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Transition from brick and mortar to online teaching: Middle-grade teachers' perspectives

Cathy Griffin

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TRANSITION FROM BRICK AND MORTAR TO ONLINE TEACHING: MIDDLE- GRADE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

by

CATHY GRIFFIN

(Under the Direction of Hsiu-Lien Lu)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate and understand how middle-grades teachers describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades students. A qualitative, descriptive case study design provided the framework for this study. An investigation into the lived experiences of a group of online middle-grades instructors making the transition from a traditional classroom setting to an online environment was conducted using interviews and online journaling.

The questions guiding this study were (a) How does a middle-grade teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners? (b) What do middle-school teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles, and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners? (c) What issues do online middle-school teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners?

Data analysis disclosed that transitioning teachers faced many challenges during the transition. Lack of preparedness, loss of control, and an intensified workload were all divulged as some of the areas of concern for transitioning teachers. The results also uncovered additional findings indicating a need to further investigate the roles and responsibilities of middle-grades parents and students who are making the transition to learning online.

The results contribute to an expanding body of knowledge that will be useful to not only teachers considering a similar transition, but administrators and schools systems as well. It also adds to the literature regarding adult learning theory as the progression through learning a new method of teaching is explained through Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

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by

CATHY GRIFFIN

Doctor of Education, Georgia Southern University, 2014

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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2014

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family. To my parents William J. Francis and Teresa R. Francis, and to my children Dustin W. Griffin and April R. Griffin. Although my father passed away many years ago, his example of impeccable work ethic and ambition along with his support, and love throughout my formative years have helped to shape who I am. I hope he is proud of who I have become. Equally, my mother's unconditional love, encouragement, continuous support (through good times and bad) throughout my entire life is simply irreplaceable. Shortly after entering my doctoral program my mother made me a desk plate that read "Dr. Cathy Griffin." The desk plate sat on my desk staring me in the face every single day. Although there were days where I felt like chucking it across the room, the love behind that desk plate kept me moving forward. I couldn't have done this without her. I love you mom!

To my children, Dustin and April, who put up with my crazy life during the entire dissertation process. Together we went through a lot of personal, family trauma during this time, and the immense support and love I received from my children helped carry me through. Additionally, to my daughter, April, I could not have survived this journey without your daily smiling face, your goofiness, which constantly kept me laughing, and for putting things into perspective when needed. I love you all and am blessed to have such an amazing family.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	7
LIST OF TABLES	10
LIST OF FIGURES	11
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	12
___ Background	13
___ Problem Statement	16
___ Research Questions	18
___ Significance of the Study	19
___ Definition of Terms.....	22
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	23
___ Theoretical Framework	24
___ Online Learning Defined	26
___ K-12 Online Learning History	26
___ Types of Online Programs for K-12	29
___ Development of the Middle-gradesLearner	30
___ Teaching Middle-Grades Students.....	31
___ Teacher Training	32
___ Online Teacher Role and Characteristics.....	34
___ From Face-to-Face to Online	37
3 METHODOLOGY.....	43
___ Research Design.....	43
___ Setting	45
___ Participants.....	46
___ Instrumentation	48
___ Data Collection Procedures.....	49
___ Data Analysis	51
___ Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions.....	54
___ Summary	54
4 RESULTS	56

_____ Study Participant Demographics.....	57
_____ Mezirow’s Eleven Phases of Transformative Learning.....	548
_____ Summary	89
5 SUMMARY, DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSIONS.....	90
_____ Summary of the Study.....	90
_____ Additional Findings.....	92
_____ Discussion	95
_____ Implications for Practice and Research.....	102
_____ Recommendations for Future Research	103
References	1044
_____ APPENDIX A	1177
_____ APPENDIX B	119
_____ APPENDIX C	1200
_____ APPENDIX D	120
_____ APPENDIX E	1204
_____ APPENDIX F.....	1205

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Participant Demographic Data	47
Table 3.2: Word Frequencies	53
Table 4.1: Phases 1 and 2	58
Table 4.2: Phase 3	70
Table 4.3: Phases 4 and 5	73
Table 4.4: Phases 6, 7, and 8.....	79
Table 4.5: Phases 9, 10 and 11	83
Table 4.6: Overarching Results.....	88

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: Transformative Learning Theory Phase Categories for Analysis	52
Figure 4.1: Participant Teaching Experience Deomographics.....	57

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Growing from 40,000-50,000 K-12 students in 2000, to well over 6,000,000 students in 2011, distance-education enrollment has seen phenomenal growth. Of those 6,000,000 students, approximately 1,030,000 originate from k-12 schools (Fast Facts About Online Learning, 2012; Picciano & Seaman, 2010). In conjunction with this growth, a need has been recognized for highly qualified teachers willing to teach in a virtual environment.

From the introduction of Sidney Pressey's "teaching machine" in the 1920s, to current access to fulltime virtual education via the Internet, educators, parents and students are faced with increased educational opportunities in the 21st century (Allen & Seaman, 2011). As a result, increasingly more teachers and students are moving out of the brick-and-mortar classroom into a virtual classroom (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012). This shift in the way that we deliver the curriculum to our children creates a demand for highly qualified teachers willing to transition into a virtual teaching environment (Fast Facts About Online Learning, 2012).

Although there is research into the transition from traditional to online teaching for secondary and postsecondary educators, the focus of this study is on the transition for middle-grades educators. Online education for younger learners is becoming more prevalent and therefore there is a need to investigate how this transition might be different.

To better understand this transition, Mezirow's transformative learning theory for adult learners will frame this study (Mezirow, 1991). This theory is targeted towards adult learners and will help to provide a framework for how teachers transition. Transformative learning is described as "a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and

actions” (“Transformative Learning Centre,” 2013, para. 1). Mezirow’s eleven phases of transformative learning, which identify key factors that either impede or facilitate progress, will be discussed and applied to this study in an effort to better understand the transition from teaching in a brick and mortar classroom to that of an online environment (Kitchenham, 2008).

Background

Higher education has utilized varying forms of online education for many years; however, in the last 10 years alone, online education has become more prevalent in primary and secondary education as well. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 55% of the nation’s public school districts report having students enrolled in some form of online education classes (“National Center for Education Statistics,” 2012). This is a 25% increase from statistics gathered in 2002 (“Fast Facts,” 2012). Looking more closely at those districts, it was revealed that 96% of the districts reported enrollment at the high school level, 19% at the middle-grades level, and 6% of online students came from the elementary school level (Queen & Lewis, 2011). It is anticipated that there will be a 22.8% growth in online course offerings for k-12 schools within the next few years (Picciano & Seaman, 2010). This growth in online education for public school students is coming from single districts creating online programs that are tailored to the needs of the students within their district, not from state-wide school systems as was typical in previous years (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Bemin, & Rapp, 2011).

Current data shows that online opportunities are available for at least some students in all 50 states (Watson et al., 2011). More than 6.1 million preK-12 students are taking some form of online schooling for the 2012 school year as compared to the more than two million

preK-12 students in 2009 (“National Center for Education Statistics,” 2012). It then follows that the demand for highly qualified teachers, trained to teach in an online environment, will increase as well. This trend towards online instruction brings with it some exciting opportunities along with many challenges for teachers and students alike (Meyen, Aust, Gauch, & Hinton, 2002).

In spite of the movement towards online learning, there are still many educators who do not feel the need for this change in educational setting. Data gathered from more than 2,500 colleges and universities between the years 2002 and 2009 revealed that the number of faculty who believe in the legitimacy and value of online education increased slightly from 27.6% to 30.9% (Allen & Seaman, 2009). Concerns about course quality, development costs, funding based on student attendance, and lack of face-to-face time were also of concern to educators (Picciano & Seaman, 2010). This hesitation to adopt new technology and move towards teaching online is also a factor for instructors in the K-12 setting (Dykman, Ph, & Davis, 2005; Zhen, Garthwait, & Pratt, 2008).

Many school administrators, however, recognize the demand for online k-12 education because it helps meet the diverse needs of their student population. According to a study by Picciano and Seaman (2010), the majority of high school administrators suggested that online classes help in many ways such as: filling the gap in curriculum areas where class offerings may not be available, using online alternatives for student credit recovery, providing additional advanced placement courses for students, preparing students for 21st century careers, and helping to build linkages with colleges. Decreasing graduation rates are also another important factor that influences administrators to offer a variety of instructional settings for students (Picciano & Seaman, 2010).

To date, most online education has been offered at the postsecondary level as colleges began offering individual courses at a distance. This has progressed into students now having the opportunity to receive a variety of degrees totally online. At the secondary level, from 2008 to 2011, the number of high school students who have taken part in some form of online instruction tripled as compared to twice as many middle-grades students (*Learning in the 21st century*: 2011 trends update, 2011). This trend towards online education is slowly trickling down into the middle and elementary schools levels. As educators, we know that there are a plethora of theories regarding adolescent learning; however, many theorists agree that the age and maturity of the child can affect learning outcomes (Steinberg, 2008) which in turn affects how we develop and teach a particular curriculum. This difference between maturity levels is always a consideration when learning to teach in a traditional setting. It follows then that in an online environment, the same differences hold true along with the added challenges that come with learning online.

Since much of the research regarding online education as it relates to students and teachers is directed towards the secondary and postsecondary levels, a focused look into a more specific group of educators such as middle-grades teachers might reveal a differing set of results. As more educators leave the brick-and-mortar classroom in pursuit of online teaching positions, many not familiar with online instruction may encounter difficulties not seen in a traditional classroom setting (Ham & Davey, 2005; Hong, 2012; Mirakian & Hale, 2007). Challenges related to preparation, course design, student engagement and technological issues are a common concern from teachers making the transition (Hong, 2012; Rice & Dawley, 2007; Scagnoli, Ph, & Johnson, 2009).

To an outsider, it is often assumed that online teaching is an easy job. Most envision the online teacher sitting at a computer at home, in pajamas, watching television, laptop running, as they attend to their online class. This stereotype is one that many online educators would adamantly refute, adding that teaching online is often more demanding and time-consuming than teaching in a traditional classroom (Amiel & Orey, 2006; J. Cavanaugh, 2005).

Problem Statement

The number of students seeking an online education at the K-12 grade level is on the rise. This growth in online education brings with it a need for online educators. Administrators around the country are beginning to realize the need for appropriate training in this growing field of education. Although some universities have been looking at the need for pre-service online teacher education programs, many traditional teachers are moving into the online environment without any training (Biro, 2007). As is the standard in a traditional school setting, appropriate training of the teaching staff and subsequent staff development opportunities are fundamental to the success of the school. It would be beneficial to investigate the challenges that middle-grades teachers might face when moving into an online position with little prior preparation.

Much of the research to date in the field of online education has been focused on post-secondary and in recent years, secondary educational settings. Offering transitioning teachers support and training as they move into an online environment has only recently been included in the research (Archambault, 2010; Barrett, 2010; Biro, 2007; Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

There are many challenges transitioning teachers face when moving into an online environment. Oftentimes, teachers are hired based solely on their highly qualified certification area and number of years teaching, rather than experience teaching online. This could be due to the fact that experienced online educators are difficult to obtain especially at the middle and high school level. One study of 596 distance educators revealed online educators had an average of 14 years of traditional teaching experience with an average of 4 years of online teaching experience. Of the participants surveyed, their years of experience in a traditional setting ranged from one year to 50 years (Archambault & Crippen, 2009a). This lack of experience can lead to frustration on the part of the teacher at having to figure out the best way to present instruction in a virtual format which in turn can affect the online experiences and success of students (Lari, 2008; Richard, 2000). To date, there is very little research into the challenges that can arise when transitioning from teaching in a traditional classroom to teaching online. Even scarcer is research specific to transitioning from a traditional middle-grades setting to teaching online middle-grades students. Uncovering these challenges would be beneficial to future online teachers, administrators, school systems and students. An investigation of the transition from a traditional middle-grades setting, to an online middle-grades environment would be useful information for this newly developing area of online education.

Curriculum theorists have argued for years over the exact meaning of what constitutes a comprehensive curriculum and the best methods for delivery of that curriculum (Connelly, He, & Phillion, 2008). This study will add to the body of knowledge related to transitioning middle-grades teachers adapting their traditional methods of delivery to online delivery of a curriculum. Schubert (as cited in Connelly et al., 2008) argues that “Curriculum not only

describes the complex intersections of the common places of teacher and learner experiences, it also includes a critical praxis that blends action, research, and autobiographical inquiry” (p. 518).

Research Questions

This qualitative, descriptive, case study of middle-grades teachers will investigate the transition of traditional middle-grades teachers, given no prior training, into an online teaching environment, with the intent of providing suggestions for future online educators making the same transition. Through teacher reflection, a better understanding of the challenges will be explored. The overarching questions guiding this study are:

1. How does a middle-grades teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners?
2. What do middle-grades teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles, and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners?
3. What issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners?

Through in-depth interviews of middle-grades teachers currently transitioning from a brick-and-mortar setting to that of an online setting, rich, thick data will be examined to looking for themes that might reveal useful information. Participants will also keep a journal of their experiences guided by prompts that stem from current research. Journal questions will explore teacher assumptions about teaching online, differences experienced, and how their teaching has been transformed. Through journal writing, the lived experiences of this

group of middle-grades teachers transitioning from a traditional classroom to that of an online setting will be exposed.

Significance of the Study

Despite the rapid growth in the last few years of the availability of online education, there is little research in the area of teacher transition from a brick-and-mortar classroom to an online classroom. At the middle-grades level, this researcher was unable to find any research to date on teacher transition from the traditional middle-grades classroom to the online middle-grades setting. At the postsecondary level, online courses are increasingly more commonplace. At the middle and high school level, however, we are just now beginning to acknowledge a growing demand for online courses (Picciano & Seaman, 2007; Watson et al., 2012). Along with this growth comes the need for qualified teachers to teach these online students (Watson et al., 2012). Oftentimes, traditional classroom teachers are taking on these new online teaching positions with little to no training (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; DiPietro, Ferdig, & Black, 2008). This study will be of value to teachers considering entering the field of online education. It also might help to inform administrators seeking to hire their online teaching staff.

Differences in age and cognitive ability levels of middle-grades students as compared to high school and postsecondary students creates the need for varying teaching approaches (Ault, 1977; Byrnes, 2001; Ojose, 2008). The slow progression of understanding as children mature from concrete thinking to more abstract critical thinking is taken into consideration when a curriculum is built in a traditional school setting (Byrnes, 2001). This same consideration needs to be taken when teaching and building a curriculum for online middle-grades students (Ojose, 2008).

This study will also be of importance to the administration of current and future online schools. A stronger understanding of the training needed by school administration to assist the teaching staff to do their job most effectively, and at the highest of levels, is of great significance to the success of the school (Covington, Petherbridge, & Warren, 2005). Critical self-reflection, and critical discourse are two key elements of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000b). It is this researcher's belief that through teacher reflection and feedback related to the transition to the online environment, teacher attributes may surface and could be used as indicators of what to look for when hiring new online teachers.

Communication, compassion, organization, content knowledge, and technical competence, have all been identified as some of the major characteristics of successful online instructors (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Hitchcock, 2013; Orso & Doolittle, 2012). Uncovering and looking more closely at these traits may offer administrators a foundation for making more informed decisions when it comes to the hiring of new online teachers.

This study will be most significant in assisting with the development of a teaching staff in future online middle schools. Although there are data available related to high school and college level online instruction, teacher qualifications, and curriculum development (Bair & Bair, 2011; Carroll-Barefield, Smith, Prince, & Campbell, 2005; Gagne, 2009; Redmond, 2011), the data gathered in this study will be of particular interest to the current trend towards offering a full-time online middle-grades education.

Ultimately, the online student is the prime benefactor of a skilled online teacher. A highly qualified, well trained online teacher prepared to meet the demands of the online environment and the online student, will result in improved student performance (Baran et al., 2011; Hitchcock, 2013; Orso & Doolittle, 2012). Research data related specifically to

transitioning teachers to online middle-grades are scarce and could be of benefit to teachers making that transition, and, ultimately, to students attending online classes.

Curriculum theorists have long debated best practices when it comes to creation and delivery of a curriculum to students. This could be due in part to the varying topics for discussion all falling under the curriculum studies umbrella. Educational topics related to the philosophy of education, sociocultural issues, historical and psychological factors, curriculum content, curriculum management, and theoretical models and implementation all fall under the curriculum studies heading (Connelly et al., 2008). This study will add to the body of knowledge in the curriculum studies field in that it will address issues related to teachers having to adapt traditional curricular delivery models to fit within an online environment. According to Hai-Jew (2011), a curriculum should be geared towards the specific developmental levels of the learner. Therefore, in an online environment it is important to have the capability to adjust the curriculum based on the needs and wide range of abilities of the online learner.

As a recently hired online middle-grades teacher, entering the online setting with no online teaching experience, this researcher has a particular interest in this study. Having encountered many challenges and difficulties during the first year as an online teacher, many of which were not foreseen by the researcher or the administration of the online school, it is this researcher's intention to shed some light on the struggles that an online middle-grades teacher might face. This researcher would like to contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding issues that may arise for the teacher transitioning from a traditional classroom to an online setting and more specifically at the middle-grades level. It is this researcher's belief that through teacher reflection, a deeper understanding may be had about

how transitioning teachers might better prepare for their new position in the online teaching field.

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous refers to learning that takes place in elapsed time between two or more people (*The online learning definitions project*, 2011, p. 3).

Brick-and-mortar school is a traditional school setting within a physical building or classroom.

Distance education refers to any course that is offered at a distance (*The online learning definitions project*, 2011).

Online School (Virtual school, or Cyberschool) refers to a form of distance education where more than 80% of instruction occurs while the teacher and student are geographically separated and where learning takes place online (Berge & Clark, 2005). Seaman (2011) defines an online school as “A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings.” According to the Online Learning Definitions Project (2011), an online school is defined as “a formally constituted organization (public, private, state, charter, etc.) that offers full-time education delivered primarily over the Internet.”

Synchronous learning refers to learning that takes place at the same time and in the same space (*The online learning definitions project*, 2011).

Virtual school is defined similarly to an online school where full-time education is offered primarily through the Internet.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

To frame the experiences of the participants in this study, a qualitative approach to the research was taken. The search for meaning and understanding of the phenomenon through inductive research strategies leading to richly descriptive data is at the heart of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). In an effort to understand how middle-grades teachers transition from a traditional teaching environment to that of an online, middle-grades instructor, several related topics were explored. Key terms such as online education, distance learning, teaching virtually, adolescent development, transformative learning theory, and staff development for online educators were used as search criteria for portions of this literature review.

This literature review is broken down into several major categories beginning with a theoretical framework based on transformative learning theory which will be used to frame the study. This is then followed by online learning defined. A brief overview of the history of online learning pointing out some pioneer online schools along with identifying some of the key differences between different types of online education will then be presented. Differing types of online programs will be defined. The middle-grades learner will then be identified followed by a description of the middle-grades teacher. Teaching middle-grades students, traditional teacher training and online teacher training will be discussed as well as the roles and characteristics of an online teacher. This literature review will then conclude with research that details the experiences of transitioning teachers from a traditional setting to that of an online setting.

Although the literature related to teacher transition from traditional to an online setting at the secondary and postsecondary level is growing daily, there are gaps in the research when it comes to teacher transition at the middle-grades level. Due to the lacking research in this

area of the population of educators who are transitioning from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades students, this study will address some of the gaps in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

The opportunity to practice and build new teaching pedagogy is an exciting and sometimes challenging experience for teachers making the transition from a traditional classroom to an online environment (Altalib, Dunfee, Hedden, Lennox, & Marengo, 2002; Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; J. Cavanaugh, 2005; Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Mirakian & Hale, 2007; Slovick, 2011). Using Mezirow's (1991) adult learning theory of transformation to frame this study supports the descriptive analysis of transitioning teachers from a traditional setting to an online setting.

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory focuses on adult learners and how they learn. The theory goes beyond rote memorization, attaining content knowledge, and learning about how we come to know what it is we know, and concentrates on the process that adults go through when faced with attempting to learn something new. Mezirow (2000) describes transformative learning as:

Transformational learning is a way of problem solving by defining a problem or by redefining or reframing the problem. We often become critically reflective of our assumptions or those of others and arrive at a transformative insight, but we need to justify our new perspective through discourse. (p. 20)

This adult learning theory focuses on transforming perspectives of the self, our belief system and lifestyle (Kitchenham, 2008). This theory of perspective transformation defines three areas of cognitive significance: technical, which is task-oriented; practical, which relates to social interaction; and emancipatory, which applies to interest in self-knowledge and self-reflection (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). According to Mezirow (1991),

understanding why we attach meaning to our roles and relationships through reflection, might be the most significant unique characteristic of adult learning. Mezirow (1991) has refined his transformative learning theory over the years to include the following eleven phases of transformative learning:

- | | |
|----------|---|
| Phase 1 | A disorienting dilemma |
| Phase 2 | A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame |
| Phase 3 | A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions |
| Phase 4 | Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change |
| Phase 5 | Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions |
| Phase 6 | Planning of a course of action |
| Phase 7 | Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans |
| Phase 8 | Provisional trying of new roles |
| Phase 9 | Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships |
| Phase 10 | Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships |
| Phase 11 | A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective |

Merriam (1991) argues that Mezirow's perspective transformation deals precisely with the process of adult learning with its strong focus on construction of experience and reflection on that experience. Transformative learning "...considers teachers as adult learners who continuously transform their meaning of structures related to online teaching through a continuous process of critical reflection and action" (Baran et al., 2011, p. 1). In addition, Baran (2011) maintains that in the context of online teaching, the use of transformative learning theory is based on three essential principles: "(a) viewing online teachers as active adult learners, (b) recognizing that transformative learning occurs through critical reflection, and (c) considering that transformation happens as teachers conduct pedagogical inquiry with technology" (p. 5).

The concepts of behavioral change and experience underpin most definitions of learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Through the lens of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, behavioral changes and experiences will be explored as the transitioning teacher takes on this new role as online instructor.

Online Learning Defined

Online learning programs, commonly referred to as virtual schools, cyber schools, cyber learning and e-learning are defined similarly. Allen and Seaman (2011) define an online learning environment as an educational setting where at least 80% of the course content is delivered online. Keegan (1996) suggests that online learning is a form of distance education whereby the teacher and student are separated geographically. Watson, Winograd, and Kalmon (2004) add that online learning is educational instruction and content delivered largely via the Internet. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) recently published a comprehensive list of definitions, concepts, words, phrases, and terms often used in the world of online learning. According to their definition, online learning is "Education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the Internet" (The online learning definitions project, 2011, p. 7).

K-12 Distance Learning History

An advertisement in the March, 1728 issue of the Boston Gazette promotes learning Short Hand through several lessons to be sent weekly to the student (Holmberg, 2005). In 1833, almost one-hundred years later, opportunities to study composition were advertised "...through the medium of the Post" (Holmberg, 2005, p. 13). Although correspondence courses got their start in Europe, in 1892 the first American to introduce university-level correspondence study was William Harper, president of the University of Chicago. Other

universities soon followed suit offering various courses through the mail (Gaytan, 2007; Holmberg, 2005).

According to Holmberg (2005), correspondence courses became more popular throughout the twentieth century as they met an important need. Students were able to learn at their own pace, from any location without neglecting their daily work. Correspondence courses were being offered from schools all around the world during this time which afforded these organizations the opportunity to learn from one another as they built their businesses.

Instructional radio and television took the place of correspondence courses in the mid-twentieth century and video and audiotaped lectures became standard in university and professional settings (Valentine, 2002). Following televised distance learning in the 1950's, the introduction to the Internet has taken distance learning to new heights (Valentine, 2002).

After the introduction to the World Wide Web, in 1989 the University of Phoenix was the first private institution to offer fully online, asynchronous academic degrees ("The History of Online Schooling," 2010). As internet access and personal computers became more widely available, in 1997 California Virtual University, a consortium of almost 100 California colleges and universities, began offering online classes ("The History of Online Schooling," 2010). In 1996 Virtual High School in Massachusetts opened as a consortium of schools across the country. It was developed in the Hudson Public School District in Massachusetts and has grown to an enrollment in 2012 of 16,201 students in 33 states and 34 different countries ("The VHS Collaborative," 2013).

Following Virtual High School, Florida Virtual School opened the first statewide online supplemental program in 1997. This program offered courses to students who wanted to supplement their current high school curriculum. For fiscal year 2010-2011, 133,702

students from all across the state of Florida completed some form of online course at Florida Virtual School (Beach, 2011).

Georgia Virtual opened in 2005 establishing the first official state school for Georgia. What began as a virtual high school to over 2800 Georgia students has grown to a student enrollment of almost 13,000 in 2011. The majority of students attending Georgia Virtual are part-time seeking to increase their content choices, move ahead in their course work, or earn credit recovery (Barge, 2011).

Gwinnett Online Campus (GOC) opened prior to Georgia Virtual, as the oldest online program in Georgia. Opening in 1999 with 122 students, it has grown in enrollment to over 5000 students in 2010. This online school began by offering credit recovery classes to high school students. In 2011, after approval to become a charter school, GOC began offering full time enrollment to high school students across Gwinnett County. In 2012, GOC opened a full-time middle-grades for grades six through eight, and in August of 2013 opened enrollment for full-time elementary students, grades four and five. This school is a pioneer in the industry due to the fact that there are very few, full-time, online schools at the middle and elementary school level (“Gwinnett Online Campus,” 2013). There has been phenomenal growth in the area of online education as parents and students seek out alternative delivery methods to supplement or even replace traditional educational models (Anderson, 2008; Archambault & Crippen, 2009; C. Cavanaugh & Barbour, 2009; Horn & Staker, 2011; Nagel, 2009; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Bemis, et al., 2011). This is due in part to the advancement of technology over the past twenty years which brought with it a change in the way that students approach learning and a change in the way that content is delivered. From 45,000 K-12 students taking courses online in 2000, to more than three million K-12 students in 2011,

we can no longer call this a distance learning phenomenon, we must accept it as an alternate form of instruction (Horn & Staker, 2011).

Types of Online Programs for K-12

Online schooling can be classified as either supplemental or as full-time virtual schooling. Supplemental programs offer courses to students who are enrolled in a school that is separate from the online school (Watson, 2010). Students typically enroll in supplemental classes to work ahead, gain credit recovery, or to attend classes not offered at their home school (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Gribbin, 2013; Molnar et al., 2013). Full-time virtual schools offer a fully online education to students.

There are also key differences in delivery of online content. There are basically two forms of delivery, blended or sometimes called hybrid learning, and fully online. Blended learning is a type of delivery whereby students participate in some form of online delivery of content and also attend at a brick-and-mortar location away from home (Bakken & Bridges, 2011; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011). Blended learning is defined as having between 30 and 80% of the course content delivered to students online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Fully online learning is teacher-led entirely through the Internet where the teacher and student are separated geographically (Glass et al., 2011).

Several categories of online education are currently offered in the United States. Watson et al. (2011) describes five different categories of online education; single-district, multi-district, state virtual schools, consortium, and postsecondary. The first type of online school is the single-district school. Single-district online programs are developed by a district for students within that particular district. Oftentimes single-district programs will open enrollment to those outside the district for a tuition fee. This is currently the fastest-growing

segment of online education. From single-district schools the field broadens to the multi-district school. Multi-district online programs typically draw their students from an entire state. This is different than the third category of online school, the state virtual school, because state virtual schools are created by state-level agencies and sometimes charge a fee for their courses. Many of the district and state operated online schools also have the option to join a consortium online program. These programs are developed by varying groups such as districts or education service agencies and provide services to those that join the consortium. The final category of online schools is the postsecondary programs. These programs are usually privately run and tuition-based (Watson et al., 2011).

Development of the Middle-Grades Learner

Jean Piaget and his theory of cognitive development has long been an important resource when discussing how children learn and how to apply that to educational issues (Byrnes, 2001). According to his theory, there are three stages of cognitive development: preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational. Although his theory has been challenged over the years, the basic premise that cognition moves from dependency in early infancy to understanding more observable concrete realities to being able to think abstractly, generally still holds true today (Byrnes, 2001).

As children move through the different stages of cognitive development in an educational setting, it is important that the chosen curriculum complements the varying cognitive ability levels of the intended learner (Byrnes, 2001; Ojose, 2008). According to Piaget's theory, there is a slow progression of understanding as the child matures. A child entering middle-grades is at a cognitive stage where the child is just beginning to move their thinking from concrete to abstract. A child entering high school has moved beyond that

concrete stage into a stage of critical thinking, and reasoning (Ault, 1977). As a result, the way in which a teacher approaches instruction to a developing middle-grades student is much different than that of a high school student who can think much more abstractly (Ault, 1977; Byrnes, 2001; Ojose, 2008).

Students transitioning from elementary school to middle-grades typically face more social-emotional challenges. The middle-grades environment is considered more anonymous where students experience more distant relationships with adults and encounter increasingly more interruptions in peer networks (Juvonen, Le, & Kaganoff, 2004). The transition from middle to high school tends to create more academic difficulties than social-emotional.

Research suggests that students do better in an environment that provides support academically as well as socially (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). According to a study by Juvonen, Le, and Kaganoff (2004) alternate models for middle-grades students such as adjusting student schedules, offering later school start times, or the option to attend school online, allows for better coordination of goals that can foster academic rigor and also provide the much needed social support.

Teaching Middle-Grades Students

The middle-grades teacher holds very different perspectives on effective teaching strategies and approaches taken when interacting with students and attending to student needs, than that of teachers at older or younger grade levels (Adler, Eccles, Midgley, 1984; Byrnes, 2001; Kieffer, Marinell, & Stephenson, 2011). This is due in part to the maturity level of the student population and the fact that the cognitive ability levels of students change as they mature (Ault, 1977; Byrnes, 2001; Ojose, 2008).

Middle-grades students go through a variety of changes over the course of their three-year middle-grades experience. Therefore, depending on the grade level, teacher instruction and approach will vary as well. According to the National Middle-School Association (NMSA) (2000), there is a six to eight year span in physical development and in the seventh grade there is a six to eight year span in academic achievement. This huge difference in physical growth and academic achievement creates a substantial challenge for the middle-grades teacher (Salyers & Mckee, 2003). Children at this age are typically very excitable, easily motivated and eager to explore. Active participation in the learning process is crucial (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). Due to the uniqueness of this age group, educational programs designed specifically to meet the needs of the developmental differences of young adolescents is important. The NMSA (2007) recommends that when planning learning experiences at this age, teachers need to plan curricula around real-world concepts, allow students to interact with peers and adults, and offer opportunities for exploration.

Differing stages of cognitive growth coupled with the many changes in physical and emotional development that children go through during adolescence, creates an extremely varied student population (Byrnes, 2001; Ojose, 2008). A student entering middle-grades at eleven years old is at a much different cognitive, physical, and emotional level than that of a fifteen year old entering high school. Subsequently, teaching strategies and content development must also be adjusted accordingly (Adler et al., 1984).

Teacher Training

Traditional training. The traditional middle-grades teacher receives an undergraduate degree in education which includes coursework in an area of concentration, instructional technology, and instructional strategies along with several months of student

teaching with a veteran teacher (“Middle Grades Education,” 2013). Once employed, teachers are typically offered staff development opportunities throughout the year to help hone their skills and keep abreast of current educational trends and issues (Davidson, 2005). In addition to attending scheduled staff development opportunities, teachers learn to teach from their colleagues and often through on the job experiences (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002).

Online teacher training

Preservice training. State education policy dealing with the field of K-12 online learning is evolving rapidly as more and more national, state, and district level programs are created (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). As virtual schools emerge, a need arises for highly qualified online instructors, which in turn requires training specific to the online educator (Archambault, 2010).

According to Kennedy and Archambault (2012), only 1.3% of teacher education programs have programs in place to prepare educators for the online teaching environment. In the 1970’s teacher education programs were mandated by the U.S. State Department of Education to require some form of practica as a requirement for teacher certification (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). Preservice teachers were required to learn about responsibility, professionalism, equality, caring, and empathy, along with skills in classroom management, reflective teaching, motivation, and differentiation. These same types of practica, adjusted for the online environment, are slowly beginning to make their way to a few K-12 online teacher education programs and field experiences (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

Internally provided training. Currently, the most common form of training in the online environment is internally provided training, followed by informal mentoring (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In a 2009 survey of the institutions with faculty currently teaching online, nearly one-fifth reported that they do not offer any training or even informal mentoring for their online instructors (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The current trend shows an increase in the number of online and face-to-face institutions that offer some form of training to their online instructors. Internally run training has increased from 59% in 2009 to 72% in 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

In one study of instructors engaged in teaching online for the first time, Conrad (2004) illustrated that sufficient preparation is a key factor to the success of the online instructor. Although the instructors in the study had many years of face-to-face, traditional teaching experience, there was a reported need for additional training, preparation, and mastery of basic competencies (Berge, 2008; Conrad, 2004; Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004). Paving the way for quality, online instructional training, in 2009, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) developed national standards for online teaching that were subsequently updated in 2011 (Tracy, Baltunis, & Swiderski, 2011).

Online Teacher Role and Characteristics

The role of an online instructor is challenging and multifaceted in that the instructor must work with students while having minimal social and teaching presence (Arah, 2012; Bawane & Spector, 2009). Although online instructors share many of the same roles and characteristics as face-to-face instructors, there are some unique differences that separate the two (J. Ash, 2004; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Denis & Watland, 2004; Heuer & King, 2004; Teles, Ashton, Roberts, & Tzoneva, 2001). Facilitative teaching, common in traditional

classrooms, is also an important component in the online classroom. However, the absence of visual cues which typically allow the teacher to assess quickly, or take appropriate corrective action is a feature of online instruction that can be a difficult adjustment for instructors to make (K. Ash, 2009; Easton, 2010; Heuer & King, 2004; Liu, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2005; Redmond, 2011; Teles et al., 2001). The inability to see when a student is frustrated, confused or bored is an added barrier requiring the online instructor to have strong virtual management skills and the adeptness to engage students virtually (Easton, 2010; Teles et al., 2001).

Many researchers (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Denis & Watland, 2004; Easton, 2010; Heuer & King, 2004; Teles et al., 2001) agree with Berge's (1998) categorization of the four different roles of an online instructor: pedagogical, technical, managerial, and social. According to Berge (1998) first and foremost, the online instructor's key function is to plan for effective learning using pedagogical practices found to be effective in the online environment. The second responsibility of the online instructor is to deal with technical support ensuring that the technology used is as transparent as possible. Managerial skills are a third major responsibility of the online instructor. The ability to juggle course content, technology, and student needs is a major component of the online instructor's job. Finally, attending to the social needs of the online student through designing friendly social environments in which to learn is an essential component to successful online instruction (Berge, 1998)

Pedagogical. The educational facilitation to ensure that students understand essential concepts, and skills is the pedagogical role of the online instructor (Heuer & King, 2004; Liu et al., 2005). Teaching students knowledge-sharing and knowledge-building skills through

facilitation of interactive, online discussion and research of external resources is an important role of the online instructor (Liu et al., 2005). According to Teles et al. (2001), “The pedagogical role encompasses everything done to support the learning process of individual students or working groups” (p. 47).

Technical. The technical function of the online course varies depending on the provision of separate administrative and technical staff of an institution (Bawane & Spector, 2009). However, when the instructor is responsible for majority of the technology management within the course, the instructor must ensure that the technology used within the course does not become a hindrance to student learning (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Easton, 2010). Berg (2008) contends that making the technology transparent to the student is the ultimate goal of the instructor. Once that goal is reached, the student can focus their attention on the academics necessary for successful learning.

Additionally, the instructor must become proficient with the technology being used in order to transfer the necessary skills to their students to become competent users of the software (Heuer & King, 2004; Teles et al., 2001). “The most effective online teachers find ways to deliver content through Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, and online games, in addition to exploring emerging technologies with educational potential” (K. Ash, 2009, para. 15).

Managerial. Strong managerial skills are required of the online instructor (Berge, 2008). Instructors must maintain student records, facilitate self-directed learning, and monitor student progress (Teles et al., 2001). This can be even more challenging in an online setting in that tracking student attendance and absences are very difficult to do (Easton, 2010). Development of norms, setting agendas, and monitoring the pacing of the course are also

important managerial tasks that the online instructor must create and supervise (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Díaz & Entonado, 2009; Heuer & King, 2004).

Social. “Designing a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted is essential for successful web-based instruction” (Berge, 1998, p. 75). Collaboration is an essential component in the online environment. The instructor is responsible for keeping discussions on track, and building learning communities that establish a culture for productive, positive interaction (Easton, 2010). Heuer and King, (2004) contend that providing students with a friendly, social environment is essential to online learning. The online instructor must have good communication skills in order to diagnose what is happening around learning (K. Ash, 2009; Berge, 2008; Denis & Watland, 2004). The instructor must take a proactive approach and reach out to students by phone, email, or text in order to keep students on track (K. Ash, 2009).

From Face-to-Face to Online

As online instruction becomes more popular, increasingly more traditional learning institutions are turning to distance education to meet the needs of their diverse student population. This results in an increased demand for online instructors, many of whom are being recruited from a traditional, face-to-face learning environment (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Berge, 2008; Clark & Berge, 2003; Dykman et al., 2005; Glass, 2009). There is an assumption by many that teaching online is the same as teaching face-to-face, however, over the past few years, research has challenged this assumption (Bair & Bair, 2011; Gagne & Walters, 2009; Jaffee, 2003; McQuiggan, 2007; Pooneh, 2008; Y Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Studies have shown that there is a vast difference between teaching in a brick-and-mortar building and teaching online (Berge, 2008; Dykman et al., 2005; Hong, 2012; Jaffee, 2003;

Kampov-Polevoi, 2010; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Educators go from the role of an instructor to that of a guide, facilitator, or mentor to their students (Bair & Bair, 2011; Berge, 2008; Redmond, 2011). This shift from being the center of attention to designer and facilitator is a transition that many teachers are unprepared for (Bair & Bair, 2011).

DeGagne and Walters (2009) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis on the experiences of faculty teaching online and concluded that there was a lack of research into understanding the insider perspective of online instructors. Likewise, Kearsley (2010) adds that there is just not enough known about the nature of online teaching in order to recommend improvements.

As online learning becomes more popular, researchers are beginning to explore the experiences of teachers as they transition between teaching in a traditional versus an online learning setting, and examine the transition through a teacher's perspective (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Conceicao, 2006; Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008; Gagne, 2009; Pooneh, 2008; Redmond, 2011; Richard, 2000). Several important themes have emerged from the current research shedding light on the transition process from a teacher's perspective uncovering areas of possible improvement to the transition process. Issues related to time management, communication, staff development, and faculty support appeared in the literature.

Time Management. Time management and the immense amount of time needed to develop, teach and maintain an online course is a recurring theme among instructors in the majority of the research to date (Bair & Bair, 2011; Berge, 2008; Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Conceicao, 2006; Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008; Gagne, 2009; Macy, 2006; Pooneh, 2008; Redmond, 2011; Richard, 2000). There is much more time and effort required to convert traditional ways of teaching to an online format. Converting one credit hour from traditional

to online resulted in a 75% increase in the time it takes to design and develop along with a 125% increase in time required to maintain the online course (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005).

In one study of transitioning instructors at a college in Texas, Richard (2000) observed that many teachers expressed frustration over the fact that course development never seems to end. Just as a traditional teacher modifies and adjusts lessons from year to year taking into consideration changes in standards and student needs, the online teacher must also make those adjustments. The difference is that an online instructor must also redesign and adjust course content within a learning management system, which can be very time consuming (Altalib et al., 2002; J. Cavanaugh, 2005; Richard, 2000).

In a study of faculty members making the transition at a nursing school, Macy (2006) revealed concerns that modifying an existing face-to-face course to an online course was extremely time consuming. Many instructors felt they didn't have the time to invest in adding enhancements like video clips or other forms of multimedia into their lesson, making for a more effective presentation of the content. Additionally, Macy (2006) found that the administration needs to recognize the work load and amount of time it takes to create and manage an online course and take it into consideration when assigning workload.

Teachers also expressed concern about time spent communicating with students (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Gagne, 2009; Macy, 2006). Teaching online is much more time intensive due in part to the fact that students can contact you directly when questions arise (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005). The immediacy of online communication causes many students to think that teachers are on call at all hours of the day and night (Richard, 2000). Teaching students the expectations of an online course and providing strict guidelines and

structure are important components to maintaining a course and preserving precious teacher time (Altalib et al., 2002; Amiel & Orey, 2006; Bair & Bair, 2011)

Communication. Adapting to teaching online requires the teacher to relinquish some control over the learning experience and place it in the hands of the student (Richard, 2000). Therefore, communication between student and teacher in an online setting is critical (Barrett, 2010; Berge, 1998; Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Davidson, 2005; Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004; Natale, 2011; Pooneh, 2008; Slovick, 2011). According to Macy (2006), of the faculty transitioning to teaching online communication was expressed as the most evident difference between teaching face-to-face and teaching online. The lack of eye contact and nonverbal cues are two important types of communication that an online teacher does not have the benefit of using, which makes daily assessment of student understanding more difficult (Macy, 2006; Richard, 2000). In addition, the use of electronic communication can cause problems with interpretation of instruction due to the inability to express emotions electronically (Richard, 2000).

Faculty Support. Due to the increased amount of time and effort it takes to develop and teach an online course, faculty support is a critical factor in a successful transition (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Clark & Berge, 2003; Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008; Macy, 2006; Pooneh, 2008; Redmond, 2011; Richard, 2000). Administration needs to understand up front the demands on an online instructor and adjust teacher workload accordingly (Macy, 2006). Control of number of students in each online class, adjusting the workload for teachers who are developing and teaching courses at the same time, and budgeting for the development of online courses were all issues of concern (Macy, 2006). Having a technology expert available

when issues arise was an expectation shared by many teachers across several studies (Barrett, 2010; Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008; Macy, 2006; Pooneh, 2008).

Staff Development. In a study conducted at the Medical College of Georgia, teachers agreed that the transition would have been much less stressful, and they could have accomplished tasks much more quickly, if additional training had been offered prior to teaching online. In addition, timely professional development throughout their teaching experience may have created a smoother transition (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005). A lack of pre-service and in-service training for transitioning instructors to the online setting seems to be a common theme among many studies to date (Barrett, 2010; Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008; Pooneh, 2008; Slovick, 2011). Being thrust into an online learning environment without adequate training leaves teachers frustrated and overwhelmed (Richard, 2000). The lack of training and guidance by many online institutions has been recognized by the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL). NACOL (2011) has established the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching as a guide for K-12 online teaching and learning. It is encouraged that states, districts, and online programs implement these standards to increase educational opportunities and enhance learning (Tracy et al., 2011).

Online Pedagogy. Common themes of frustration during the transition were expressed with regard to course development issues related to rethinking the educational process. Teachers struggled with trying to convey online what goes on in a traditional classroom (Richard, 2000). Since all teaching in the virtual classroom is done electronically, and students are responsible for their own learning, teachers had to adjust to new ways of presenting the content (Richard, 2000). Oftentimes instructors simply try to replicate online pedagogical practices they were used to using in a classroom (Baran et al., 2011). Redmond

(2011) contends that “The replication of traditional methods does not capitalize on the dynamic nature of a technologically enhanced teaching and learning environment (p. 1051). This can lead to failure if the instructor cannot make the transition from “...teaching from one of disseminating information to one of creating learning environments where students co-construct knowledge through interactions” (Redmond, 2011, p. 1051). As instructors gain confidence and experience in teaching online, significant changes in pedagogical practices are apparent during the transition and growth becomes spiral in nature (Redmond, 2011).

Online Curriculum. According to Ornstein and Hunkins (2009) the way we approach curriculum depends on how we define it. There are five basic definitions of curriculum: (a) a plan for achieving goals, (b) dealing with the learner’s experience, (c) a system for dealing with people, (d) a field of study with its own domains, theory and principles, or (e) in terms of a subject matter (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009). “Variations in the way curriculum is defined provide needed scope and diversity” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009, p. 10).

The scope and diversity of an online environment incorporates all five of Ornstein’s definitions of curriculum. Many online instructors are not only responsible for teaching the curriculum online, but also organizing and developing the delivery of that curriculum (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Pape & Wicks, 2009). For the online instructor, this requires re-thinking the traditional curriculum to fit with the online environment (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005). Hai-Jew (2010) contends that “A well-designed curriculum for online learning nurtures both student learning and student retention” (para. 1). The challenge facing the online instructor is to arrange the course content creating a coherent e-learning path using multiple technologies (Hai-Jew, 2011, para. 1).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Teachers transitioning from a brick-and-mortar classroom to an online setting face challenges that are often not addressed before the change is made (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008; Gagne, 2009; Lari, 2008; Macy, 2006; Redmond, 2011; Richard, 2000). Very little research has been done specifically focused on this transition and more precisely, on the transition at the middle-grades level.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges facing middle-grades teachers transitioning from a brick-and-mortar classroom to that of an online middle-grades environment. Addressed in this section are the study design, sample selection, data collection, and analysis of the data.

Research Design

This qualitative, descriptive, case study of middle-grades teachers is appropriate since this study sought to explore factors that may be influencing the transition between teaching in a traditional setting versus an online setting. Qualitative research seeks to uncover how meaning is constructed and discover how people make sense of their worlds (Merriam, 2009).

Descriptive case studies focus on describing what is prevalent with respect to the phenomenon being studied (Kumar, 2011). A rich, thick description of the phenomenon is the end product of a well-executed, descriptive study (Merriam, 2009). Documenting the lived experiences of transitioning middle-grades teachers to an online setting through individual teacher reflection is powerful information that can be used to enhance and enlighten the experiences of those that follow.

The choice to use a case study research model was made based on the distinctive setting of the study. The setting for this study was uncommon in that the online school that

was studied is one of a kind. The structure of the school setting, teacher-developed curriculum, instructional delivery methods, age of student population, and overall dynamics of the school were unique. Since the variables were embedded in the situation to the point where they might be impossible to identify ahead of time, a case study was the best design choice (Yin, 2003). A case study approach to educational research was considered the best methodology for seeking understanding in order to improve practice (Merriam, 1991).

According to Stake (1995), four aspects of case study research are different from other forms of research. First, it is more concrete since it resonates from our own lived experiences and creates a vivid picture of the phenomenon. Second, the experiences are rooted in context which is different than the more abstract derived from other types of research designs. Third, case studies are more developed by reader interpretation whereby the reader ties their own understandings and experiences to the study. This then leads to generalizations as new data are added to old data. Finally, it is geared towards reference populations determined by the reader. The reader helps extend the generalizations to other like-minded populations.

Rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences during their transition lent itself to the use of a qualitative case study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Interviews and discussions with teachers currently working through, or having completed the transition from a traditional setting to one of an online setting were an important component to this study. Due to the fact that little research has been done on transitioning middle-grades teachers to an online setting, a qualitative case study approach assisted with the exploration of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

Setting

This researcher found only two currently operating, fully online, public middle schools in the state of Georgia; therefore, purposeful sampling was employed (“Georgia Department of Education,” 2012). The program chosen for this study was that of a single-district online program servicing Gwinnett County, Georgia. Gwinnett County is considered to be one of America’s fastest-growing counties. It is located just outside of Atlanta Georgia and includes the largest school district in the state. Gwinnett County Public schools serve 169,500 students in 132 schools (“Gwinnett County Public Schools,” n.d.). Gwinnett Online Campus (GOC) currently provides a full time, online program for grades 4-12 to Gwinnett County residents. This school also offers supplemental courses for students within the district and state-wide on a tuition basis. Currently, GOC offers a fulltime, online education to grades 4-12 along with supplemental programs at the high school level. (“Gwinnett County Public Schools,” n.d.).

Students attending GOC come from all over Gwinnett County, Georgia. At the time of this study, GOC served full-time students in grades 4-12 with additional supplemental programs for grades 9-12. The full-time program was structured so that students could attend daily lessons fully online. Final exams and state testing were required to be done in person. However, once a week every core course offered a face-to-face opportunity for learning as well. These learning labs offered students an opportunity for some face-to-face time with their teacher along with peer interaction. Extra face-to-face tutoring was made available as well upon request.

GOC (“Gwinnett Online Campus,” 2013) is the oldest online program in Georgia, founded in 1999 with an enrollment of 122 high school students. Although GOC has been operating in Gwinnett County since 1999 offering supplemental programs to high school

students, GOC received its charter as a full-time online school from the Gwinnett County Board of Education in March of 2010. After receiving the charter, GOC opened up enrollment to full-time high school students living in Gwinnett County. One year later, GOC began offering courses to full-time, middle-grades students, grades six through eight. In the fall of 2013, GOC opened up enrollment to full-time elementary students in grades four and five (“Gwinnett Online Campus,” 2013). At the time of this study, GOC had an enrollment of approximately 65 full-time, middle grades students.

Participants

The purpose of this study was to investigate and understand the transition of traditional middle-grades teachers to fully online middle-grades teaching. Based on the purpose of the study, seven Gwinnett County middle-grades teachers currently teaching at Gwinnett Online Campus (GOC) were asked to participate. Although several of the participating teachers had taught or were currently teaching grade levels other than just middle school, all had transferred to GOC from a traditional middle-grades setting and all were currently teaching one or more middle-grades courses at GOC. Three of the participants made the decision to transfer from a brick and mortar setting within Gwinnett County to GOC as fulltime teachers in August of 2012, while the remaining participants were new to GOC in the fall of 2013. Full-time student enrollment at GOC for the fall of 2012 included 18 elementary students, 23 middle-grade students and 238 high school students. An alias was assigned to each study participant in order to provide participant anonymity. Prior to interviewing the participants, demographic data was obtained. Table 3.1 displays the results of the demographic data gathered.

Table
Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	Age	TTE	OMTE	Degree	Description
Marina	F	32	7	1	Master's	Marina began teaching part-time at GOC in the fall of 2013. At the time of this study, she was also teaching part-time high school math at Georgia Virtual. Her workload at GOC consisted of teaching three accelerated middle school math courses that contained a total of approximately 20 students.
Jackie	F	32	7	1	Master's	Jackie began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2013 as a middle-grades and high school math teacher. At the time of this study, this teacher was teaching approximately 70 students working out of three different courses.
Doug	M	42	11	2	Master's	Doug began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2012 as a middle-grades language arts teacher. At the time of this study, this teacher was teaching elementary and middle school language arts and social studies. His workload included instruction to approximately 60 fulltime students working out of four different courses.
Sara	F	39	16	2	Specialist	Sara began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2012 as a middle-grades social studies teacher. Currently, she is the lead course developer for GOC.
June	F	51	17	2	Master's	June began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2012 as a middle school health and physical education teacher. At the time of this study, she taught health and physical education to both elementary and middle school students. Her workload included a total of approximately 70 students working out of five different courses.
Carol	F	55	17	1	Bachelor's	Carol began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2008 as an adjunct high school teacher. She then began teaching full-time high school students in the fall of 2011. At the time of tSara began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2012 as a middle-grades social studies teacher. Currently, she is the lead course developer for GOC.his study, she was teaching one middle school science course and two high school science courses that enrolled a total of approximately 60 students.

Dee	F	52	22	2	Specialist	Dee began teaching at GOC in the fall of 2012. She began teaching three middle school science courses containing approximately 60 students. At the time of this study, she was teaching two elementary science courses and one middle school science course with a total student count of approximately 40 students.
Mean		43	13.9	1.6		

Note. TTE = total teaching experience; OMTE = online middle-grades teaching experience; M = mean

Instrumentation

Individual interviews and online journaling were utilized in this study. Analysis of interviews and journal responses in qualitative research can be powerful tools for uncovering feelings that cannot be observed by the researcher (Kumar, 2011).

Interviews. A case study was employed to understand how the participants viewed their transition from a traditional classroom setting to an online environment. In order to fully understand the emotions, feelings, and challenges participants encountered during their transition to an online environment, interviews were conducted. The use of rich, thick description is a crucial component in qualitative research which lends itself to the use of personal interviews and researcher reflection (Creswell, 2009).

Participants were asked specific questions, shown in Appendix A, related to their experiences during the transition to teach online. Interview questions for this research were adapted from similar studies. At the high school level, Faulkner-Beitzel (2008) conducted a study of high school teachers learning to teach online. She studied the experiences of high school teachers and the development of online pedagogy. At the university level three studies were examined. Lari (2008) contributed to the research with a study of faculty transition from traditional to online at the university level, while Richard (2000) studied higher education faculty and their experiences while training for teaching online. Similarly, Gagne (2009)

chose to research the experiences of online instructors currently teaching in higher education. Additionally, Macy's (2006) research on nursing faculty making the change from teaching face-to-face to teaching online also influenced this study. Mezirow's (2006b) transformative learning theory guided the selection of questions for the interviews. According to Mezirow (1981), reflecting critically and then taking action on our transformed perspectives is key to transformative learning. Questions from the above studies were adapted for use in this current study.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory was used to frame the interview questions in this study. Shown in Appendix D, are the interview questions and how they connected to Mezirow's theory of adult learning. According to Mezirow's learning theory, as teachers transition to an online teaching environment, they will be faced with a continuous process of critical reflection and action (Baran et al., 2011).

Online Journals. Participants were given access to a password protected, online website dedicated exclusively to the study. Through the secure website, participants were asked to reflect on and respond to three different writing prompts within the one-month study period. Writing prompts were developed based on previous research from similar studies as listed in Appendix E. Mezirow's transformative learning theory of adult learners framed the writing prompts.

Data Collection Procedures

To protect the rights of all participants, approval was obtained from Gwinnett County Public schools, Gwinnett Online Campus, and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the start of the study. Credibility of results in qualitative research is often an issue that

requires the researcher to evaluate closely the data collection methods (Merriam, 2009). Two qualitative data collection methods were used: participant interviews, and participant journals.

Interviews. Participant interviews were conducted individually in a face-to-face setting. Interviews were held in a private office, free from distraction, located at GOC. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured. The use of semi-structured interviews is advantageous because it provides much deeper depth of data than what can be discovered in a structured interview (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). According to Merriam and Caffarella (1991), open-ended questions are an important way to encourage rich, detailed responses (Appendix A). Follow up questions based on participant responses were initiated to allow the design to emerge naturally, which is an important piece to qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

Online Journals. The final component to this study utilized journaling. Journal prompts were provided in order to examine current beliefs, opinions and practices related to time spent preparing, maintaining and teaching in an online environment (Appendix B). Journal writing offered the participants an opportunity to reflect on and refine ideas, beliefs, and their own responses to the research (Janesick, 1999).

Teachers were asked to respond in writing to three writing prompts over the course of the study. Participants were asked to reflect on why they chose to teach online, what differences they had experienced between teaching in a traditional setting and online, and finally, what they had learned while progressing through the transition. The writing prompts (Appendix B) were developed from each of the three research questions in this study which were also tied to current literature. Participant responses were then analyzed to find patterns and themes in the data.

Data Analysis

Qualitative, descriptive research lends itself to the use of large amounts of rich, descriptive data derived from the participant's own frame of reference (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The data gathered from the study was analyzed using Creswell's (2009) steps of qualitative analysis: (a) collect the data, (b) transcribe the data, (c) code the data based on descriptions and themes. QSR NVivo code-based software was utilized to assist in analyzing the data. As the data was analyzed through the lens of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the exploration of potential influences on the transformation of online teachers was revealed. Teachers reflected on their experiences through the interview process and personal journals. Transformative learning theory argues that reflection is the key component involved in adult learners transforming their perspective in a learning situation (Cranton, 1994). According to Mezirow (2000b) "contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons" (pg. 3) are important to emphasize when analyzing the learning of adults.

Interviews and Online Journals. Interview questions and journal prompts were formed using transformative learning theory as a lens. Mezirow's 11 phases of adult learning guided the formation of the interview questions. Questions begin with reflections on a disorienting dilemma (teaching online for the first time) through the 11 phases ending with questions of integration of newly discovered ideas and skills (Mezirow, 2006).

Audio-taped interviews were conducted face-to-face over a one-month period. Transcription of the audio-taped interviews into text files were completed by Transpeed Transcription Services. Copies of the transcripts were then emailed to study participants for

review and corrections. Journal writing responses were gathered through the Achieve2020 secure website.

Transcripts were downloaded into QSR NVivo coding software to identify patterns within participant responses. In order to form a description and identify themes, codes were then developed to analyze the interview and journal data (Creswell, 2009). After several passes through the data, Mezirow’s 11 phases of transformative learning were grouped into five categories based on commonalities found within participant responses. The grouping of phases and the rationale displayed in Figure 3.1 were then used to further analyze participant responses into subcategories.

Phase and Description	Grouping Rationale
Phase 1 A Disorienting Dilemma	Phases one and two were grouped together during the analysis process. Participants often disclosed feelings of guilt or shame in reference to a disorienting dilemma. Therefore, these two phases were analyzed together as one theme.
Phase 2 A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame	
Phase 3 A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions	Phase three was not grouped with any other phase. Based on participant responses it was determined that the assumptions participants had while making the transition were strong enough that this phase should stand on its own.
Phase 4 Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change	Phases four and five were grouped together during the analysis process. This decision was based on participants’ responses. Participants’ often uncovered shared discontent while seeking out new options.
Phase 5 Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions	
Phase 6 Planning of a course of action	
Phase 7 Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans	Phases six, seven, and eight were grouped together during the analysis process. Based on participant responses, it was found that these three phases are tied very close together.
Phase 8 Provisional trying of new roles	
Phase 9 Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships	Phases eight, nine and ten were grouped together during the analysis process. Based on participant responses, these three phases worked together to form a culminating end to the learning process.
Phase 10 Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships	
Phase 11 A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective	

Figure 3.1. Transformative Learning Theory Phase Categories for Analysis

Content analysis performed within the QSR NVivo software using both interview and journal responses was then used to further organize the data for examination. The software assisted with identifying themes within each of the groups of phases. Word frequency and common phrases within each phase group were chosen using QRS NVivo which helped to further analyze associations within each group of phases gleaning insight into participant responses (“QSR International,” 2014). Using this iterative process based solely on related words and phrases, Table 3.2 shows a frequency report developed which further assisted in revealing four emerging themes.

Table 3.2

Word Frequencies

Theme	Frequency	% Shown	% Total
Training	698	11.3%	1.9%
Communication	3659	59.0%	13.7%
Time/Work	670	10.8%	2.2%
Technology	67	1.1%	0.9%
Relationships	145	2.3%	7.3%
Control/Power	962	15.5%	2.6%
Total	6201	100.0%	28.6%

Four themes emanated from participant responses: (a) a lack of preparation created challenges for teachers, (b) loss of control or power as students are responsible for their own learning at home, (c) stronger student relationships are built and communication is much more frequent and persistent, (d) workload is intensified. Once these four themes were revealed, the results were then used to answer the study research questions.

Validation of the findings was done through member checking. Participants were allowed to review their statements for accuracy and completeness to ensure that the representation of the perspective of the participant was accurate (Creswell, 2008; Gall et al., 2007; Merriam, 2009). None of the participants requested any changes.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

The data provided by the participants in the study was limiting due to the small sample size. Although participants were encouraged to provide honest, comprehensive responses, some information may have been held back. To ensure thick, rich data, there was no time limit for participant responses and all interviews were held in a comfortable setting off campus.

Further limitations might have occurred with respect to the researcher's influence on the study. As part of the middle-grades online teaching team that comprised the participants in this study, bias might have been introduced into the study. According to Moustakas (1994), epoche is a process whereby the researcher explores his or her own experiences related to the phenomenon in order to become more aware of personal assumptions. These assumptions are then set aside, or bracketed in order to examine the phenomenon without prejudice (Merriam, 2009). Member-checking also helped reduce bias. Honest, thoughtful, and rich responses to questions about experiences transitioning to an online format were an important assumption with this study.

Delimitations exist with the purposeful sampling methods used to choose the participants in this study. Due to the newly emerging field of full-time, middle-grades online education, potential participants were limited. This study was delimited to seven, full-time Gwinnett Online Campus middle-grades teachers.

Summary

Research studies have found that teaching approaches commonly used within the traditional classroom such as, lecture and direct instruction, do not translate well into the online environment because the two settings are different. Partly to the fact that the online

instructor does not have the benefit of visual cues, and immediate response from students (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Lockyer, Sargeant, Curran, & Fleet, 2006). It then follows that teachers making the transition from a brick and mortar classroom to an online classroom will likely encounter situations unfamiliar to them.

Through the course of this study, this researcher explored the challenges many teachers faced when taking on the role of an online teacher. This study sought to investigate by way of personal interviews and participant journals, the experiences teachers encountered after making the move to an online teaching environment. At the time of this study, fully online middle schools were uncommon, and as a result, the research was lacking in this area. Understanding the transition process that teachers go through at the middle-grades level will have implications for other newly forming online middle schools.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

A qualitative, descriptive case study design provided the framework for this study. The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher transition from a traditional middle-grades setting, to an online middle-grades environment. The objective of the findings from this study is to provide recommendations for teachers who might be contemplating this same transition. The overarching questions that guided this study are:

1. How does a middle-grades teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners?
2. What do middle-grades teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles, and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners?
3. What issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners?

Demographic information will be discussed first using the information gathered from study participants through the questions provided in Appendix F. Teachers' perspectives themed towards Mezirow's 11 phases of adult transformative learning theory will then be presented, followed by the coded responses. The study research questions will be addressed in conjunction with each of the pertinent phases as information is gleaned from emerging themes. To increase the credibility of the study, supporting quotes will be used to provide rich description and in-depth information.

Study Participant Demographics

Participants had between less than one and as many as ten years of teaching experience in an online setting while teaching experience in a traditional environment ranged from seven to 18 years (Table 4.1). The participants ranged in age from 32 to 44 years old. There were six females and one male participant. One participant earned a bachelor's degree in education, four of the participants obtained a master's degree in education and two participants earned a specialist's degree in education. One participant earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and then obtained certification and a master's degree in education, while the remaining participants earned their degrees in education. All are considered highly qualified to teach in the state of Georgia. Four participants were in their second year of teaching online middle school, two participants were in the middle of their first year of teaching online middle school, while one participant was in her 10th year teaching online, one of which was in middle school.

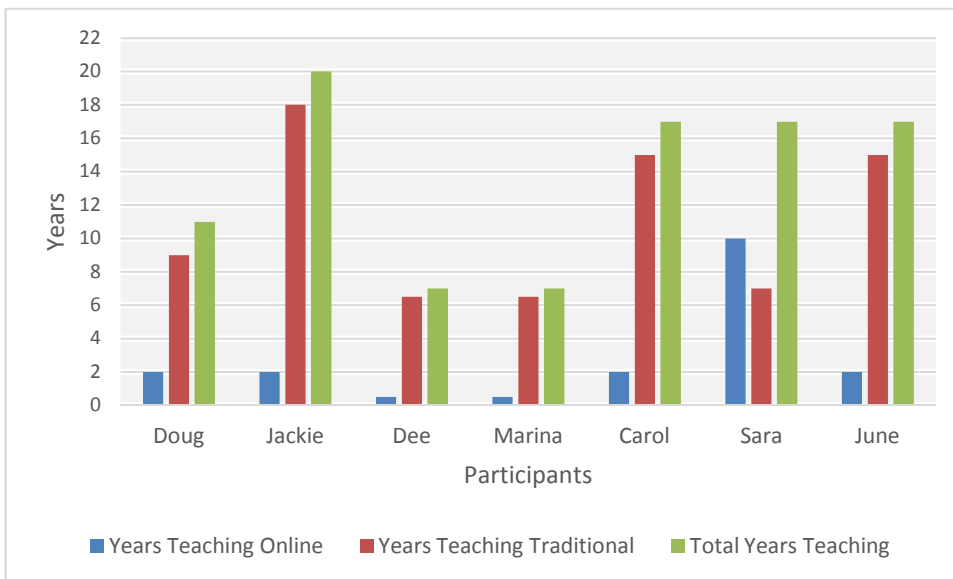


Figure 4.1. Participant teaching experience demographics.

Using the demographic information provided in Table 3.1, and study participant responses to the interview questions and journal responses, there did not appear to be any noticeable differing of participant responses based on age, gender, or highest degree earned. Since participants were all responding to questions that focused on their initial transition experiences, none of the responses stood out as being extremely different.

Mezirow’s Eleven Phases of Transformative Learning

Phase 1 and 2: A disorienting dilemma followed by self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame. From interview questions 3, 6, 7, and 9 along with journal response 1b, five themes emerged as disorienting dilemmas and feelings of guilt or shame for teachers making the transition. These themes are provided in Table 4.1. The results indicate that all seven participants believe that their initial disorienting dilemmas revolved around anxiety and frustration over feelings of loss of control, lack of preparation, the high level of technology knowledge requirements, extreme time commitment, and adjusting to the differences teaching an online middle-grades student versus a student in a traditional setting.

Table 4.1

Phase 1 and 2: Online Teachers’ Perceptions of Disorienting Dilemmas Followed by a Self-Examination with Feelings of Guilt or Shame

Online Teachers’ Themes	OT Doug	OT Jackie	OT Dee	OT Marina	OT Carol	OT Sara	OT June	Total
Loss of Control/Power	X	X		X	X	X	X	6
Lack of Preparation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
High Level Technology Knowledge Requirements	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Workload	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Teaching the Online Middle-Grades Student is Different Than in a Traditional Setting	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7

Note. OT = online teacher.

Loss of control/power. All of the participants expressed feeling a loss of control or powerlessness stemming from the inability to physically monitor student engagement and activity as is typical in a traditional classroom setting. Students are ultimately responsible for their own learning and parents are responsible for monitoring their child's progress. When Jackie was asked what advice could be given to teachers considering a move to online teaching, she stated that the most difficult aspect of the transition is:

Giving up control because you can't sit with them [students] each day and tell them "you do this and then let me check that." You have to count on them [students] being responsible or their parents being responsible for keeping them on track (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Sara shared similar concerns. She not only worries that her students are thoroughly working through the lessons, she also fears that they are skipping lessons entirely and the online teacher would not be aware until an assessment possibly reveals gaps in learning.

Again, just not being in front of the students and not knowing what they're truly receiving and what they're missing. I feel like in an online environment there's a lot of trust that you're having to put in the student that they're going through every part of the lesson. I think that's the difficult part because they may be skipping around and they skip a lesson, and you don't know that until they go to their assessment and then at that point you're having to re-teach or reevaluate and it's too late (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Similarly, June expressed many of the same concerns as Sara over student responsibility and accountability.

It's still challenging to me to know are my students doing all the work that really they should be doing. They can click into a lesson and click out, but I don't really know that they have gone through the lesson. Some of the work that they submit I question if they've completed it. I guess I had more confidence, they could have taken homework home in a brick and mortar school and a parent could have done it, but I never felt that. I never really felt that my student wasn't doing their own work and now I do. I do question that and I have problems with that. And tests, I still don't feel that our tests are as secure and know that it's the student's knowledge and not somebody else's knowledge.

I always felt like I needed a lot of control in my classroom and you have to let a lot of that go because you're dependent on technology and technology doesn't always work (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Doug added his feelings of loss of power as a teacher. He questioned how the newly adopted standards for teacher accountability might translate in an online teaching environment. He adds that online students are, for the most part, responsible for their own learning. There is not a teacher standing by their desk prompting students when necessary or giving them immediate feedback when problems arise. This dilemma caused Doug some anxiety over student test scores, and subsequently, teacher accountability. As Doug expressed, not being in control of curriculum delivery "...is frightening, especially with the current trend of measuring teacher effectiveness through student test scores" (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Lack of preparation. A lack of preparation was the strongest theme that surfaced in this phase of transition. All participants experienced many different levels of unpreparedness with the overarching theme being not knowing what to expect or even what their job would entail. June laughingly shared, “I’ll never forget when we got together in July and said, ‘So what do we do? Just sit at the computer and wait for them to e-mail us? How do we spend our days?’” (personal communication, February 19, 2014). Once the school year began, all of the participants expressed feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and challenged in their new positions. Sara confided:

The things overwhelming was learning all the technology, learning the learning labs, coming into a brand new system and having to try and figure out, I mean you don’t know what you don’t know until you don’t know it. Just trying to figure out all those things was the hardest part (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Marina discussed the fact that she shared her lack of preparedness with her students. Since teaching middle-grades children in an online environment is very unique, the students attending were working through similar challenges. Marina revealed:

I knew that when I walked in if I didn’t know how to use the SMART board (interactive whiteboard) they did, and they enjoyed it. And they would use it and they enjoyed showing me. And I think it [learning technology together] helped us build our relationship even more and now we joke about it. So they walked me through it and I think that was a good experience for them as well. You know this is new and different and there’s a learning curve for all of us and to see that I struggle with something as well, helped them those first students that I had (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Carol agreed with Marina and disclosed:

I did feel a little unprepared the first couple of weeks, but my kids were equally under prepared because of orientation and stuff. And so even though the kids and I kind of learned it together I was ahead of them and so I didn't feel any shame regarding the kids and how they were educated. I felt pretty good about that (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Answering student and parent questions in the first few weeks left several participants a little nervous due to their level of preparedness. June divulged feeling guilty at not readily having answers to questions posed by the students and their families. She stated that:

Oh I definitely felt guilty for the families because I didn't feel [prepared to answer questions], in my personality I felt like not being prepared or available to answer questions when they were presented and having to reach out to somebody else, but I kind of think it made me a better person because it forced me to reach out to other people and I feel like that was okay (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

The first few weeks were also challenging for Dee. Looking back, she realized that none of the newly hired middle-grades teachers were prepared for what was to come. Not knowing the students view of the content and subsequently, not knowing how to answer their questions was a struggle.

High level technology knowledge requirement. When initially hired to teach online, participants all felt as though they were technologically savvy enough to handle the technology demands required of the position. During the first few weeks of the new school year, several participants expressed unease at the amount and level of technological issues

that arose. This was due in part to the newness of the online environment as a whole, and not being prepared for the types of technological issues that might arise.

When Doug was asked about the first few weeks of his transition, he had mixed feelings. He felt confident in his skills teaching middle-grades students, however teaching them online where technology skills were extremely important, and not knowing their level of experience, was worrisome. Although Doug felt comfortable using technology, he still had apprehension about the learning management software that was required for teaching online.

According to Doug:

I would say on a scale of one to ten I probably felt a five. The reason I would say five is that I taught middle-school face to face. I felt like I knew middle-school kids because I taught them for nine years so I felt like that was a plus. I also felt like I was pretty comfortable with technology, you know all of that stuff, so I wasn't scared of that sort of stuff. And I had developed some of that [course content] and that's what I was going to be teaching so I even felt comfortable with that. Some of the reason it's not a higher score though is it's a brand new school, it's a brand new environment. Even though I was familiar with everything, I wasn't familiar that much with D2L (Desire to Learn online learning management software) and how the actual courses were. I wasn't familiar with any of the students that I taught. I didn't know their level of technology acumen and how much they knew coming to the school academic-wise. So there was definitely, I think a lack of preparedness.

I think the challenge as far as from the technology aspect, I'm not sure I'd say it's a challenge, but the technology issues can be a stumbling block if you are constantly having to log on and fix (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

When Marina was asked about her comfort level using the technology required to teach online, she added, “The technology, not so comfortable. I think you just learn and handle it as it goes” (personal communication, February 24, 2014). She went on to reveal that in a traditional classroom setting, you can use the strategies you were taught in college to teach students and then adjust as you grow and learn. However, at the time she received her certification to teach, she was never exposed to teaching technologies used in an online environment. Marina revealed:

And I was not taught any of the D2L (Desire to Learn Learning Management software) or technology components, and I never used a Smart board, any of it, before I came to online. I had some anxiety with proficiency of both the technology components of teaching online as there are so many different aspects and the fact that technology is continually changing (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Sara agreed with Marina in that she felt overwhelmed learning all of the new technology. Sara stated that “Just trying to figure out all those things was the hardest part” (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Workload. This theme revealed that participants felt extreme pressure to be able to accomplish all of the tasks necessary in an online environment. Tasks that were mentioned include communication with students and parents, developing and repairing lessons, and managing the courses on a daily basis. Participants had the added requirement of holding one face-to-face class session (Learning Lab) each week for each of the classes that they taught. Participants were responsible for from four to nine different courses containing from two to twenty two students.

June compared her time spent teaching online to that of a traditional teaching environment as "...a different type of teaching in terms of time" (personal communication, February 19, 2014). She goes on to say that "I think it is just a different type of time that's spread out more. It's not as concise as a school day" (personal communication, February 19, 2014). This sentiment was shared with others such as Doug who stated "I think time-wise it was probably, it was a difficult transition in the fact that I had never done it before and I was used to the brick and mortar, it was different" (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

When participants were asked whether they had to develop lessons for their courses, five out of seven participants replied that during their first online teaching experience, they were also doing lesson development. Participants added that trying to do both teach and develop at the same time, was very time consuming and the increased workload was challenging. The time involved in creating online lessons requires much more planning and effort than in a traditional setting. Doug, Sara, Carol, Dee, and Marina concurred with June's statement that developing online lessons was:

Much more challenging. You have to be very specific about what you want. You have to be very specific of how a student is going to read what you presented and be more mindful of that. So much more time and effort goes into planning a lesson online. And even when you want to change a lesson so much more time goes into changing a lesson and keeping it up to date. You know you can't just look up a statistic and say well okay this is a new statistic. You've got to go make sure you've got the correct information, put it in the lesson, [and] upload the lesson (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Sara added that she often:

spent eight to ten hours per lesson. I would never have done that. I would never do that in the brick and mortar. I always felt prepared in brick and mortar, but I would never put that much time and energy into one lesson” (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Doug agreed with Susan when he said:

If it took me thirty minutes to come up with a lesson or an hour to come up with a lesson for brick and mortar, it might take eight hours to come up with a clear lesson for online (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Student and parent communication was another time consuming task that was revealed by participants. Participants concurred that in a brick and mortar setting, teachers communicate verbally with students daily, on the spot, within the classroom and tend to only communicate with parents during conferences or when a problem arises. In the online setting, communication with students is intensified. Since student assignment feedback is done through course dropboxes, participants have to type in their comments to students, which can take extra time. The quality of teacher feedback is also a consideration that adds to issues with time. When having to respond to student work using text as feedback instead of verbal feedback, participants have to be very detailed in their responses to ensure students fully understand. When asked about time management when teaching online, Marina shared that she often felt overwhelmed when grading student work. She stated:

It’s making sure that, basically you can have e-mails come in and you can have assignments come in at any time. And so I can sit down and my dropboxes are full and grade all sixth grade papers, then I do seventh and then I do eighth. And if I go

back and I click on sixth grade there's more. And it [student dropbox] was clear five minutes ago" (Marina, personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Parent communication is also a time factor that teachers face when managing their time teaching in an online environment. Due to the maturity level of middle-grades students, parents are forced to be much more involved in the learning that takes place. Therefore, oftentimes parents must also learn the content and the technology right along with their child and consequently, parents are in contact with teachers regularly with questions or concerns. Sara talked about the fact that she found "the level of parental involvement is extreme in the online setting versus the traditional setting." She continued with "It is sometimes very time consuming to interact with the parents in regards to the details of the course" (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Carol agreed when she stated:

It's not all of the students, but there are certain few that are pretty high maintenance and you're constantly having to explain to the kid and explain to the parent. I think that's my biggest challenge (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Many of the tasks involved in teaching online take a lot longer than is typical in a traditional classroom. Sara pointed out that "You would think the opposite with all the technology available at our fingertips, but it is often the technology which is requiring you to do more work" (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Teaching the online middle-grades student is different than in a traditional setting.

Prior to teaching online, participants experienced concern over the type of student they would be required to teach in an online setting. Thinking about the middle-grades students that study participants were used to teaching in a traditional classroom, it was difficult for many to envision what type of student would choose to enroll in an online middle-grades and how

teaching an online middle-grades student might be different. There was also some apprehension about whether middle-grades students would have the necessary technology skills to effectively navigate the online courses.

All of the participants discovered that although they felt they were much more connected with their students in an online setting than they ever were in the brick and mortar environment, frequent communication with students and strong student relationships were required to make it work. Doug realized that not seeing students on a daily basis can cause problems if that communication between the teacher and student is not established (personal communication, February 17, 2014). Marina concurred when she added:

In a brick and mortar I spent a lot of time building relationships, icebreakers and everything, and you really don't have the opportunity to do that online, so trying to find different ways to do that is critical (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Doug explained that his challenge connecting with his students required that he spend time creating a classroom culture that made all of his students feel comfortable and a part of the class (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Several participants struggled with communicating with their students online and creating a relationship. Dee pointed out that "...it doesn't matter where you teach or the avenues used to teach middle-grades, they [middle-grades students] are challenging. Dee went on to explain that when you couple the challenging middle-grades student with the online environment, there is a lot of reaching out and "...tapping them on the shoulder all the time to keep them going" that needs to be done continuously (personal communication, February 19, 2014). June found that not seeing the students face to face could be difficult

when it came to communication and she felt that in the beginning, her methods of communication were not where they needed to be. June also added that,

Besides the fact that I didn't feel prepared, I didn't know how this age group would handle this environment. I even questioned it with high school students. I thought it was appropriate for college age students. High school, I had some questions about it when they opened the high school. And middle-school, I had even more questions of how this truly would be effective for students at this age to be working just online. (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

The added responsibility for students to navigate their own learning at such a young age was also a concern that participants shared. In an online environment, students are put in charge of their own learning, shared Doug (personal communication, February 17, 2014). This created a situation where the parent often had to step in and take control of the home learning environment of the student. As Jackie observed, parents had to take on a facilitative role in their child's learning. Parents had to monitor their child's progress much more closely to ensure their child was doing the necessary work (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Sara added that there was a level of trust that that the student was actually going through the lesson thoroughly and that they were doing all of the required assignments and practice that went along with it (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Furthermore, June questioned the integrity of assessments being taken online at home. She feared that students were not always taking assessments or doing work on their own (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Research question one asked how a middle-grades teacher describes the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners. The first two phases of

Mezirow’s adult learning theory captured teachers’ initial viewpoints as they began their transition. A lack of preparation, increased workload and technology knowledge, the differences between teaching online and face-to-face, along with feeling a loss of control all created real challenges for these teachers.

Phase 3: A critical assessment of assumptions. From interview questions 3, 4, 6, and 7, and journal response 1a, three themes emerged related to teachers’ assessment of assumptions prior to teaching online, and are provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Phase 3: Online Teachers’ Assessment of Assumptions Prior to Teaching Online								
Online Teachers’ Themes	OT Doug	OT Jackie	OT Dee	OT Marina	OT Carol	OT Sara	OT June	Total
Teaching Online Would be Similar to Traditional Teaching	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Technology Requirements Would Be Manageable	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
More Flexibility and Smaller Workload	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7

Note. OT = online teacher.

Teaching online would be similar to traditional teaching. All participants felt that there would be similarities between teaching online and teaching in a traditional setting. Several expressed concerns over how to translate teaching in a brick and mortar classroom where the teacher is physically present, to teaching online; especially when it came to the integrity of student work. One participant shared her hopes that teaching online would naturally segue into strong collaboration between content areas. Subsequently, she was disappointed that this did not occur. However, others celebrated the many avenues for differentiation of student instruction in an online environment. When Carol was asked her assumptions about being an online teacher she described:

When I did begin teaching online, I thought it would be like face to face teaching. I even printed each assignment and placed it in a student paper folder. This did not last long, but I did not have a good basis for how online teaching was different (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

June felt that an online teaching position would allow her to focus more on just teaching and less on the ‘extras’ such as discipline, and all of the additional duties often assigned to teachers in traditional settings. She was disappointed that she spent the majority of her time trying to motivate students and keeping online lessons updated. She stated:

I thought I would be able to collaborate with other subject areas and combine our curriculums. I really thought this job would be all about teaching the material.

Unfortunately these assumptions have not been experienced. I do not spend most of my time focusing on teaching, I spend most of my time dealing with students who aren’t doing what they are supposed to be doing and updating my lessons (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Prior to teaching online, Marina thought that much of what she used to do in a brick and mortar classroom would easily translate into an online environment. She discussed that differentiation in an online setting was easier to attain due to the many different media resources available to students. She stated:

A lot of the traditional teaching methods can transfer over to teaching online.

Basically a good teacher is a good teacher no matter whether they are online or in a traditional classroom because their goal is to help the students learn and succeed.

Differentiation can be accomplished through a variety of assessment methods, alternate assignments, and various interactive activities (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Technology requirements would be manageable. All participants felt confident in their ability to handle the technology involved in teaching online courses. Dee, Doug, Sara, and June expressed that learning any new technology would not be a problem for them (personal communication, February 19, 2014; personal communication, February 17, 2014; personal communication, February 26, 2014; personal communication, February 19, 2014). Doug stated that “I felt confident that I could master the technology. I felt that my technological proficiency was strong and that I could learn any skills that I lacked” (personal communication, February 17, 2014). Participant assumptions about being capable of managing the technology requirements were correct in that all participants agreed that although time consuming, and frustrating at times, they had all been able to master the required technology and continued to learn new technology. All participants had a confidence in their technology skills before taking on this online position and agreed with Doug that in an online environment technology is constantly changing and it is just a part of the job to stay

abreast of those changes and learn as you go (personal communication, February 17, 2014). Dee, Doug, and Sara expressed similar opinions when they claimed that the teachers who were initially hired to teach online at this school, all had very strong technology skills in the traditional setting, and typically were the forerunners in technology usage at their old schools as well (personal communication, February 19, 2014; personal communication, February 17, 2014; personal communication, February 26, 2014).

More flexibility and smaller workload. All participants held the assumption that online teaching would yield more flexibility. Five participants shared the expectation that teaching online would allow a more flexible schedule allowing for more time with family. When asked why she decided to teach online, Marina stated:

I decided to transition from a traditional middle-school to an online school mainly for the flexibility of hours and ability to spend more time with my kids at home. The traditional school doesn't allow for any flexibility in hours and is twice as challenging to schedule a substitute than to be at school leaving my little opportunity to be involved in my children as much (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

June had similar assumptions when she talked about her decision to teach online.

Initially I thought the transition would allow for me to have more time to collaborate with my teammates and do lessons/activities that connected my class to theirs. I also thought this type of teaching would provide a more flexible schedule for me as a mother of three young children (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

All but Doug and Jackie assumed that there would be a smaller workload involved in teaching online. As Jackie stated “I assumed it would be just as much work, but in a different manner” (personal communication, February 26, 2014). June added “I really thought this job

would allow me to focus just on teaching and not the extras” (personal communication, February 19, 2014). Sara anticipated that it would be easier than in the brick and mortar with more down time (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Phase 4 and 5: Recognition that the process of transformation is shared by others, and exploration of options for new roles and relationships. From interview questions 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 along with journal responses 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d, the themes that emerged as challenges during the transition that were shared by others who had negotiated similar challenge are provided in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Phase 4 and 5: Online Teachers’ Recognition That the Process of Transformation is Shared by Others That Have Negotiated a Similar Change, and Exploration of Options For New Roles and Relationships

Online Teachers’ Themes	OT Doug	OT Jackie	OT Dee	OT Marina	OT Carol	OT Sara	OT June	Total
Lack of Preparedness	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Changes in Teaching Role	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Changes in Student Role	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Changes in Parent Role	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Increased Workload Requirements	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7

Note. OT = online teacher.

Lack of preparedness. All participants shared feelings of being unprepared when making the transition to teaching online. Participants also agreed that the strong relationship built between colleagues during the transition and the fact that all participants shared similar struggles during that time, helped to get them through the challenges they faced. Dee expressed her feelings during the first two weeks.

It is really all a blur. The first two weeks were so intense and the learning curves are so high I kind of felt, I was so glad we were working as a team because if I had been

all by myself I really would have thought it was me. So I will say the first few weeks were very challenging. I was not; I don't think any of us were really truly prepared for what it was going to be like. I feel like we really, we did get hit by a Mack Truck. We didn't know what was going on (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Sara had similar feelings regarding the importance of the relationships built with colleagues during the transition and being unprepared. She claimed that:

We all came in together. We were all trouble shooting together and going through it together and helping each other. I think it's harder when you're on your own and I think as a group we could vocalize [concerns] to administrators better (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Doug continued with his belief that others had most likely experienced similar situations, but that this small group of teachers making the transition to teaching online middle-grades were unique enough, that he felt that they were on their own and therefore needed to lean on each other for support (personal communication, February 17, 2014). June added "I started at a time when several other teachers were just starting off, and we all found great comfort in having each other to learn with" (personal communication, February 19, 2014). Jackie had a similar viewpoint when she stated "I think back to when we all sat together and worked together and we worked it out together. If I didn't have that, I would be totally lost" (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Marina felt comfort knowing that "...when I didn't know something, one thing that I always felt very grateful for was that I knew there were people I could ask" (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Changes in teaching role. Participants expressed their opinion that their teaching role had changed from the traditional direct instructor role found in most traditional classrooms, to that of facilitator, coach, or director. Dee described her changing role as follows:

I think in the classroom I was much more, this isn't the best analogy but I was much more of a drill sergeant. I was putting them through their paces. Okay we're doing to do this, now we're going to do this, now we're going to do this, now we're ready for the test. Whereas here, it's like here's the information. And I'm putting the responsibility back on them so I am a little bit more of a cheerleader and a little bit more of a coach, here's the information. Come on let's do this. I think in the regular brick and mortar there's a lot more control (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Marina said that her role as facilitator was similar to the role she took in the classroom. She stated that "I still have to facilitate, it's just a different method" using email and learning labs instead of the fact-to-face interactions typically experienced in a traditional classroom (personal communication, February 24, 2014). June felt as though she had a dual role as an online teacher. When students were working from home, she felt more like a facilitator, when students were on campus during learning labs, she took on the typical teacher role (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Changes in student role. Changes in the role of the student were observed by all participants. Dee argued that in a traditional school setting, typically students were the recipients of the knowledge that the teacher exposed to them (personal communication, February 19, 2014). Doug pointed out that "Teachers have ways of insuring that students physically in the classroom receive instruction, no matter what, but that is not always the case

online” (personal communication, February 17, 2014). In the online middle-grades environment, students must take on the role of instructor, to some extent. Dee, June, Doug, and Sara all mentioned that students are responsible for viewing the content, completing and turning in assignments on time, and reaching out to teachers to ask questions when needed (personal communication, February 19, 2014; personal communication, February 19, 2014; personal communication, February 17, 2014; personal communication, February 26, 2014). Moreover, Doug added that students must also take on the role of active communicator with their teachers; a role that is characteristically not present in a traditional setting, and one in which middle-grades students tend to struggle with in the online setting. Doug went on to say that:

The student has an expanded role in the online classroom. He or she cannot sit back in the classroom and “absorb” teaching. Students have to actively engage in the lessons and communicate with the teacher much more frequently than in a brick and mortar classroom (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

As a former online high school teacher, Carol revealed that teaching online high school students was much different than online middle-grades students due to maturity level (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Jackie, a former high school teacher in a traditional setting, who now teaches middle and high school online students, concurred stating that high school students don’t require as much hand-holding as the online middle-grades students. She said that online middle-grades students need their parents to help keep them on track, whereas online high school students are more self-motivated. Jackie also added that she often had to scale back her approach to teaching middle-grades students because she felt

like she was talking over them at times due to their maturity level (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Changes in parent role. In an online middle-grades environment, participants argued that parents must take a more active role in their child's learning. Participants all had similar comments to Carol's when she mentioned that "...the level of parental involvement is extreme" when working with online middle-grades students (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Since this role and degree of involvement was new to parents, Marina suggested that she must also teach the parents how to manage their new role. She pointed out that:

In middle-school they need a lot of hand-holding. There needs to be an understanding between the parents, the student, and the teacher as to defined roles. What I'm finding is that my role is telling the parents a little bit more of what they need to be doing. I'm working on how to do that very professionally and just very seamless, I'm working on that. That role doesn't exist [in a traditional setting]. That role of okay, as a parent this is what you need to be doing at home with your child. Because the parent becomes almost like a facilitator during that time, making sure that their child is sitting down looking at the computer doing homework, doing stuff, because I'm not there. So portraying that importance to the parent is something that I'm trying to figure out (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Increased workload. "There were many times that I felt overburdened, but our group did an excellent job of helping each other out and providing support to each other" expressed June when asked about her transition to teaching online (personal communication, February 19, 2014). This sentiment was conveyed by all participants. Although participants

discovered that they were faced with an increased workload, knowing that they had colleagues in the same situation providing support was a comfort to them. Dee described the workload as “...an avalanche” if you didn’t stay caught up, and like “...getting hit with a Mack truck.” She then followed with “I was glad we were working as a team” (personal communication, February 19, 2014). Sara described feeling as though “...we were all doing the work of three or four people” but we were “all trouble shooting together...and helping each other” (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Finally, Dee argued that even after her first year teaching online, she felt as though “...we are still in the mode where we’re working practically 24/7” personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Phase 6, 7 and 8: Planning a course of action, acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the plan, and trying on of new roles. From interview questions 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17, the themes that emerged as teachers planned a course of action, acquired the necessary knowledge and skills, and tried on their new roles are provided in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Phase 6, 7 and 8: Online Teachers’ Planning of a Course of Action, Acquire Knowledge and Skills, and Trying on New Roles.

Online Teachers’ Themes	OT Doug	OT Jackie	OT Dee	OT Marina	OT Carol	OT Sara	OT June	Total
Due to Change in Teaching Role, Reach Out to Students and Parents to Build Relationships	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Learn to Manage Workload Through Flexibility, Organization, and Balance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7

Note. OT = online teacher.

Due to a change in teaching role, reach out to students and parents to build relationships. All participants agree that it was important to build relationships with students and their parents. In the online environment, participants argued that due to the change in

teaching role to facilitator, and not seeing the students on a daily basis, building strong relationships with students and parents was imperative. Participants searched for new ways to engage with their students virtually. Doug argued that since he spent less physical time with his students, he had to "...actively engage students in communication, and build relationships outside of the classroom." He went on to state that:

Since I only see student one hour a week in the classroom, I have to reach out to them individually or in small groups to foster a personal relationship...a key component in their academic success....especially at an online school. This can be done through email, feedback, video-notes, audio, texts, phone calls, conferencing, advisement, letters, notes sent home, clubs, lunch with students, after-school tutoring or help sessions, rich experiences (field trips), Collaborate sessions, etc. (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Since the majority of the student's time is spent at home alone at a computer, in the online setting it is essential that we "...reach out even more to make sure we don't lose any kids through the cracks" stated Dee (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Marina disclosed that she was emailing, and making phone calls much more than she ever did in the traditional setting. She felt a sense of responsibility for what her students learned even though she had no control over what the student was doing with their time at home. With the added responsibility on the student, to learn the curriculum on their own, Marina argued that a strong relationship with her students was crucial. Marina also made the point that:

In a totally online setting this [building relationships] is still very challenging and is hugely based on the participation from the student on whether I can build that

relationship as easily. If they don't respond to e-mails or discussion boards or come to chats it is very challenging to build that relationship where they trust me and know that I am here to help them (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Dee discovered that her communication with her online students was more individualized than in the brick and mortar setting. She stated:

I did some thinking about it and I really believe it's about the amount of individualized communication online versus classroom. I believe that in the classroom teaching as it is set up here in our county where basically you're teaching four classes in a day in middle school, and most of us teach the same subject four times to four different groups of kids coming in and out, in and out, you're standing at the door even as I used to do and greet them as they come in, and do all this good teaching because that's what you do, but even with all that that's pretty superficial. And my communication with that class of twenty-eight kids is still me talking to all of them, the whole class 90-95% of the time. Very little one on one individual communication. Whereas in online study it's almost all individual (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Doug discovered that communicating with students in other school activities also helped to build that relationship. He stated:

While attendance in face-to-face class or virtual class can be skipped, I believe that more and frequent contact with the online students helps them to succeed. I think that students enjoy attending "virtual" classes or even brick and mortar help sessions, tutoring, and field trips (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Doug, Dee and Marina commented on the importance of not only communicating with students regularly, but opening up the lines of communication with parents and helping to

guide them in their new role as an at home facilitator to their child's learning (personal communication, February 17, 2014; personal communication, February 19, 2014; personal communication, February 24, 2014). Marina felt as though she needed to help parents in their new role by informing them of their new responsibilities as the parent of an online student (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Learn to manage workload through flexibility, organization, and balance.

Participants agreed that managing the online workload was an important priority requiring flexibility, organization and creating balance. Marina stated:

I don't know how you make balance a skill, but you need to balance things because online is always there, so you have to be able to shut it down. And the structure, you have to have a routine and a schedule so that you're working, I mean if you're working at home all the time then you don't have someone over your shoulder saying it's time to work (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

Doug gave the following advice for managing workload:

And then you have to be able to manage your time well because in a brick and mortar it's always managed for you. I mean kids come in and out and you go to lunch at a certain time and you have teammates that if you forget something they'll help you. But here you're going to have to better manage your time because there's a lot more freedom as to when we complete assignments (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Dee argued that an online teacher must be task oriented, organized, and a multi-tasker. She claimed that "...to be a successful [online] teacher you really have to be able to keep all the plates in the air. If you can't do that, you're in trouble" (personal communication,

February 19, 2014). Sara advised that the online teacher needs to be able to handle stressors while being flexible since things can change very quickly in the online environment (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Research question two asked what middle-grades teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners. Phases four through eight begin to answer this research question. Participants disclosed their opinions that online middle-grades teachers need to be highly organized, skilled in technology, feel comfortable reaching out to students and parents, embrace flexibility, and find ways to manage the workload. The online middle-grades teacher must also take on the role of facilitator rather than direct instructor.

Phase 9, 10 and 11: Renegotiating relationships, building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and reintegrating them into life based on teacher’s perspective. From interview questions 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 and journal responses 3a and 3b, the themes that emerged as online teachers renegotiated their relationships, built competence and self-confidence in their new roles and incorporated them into their life are provided in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Phase 9, 10 and 11: Online Teachers’ Renegotiate Relationships, Building Competence and Self-Confidence in New Roles and Relationships, and Reintegrating Them into Life Based on Teacher Perspective

Online Teachers’ Themes	OT Doug	OT Jackie	OT Dee	OT Marina	OT Carol	OT Sara	OT June	Total
Relationships With Students and Parents Became Much Richer in an Online Setting	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Continue to Manage Workload Through Flexibility, Organization, and Skill Mastery	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7

Note. OT = online teacher.

Relationships with students and parents became much richer in the online setting.

Doug, Carol, and Jackie expressed that at the middle-grades level in an online environment, the maturity level of the online middle-grades student required much more parent involvement which in turn required stronger teacher relationships with parents (personal communication, February 17, 2014; personal communication, February 26, 2014; personal communication, February 26, 2014). According to Doug, teaching students valuable communication skills was vital to building relationships. Doug experienced that:

Like most of these issues, there are students that absolutely “get it” and have the maturity to succeed and there are those that struggle due to immaturity.

Communication, especially between students, is an issue that requires some maturity, and online teachers have to teach students appropriate communication skills (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Having taught online middle and high school learners, Jackie concluded that:

Parent guidance and support is critical. Middle-school learners are too young to be successful online on their own. Being young definitely makes it harder, support from home is key (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

June concurred with Jackie’s assessment of middle-grades versus high school learners adding that “At this age though I do believe that success is highly related to parents keeping up with student progress (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

As participants communicated with their students and parents through email, phone, and in face-to-face meetings in learning labs, their relationships grew stronger. Dee shared that:

The biggest difference for me is the relationship I have built with the kids. I get to communicate so much more with the students directly – as opposed in a traditional classroom with so much more whole class instruction (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Sara reported that as her relationship with her students developed, her students felt more comfortable reaching out to her for help which further strengthened their rapport (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Doug concurred with Sara and added “...once we got through the first semester that [communication] got easier. The students kind of knew what to expect.” Doug went on to explain that once students became more comfortable contacting their teacher directly, communication and teaching became easier (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

Carol revealed that through the close communication she had with her online students, she was able to give much more quality feedback on assignments and that “...my relationship with those students is much deeper than anything I ever had in the building.” She also related that through her strong relationships with her students, she learned to discern “...when a student was highly engaged based on their [work] submission” (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Communicating much clearer instructions resulting in better quality student work submission was a skill that June developed during her transition. Once relationships were established, she also felt more confident assisting students with their lessons and helping students troubleshoot when there were problems (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

All participants conveyed similar feelings of astonishment at the intensity of contact between student and teacher in the online environment. Dee described:

But I think if you had asked me before we started, I would not have even guessed that my online teaching, my online students and I have a closer personal relationship than I ever had in a brick and mortar building. (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Participants continue to manage workload through flexibility, organization, and skill mastery. Participants claimed that in a traditional classroom setting, teachers are given daily schedules and routines that they are required to follow, leaving little room for flexibility during the course of the day. Online teachers have much more flexibility with their time which participants agreed required the online teacher to be much more organized in order to manage the extensive workload. Doug advised:

Time management, organization, technology prowess, and communication. These skills are essential...technology least of all...that can be learned. Brick and mortar schools manage your time for you...if you teach online, you have to effectively manage your own time (both for school and for family) and that can be tricky. Most online teachers I know tend to overwork or spend too much time online.

You have to be able to manage your time well because in a brick and mortar it's always managed for you. I mean kids come in and out and you go to lunch at a certain time and you have teammates that if you forget something they'll help you. But here you're going to have to better manage your time because there's a lot more freedom as to when we complete assignments (personal communication, February 17, 2014).

June discussed what she thought was needed to be a good online teacher. She added that since things change quickly in the online setting, teachers need to be ready to change at a moment's notice. She stated:

To be a good online middle-grades instructor you have to have great organizational skills, be flexible, and know how to manage time efficiently. The online environment can be very tedious so it is important to stay organized so you don't miss something. Things commonly change in this environment so if you don't like change and have trouble being flexible this isn't the environment for you. Lastly, it is very possible to work at your computer for hours upon hours, it is important to utilize your time on your computer efficiently so that you have plenty of time away from your courses (personal communication, February 19, 2014).

Participants also noted at this phase that there are certain skills the online teacher needs to develop in order to help decrease the workload. Skills such as being a quick typist, knowing how to research content topics to support the online lessons, and being a content expert, all help to speed up the workload. Sara remarked that she was "...forced more into my content in an online environment." She felt that having to develop the lessons for her course, which required lots of internet research into her content topics, forced her to become an even better content expert than she was before (personal communication, February 26, 2014). Dee also argued that although she was already an expert in her content area, she felt her knowledge of the content grew due to the research and development of online lessons (personal communication, February 19, 2014). Additionally, Carol claimed that she had to become a "...master researcher of the Internet for great interactive methods of delivery" (personal communication, February 26, 2014).

Research question three asked what issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners. Participant responses and subsequent themes throughout all phases of Mezirow’s learning theory touch on some form of issue related to online middle-grades learners. What was revealed to be most specific to this age of online student is the amount of hand-holding that is required of the teacher and the parent. Participants agreed that students at this age, in an online environment require close monitoring from the teacher and parent to keep them motivated, engaged, and on track.

Overarching Results. Table 4.6 shows the overarching themes that emerged from all participants, and the frequencies. The consistent and overarching themes revealed regarding middle-grades teachers’ perspectives as they transitioned from brick and mortar to online teaching are as follows: (a) a lack of preparation created challenges for teachers; (b) loss of control or power as students are responsible for their own learning at home; (c) stronger student relationships are built and communication is much more frequent and persistent; (d) workload is intensified.

Table 4.6

Overarching Thematic Results for Teachers’ Perspectives Transitioning from Brick and Mortar to Online Teaching of Middle-Grades Students

Overall Themes	OT Doug	OT Jackie	OT Dee	OT Marina	OT Carol	OT Sara	OT June	Total
Preparation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Loss of Control or Power	X	X		X	X	X	X	6
Student Relationships and Communication	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Workload	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7

Note. OT = online teacher.

Summary

Participants making the transition to teaching online experienced various curricular shifts and have had to adjust their traditional teaching practices to accommodate this new method of teaching. Curriculum is defined by Kerr (as cited in Kelly, 2009, p. 12) as “All the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school.” The definition of curriculum provided by Kerr in 1968 can still be applied to the 21st century learning taking place online today. Teaching middle-grades students an online curriculum outside of the school setting was, according to study participants, challenging. According to Kelly (2009) “The teacher’s role is central to the effectiveness of any attempt at curriculum change or development” (p. 17).

Understanding the transition process for online teachers might then improve the effectiveness of their change in curriculum. According to Ornstein and Hunkins (2009) educators involved in the curriculum today “...need novel ways of thinking, reflecting, responding, interacting, and relating” (p. 331).

Online education is not a new phenomenon. Higher education and even high school institutions have utilized distance education for decades in an effort to reach out to a larger population of students. However, public, online schools at the middle-grades level are a rarity. Middle-grades and even elementary students are slowly making their way to the few newly established, full time, online schools. As students migrate from the brick and mortar traditional school setting to that of an online environment, teachers are also making a similar transition. With this transition come newly defined roles and responsibilities of the online teacher.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a summary, discussion, implications for practice and research, and conclusion. Included is a summary of the results of the research questions, discussion of key points stemming from the research results, implications and recommendations for future research and a conclusion.

The findings resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Participants revealed a need for preservice training in preparation for teaching online middle-grades students.
2. Participants indicated concern over the workload required of the online teacher as being much more than what was expected in the traditional classroom.
3. Participants communicated feeling a loss of power due to the students and parents taking on the majority of the responsibility of the learning process.
4. Participants agreed that teaching online middle-grades students required much more responsibility on the part of the student and parent.
5. Participants expressed amazement at the increase in communication and the strong relationships built between teacher and student in the online environment.

Summary of the Study

Study participants all described very similar experiences transitioning from teaching in a brick and mortar setting to teaching middle-grades students in an online environment.

Similar roles and necessary skills of an online middle-grades teacher were revealed by study

participants. Participants also uncovered issues that they felt were specific to online middle-grades learners.

The three research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does a middle-grade teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners?
2. What do middle-grades teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles, and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners?
3. What issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners?

How does a middle-grade teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners? Themes revealed that study participants felt that the transition from the brick and mortar setting to teaching online was very challenging. Lack of preparedness, loss of control, learning new technologies, increased workload and time requirements, and the differences teaching an online middle-grades student versus teaching middle-grades students in a traditional classroom, were all disorienting dilemmas shared by study participants.

What do middle-grades teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners? According to study participants, the role of the online middle-grades teacher shifted from one of direct instructor, to that of facilitator, director or coach. Study participants revealed that online middle-grades teachers have to be able to handle lots of different stressors, while maintaining patience and flexibility with students. Participants agree that since the online

teacher does not see students face-to-face daily, teaching online middle-grades students requires very strong communication skills and therefore demands building sound relationships with students and parents. Time management, organization, flexibility, skill mastery and finding balance are also skills uncovered by participants as necessary for the online teacher.

What issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners? Participants discovered that teaching online middle-grades students presented some unique challenges. Middle-grades learners require much more “hand-holding” than students at the high school level or even students in the brick and mortar setting. Middle-grades students, who adjust well to learning online, tend to either be very self-motivated, or have strong parental support. The level of student responsibility for meeting course deadlines and mastering the content falls on the student. Participants found that this level of responsibility and commitment can be difficult at such a young age without adult support and supervision at home.

Additional Findings

Two additional themes surfaced from this study that did not apply directly to Mezirow’s phases of adult learning, but warranted discussion. The two themes are as follows: (a) the new role and the responsibilities that come with being a middle-grades student in the online setting; (b) the new role and responsibilities that come with being the parent of a middle-grades online student. Both of these themes were discussed throughout the interviews and journal responses by all participants.

Middle-grades student role and responsibilities. All participants revealed concerns about the degree of responsibility placed on a middle-grades student as they navigate their transition to an online setting. Students are expected to communicate with all of their teachers

weekly, review online lessons daily in all courses, submit assignments in all courses, navigate through all of the technology not only within the lessons, but the technology required for work completion, and keep up with all due dates. Participants argue that this is a lot for a middle-grades student unless the student has a strong support system at home. Sara added:

Online students must be mature enough to understand they have to work independently, stay on top of assignments, reach out to their teachers when they are struggling, and be willing to take risks and meet the challenges that an online environment throws at them. (personal communication, February 26, 2014)

According to study participants, the role of the online middle-grades student requires a shift from that of passive classroom participant where the teacher hand-feeds information to the students, to that of self-motivated, self-instructed student. This role change can be overwhelming for students and very difficult to make for some. Jackie added “I felt I did everything [in the traditional classroom] and they did very little. And that shifts, that weight shift is, that’s why I like the online. It forces the shift to a certain degree to be back on them.” (personal communication, February, 26, 2014) Dee argued that:

The successful student will assume the role of researcher and discoverer. This is a more active role than in a typical brick and mortar schoolroom where the students spend most of their day passively receiving information. Every child is not a good fit for online education. Some kids can do it with minimal parent support. Those students are naturally organized, task oriented, intrinsically motivated, and naturally curious about the world around them. They realize that learning requires effort and are not reticent about applying that effort. The successful middle grades online learner

has a positive "can-do" attitude and does not become discouraged about small challenges and technology issues. (personal communication, February 19, 2014)

Middle-grades parent role and responsibilities. Study participants agreed that the parent of a middle-grades online student must take on a more active role in the education of their child. The parent must monitor their child's progress closely and at times, take on a teacher role. Doug shared:

There is a much greater responsibility put on parents of middle-grades children in an online setting. They have to provide the framework and support for their children to succeed. Much of that framework and support is provided in the brick and mortar by default, but parents have to be prepared to step in and help if their children struggle with any of these skills. (Personal communication, February 17, 2014)

Most middle-grades students are too young to be successful online on their own, and support from home is key (Jackie, personal communication, February 26, 2014). This sentiment was shared among all participants. June added "At this age though I do believe that success is highly related to parents keeping up with student progress." (Personal communication, February 19, 2014)

Marina summed up her ideas regarding student and parent roles and responsibilities in an online setting with the following comments:

There needs to be an understanding between the parents, the student and the teacher as to [their] defined roles and I don't think that's been developed yet, especially for the parents and the students in middle-grades all working together. The student's role and parent's role are new and different online and many times neither party knows exactly which role to take.

Success can occur for students in the online environment and it really offers a great alternative to learning. Identifying those students that will be successful in the online environment is a huge challenge right now for online teachers and administration as there are key skills and personalities that will be more successful online. Some of these key factors include having a parent who can demonstrate a teacher role at home. Support from home and school. The child needs to be motivated to succeed in order to sit down and stay focused day in and day out. A set schedule can really help as well. (personal communication, February 24, 2014)

These two additional themes uncovered within this study offer teacher perspectives of changing student and parent roles and responsibilities in an online environment. Delving deeper into these themes might reveal important factors that could be helpful to future online students, parents, and teachers of online middle-grades education.

The following section presents discussions related to the major themes taken from this study. Four themes resulted from this study. Each theme is discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Discussions

(1) Participants agreed that lack of preparation created challenges during their transition

All participants disclosed feelings of unpreparedness during their transition to teaching online middle-grades students. According to Arah (2012), the nature of teaching online is complex and challenging and therefore requires substantial training and support. This new environment requires teachers to assume new responsibilities and develop new skills and talents all while educating a population also struggling through similar transitional challenges.

Arah (2012) argues that there are two major differences between teaching traditionally and teaching virtually that can create a tough transition. First, is that it is student/learner-centered. This is based on the constructivist theory of knowledge "...that allows the learner to become autonomous, active, and responsible for his or her learning" (Arah, 2012, pg. 851). The second reason is that it is a technology driven environment. These two overarching challenges describe what participants disclosed as difficulties experienced during their transition and areas where they felt unprepared. Participants struggled with feeling unprepared to monitor and meet the needs of their online students while also navigating new technology and troubleshooting technology issues experienced by their students.

(2) Participants agreed that adjusting to a loss of control or power was difficult

Moving into a student-centered versus teacher-centered learning environment was a big adjustment for participants. Handing over control of student learning directly to the student and oftentimes the parent was a concern for all participants. In this age of teacher accountability, participants feared that any negative student learning outcomes would be an unfair reflection on their teaching skills. Since learning is taking place from home, and the online teacher does not have the ability to physically monitor student progress and work habits like the traditional teacher, this power shift is disconcerting to the online teacher (Archambault & Crippen, 2009b). In an article that discusses the paradoxes of online teaching the authors wrote:

Teaching online involves a shift to the sidelines, from being a visible center of attention in the face-to-face classroom to serving as a designer and facilitator of online experiences. This is a shift for which many faculty members are unprepared. (Bair & Bair, 2011, p. 2)

Participants observed students having difficulty managing the increased flexibility, self-discipline, and motivation needed to be productive in an online setting. This loss of control over the student's learning environment was unsettling to participants after migrating from an environment of control over the classroom.

(3) Participants agreed that workload intensified

A recent survey of K-12 online teachers revealed that the amount of time dedicated to teaching online, control of the content, and various issues related to student participation online presented unique challenges not seen in a traditional classroom setting (Archambault, 2010). The fact that time spent teaching online surpasses that of a traditional face-to-face setting adds to the workload of the online teacher. The results from one study found that online courses require 40 percent more work for the teacher than in a face-to-face setting (Bender, 2012).

One study of transitioning teachers found that instructors were overwhelmed with emails from students asking questions about details that were already addressed within the course materials. It was discovered that students who typically ask a lot of questions in a traditional classroom along with students who had little to say in the classroom, now found that they had access to an additional means of communicating with their teacher. Although strong communication between teacher and student is essential, this resulted in an increase in workload for the online teacher (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005).

Workload is also increased due to all of the different technologies used in an online course. Not only are online teachers trouble-shooting student technology issues, technology is changing so quickly that trying to keep up with the latest 21st century skills and applications

can be time consuming. Gagne and Walters (2009) found that some teachers felt that “...keeping up with technology is like chasing the wind” (p. 584).

(4) Participants agreed that stronger relationships between teacher, student, and parent were necessary due to the maturity level of middle-grades students, and frequent communication was crucial

Participants described an initial struggle with trying to communicate with their students in the online environment. Engaging in new ways to communicate with students through phone calls, email, text messaging, course feedback text boxes, and live, virtual chat sessions was unique to the participants in the virtual setting. One study revealed faculty indicated that at times they missed the traditional face-to-face interaction and therefore they tried to duplicate it as best as possible online (Biro, 2007).

As study participants reached out to their students on a daily basis, one-on-one, relationships grew. All participants expressed their amazement at the level of student and teacher relationships that were built in the online setting. Participants had initial assumptions that due to the lack of face-to-face time with their students, they would feel a huge disconnect with their students when teaching online. This assumption was disproved and according to participants far exceeded any teacher and student relationships built in the brick and mortar setting.

Participants also discovered that due to the maturity level of middle-grades students, closer monitoring by parents and teachers was needed. Asking students at this age to take on the immense responsibility of their entire learning process is a difficult task. In an article that described the unsuccessful implementation of an online high school program, it was stated that a “...lack of parent support, lack of motivation, and lack of self-discipline” were argued

to be major contributors to the school's demise (Schomburg & Rippeth, 2009, p. 34). One study found that there was generally a higher drop-out rate in online courses due to "...lack of time, management, motivation, or support" (NETC, n.d.). These are all skills that in most cases require a level of maturity beyond that of the typical middle-grades student. Schomburg and Rippeth (2009) surveyed online high school students and asked them for comments about their online program. The two most common comments were that they enjoyed the freedom of working at their own pace, and that their success was due to the support they received from instructors.

(5) Mezirow's phases of transformative learning compared to participant transition

Based on the results, the participants' transitional journey to teaching online closely followed Mezirow's phases of transformative learning for adults. Participants begin their transition with disorienting dilemmas which included an increased workload, high-level technology expectations, feelings of powerlessness, and a lack of training. To some, this led to feelings of guilt and an assessment of their assumptions made prior to beginning the new position. Many had assumptions that teaching online would be easier than teaching in a traditional classroom and that job flexibility and a decreased workload would be the norm. These assumptions were soon dispelled as participants worked their way through the first few months of teaching online.

Following Mezirow's phases, as participants progressed through their first few months of teaching online, they began exploring and adjusting to their new role as an online middle-grades teacher. Many participants received support from fellow colleagues as they reached out for help and worked through the challenges together. Eventually, as participants worked through the many challenges and issues that arose during their transition, feelings of

competence and self-confidence crept in as they reintegrated new perspectives into their new role as an online middle-grades teacher.

(6) Repeating themes prevalent throughout Mezirow's phases of transformative learning

Several themes were repetitious throughout Mezirow's different phases. A lack of preparedness, an intense workload leading to time issues, and building relationships were themes found within the phases consistently. Themes related to a lack of preparedness are found quite frequently in the beginning and middle phases of Mezirow's theory. Since the online middle-grades teaching position is new to the school, it follows that there might be unforeseen problems that arise. As themes are discovered in the latter phases of the transformative learning theory, unpreparedness is still mentioned by participants. Although participants at this point had passed through the initial challenges related to their transition, participants reveal feeling unprepared for the issues that arise with student motivation, and parent support.

Workload and time issues were also mentioned throughout the themed phases. Initially, participants were overwhelmed at the amount of troubleshooting and technology glitches that they had to deal with not only with maintaining their course, but related to working with student technology difficulties as well. Grading student submissions was also mentioned during the middle phases of transition as being time consuming, along with the constant communication with students and parents trying to keep students motivated and on track.

Building student and parent relationships is another theme that showed up consistently throughout Mezirow's phases of adult learning. Participants originally express their amazement at the amount of student contact they have teaching online as compared to the

brick-and-mortar setting. Finding different ways of communicating not only lesson content, but student progress and support found its way into the middle phases of Mezirow's theory. Finally, participants discovered that frequent communication between students, parents and the teacher, led to stronger relationships which ultimately kept students on track and progressing.

(7) Additional findings related to the current literature

Additional findings revealed a possible need for research into the online middle-grades student and parent roles and responsibilities. This researcher was unable to find current literature addressing middle-grades online students and parents due to the rarity of online middle-grades schools. Based on the literature related to secondary and postsecondary online students, a few comparisons could be made. Time management, self-discipline, self-directed, and self-motivation were mentioned as being important characteristics of the successful online student (Dabbagh, 2007; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Schomburg & Rippeth, 2009). Findings from one study claim that the role of the online learner is very different than that of a student attending face-to-face. "Online learners must take more responsibility, adjust to a new climate, adjust to new context, know how to participate, synthesize ideas, apply ideas or concepts, and stimulate their own curiosity" (Yi Yang & Cornelious, 2005).

As it relates to changes in the role and responsibilities of the parent of an online middle-grades student, the research to date is scarce. Although many studies claim that parent support is an important factor in student success (Barbour, 2009; Dabbagh, 2007; Garrison et al., 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Yi Yang & Cornelious, 2005), detailing out exactly what that support looks like was not found in the literature by this researcher.

Implications for Practice and Research

This qualitative study of the perspectives of teachers transitioning from a middle-grades brick and mortar classroom to a middle-grades online classroom adds to the growing body of research related to online education. This study explores the perspectives of teachers as they make the transition to teaching middle-grades students online. Although there have been many studies related to teachers making similar transitions within secondary and postsecondary institutions, very few address the transition from the perspective of a middle-grades teacher.

Uncovering middle-grades teachers' perspectives as they transition from a traditional classroom to an online setting are important to educators considering a similar transition. Understanding how the two environments are similar or differ can help to inform future online educators of what could be expected as they make a similar transition. Moreover, the results of this study can provide administrators of online institutions a better understanding of the challenges that transitioning teachers might face.

This study indicates that teacher preparation is crucial to a smooth transition to online teaching. A clearer understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the online middle-grades teacher could prove useful to administrators when preparing faculty to teach online and for future ongoing staff development programs to help support online teachers. Recognizing the qualities that contribute to effective online middle-grades teachers could also be beneficial to administrators when seeking to hire new faculty.

Additionally, it is essential that the administrators of online institutions recognize and help to support their faculty due to the increased workload of the online setting. Although online teachers have more flexibility in an online environment, the time commitment as a

result of the many forms of communication between teacher and student, level of technology usage, and course management responsibilities can create a very challenging workload.

Finally, understanding that there is an increased level of communication between the teacher, student and parent in an online setting leading to a much richer relationship could be of benefit to parents of potential online students and the community as well. There is often a misconception that students in an online setting do not get the attention that the face-to-face student gains in a traditional classroom. This misconception could be dispelled encouraging more students to consider the possibilities of the online environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest recommendations for future research. First, the sample for this descriptive case study was small due to the rarity of a fully online middle school. Additional research to determine if these findings will transfer to other cases is needed.

Furthermore, additional studies focusing on the middle-grades online learner should be conducted. Throughout this study, there appeared a recurring theme related to the responsibilities, characteristics and role of the online middle-grades learner. Future research that might uncover a clearer understanding of how middle-grades students adjust to learning online could be beneficial.

Additionally, a study that focuses on parental responsibilities related to having a middle-grades child learning fully online should also be conducted. Participants of this study referred to parental support and monitoring at home as being important factors to the success of the online middle-grades student. Further research should be conducted to examine the effectiveness of strong parental support of the online middle-grades learner.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Initial interview questions were created by the researcher based on researcher experience transitioning from teaching in a traditional classroom to teaching online.

1. What educational training do you have to teach?
2. Have you ever taught online before taking on this middle-grades online position? If yes,
 - a. What grade level did you teach online?
 - b. Did you develop the course?
 - c. Did you have to modify any of your previous online teaching strategies to fit with your middle-grade learners?
 - d. Describe any experiences related to teaching middle-grades learners online that were not seen at other grade levels.
3. Describe in general your experience transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching.
4. How much training related to online teaching did you have prior to teaching online? If none, how did you learn to teach online?
5. How much training related to teaching middle-grades learners online did you receive?
6. How well prepared did you feel when you first began teaching online middle school?
7. When you first began teaching online, did you have any feelings of guilt or shame about your level of proficiency?
8. Were you required to develop the courses that you taught? If yes,
 - a. Were you provided training for course development?
 - b. How is developing online lessons different than developing traditional lessons?
 - c. What challenges did you face when developing online lessons?

9. What is challenging for you as an online middle-grades teacher?
10. What made you willing to take up this challenge?
11. What could have been done to help you transition?
12. Describe any experiences related to teaching online middle-grades that may have transformed your teaching.
13. How have you modified your traditional teaching methods to fit in the online environment?
14. In terms of your role, what differences do you perceive between teaching face-to-face and online middle-grades learners?
15. What role must a teacher take to teach in an online middle-grades environment?
16. What was needed for you to feel competent at teaching middle-grades learners online?
17. What further training do you feel you still need?
18. What types of qualities are needed by instructors to teach online middle-grades courses?
19. What specific skills are needed by the instructor to be fully prepared to teach online middle-grades learners?
20. What would you suggest to those who are starting this similar journey?

APPENDIX B

Journal Writing Prompts

1. Why did you decide to transition from teaching traditional middle-grades to that of an online middle school?
 - a. What were your initial assumptions about the transition?
 - b. Did you experience any feelings of guilt or shame about your proficiency level when you first made the transition?
2. What is the biggest difference you have experienced so far between teaching middle-grades in a traditional setting versus teaching middle-grades online?
 - a. Where you able to utilize traditional teaching methods?
 - b. In what way did your role change?
 - c. What changes have you made in terms of curriculum delivery and instruction with the transition to online?
 - d. Were there instances where you were able to recognize that any challenges you had during the transition were shared, and that others had negotiated a similar transition?
3. What have you learned so far about online middle-grades instruction that you feel would be important to share with potential online middle-grades instructors?
 - a. What are the most important skills that you feel are necessary for an online middle-grades instructor?
 - b. What are the most important skills that you feel are necessary for an online middle-grades learner?

APPENDIX C

Demographic Data Form

Demographic Data

Study: A qualitative descriptive case study: To investigate the challenges facing middle-grades teachers transitioning from a brick-and-mortar classroom to that of an online middle-grades environment.

Primary Research Question: How does a middle-grades teacher transition from a brick-and-mortar classroom to that of an online classroom?

Time of Interview:

Participant Name:

Date:

Place:

Demographic Information:

A. Participant's academic title and degree: _____

B. Participant's age range:

20-25 _____ 36-40 _____ 51-55 _____

26-30 _____ 41-45 _____ 56-60 _____

31-35 _____ 46-50 _____ over 60 _____

C. Participant's Gender: _____

D. How many years in the teaching profession: _____

E. How many years of teaching in the traditional classroom: _____

F. How many years of teaching online: _____

G. What subject areas do you currently teach: _____

H. What grade level do you currently teach: _____

APPENDIX D

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, RELATED RESEARCH, AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PHASE

Supports Research Question 1: How does a middle-grade teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners?								
#	Question	(Macy, 2006)	(Gagne, 2009)	(Pooneh, 2008)	(Richard, 2000)	(Faulkner-Beitzel, 2008)	(Mezirow, 2000a)	Phase #
3	Describe in general your experience transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching.	X	X	X			X	1, 3
7	When you first began teaching online, did you have any feelings of guilt or shame at your level of proficiency?						X	1, 2, 7
11	What could have been done to help you transition?			X	X		X	5
12	Describe any experiences related to teaching online middle-grades that may have transformed your teaching.			X		X	X	6, 7, 8, 10, 11
1	What educational training do you have to teach?	X				X		
10	What made you willing to take up this challenge?				X			4
2	Have you ever taught online before taking on this middle-grades online position? If yes, a. What grade level did you teach online? b. Did you develop the course? c. Did you have to modify any of your previous online teaching strategies to fit with your middle-grade learners? d. Describe any experiences related to teaching middle-grades learners online that were not seen at other grade levels.							5, 9
6	How well prepared did you feel when you first began teaching online middle school?	X				X		1, 2

8	Were you required to develop the courses that you taught? If yes, a. Were you provided training for course development? b. How is developing online lessons different than developing traditional lessons? c. What challenges did you face when developing online lessons?	X						1
13	How have you modified your traditional teaching methods to fit in the online environment?					X	X	5, 8, 9, 10, 11
4	How much training related to online teaching did you have prior to teaching online? If none, how did you learn to teach online?	X		X				7
5	How much training related to teaching middle-grades learners online did you receive?	X		X				7
17	What further training do you feel you still need?					X	X	11
Supports Research Question 2: What do middle-grades teachers recognize as being the most important characteristics, roles, and necessary skills of an online teacher of middle-grades learners?								
18	What types of qualities are needed by instructors to teach online middle-grades courses?	X					X	11
19	What specific skills are needed by the instructor to be fully prepared to teach online middle-grades learners?					X	X	11
14	In terms of your role, what differences do you perceive between teaching face-to-face and online middle-grades learners?	X		X				5, 8, 9, 10
15	What role must a teacher take to teach in an online middle-grades environment?	X		X			X	4
Supports Research Question 3: What issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners?								
9	What is challenging for you as an online middle-grades teacher?			X	X	X	X	1

20	What would you suggest to those who are starting this similar journey?			X				
16	What was needed for you to feel competent at teaching online middle-grades?		X			X		7

APPENDIX E

JOURNAL PROMPTS AND RELATED TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PHASES

Supports Research Question 1: How does a middle-grades teacher describe the transition from brick and mortar to online teaching of middle-grades learners?					
Prompt #	Question	Allen, I., & Seaman, J. (2012)	Bennett, S., & Lockyer, L. (2004)	Díaz, L., & Entonado, F. (2009)	Phase #
1	<p>Why did you decide to transition from teaching in a traditional middle-grades to that of an online middle school?</p> <p>a. What were your initial assumptions about the transition?</p> <p>b. Did you experience any feelings of guilt or shame about your proficiency level when you first made the transition?</p>	X			1, 3
Supports Research Question 2: How does a middle-grades teacher learn to teach middle-grades learners in an online environment?					
Supports Research Question 3: What issues do online middle-grades teachers identify as being specific to middle-grades learners?					
2	<p>What is the biggest difference you have experienced so far between teaching middle-grades in a traditional setting versus teaching middle-grades online?</p> <p>a. Where you able to utilize traditional teaching methods?</p> <p>b. In what way did your role change?</p> <p>c. What changes have you made in terms of curriculum delivery and instruction with the transition to online?</p> <p>d. Were there instances where you were able to recognize that any challenges you had during the transition were shared, and that others had negotiated a similar transition?</p>		X		4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
3	<p>What have you learned so far about online middle-grades instruction that you feel would be important to share with potential online middle-grades instructors?</p> <p>a. What are the most important skills that you feel are necessary for an online middle-grades instructor?</p> <p>b. What are the most important skills that you feel are necessary for an online middle-grades learner?</p>			X	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11

APPENDIX F

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Prior to interviewing the participants, they were asked the following demographic questions:

1. Are you male or female?
2. How old are you?
3. How many years of teaching experience to you have?
4. How many of your years of experience were in an online environment and in a traditional classroom?
5. What is your highest post-secondary degree?
6. Is your degree in education? If not, explain how you are highly qualified to teach in Georgia.