcher memos after each set of participant interviews and after the document analysis was completed.

### ***Document Analyses***

Participants were not the only data source in my study. Analyzing documents is another form of qualitative research that added more depth to my research findings than using interviews (Merriam, 2002; Saldaña, 2021). I analyzed documents for their involvement in a participant's

transition from elementary to middle school in the context of my second and 3rd research questions. My second research question invited participants to compare the expectations of elementary and middle school parents. Participants mentioned documents outlining those expectations. The 3rd research question in my study asked participants to recall how they learned to transition from elementary school parent to a middle school parent, which also involved documents that educated them about the transition. The type of documents I analyzed included official school websites and social media accounts, unofficial social media accounts, and electronic copies of communication sent to participants regarding the transition from elementary to middle school.

I used a document analysis organizer (see Appendix E) to capture the data from each document and as a tool to establish connections to my research questions and reflect on the document's significance. I created the document analysis tool by bridging document analysis techniques I have used as a social studies teacher, the nature of my research questions, and an effort to connect documents to previous studies, participant interviews, and other documents. The summary portion of the document analysis organizer also served as a memo space.

### **Narrative Analysis Procedures**

Rereading, In Vivo coding, and Versus coding were used to analyze participant narratives in this study.

#### ***Rereading***

The data source for this study was the participants' narratives. As the researcher, data collector, and data analyzer, I went back to the data source to ensure I understood the participants' experiences as they were told. I reread each participant's interview transcript to frame the context of the participant's responses (Saldaña, 2021). The rereading not only

refamiliarized me with the participants' experiences but ensured I was looking at the experiences from the participants' points of view instead of relying on my recollections of their experiences. I reread each participant's interview transcripts after every interview. To see the continuity of their experience, after a participant completed their last interview, I reread their transcripts as a collective group.

### ***In Vivo Coding***

While rereading the participants' transcripts, I used In Vivo coding to categorize their experiences. In Vivo coding drew me to the words and phrases participants used themselves (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to describe their experience transitioning from elementary to middle school parent. Using the participants' language reduced researcher assumptions, discovered patterns within an individual participant's experience, and ultimately led to identifying similarities and differences experienced among the participants.

### ***Versus Coding***

I applied Versus coding to categories created through rereading and In Vivo coding. Versus coding compared and contrasted participant narratives in the context of two separate experiences: elementary school and middle school (Saldaña, 2021). The lived experiences of each participant were also compared to the others in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Additionally, both in vivo coding and versus coding apply to document analysis (Saldaña, 2021). Therefore, I used vivo and versus coding to analyze data gathered from websites and social media outlets relating to my second and third research questions in the same manner I used them to code participant interviews. To organize the data generated from participant interviews,

documents, and researcher memos, I created charts to lay out the data to better see how participants compared and contrasted with one another.

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

The methods matrix (see Appendix A) helped determine the most logical instrumentation choice, the researcher, as the data collection method. I followed up with a validity matrix (see Appendix F) to account for the validity of the study's instrument. The validity matrix addressed my research questions, why I needed answers to those research questions, what kind of data answered my research questions, how I planned to analyze data from answering my research questions, validity threats, strategies used to contend with the validity threats and finally why I chose those strategies (Maxwell, 2013). As a result of my validity matrix, I achieved participant trustworthiness by providing an audit trail, having time to debrief, and employing member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The intricate, personal nature of narrative inquiry requires a bond between participants and researchers, so participants feel safe to share their lived experiences (Patton, 2015). While a participant's strong sense of security yields rich, detailed narratives, it also has the potential for data to be inadvertently skewed as researcher bias can form because the researcher is the storyteller of their participant's story (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, as the interviewer/interviewee relationship is established, it is vital to use trustworthiness checks to ensure the validity of the data as it is gathered and later analyzed. Trustworthiness checks are not exclusively beneficial for the researcher and participants. Audit trails, debriefing, and member checks produce in-depth participant introductions and detailed data collection and analysis procedures that also allow readers to feel included in the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I used audit trails as one trustworthiness check. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended completing an audit trail of data gathered in qualitative research in a similar manner as an audit would be employed in the financial realm. The audit trail included compiling all forms of data gathered, including researcher-generated data, such as researcher memos, and providing them to an auditor, chosen in accordance with researcher protocols, to confirm that the researcher's findings are based on the data presented in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail's documentation collection began as soon as my research began. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that being proactive in collecting documentation was more advantageous for trustworthiness than retroactively gathering documentation for audits. The audit trail can be completed in person or presented via a secured electronic presentation.

Another trustworthiness check I used was debriefing. In debriefing, I selected a debriefer, in accordance with researcher protocols, who acted as a sounding board as I shared the status of my research, methodological and analytic approaches, and where my mind space was as a researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The debriefer shared their insight and held me accountable to the research process for the entirety of my study.

Additionally, I used member checking as a trustworthiness check. Member checking allows participants to verify their experience is accurately represented and creates a collaborative, safe relationship between the researcher and the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants in my study reviewed their portraits to ensure I documented our interview sessions and their thoughts and feelings precisely as they happened. Not only did the inclusive nature of member checking show participants they were the owners of their lived experiences and not the researcher, but it also provided participants with an opportunity to add any

recollections they might have initially dismissed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking occurred in person or via a secure electronic platform.

I knew I could not eliminate all validity threats, but I was responsible for reporting on any that arose (Maxwell, 2013). I used researcher memos to document the presence of any potential researcher bias or other validity threats. Throughout the research process, I wrote or recorded my reflections about what I was thinking, observations about participants and myself, any uncertainties I had, or potential areas where trustworthiness or validity might be compromised. The memos were primarily compiled electronically; however, if a thought presented itself when an electronic method was not plausible, I handwrote the memo.

Interview data, document analysis, and researcher memos were used to present another validity check: the triangulation of data sources (Patton, 1999). Participants' interviews were aligned with documents pertaining to their lived experiences to substantiate or generate further questions about their recollections. My researcher memos were reviewed in the context of participant interview data and document analysis to see if patterns emerged. The triangulation of data sources was not simply using multiple data sources to find a connection between all data sources. It was just as important to report discrepancies throughout the data sources to demonstrate researcher credibility so readers are confident your data is not one-sided (Patton, 1999). The triangulation process added to the validity and trustworthiness of the study because multiple data collection methods created an opportunity to discuss commonalities and differences between the data sources. The

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

This chapter documents narratives from three mothers who experienced a parental transition as their child completed elementary school and began middle school. The details in the participants' narratives gave context to their experiences and will later be analyzed to see how their transition coincided with the research questions:

RQ1: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia describe their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school?

RQ2: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia explain their parental roles in the elementary school environment versus their roles in the middle school environment?

RQ3: What assistance was available for parents from select regions of Georgia in their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents?

In addition to the participants' narratives, this chapter includes an analysis of tools available to participants during their transition to middle school parents.

Through narrative inquiry methodology, participants reflected on their experience as elementary school parents, relayed their experience as middle school parents, and offered advice for future middle school parents and school officials to aid in the middle school transition. The

participant narratives mirrored findings from previous research, provided insights that opened ideas for future research into the parental transition from elementary to middle school, and suggested action for practical implications surrounding the middle school transition experience for parents.

I have a personal and professional connection to the transition from elementary to middle school. I am a middle school parent and a middle school teacher. Therefore, as the researcher, I was committed to exploring the parental transition process from elementary school to middle school to better understand what parents experience during this pivotal developmental age and academic shift.

The next section provides the following for each participant:

- general background
- description of their child's elementary and middle schools
- daily life as an elementary and middle school parent,
- connection to their child's elementary and middle schools
- communication between themselves and the elementary and middle schools
- changes experienced during their child's 5th-grade year
- their recollections of being a middle schooler
- the setup and culture of their child's middle school
- parental uncertainty they experienced in the transition to middle school
- reflections as a new middle school parent
- advice they have for future incoming middle school parents and school personnel related to the middle school transition process

These components established the time and setting of the participants' lived experiences in each stage of the middle school transition process. The details participants expressed paint a portrait of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they transitioned from a role they became accustomed to in elementary school to their new role in middle school.

For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were given to the participants, schools, and individuals participants mentioned in their narratives during this study. Each participant was given a letter in alphabetical order as an identifier. Then, I chose personally meaningful names that corresponded to their assigned letter. These are the experiences of Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee.

### **Amanda**

Amanda is a white working mother in her 30s. She has two sons who are three years apart in age. Her older son, Andy, began middle school in August 2023 in a suburban city in northwest Georgia. Amanda described her sons as being active in extracurricular activities such as sports and church. She reported from the start of Andy's elementary school career that she regularly volunteered at the school to be in tune with what was happening at the school, support the teachers, and stay connected with other families. Before COVID-19, her sons rode the bus to school in the mornings and then went to the after-school program until she was off work. As a result of COVID-19 shutdowns, Amanda began working remotely from her house, and therefore, her sons no longer attended the after-school program. Instead, they went to and from school either by bus or car. When Andy began middle school, he began walking and riding his bike or scooter to and from school because they lived so close to his middle school. Amanda recalled her experiences and interactions with teachers, administration, staff, and families at her son's elementary school as being "very positive".

When Andy entered middle school, Amanda read current literature regarding teens and social media. She also consulted with friends who had children who already attended middle school, for advice on what to expect as a middle school parent. She wanted to be proactive as a middle school parent because she felt “the things that could happen in middle school really can change your course versus in elementary school.” Amanda attended a rising 6th-grade parent orientation at Andy’s middle school at the end of his 5th grade year. A few months later, she met Andy’s new teachers when he picked up his class schedule at the beginning of his 6th-grade year. While she found comfort in some of the advice she received, she stated that there was still uncertainty about transitioning from being an elementary school parent to a middle school parent. Amanda reported it felt like there was “no ease” into the role of a middle school parent because of how different elementary and middle school structures and cultures are from one another. Amanda stated she struggled with the fact that Andy was growing up, was unsure of how much independence to give him, was concerned with the possible social struggles middle school could bring, and was uncertain about the academic rigor of middle school. Throughout our three interviews, Amanda discussed the nervousness of being a new middle school parent, the excitement that transitions can bring, and how she handled the learning curve of the parental transition to middle school. Ultimately, Amanda believed her transition to a middle school parent was successful. That success seemed to be attributed to her self-described mindset of “having a lot of questions and just kind of resolving the fact that, we’ll just figure this out together.”

### ***Atlas Elementary School***

Andy attended Atlas Elementary School in a RESA region 4. According to Georgia’s Governor’s Office of Student Achievement data, Atlas had approximately 700 students enrolled in 2022-2023 (GOSA, 2025). Atlas Elementary School’s webpage shows their students attended

one of two middle schools and follow into one of two high schools. Discipline data published by GOSA (2025) reported Atlas Elementary School's In-School Suspension (ISS) rate as an estimated 0% and their Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) rate as an estimated 2%, with a total of approximately 30 reported discipline reports. Atlas Elementary School's Strategic Plan included district-mandated math and literacy improvement goals as well as a site-selected goal to increase effective teaching strategies to promote more on-task and engaging student behavior. GOSA indicated that 73% of Atlas's certified personnel have earned advanced degrees. Atlas Elementary School's website showed their administrative team led by a principal supported by a general education assistant principal, and a student services assistant principal. Atlas Elementary School's student support team included two counselors, a school psychologist, a school social worker, and a school nurse. Additional staff included a media specialist and a media clerk.

### ***Ajax Middle School***

Amanda's son, Andy, attends Ajax Middle School in RESA region 4. According to Ajax's school webpage, Ajax had approximately 1,000 students enrolled in 2023-2024 and has been identified as one of Georgia's most diverse public schools. School district attendance zone maps showed that Ajax Middle School comprised five elementary feeder schools. GOSA discipline data reported Ajax Middle School's ISS rate as an estimated 18% and their OSS rate as an estimated 13% in 2023. Ajax Middle School's Strategic Plan included district-mandated math and literacy improvement goals and a site-selected reduction of discipline incidents goal. GOSA indicates that 70% of Ajax teachers earned their gifted endorsement, and approximately half of their faculty have earned advanced degrees. Ajax Middle School's website shows their administrative team led by a principal, supported by three grade-level assistant principals, and one student services assistant principal. Ajax Middle School's student support team includes two

counselors, a school psychologist, a school nurse, and a school social worker who concurrently served another school. Additional staff included a media specialist and media clerk.

Ajax Middle School held an orientation meeting for rising 6th-grade parents and posted the presentation from that meeting on their school website. Additionally, the presentation provided information on ways parents will receive communication from the school and how to contact Ajax administration, faculty, and staff. The orientation meeting outlined the daily schedule for 6th graders at Ajax Middle School, curricular and extracurricular offerings, Ajax behavioral expectations, locker procedures, transportation options, reminders to plan for 6th graders starting/ending school later than elementary school, a plea to have 6th graders maintain appropriate personal hygiene, acceptable technology usage at Ajax, and student support services available at Ajax.

### ***Interview Format***

I interviewed Amanda on three separate occasions via Microsoft Teams. The first interview focused on Amanda's experience as an elementary school parent. The second interview was two days after the first interview, and Amanda discussed the events of her first year as a middle school parent. The culminating 3rd interview, conducted four days after the previous interview, allowed Amanda to reflect on her experience of transitioning from an elementary school parent to a middle school parent and gave her space to provide insights that she believed future middle school parents and school personnel might benefit from in the years to come.

### ***Daily Schedule as an Elementary School Parent***

Amanda woke Andy up at 6:00 a.m. every morning throughout elementary school. Andy took the county school bus to school from the time he was in kindergarten until his school closed

during his second-grade year as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Amanda took Andy to the bus stop each morning in time for him to catch the bus at 6:30 AM. Upon the school reopening in Andy's 3rd-grade year, Amanda began taking Andy and his brother to elementary school each morning and left the house around 7:10 AM. Between waking up and heading out the door to start the school day, Andy had "his breakfast, a little quiet time, then he'd get ready and we'd go to the bus" or later Amanda drove him to school.

Amanda's job was based in an office away from home when Andy was in kindergarten through the time his school was closed in second grade. Therefore, Andy attended his school's after-school program when school dismissed at 2:20 p.m. until Amanda picked him up around 5:00 p.m. When Andy was in 3rd grade, Amanda began working remotely from home, so he no longer attended the after-school program. Instead, he either took the bus home or Amanda picked him up from school in the car line right at dismissal. Andy's bedtime until he was 10 years old was 8:30 p.m. Then, when Andy was in "5th grade and double digits...he got to go to bed at 9:00 p.m." Amanda used the time from when Andy and his brother came home until their bedtime to have them participate in extracurricular activities, complete any homework, have dinner, and to decompress.

As Andy got older his extracurricular activities increased. At one point, Andy was "doing baseball and football." By the end of elementary school, Andy realized baseball was his passion. Andy came to Amanda and said "I just want to focus on one area and get really good." Therefore, that was where the majority of his extracurricular attention was spent. As a family, they learned how to manage their time well to make the most of the hours they had from the end of the school day until Andy and his brother's bedtime. Amanda felt her daily schedule while

Andy was in elementary school was about finding the right balance of school, extracurriculars, quiet time, and “then still trying to work” herself.

### ***Getting Connected at Atlas Elementary School***

When Andy began elementary school, she was not sure what her role should be as the parent of a school-aged child, so she did what just seemed like the right thing to do, she decided to volunteer at his school. She knew that being a “room mom” for Andy’s class would not be a good fit because she worked full-time, and that volunteer job was quite time intensive. Amanda would “always try to tell the teachers at the beginning of the year, I am a working parent.” She would tell the teachers “if you need any supplies, if you need a book, tell me, I will gladly buy whatever you need and send it in.” Thankfully Amanda’s work schedule allowed her to volunteer at Atlas Elementary’s school store every Friday morning and she continues to do so because her younger son still attends Atlas.

In addition to volunteering at the school store, Amanda was a member of Atlas’s Parent-Teacher-Student-Association (PTSA) and would assist with any extra events PTSA hosted. While Amanda was volunteering at Atlas, she felt like she was able to give back to the school. However, volunteering benefitted her as well. Volunteering gave Amanda a path to get to know the faculty, staff, administration, and families at Atlas on a more personal level and have them get to know her. Consequently, her sons also were able to develop relationships with those individuals too. That relationship building gave Amanda comfort that her sons had increased access to trusted adults at their school and that those trusted adults could look after her sons while she was not there.

Another motivator to get connected and plugged-in at Atlas was Amanda’s belief that it was important to focus not just on Andy’s academics at Atlas but also “trying to find his niche,

so that way he knew who his people are and could start getting that community right.” Amanda was relieved that Andy found a core group of friends relatively quickly. Because Amanda was at the school frequently, she got to know Andy’s friends and connected with their parents quicker than if she was not a volunteer. While the kids were developing friendships at school, the parents became friends as well. As a result, both the kid and adult friendships began to extend beyond the school campus. The strong connections Amanda forged with other Atlas families created a support system for Amanda throughout Andy’s years at Atlas and fostered relationships for her younger son as well.

### ***Communication between Amanda and Atlas Elementary School***

Amanda’s experience as an elementary school parent was overwhelmingly positive, for which she was very grateful. Looking back on her time with Andy at Atlas Elementary, she realized that she did not have any academic or social situations that caused her great concern. While Amanda did gain insight into school happenings as a result of her volunteer work at the school and via friendships with other Atlas families, she was very appreciative of and came to rely on the communication she received from Andy’s teachers at Atlas. When Andy was in kindergarten, first and second grades, Amanda received daily communication from Andy’s teachers through a folder system. Each day Andy “came home with a folder in his backpack” that had a combination of work he completed, assignments he needed to complete, a behavior report, classroom announcements, and schoolwide notices. After checking the folder, Amanda would take out anything that was to stay at home, return any required correspondence, and could send a note back to the teacher if necessary. Additionally, if there was a specific concern or need that was easier to email, Andy’s teacher would do so. Amanda did not “worry about his grades and his work or anything like that because the teacher would just make sure that you knew if there

was something to do, they would reach out to me.” If there was a cause for concern, the teacher would let Amanda know ways to address the concern and Amanda adhered to the suggestions. Amanda appreciated how straightforward this process was to navigate.

As Andy entered 3rd grade, the communication between Amanda and his teacher changed due to COVID-19 precautions and because he progressed further into elementary school. Some information was still sent home via a communication folder, however, Amanda learned about what occurred during Andy’s school day in an agenda. Andy’s daily job was to write down in his agenda what his teacher instructed him to write regarding the lessons they completed and the corresponding assignments. Amanda’s job was to read Andy’s agenda as well as “sign it, every day” so the teacher knew she “reviewed his agenda.” If there was anything the teacher needed to tell Amanda it was written in the agenda for Amanda to see when she signed it for the day, or the teacher emailed the information to Amanda instead.

In fourth grade, Andy’s teacher used an app called Class Dojo to communicate with families. Andy no longer brought an agenda back and forth between school and home. Amanda saw Andy’s daily classroom activities and behavior reports on the Class Dojo app she downloaded on her phone. Amanda liked that via Class Dojo, Andy’s teacher “could send pictures, because then I could see what they were doing during the day.” Amanda checked Class Dojo when she received notifications and could also check the app throughout the day if needed. The only downside to Class Dojo was that to enjoy all the features, it was “\$60 for a year, which was fine for me, but pretty pricey for some parents.”

When Andy was a 5th grader, Class Dojo stopped and the agenda system returned. However, this time, there was no requirement for Amanda to sign the agenda or for Andy to bring the agenda home each day. It was expected that the students would be in charge of writing

down everything on their own instead of the teacher providing the information, but it was not required. Amanda was thankful Andy was a rule follower and would want to meet this higher level of responsibility, but was a bit nervous as well. It was the first time Amanda felt she was “slowly losing that grasp of do you really have homework?, do you really not have any missing assignments?” because everything was up to Andy; that was hard for Amanda to embrace at first.

Amanda still received emails regarding information that impacted the class, but the information did not seem as detailed as in previous years. The emails were sent via the school district’s new learning management system and communication platform which took Amanda a while to get used to using. However, she took comfort in the process she had grown accustomed to since Andy was in kindergarten, if there was a concern, the teacher would contact her.

Andy thrived in elementary school. He learned what the school’s expectations were and he abided by those expectations. At the beginning of each school year, Andy figured out the way of work in his new teacher’s classroom and adapted to that teacher. Therefore, Amanda had minimal interactions to address Andy’s academic or behavioral concerns with Atlas’s administrators or counselors. The one time Amanda did have to speak with Atlas’s principals and one of their counselors was to discuss a social concern between Andy and another student and she was “pleased with how the situation was handled.”

### ***Changes in 5th Grade***

When Andy began 5th grade at Atlas, she noticed that Andy and his classmates were “growing up faster than I think a lot of the parents were ready for.” At school, 5th graders had a short class about puberty. The topic of conversations at home drifted into the uncharted waters of romantic relationships and the sexual orientation of others because of what Andy was hearing at school from his peers. While Amanda was comfortable having these discussions with Andy, she

was taken back that she was having them with him when the topics were not even on her radar. She wanted to make sure she addressed his questions to keep the line of communication open between the two of them. Amanda wanted Andy to feel at ease coming to her in the future about things that are happening at school that might not necessarily be addressed at school.

In kindergarten through fourth grade, Andy had one teacher for his core academic classes. However, starting in 5th grade, he had half his academics with one teacher and the other half with a different teacher. Amanda remembered that even when Andy switched classes if “he had a missing assignment, it was never the teacher he switched to that reached out to me”, everything still came from Andy’s primary teacher.

Towards the end of Andy’s 5th grade year, Amanda had trouble acknowledging that her son was old enough to go to middle school and wondered if he was truly ready to move on from elementary school. She started to think of her own middle school experience and what she heard from others regarding middle school. Amanda kept thinking “kids are hormonal, they don’t understand”, there’s a possibility of bullies, and “I don’t want him to get hurt.” Amanda also found herself thinking of the end of elementary school as “feeling like a downhill slide” with the “hardest part, just feeling like we are entering a new stage.” The idea of middle school beginning turned into the idea that “once my child hits middle school, they might as well go to college.” She realistically knew that was a fast progression and remained grounded, but seeing Andy at the end of his years at Atlas affected her more than she expected.

During the last half of 5th grade, Andy and his classmates went to tour their middle school. Andy came home and told Amanda how surprised he was about the size of the middle school. He could not believe how much bigger the middle school was than Atlas. The middle school visit also made both Amanda and Andy more aware that not everyone from Atlas

continued to the same middle school and that at his middle school Andy would be with students from other elementary schools. Some nervousness set in about what the logistics of leaving Atlas was going to be like for Andy and Amanda.

Amanda also had an opportunity to visit Andy's middle school during Andy's last month of 5th grade for a rising 6th-grade parent orientation. When she arrived on the middle school campus, Amanda understood why Andy was overwhelmed by the size of the school. However, Amanda was pleased to hear the information the middle school administration, faculty, and staff shared with the 5th-grade parents. The orientation allowed her to start wrapping her mind around the middle school way of work because she saw an "overview of what their schedule looks like and some tips that were very helpful."

Amanda was grateful for the knowledge she gained about Andy's middle school but also felt like she left with some big concerns. During the presentation, it was mentioned to parents that their kids are "going to turn into kids that you don't recognize, but when they go to high school, they'll be back." Hearing that, Amanda thought, "oh, my God, what are we getting into?." It made Amanda conjure up all sorts of scenarios about what middle school life would be like. In the orientation, parents were told about the laptops their children would be assigned when they entered 6th grade. Again, Amanda felt excited about another opportunity Andy would have as a middle schooler and how much the laptop would be beneficial. However, that excitement was tempered by the follow-up discussion of how great of a financial and personal responsibility it is to have the laptop. Whatever happens on, or to, a student's laptop, good, bad, or indifferent, was the student's sole responsibility. It was hard for Amanda to imagine Andy being responsible enough to bring a laptop back and forth from school daily. To add to the trepidation, Amanda worried about what other students had done on the laptops in the past to

give the middle school administrators such cause for concern in their delivery to the incoming 6th-grade parents. While Amanda felt fairly comfortable that Andy would be just fine in middle school, the impending unknowns were something she had not been faced with in the past concerning Andy's school experience. She was happy to celebrate the milestone of moving up to middle school but was apprehensive about leaving the comfort of Atlas.

### ***Middle School Daily Schedule***

One of the hardest parts about becoming a middle school parent was learning a new daily schedule for her family. Anthony, Amanda's youngest son, still followed the elementary school schedule, while Andy followed the middle school schedule. Even though Andy was the only one with a new daily routine, it impacted the rest of the family, which proved to be difficult for Amanda to navigate and balance in the beginning.

Amanda's daily school schedule began with getting Anthony up at 6:30 a.m. every morning and heading out the door at 7:10 a.m. to take him to Atlas Elementary School as she had in the past. Andy would wake up around 8:00 a.m. and had a slow start to his morning. He eased into the day because he did not need to head to school until a little before 9:00 a.m. Andy had extra time at home when he started middle school. He either walked or rode his bike or scooter to school since it was so close, and the tardy bell at Ajax Middle School did not ring until 9:15 a.m. The low-key, extended time at home and Andy's being his own transportation to school was the antithesis to everything she lived when Andy was at Atlas Elementary. As different as the start of the school day was for Andy when he began at Ajax, Amanda was happy she was at the house when Andy left. Amanda said she could not imagine Andy "trying to get himself up at 12 [years old] and get out the door." Amanda remembered Ajax staff telling parents if you work and are gone from the house before your middle schooler, "have conversations with your students about

what happens if they miss the bus.” That was another signal for Amanda that she was “on a different stage of life” with Andy.

The disjointed elementary school and middle school schedules also continued in Amanda’s afternoon routines. She still picked up Anthony at 2:20 p.m. at Atlas and they started his extracurricular activities shortly thereafter. Andy would not get home until around 4:15 p.m. because Ajax Middle’s dismissal was so late. Many afternoons, Andy returned to an empty house since Amanda was with Anthony at his practices or other events. Andy had to be responsible enough to get himself in the house and exhibit responsible choices while Amanda simultaneously had to increase her level of trust with Andy.

During the first semester of Andy being in middle school, if Anthony and Amanda were home when Andy arrived in the afternoon, they saw a different Andy than they were used to seeing. Andy “would come home at the end of the day just depleted.” Once he came home, he would go straight to his room for around 30 minutes. He did not want to talk or interact with anyone. Anthony was ready to play, and Andy was ready to decompress. Amanda had never seen that dynamic between her sons. Historically, Andy and Anthony had gotten along well with one another and wanted to be with each other. It took a toll on her because she never expected to see that divide between them and was not sure how to handle it or how to help Anthony not feel rejected. One day, Amanda realized why Andy was so exhausted. She thought about Andy’s day being so packed; it was “from 9 to 4, that’s a long day with all those people, with changing classes, and carrying all your stuff.” Andy was just not ready for any more stimulation when he got home. After that realization, Amanda no longer interrupted Andy’s self-imposed, temporary isolation. However, Andy having some alone time organically ended, because given the lateness of the day, he did not have much time between school dismissal and his extracurricular activities.

The later start of extracurricular activities also meant the activities ended later. Amanda said Andy would get home at “4:30 p.m. then all the things started at 5:00 p.m. so we were immediately getting in the car; there’s no time to eat, there’s no time to debrief, we are just immediately going to something.” Andy, Anthony, and Amanda arrived home later than on the elementary school schedule. For Andy, the extended time out for practices, games, and meetings was balanced by the capability of having a later start in the morning. However, Amanda and Anthony did not have that luxury. Therefore, they had to devise a new way of managing their time so they could still be ready to go to school in the morning.

Deep down, Amanda knew there was some sort of rhyme or reason for having middle school start and end so late, but it was still hard for her to comprehend. Amanda summed up transitioning to the middle school schedule by saying, “I was not as busy as this at Atlas, this is a totally different ball game in middle school, I'm constantly busy and I felt like we had a lot more downtime when he was in elementary.” Going from the elementary school schedule to the middle school schedule was an unforeseen, drastic adjustment.

### ***Amanda’s Recollection of Being a Middle Schooler***

Amanda attended her 6th and 7th grade years in Indiana. The school she went to in Indiana was a 6, 7, 8 grade school, and she said it was “very much like Andy’s school.” For two years as a middle schooler in Indiana, Amanda had a locker and traveled all over the school campus for her classes. Then, in 8th grade, her family moved to central Georgia. The Georgia middle school she attended contained only 7th and 8th grades; the “middle school environment and makeup was completely different.” There, Amanda did not travel all over campus. Her classes “were in a four corner like bucket, so you didn’t really travel” since everywhere she went was in very close proximity. When Andy began middle school, she assumed it would be like her

experience in her Georgia middle school since they were in the same state. However, she quickly learned her assumption was not completely true.

### ***Ajax Middle School Set-up and Culture***

When Amanda and Andy went to pick up his 6th-grade schedule the week before school started, she truly got a sense of how much larger Ajax was than Atlas in terms of its campus and how the number of students at Ajax dwarfed the student population at Atlas. All the elementary schools feeding into Ajax made it “at least three times the size of his elementary school.” When Amanda compared her own experience to Andy’s, she said Ajax was “much bigger than the middle schools than I went to growing up.” Amanda also realized Andy’s schedule was all over the building like she had when she went to middle school in Indiana. The thought of Andy covering so much distance during the school day while navigating the crowded hallways, taking locker breaks, and carrying his laptop gave Amanda parental anxiety. It made Amanda nervous that Andy was contending with such a large middle school, however, she really embraced the fact that the five feeder schools converging at Ajax exposed Andy to such a diverse population of students. Amanda felt the diversity of Ajax would serve Andy well as he goes through life. She wanted Andy “to be exposed to a bunch of different cultures and different people and all of that good stuff.” Learning to interact with others who are not the same as you is a real-world skill Amanda was excited Andy got to learn at such a young age.

After receiving Andy’s schedule and meeting his teachers, Andy was more at ease than Amanda was. It was difficult for Amanda to understand that Andy had his schedule and was supposedly prepared to begin the year. For Amanda, there was “actually no eased transition so I was a little anxious for him.” The brief visit to Ajax to pick up Andy’s schedule was a couple of days before school started, and then just like that, she and Andy were in the throes of middle

school. The rising 6th-grade parent orientation seemed forever ago to Amanda, so it did not even come into play when thinking of the transition. The abrupt feeling at the start of middle school was perpetuated by Amanda having uncertainties about what she should expect from middle school and therefore not being able to help Andy understand the expectations either.

Ajax was not separated into pods as Amanda envisioned, but she did like the fact that there were separate hallways for each of the three grade levels. There were common areas for non-academic classes, the media center, and the cafeteria. Amanda felt better that Andy would have limited exposure to the older students at Ajax because it eased some of her social worries about Andy starting middle school. A two or three-year age difference between 6th graders and 8th graders is not too large, but Amanda knew the developmental age of Andy versus an 8th grader had the potential to be enormous.

In addition to the physical setup of Ajax Middle School, easing some of Amanda's concerns, she was very comforted by Ajax's strict adherence to a no cell phone policy at school. Ajax students were required to keep their cell phones in their lockers for the entire school day, and if they did not, they faced disciplinary action. Amanda was worried about a cell phone being a point of contention between her and Andy once he began middle school. She did not want Andy to have a smartphone because she did not "want him to be on social media and I didn't want him to have the Internet in his pocket." However, she also wanted him to have a way to communicate with her since he would be leaving the house or coming home on his own when he started middle school. So, Amanda got Andy a phone that "does not go on the internet and can only download approved apps"; it only allowed Andy to call or text. Even though Amanda was not going to give in to getting Andy a smartphone, she was worried that if Andy was around other students using them during the day, she "would get more pushback from him than everyone

else had a smartphone” and he did not. Amanda began preparing herself for how cell phones would create extra turmoil at home. However, with Ajax’s policy against student cell phone usage, it became a nonissue.

Another pleasant surprise Amanda enjoyed about Andy’s first year of middle school was that Andy found an interest in music. Andy had always been involved in extracurricular activities, but those activities did not include anything musical. When Andy entered Ajax, he had the opportunity to join the band and did. Amanda was grateful for this chance for Andy to try something new. She felt it was a wonderful way for him to branch out of his comfort zone and become even more well-rounded.

### ***Parental Uncertainty in the Middle School Transition***

Andy’s beginning middle school brought Amanda a whole new world of uncertainties. One of the few things Amanda was certain of when middle school started for Andy, was that she did not know what middle school life would be like. She wondered about the academic and social aspects of Andy starting 6th grade and what developmental changes she would begin noticing with Andy at home. Amanda “remembered having a lot of questions and just kind of resolving the fact that we’ll figure this out together.” She knew “sadly, the first child is always the guinea pig child,” and they would take it one day at a time to make sense of their new normal.

Without knowing where to start for sure, Amanda decided to begin having Andy exercise more independence. Independence was something Amanda remembered Ajax mentioning in the rising 6th-grade parent orientation and that Atlas was encouraging at the end of 5th grade. At home, Andy was going to be responsible for getting himself to and from school. Therefore,

Amanda wanted him to be confident with independence so then she would feel more secure with his new responsibilities as well.

To start fostering Andy's independence, she stepped back and let Andy figure things out on his own. For example, Amanda was not sure how Andy would manage getting around Ajax's large campus, but she did not devise a plan for him: she just let Andy try what he thought would work best. She checked in with Andy to see how things were going with getting from one class to another. Through that check-in, Amanda learned that Andy was not going to the bathroom during the day. Andy said he "was carrying his backpack the whole time," which did not bode well for going to the restroom, and he did not want to be tardy for class either. Amanda never thought about the bathroom as an obstacle.

This example early on showed Amanda there would need to be a healthy balance of independence and check-ins. Andy was more than capable of figuring things out on his own, but he was also just a 12-year-old boy who needed guidance too. Amanda knew the fluidity of allowing for independence while providing guidance would be a big learning curve for her, especially since she had been so involved in elementary school. She "tried very hard to not be the helicopter parent" and was committed to helping Andy figure things out for himself.

When Andy was in elementary school and he became friends with someone, Amanda became friends with their parents. That was how things naturally happened. Kids needed parents to get in touch with one another and make plans. In middle school, with Andy having his own phone, and his friends having their own phones, the parents did not get to know one another as much. Most of Andy's new friends also tended to live farther away from his house because they were from the other schools that fed into Ajax. So, it was more difficult to get together with one another, and they just communicated through texts or phone calls. The new communication

methods did not necessitate parents as much as they did in elementary school, which caused another uncertainty for Amanda.

Andy had never had friends that Amanda had not physically met. Amanda said Andy made friends at Ajax with “new kids, but he hasn't asked to hang out with them, but he talks about them all the time.” Amanda was unsure “if they're just maybe school friends and not outside of school friends.” She wondered “if that’s just because, we're so busy and so he just keeps it that way” and realized “it’s not like I know the parents to keep that relationship going, so we haven't hung out with any of the new people that he’s met in middle school.” At Atlas, Amanda either saw Andy’s friends when volunteering at Atlas, or they knew one another from extracurricular activities. Amanda attempted to meet some of Andy’s Ajax friends, but the closest she came to seeing friends at Ajax was “at the band concerts.” Amanda handled this as other independence versus guidance scenarios. She saw how it was going from afar and then stepped in as needed. Amanda wanted to make sure Andy made wise choices when it came to making friends but wanted to give him room to explore new friendships as well.

Amanda had friends whose children had already gone through the middle school transition, and when she was unsure about something, she would turn to them for parental advice and as a sounding board. She found, though, that friends who had high school or college-age children seemed to be too far removed from the middle school environment to provide advice that was not too jaded. When Amanda spoke to friends with older children, it seemed as if they only remembered the negative aspects of middle school or said they did not remember much because middle school parenting was such a whirlwind that it was a blur to them. Therefore, Amanda tried to speak to friends who had current middle schoolers when she needed advice.

Amanda found herself waiting and seeing how Andy would react to something during his 6th-grade year because she wanted him to make his own choices and grow into his own person. She did not want to hinder that growth by leading the way and having him follow. But having Andy take the lead meant Amanda did not always know where they were going. However, she knew that as long as she did not let Andy get too far down the path, she could step in and take the lead when needed.

### ***Communication between Amanda and Ajax Middle School***

From the beginning of Andy's first semester at Ajax Middle School, Amanda saw a major shift from the communication she became accustomed to at the elementary school level. While Andy was in elementary school, Amanda never realized if Andy was missing an assignment or needed extra help, because the teacher reached out to her before she would ever have known there was an issue. Most everything Amanda received from the school was from Andy's individual teachers "was all emails, there was not an app" to interact with beyond to "go in and see grades" that were already being emailed. In 6th grade, everything was up to Andy to realize and take care of, or for Amanda to monitor via the district's learning management system.

At Ajax, the students were responsible for organizing themselves to complete and turn in their assignments and prepare for assessments. The teacher's job was to teach the lesson and provide resources, but the students were in charge of knowing what was expected from them at the end of class and meeting those expectations. Student academic responsibility was the standard for each class, which meant Andy was now in charge of knowing the ins and outs of all his seven classes. Gone were the days of the proactive emails home to Amanda letting her know Andy was missing work. Andy had to be proactive to complete the assignment on his own and then react and make up the assignment if he did not do it.

The district's learning management system helped both students and parents keep track of assignments to be completed, resources, and grades. However, Amanda did not have much experience using the system because, at Atlas, it was not necessary. The features in the learning management system were not as applicable to an elementary school setup, and parents had consistent, even almost daily, communication with their child's teacher.

However, Ajax Middle School's teachers relied heavily on the district's learning management system and assumed that Ajax families would, too. A problem arose, though, because Amanda did not know she should be regularly using the learning management system to view Andy's progress. Andy was falling behind in some of his work, and Amanda was unaware of what Andy was doing or not doing in class because he had not accurately relayed that information to her. Ultimately, Amanda contacted one of Andy's teachers when she heard Andy was struggling and discovered the importance of staying connected with Andy's classes on the learning management system. Checking the learning management system had to become a new learned behavior for Amanda. No daily folder or agenda was coming home for her to see. If Amanda wanted to stay informed and not solely rely on a 12-year-old's recollection of events, she needed to utilize the learning management system.

While academic informational needs could be met on the learning management system, some school events and notices were not posted there for families to see. For those items, the information should have been delivered to Andy by his homeroom teacher, and Andy was to bring it home. Unfortunately, Amanda found out that things did not always go as planned. Sometimes, the teacher did not send an announcement home; other times, Andy forgot to bring the announcement to Amanda. In fact, Amanda missed going to an awards assembly because Andy did not bring the invitation home. Andy thought his mom already knew about the assembly

because she always knew when things were happening when he was at Atlas. Amanda said Andy approached her and said “you didn't come” and Amanda could only respond with “you didn't tell me, when would I have known this?.” Consequently, Andy realized he needed to be better at bringing information home, and Amanda realized she needed to ask Andy more questions about school events.

Amanda did not find the strong parent-teacher relationships at Ajax like she found at Atlas. Communication at Ajax was more student-driven so the parent-teacher interaction was far less than in elementary school. The number of teachers Andy had at Ajax also inadvertently impeded the relationship-building between them and Amanda. In elementary school, Amanda had to get to know one and later just two teachers, which was manageable. Amanda would have to get to know seven teachers for middle school, which is not nearly as feasible. Volunteer opportunities were not as available at Ajax as at Atlas, which decreased Amanda's chances to get to know Andy's teachers. Ajax did offer parent-teacher conferences for a week during the first semester. However, it was suggested that if your student was on track with their studies and behavior, then there was no need to attend. Amanda recalled the teachers insinuating “don't talk to me if you have an A.” Andy was meeting expectations, but Amanda wanted to see at least one of his teachers, so she scheduled a conference in the class “where he had a B.” As a result of these obstacles to forming parent-teacher relationships, at the end of the school year, there were some of Andy's teachers that Amanda had never met. Amanda knew this was all part of Andy's journey for more independence, but it was another big adjustment for her as a parent. Instead of her building relationships with the teachers, she was now trying to teach Andy to build those relationships on his own.

Although communication from Andy's 6th-grade teachers was not very consistent, the school's principal sent families a weekly email to keep them abreast of the happenings at Ajax. The email was sent via the learning management system every Friday evening and posted on the school's website. If Amanda had a question or concern about something impacting Andy at school, she knew she could contact the 6th-grade assistant principal and would feel comfortable doing so. However, she was not aware of who Andy's counselor was at Ajax. When Andy was in elementary school, he had the same counselor from kindergarten until 5th grade because the counselors were assigned alphabetically. At Ajax, she was not sure how counselors were assigned and said, "I have no idea who the counselors are, none of them." Amanda said a counselor was at the parent orientation but did not know "if she was dedicated to 6th grade or if she was for the whole school." Thankfully, Andy had an incident-free year. But, if there had been an issue at Ajax, Amanda would have been more likely to seek assistance from the 6th-grade assistant principal versus trying to find the correct counselor to contact.

### ***Amanda's Reflections as a New Middle School Parent***

Reflecting on her first year as a middle school parent, Amanda felt one of the most overwhelming pieces of the middle school transition was her lack of control. She went from being proactive in elementary school because she was in the know and knew what to expect to being reactive in middle school because she did not know what was coming next. It did not help that as Amanda experienced a loss of control, Andy was surrounded by more outside influences than he had ever been exposed to before. Andy was around more students and older students than he was in elementary school, and Amanda did not know most of them. Amanda felt it was "completely different when you can't control...and there are a lot more influences" around than there have been in the past. It was unsettling for Amanda to think of the academic and social

stresses Andy might face in middle school and that she would not know how he would handle them until those stresses presented themselves. Thinking of the “what if” scenarios was taxing, and Amanda needed to remind herself that she and Andy were going to get through 6th grade together.

If Amanda had the chance to speak to upcoming middle school parents at Ajax Middle School, she would tell them how important it is to quickly figure out how to use the district’s learning management system and app regularly. She felt the district’s app was her direct access to Andy’s academics and the lifeline for school communication was through the learning management system. Amanda would also want new Ajax families to know the possibility “that their kids are just not going to be communicative for a while.” As the year goes by, though, you might not need to check their academic progress as often, but it will still be necessary for you to access the learning management system to receive updates about school announcements. Amanda would also suggest that parents find out who to contact at school if they have questions or concerns.

Given the opportunity to give feedback to Ajax Middle’s faculty and administration, Amanda would stress the importance of educating parents about the difference between elementary and middle school communication methods. She would not want Ajax to eliminate their expectation of student independence. However, Amanda wished that the shift had been explained to her better and that the school communicated more with 6th-grade parents at the beginning of the year. She would also tell them to continue offering the rising 6th-grade parent presentation because even though it was a couple of months before middle school started, it still helped set the stage for the upcoming transition. In that presentation, Amanda would have liked to see a difference in information delivery. She did not need anything sugar-coated; however,

hearing about the misuse of school laptops was very nerve-racking. The scenarios they presented had Amanda hesitant about Andy ever touching one of the school laptops. She was nervous about the damage his 6th-grade boy choices might cause but more so what he and others would try to access on the laptops. Amanda appreciated the warning, but the message delivery could “have had a different tone.”

Regarding how the middle school transition potentially impacts life at home, Amanda would tell families with a new 6th grader and elementary age siblings that the transition could possibly affect sibling relationships. Amanda was so surprised to see the interaction between Andy and Anthony change like it did. She recalled that change as being “the craziest, no matter what, they were fighting, no matter what was said, no matter what they were doing, it just escalated, and we never had that dynamic before.” She might not have been able to stop the relationship change, but she wished she would have known about the possibility so she could have braced herself. Looking back, Amanda remembered things changing for her and her sister when she went to middle school. Although she did not remember that until she saw it begin with Andy and Anthony. Once Amanda saw the difference between her boys, she also heard that other families were experiencing the same thing and wished they had a heads up, too.

As terrifying as transitioning to middle school could be, Amanda would remind families that the middle school transition is also exciting. The days might seem very long at times, but the year flies by. Looking back over the year, Amanda took great pride in the growth she saw in Andy. Yes, the academic progress was something she was beyond proud of. However, thinking about how Andy matured over the course of the year brought a huge smile to her face. At the beginning of the 6th grade, Amanda could not help but have some doubt creep into her thoughts about how in the world Andy would manage the land of middle school. Then suddenly, he was

doing it. Not only was Andy managing, but he was also excelling. The success of 6th grade created an excitement to see what seventh grade had in store. With such a gamut of emotions, Amanda felt something that she never thought would enter her mind, “middle school goes by incredibly fast.”

## **Bea**

Bea is a white working mother in her 30s. She and her husband, Bernard, have two children, Brianna and Benjamin, who are three years apart in age. Their oldest child, Brianna, began middle school in August 2023 in RESA Region 2. Bea described her family as having close ties with their community and being very involved in sports. Bea works as a paraprofessional at the elementary school where her children attended, and Bernard owns his own business. Before Bea worked at her children’s school, she was a regular volunteer and a room mom for Brianna’s classes. When Benjamin began kindergarten and students returned to school after the COVID-19 Pandemic, Bea worked as a substitute teacher. Through her work as a substitute teacher, Bea found full-time employment at Brianna and Benjamin’s school and became more familiar with the inner workings of the school than she had been as a room mom. Bea felt comfortable and confident with her role as an elementary school parent but was unsure of what to expect when Brianna progressed to middle school.

Bea remembered the summer between Brianna’s 5th and 6th grade years as being a time to enjoy the simple things in life and being around family. Bea wanted Brianna to have a relaxing and fun-filled summer in an effort to ease any anxiety she might be feeling about the impending start of middle school. When recollecting Brianna’s 6th grade year, Bea described how the social and academic transition to middle school impacted her daily schedule and presented unanticipated parental experiences. Overall, Bea reported that she believed Brianna had a

successful 6th-grade year. Throughout the three interview sessions, Bea spoke of balancing Brianna's new developmental needs with her motherly instincts to be hands-on and involved in Brianna's education.

### ***Buford Elementary School***

Brianna and Benjamin attended Buford Elementary School in a suburban area of northern Georgia. According to GOSA data, Buford had approximately 900 students enrolled in 2022-2023. Buford Elementary School's district webpage reported Buford as one of four feeder schools for Bayside Middle School. Discipline data published by GOSA reported Buford Elementary's ISS rate as an estimated 6% and their OSS rate as an estimated 1%, with a total of almost 180 discipline reports in 2023. Buford Elementary School's School Improvement Plan outlined a path to increase the percentage of their 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders scoring Proficient on the Georgia Milestone assessment's English Language Arts and Math sections. GOSA indicated that approximately 68% of Buford's certified personnel have earned advanced degrees. Buford Elementary School's website showed its administrative team was led by a principal and supported by two assistant principals. The student support team at Buford included two counselors, a school psychologist, an instructional coach, intervention support personnel, and special needs support. Additional staff included a media specialist, technology support, and classroom paraprofessionals.

### ***Bayside Middle School***

Brianna attended Bayside Middle School in a suburban area of northern Georgia. According to GOSA data, Bayside Middle had over 1,700 students enrolled in 2023-2024. Discipline data published by GOSA reported Bayside's ISS rate as an estimated 21% and their OSS rate as an estimated 11%, with a total of approximately 900 discipline reports in 2023.

Bayside Middle School's School Improvement Plan included two school-wide goals. The first goal addressed the need to increase the percentage of students scoring Proficient on the Georgia Milestones assessment's English Language Arts and Math sections. The second goal was to decrease ISS incidents on Bayside's campus. GOSA indicated that approximately 70% of Bayside's certified personnel have earned advanced degrees. Bayside Middle School's website shows its administrative team was led by a principal who was supported by three grade-level assistant principals and one student services assistant principal. Bayside Middle School's student support team includes five counselors, a school psychologist, an instructional coach, intervention support personnel, a school nurse, and special needs support. Additional staff include a media specialist, technology support, and classroom paraprofessionals.

### ***Interview Format***

I interviewed Bea on three separate occasions via Microsoft Teams. The first interview focused on Bea's experience as an elementary school parent. The second interview was completed one day after the first interview and Bea discussed the events of her first year as a middle school parent. In the culminating 3rd interview, conducted a day after the previous interview, Bea reflected on her experience of transitioning from an elementary school parent to a middle school parent. The last interview also included time for Bea to share her thoughts for new middle school parents. Bea also used this opportunity to give advice for faculty and staff at elementary and middle schools regarding the middle school transition for parents.

### ***Daily Life as an Elementary School Parent***

Throughout Brianna's elementary school years, Bea began school mornings at 5:00 a.m. so she would have an hour to herself before waking Brianna and Benjamin up at 6:00 a.m. She said, "I like my alone time in the morning, so then I'm ready to just help them [the kids] get

ready,” instead of everyone getting ready at the same time. Once the kids were awake, they would have breakfast and then get dressed. Bea’s goal was to have Brianna and Benjamin have their next day’s outfits ready the night before to make things easier in the morning. However, she said, “that doesn’t always happen, and I usually regret it” when the outfits need to be gathered in the morning. The other time saver in the mornings for Bea’s family is that they shower at night.

When Brianna began elementary school, the morning routine was not as rushed because Bea was not working. Bea would walk Brianna to the bus stop, and then she and Benjamin could continue getting ready for the day. However, when Benjamin became a kindergartner at Buford, there was a demand for substitute teachers as schools reopened after the COVID-19 pandemic. Bea began regularly subbing at Buford and other schools in the district. Later, Buford Elementary had a full-time paraprofessional position open, and Bea was offered the job. When Bea started working, she had to have both kids and herself out of the house, ready to go, at 6:45 a.m. to be at work on time. The 45 minutes from wake-up to out the door was sometimes a whirlwind. Towards the end of Brianna’s years at Buford Elementary, the family’s mornings began even earlier as they moved into their camper while they renovated their house.

When the school day was over, Bea ensured Brianna and Benjamin had downtime when they got home. Bea realized, especially when Brianna was little, that Brianna “didn’t do well going straight from school into something else” because her brain had been going full steam all day. Bea felt “that downtime was kind of crucial” for Brianna because she had a busy extracurricular calendar. The decompression time was generally about 30 minutes and could be spent watching TV or any other activity Brianna chose. Often, Bea found Brianna needed a snack right after school, which was incorporated into the relaxation routine.

Around 4:00-4:30 p.m., Bea would have an early dinner ready for the family. Brianna would eat enough to hold her over until after her practices or games. Then, when they returned home, Bea would get Brianna another snack or a second serving of dinner. After getting that time to have some renourishment, it was time for Brianna to shower, head to bed, and rest up to start the routine again in the morning. It was Bea's goal to have Brianna and Benjamin in bed by 8:00 p.m. Bea and Bernard wound down then and got ready for the next day as well.

### ***Getting Connected at Buford Elementary School***

When Brianna started kindergarten, Bea struggled. She was not ready to send Brianna to school. Bea remembered thinking, "I hated it, I missed my buddy" when Brianna started at Buford. Therefore, anytime there was an opportunity to volunteer at Buford, Bea signed up. It was a win-win situation. The school gained a devoted volunteer, and Bea was able to develop an understanding of Brianna's school day while seeing Brianna in her element. Bea also knew that Bernard's schedule and responsibilities as an entrepreneur would not allow him to be involved in Brianna's school day, so she felt compelled to be at the school to represent them both.

Brianna loved learning, had many friends, loved her teachers and her teachers loved her from the beginning of her Buford Elementary career. Consequently, it was natural for Bea to seek out engagement opportunities at Buford Elementary because she wanted to be involved in the positivity Brianna experienced and keep that momentum going. Bea heard others she knew complaining about elementary school and wondered "why are all these people complaining, what are they talking about?." From Bea's perspective, being an elementary school parent was a breeze because Brianna made it easy for her. After Bea began working at Buford Elementary, she noticed just how much Brianna's eagerness to be in school positively skewed the elementary school experience for her and Bernard. Bea saw how not all students enjoyed school and that

sentiment was displayed in misbehavior or low academic achievement. This reassured Bea that she should do all she could to continue to foster Brianna's love of learning and stay involved at Buford Elementary.

### ***Communication between Bea and Buford Elementary School***

When Brianna was in kindergarten through second grade, Buford Elementary provided her with a daily communication folder that she carried back and forth between school and home. Within that folder, Bea and Bernard could see examples of Brianna's work, learn about Brianna's current units of study and upcoming events at the school, and see if Brianna's teachers had any academic or behavioral concerns that required parental attention. The school also used Canvas, a learning management system, to connect with families. Classroom teachers and administration sent weekly updates via Canvas.

In addition to the daily communication folder and Canvas, Bea could find out more details about school happenings while she volunteered at the school. As a volunteer, she saw the personalities of the faculty and staff members and got to know them as individuals instead of figureheads in classrooms. When Bea became a full-time employee at Buford, she gained more insight into the inner workings of the school and saw the larger picture of how Buford functioned as an institution. As a result of Bea's paraprofessional job at Buford, she did not have to rely on email and Canvas communication to stay current with issues concerning Brianna's education or school social events. Instead, she could inquire with and receive information directly from those involved in decision-making positions at Buford.

### ***Changes in 5th Grade***

When Brianna began 5th grade, Bea noticed the expectations for 5th graders were more extreme than Brianna had experienced when progressing from one grade to another in the past.

Bea saw that Brianna “had more homework than before, and just her workload, I think it felt a little heavier.” Luckily, Brianna did not seem to mind it because she enjoyed school so much. There was also a shift in the type of work assigned. For example, there were more assigned readings rather than reading a book of your choice. Bea saw Brianna still loved reading; she just knew it was a bit different for Brianna when the reading was not something she picked on her own. Bea was unsure if she was correct, but she saw the increased workload as a way for the 5th-grade teachers to start “prepping them from middle school.”

In addition to the workload changes, Bea said, “I kind of remember Brianna felt more rushed her 5th-grade year than before” because of their daily schedule. The 5th graders had their academic classes all in a row in the morning and their “specials”, classes like PE, art, music, and computers, at the very end of the day. Bea remembered Brianna commenting about the dismissal process being almost frantic because “they had to pack and be ready to get out on the bus from specials.” There was no relaxed transition before going home, and Bea noticed it was more for Brianna to handle than in years past. Brianna’s daily schedule was also different because she had new transitions throughout her school day. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, 3rd graders at Buford began having more than one academic teacher during the day. They would have one teacher for two academic subjects and then switch to another teacher for their other two academic subjects. However, due to COVID-19 safety protocols, Brianna did not start switching between teachers until her 5th-grade year.

Bea and Bernard found themselves addressing the social aspect of school more frequently when Brianna became a 5th grader. Because Bea worked at Buford, she saw Brianna and her classmates daily. She noticed that “5th grade attitudes were really starting to roll in her classes and her friends.” Thankfully, Brianna did not seem impacted yet by the encroaching

negativity. In fact, Brianna received awards at Buford for her outstanding character. Bea reminded Brianna “who she needs to be if this is the title she has.” Bea and Bernard wanted Brianna to continue being a positive role model in her class and not follow the poor choices of others Bea was seeing. They reminded Brianna that “right now people are looking up to you” because you are a leader in your class, and others will take notice of what choices you make. Bea felt like she had that conversation with Brianna often because she wanted Brianna to stay focused on the positive path she was on and not get sidetracked by those displaying negative character traits.

At the end of Brianna’s 5th grade year, Buford Elementary took 5th graders to tour Bayside Middle School. Bea could not go but remembers Brianna saying “she loved it and thought it was great.” The only part that Brianna seemed to be nervous about was the size of the school and the kids at Bayside. However, Brianna’s nervousness outweighed her excitement about starting middle school. To foster even more excitement about reaching the middle school milestone, parents of 5th-grade Buford students threw a “really big send off pool party for all the 5th graders,” which helped set the positive forward-thinking tone for the rest of the summer.

Bea remembers wanting to get the most out of the summer between 5th and 6th grade because she said, “selfishly, this is my last summer with my baby always with me [at school]” and we wanted to “live up summer and have as much fun as we could before God knows what” will happen in August. Throughout the summer, they “played hard, and went and did all the things”, especially anything involving water. Bea described that summer as being “fast and furious” in a good way. As the summer started to come to an end, Bea said, “I do not remember doing anything major” to prepare for the start of middle school. Bea just remembered wanting Brianna “to feel as confident as possible” when she walked into Bayside Middle School.

One way Bea helped Brianna build confidence was by changing some of their back-to-school shopping routines. Bea described Brianna as the opposite of a “picky kid” because “she does not even really know what name brands are, she just doesn't care; if she likes it, she wears it, if she doesn't, she doesn't.” Therefore, Bea did not spend much money, time, or thought shopping for back-to-school clothes when Brianna was at Buford. However, Bea felt that having Brianna pick out what made her feel the best and be more active in the back-to-school preparation would help Brianna feel more comfortable starting the school year.

The little bit of change in the routine made the start of school feel more special for Brianna. Bea said she will never forget when Brianna came home on the first day of school and one of the first things Brianna told her about the day was “I got so many compliments on my shoes.” The shoes to Bea were just a pair of regular sneakers, but to Brianna, the shoes became a confidence boost. Bea said, “sometimes you do not realize you are missing that confidence until you get it,” and that was what Brianna experienced. Overall, Bea described their middle school preparation as being pretty mild but said, “I was glad we chose to go that route and that Brianna was on board with it.”

Bea planned for Brianna's start at Bayside but did not do much preparation for herself. There was no specific tour for parents to visit and get familiar with Bayside. Bea did attend the “Meet and Greet” event at Bayside a couple of days before school began. At the “Meet and Greet,” Bayside parents accompanied their students as they received their schedules and met their teachers for the year. During that time, Bea got an idea of how the school was laid out and could put a face with Brianna's teachers' names, but she did not receive any information about what to expect as a middle school parent.

### ***Bea's Recollections of Being a Middle School Student***

Bea entered Brianna's transition to middle school carrying the context of her own middle school experience. Overall, Bea said, "I thought middle school was good." She remembered not loving the hormonal aspect of middle school, but did remember she had some good teachers. Looking back on her middle school years, Bea said middle school was hard for her as a student. She was not like Bernard or Brianna, who both had a love of learning; she did not enjoy it as much because she struggled academically. For Bea, "it was really fascinating to watch" this middle school experience because she sees Brianna blossoming. Which, Bea said was "so different than what I know" of middle school academic achievement.

The middle school Bea attended was a middle school for grades 6 – 8. Her class was the first one to have 6th grade included at the middle school level. As a 6th grader at Bea's middle school, you did not switch classes unless you were on the advanced math track. Consequently, Bea did not begin switching classes until her 7th-grade year. When Bea began switching classes, she did not have far to go. Bea's middle school was set up in L-shaped blocks. She said the layout made going from one class to another easy since "you stayed on your block for all of your classes." There was not a need to travel off your block.

### ***Middle School Daily Schedule***

When Brianna began school at Bayside, Bea's morning routine at home did not change too much. The school district offered the children of elementary school employees the opportunity to ride a bus to their middle school from where their parents worked. Therefore, Brianna still rode to Buford with Bea and Benjamin as she had always done in the past, and from there, she rode a bus to Bayside. At the end of the day, Brianna rode the bus directly home.

Middle school marked the first time Bea relied on the school bus to get Brianna to and from school since she began working at Buford.

Normally, Brianna was home around 3:30 p.m. each school day. Bea said, “we are really lucky we are the second stop from leaving school,” which allowed Brianna to get home significantly earlier than others on the bus. Bea was also thankful that Bayside’s dismissal was earlier than some other schools in the district and the neighboring districts. She emphasized how she hoped the school district would continue to listen to the pleas of Bayside parents and would not decide to change the dismissal time to mirror the other middle schools. Bea realized their evening routine would be more impacted if Brianna came home later than she already was getting there.

Like when Brianna was at Buford, when she came home from Bayside, she still needed decompression time. Besides a snack and quiet time, Bea noticed that Brianna needed time to use the restroom. Brianna did not feel comfortable or felt like she had time to use the restroom during the school day, so when she came off the bus, the restroom was high on her priority list.

Bea spoke with another mom of a middle schooler about their after-school routine. The mom told Bea that after a day at middle school, her “daughter didn't even want to talk...I would put up on her bed, her snack and her drink.” That way all her daughter needed would be up in her bedroom and ready without any conversation needed. Then, after 30 minutes or so, she would be ready to come out to be with the rest of the family and discuss how everyone’s day went. After hearing this other mother’s account, Bea’s idea of decompression time was reaffirmed, and Bea tried to make sure Brianna had the quiet time she needed.

The family evening routine changed slightly when Brianna made the middle school softball team. The practices were earlier than the other teams Brianna played on, and Bea was

helping coach the team, which meant they had to be at practice even earlier. Consequently, when Bea described her family's evening meals, she said, "the food quality wasn't what I'd want, but we still did the same, you know, heavy meal before and then a lighter meal after or heavy snack and that's still worked out pretty well." After getting home from practice and having something extra to eat, the family fell into the same routine they had when everyone was at Buford. Bea realized the middle school routine took more of a toll on Brianna because she was starting her day with the same wake-up time as in elementary school but ending her day later.

### ***Bayside Middle School Setup and Culture***

The impression that Bayside Brianna gave Bea was "there's no fun." Bea asked Brianna what that meant, and Brianna told her, "there is no recess, it is just hard work and no play whatsoever." Brianna then told Bea, "we don't even get a long lunch to where we can talk to our friends casually, and we don't have enough time in the hallways to get there and have time to chat" with anyone. Bea advised Brianna to give things a chance and that she would find fun somewhere and meet some friends as the year progressed. However, Bea realized that Brianna did not start her day with many people she knew because her day began in homeroom, where she only knew two students. Four elementary schools feed into Bayside Middle School, and Brianna ended up in a homeroom comprised mainly of students from everywhere except Buford. Bea was hopeful Brianna would be as comfortable in school meeting new friends as she was on the softball field because homeroom was the only time students at Bayside had downtime.

Unfortunately, Brianna was uncomfortable talking to others who already knew one another. Brianna also did not want to go against the rules set forth by her homeroom teacher and get out of her seat to speak to the students she knew from Buford. Thankfully, as part of Bayside's intervention plan to help struggling students, homeroom assignments are altered in the

middle of the year to create homerooms for students needing academic assistance. Brianna's homeroom became an intervention homeroom, and since she did not need any remediation, her homeroom was changed. Bea was not only delighted to find out that Brianna did not need extra help but was going to move into a homeroom where she knew the majority of the students. Brianna's new homeroom teacher was a "really fun, young teacher," which Bea felt helped Brianna feel more at ease as well.

After homeroom, Brianna had her four academic classes back-to-back. Her day finished with two "connections" classes, which are the equivalent of "specials" in elementary school. Bea saw Brianna's school day as being "go, go, go, go, go" to the end. However, Bea was happy Brianna had physical education (PE) for her last class because, in Brianna's mind, PE "was like a decompression class." PE provided Brianna with a buffer before the rush came back at dismissal. For the entirety of the year, Brianna would have the same academic classes and PE. Then, every 9 weeks, known as a quarter, her other connections course changed.

Bayside's scheduling for academic classes is based on student academic progress and needs. Bea was grateful Brianna was in advanced classes, not only because those classes were more rigorous than on-level classes but also because, for the most part, student behaviors seemed to be better in advanced classes. Connection classes at Bayside had a mixture of general education and advanced students. Bea said Brianna learned firsthand how you could receive consequences for others' actions when her connections classes could not do projects or fun activities because of the behavior of other students. Bea used those occurrences as teachable moments of how to work through frustration, how to be a good role model for others, and how to be resilient so she did not develop a negative attitude.

When Bea asked Brianna about the students in her classes, she was surprised to hear that she did not have the same group of students in each of her class periods. Bea envisioned Brianna traveling from class to class with the same advanced students. Bea said hearing that was not the case put the size of Bayside into perspective. The school was so large that multiple sections of classes were required for students each class period, which meant the probability of traveling in a pack was reduced.

### ***Parental Uncertainty in the Middle School Transition***

Bea figured out what she did not know about middle school in the moment; she explained she did not know, what she did not know. Therefore, she learned what middle school and being a middle school parent was like on a daily basis. On the first day of middle school, Bea and Bernard discovered there was a learning curve to figure out the afternoon bus routine. They were waiting for Brianna at the bus stop and were unaware of the buses taking unusually long at the beginning of the year. Bea and Bernard committed to Brianna not having a phone until she was older, so they did not have a way to contact her while she was on the bus. Other parents at the bus stop let Bea and Bernard know this was typical, and they received text messages from their kids that the bus was on its way. Bernard knows one of the assistant principals at Bayside. While he did not want to abuse that relationship, he sent a message to him to ask if all was well with Brianna's bus. The assistant principal messaged back with the good news that everything was fine and that the buses were just way behind schedule. After that incident, Bea and Bernard decided to get an air tag for Brianna to keep in her backpack so they would know where Brianna was on her route home. The air tag provided Bea and Bernard with a way to find Brianna's location if something seemed out of sorts without needing to give in to getting her a cell phone.

Riding the bus also shed light on how much more Brianna was exposed to now that she was in middle school. Brianna came home one day and said she had a conversation with a girl on their bus ride home that was like nothing she had been around before. The girl came and sat next to her, started talking, and did not stop the whole ride home. Bea thought this seemed good because it was a way for Brianna to get to know her neighbors. However, Brianna described the other girl as being “weird”, which was out of character for Brianna to say. Bea asked Brianna to clarify what she meant. Brianna went on to say the other girl mentioned something about trying to harm herself. Bea felt terrible for the other girl and for Brianna being in that position without knowing what she should do. Thankfully, the other girl was all right, but it was hard for Brianna to move past that conversation. Brianna ended up reading on the bus more often, so she did not have conversations with others on the way home. Bea was surprised she would address issues like that at such an early age with Brianna. It made Bea question what else Brianna would encounter as a middle schooler.

Behaviorally, when Brianna began middle school, she was not as predictable as she had been in the past. Bea said she noticed Brianna’s “attitude changing, especially if she was hungry or tired” and knew Brianna’s hormones were changing. Consequently, Bea tried to help Brianna by showing more “love than discipline at that time.” However, Brianna had some moments of irrational attitude and Bea was not sure what to do except buckle up and weather the storm together. Nevertheless, when all had calmed down, Bea discussed with Brianna that she was accountable for her actions and found ways for both her and Brianna to learn from the experience.

By witnessing other parents interact with their middle school kids and hearing Brianna tell about the behaviors of others at Bayside, Bea realized that not all parents instilled

accountability in their children like she and Bernard expected from Brianna. Bea saw that many of Brianna's classmates had more freedom than Brianna. Bea noticed those classmates often took advantage of those freedoms, which led to unwise choices. Bea saw very little of the parents she knew showing "continual correction" with their kids, and the kids seemed to be doing whatever they wanted without any consequences or teachable moments to guide them towards the right path.

Brianna mentioned to Bea that it was so different for her to see other students, and even her friends, behave poorly at school. Bea told Brianna I know it is "eye-opening, and I'm so sorry, baby, but that's the world" sometimes, and you will have to learn to keep focusing on what you know is right.

Bea even found herself torn between keeping trust between her and Brianna and letting one of her friends know what her daughter is doing at school. Brianna told Bea that a friend of the family's daughter was flipping people off in the hallways. Brianna confided in Bea not to get the girl in trouble, she was just surprised by the girl's actions. Bea knew there was not much structure for the girl to follow at home, so she decided not to say anything to the girl's mom. Bea said, "I think the schools expect the parents to do and they're just not" instilling behavior expectations at home." Instead, the kids seem to have little consequences for their actions and are attached to their cell phones. While Bea knew Brianna would be in the minority, this solidified Bea and Bernard's decision to keep a cell phone and social media away from Brianna until she was older. However, it also made Bea begin thinking about how to balance giving Brianna opportunities for independence in conjunction with providing structured ground rules for her to follow.

Bea also became aware of how little she knew about Brianna's life at Bayside as she had conversations with Brianna about her day. Bea was used to knowing exactly who Brianna was talking about when she told stories about something that happened at school. However, since there were students at Bayside from other elementary schools, Bea hardly knew anyone Brianna referred to in her rundown of the day's events. Because Bea did not know the students Brianna mentioned, it also meant Bea did not know the students' families, which was something she again always knew at Buford. The unknown of who Brianna was interacting with was an odd feeling for Bea because that was far from the case at Buford.

Another social aspect of Brianna being a middle schooler that Bea did not anticipate was the impact it would have on the relationship between Brianna and Benjamin. Most of the time, Brianna and Benjamin had a strong, positive relationship with one another. When Brianna started getting home later than Benjamin, it strained their relationship. Benjamin was home about an hour before Brianna got off the bus. Benjamin had his decompression time before Brianna even got home. When Brianna walked in the door, Benjamin was ready to play and be around her, but Brianna was "much more short-tempered with him" and was more irritable towards Benjamin. However, at the same time, Brianna sought out affection from Benjamin. Brianna wanted Benjamin to show her love by giving hugs or kisses, and Benjamin did not want any part of that. Brianna would say, "give me hugs and he was like, get off me." Instead, Benjamin wanted Brianna to play with him, and Brianna was not interested in playing. Bea saw Brianna and Benjamin seeking out affection from one another and not realizing the type of affection they were searching for was the opposite of what the other could give. Bea always thought Brianna and Benjamin "were like best friends," but felt that Brianna's starting middle school strained their relationship. It seemed they did not know how to communicate how they missed one

another without annoying one another. Bea said, “we'll see this next year” whether or not that trend continues.

When Bea was pressed with a middle school scenario she was unsure how to approach, she typically reached out to other Bayside parents. If the question concerned academics or a specific assignment, Bea and the other parents would try to piece together what their kids told them. From there, they would have a better picture of what the assignment entailed. Through this process, Bea was relieved to learn that Brianna usually knew the most about what assignment expectations were and seemed to continue to be actively listening in her classes. As the year went on, Bea’s uncertainty about Brianna’s academics diminished as she became more confident in Brianna’s sense of responsibility.

### ***Communication between Bea and Bayside Middle School***

The transition from elementary to middle school included Bea getting accustomed to a completely different communication style at Bayside Middle. At Buford, Bea said she was “so used to being consumed with everything and everything’s sent home and you just always felt in the know.” Conversely, at Bayside, Bea experienced a “lack of communication” which led to a “lack of knowledge” for her. When Brianna was at Buford, Bea remembered being “told so much of what’s happening whether it’s through Canvas or in a sheet... you're kind of are aware of their work, whereas here [at Bayside] I had no clue like whatsoever what everything was unless it was by me asking.” Bea recognized she “might be a little different than other people because I'm used to just so much being in the know” since she volunteered and then worked at Buford. Nonetheless, Bea was taken aback at the decline in communication at the middle school level.

As much as Bea felt out of the loop on what was happening at Bayside, she was impressed with “how much independent schooling she [Brianna] had to do, where I didn't even know anything about it.” While Bea appreciated and understood the move towards more self-directed learning in middle school, she also felt “it is a struggle” for both students and parents. There were a couple times where Brianna forgot about an assignment, and Bea was unaware of it to remind her, so it was “late-night scrambling” to get things complete. On a few occasions, Bea emailed Brianna’s teachers for some clarification. Generally, Bea received a prompt and helpful response. However, there were two teachers who never responded to her emails. Bea said, “luckily they weren't important questions, so I was able to let it go and we found the answer, but that was new to me and I didn't know if that was normal, it was odd.”

Thankfully, though, Brianna did well with being self-disciplined and in charge of her academics. Therefore, it did not matter as much if Bea knew what was going on or not. Over Brianna’s 6<sup>th</sup>-grade year, Bea said, “it was just really interesting to see her have to develop that kind of self-production and just really being accountable,” while Bea was simultaneously learning to acclimate to a school environment with little parental communication.

Bayside’s administration, just like at Buford, sent out a weekly email blast to families. There were some helpful things in the emails, but Bea found information sent out via social media to be more useful. There were times when the email from the school went to Bea’s junk mail by mistake. Therefore, Bea was more confident seeing information posted on social media in real-time versus waiting for a weekly email update. Receiving school information via social media was not something as common at Buford as it was at Bayside, but it was a change Bea welcomed.

At Buford, Bea knew the guidance counselors well, not only because she worked there but also because the counselors were always busy and part of campus activities. After a year of Brianna being at Bayside, Bea had no idea who the guidance counselors were. Bea attributed this to possibly being a result of Brianna not needing to see the guidance counselor or Bea not feeling the need to contact them. However, not knowing who they are, surprised Bea a bit.

Bea also remembered that Brianna was reluctant to go to the school nurse. Brianna feared going to the nurse because they didn't know each other and “she was like, a stranger, weird.” To Bea, these recollections made it clear “how much more intimately we knew our staff at Buford versus in middle school.” Bea surmised the lack of connection to Bayside’s staff could be due to the sheer number of students at the school, minimal communication from the school about their staff, or a combination of the two. Regardless, it was a noticeable example to Bea how middle school is a different world from elementary school.

Bayside did offer some community-building type of events, but Bea and her family did not attend. Bea appreciated Bayside holding the events for others, but said her family “just didn't really have the time to do it, nor the desire, to be frank, because they just didn't seem appealing and we usually had sports.” Bea felt like the family needed to do something else in the evenings to give them a break from being at school, especially since the events that were offered seemed to be geared toward families with needs her family did not have. Several times, however, Brianna and the rest of the family went to some of the middle school basketball games. Bea said she enjoyed “those games because Brianna got to bond with some friends in the stands and I got to see some parents I had not seen in a while.” The basketball games were a place where Bea felt her family could naturally connect with the school.

### *Bea's Reflections as a New Middle School Parent*

When reflecting on her transition from an elementary school parent to a middle school parent, Bea felt like the biggest thing she needed to get used to was that Brianna “really had to be on her own” at Bayside. Any nervousness Brianna had when she began the year at Bayside faded away throughout the year. However, what did not fade away was how difficult it was for Bea to “just cut the cord and let her go.” It felt unnatural for Bea to see Brianna with so much independence and for Bea to feel removed from Brianna’s school experience. The transition to middle school made it evident to Bea that Brianna was moving closer to her teenage years, a milestone Bea was not quite ready to wrap her head around.

Bea wished she had been better versed in the academic aspects of middle school. She did not feel prepared for the degree of independence expected at Bayside and would want new middle school parents to be informed about that as they transitioned to middle school. Brianna always loved school, so academics were not too much of a concern for Bea. However, it still took a while for Bea to become comfortable with Brianna having more information about academic requirements than she did.

The other area Bea would want new middle school parents to be informed about is the inevitable transportation issues they will experience during the year. Specifically, Bea would want to “prepare them for the first week of transportation chaos.” Things do get better and more consistent as the year progresses, but Bea wished she had been warned about transportation shortcomings because it caused undue stress at the beginning of the year. Additionally, Bea would want parents to know that transportation issues do not necessitate getting their child a phone. There are ways to handle the transportation pitfalls that do not involve your child using a cell phone.

Even more than academics, Bea wished she had more insight into how much Brianna would be confronted with socially as a 6th grader and would want parents to be as ready as they could for that. Bea said she knew Brianna mainly hung out with “her little clique, but then randomly she will say things that I didn’t even know she was exposed to.” Whether it came from others in Brianna’s clique or not, Bea was not prepared initially for some of the questions Brianna asked her. Bea was thankful Brianna came to her instead of elsewhere for the questions but was taken aback by how good she would have to be to “think on the fly to talk about it.” This was not what Bea was used to.

In the past, Bea knew when she would talk to Brianna about something. She could get overly prepared with whatever might be brought up because it was her and not Brianna who addressed the issue. When middle school began, it seemed to be Brianna who generated the topics. This made Bea feel uneasy because she said, “I’m big into giving her facts, I don’t want to sugarcoat it because I don’t want her to be embarrassed with someone who really knows what it is and she kind of does not.” Therefore, one of Bea’s biggest pieces of advice for parents transitioning to middle school would be “just get prepared to answer every question, it’s coming.” Whether the topic is big or small, something your family supports or does not support, something you have heard of or not heard of, your child could ask you about all of it because they are exposed to much more at middle school than they are at elementary school.

Bea even saw how the exposure to new topics was not limited to just the school day. Brianna’s softball team was out for dinner one night, and a teammate of hers showed the rest of the team an inappropriate picture she received on her phone. The incident made Bea and Bernard more grateful they had not given in to getting Brianna a cell phone; it showed what problems came from doing so. It also made them thankful that Bayside was implementing a more stringent

no-cellphone policy, so Brianna's chance of cell phone exposure was reduced even more during the school day.

Bea is aware they can only do what they can do to teach Brianna the life skills and life lessons they want her to learn. She did not have blinders on to the fact that Brianna would be around others who may not share their family's viewpoints and would also want other parents to realize that. Bea said for new middle school parents that have a child that is "all into school and clean nosed, be prepared because there are a whole lot of other kids that aren't." Bea clarified her suggestion by saying the difference is more noticeable "when you get to the middle school where so many [students] migrate into one spot and then usually the kids that are a little bit more troubled band together and it can just be heavy and a lot to see and hear" for students not used to that kind of environment. Bea felt like the more she understood that situation, the more she could be ready to help Brianna.

Bea had an idea that middle school would bring some friendship issues with it for Brianna. She expected issues along the lines of the stereotypical girl drama, and unfortunately, Brianna did experience some of those. What was not on Bea's radar when Brianna started middle school was that some friendships that had lasted throughout her years at Buford might not have continued at Bayside. Bea was used to the elementary environment where, logistically, Brianna and her friends were "very close to each other, all their classes, all of them are on that same hall." Then, when Brianna started at Bayside, Bea asked her about one of her friends, and Brianna told her, "I just never see her, Mom." That ended up being true of more than one friend. It hit Bea how the vastness of middle school created a divide "just organically, not because anything happened, but because now they're just kind of segregated from each other and they can't communicate like they used to." Bea wished she had known about that going into middle

school for Brianna's sake, but also her own. When Brianna lost contact with her friends, Bea inherently lost contact with hers as well. The parents socialized with one another while their kids hung out. If there was not any hanging out going on, that meant the parents most likely were not seeing one another either.

As daunting as middle school might sound, Bea also wanted to make sure that upcoming middle school parents knew how exciting the year was going to be for them. Bea enjoyed seeing Brianna grow academically and personally during her 6th-grade year. The independence Brianna learned throughout her first year in middle school was also a learning experience for Bea as a mom. She had to learn how to trust herself, trust Brianna, and trust the school all at the same time. At the end of the year, Bea was proud of Brianna and herself for having a successful first year at Bayside.

Bea acknowledged the fact that the old adage about the days being long and the year being short is applicable to middle school. 6th grade, like previous school years, was filled with so many things that it seemed to fly by. Bea asked Brianna if she felt like the year went by quicker than others, and Brianna said, "yeah, actually, it really did go fast, Mom." Each quarter seemed to have something to look forward to within it. By the time you knew it, you were already in the 4th quarter. So, Bea said to treasure the excitement of being a 6th-grade parent because it will go by quickly.

### **Caitlee**

Caitlee is a white working mother in her 30s. She and her husband, Carl, have a son named Colin. Caitlee also has three stepdaughters ranging in age from teenage years to adulthood. Caitlee sees her stepdaughters approximately twice a month. Colin began middle school in RESA Region 1 in August 2024. Caitlee works full-time from home. Carl is a

superintendent for a construction company. Caitlee described her family as being very busy and constantly on the go because of Colin's sports schedule. Caitlee frequently volunteered at Colin's elementary school and was thankful Colin had such a wonderful experience as an elementary school student. Caitlee was eager to see what middle school would be like for her family but did not know what she should expect as Colin began 6th grade.

During the summer between 5th and 6th grade, Caitlee tried to be as positive about the transition to middle school as possible. She did not want to cause Colin or herself any undue anxious feelings. Caitlee and Carl decided Colin would attend a middle school outside of their assigned school zone. They were confident in their decision because they researched which school would be the best fit for Colin and their family. However, they knew that beginning middle school at a school where Colin would not know as many students could be intimidating for him. Therefore, Caitlee presented the start of middle school to Colin as an opportunity to meet new friends.

Colin welcomed this approach and seemed excited to become a 6th grader. Caitlee recalled how she navigated through middle school's new social and academic expectations and how she was more prepared for some of the changes than she was for others. During the interview sessions, Caitlee remembered how she yearned to be involved in Colin's education at the middle school level and how she discovered the middle school version of parental involvement.

### ***Calvert Elementary School***

Colin attended Calvert Elementary School, located in a RESA Region 1. According to GOSA data, Calvert had approximately 650 students enrolled in 2022-2023. Discipline data published by GOSA reported Calvert's Elementary ISS rate as an estimated 0% and their OSS

rate as an estimated 2% with approximately 120 discipline reports in 2023. Calvert Elementary's School Improvement Plan focused on increasing the percentage of students scoring proficient on the Georgia Milestones English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments. Their School Improvement Plan goals addressed both the general education and students with disabilities populations. GOSA reported that approximately 70% of Calvert Elementary's certified teachers have earned advanced degrees. Calvert Elementary School's website shows their administrative team led by a principal supported by an assistant principal, an evaluation and assessment coordinator, an instructional lead coach, and a school counselor. Additional staff include a media specialist, a media center clerk, and support teachers.

### ***Cardinal Middle School***

Colin attended Cardinal Middle School in RESA Region 1. According to GOSA data, Cardinal had approximately 900 students enrolled in 2024-2025. Cardinal Middle School's ISS rate was approximately 21%, and their OSS rate was approximately 19% in 2024. GOSA data indicated that 77% of Cardinal Middle School's faculty, administration, and support staff have earned advanced degrees. Cardinal Middle School's website shows that their administrative team was led by a principal, supported by two assistant principals, a student services coordinator, and two guidance counselors. In addition to certified and classified classroom personnel, Cardinal Middle School reportedly has a media specialist and a media clerk.

### ***Interview Format***

I completed three interview sessions with Caitlee on two separate days. Each of the interviews was conducted via Microsoft Teams. The first interview focused on Caitlee's experience as an elementary school parent. Two days later, I met with Caitlee for our second and third sessions. The first session of the day revolved around outlining Caitlee's parental

experience in middle school. In the final interview, Caitlee relayed her insights into the overall parental transition from elementary school to middle school. Caitlee then followed up with advice she wished to pass along to new middle school parents and middle school personnel.

### ***Daily Life as an Elementary School Parent***

Caitlee's day began around 5:00 a.m. each morning Colin attended Calvert Elementary. She said Carl usually had to be at work around 4:00 a.m., so he was "out of the house before we even thought about waking up." Therefore, she got up early to get Colin's "lunch made and whatever else needed to be done." When Colin was in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, Caitlee drove him to school. During those years, Caitlee would wake Colin up by 6:30 a.m. with a goal of being ready to leave their house at "7:30ish and getting him to school by 7:35 a.m."

Caitlee's morning routine changed following the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. Colin became more familiar with kids in their neighborhood when Calvert Elementary was forced to close for in-person learning because of mandated COVID-19 precautions. When Calvert reopened, Colin realized that some of his neighbors were in his class. He also noticed that many of the neighborhood kids rode the bus to school rather than being dropped off in the carpool line. Consequently, Colin became interested in riding the bus to school as well. At Colin's request, he rode the bus to Calvert for the remainder of his elementary school years.

However, the transportation change necessitated an earlier start to Colin's morning. Caitlee continued to wake up at the same time when Colin began taking the bus to Calvert, but she did not have as much time in the mornings to prepare for the day. Colin's bus arrived at his bus stop at 7:02 a.m., so Caitlee woke him at 5:50 a.m. Even though the morning felt more rushed than when she drove Colin to school, Caitlee still always cooked a big breakfast for Colin

each morning. She did not want to give that up when he became a bus rider. Caitlee said, “breakfast is the biggest meal” at their house. Caitlee felt a high-protein breakfast was the start to the day Colin needed since he was so active in sports. Caitlee also enjoyed breakfast time because she always loved cooking. Therefore, she made sure Colin’s transportation change did not impact their family’s breakfast routine, and Colin was very appreciative.

In the years Colin was a car rider in the morning, he was also a car rider in the afternoon. Similarly, when Colin was a bus rider, he rode the bus to and from school. Because Colin was one of the first bus stops to be let off in the afternoon, he was typically home around 2:40 p.m. Colin’s arrival at home signaled the beginning of Caitlee’s afternoon elementary school mom routine. Her daily afternoons involved helping Colin complete his homework, cook dinner, and attend sports practice.

Caitlee was thankful that while Colin was in elementary school, “there was never that much homework, and if there was, he nailed it; he was a great student.” Caitlee remembered Colin being able to come home from Calvert, complete his homework, and have “45 minutes or so until dinner was done” to play on her phone. It also helped that Colin was not locked into having homework each night. Colin received a weekly homework sheet on Mondays and was expected to complete it by the end of the week. Therefore, Caitlee could plan out how much or how little homework Colin should do each day depending on what their schedule was for that week.

After they ate dinner, Colin would change for football practice and be at the field by 6:00 p.m. or 6:15 p.m. for practice to start at 6:30 p.m. Caitlee and Colin would usually be home from practice around 8:15 p.m. Colin would shower, and then he went to bed. During football season, this would be the family’s routine every “Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and when it came to

championship season, it was Wednesday practice too.” In his later elementary years, Colin began playing soccer during football off-season, and that schedule was similar to what they were used to with football.

### ***Getting Connected at Calvert Elementary School***

Caitlee always knew she wanted to be involved at Colin’s schools. She remembered as she was growing up, her mom’s work schedule did not allow her to be a parent volunteer at school. Therefore, Caitlee made a concerted effort to be an active presence at Calvert because she said, “I never had that, so I wanted my son to have that.” Caitlee thought, “I know teachers can use a hand,” so she went to Calvert “at least once a week”, even when employed full-time.

Finding a place to volunteer and offer assistance at Calvert came easily for Caitlee. She loved how the teachers at Calvert “were always welcoming and wonderful” and how “you just knew everything about every teacher, it was great.” Through her volunteer experience at Calvert, Caitlee felt personally connected to Colin’s education. She said Colin’s “teachers knew they could depend on me” for almost anything they needed. She was proud she could give something back to Calvert since they had been so great to Colin and her family.

The positive energy Caitlee felt from Calvert’s faculty made it even more motivating for her to donate her time and resources. Caitlee felt a sense of community all over Calvert’s campus. She remembered how Calvert’s faculty started students’ days off by having them “feel welcomed the second you open the car door, at car line in the morning; the teachers are great, wonderful, welcoming, just getting the day started with excitement.” To make Fridays even more special, the teachers at the car line would bring out speakers to play music for the kids as they came into school. Caitlee said, “I loved that” and was very appreciative because “it takes a lot of

energy for teachers to be out there, have their own families, and still be able to come to school with that much energy for other children; it was amazing to me.”

### ***Communication between Caitlee and Calvert Elementary School***

When Caitlee was not volunteering at Calvert, she was still up to date with what was happening in Colin’s classroom. In kindergarten through 3rd grade, Colin had a folder he brought home from school each day. On “one side of the folder, it had stuff you keep [at home] and then the other side was returned items.” Parents were expected to sign the folders once a week. Beyond seeing Colin’s daily folder, Caitlee also saw important classroom notices and reminders via apps such as Class Dojo or Remind each year Colin was at Calvert. In some grades, teachers used a weekly classroom newsletter to inform parents and students about the topics and assignment expectations for the week. To learn about school wide announcements or events at Calvert, Caitlee signed up to receive emails and text messages from Calvert’s administration. Caitlee felt the variety of communication methods used at Calvert kept her from guessing what Colin was doing at school and what she should be doing at home to help support Colin and his teachers.

### ***Changes in 5th Grade***

Caitlee did not feel like 5th grade was much different for her, Colin, or their family. Things seemed to be the same for a Calvert 5th grader as they were for 3rd and 4th graders at Calvert. The last three years Colin attended Calvert, he had two teachers to switch between, the same weekly homework routine, and was doing well in school. The only difference Caitlee recalled was towards the end of the school year. In April of Colin’s 5th-grade year, Caitlee had a conference with his main teacher about planning Colin’s middle school courses. Before that conference, Caitlee had not heard any information regarding the middle school transition.

Occasionally, Caitlee said Colin would “come home and tell me ‘like, yeah, we talked about 6th grade today’, then I’d say ok, well, what did you talk about?” and Colin would respond that he did not remember. It was the first time since Colin began at Calvert that she did not feel like she was privy to the information she needed.

At the conference about Colin’s middle school course options, the teacher suggested that Colin take advanced level courses. As excited as the teacher was for Colin to be taking advanced level classes, without knowing what the course work entailed and knowing that Colin “hates reading and is lazy”, Caitlee declined the advanced reading placement for him. Caitlee wanted Colin to start his middle school years as successfully as possible. She did not want the added pressure of an advanced class that did not fit his personality.

### ***Caitlee’s Recollections of Being a Middle School Student***

Caitlee attended a 6th- 8th-grade middle school in a school district adjacent to where Calvert is located. Caitlee remembered her middle school as “not the greatest middle school in the world.” She explained that her middle school was in an area that others would consider needing improvement. However, it was the middle school she was assigned to attend. Caitlee said her middle school “was on the way for my dad to go to work, it was convenient,” so there was no other option for Caitlee other than to make the best of her assigned school. Looking back, Caitlee did not feel it was the students she went to middle school with that caused her to recollect the school’s shortcomings; it was the adults at the school. Caitlee described her middle school years

as just going through the motions until she was finished and ready to go on to high school.

Caitlee wanted to do everything possible for Colin to have a better middle school career than her own. Therefore, Caitlee and Carl decided to take advantage of their school district’s

school choice policy and chose to enroll Colin in Cardinal Middle School, which was not their assigned school. Caitlee heard from others about issues at Colin's assigned middle school. She did further research into what she heard and later read from parents in the community. Caitlee realized the information she was being told from others and what her initial internet searches produced was "hearsay, and you know you can't go by every Google comment that you see."

Caitlee turned to the statistical information she found about their assigned school and compared that to the schools under consideration for Colin. As a result of that research, Caitlee found that Colin's assigned school seemed to mirror the middle school she attended. Caitlee did not want Colin in a school that appeared to lack a strong administrative and faculty team. Beyond the supporting empirical data that led Caitlee and Carl to choose Cardinal Middle School, Caitlee remembered how the social aspect of middle school could be troubling. She was not happy with some situations related to Colin's football team. However, most of Colin's football team would not attend Cardinal, which made Cardinal an even better choice in Caitlee's eyes.

Caitlee felt it was a non-issue for Colin not attending school with the rest of the neighborhood because Colin began making stronger friendships with kids outside of the neighborhood. She explained, "we meet a lot of people [in the community], and it's crazy that I don't know the people in my neighborhood." Caitlee said their family was so busy with sports that there was no time to socialize with people in the neighborhood when they were finally at home. Therefore, Caitlee felt confident Colin would not feel slighted by attending Cardinal instead of his assigned school. Caitlee said, "you have to be proactive for your child, you're the only one that has their best interests, so I just knew the decision that I needed to make." She was thankful for the opportunity to make that choice.

### *Middle School Daily Schedule*

Caitlee said their middle school mornings became the “same as the last schedule, just a little later in the morning.” A bonus of Colin attending Cardinal Middle School was that Caitlee had a good friend who lived near the school. Therefore, when Colin started at Cardinal, Caitlee started meeting her friend “every other morning, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, to go walk.” While they walked, Colin would stay at the friend’s house and “do whatever he needs to do” for school. On the mornings Caitlee walked with her friend, she woke Colin up at 6:30 a.m. She cooked their regular household breakfast for them, and then they headed out to her friend’s house. A non-walking morning consisted of waking Colin up at 7:30 a.m. and “then it’s, you know, breakfast and all the things and we were out the door by 8:15 a.m.” Caitlee said Colin had “to be at school by 8:40, so he was at school right around 8:25 or 8:30” each morning.

In the afternoons, some days, Caitlee picked Colin up from Cardinal, and other days, Carl would pick him up. When Caitlee picked Colin up, she left the house at 3:45 p.m. However, Caitlee said, “if he [Carl] goes to get him, he feels bad, so he leaves the house at like 3:15,” so Colin did not have to wait as long in the car rider line. Regardless of who went to get Colin, they were home between 4:00 and 4:20 p.m. each day. Because Colin was getting home later in the afternoon, Caitlee said she found they were “ordering food more often, which I can't stand because I love to cook, and I love to do everything around the house.” However, Caitlee’s full-time job did not always allow her to prepare dinner prior to the end of the school day, and there was not enough time when Colin came home to fix a meal before the evening’s activities. As a construction superintendent, Carl spent his days constantly on the go, so neither one of them “wanted to put the extra energy in the food”, which led them to order dinner from somewhere instead of cooking at home.

Once the family had dinner, the evening switched to focus on school. Colin had homework on “most days, especially math.” Caitlee said math tended to have the most homework because it is “so fast, more fast-paced with advanced.” Colin had math homework “three to four nights a week” and often had a “social studies study guide, a science study guide...and a math study guide on top of math homework.” Caitlee remembered being thankful for times when Colin had a project in one subject and another subject not being as heavy that week.

Colin’s extracurricular schedule did not slow down when he started at Cardinal, which made juggling middle school academics even more of a challenge for Caitlee as she adjusted to Colin’s new schedule. They tried to get as much work completed as possible before evening practices. However, that did not always happen. Caitlee found herself scrambling to help Colin. Caitlee would tag team with Colin to reference any notes in his notebooks to complete assignments, and if he could not find the answers there, she would help him find the information online. She found herself “doing a lot of work” to help Colin complete his assignments. Caitlee became involved in helping Colin “because there’s no reason to be doing the work online at home” and not making a good grade on the assignment. She wanted Colin to comprehend the content and know how to use his resources to build his comprehension when needed. Those teachable moments were valuable but time-consuming in an already time-crunched evening.

### ***Cardinal Middle School Setup and Culture***

Colin’s school day at Cardinal Middle School consisted of eight class periods. Five of the class periods were core academic subjects. Two of the class periods were termed connections classes, which are considered electives, and one class period was homeroom. The core academic subjects and homeroom remained the same on Colin’s schedule for the entirety of the school

year, while the connections classes rotated after the first semester. Colin's academic classes were scheduled after homeroom and his day ended with his two connections classes.

Each of the class periods, except homeroom, was taught by a different teacher. Therefore, Colin and his family needed to learn seven teachers' personalities and expectations. Caitlee felt overwhelmed with the thought of the number of teachers at the beginning of the year but learned the way of work for Colin's teachers as the year progressed. Caitlee was comforted knowing Colin did not have to travel far between his teachers' classrooms. Cardinal Middle School was divided into separate sections for each grade level and a common area for their connection classes. Even though Caitlee became familiar with the names of Colin's teachers and began understanding how they ran their classrooms, she was unaware if Colin had a guidance counselor or who Colin's assistant principal was at Cardinal. Caitlee assumed the counselor and administration were structured similarly to high school and said, "I think they have an admin for each grade level," and the counselors would be assigned in the same manner.

When Colin was at Calvert, he had a laptop he used at school, however, that laptop stayed in his classroom. Caitlee learned that students at Cardinal had more access to technology than Colin had in the past. District-wide, each middle schooler received a laptop at the start of the school year that they were allowed to take back and forth between school and home.

Caitlee was not as connected to Cardinal as she was to Calvert. She was unsure of what volunteering at Cardinal looked like. Caitlee said if she was involved with Cardinal's PTA, she would "probably know...but had not heard of any" because she was not in the PTA. As Caitlee worked more as Colin got older, it became more difficult for her to go to the school to volunteer. However, as at Calvert, Caitlee continued to send in any supplies teachers needed. She wanted to support Cardinal teachers as much as she could. Caitlee regularly reached out to Colin's teachers

to ensure the class had all the required materials for labs or projects. Helping was a way Caitlee showed Colin's teachers that even though she was not physically at the school, her family was there for them.

### ***Parental Uncertainty in the Middle School Transition***

During Colin's transition to middle school, Caitlee felt torn about when to help Colin and when to step back and let Colin figure things out on his own. She said, "I try to stay on him, but I know at some point he has got to learn it himself." As Colin began his assignments, Caitlee remembered she would "go behind [him] and check everything." However, even with Caitlee double-checking Colin's workload and submissions, Caitlee recalled, "for ELA the first couple weeks of school, we missed four assignments." She said the assignments were not big, they were things "like put your name on the top right corner of a Word document, just to get them familiar with what they were using." Missing those assignments made it clear to Caitlee that she and Colin were learning the middle school system right along with one another. Caitlee expected to be more helpful because of her work experience. Instead, she found that even though she worked "on technology all day, when it comes to his stuff because I am not in it like he is, it is just different." Consequently, she did not understand the technology Colin was expected to use as quickly as she thought she would. It was difficult for Caitlee to give Colin the academic independence she wanted to give him because she had to learn the middle school technology system alongside him.

Caitlee did not feel as if she completely understood middle school scheduling. She knew Colin had the typical language arts, reading, math, science, and social studies classes on his schedule but was unsure how homeroom or the connection rotations worked. Thankfully, after

the first few weeks, she started to see how Colin's school day, and the rest of the year, would flow.

However, toward the end of Colin's first semester at Cardinal, Caitlee was notified that he would have a new vocabulary class. She had no idea what the class was about, why Colin was going to have the class, or how that was going to fit into his current schedule. When Caitlee received that notification, she felt like she was right back at the beginning of the year, not knowing what Colin's day was like. She asked Colin about the class, but he said he had no clue what the class was either. Caitlee realized she was relying on an 11-year-old boy for important information, which was not the most reliable source, and needed to do some research on her own.

Caitlee turned to look for information in her email, in notifications from the school, through papers Colin brought home, and on Cardinal's website. However, she did not find anything about the newly assigned class. Caitlee decided to address this issue like other uncertainties at the beginning of the year: go with the flow and call the school if anything becomes problematic. Later, Caitlee found the class would fit into Colin's daily schedule and was also known as an acronym used schoolwide at Cardinal. Unfortunately, learning that information was not helpful either because "it doesn't spell it [the acronym] out, it just says vocabulary with the teacher's name and the room number" next to it. Therefore, Caitlee was right back where she started, waiting. Caitlee was not used to taking this more reactive approach; she was more accustomed to being informed about anything concerning Colin's education.

If Caitlee had a question about something that was not specific to a particular teacher, she found it difficult to locate answers or contact information for those who could help when she looked on Cardinal's website. As she navigated the links on Cardinal's webpage, she found them

to be incomplete, or they directed her to district-level topics and personnel. Caitlee did not expect to understand the ebbs and flows of middle school immediately, but she also did not expect to lack the resources to clear up any uncertainties. She did not want to have to call or go to the front office at Cardinal if she had a question. She wanted to be able to voice her concerns or pose her questions directly to the person who could be of assistance.

Beyond the logistical setup of middle school, Caitlee struggled with how to help Colin with the academic expectations at Cardinal. In elementary school, the homework routine was the same throughout the year. Caitlee knew Colin would not be assigned anything beyond the worksheet packets he received each week. Conversely, at Cardinal, Caitlee discovered that “every week is different” in terms of the homework workload. Colin brought home a combination of daily assignments and study guides from his academic classes. Some weeks, he did not have many assignments at all, while some weeks he seemed overloaded. Caitlee felt 5th grade “did not prepare you for that much stuff” or the unpredictability of assignments.

Additionally, Caitlee realized Colin did not develop study skills in elementary school because he “never had been a kid that had to study.” Colin grasped academic content quickly in elementary school. Therefore, he finished his classwork before others in his class and did extra practice while his teacher helped those who needed remediation. Consequently, Colin did not study at home since he had already mastered the content. As a 6th grader, though, the content did not come as organically to Colin, and he did not have as much time to practice the content in class. When Caitlee noticed Colin needed more assistance, she had to find a way to build study skills into Colin’s homework time. Adding the time needed to incorporate study habits into their already busy evenings was an unforeseen challenge.

### *Communication between Caitlee and Cardinal Middle School*

Caitlee learned at the beginning of Colin's 6th-grade year that she needed to get familiar with the learning management system used by Cardinal's teachers. She was eager to get set up, but for some reason, she was not able to log into the learning management system through her parent account. To stay connected, as a workaround, she had Colin log into his student account when he was at home. This allowed Caitlee to see the expectations for each of Colin's classes. A bonus to logging in via Colin was that it showed Caitlee exactly what Colin saw versus the parent account, which reportedly differed from the student view.

Caitlee was appreciative that "every teacher had a calendar, which had clickable links, and it had everything listed that they're doing for the day" posted on the learning management system. The calendars were not comprehensive, but they at least gave an idea of what the week would be like in class. Caitlee said the learning management system "took a while to learn." However, when she became comfortable with it, she could easily check on what Colin needed to complete, help direct him if needed, and then say, "do your thing." Having access to the learning management system also allowed Caitlee to see Colin's grades in real time so she could see where he was excelling or where he needed improvement.

Each of Colin's teachers at Cardinal used the app Remind to communicate with their students' families. Caitlee was thankful she used Remind while Colin was at Calvert because it meant she did not have to learn something new. Caitlee heard from "everybody a couple times a week" via Remind regarding announcements and helpful information for Colin's classes.

The exception to the Remind communication was Colin's social studies class. Colin was originally scheduled to be in a social studies teacher's class who was later transferred within the district because Cardinal "had too many teachers for 6th grade for the students that ended up

coming in.” Therefore, Colin was moved to another teacher’s social studies class. When the schedule change occurred, Caitlee was not “getting any correspondence” even though “everything was supposed to just switch over” to the new teacher’s Remind list. Instead, she relied on Colin to keep her up to date with information that might not be included in the learning management system. Caitlee soon realized she needed to email the new teacher to be added to their Remind as soon as possible so she would feel more confident she was completely up to date with happenings in Colin’s social studies class. Caitlee was pleased that if she ever had questions that were not answered on the learning management system or in a Remind notification, then she could message the teacher through Remind or via email and would get a response “pretty quick.”

Caitlee felt “as far as school correspondence goes, Cardinal was pretty good about sending out emails.” The schoolwide emails were helpful but were often generic and lackluster. She found it odd that Cardinal did not have anything “like flyers, reminders, or any type of newsletters” in electronic or hard copy versions. Caitlee expected to see something of that nature because she thought the school “would want to get out what kind of clubs they are offering” and other promoted schoolwide events or initiatives. To find that information, she acknowledged she “probably could take an extra step and go to their website, but who has time for that?” especially considering she was “in email all day.”

### ***Caitlee’s Reflections as a New Middle School Parent***

Caitlee remembered an air of “excitement” around Colin starting 6th grade at Cardinal. She described herself as being “pretty sentimental,” so she “loved watching Colin expand, do things, and make friends, and there’s just so much of it that comes with middle school.” Caitlee admitted that the transition to middle school was not without some sadness because it is hard to

come to terms with your baby becoming a young adult. However, she said, “the excitement overshadows the sadness.”

Caitlee believed the eagerness she and Carl felt for Colin as he entered middle school helped him end elementary school and begin at Cardinal with a positive mindset for himself. She remembered Colin realizing, “my parents are excited for me, I need to be excited, and I don’t need to look back.” Caitlee felt framing middle school as a new opportunity for Colin made his transition successful. Colin “knew he wasn’t going to be with all of his friends, but he had a pretty open mind and positive outlook on meeting new people, so it wasn’t as torturous for him as it would be for some children.”

As 6th grade was underway, Caitlee felt “bittersweet” about the middle school transition. She still held onto the excitement she had for Colin starting a new chapter in his life, but she also was going through the days feeling and thinking, “oh my gosh, my hair is on fire.” Caitlee thought there were “things that the elementary school could have done to help prepare better.” Middle school academics “was a big stressor in the beginning”, especially the advanced math class, because neither Caitlee nor Colin was used to the workload Colin brought home. They both had been used to the fluidity of having homework due at the end of the week and being able to decide when they wanted to complete the work. She also wished Colin began at Cardinal with a foundation of study and organizational skills instead of having to simultaneously learn them as he learned his middle school coursework.

Likewise, as Caitlee reflected on Colin’s end of 5th grade and the beginning of 6th grade, she thought Cardinal and the school district could improve how they help students and parents transition to middle school. Colin did attend a middle school orientation at Cardinal, which Caitlee was grateful for when they went. However, when she retrospectively thought about the

orientation, she did not see as much value in it as she had initially. The orientation took place when Colin was still in 5th grade and consisted of the incoming 6th graders completing a “scavenger hunt at the middle school.” The students were given a piece of paper, and they had to find letters written throughout the 6th-grade hall and connections classes. Caitlee thought it was “actually really, really cool” when she and Colin participated in that activity. Then, as the summer came to a close, she realized the scavenger hunt was just fun and not helpful. Caitlee did not have anything to refer back to later because they “ended up having to turn in the paper” at the end of the orientation. Even if they were able to keep it, they would have only left with a list of locations and letters.

Caitlee never received anything from Cardinal or the district about what to expect in middle school. She remembered her own transition to middle school and getting a small packet about what to expect as a middle schooler, but she did not get anything like that for Colin. Caitlee felt if she or Colin had something similar, she would have known “a little bit more of what we were getting into.” The week before Colin began at Cardinal, he and Caitlee attended another orientation where they met Colin’s teachers. There, Caitlee felt she gained some more insight, especially with the advanced math class, but at that point, it was hard to digest everything because it was all happening so fast.

The non-academic aspect of middle school took Caitlee by surprise. The school week schedule Caitlee had lived throughout Colin’s elementary school years suddenly no longer existed. When Colin started at Cardinal, she thought, “how are we going to do this?” The late middle school dismissal shortened their evenings. Caitlee began struggling with balancing the new schedule at the beginning of the school year, and that was a time when sports had not even started yet.

Caitlee was overwhelmed at the thought of Colin having an increased academic workload, coupled with his extracurricular activities, all squeezed into fewer available hours after school. It got to the point where Caitlee had to get creative to carve out more time in the evenings. Many days, she worked harder to complete projects for her job as early in the day as possible. There were times when Caitlee used a device that mimicked her being online so she could leave her computer to start figuring out dinner before Colin came home. Caitlee never envisioned this way of work, but when presented with how chaotic being a middle school parent became, she resolved herself to the fact of “sometimes you have to do what you have to do.” Thankfully, as 6th grade progressed, Carl started being able to come home earlier, and Caitlee did not have to rely on her mimicking device, although she took comfort that it was there if Carl’s schedule ever changed.

Caitlee learned to embrace being the parent of a middle schooler meant she would have to become comfortable with being flexible. Not much seemed to follow a pattern as it did in elementary school. Caitlee faced new stressors each day, addressed them, and kept going. She thought, “what else am I going to do?” Caitlee realized that getting bogged down in the pressure of classes or the schedule wasn’t going to benefit anyone. She also found that she began to “forget about the past real quick” because she concentrated on the present more so than before.

Caitlee advised that new middle school families should practice the “go with the flow” mindset as early as possible. She said it is futile to “set yourself on a schedule until you know what life is going to be like because it is a very different scenario from elementary to middle, there’s no streamline.” Likewise, Caitlee suggested that new middle school parents understand that their middle schooler’s schedule “sets the schedule for you.” She explained that the wiggle room to incorporate your schedule and your child’s declines with middle school’s later dismissal

and increased academic expectations. Caitlee said having “an open mind” will make it more likely to reduce potential stress caused by the middle school transition.

Regarding the social aspect of middle school, Caitlee believed parents could give their children an advantage by helping them build social skills before entering 6th grade. She acknowledged that not all children do well in social settings, but if they are able to do so, she encouraged parents to “have social time with your child as often as possible with new people.” The possibility of Colin encountering a negative social experience in middle school worried Caitlee, but she took comfort in knowing Colin thrived when meeting new people. He learned those skills through sports and from Caitlee and Carl’s guidance. Therefore, when Colin began middle school, he was not timid. Caitlee attributed part of Colin’s successful transition to middle school to his ability to handle different social situations.

Caitlee wished she could go back in time and ask Cardinal Middle School and the school district to provide better communication to new middle school families. At the time, she was thankful for the information she received but later realized it lacked valuable components that would have helped ease the transition. She would have benefitted from something similar to a “college course catalog” generally describing what middle school courses entail. Caitlee did not even know she needed that information until 6th grade was about to start. Then, when she had questions, she was not versed enough to find out where to find reliable information explaining middle school coursework expectations at Cardinal or in the school district.

Caitlee believed the year would have started a bit smoother for her if she knew “a little bit more of what we were getting into.” She said if she could redo anything about Colin beginning middle school, she would not have had Colin take advanced math and did not think she “will ever put him in another advanced class.” Caitlee thought having eight class periods

daily was “a lot on a student to have that many classes in a day and to have an advanced course”, especially since advanced courses moved so quickly. She felt she might have had a different outlook on advanced courses if the school day was “more block scheduled” or advanced level classes were not offered until after 6th grade when students had “the hang of what they are getting into.”

Overall, Caitlee felt she endured the transition to middle school well. She learned more each day about how to ease into the transition and guided Colin as best as she could. Caitlee realized the transition could have been more seamless if she had more applicable, detailed information about what to expect before Colin began middle school. Caitlee hoped to see future middle school parents provided with what she did not have when Colin began 6th grade

### **Summary**

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced their transition from elementary to middle school parent in three different middle schools in Georgia. The schools in this study were in three different Northwestern Georgia RESA regions and were bound by differing district guidelines that drove the instruction and organizational setup of the schools. None of the middle schools in this study had the same transition process for incoming 6th-grade parents.

While Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced their transition to middle school parents in different locations, their narratives paralleled one another. Each participant was a mother who made a conscious effort to be engaged in their child’s education from the time their child started elementary school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were also all employed full-time and balanced a busy extra-curricular family life at the time of their transition to a middle school parent. Interwoven in each of their lived experiences of transitioning from elementary school parent to middle school parent were shared concerns about the changes in communication methods in

middle school, uncertainties of what was expected of them as a middle school parent, uncertainties of middle school academics, and how the middle school schedule impacted their daily routine. When Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee reflected on their transition to a middle school parent, they each offered similar advice to upcoming middle school parents and the school personnel involved in the elementary to middle school transition. The next chapter details the themes that emerged from Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's narratives, an alignment of this study's research questions and participant's experiences, a discussion of how their experiences related to previous literature, an acknowledgment of the study's limitations, and the implications their narratives might have on future research and practical application concerning the middle school transition from a parental point of view.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THEMES**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses emerging themes in Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's narratives and how the themes coincide with the study's research questions. Each emerging theme was identified using rereading, in vivo coding, and versus coding narrative analysis procedures. Rereading the participants' transcripts after their interviews placed me back in the time and space of our interview (Saldaña, 2021). To prevent framing the individual interviews in isolation, I reread the participants' series of interviews as a collective group, which captured their experiences before, during, and after their child transitioned to middle school. The rereading process also prompted me to reach out to the participants in the study for further clarification or follow-up questions generated as I reread their transcripts.

As I reread the participants' transcripts, I applied in vivo coding. The lens of in vivo coding focused my attention on the words and phrases participants chose to describe their transition to being a middle school parent (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I collected participants' words and phrases in a table format. Then, I aligned the individual tables with those from the other participants. I color-coded similarities within and between participants' tables, which ultimately illustrated patterns and unique qualities within and between participants' lived experiences. The patterns led to the identification of overarching categories that summarized the participants' recollections of their transition to being a middle school parent. The in vivo coding

emphasized the participants' voice, reduced researcher assumptions, and laid the foundation for versus coding.

From the in vivo coding process, versus coding organically took shape. The participants relayed their narratives in terms of two distinct environments: elementary school and middle school. Therefore, the compare-and-contrast nature of versus coding matched the dichotomy of the participants' narratives (Saldaña, 2021). Additionally, the individual experiences of each participant were compared to one another.

In vivo and versus coding were exercised with a document analysis of resources available to participants. The participants' voices and their comparisons of elementary versus middle school identified shared components among the participants. Commonalities among the participants were categorized into themes. The themes evident throughout each parent's experience as their child transitioned from elementary to middle school were communication, expectation uncertainties, academic uncertainties, routine changes, and advice.

### **Communication**

Each of the narratives in this study contained components where communication was helpful and where communication seemed to be lacking in the transition from elementary to middle school. The communication methods discussed by the participants included in-person, hard copy, and electronic communications between themselves, their child's teachers, and the school. This section contains Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's recollections and reflections on the communication they had with their child's teachers and schools before, during, and after the transition to middle school.

### ***Teacher-Parent Communication***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee all described frequent communication with their child's teachers in elementary school and how the communication between teachers and parents decreased when their child began middle school. Each participant remembered their child having a daily communication folder in elementary school. The daily communication folders were each separated into "Stay at Home" and "Return to School" sections and were expected to travel between school and home each day. Atlas Elementary stopped using the daily communication folder in 3rd grade, and the folder system was replaced with various teacher-parent communication apps for the rest of Andy's elementary school career. Buford Elementary and Calvert Elementary used the daily communication system throughout elementary school but relied more on teacher-parent communication apps beginning in 4th grade. Bea said as the years went on, though, that "the older they get, you kind of forget [about the folder] because they get better at being like, 'oh yeah, mom here'" instead of her asking for the folder each day. At Calvert Elementary, parents were required to sign the back of the daily communication folder every Wednesday to acknowledge they received all the information sent home.

Each participant said at some point in their child's elementary school years, teachers used the app Class Dojo to send class announcements and consistently update them about their child's behavior and progress. The reminders, positive behavior acknowledgments, and negative behavior notifications kept Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee connected to their child's classroom and their teacher. Instead of Class Dojo, some Calvert Elementary teachers used the app Remind to connect with parents about their child's school day.

In addition to the daily communication folder and the apps to stay in touch with parents, each participant said they relied on teacher emails for information about their child's progress.

Amanda felt there was “proactive communication coming from the school to the parents” with each of Andy’s teachers at Atlas Elementary. The worry about Andy’s academics in elementary school was nonexistent for Amanda because she said if there was an issue, Andy’s teachers “would reach out to me” in an email before anything went “awry.” Likewise, Bea said teachers at Buford always sent the most important communication “through email, and [it] always seemed easy, no big deal.” Because Bea was a Buford employee, teachers often stopped by to update her on Brianna’s progress when she was at work. Caitlee said Calvert teachers “were great at sending out emails” and keeping families involved with what was happening as a whole class and when needed, how your child was doing individually. Each participant discussed the pleasure of feeling connected to their child’s classes.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee each mentioned they did not know how much information they received in elementary school until their child began middle school, and they felt unaware of what was happening in their child’s classes. Amanda remembered “having a lot of questions” when Andy began 6th grade and what a new feeling that was for her. In Andy’s previous school years, she knew what to expect because the information from elementary school was forthcoming. She said she quickly resolved that she would have to figure things out as time went along, and reminded herself “the first is always the guinea pig child.”

Amanda said Andy’s homeroom teacher would “send stuff home every once in a while,” but nothing consistently. She even missed attending an honor roll assembly for Andy because information was not sent home regarding how and when to participate. When Andy started 6th grade, Amanda was unaware of the importance of downloading the app for the school district’s learning management system. Not having the app kept Amanda in the dark about Andy’s missing work and progress in his classes. She felt more connected to Andy’s studies at Ajax Middle

when she started using the district's app. However, it took some time to retrain herself to not wait for news from teachers. Amanda said, "it is just completely different; it's just all you." As a middle school parent, you had to seek out information instead of having it proactively sent to you.

Bea explained that in elementary school, she was so "consumed with everything, everything was sent home and you just always felt in the know." Then, when Brianna started at Bayside Middle, Bea realized "there's so much more on them [the kids], which I appreciate and get it, but it still is a struggle" as a parent to grasp the middle school experience. She described 6th grade, especially the first semester, as a time with "a lack of knowledge." To get clarification on some things, Bea emailed three of Brianna's middle school teachers questions. One of the teachers responded promptly, and the situation was resolved. The other two teachers never replied to Bea's emails. Bea remembered ultimately finding an answer to her questions and "was able to let it go." However, she said, "that was new to me, and I did not know if that was normal." Bea felt the lack of communication at middle school was her number one adjustment in the transition from elementary to middle school parent.

Caitlee received more frequent updates from Colin's middle school teachers than Amanda and Bea received from their children's teachers. Cardinal Middle School teachers used the Remind app to send information to families in their classes. Caitlee used Remind when Colin was at Calvert, so she was familiar with the app. The difference at Cardinal, though, was that most teachers on average used Remind "a couple times a week," which was less than she was accustomed to hearing from teachers at Calvert. Caitlee also had to manage more messages because Colin had more teachers at Calvert than he had in elementary school. However, Colin had one teacher she did not hear from during Colin's first quarter at Cardinal. The decline in

communication at Cardinal was an adjustment for Caitlee. She had to start relying on Colin to share information from his classes at Cardinal when he got home from school. Caitlee worried she would miss out on something from Colin's teachers. She knew Colin would say he was listening, but in reality, "it was in one ear and out the other," and he did not recall enough information to share with her. Thankfully, if Caitlee had a question for one of the teachers at Cardinal, she felt confident enough to email them, and they quickly answered. Cardinal's teachers also posted a daily "calendar with clickable links" within their learning management system for students and parents to access. Caitlee's login for the parent portal on their learning management system was incorrect, so she logged in as Colin to see what teachers posted for their classes.

### ***School-Parent Communication***

When Andy was at Atlas Elementary, Amanda received the majority of school-wide information from emails sent by the principal. At times, school-wide announcements and sign-ups for school events would be sent via their learning management system. However, information applicable to the whole school was also delivered via the classroom teacher. Conversely, at Ajax Middle, information pertinent to a collective group of students was solely delivered by the principal. Routine school-wide information was sent in an email from Ajax's principal called Friday at Five. The emails were delivered each Friday at 5:00 p.m. If there was a special school announcement or event that could not wait until the Friday at Five messages, then the principal sent a separate email.

Amanda learned to faithfully read through the Friday at Five messages after she and Andy attended an interactive informational night about Ajax's music department. At that event, she "felt like some people knew immediately what to do" while she had no clue what to do

beyond just being there. It turned out that the parents who knew how to navigate their way through the music department's event read the Friday at Five message. From that moment, Amanda realized the importance of giving Friday at Five its due diligence.

Bea remembered Buford Elementary's principal sending a weekly school-wide email that outlined the week's activities and helpful information for families. Bea also "felt like the PTA was more vocal" at Buford than at Bayside and dispersed information for school-wide initiatives along with the principal. When Brianna started at Bayside, Bea noticed she received less information concerning the entire school via email. Instead, Bea became aware of Bayside's happenings on their Facebook page. At first, Bea was skeptical about turning to social media for her source of school information. Buford tried disseminating announcements on social media, but emails seemed more effective and up-to-date than their social media posts. However, Bea was impressed with Bayside's social media presence and believed their Facebook page was more effective for families than any email they could send. Bea would have missed Brianna's 6th-grade Meet and Greet day if it were not for Facebook. The email Bayside sent out regarding the Meet and Greet times mistakenly went to Bea's "junk" folder without her realizing. Thankfully, Bea had already followed Bayside on Facebook and saw all the Meet and Greet details on her Facebook feed.

Caitlee felt Calvert Elementary was "great about sending out emails" but also liked their option of signing up for school-wide text messages. She signed up for any method of communication offered at Calvert. Caitlee did not remember ever experiencing a moment when she was unsure of what was happening at Calvert. However, she could not say the same for her experience at Cardinal Middle. Caitlee acknowledged Cardinal was "pretty good about sending out emails" but did not understand why they did not utilize more of a variety of communication

methods. Caitlee never saw anything like flyers or reminders sent home with Colin at Cardinal. She found that “weird” because she thought “you would think they would want to get it [information] out” so stakeholders were aware of things like what clubs students could join at Cardinal and the details regarding how to participate in them. Caitlee felt she was missing things at Cardinal, and that would be beneficial for her to know because the amount of information relayed to families seemed to be so much less than she received at Calvert.

### ***Discussion***

Consistent with previous research (Akos et al., 2005; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; DeSpain et al., 2018), the importance of communication between school and home was interwoven in Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee’s experiences. Each participant in this study felt they benefited from the communication system established at their child’s elementary school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee’s narratives expressed confidence about their child’s elementary school experience because of the communication they received from their child’s teachers and school. The communication the participants in this study received at the elementary school level was described as frequent, consistent, proactive, and often tailored to the needs of their children, as Rudolph et al. (2001) found in middle school transition research.

Similar to Fagell’s (2019) research on parental sentiments when their child transitioned to middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee did not feel as confident as middle school parents as they did as elementary school parents. Contradictory to their experience as elementary school parents, the participants in this study felt they were searching for information when they became parents of middle schoolers. The communication Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee received from their middle school teachers seemed limited and sparse. The lack of communication felt by parents of

middle schoolers was found to create a sense of disconnect between them and their children's middle school classes (DeSpain et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2020).

Caitlee received some information from teachers at Cardinal Middle via the Remind app, which was helpful because Calvert Elementary also used Remind. However, that was where the continuity of communication from elementary to middle school stopped in this study. For Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee, the main source of communication between home and school became seeing their child's progress posted on the school district's learning management system. The communication method at Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal was not something participants in this study were accustomed to using as elementary school parents and mirrored middle school communication practices in previous research (Bachmann et al., 2022; Madjr & Cohen-Malayev, 2016).

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee mentioned they received regular to semi-regular updates about school-wide activities from the school administration. However, those updates still did not fulfill the void of classroom-specific information for them. Getting familiar with the communication norms at Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal middle schools stalled the positive communication momentum Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee built as elementary school parents, as discussed by Smith et al. (2019).

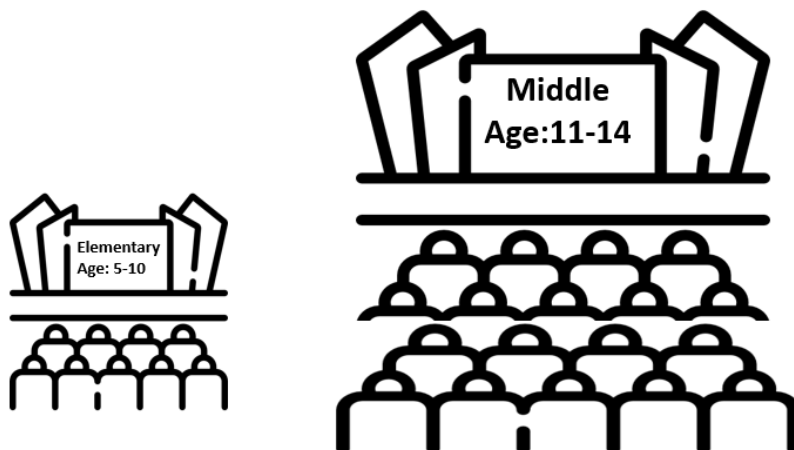
### ***Conclusions***

The stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993) is applicable to Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's experiences because their parental experience regarding middle school academics was dictated by their child's new developmental needs in a new and larger educational environment (see Figure 3). Upon their child's start in middle school, the communication lines from school to home shifted to being student-centered to foster skills for educational independence. While

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee acknowledged the need to learn more independence at the middle school level, they did not anticipate how much that independence resulted in a decline of parental awareness. Based on Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee’s communication recollections and reflections throughout their experience of transitioning to a middle school parent, it was evident the participants felt more connected to their child’s elementary school education than they did with their child’s middle school education. To find ways to connect as a middle school parent, the participants had to navigate new parenting tools that complimented their child’s new developmental needs and supported the institutional setup of their child’s middle school.

**Figure 3**

*Participants’ Experience and Stage-Environment Fit Theory*



Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced role exit (Ebaugh, 1988) when their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school. As Icard (2014) referenced Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were in a managerial role as elementary school parents and then became assistant managers as middle school parents. The participants were the lead communicators between home and elementary school and kept their children informed about elementary school responsibilities. Conversely, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee deferred to their child for information when middle

school began. Therefore, the transition from an elementary school parent to a middle school parent included exiting a role structured with parents at the forefront and entering a role with parents in the background.

### **Building Personal Connections**

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee each expressed their appreciation for getting to know their child's teachers in elementary school. They forged personal relationships with teachers, faculty, and staff at their children's elementary schools by being present on campus. Each of the participants frequently and consistently volunteered at their child's elementary school. Bea also volunteered to be a room mom in Brianna's classes until she began working at Buford. The time spent volunteering provided a path for Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee to speak to teachers one-on-one, which helped them gain insight into how to best help their children and their teachers.

As much as each participant valued the personal connections they had with their child's elementary school, none mentioned volunteering at their child's middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee said they were unaware if volunteering was possible at middle school like they experienced at elementary school. However, they each made a point to let their child's middle school teachers know to reach out if they ever needed help with anything at all. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee assisted middle school teachers by sending in supplies. As happy as they were to help, they expressed that it felt different to volunteer in a manner where they did not interact face-to-face with teachers. Amanda had to remind herself of the fact that "you do not make those [teacher]relationships that you do when you are in elementary school."

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee also found they did not feel as personally connected to their child's middle school because there was not a sense of community in middle school like in elementary school. Caitlee remembered how the welcoming spirit began at Calvert "the second

teachers opened the car door at carline in the mornings” for each student to get out of their car and start their school day. Even if there was an elementary-like, high-energy presence at their child’s middle school, they were not aware of it because they were not there to see it themselves.

Amanda attended honor roll assemblies each quarter with Andy, and she and her family went to Andy’s band concerts at Ajax. Bea and her family went to a basketball game at Bayside. There was nothing for Caitlee to attend at Cardinal beyond when Colin met his teachers at the beginning of the year. These sporadic events paled in comparison to how often Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee went to their child’s elementary school. The sense of community in middle school was not there because the participants were not at the school to feel part of the community.

### *Discussion*

As Breese and O’Toole (1995) explained, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had to learn new norms when their child began middle school. One set of norms they had to establish at the middle school level were the acceptable parent/teacher/school connections. They had to evaluate which elementary school tactics were applicable to the middle school setting and learn new methods as the year progressed.

Each participant in this study was actively engaged in their child’s elementary school classrooms and campus. However, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee did not volunteer at their child’s middle school. The volunteer options they were accustomed to from elementary school were not present in middle school, as Hill et al. (2016) similarly explained in their research regarding middle school parental involvement. There did not seem to be a space for Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee in the middle school setup to be present and vested in the school as they were at the elementary school level. Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal Middle missed capitalizing on parents’

willingness to be involved at their school, as previous research warned could happen at the middle school level (Epstein, 2010; Giannetti & Sagarese, 1997).

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee also did not feel connected to their children's middle school teachers. In middle school, Andy, Brianna, and Colin had at least six different teachers a day versus the one or two they had in elementary school. As Smith et al. (2019) described, with the increased number of teachers and decreased communication methods and volunteer opportunities in middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee did not develop the deeper parent-teacher relationships they had in elementary school at the middle school level.

### ***Conclusion***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee spoke of their volunteering and presence in elementary school with a sense of pride. The participants each discussed how they enjoyed knowing the ins and outs of their child's elementary school and establishing rapport with their child's teachers on a personal level. Even more importantly, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee described how they were thankful they could give back to their child's school by volunteering; volunteering gave them an outlet to show their appreciation for their child's elementary school.

Both the stage-environment theory (Eccles et al., 1993) and role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) were applicable to Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's transition from an elementary school to a middle school parent. When their child began middle school, volunteering and building personal connections at school dramatically declined for Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee. Developmentally, the independence expected of middle schoolers did not allow parents to be at school as often and left Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee having a seemingly outsider's view of their child's middle school experience. The middle school environment necessitated the participants learn a new educational

involvement role with less in-person appearances at school and a balance of supportive and active involvement at home.

### **Resources Available to Participants During the Middle School Transition**

An analysis of digital resources Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had available to them during their transition to middle school was completed to supplement their narratives. The digital resources included official school websites and social media accounts from their child's middle school.

Ajax Middle School predominately displayed district-wide information at the beginning of their website. The district information took up the entire screen on Ajax's website with pictures, headlines, events, and links. The natural tendency was to scroll through the district information to find information pertaining to Ajax. However, when you reached the bottom of Ajax's site, you still did not find school-specific information. Consequently, you were left to start at the top of the site again.

Upon closer inspection, there was a small button labeled "Menu" in the top left corner of the site, overshadowed by the large pictures nearby. Under the "Menu" button was a tab labeled "Resources," which provided options to see Ajax's bell schedule, information for those entering 6th grade or new to middle school, and a grade-level student supply list. Ajax's feeder schools were listed in the "About" section under the "Menu" button to show which elementary schools Ajax students attended and which high school Ajax students were slated to attend. Links to the district's learning management system information and parent login were provided with district-wide information on Ajax's site.

General information concerning the entire district was also the primary focus at the start of Bayside Middle School's website. In contrast to Ajax's website, Bayside's school-specific

information was found at the bottom of the district-related information. Bayside's website did not include their school's bell schedule or any information directly aimed at new middle school families, but it did include information about what supplies students needed at Bayside. Links to the district's LMS information and parent login were provided, as well as district-wide information on Bayside's site.

Cardinal Middle School's website began with school-specific information rather than general district points of interest. Cardinal's website listed links for each grade level containing bell schedules and student supply lists. Like Ajax and Bayside, links to the district's learning management system information and parent login were provided with district-wide information on Cardinal's site.

Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal's websites all contained an "About" link outlining the history and mission of their school. Each school listed its faculty and staff in conjunction with the "About" section. Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal incorporated pictures of their faculty and staff. However, the format among the schools varied.

An additional similarity shared among the schools was the presence of outdated information on their websites. The outdated information appeared to be inadvertent oversights, as it was found on documents, announcements, and pictures that seemingly needed to be updated annually. However, even the inconsequential, outdated information created more confusion for parents in an already confusing time.

The official school websites for Atlas, Buford, and Calvert Elementary Schools all mirrored the same setup as their corresponding middle school. None of those elementary schools' websites contained information about the transition from elementary to middle school.

**Table 1**

*Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal Middle Schools Official School Website Analysis*

Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal also used social media outlets to inform their families about

School	District Information Listed First	Bell Schedule Listed	New to 6th Grade/Middle School Link	Student Supplies List Link	Feeder School Information Provided	Link to LMS Information	Link to Parent LMS Account	“About” Link
Ajax Middle School	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bayside Middle School	X			X		X	X	X
Cardinal Middle School		X		X		X	X	X

their school. Ajax included links to X and Instagram accounts. Bayside and Cardinal included X accounts as well. However, the link was represented with the discontinued Twitter logo. Bayside was the only school of the three to include a LinkedIn account, and Cardinal was unique among the three schools in that they posted a link to a YouTube channel. All three schools in this study posted links for and primarily used Facebook for social media communication but differed in the frequency social media was incorporated into their communication with families.

Ajax Middle School’s official Facebook account reported approximately 400 followers, and the account did not appear to be consistently updated. Ajax’s Instagram account showed less than 300 followers and less than ten posts. The most recent post from Ajax Middle School on X was from over three years ago. District-level social media accounts were posted on Ajax’s website. However, they were not prominently displayed.

Bayside Middle School’s Facebook account had over 1,500 followers and appeared to be frequently updated. The feed was also embedded into the school’s website and could be viewed without logging into Facebook. Bayside’s X account was last updated almost two years ago. The

LinkedIn account posted on Ajax's website was their district's account and appeared to be updated regularly.

The social media account links posted on Cardinal Middle School's main website all connected to district-level accounts. However, within the links for parents, there is a Facebook account posted for Cardinal's PTSA. Cardinal's PTSA Facebook account showed 500 followers. An official Cardinal Middle School Facebook account was found in an internet search but was not linked to their website. The official Cardinal Middle School Facebook account recorded 2,100 followers and appeared to be regularly updated.

### ***Discussion***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee constructed their beliefs about being middle school parents based on what their schools communicated to them, which paralleled previous parental role-construction research in schools (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022). The school-parent communication at the middle school level was less than what participants in this study were accustomed to at the elementary school level. Therefore, if Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had a middle school parental concern or question, they turned to resources posted by the middle school. However, the resources available to Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were not regularly updated, focused more on district-wide initiatives, and/or were not user-friendly. Consequently, as new middle school parents, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were sometimes left with unanswered questions or concerns when they tried to find information independently. Epstein (2010) found that providing a variety of communication avenues for parents increased parental engagement. Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal did utilize email, their learning management system and websites, apps, and social media. However, parental engagement was not increased for Amanda, Bea, or Caitlee. Even though a variety of

communication was present for the participants in this study, the quality of the communication relayed lacked the content Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee needed to supplement what they received from their child's classroom teachers.

### ***Conclusion***

During Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's reflections about their transition to middle school parents and suggestions for schools to assist parents in their middle school transition, there was an undertone of a yearning for more accessible communication. The participants learned early on that the middle school environment deviated from the parent-centered norms they had become accustomed to in elementary school. Consequently, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee shifted their elementary school role as *receiver* of school-related information to *seeker* of school-related information as a middle school parent. Despite the participants' commitment to seeking information, they often did not find what they needed in the resources their child's middle school provided. As a result, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were left to make assumptions about the answers to questions they had regarding their child's middle school experience.

Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal Middle Schools missed an opportunity to benefit from parents actively seeking information to help their child or themselves better understand the middle school environment. If Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had a user-friendly, middle school transition resource repository available to them as they transitioned to a middle school parent, they would have been less likely to question if they were navigating the transition as expected. Proactively providing more applicable resources for middle school parents to access when they need assistance potentially results in more confident and informed parents, who in turn are better prepared to support their middle schooler.

The emerging theme of communication addressed each of this study's research questions. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee described their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school in terms of the communication, or lack thereof, they received at each step of the process. In relation to communication, the participants explained their role in the elementary school environment versus their role in the middle school environment as the shift from them being the deliverer of information in elementary school to their child being the deliverer of information in middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee described their belief that they did not have adequate assistance in transitioning from elementary to middle school parents.

### **Expectation Uncertainties**

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt comfortable and certain in their role as elementary school parents. However, when Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee transitioned to middle school parents, they felt a sense of uncertainty. The start of middle school brought new social and academic situations for their child, presenting the participants with uncharted parental experiences.

### ***Uncertain of How to Parent Middle School Social Situations***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee each discussed feeling a loss of control when their child began middle school. They were always aware of what was happening at their child's elementary school and were familiar with the faculty, staff, and families all through elementary school. In their narratives, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee shared that overall, they were excited for their child to begin a new stage in life but were anxious about the unknowns they would encounter in middle school.

When Andy began middle school, Amanda said, "I did not know what to expect and how he would react to certain things." Amanda remembered that she knew middle school was a time

for Andy to have more independence, but she struggled with how much to give him. She did not want to give Andy too much independence and risk him floundering in middle school; however, at the same time, she did not want to stifle him to the point where he would not learn to function on his own. Likewise, Bea said, the part of transitioning to a middle school parent that was the “most difficult was independence, having to trust her [Brianna]” and learning to “cut the cord.” Caitlee resided herself to the fact that she just needed to “go with the flow” when Colin started middle school and give him space to foster independence. Coming to that realization was not easy because Caitlee was used to being the one who knew what to expect at school before Colin did; it was a role reversal for her.

Each participant in this study also experienced a parental shift in their child’s friendships when they transitioned to middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee knew their child’s friends throughout elementary school and orchestrated get-togethers for them. In middle school, that stopped. Instead, the participants in this study began hearing their child talk about new friends they met in middle school and were at the mercy of whatever their child felt like sharing about their new friends. Caitlee remembered asking Colin questions like “do they play sports?, do they have siblings?, are they nice?, etc.” to try and get to know something about his new friends.

Amanda and Bea had similar experiences, and like Caitlee, they were unsure what their role should be concerning middle school friendships. Andy, Brianna, and Colin had never seen so many new friendship possibilities as they had when they started middle school. However, they also had not made many friends without their parents being somewhat involved in the connection.

Amanda said Andy did not hang out with any of his middle school friends outside of school. She was unsure why that was the case, but even if she wanted to help move a friendship

along, “it is not like I knew the parents to keep that relationship going.” Bea said not only was it hard not knowing much about Brianna’s new friends, but it was unnerving being aware of “the freedom they [new friends] all had” in their families. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had to learn from their children what they expected from them in developing friendships while balancing the parental role of protector to help make sure wise friendship choices were being made.

### *Uncertainties of Middle School Academics*

Another change Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee endured as their child transitioned to middle school was the parents’ role in middle school academics. Bea explained she was grateful Brianna had to learn independence in her middle school academics because she recognized the importance of the life skill. At the same time, though, Bea felt nervous because she “had no clue like whatsoever what anything [academically] was, unless it was by asking and praying” for information from Brianna. The other participants in this study mirrored Bea’s sentiments and felt disconnected from their child’s academics as well. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee appreciated the notifications sent if their child missed an assignment. However, they each had to train themselves to remember those notifications were parent-teacher communication in middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee learned that the communication norm in middle school was no news is good news, which was completely opposite of elementary school’s all news, all the time, way of work.

In addition to learning how academics were communicated in middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee saw a difference in the type of assignments their child brought home in middle school. During elementary school, the weekly homework assigned to Andy, Brianna, and Colin primarily focused on rote memorization, skill-based practice worksheets, or digital resources their teachers sent home. In middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee saw more open-ended assignments and an emphasis on studying. None of the participants in this study felt their child

had ever been taught how or what it meant to study. Teaching their child study skills on top of relying on their child to know exactly what to study was a common stressor for Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee. The amount of homework their child had in middle school varied among participants. However, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee spoke of the increased likelihood of their child having multiple tests to study for on the same days because of the increased number of teachers their child had in middle school versus elementary school.

### *Discussion*

The expectation uncertainties Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced could have been avoided if they were proactively made aware of the academic and parental expectations they would face as middle school parents. Parents of children transitioning from elementary to middle school should not be left wondering about what is expected of them in middle school (Fagell, 2019; Măirean et al., 2022; Musser, 2016). Andy, Brianna, and Colin learned middle school expectations as they went through their school day, but their parents were not taught those lessons, which Fite et al. (2018) and Garbacz et al. (2021) cited to be problematic in their research of the transition to middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt removed from their child's academics and experienced a major shift from their expected involvement in elementary school consistent with previous middle school transition studies (Akos et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2019; Warner, 2020). Each of the participants in this study, as Rudolph et al. (2001) also described in their study of navigating the transition to middle school, had a desire to be involved in their child's middle school academics but were not sure how to support them in the middle school environment.

Independence was the overarching developmental change participants in this study faced with their child. Ajax, Bayside, and Cardinal Middle Schools encouraged academic

independence. Andy, Brianna, and Colin craved more independence at home. However, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were uncertain of how to confidently provide that academic and social independence because they were not prepared with the skillset to do so as previous literature suggested was necessary (Icard, 2014; Marshall & Neuman, 2012).

Each participant in this study experienced the perpetual struggle of creating independence for their child while still being involved in their academic and social lives, as Loke and Lowe (2014) cautioned could occur. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were left to assume they were balancing middle schooler independence and parental involvement correctly because they were unsure of what their school expected of them, similar to what Musser (2016) found in her research on family educational involvement.

Socially, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced their child meeting new friends, which they thought was exciting and daunting at the same time. As Duchesne et al. (2016) described in their research on the adaptation to middle school, the participants in this study wanted their child to have new friends but did not know how to support their friendships without being too involved. Therefore, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee, just tried to do the best they could parenting a middle schooler and hoped the role they constructed for themselves met expectations, which also paralleled parenting techniques in previous middle school transition literature (Hill, 2022; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Schwandt, 2000; Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022).

### ***Conclusion***

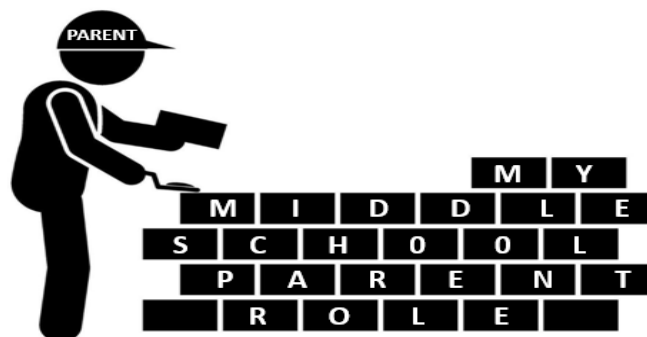
Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee spent six years as elementary school parents knowing their academic and social roles. Conversely, the participants believed that as middle school parents, they had more questions than answers, which was unsettling for them. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee mentioned in their narratives that they knew the start of middle school would signal a new

chapter in their lives and understood their elementary school parental role would not seamlessly transfer to middle school. Unfortunately, the participants were not aware of which elementary school parent attributes should continue or cease in middle school because they did not know the middle school social and academic expectations.

Therefore, as in role construction (Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022), the participants constructed their role from perceived middle school parent expectations. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee reactively constructed their middle school parent role in real-time with the knowledge they had in that moment. The participants constructed their roles by compiling information from the limited communication from their child's school, personal experiences, advice from others, and anything else they thought might be applicable (see Figure 4). This role construction contradicted the proactive messaging the participants received as elementary school parents, which provided seemingly prescribed expectation lists. One disadvantage of Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee constructing their own roles, given their levels of uncertainty, was they frequently questioned whether the social and academic roles they constructed were appropriate for their child or their child's middle school. Additionally, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt their confidence as middle school parents could have been achieved quicker if they were not left to building and rebuilding their expectations with minimal guidance from their child's school.

**Figure 4**

*Participants' Experience and Role Construction Theory*



The emerging theme of expectation uncertainties addressed RQ1 in this study. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee described their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school related to their perceptions of the expectations at each stage. Before the middle school transition, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt their expectations were well known and they met those expectations. During the middle school transition, the participants were unsure what the expectations were and, therefore, were unsure if they met the expectations. After the middle school transition, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had a better understanding of their expectations and felt they were more successful in meeting those expectations.

The emerging theme of expectation uncertainties also provided insight into RQ2 of this study. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee discovered, as they became more certain about what middle school expected of parents, that their role in the middle school environment was to be a support versus being a leader. The participants explained that their role as a middle school parent was new to them and was learned through lived experience and the limited communication they received from their child's middle school.

### **Routine**

The later start and dismissal times of Andy's, Brianna's, and Colin's middle schools did not coincide with the elementary school daily schedule they had been used to for six years. This section explores how the participants' daily routines were changed because of their child's transition from elementary school to middle school

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had not anticipated how much their child's transitioning to middle school would impact their family's daily routine. Amanda said when middle school began, she was "constantly busy, and I felt like we had a lot more downtime when he [Andy] was in elementary." Her sentiments were evident in Bea and Caitlee's narratives as well. Andy,

Brianna, and Colin's extracurricular schedule did not get more intense when they started 6th grade. The amount of time between school dismissal and the start of their practices decreased because of the middle school hours. Therefore, when Andy, Brianna, and Colin came home at the end of the school day, their families had to be ready to prepare for the evening's events immediately.

Each of the participants in this study recalled how their family's evening meal routine dramatically changed when their child began middle school. Amanda described a typical school night for their family as Andy coming home from middle school at 4:30 p.m., needing to be at practice at 5:00 p.m., "immediately getting in the car", and having "no time to eat". Bea prided herself on having home-cooked, nutritiously sound meals before Brianna attended her extracurricular activities in elementary school, but that changed after the transition to middle school. Brianna got home at 3:00 p.m., which was earlier than some other middle schools, but still encroached on her time at home before her evening practices. Bea said, "the food quality was not what I would want" Brianna to have before practice. Bea did not have the time to prepare meals like she was able to do on the elementary school schedule. Similarly, Caitlee found her family started "ordering food more often" when Colin began middle school. Caitlee was not happy with the idea of the new food options because she said she "loved to cook and loved to do everything around the house." However, with her and her husband's work schedule being so busy, and the decreased time Colin had at home when he started middle school, there was no way "to put that extra energy into making food" like she had done when Colin was at Calvert Elementary.

Despite the rushed afternoons Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced when their child began middle school, they each mentioned they knew their child needed downtime when they

came home. Therefore, they tried to hold even a few minutes sacred so their child had some time to decompress before they started their evening routine. The participants also described how their children took advantage of their middle school's later start time to create downtime for themselves. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were thankful their child could complete schoolwork, relax, and ease into their day before school since they did not have to be at middle school as early in the morning as they did in elementary school.

Amanda and Bea both experienced the same unexpected change when their child began middle school; interactions between siblings became quite different than they were in elementary school. Andy and Brianna always had strong, positive relationships with their sibling before middle school. When middle school began, Amanda and Bea saw strained sibling relationships and felt blindsided by that shift.

Amanda said she noticed a separation between her sons when Andy began middle school. The elementary school and middle school schedules did not allow Amanda's boys to start and end their days with one another like they did when they were both in elementary school. When Andy got home from middle school, his brother was ready to play with him. However, Andy "was so exhausted, he would just go to his room, shut the door, and did not want to talk." Amanda struggled with how to maintain the connection between her sons while still honoring their conflicting needs for attention and space.

Bea described the same situation with Brianna and her brother. She said it was difficult to see Brianna's brother pining for his sister's attention when she got home from middle school and Brianna wanting "her little brother to leave her alone." Bea said her son "did not understand" the situation because his mindset was, "well, I just got home from school too, like you did, so you

should be ready to play like I am; he was not factoring in the time he already had to decompress before Brianna came home.

The transition to middle school was the first time Amanda and Bea did not see their children as peers. When Andy and Brianna began middle school, Amanda and Bea saw an inherent separation between siblings based on the differing elementary and middle school schedules, but a developmental divide also presented itself as a result of the maturity differences between elementary and middle school students.

### ***Discussion***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee quickly learned that the start of middle school signaled a new and very different routine for their family, similar to the change Perkins & Gelfer (1995) described in their research. They were unaware of how different the structures of elementary and middle schools were until middle school actually began. Each of the participants in this study would have benefited from a proactive understanding of middle school logistics, as suggested in previous middle school transition research (Akos et al., 2005; Bishop & Harrison, 2021), and how those logistical details would carry over to their family's daily schedules.

### ***Conclusion***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's descriptions of their daily routines before and after their middle school transition experience highlighted the dichotomous nature of elementary school and middle school. The elementary schools in this study had significantly earlier start and dismissal times than the middle schools had in this study. Therefore, the participants went from having rushed mornings as elementary school parents to having rushed afternoons when their child began middle school. However, in the busy afternoon hours, schoolwork, extracurricular

activities, and the developmental age of middle schoolers did not bow to one another; instead, they collided, and the participants were not prepared to brace themselves for that impact.

To reduce potential added chaos in their new middle school routine, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee learned to increase their child's academic and social independence at home. Academic independence came in the form of academic time management. The lack of time between middle school dismissal times and when Andy, Brianna, and Colin began their extracurricular activities decreased the amount of time they had to work on school assignments. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee found that allowing their child to decide when and how they would complete their assignments was more effective than implementing a schedule for them.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee noted relinquishing control was not without growing pains for them or their child. Not all the ideas their child had were successful, so it was a trial-and-error process. Additionally, because the participants had been accustomed to steering their children's academic choices in elementary school, it was difficult for them to take a step back to let their children lead. However, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee believed that helping their child gain more academic independence was a necessary skill they needed to be comfortable with as they continued their academic career.

The need for social independence became apparent when Andy, Brianna, and Colin came home from middle school. The participants described how quiet their child was after a day at middle school; it was like their child was in a fog of overstimulation. Despite wanting to know how their child's school day was, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee realized it was helpful to give their child time on their own, even for a little while. Honoring this need prevented potential conflicts caused by pressing their child to have conversations when they were not ready.

The emerging theme of routines addressed RQ1 in this study. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee described their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school in terms of their daily schedules at each stage of the transition. Before the middle school transition, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's daily routines started and ended earlier than when their child started middle school. The early dismissal time provided the participants time to prepare dinner, help their child with school work, and get themselves together before the hectic nature of extracurricular activities began. During the transition to middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's routines drastically changed. Because their child came home later as a middle schooler, the participants often did not have time to prepare dinner like they had in the past. Consequently, their families began eating meals that did not match the quality of meals they had in elementary school.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee noticed the importance of their child taking advantage of the late middle school start time to complete schoolwork and have a relaxed start of the day. After Andy and Brianna's transition from elementary to middle school, Amanda and Bea saw the relationships between siblings change because of the middle school routine. Not only was there a developmental difference between siblings after the transition to middle school, but the difference between the elementary and middle school daily schedules created physical distance between siblings; the middle school sibling and elementary school sibling were not at home at the same time as often anymore.

### **Advice**

Incorporated into each of the participants' narratives was an opportunity for them to provide future middle school parents and schools with advice they wished they would have had in their transition to becoming a middle school parent. This section explores what Amanda, Bea,

and Caitlee felt incoming middle school parents would benefit from knowing before their child begins middle school. Additionally, this section provides suggestions Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee believed schools could implement to better prepare parents for the transition to middle school.

### ***Advice to Incoming Middle School Parents***

While Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced unique nuances as their children transitioned from elementary to middle school, they each wished they had known how important it was to pay attention to missing assignments starting at the very beginning of the year. Looking back, they realized that it should have been obvious to check their child's grades frequently, but it was not. Each middle school present in this study used a different learning management system, but they all performed the same basic function: record student grades, show progress, and communicate that information to parents. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee did not realize that checking their child's progress was the communication method at middle school; they were waiting for communication from each of their child's teachers. Each of the participants in this study believed if they understood the role of the school's learning management systems, they could have prevented some confusion and missing assignments.

The participants in this study also stated they wanted to tell future parents of middle schoolers that there are ways to make the transition to middle school less daunting for them and their child. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee framed the start of middle school in a positive light for their child. Amanda enthusiastically embraced Andy's new opportunity to join the band in middle school. Bea shaped Brianna's summer before 6th grade as a time for celebration of what she accomplished in elementary school and the start of a new chapter. Caitlee emphasized the excitement Colin would feel as he met new people in middle school. Each of the participants

built momentum for middle school based on their child's strengths and suggested that parents of incoming middle schoolers do the same.

Andy, Brianna, and Colin attended large middle schools where they met many students they did not know. Their parents were worried about the social aspect of middle school being a problem, but thankfully, it was not an issue for them. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee attributed that success to the school culture. but more so that their child was used to being in social situations in their participation in extracurricular activities. Each participant also stressed the importance of keeping an open line of communication with children transitioning to middle school. They felt it was helpful for their child to feel comfortable enough to come to them when they had concerns about middle school. However, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee also said new middle school parents should be ready to ask probing questions with their child because new middle schoolers are not as forthcoming with information as parents might like.

Additionally, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee wanted to prepare new middle school parents that having an open line of communication and asking their child questions can, at times, bring information you might be surprised to hear. Bea explained she was "caught off guard" by some of the conversations she had with Brianna. She had not anticipated what middle schoolers are inherently exposed to at school by being surrounded by so many students who are going through developmental changes and might have more knowledge about the world around them than Brianna was privy to as a 6th grader.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had the same daily school schedule for six years in elementary school; it was second nature to them. Each of the participants in this study recommended that new middle school parents begin preparing for a new school day routine before their child begins middle school. They felt the beginning of 6th grade would not have been as hectic if they were

forewarned about how the difference between elementary and middle school schedules impacted their family's routines. When Amanda attended a rising 6th-grade parent meeting, they told parents about possible changes families would have to make in their morning routines since middle school started later than elementary school. However, nothing was mentioned about the evenings for families. Caitlee equated getting accustomed to the middle school schedule as being similar to the routine change a family experiences with a newborn. She said the middle school schedule was a drastic change that required you to "make your schedule" and be alright that you "are never going to hit that schedule," just like would happen when adjusting to life with an infant. Entering middle school with a new schedule felt like hitting a brick wall for them, and they did not want incoming middle school parents to be as shocked as they were when they transitioned to middle school parents.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee said getting used to the middle school schedule felt like an eternity. Although upon reflection, they stated the middle school transition went by incredibly fast. Bea said going through the first year as a middle school parent "feels like you just kind of blinked." Each of the participants in this study attributed the fast-paced nature of middle school to the school year being divided into quarters and semesters, which was not as applicable in elementary school. Amanda said the school year felt segmented because the concentration was on each quarter being a grading period; it was nine weeks at a time, and then the year was suddenly over. Each of the participants suggested that new middle school parents embrace each day, good or bad, because middle school moves much quicker than elementary school and high school feels right around the corner.

### *Advice for Schools*

Amanda was the only participant in this study who had an option to attend a middle school transition program. Bea and Caitlee wished they had the opportunity presented to them and suggested that all middle schools implement a transition program for parents. As grateful as Amanda was for the Ajax's middle school transition program, she believed she would have benefitted more from the program if it had a more positive tone. Amanda said she understood that Ajax's staff tried to prepare parents for changes they would see in their middle schooler. However, Amanda left the meeting with mixed feelings about what to expect from middle school. Part of the transition program included Ajax's staff telling parents not to worry because they are going to get through middle school, but know your kids will "turn into kids that you don't recognize, but when they go to high school, they'll be back." Amanda went home from the meeting thinking, "oh, my God, what are we getting into?" and seemed to forget the other information from the presentation.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee consistently mentioned the lack of communication they felt between school and home at the middle school level. Each of the participants in this study acknowledged the need for students to be more involved and in charge of their academics when they begin middle school. However, that realization came after the school year began. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee wished they had been provided a set of general middle school guidelines and expectations for middle school students and parents at the start of the year. They believed being told that information up front would have diminished the disconnect they felt concerning their child's academics.

For elementary schools, the participants in this study suggested implementing more independence and study skills into the later elementary years. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt their

child had no idea how to keep track of assignment due dates or how to study when they entered middle school. Therefore, Andy, Brianna, and Colin had to learn those skills in addition to learning the academic content in middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee believed that if their child entered middle school with more independence and study habits, not only would it have made the transition better at school, but from the parent point of view, it would have improved the transition at home as well. Having those skills might not have eliminated all homework and test preparation struggles between Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee and their children. However, they believed it would have decreased the frequency and intensity of the occurrences.

### ***Discussion***

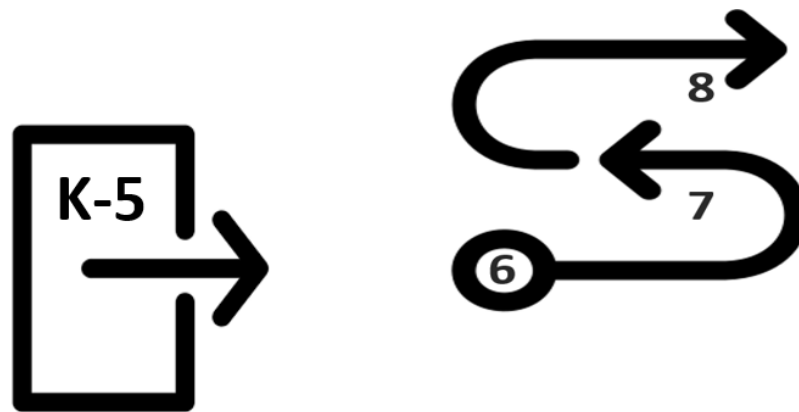
Thankfully, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee stated they felt their transition to a middle school parent was successful overall. However, the caveat to that was there were things they felt they should not have needed to struggle through during the elementary to middle school transition. Institutionally, elementary and middle schools have more differences than similarities (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Smith et al., 2019), and Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were not as aware of that as they had wished. In agreement with Fite et al.'s (2018) findings, each participant in this study believed they could have been better equipped with strategies for parenting a middle-school-aged child. Erickson (1968) explained the age of adolescence as the developmental stage when a child is balancing how to come into their own as a person while still yearning for direction of what kind of person they should be. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee did not feel they were prepared for the switch to act as more of a guide rather than a leader as their adolescent child continually weighed independence versus guidance.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee saw themselves exiting the role of an elementary school parent in the same way Breese and O'Toole (1995) described in their role exit theory. By 5th grade as

elementary school parents, the participants felt well-versed in their elementary school role. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee no longer needed a script to guide them through being an elementary school parent. However, as they exited elementary school, the participants left behind the role they played there. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were tasked with learning their new role as middle school parents. The role of middle school parent seemed more foreign to them because it was not the nicely packaged role they knew as elementary school parents. Instead, it seemed full of twists and turns compared to being an elementary school parent (see Figure 5)

**Figure 5**

*Participants' Experience and Role Exit Theory*



Despite coming to terms with one role ending and another role starting, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were not as confident as they would have liked when they began their new role as a middle school parent. Amanda did attend a transition to middle school program, but she still left the meeting with unanswered questions. Bea and Caitlee were not offered a transition to middle school meeting. The lack of middle school transition support available impacted the experience the participants had as their child began middle school (Epstein et al., 2019; Van Valkenburgh et al., 2021). Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee headed into the parental middle school transition with a reactionary approach when they could have been more proactive if they had been afforded the

opportunity to know more about the culture of middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee hoped the suggestions they provided for new middle school parents and school staff would help curb some of the uncertainty and disconnect they experienced in their own transition from elementary to middle school parent.

### ***Conclusion***

Within the advice Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee wanted to provide incoming middle school parents was a sense of embracing the new academic and social developmental changes the transition to middle school brought. The participants were excited to celebrate the newness of middle school and acknowledged changes were going to happen whether they were ready for them or not. Therefore, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee tried the best they could to align themselves with the changes their child experienced in transition to middle school and wanted future middle school parents to do the same.

However, as stage-environment theory suggests, tensions can be created when parents do not understand the level of independence needed by middle schoolers and how that independence is exercised in the institution of middle schools (Eccles et al., 1993). This is where Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's advice for schools bridges parental understanding and school communication. The school-based suggestions given by Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee did not express a desire to make overhauling changes to the elementary to middle school transition. The participants primarily wished they had known more information before and during the time their child started middle school. During their middle school transition experiences, the participants did not know what they did not know until they were confronted with an issue. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt that the frontloading of parental information in the transition to middle school would reduce some confusion and stress for future middle school parents.

The advice Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee shared addressed RQ3 of this study. The participants were longing for more assistance in their transition from elementary school to middle school parents. Amanda was the only participant to attend a middle school transition meeting but did not feel it was comprehensive enough. Bea and Caitlee did not have a middle school transition meeting at all. Each participant had a learning management system available to them, but they were unsure of how to use them in the context of middle school or the importance of them at the middle school level. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee appreciated the school-wide emails they received from their child's middle school but did not find user-friendly resources available when they tried to locate the answer to a question on their own. Overall, the participants' reflections identified that improvements were needed in the assistance available to them during their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's lived experiences were unique to the context of their lives. While their narratives produced similar findings and the advice they offered mirrored one another, their experiences may not parallel the experiences of other parents experiencing the transition from elementary to middle school. However, their narratives can serve as a data set to compare with future research into the parental experience of transitioning from elementary to middle school.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the purpose of the study, revisits the study's research questions and research design, provides an overview of the study's participants and procedures, and discusses the emerging themes evident among the participants' portraits. Following the limitations of the study, this chapter suggests implications for future research and practice so this study becomes a living document that researchers and practitioners can refer to in their efforts to chronicle and improve the experience parents have as their child transitions to middle school.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to provide the narrative of parents who experienced having their child transition from elementary school to middle school to help gain an understanding of a time when parents tend to be unsure of where they fit in their child's academic and social development (Epstein et al., 2019). The study aimed to compare and contrast the participants' perceived parental expectations at the elementary and middle school levels through their narratives. The study also sought to identify resources and techniques the participants utilized during their transition from an elementary school parent to a middle school parent. Overall, the study served to help bring more qualitative research into the field of middle school education with hopes of the participants' narratives positively impacting how schools address the parental experience of the middle school transition.

## Research Questions

Three research questions supported the purpose of the study and served as a foundation for the study's research design.

RQ1: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia describe their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school?

RQ2: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia explain their parental roles in the elementary school environment versus their roles in the middle school environment?

RQ3: What assistance was available for parents from select regions of Georgia in their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents?

Research Question 1 provided participants with the opportunity to create a portrait of their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school. Within RQ 1, the participants discussed academic and social topics they experienced along each stage of their transition to being a middle school parent. Stage-environment theory (Eccles et al., 1993) was aligned to participants' narratives in relation to RQ1.

Research Question 2 identified how parents explained their role as an elementary school parent versus their role as a middle school parent. In the process of comparing and contrasting their roles as parents in the elementary and middle school environments, the participants recalled the institutional structures of elementary and middle schools and the cultures of each educational level. The academic and social components of the elementary and middle school experience were considered in the participants' examination of their transition from elementary to middle school.

Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory supported RQ2 given the participants left their role as an elementary school parent and entered their new role as middle school parent.

Research Question 3 focused on how the participants gained insight into what a middle school parent entailed. However, RQ3 also highlighted where participants felt they lacked available resources to assist as their child transitioned to a middle schooler. The participants' narratives, in the context of RQ3, supported and challenged previous findings surrounding the parental experience in the middle school transition.

### **Participants**

The study consisted of three participants from various RESA regions in Georgia. The participants, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee, were all white, working moms, in their 30s. Each of the participants was interviewed within a year of experiencing their oldest child transitioning from elementary to middle school.

### **Research Design**

This study was qualitative in that the researcher aimed to make sense of participants' experiences compiled through researcher-conducted interviews (Patton, 2015). Given that the study focused on a small group of participants with similar experiences, case study methods could be employed (Saldaña, 2011). However, as the participants' contextualized lived experiences served as the data source of the research, the study applied narrative inquiry techniques (Merriam, 2002). The participants' experiences in this study had a clear beginning, middle, and end: before the middle school transition, during the middle school transition, and after the middle school transition. Therefore, there was the rationale to use narrative inquiry as the predominate research design (Clandinin, 2013) blended with shared case study attributes.

Seidman's (2019) interview format was used to best capture participants' experiences before, during, and after their child underwent the transition to middle school. Each participant was independently interviewed on multiple occasions to give them and the researcher time and space to reflect on the completed, present, and future interviews. The portraits of the participants in this study began with a description of their daily schedule as an elementary school parent, followed by their recollections of their interactions with their child and the elementary school they attended. Once the context of the participant's experience as an elementary school parent was established, the narratives continued to detail the nuances of the transition to a middle school parent, which included the participant's middle school daily schedule, uncertainties about the transition, and the communication they had with their child's middle school. To conclude their narrative, each participant in this study reflected on their experience of becoming a middle school parent.

After compiling the individual narratives in this study, they were contextually compared and contrasted with one another to uncover any emerging themes seen among the narratives. The identified themes were then examined to see if they aligned with previous research of the parental experience in the middle school transition and viewed through the lens of the applicable conceptual frameworks.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The emerging themes in this study were communication, expectation uncertainties, academic uncertainties, routine changes, and advice. This section summarizes each of the emerging themes and includes examples of the themes seen in the participants' voices.

## *Communication*

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee discussed areas where communication was present and when they believed they would have benefited from more communication during their experience transitioning from an elementary school to middle school parent. The communication methods present within the participants' narratives included in-person, electronic, and hard copy communications between home and their child's school.

Each participant in this study felt disconnected from their child's middle school academics. Bea remembered as an elementary school parent that she was "so used to being consumed with everything and everything's sent home, and you just always felt in the know." When their child began middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were no longer the primary receivers of information from school. Instead, because of the independence encouraged at the middle school level, their child was expected to relay how they are progressing academically to their parents. Amanda described the communication between middle school and home as "just completely different" than she had been used to at Andy's elementary school.

Besides relying on their child to communicate their academic needs and successes, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee, could access the learning management system used at their child's middle school to find out information about their child's academics. However, utilizing the learning management systems as a main communication method was not instinctual for the participants. Caitlee recalled the learning management system at her child's middle school "took a while to learn," and therefore, she was not comfortable using it until after her child finished the first quarter of middle school.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt the positive momentum of communication at the elementary school level taper off when their child began middle school, as Smith et al. (2019)

described. The perceived lack of communication between schools and parents during the transition from elementary to middle school can lead to parents feeling disconnected from their child's middle school experience (DeSpain et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2020).

The sense of disconnect led to a decrease in parental confidence. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were not secure in their new role as middle school parents because of the shift from parent-centered communication to student-centered communication in middle school. As the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993) suggests, the participants were not aware of how their child's developmental needs and the structure of middle school would combine to create new communication norms for parents. Additionally, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt the effects of role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) when the culture of communication in middle school dictated that parents take a step back so students could take charge to self-manage their academic progress.

### ***Expectation Uncertainties***

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's portraits all described a decline in parental confidence and an increase in feeling a sense of losing control when their child began middle school. The participants attributed those sentiments to being uncertain about the academic and social expectations for parents at the middle school level. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were not sure how or if the parental expectations they met in elementary school were transferable to the middle school environment.

As Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee adjusted to their child becoming a middle schooler, they each struggled to grasp what their expectations were as a middle school parent. The participants learned their role as a middle school parent was to consistently find the right balance of honoring the developmental independence their child needed at school and home while still offering them

support at home and school. When Brianna began middle school, Bea felt the “most difficult transition was independence” because she was confronted with the fact that she needed to start “letting go more.”

Their previous role of school volunteer was not applicable in the middle school setting. Knowing their child’s friends and organizing social gatherings as they did in elementary school did not transfer to middle school because of the structure of middle school and their child’s developmental ages. Amanda said Andy speaks about friends he made in middle school, but she “has not met them.” By default, Andy oversaw organizing social events because Amanda did not know his friends’ families to coordinate activities. Brianna and Caitlee’s experience with their child’s middle school friends mirrored Amanda’s experience. Caitlee explained that when she and her husband heard about Colin’s middle school friends, they attempted “to get to know them through Colin”, which was much more difficult than getting to know elementary school friends in person.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee faced unanticipated challenges in their child’s middle school academics. The challenges were not necessarily content-related; they were more centered around a lack of academic skills. The participants felt their child was ill-prepared with the study skills expected at the middle school level. Additionally, while Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were appreciative of their child learning how to be academically independent in middle school, they realized early into the start of middle school how little practice their child had in managing their academics. The participants were unsure how to help their child build academic independence because it was not an expectation they addressed in elementary school.

As researched suggested (Icard, 2014; Loke & Lowe, 2014; Marshall & Neuman, 2012; Musser, 2016), before and during their middle school transition, the participants conveyed they

did not have the knowledge to balance the expected academic and social independence in middle school, which impacted the quality of their involvement in their child's middle school transition. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's experience transitioning from an elementary to middle school parent illustrated role construction (Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2022). Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee tried to meet perceived middle school expectations. However, given they were not certain they understood what was expected of them as parents, the participants questioned whether they met expectations.

### ***Routine***

When Andy, Brianna, and Colin entered middle school, their new schedule inherently became their family's new schedule. The participants had not considered middle school's start and dismissal times to be as challenging as they proved to be at the start of middle school.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's narratives each discussed the impact of the middle school schedule on their family's daily routine.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were stunned how much their child's transitioning to middle school impacted their family's daily routine. When Andy, Brianna, and Colin began middle school, their school day started and ended later than it did when they attended elementary school. The later start of middle school brought a welcomed, less chaotic morning routine for the participants in this study. However, the later middle school dismissal time created a much more overwhelming and hectic evening for Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee. Amanda described her afternoon when Andy got home from middle school as "immediately getting in the car, there's no time to eat, there's no time to debrief, we're just immediately going to something, and it just feels very busy."

The participants in this study did not ever think their middle schoolers' schedule would dictate their family's evening meals. Caitlee stated she "definitely found ourselves ordering food more often" when Colin started middle school. She described their middle school afternoon being so rushed that they could not "put that extra energy in food" to be cooked at home. Each participant recalled that the quality of their family's meals declined when their daily routine was impacted by how middle school's late dismissal encroached on their family's time to get ready for evening activities.

Amanda and Bea experienced how the transition to the middle school schedule changed how their child interacted with their sibling, which was unexpected as well. Amanda said, "the dynamics between my middle schooler and my elementary schooler completely changed," and that "took me off guard." After Andy started middle school, Amanda remembered him and his brother fighting like they had never fought before. Amanda felt Andy started to see his brother "as a baby" since he was still in elementary school. Bea saw Brianna becoming "much more short-tempered" with her brother when she came home from middle school, while her brother was yearning to play with her right away when she got home. After Brianna was home from her day at middle school, she would "pine more for his [her brother's] affection" by trying to give him more hugs, which he was not sure how to handle. Bea surmised that Brianna and her brother also needed to adjust to how the new middle school schedule and developmental differences impacted their sibling interaction time.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee had six years to perfect their daily routine when their child was an elementary school student. However, when the participants' children began middle school, their elementary school schedule expertise was no longer applicable, as Perkins & Gelfer (1995) suggested. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee found themselves switching their rushed elementary school

mornings for rushed middle school afternoons. As the participants began their new daily schedule upon their child's start of middle school, they experienced role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988). Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee exited their role of organizer of morning chaos to organizer of afternoon chaos.

### *Advice*

The culminating piece of Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's narratives was a time for them to provide suggestions for new middle school parents and schools. The participants reflected on their experiences before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school to generate pieces of advice for incoming middle school parents and school staff.

Each of the participants in this study stressed the importance of new middle school parents learning how to check if their child is missing work as early as possible into the start of 6th grade. Amanda warned a new middle schooler will "just not be communicative for a while", they are not used to needing to communicate about their grades. She wished she had known that as a new middle school parent so she could have helped Andy learn that skill earlier in the year.

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee also suggested that incoming middle school parents find any way they can to frame the middle school transition in a positive light for their child. They each felt a positive mindset was helpful for their child as they began middle school. Amanda embraced the opportunity for Andy to join the middle school band program. At home, Amanda highlighted Andy's new middle-school-aged responsibilities, such as being in charge of locking the house on his own when he leaves for school. Bea wanted Brianna to "feel as confident as possible" when 6th grade started. She took time to celebrate Brianna's new beginning and even went special back-to-school shopping with Brianna, which was new for them. Caitlee used

Colin's "open mind and a pretty positive outlook on meeting new people" as an advantage. She discussed the new social situations middle school would create for Colin.

However, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee recognized that a positive mindset was not the miracle cure for everything their child faced in their middle school transition. Consequently, they recommended that new middle school parents find ways to open the line of communication with their children as much as possible as they become middle school students. Bea said she "did not even know what she [Brianna] was exposed to" in middle school but was pleased Brianna was comfortable coming to her to clarify anything she saw or heard at school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee believed that open communication with new middle schoolers helps relieve some stressors by providing an avenue for discussion when middle school becomes academically or socially challenging.

The participants in this study each warned that new middle school parents should understand that the routine they became accustomed to in elementary school is going to change, and it will be easier on them to just learn how to embrace the new. Caitlee said the start of middle school means parents should realize "it is not about you anymore, it is about them" leading the way.

Lastly, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee wanted new middle school parents to know that the start of middle school may seem painstakingly long, but after the first quarter of 6th grade, the rest of the year flies by. Amanda said new middle school parents should be prepared that 6th grade "really goes by incredibly fast." Caitlee said that as a new middle school parent, you might feel "stressors every day," but because middle school seems so fast-paced, "you forget about the past real quick"; you only have time to keep moving forward.

The advice Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee gave for elementary and middle school staff centered around communication and preparedness. The participants in the study felt that a transition to middle school program that provided clear expectations for students and parents, delivered in a welcoming format, should be implemented by middle schools. Caitlee remembered she yearned to know “more about expectations” she needed to meet as a middle school parent. Upon reflection, the participants in this study would have appreciated their child’s middle school proactively telling parents about the shift from elementary school style communication to that used in middle school. Bea said when she started as a new middle school parent she “had no clue like whatsoever where anything was” regarding Brianna’s academics. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were excited to see their child learning the value of independence; however, they wished their elementary and middle schools had communicated the level of independence expected at middle school beforehand. For elementary schools, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee suggested more of an emphasis on study skills because applying study skills is a middle school expectation their child did not have. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee hoped that future middle school parents would receive more communication and information about middle school parental expectations before and during the middle school transition. Their lived experience paralleled Eccles et al. (1993) stage-environment theory. The participants faced difficulties in their transition when they did not grasp how much independence their child and the institution of middle school required.

The advice Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee gave for middle school aligned with previous research identifying family support to be instrumental in increasing the success of the middle school experience for students (Waters et al., 2014). Similar to Arowosafe and Irvin’s (1992) and the Georgia Department of Education’s (2017) findings regarding middle school transition

programming, the participants believed they would have benefited from a middle school transition program highlighting the academic and social needs of middle school students.

### **Findings Aligned with Research Questions**

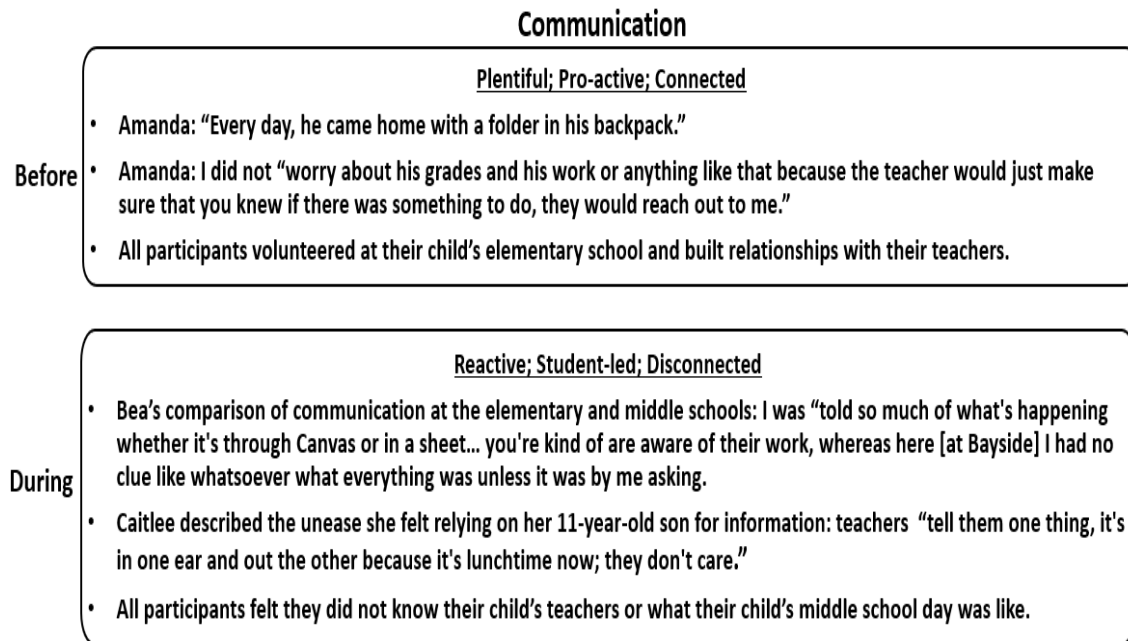
This section revisits each of the study's research questions in the context of the study's findings. The research questions were answered by aligning the findings to each question. Additionally, this section contains figures to visually represent how the participants' narratives aligned to and answered each research question.

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

**Communication.** During the transition to middle school parents, the participants described more of a reactive, student-led, and disconnected sense of communication. Bea said she experienced a shift in communication styles when Brianna began middle school. Bea explained she had no idea what was going on at Bayside unless she asked. Bea became a seeker of information at Bayside Middle, rather than just the receiver of information like she was at Buford Elementary. Caitlee remembered she was uneasy about Colin being the keeper of the information when he transitioned to Cardinal. She did not feel confident Colin would remember to relay messages from his teachers or the school correctly because he tended to be distracted easily. Each of the participants mentioned that they did not feel the same sense of connection with their child's middle school teachers as they had with their elementary school teachers. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee said that if their child's middle school teachers walked past them on the road, they would have no idea who they were. Additionally, the participants felt they did not grasp what their child's middle school day entailed. These sentiments stemmed from the participants not volunteering at their child's school as they did as elementary school parents.

**Figure 6**

*RQ1 and Communication*



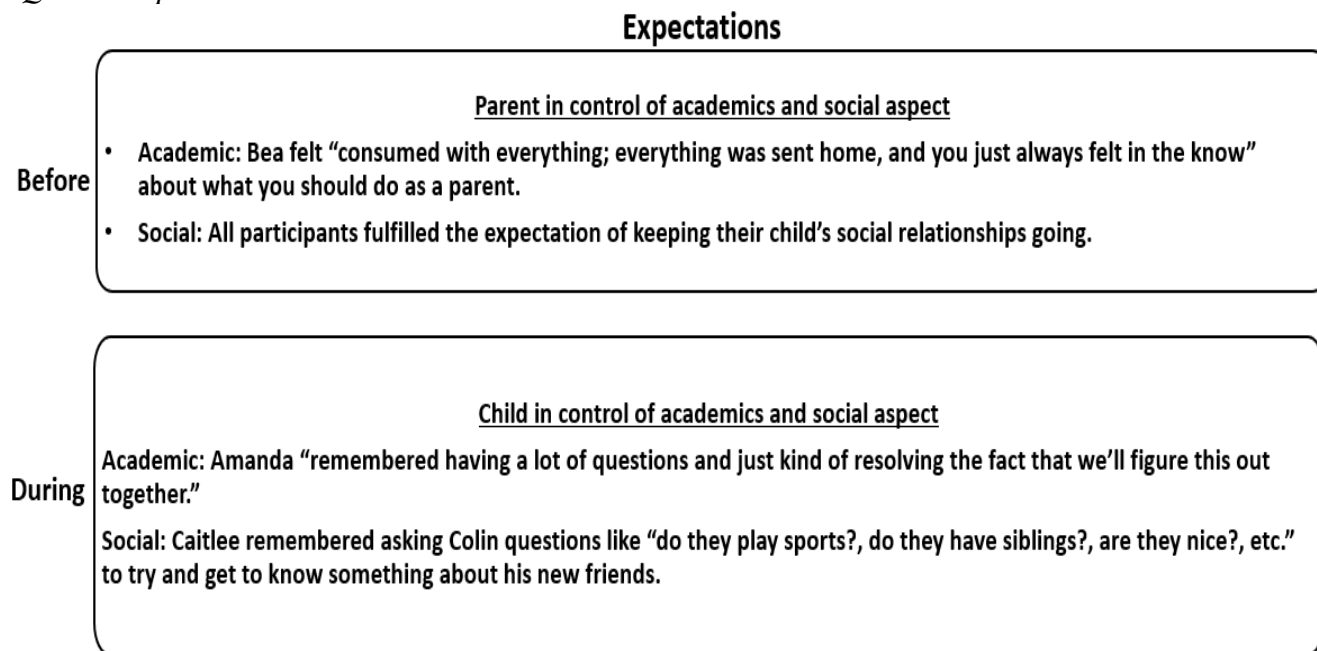
**Expectations.** Before Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee began their role as middle school parents, they described how it was expected of them to be in control of their child’s academics and the social aspects associated with elementary school (see Figure 7). Bea remembered always being aware of what was happening with Brianna’s classes and being fully aware of the expectations she needed to meet as an elementary school parent. Socially, the participants explained that if there were friendships being made, it’s because they, as parents, reached out to the other families to foster friendships. Conversely, if there was a potential friendship Amanda, Bea, or Caitlee did not see as a good fit, then they would not encourage that one as much as others. Through their involvement in building friendships for their child, the participants also made friends with the families of their child’s friends.

During the parental transition to middle school, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced an expectation shift (see Figure 7). The participants found the expectation of a middle school parent

was not to be at the forefront of their child’s academic and social decisions. Amanda understood she was expected to take a step back since Andy was now in middle school, but it took her a while to get used to that idea. She recalled thinking this is just the new normal for her and Andy, and they both would grow accustomed to the expectations together. Socially, Caitlee remembered how different it was for her to not know Colin’s friends. Colin talked about his friends at school, but Caitlee never met his new middle school friends or their families. Therefore, Caitlee asked Colin questions about them to get to know them by proxy. Caitlee felt this was the best way to be involved in Colin’s social life without overstepping the expectation of Colin making friends on his own accord.

**Figure 7**

*RQ1 and Expectations*



**Routine.** Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee experienced a reversal of their daily routines when their child began middle school (see Figure 8). Before the middle school transition, the participants described their mornings as being rushed, while their afternoon provided some decompression time before their evening activities began. The elementary schools in this study

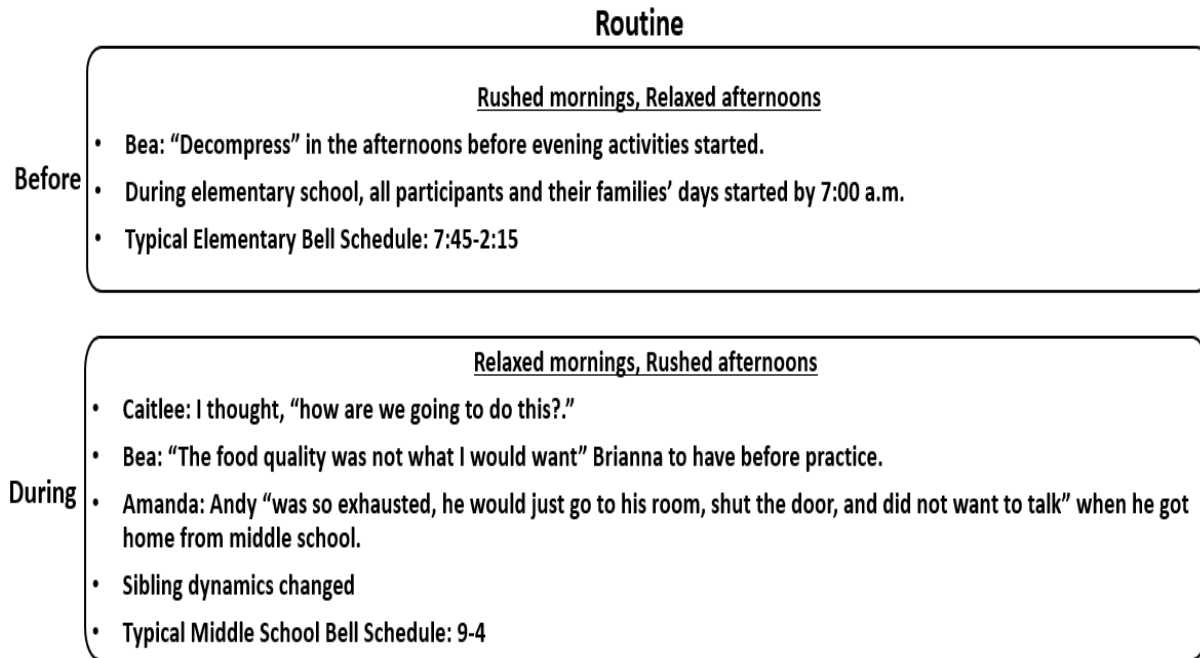
all generally started their school day around 7:45 a.m. Consequently, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's mornings were in full swing by 7:00 a.m. When Andy, Brianna, and Colin finished their elementary school day around 2:45 p.m., the participants recalled having time to prepare dinner. At the same time, their child unwound for the day, and then they completed school assignments before leaving for their extracurricular activities.

During the transition to middle school, the participants experienced their morning routes slow down, and their afternoons become rushed with their middle schooler. The middle schools in this study all started their school day around 9:00 a.m., but Andy, Brianna, and Colin were not home until around 4:00 p.m. Caitlee recalled wondering how they would make the middle school routine work for their family. She said even when they did discover a routine that fit their family's needs, the afternoon still felt very hectic. Each of the participants explained that their evening meals changed because there was not as much time for Andy, Brianna, or Colin to eat before they had to leave for their practices or other activities. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were surprised about how much the afternoon heavy middle school schedule influenced their family's routine.

Amanda and Bea also saw how the change in the middle school routine impacted sibling relationships. When Andy and Brianna came home from middle school, they were ready to decompress, while their elementary school sibling was ready to play. This created tension and hurt feelings among siblings where there was no conflict before. Amanda and Bea had not anticipated that the sibling dynamic would change. Ultimately, they each felt like they found a system that worked for their family to continue positive sibling relationships.

**Figure 8**

*RQ1 and Routine*



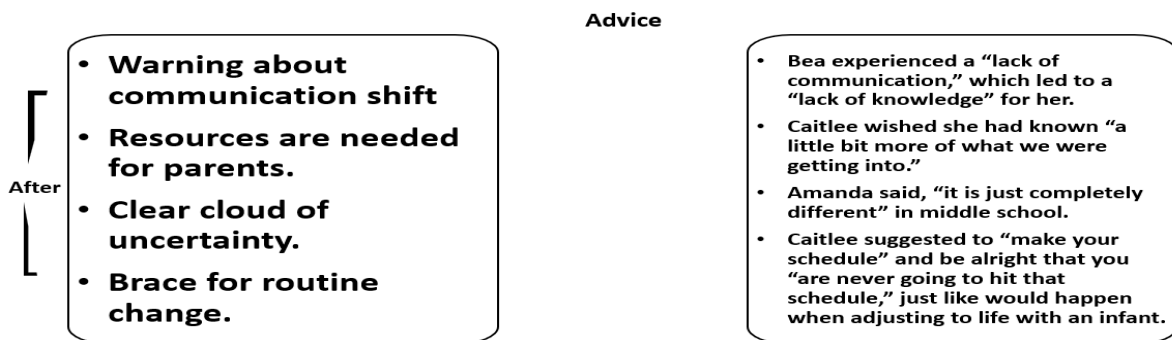
**Advice.** Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee each noted they understood there would be changes when their child transitioned to middle school. The participants also believed the changes they experienced were needed to fit where their child was developmentally and were not interested in seeing sweeping changes to communication, parental expectations, or routines at the middle school level. However, upon reflecting on their experience transitioning to a middle school parent, Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee offered pieces of advice for future incoming middle school parents and schools in hopes of easing the transition for others (see Figure 9).

The participants wished they had known before their child transitioned to middle school how much the responsibility of communication shifted to their child. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee felt they would have benefitted from resources before and during the middle school transition to help them adjust to their new parental environment. Beyond knowing that being a middle school parent would bring new experiences, they did not fully comprehend what the transition entailed.

The uncertainty experienced by Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee resulted from the polarity of their elementary and middle school experiences. The participants expressed that they could not rely on their elementary school parental tools because those tools often were not applicable to middle school. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee also suggested that incoming middle school families brace themselves for the routine change the middle school transition brings. Caitlee equated getting used to the middle school schedule with the experience of having an infant in the household; you try to make a schedule but understand that you might have to make a different one. While the participants acknowledged it would be impossible to account for all the changes experienced as parents have a child transition to middle school, their narratives each noted that these pieces of advice would have been welcomed in their transition to a middle school parent.

**Figure 9**

*RQ1 and Advice*



**Research Question 2**

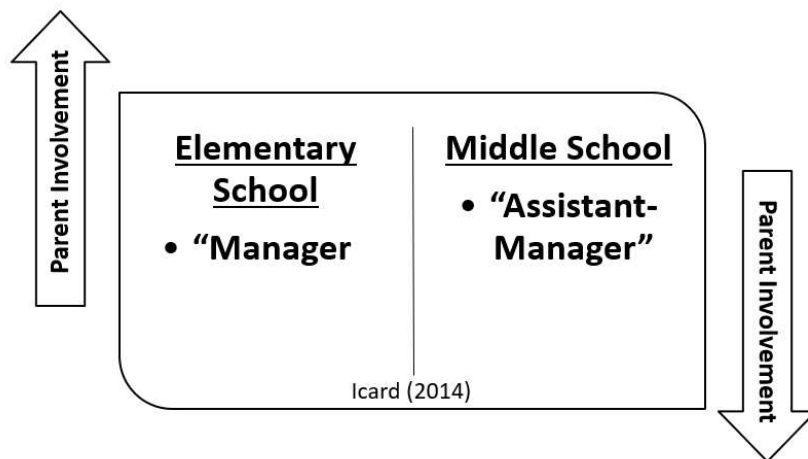
Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee described themselves as being heavily involved in their child’s school, academics, and social relationships when they were in elementary school. Then, when their child began middle school, the participants experienced a decline in their parental involvement. The decrease in Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee’s parental involvement at the middle school level was attributed to what Icard (2014) described as parents transitioning from a

managerial role in elementary school to an assistant-manager role in middle school (see Figure 10). The transition to middle school took the academic and social responsibility and decision-making from being parent-centered to being student-centered. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were the figureheads of all academic and social issues in elementary school. At the middle school level, each participant filled a supporting role for the child’s academic and social concerns; they took direction from their middle school student, versus giving them direction as they did in elementary school.

The participants also described the conflicting nature of their roles as elementary and middle school parents (see Figure 11). In elementary school, providing parental support outweighed student independence. At the middle school level, student independence outweighed parental support. Bea was impressed with “how much independent schooling she [Brianna] had to do, where I didn't even know anything about it.” While Bea appreciated and understood the move towards more self-directed learning in middle school, she also felt “it is a struggle” for both students and parents because the shift was unexpected and went against the roles established in elementary school.

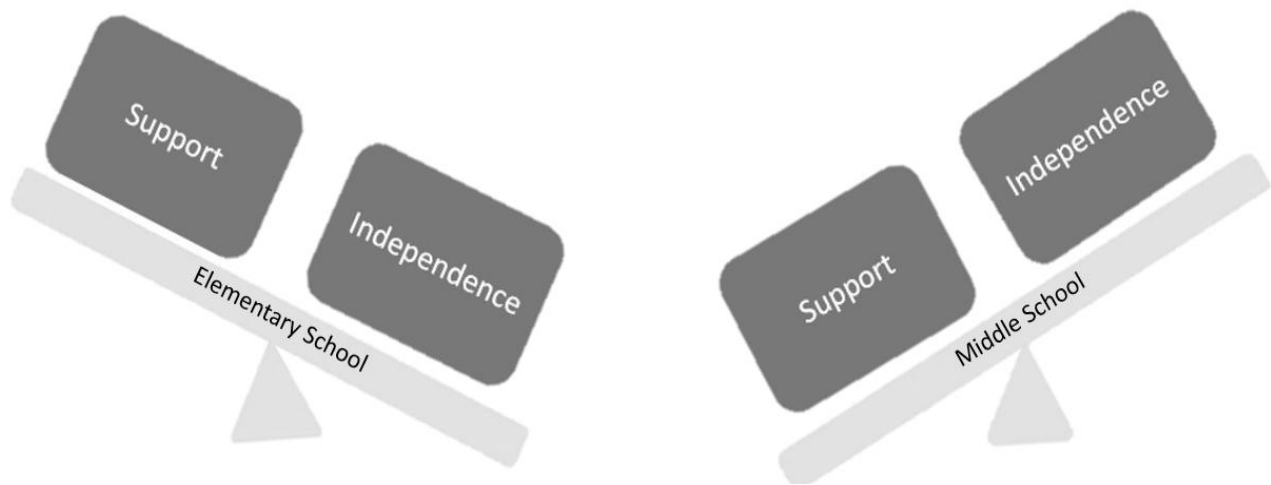
**Figure 10**

*RQ2: Elementary and Middle School Parental Roles*



## Figure 11

*RQ2: Balance of Parental Support and Student Independence in Elementary and Middle School*



### *Research Question 3*

In addition to the official school websites available to each participant (see Table 1), Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were provided with some other resources before and during the time their child transitioned to middle school. The participants discussed those resources' positive and negative aspects (see Figure 12).

Amanda was the only participant in this study who had the option to attend a parent information night for rising middle school parents. She appreciated that opportunity because it allowed her to visit Ajax Middle and learn some helpful information. The downside to the parent information night was that she left the meeting uneasy because the presentation made it sound like your child would morph into someone unrecognizable to you during their middle school years.

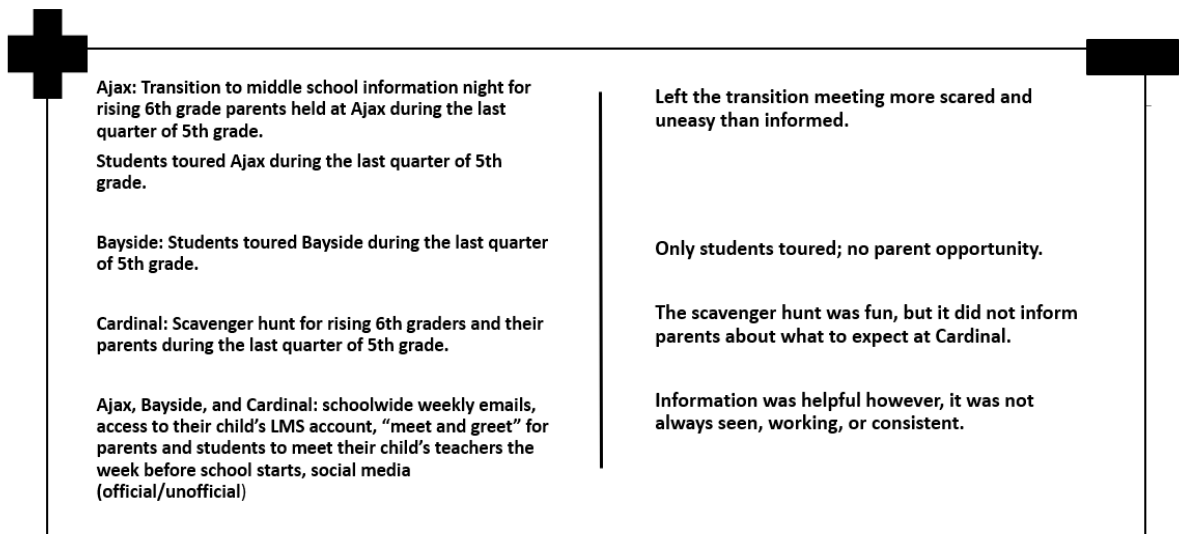
Bea was thankful that Brianna toured Bayside Middle at the end of her 5th-grade year. However, Bea wished she had the chance to visit Bayside before the end of Brianna's elementary school years, so she had an idea what the middle school layout was like as well.

Caitlee and Colin both attended a rising middle schooler night at Cardinal Middle. Caitlee and Colin completed a scavenger hunt around the school during that time. The experience taught Caitlee the logical setup of Cardinal, but she did not learn anything else about the middle school experience.

During the middle school transition, each of the participants received information from their child’s middle school via schoolwide emails, their child’s LMS accounts, parent/student/teacher/ “meet and greet” to pick up class schedules at the start of the year, and official/unofficial social media accounts. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee appreciated the communication they received, although there were times when the information did not get to them. At times, emails would inadvertently be sent to their “Spam” folder, links would not work, or the information was sent sporadically, so the participants were not in the habit of checking for messages.

**Figure 12**

*RQ3: Resources Available to Participants in their Transition to a Middle School Parent*



## **Limitations**

The content-rich narratives in this study painted a portrait of the parental experience of having a child transition from elementary to middle school. However, this study was limited to three participants from northern Georgia RESA regions. Therefore, the findings in this study are not generalizable. The participants in this study were parents who regularly volunteered at their child's school and were engaged in their child's education. Additionally, the participants in this study had not experienced any academic or social concerns with their child. These factors helped shape their experience of transitioning to a middle school parent but potentially impacted the scope of the study's findings.

The participants in this study were all mothers. Consequently, the findings in this study are all from a mother's point of view. There was a lack of diversity among the participants, in that each participant in this study was white. Each school district represented in this study had multiple elementary and middle schools. Therefore, the experiences in these districts could differ from districts comprised of fewer schools; fewer schools could create a more homogenous transition to middle school.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee's lived experiences were unique to the context of their lives. While their narratives produced similar findings and the advice they offered mirrored one another, their experiences may not parallel the experiences of other parents experiencing the parental transition from elementary to middle school. It is possible that other parents who had a child enter middle school had a contrasting experience to that of the participants in this study. Therefore, future research could support or not support the findings from Amanda, Bea, and

Caitlee's narratives, thereby broadening the scope of understanding how parents experienced the parental transition from elementary to middle school.

Future research could address the limitations of this study. Capturing the experiences of parents transitioning from elementary to middle school in a larger-scale qualitative study would fill a void (Alverson et al., 2021; Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Kohut, 1976; Zeedyk et al., 2003) in middle school transition research. Including participants with diverse backgrounds, from various locations, differing levels of parental educational engagement, and a variety of academic and social concerns potentially would provide more insight into how to meet the needs of middle school parents. Additionally, I recommend expanding the participant pool because it would create an increased opportunity to uncover counter-stories previously not considered in the research into the transition to middle school.

Future research could also explore specific concerns expressed by each participant in this study. I believe it would be beneficial for qualitative research to explore the perceived impact of middle school transition programs, examine areas where elementary and middle schools could collaborate in the middle school transition process, and how parents of middle schoolers balance simultaneously providing their child independence and support. Each participant mentioned they unintentionally lost their own friends when their child began middle school because of feeder school patterns and middle school schedules. Therefore, I also suggest that future research consider the impact the experience of transitioning to middle school on a parent's social life, which seems to be an under-researched component of the parental transition process from elementary to middle school.

The suggested future research topics could be conducted by qualitative researchers, education interest groups, state departments of education, or school districts to capture

participants' lived experiences to improve services provided to parents before, during, and after the middle school transition. The research should be revisited when there is a sense the needs of middle school parents have shifted or there is lack of parental involvement before and during the middle school transition process.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

The narratives from each of the participants can serve as learning tools for new middle school parents and elementary and middle school staff members. Each of the participants in this study was unaware of how little they knew about middle school until their child began 6th grade. However, through RQ3 and the document analysis process, I found the schools represented in this study did provide some information for parents; the parents just could not find it or know to look for it. Therefore, one step middle schools could take would be to develop clear, user-friendly communication to parents regarding the transition to middle school, middle school expectations, and best practices for parents of middle schoolers.

I would suggest that as middle schools establish resources for middle school parents, they incorporate parents in the process. Bringing parents and schools together positively impacts the school climate and decreases parental concerns in the middle school transition process (Madjr & Cohen-Malayev, 2016). The participants in this study had valid suggestions for schools, but other than this study, they had not voiced their opinions because they were not asked. If schools were to take the time to ask for parental feedback, they would be more likely to establish beneficial resources for new middle school parents. In turn, those resources would be more likely to increase parental confidence in the middle school transition experience, positively impacting middle school students and staff (Bullock et al., 2022).

This study has already led to the establishment of a “Parent University” and a new program for incoming middle school parents at my school. When I began my literature review for this study, I shared the information I learned with my school’s administration team. During the interview stage of this study, the administration team asked what insights I found that could be applicable to our school’s culture. As a result of those conversations, my administration team said they were open to changing our parental engagement strategies. They said they would like more opportunities for parents to learn about middle school, find ways to teach parents how to support their middle schoolers, and revamp our incoming 6th-grade parent information session specifically. Therefore, I eagerly began working with my school’s instructional coach to develop a “Parent University” and a new middle school transition informational program for our school.

Our school’s “Parent University” was established to address the needs of current middle school parents. To date, “Parent University” sessions have included an informational night regarding state testing and how to help best prepare your child for state testing and a curriculum night featuring teachers discussing parent and student academic expectations. Plans are underway to focus on tips for parents to use when encountering common middle school social issues. “Parent University” helped define middle school parental roles that Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee were unsure of in RQ2.

Before I started this study, I did not even know my school held an information session for new 6th-grade parents because teachers were not involved in the event. I learned that traditionally, our school invited incoming middle school parents from our feeder schools to come to our gym for a presentation by our administrators. The presentation was held one evening after school. It consisted of the attendees sitting in the gym bleachers for an hour and a half listening to a PowerPoint presentation led by our principal. Our school’s previous middle school transition

meeting mirrored the program Amanda attended at Ajax Middle School, except that it was not even available for parents to refer to later.

Through RQ1, I learned Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee wished they had more insight into middle school before their child transitioned to middle school. We considered that idea when we developed a new middle school transition night. The structure of our school's newly created transition to middle school meeting was still in the evening for an hour and a half. However, the evening consisted of four mini-sessions: a general information session led by our 6th-grade assistant principal and our principal, a session focused on core academics led by our 6th-grade teachers, a session highlighting our "house system" and school culture, and a gallery-walk featuring our school's connections courses, guidance department, clubs, and sports. Attendees were divided into three smaller groups after the general information session to travel to the other three mini-sessions.

The theme of the evening was "Middle School Mysteries" (see Figure 13). Each of the sessions provided information to help solve the seemingly mysterious middle school environment. As part of the RSVP for the event, attendees provided a question they had about the transition to middle school. To ensure we addressed the most frequent parental concerns, we categorized those questions and used them to drive the planning of the mini sessions. Time was also built into each of the mini-sessions for parents to ask unanswered questions, and reference materials were created for parents to take home.

Figure 13

*Implications for Future Practics: “Middle School Mysteries”*

## Implications for Future Practice



Parents were given a card to complete as they traveled to the mini-sessions. At the end of the evening, parents submitted their cards. The feedback from the cards was used to determine where parents needed more clues to unlock the mysteries of middle school so we could develop future “Parent University” nights addressing those topics. Information from each “Middle School Mysteries” session was posted on our newly established “Parent University” section of our school’s webpage and on our school’s social media outlets. Regardless of whether parents were able to attend “Parent University” or “Middle School Mysteries”, by posting the information, parents will be able to see we were welcoming them to our campus, which helps create stronger collaboration between school and home (Hill, 2022; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

We have been asked to showcase our “Middle School Mysteries” transition program and “Parent University” resources with hopes of creating similar programs across our district. This study reinforced a passion inside me for demystifying middle school for parents. I have already

seen a positive change in my school regarding parental engagement and look forward to finding ways to expand the positive change beyond my school and district.

On a smaller scale than “Parent University” and “Middle School Mysteries”, middle school classroom teachers could use this study’s finding to incorporate school-to-home communication that informs parents of the expectations related to their course and provides tips to support academic independence. Additionally, middle school classroom teachers could use the narratives in this study to evaluate how they address parental concerns in their class.

## **Conclusion**

This study began with three research questions. Each of these research questions was answered by the participants as they delivered their narratives. Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee revisited their experiences as elementary school parents, recalled their experience transitioning to middle school parenthood, and reflected upon what they learned after becoming a middle school parent. The participants described that they had to unlearn their role as an elementary school parent as they entered their role as a middle school parent. Incorporated in Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee’s descriptions were tools they used to help them in their transition from elementary to middle school parents.

While this study had its limitations, I believe it has the potential to create future research into the parental experience of transitioning to middle school. Additionally, I hope elementary and middle school staff can find Amanda, Bea, and Caitlee’s experiences applicable to their schools. I see the participants’ narratives in this study as having the ability to change the manner in which schools approach parental involvement in transition from elementary to middle school.

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## APPENDIX A

### Methods Matrix

## Appendix A

### Methods Matrix

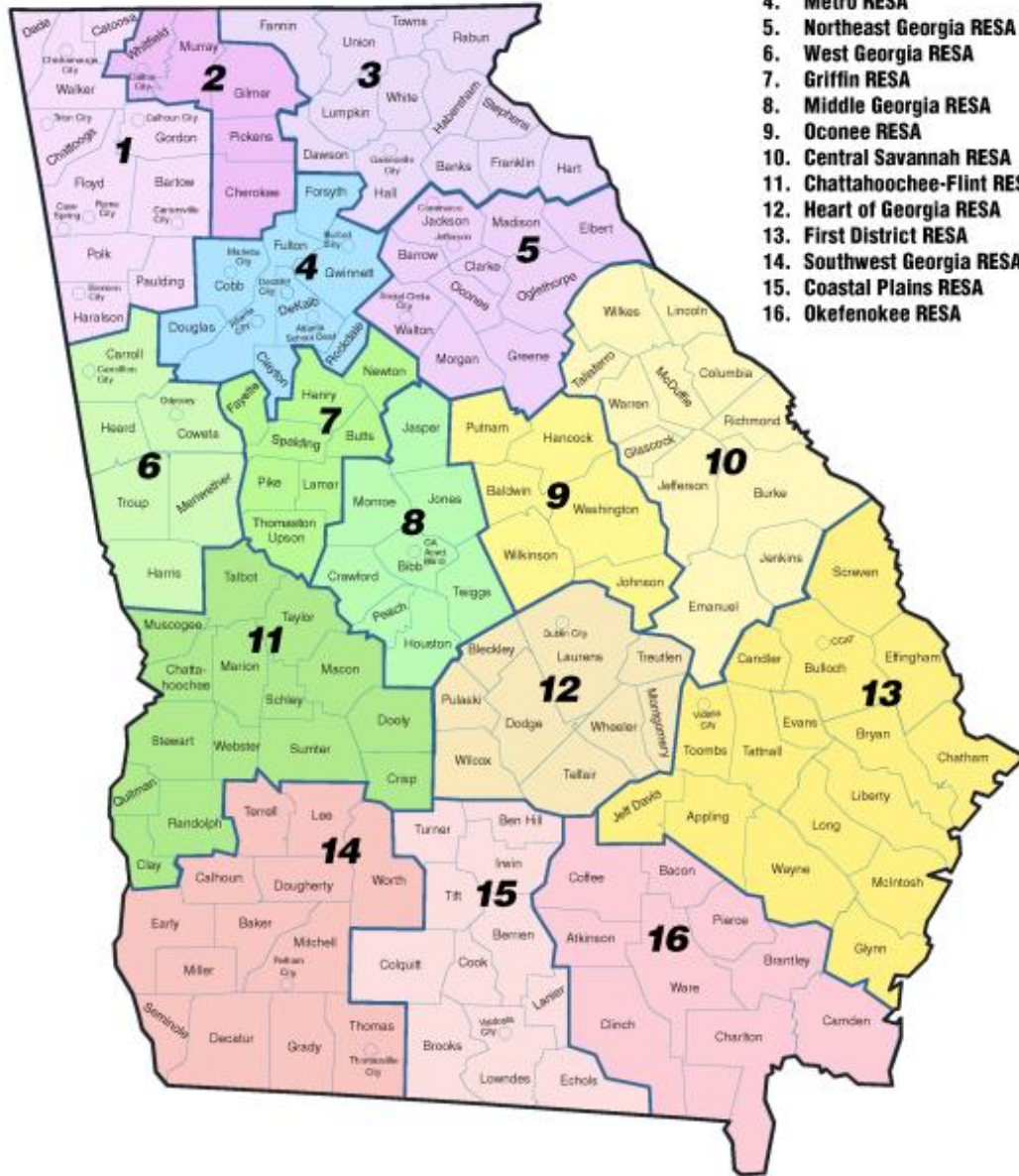
<i>Research Questions What do I want to know?</i>	<i>Why do I need to know this?</i>	<i>Sampling data Where will I find this?</i>	<i>Data collection methods. What kind of data will answer these questions?</i>	<i>Whom do I contact for access?</i>	<i>Data analysis</i>
What experiences did parents of middle school students have before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary to middle school?	The narratives of the parents provide a first-hand account of the experience new middle school parents undergo in the elementary to middle school transition.	Middle school parents	Seidman three part interviews with middle school parents  Researcher memos	Middle school parents	audio recording transcription coding categories narrative analysis re-reading
How do the expectations of middle school parents compare and contrast with the expectations of elementary school parents?	To understand what the institutions of elementary school and middle school expect from the parents in their schools.	Middle school parents  Official school website and social media accounts of where parents experienced elementary and middle school	Seidman three part interviews with middle school parents  Researcher memos  Document analysis	Middle school parents  Internet	audio recording transcription coding categories narrative analysis re-reading
What assistance was available for parents from select regions of Georgia in their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents?	To understand the method by which middle school parents learn how to be the middle school parents they became.	Middle school parents  Official school website and social media accounts of where parents experienced elementary and middle school	Seidman three part interviews with middle school parents  Researcher memos  Document analysis	Middle school parents  Internet	audio recording transcription coding categories narrative analysis re-reading

APPENDIX B

Map of Georgia RESA Regions

Appendix B

# Georgia Map



1. Northwest Georgia RESA
2. North Georgia RESA
3. Pioneer RESA
4. Metro RESA
5. Northeast Georgia RESA
6. West Georgia RESA
7. Griffin RESA
8. Middle Georgia RESA
9. Oconee RESA
10. Central Savannah RESA
11. Chattahoochee-Flint RESA
12. Heart of Georgia RESA
13. First District RESA
14. Southwest Georgia RESA
15. Coastal Plains RESA
16. Okefenokee RESA



Richard Woods, Georgia's School Superintendent

August 25, 2020

[https://www.gadoe.org/Pages/Regional-Education-Service-Agencies-\(RESAs\).aspx](https://www.gadoe.org/Pages/Regional-Education-Service-Agencies-(RESAs).aspx)

## APPENDIX C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions

## Appendix C

### *Semi-Structured Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions*

	Interview 1 Elementary School Focus	Interview 2 Middle School Focus	Interview 3 Reflective Focus
<p>RQ1: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia describe their experience before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary school to middle school?</p>	How would you describe the elementary school your child attended?	How would you describe the middle school your child attends?	If you had any elementary to middle school transition challenges, what did you do to overcome them?
	Tell me about the life of a parent of an elementary school student.	Describe your first month of being a middle school parent.	What suggestions do you have for new middle school parents?
	Describe what it is like for your family to get ready for elementary school in the mornings and what it is like when your child comes home from elementary school in the afternoons.	What was the easiest part of becoming a middle school parent?	What would you equate with your experience transitioning from an elementary school parent to a middle school parent?
	What was the easiest part of being an elementary school parent?	What was the most difficult part of becoming a middle school parent?	
	What was the most difficult part of being an elementary school parent?	Describe what the mornings are like for your family getting ready for middle school and what the afternoons are like when your child comes home from middle school.	
<p>RQ2: How do parents of middle school students from select regions of Georgia explain their parental roles in the elementary school environment versus their roles in the middle school environment?</p>	Describe how 5th grade was for you as a parent.	Explain what your interactions have been like with your child and their middle school academics.	
	What was the summer between 5th and 6th grade like for you as a parent?	Explain what your interactions have been like with your child and the social life aspect of middle school.	
	What was your role in your child's elementary schooling...both at school and at home?	What is your role in your child's middle school career...both at school and at home?	
<p>RQ3: What assistance was available for parents from select regions of Georgia in their transition from elementary school parents to middle school parents?</p>	How did you learn how to be an elementary school parent?	How did you learn how to be a middle school parent?	If you learned a helpful piece of advice about the transition from elementary to middle school, what was it, and where did you hear it?
	Describe the communication you had with your child's elementary school...including but not limited to information sent home with students, email, social media, word of mouth, etc.	Describe the communication you have had with your child's middle school...including but not limited to information sent home with students, email, social media, word of mouth, etc.	What do you wish you had learned earlier about life as a middle school parent?
		If you were unsure about something concerning your child's middle school academics or developmental concerns, where would you seek clarity?	Reflecting on your parental transition from elementary to middle school, explain a time when you reached out for guidance or wish you had. Where did you reach out for guidance, or where would you have reached out for guidance?

## APPENDIX D

### Institutional Review Board's Protocol Exemptions

## Appendix D



### ***Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants***

#### **PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

**Protocol Number:** 04506-2024

**Responsible Researcher(s):** Catherine Fernandez

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Jamie Workman

**Dissertation Research Member:** Dr. Taralynn Hartsell

**Project Title:** *A Narrative Inquiry of How Parents Experienced Their Child's Middle School Transition in Select Regions of Georgia.*

#### **INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

→ This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator ([irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu)) before continuing your research study.

#### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

- → *Exempt guidelines permit the recording of interviews for the purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Once an interview transcript is created the recording must be deleted permanently from all recording devices and files used to maintain the recording. Exempt guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings.*
- → *Interviews must be conducted in a location that prevents onlookers from listening and/or watching the interview session.*
- → *As part of the informed consent process, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming the participant's understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. The consent statement must be read aloud at the start of each interview session. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*
- → *Pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate, secure file from corresponding name lists.*
- → *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email list, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- →  *Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at [tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu) to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

*Elizabeth W. Diphis*

Elizabeth W. Diphis, IRB Administrator

*04.22.2024*

Date

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application. →  
Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-259-5045.*

## APPENDIX E

### Document Analysis Organizer

Appendix E

A Narrative Inquiry of How Parents Experienced Their Child’s Middle School Transition in  
Select Regions of Georgia

Cathy Fernandez

Document Analysis Organizer

**Document Information**

<b>Document Title</b>	
<b>Author(s)</b>	
<b>Where was it found?</b>	
<b>Document Type</b>	
<b>Publication Date</b>	
<b>Context/Background</b>	

**Document Characteristics**

<b>Language</b>	
<b>Format/Structure</b>	
<b>Style/Tone</b>	
<b>Key Themes/Topics</b>	
<b>Misc:</b>	

## Document Analysis

<b>RQ Correlations</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	
<b>Limitations</b>	
<b>Similar to...</b>	
<b>Contradicts...</b>	

### Summary/Reflection

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## APPENDIX F

### Validity Matrix

## Appendix F

### Validity Matrix

<i>What do I need to know?</i>	<i>Why do I need to know this?</i>	<i>What kind of data will answer the questions?</i>	<i>Analysis Plans</i>	<i>Validity Threats</i>	<i>Possible strategies for dealing with validity threats</i>	<i>Rationale for strategies</i>
What experiences did parents of middle school students have before, during, and after their child transitioned from elementary to middle school?	We need to know the personal narrative of middle school parents to understand the transition to middle school from their point of view. This information cannot be understood second-hand	Seidman three-part interview  Researcher memos from the conclusion of each interview	Transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews will be coded, categorized, and reread.  Researcher memos will be reread and categorized.	Researcher bias as a middle school teacher and elementary school parent.  Researcher bias includes the presumption that parents have a more positive experience in elementary than in middle school.  Researcher bias also includes information gained from existing literature.	Guba's measures of Trustworthiness...  Audit trail  Debriefing  Member checking	Audit-trail documents accounts for each stage of the study  Debriefing provides researcher opportunity to recount where they are in the research process and their mental state in the research process  Member checking allows participants to verify the depictions of their experiences.
How do the expectations of middle school parents compare and contrast with the expectations of elementary school parents?	To understand what the institutions of elementary school and middle school expect from the parents in their schools.	Seidman three-part interview	Transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews will be coded, categorized, and reread  Researcher memos will be reread and categorized.	Researcher bias as a middle school teacher and elementary school parent.  Researcher bias includes the presumption that parents have a more positive experience in elementary than in middle school.  Researcher bias also includes information gained from existing literature.	Guba's measures of Trustworthiness...  Audit trail  Debriefing  Member checking	Audit-trail documents accounts for each stage of the study  Debriefing provides researcher opportunity to recount where they are in the research process and their mental state in the research process  Member checking allows participants to verify the depictions of their experiences.
What are the mechanisms by which parents learn how to navigate the transition from elementary to middle school as their child enters middle school?	To understand the method by which middle school parents learn how to be the middle school parents they became.	Seidman three-part interview	Transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews will be coded, categorized, and reread  Researcher memos will be reread and categorized.	Researcher bias as a middle school teacher and elementary school parent.  Researcher bias includes the presumption that parents have a more positive experience in elementary than in middle school.  Researcher bias also includes information gained from existing literature.	Guba's measures of Trustworthiness...  Audit trail  Debriefing  Member checking	Audit-trail documents accounts for each stage of the study  Debriefing provides researcher opportunity to recount where they are in the research process and their mental state in the research process  Member checking allows participants to verify the depictions of their experiences.