

## ABSTRACT

Navigating the Freshman Transition: A Collective Case Study Understanding the Experience of Students as they Transition from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Grade at a Private, Single-Sex School in Texas

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At The Hockaday School, a private, single-sex school in Texas, many students struggle as they make the transition from eighth to ninth grade. Students feed into the ninth grade from within the school, or from other public and private schools, and come from either boarding or day-school backgrounds. Students may be local, domestic, or international, and have varying experiences regarding academic rigor and college-preparatory structure. Out of about 130 students, nearly 40 are new to the school each year, and the transitional experience looks different for each student, depending on their educational background. Some students can smoothly transition, while others find particular obstacles to be difficult to overcome.

The focus of this study was to identify the greatest areas of struggle new ninth-graders experience and detect whether or not there are predictors for these difficulties. It also investigated what assumptions exist that influence the expectations placed on students by teachers, administrators, and parents, and what support measures exist or are missing in transitional programming. The study used Harris and Barnett's Thriving

Transition Cycle (2013), a repeating cycle of transition and adjustment, as a framework for measuring students' ability to successfully transition from middle to high school.

Existing literature suggests that intentional programming, both in advance of the school year and throughout ninth grade, helps freshmen gain necessary academic and self-efficacy skills. The following is a collective case study that gathered data from participants regarding their transition into ninth grade and identified where additional support was needed. A group of students from various educational backgrounds was asked to provide evidence from their experiences that pointed to the greatest areas of struggle experienced by students overall. The results of the study provided a foundation for the creation of new transitional programming to prepare students for the obstacles they encounter.

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Students as they Transition from 8th to 9th Grade at a Private, Single-Sex School in Texas

by

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A Dissertation

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## DEDICATION

To my incredibly loving and supportive family. My entire life I knew that whatever path I chose, I'd have their support. To my parents, Brian and Suzanne, for helping me learn balance, resilience, and perseverance, and for loving me no matter what. To my sister, Lauren, for your unwavering confidence in me. To my husband, John, for all you've done to love and empower me along the way. To my dogs, Darla and Obi, for keeping me company on late writing nights.

And to my daughter, Evelyn. It's all for you.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to the Problem of Practice

#### *Introduction*

Transition, for anyone, is a period that often requires significant change and adjustment. All too often, transitions are unexpected, but even carefully planned and anticipated transitions can have a substantial impact on an individual's feelings of self-control and confidence. Children, whose brains are in a constant state of development, encounter transition simultaneously with other potentially difficult phases of development, such as navigating social situations, harnessing emotions, and contending with adult authority (Damour, 2016). It is, therefore, unsurprising that high school freshmen have a reputation for being unaware, inexperienced, and in a perpetual state of apprehension.

The freshman year of high school is all about firsts—first high school dance, first big exam, first failing grade, and many others. Being a freshman is also about learning to navigate a sea of new people and understanding different classroom policies and expectations, as well as the unspoken hierarchy and hegemony of the upper-level students. High school is likely the first time students are experiencing grades that are recorded on their transcript, navigating new, larger school environments, and increased academic rigor (Srofe, 2009). The combination of these challenges is often difficult for students to balance.

Entering high school, however, is not without its attractions. Many students look forward to the opportunity to make new friends, have increased levels of freedom and

privileges, select from a greater variety of courses and teachers, and begin making plans for the future (Akos & Galassi, 2004b). Problems arise, however, when students are left to negotiate all of the new aspects of high school, good and bad, on their own. An unfortunate assumption exists that the freshman struggle is something of a rite of passage—that ninth-graders worry unnecessarily about simple problems that pale in comparison to higher education and adulthood. However, adolescents’ struggles with these complexities are completely developmentally appropriate, and they likely require support to ensure that they come out successfully on the other side.

This study investigated students from various backgrounds’ experiences during their first year of high school by collecting data on the biggest obstacles they encountered as freshmen. Additionally, the study examined how various educational backgrounds influenced a student’s perspective on or experience of said obstacles. This information provided a framework for transitional programming to be adjusted accordingly to better support transitioning students.

### *Statement of Problem*

Students learn about balancing their academic, social, and personal lives during their first year of high school. Existing literature on the topic of student transitions discusses them as they pertain to specific categories, such as academic backgrounds, the ability to self-advocate, preparedness for social changes, and how socioeconomic status might affect a student’s ability to cope (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Costain, 2017; Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Durant, 2009; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Fromme et al., 2008; Legters & Kerr, 2001; Long, 2009; Neild et al., 2008; Southern Regional Education Board, 2002; Srofe, 2009; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). However, each

student makes educational transitions while simultaneously experiencing a unique combination of other variables that might impact their adjustment to their new context. Simply stated, student experiences cannot be simplified to a single one of the aforementioned categories. The high school transition is often closely associated with academic achievement loss and a struggle to find identity, and research often refers to transitional programs existing in schools across the United States. These programs aim to help freshmen prepare for the inevitable adjustment.

The following study took place at The Hockaday School: a private, all-female, pre-K–12 institution in Texas. At Hockaday, programming was in place that attempted to preemptively introduce orientation information that provided context, vocabulary, and resources to students at the beginning of the ninth-grade school year. This programming endeavored to provide a consistent knowledge-base to all incoming freshman students who came from a variety of backgrounds, including from within the same school, other private schools, or public schools. Students may have been local, from around the United States, or international students living on campus.

While freshman programming at the aforementioned institution endeavored to prepare the students for the inevitable difficulties of transitioning into high school, it became clear that this curriculum was lacking in some key areas. Students continued to struggle with transitional pieces and required additional support to be successful. Some students, even with such accommodations, found that they continued to struggle and eventually pursued education elsewhere. A student's perspective of their ninth-grade success can affect their self-confidence and ability to perform effectively throughout high

school, so it was essential that transitional programming provided an even foundation for each student involved.

As a result, it became clear that this study was necessary to identify the greatest areas of struggle that ninth-graders experienced at Hockaday. The information gathered from this study offered an opportunity for improved, more comprehensive curriculum to be constructed for incoming ninth-grade students from a variety of backgrounds. This information also allowed for continued programming to be authored for grades ten through twelve as well so that students were well-prepared for college-level success.

### *Purpose of the Study*

This collective case study aimed to understand the struggles faced by female adolescent students transitioning into ninth-grade at The Hockaday School. More specifically, as the researcher, I closely reviewed the experiences of student participants from a variety of backgrounds to identify the areas of greatest need for academic and social-emotional support. Direct reports from a diverse selection of students about their experience provided a comprehensive perspective of how students experienced this transition.

The fundamental research question for this study was, what were the greatest areas of struggle in the eighth-ninth-grade transition at a Hockaday, and what were their causes? Additional research questions included: What assumptions influenced the expectations that were placed on students as they made this transition? How did different background environments influence the transition? How did students feel most supported and unsupported by the school as they made this transition? How did previous social and

educational experience affect their adjustment to a new environment? Did some students face more obstacles than others, and could this disparity be leveled out?

The purpose of this study was to better inform teachers and administrators of how certain variables affected the ninth-grade student experience. Adults could then use that information to create and improve transitional programming to better prepare students for the obstacles they faced when entering the ninth grade and give them better academic and social-emotional success. After identifying these areas of struggle, the intent was to author new, improved programming that could offer comprehensive, individualized support to each student as they navigated their transition.

#### *Philosophical Assumptions: Theoretical Framework*

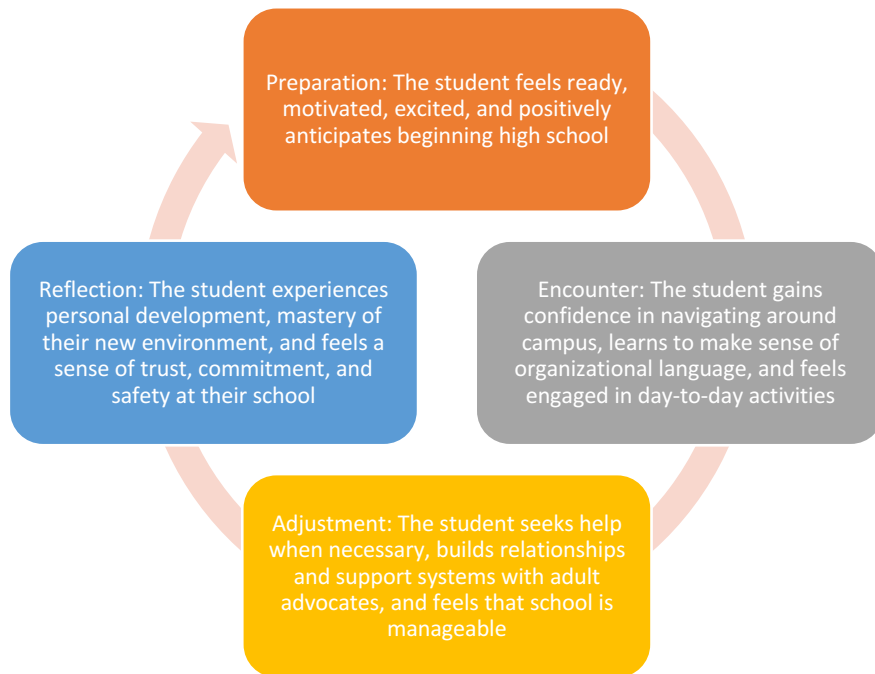
In 1990, Nigel Nicholson observed career transitions and proposed that the transition into a new work experience is a highly dynamic process involving multiple factors, calling his idea The Theory of Work Role Transitions (Nicholson, 1984). He claimed that to move successfully through a role transition in the workplace, an individual must go through four stages: preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization. Each stage required the individual to achieve specific benchmarks and surmount difficulties, and it was important for an individual to fully experience and overcome each stage of the transition (De Clercq et al., 2018; Nicholson, 1984).

In 2013, Harris and Barnett adapted Nicholson's model to accommodate the transition from high school into higher education, calling their expanded model the Thriving Transition Cycle (Harris, 2013). Harris and Barnett edited the phases of the model to preparation, encounter, adjustment, and reflection, including descriptive sub-stages of each phase. What also separates Harris and Barnett's model from Nicholson's is

that it is a true cycle, with preparation acting as both steps one and five. This cyclical nature of the new model demonstrates the dynamic and repeating nature of the process of transition as one that does not truly end, but rather begins again “with the resolution of one stage defining the next” (Harris, 2013, pp. 1–2). Essentially, the experience of transition is not finite but is continuously experienced in moving from one stage of life to the next.

Harris also purports that traditional orientation programming that is limited to front-loaded information does not fully provide the participant with the tools they need to thrive. To truly follow each of the stages of transition in the cycle, it is necessary to utilize early intervention techniques as well as reflective exercises. He states that these early intervention techniques are far preferable over crisis management, and that transition programs should be well-embedded into the entire student experience to truly be successful (Harris, 2013).

Because the Thriving Transition Cycle can successfully guide students as they move into higher education, this cycle was applied to this study, as students made the transition from eighth to ninth grade at a college preparatory institution. When each stage of the cycle was well-resolved, students had the best opportunity to thrive in their new environment. Furthermore, teaching effective adjustment behaviors earlier would be all the more beneficial to students when the time came to transition to higher education. Figure 1 provides a visual for how Harris and Barnett’s cycle may be applied to the high school transition.



*Figure 1. The Thriving Transition Cycle Applied to High School Freshmen (Harris, 2013).*

This study examined the struggles that current high school freshmen experienced as they moved through the various stages of transition and identified in which areas they required additional support. Harris suggests that effective transitional support and intervention is most beneficial to students who find it difficult to self-advocate and seek help, while students who are accustomed to success may find themselves seeking help from outside of the school to avoid being viewed as a failure (Harris, 2013). Therefore, selecting participants from various educational backgrounds from whom to collect data provided a clearer picture of where students were not receiving the support that they needed.

### *Research Design and Methods*

Due to the need to better understand the freshman transition experience, and; therefore, stories from participants during their ninth-grade year, a collective case study was appropriate. The research took place on the Hockaday campus, and was open to any current tenth, eleventh, or twelfth-grade student who attended Hockaday during ninth-grade. This study was specific to the Hockaday freshman experience, and it was therefore crucial to the validity of the data that the study take place within the Hockaday student body. A pool of participants was gathered on a voluntary basis, followed by voluntary response arrangement of participants into collective cases based on experience. These cases were new students, existing students, and boarding students.

During the first phase of this collective case study, the researcher administered a qualitative questionnaire assessing the transition experience of students from a variety of backgrounds. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on the type of student (new, existing, or boarding), and ask questions that gauged the difficulty of the participant's transition into high school. Questions also included information on the participant's cultural identifiers. Between the phases of the study, selected students were arranged into collective cases based on their questionnaire data. In phase two of the data collection, selected students participated in group interviews that deeply investigated various aspects of the transition experience, what programming was helpful, and where improvements should be made to the freshman experience.

### *Key Terms*

*Adolescence*: The social and personal experience of puberty (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019).

*Boarding students*: For this study, the term *boarding students* refers to students who live on campus in the residence department. These students only visit home on weekends or holidays.

*Day students*: For this study, the term *day students* refers to students who live at home with their parents or guardians, and commute to and from campus daily.

*Friend group*: For this study, a friend group refers to a group of adolescents that shares social plans, group chats, and unspoken rules and expectations.

*Gender*: Often confused with sex, gender refers to the social and cultural expression of sex that is based on societal and cultural influences. Gender expression is not necessarily based on one's biological sex as assigned at birth (Newman, 2018).

*Puberty*: The biological process of maturing into an adult (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019).

*Sex*: Male and female, related to biological, and often anatomical and physiological characteristics at birth (Newman, 2018).

### *Conclusion*

Despite the frequency of difficulty making successful transitions into high school, ninth-graders are often expected to do so with little or no preparation or support. The unfortunate consequence of this negligence is students who fail to master essential skills, have low self-esteem and high anxiety, and are underprepared for future transitions. The purpose of this study was to gather information from students who had already completed their transition into high school, focusing on what they identified as the most significant struggles they encountered. This information was then used to author a new transitional

curriculum to support students as they entered high school. The next chapter explores existing research to support the need for this study, as well as point out the gaps in the available literature that create the necessity for this research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

The freshman transition is often a disruptive and difficult part of life for an adolescent, and if not properly supported, a student's academic outcomes and well-being can suffer. Ninth-graders appear to struggle, some more than others, as they face this transition simultaneously with several other of life's most difficult challenges. To support these students through a difficult transition, it is crucial to understand the reasons why the existing programming has been ineffective for some students at the site of this study. This literature review illustrates the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of existing transitional programming, the significance of developmental milestones during the time programming is implemented, and that transition within a single-sex education environment is unique enough to warrant additional research.

The literature review begins by examining existing transitional programming, beginning with the initiatives that drive most eighth to ninth-grade transitional curriculum, followed by a look at programs that colleges and universities use to acclimate their students, and the motives behind it. Next, the chapter examines the relevant developmental obstacles of 14-year-old adolescent females as they face high school in conjunction with increased academic rigor, the onset of mental and physical development, increased social complexities, evolving relationships with adults, coping with stress and anxiety, and planning for a looming future, all in a time of social media dominance. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the debate on the merits

of single-sex education, a look at the lack of gender discussion among existing research, and an examination of the uniqueness of a combination boarding and day school.

### *Existing Transitional Programming*

Research exists regarding the difficult transition that students face when leaving eighth grade and entering high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004b; Durant, 2009; Eiser, 2011; Long, 2009; Neild et al., 2008; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). However, most of the completed research is targeted at evaluating the effectiveness of existing programming for large, public high schools or higher education, and a gap in the research exists for smaller learning communities like private, independent schools (Costain, 2017; Credé & Niehorster, 2012; De Clercq et al., 2018; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Fromme et al., 2008; Harris, 2013; Legters & Kerr, 2001; Srofe, 2009; Way, 2015). Existing research addresses many legitimate concerns regarding the freshman transition, including building a sense of community, early prevention methods, and acquiring new study skills to prepare for increased academic rigor (Srofe, 2009). Many of these factors can be carried across programming at various types of schools, as the need for strengthening these skills is universal. However, other factors are less relevant to a small, independent learning context, such as dropout rates, behavioral disruptions, and decreases in achievement as benchmarked by standardized testing.

### *Large High School Programming Goals*

Many school districts develop and execute onboarding programming for their new freshman that takes place over the summer, and sometimes continues into the school year. Schools implement these programs to attempt to meet the requirements put in place by the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and are often somewhat successful in achieving

academic goals (Way, 2015). However, some researchers have argued that many transitional difficulties may be a direct result of the structure of traditional high school, in that students attend up to seven or eight classes per day, and their teachers see upwards of 100 students daily (Sherry, 2007; Srofe, 2009). Due to such large student populations, it is very difficult to create personalized transition experiences for students that appeal to their strengths and potential areas of growth (Sherry, 2007). Additionally, in a study conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, after shadowing students in 48 states, a significant mismatch was observed between school policies and programs, and the developmental needs of high school freshmen (Black, 2004; Srofe, 2009). Particularly for already-vulnerable students, entering ninth grade without sufficient, individualized programming can increase the likelihood for students to become disengaged from their teachers, the community, and the learning.

Some of the most prevalent topics among those addressed in the existing research are the prevention of extremely negative consequences, such as the oversaturation of ninth-grade classes, students falling behind and failing to graduate on time (if at all), and dropping out of high school altogether (Akos & Galassi, 2004b). Many researchers describe ninth grade as a bulge, bottleneck, or holding tank for students (Durant, 2009; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Grade enrollment numbers show that the number of students entering ninth grade compared to eighth grade is increasingly large. Wheelock and Miao's data show that as of 2001, thirteen percent more students were enrolled in grade nine than in grade eight the previous year nationwide (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). After the increase from eighth to ninth grade, the move to tenth grade showed the largest dip in enrollment from one year to the next. The bottleneck effect can be attributed to the

increase in numbers in ninth grade without the relief of students moving on to tenth grade since as of 2001 the enrollment in tenth grade was between eleven and twelve percent smaller than that of ninth grade (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). The failure of students to move on to tenth grade likely indicates that more students are flunking their ninth-grade classes, and creating a foreboding pattern for the future graduation rates (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Since 1984, graduation rates across the nation have seen a steady decline, with an accelerating decline in the 1990s, and many students not graduating within four or five years (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Additionally, reports have indicated that the United States is facing an alarming dropout crisis, particularly in large cities such as New York, Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Neild et al., 2008). In some cities, fifty percent or more high school students drop out before receiving a diploma, with a large portion of this percentage never earning enough credits to move past ninth grade (Neild et al., 2008). It is, therefore, unsurprising that dropout rates are directly correlated with academic failure that takes place during the transition into high school (Durant, 2009; Legters & Kerr, 2001). If it is possible to predict dropout rates based on ninth-grade outcomes, “one could reasonably conclude that the transition alters students’ education trajectories in ways that could not fully be predicted before high school” (Neild et al., 2008, p. 544). If students find themselves able to navigate the difficult transition into high school, they soon find themselves faced with new transition post-high school.

### *Programming to Transition into Higher Education*

Another subgroup of literature regarding educational transition is targeted toward high school students' transitions into colleges and universities after graduation (De Clercq et al., 2018). The literature indicates that students often find themselves overwhelmed with the vastness of the change, with many students leaving home for the first time, experiencing a massive increase in independence, navigating new social environments, and adapting to new responsibilities (Cossy, 2014; Credé & Niehorster, 2012; De Clercq et al., 2018; Fromme et al., 2008). According to Crede and Niehorster (2012), these adjustment factors are widely recognized as a concern by the substantial body of research that exists on the transition into higher education and are also thoroughly addressed by existing orientation programs for freshmen.

One significant difference between existing high school and college transition programs is the emphasis that higher education environments place on mental health, in addition to more easily observed issues such as academic achievement. Researchers identify college as a time when students undergo major changes in identity (Fromme et al., 2008), and have observed that the transition from high school to college has created a mental health crisis among young people (Cossy, 2014; Eiser, 2011). At the college level, more and more students are experiencing mental health problems, and there is an observable increase in depression and anxiety. Also, "an often overlooked but equally serious problem is the rising number of students struggling with eating disorders, substance abuse, and self-injury" (Eiser, 2011, p. 1). Even if students do not come forward to request counseling services and assistance for diagnosable mental health problems, stress levels are immensely high during such an extensive adjustment period (Cossy, 2014).

As a result of the increased recognition of mental health problems and the high stress associated with transition, many orientations and transition programs for higher education have incorporated mindfulness and self-care components into both their transition process and as a generally accessible on-campus resource. Research strongly indicates that mental health support has a strong impact on the improvement of student life, as well as academic achievement, student retention, and overall well-being (Eisner, 2002). The National Survey of Counseling Center Directors found that “59 percent of clients indicated that counseling had helped them remain in school, and 60 percent stated that counseling had helped improve their academic performance” (Eiser, 2011, p. 2). This information indicates that it would be beneficial to include a mental health aspect in high school transitional program.

#### *Transitional Programming for Independent Schools*

Despite the ample existing research on educational transitions, it remains difficult to find resources regarding the transition experience of smaller learning communities such as private schools. This section provides perspective on the uniqueness of the transitional experience in an independent school context. While the middle to high school transition is widely considered the most challenging of K–12 transitions (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Southern Regional Education Board, 2002), Costain notes that transitions to kindergarten, middle school, high school, and college each include unique difficulties and opportunities (Costain, 2017). The challenge remains, however, to figure out the best ways to provide students with experiences that allow them to feel confident, significant, and prepared (Costain, 2017). Large quantitative studies are available that provide data on dropout rates and use standardized testing scores to measure academic achievement,

but Long (2009) suggests that there is a notable absence of student perspectives. This oversight leaves little information available on students' first-hand experience of high school, and what serve as the greatest factors for success (Long, 2009).

After reviewing what the students most highly prioritize when transitioning into high school, administrators must decide upon the best methods to use to build and implement this curriculum. Steele suggests that many existing programs, in an attempt to prepare students exclusively for rigorous academic challenges, miss their mark when it comes to ensuring students possess all of the necessary skills to become successful in high school (Steele, 2010). It is widely suggested that transitional programming include coursework that focuses on the skills needed to master the challenges of high school curriculum (Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Southern Regional Education Board, 2002), but literature also suggests that this programming best serves students when it includes personalized academic and social components that enable close bonds to be built with teachers and peers (Steele, 2010).

Additionally, Steel refers to the best practice of creating small learning communities, which improve students' opportunities for learning (2010). As mentioned above, ninth-grade classes are increasingly large, which can be a very difficult environment for students to adjust to. Most students are likely moving from smaller, more intimate, and supportive middle school contexts into large high schools that combine many middle schools into one, and potentially house students from all different age groups. This new atmosphere can feel impersonal, and the complexity of being surrounded by older students can increase social pressures (Steele, 2010).

Ellerbrock and Keifer suggest that happy, successful students describe their high school as a community of care. A community of care is defined as “a school culture in which students and teachers care about and support each other, individual’s needs are satisfied within a group setting, and members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group” (2014, p. 3). They suggest that transitional aid can begin while the students are still in middle school, with educators providing students with foundational skills that will allow the change to high school to feel less jarring and abrupt, and instead create a sense of continuity (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Furthermore, beginning transitional programming in middle school while class sizes are smaller and more intimate will help to ensure that programming feels more personalized to promote the feeling of a community of care. Teachers who implement this programming can get to know students on an individual level, allowing them to create learning experiences and lessons that meet personal needs and set them up with coping skills to meet new challenges in ninth grade (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014).

To create caring communities, the specific needs of a school and its students must be assessed and analyzed, and new programming should address the most prominent issues faced by the students. Middle and high school teachers need collaboration to support adolescents in this time of transition. This proactive approach can tackle identified issues before they have the chance to become bigger problems for the students. By creating this programming that guides students from one stage of school to the next, essentially bridging what once felt like an insurmountable gap, students are better supported overall, changing difficult challenges into attainable goals, and allowing students to become adaptable, enthusiastic, and resilient in the face of change.

### *Developmental Obstacles of 14-Year-Old Females*

Program development for the eighth to ninth grade transition should revolve around the most prominent obstacles faced by adolescent girls today. There is an abundance of existing research on adolescent development. Despite this accessible information, adolescence is not smooth, easy, or predictable, and no formula exists to predict high achievement and success for students. Therefore, it is necessary to utilize knowledge of potential oncoming obstacles to create flexible, institution-specific programming that appeals to students within the environment, whatever their level of developmental readiness. Akos and Galassi (2004b) regard academic and social concerns as the primary focus of most existing transitional programming. However, other research indicates that academic success, mental and physical development, confrontation of new social complexities, evolving perception of adults, coping with stress and anxiety, and planning for a not-so-distant future, all in a time of extreme connectedness attributed to social media are necessary aspects to consider as well (Damour, 2016). Unfortunately, despite this great combination of obstacles that girls encounter as they make this transition, academic success is often the most valued, or only focus.

### *The Pressure of Academic Success*

At Hockaday, the population of students is largely affluent, and there are low occurrences of dropping out, unplanned pregnancies, and failure to promote to the next grade level. However, new research suggests that high academic pressure causes these students to experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and substance use than adolescents from differing socioeconomic backgrounds (Liang et al., 2016; Luthar & Becker, 2002). Specifically, affluent high school girls suffer greater transitional

challenges than boys at the same age (Liang et al., 2016; Luthar & Barkin, 2012). Girls in these populations experience extremely high expectations from multiple angles, and their achievement is most often rewarded by extrinsic validation. Their pathway seems paved in front of them: produce outstanding academic work, receive admittance to highly esteemed universities and colleges, and have a successful career and family (Liang et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2018), all while being nice, looking pretty, staying skinny, and having a successful social life (Damour, 2016; Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). The competitive atmosphere and high-pressure environment created by these forces have students reporting feeling crushed under overwhelming pressures to succeed and achieve, the need to be perfect, and the extreme fear of failure (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Spencer et al., 2018). At a time when students are developing mentally, they are also being asked to face huge mental challenges.

### *The Onset of New Mental and Physical Development*

As an added challenge, the new academic demands of high school intersect with the onset of major mental and physical development. Girls begin to feel torn between the children they have been, and the adults they are trying to become as they strive to meet new social norms and expectations. In the grade levels just preceding ninth grade, most girls begin to experience the internal pull away from their childlike interests and behaviors and are setting subconscious goals to imitate greatly admired older teens (Damour, 2016). Leaning into this surge towards adulthood likely also means pulling away from the comfort of available parents or other trusted adults at a time when new risk-taking behaviors also begin to result in greater consequences (Damour, 2016). The adolescent relationship with adults can be dichotomous, with girls simultaneously relying

on the advice of an adult to avoid tricky peer-pressure situations, while also wanting to be dropped off a block from the party so as not to be seen with them.

Experiencing adolescence can be comparable to experiencing an identity crisis. Pipher refers to adolescents as travelers who are neither children nor adults, sometimes four years old, sometimes twenty-five, fitting in nowhere, always searching for a home, native land, or safe place to belong (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Regardless of how mature they may seem, adults must remember students' adolescence. Some students remain childlike for longer than others, while a few (especially those with older siblings) seem to be rushing headfirst toward adulthood. It is imperative that, during the transition into high school, adults remember that adolescence is a time when everything feels new, not just the school year, the classes, and the teachers. Students are intensely preoccupied that everything about their lives seems to be growing and changing, and the need to focus on algebra can seem trivial as a result.

Another factor to consider is the onset of hormonal fluctuations associated with puberty. Girls most often hit puberty before their male friends, and the age of female puberty seems to keep dropping (Damour, 2016; Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Although puberty is, by definition, a biological process, it is also closely associated with the social and personal experiences of adolescence and is often just as influenced by culture (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). The result of puberty colliding with adolescence is most often an intense fascination or preoccupation with one's body, and the changes it is going through. A young girl's emotional system may be changing along with her body, but these changes are likely happening at different rates. Immature emotional responses can be

extreme and chaotic, with small events triggering excessive reactions, causing girls to lose perspective (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019).

Keeping one's reactions in check can feel impossible with the influence of surging hormones, which can cause girls to feel out of control and defensive of their feelings and behaviors. Research by David Elkind (1967) refers to the idea that teens often feel that they are being watched and judged by an imaginary audience, with as much interest in their behavior and appearance as they have (Elkind, 1967; Eva & Wood, 2018; Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). This paranoid concern over the perception of others can create difficulty when making social adjustments during adolescence when the need to be associated with a friend group feels crucial. Maintaining existing friends or perhaps finding new ones within a new school context can be a very different experience for every girl. During this developmental phase of egocentrism, girls begin to overanalyze conversations, comments, and body language, attributing meaning where there is none, and often misreading one another's true intentions. The resultant undecipherable code can create miscommunication and conflict among friends (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Any conflict among friends can be particularly difficult while trying to navigate social adjustments, make new friends, find a sense of belonging.

### *Making Major Social Adjustments*

It seems counterintuitive that appearance should be valued so highly in a time when most girls are experiencing an awkward phase, but as mentioned above, the pressure to be pretty and skinny is closely allied with being popular. Girls who do not meet societal expectations for appearance can suffer consequences such as being left out of social plans or being ridiculed by peers. Unfortunately, the war is unwinnable. Pretty

girls, while perhaps finding superficial success making friends, suffer from the negative stereotypes that cultures place on attractiveness, overly valuing sexuality, and implying negative ideas about their intelligence (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). As a result, girls find themselves caught between dichotomous expectations.

As a defense mechanism for their perceived failure to meet expectations, girls often attempt to push negative attention to each other to preserve themselves in social situations. They find it preferable to punish others for failing to achieve impossible societal standards and find themselves pointing out faults in each other to avoid being recognized as a fraud (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Dichotomously, no one wants to be identified as the girl who thinks she's "all that." Rachel Simmons (2002) refers to the demonization of confident, assertive, self-satisfied girls who are somehow able to force behaviors to meet society's expectations. These girls are often criticized for unfeminine behavior that undermines the definition of being a "good girl." This impassable situation often leaves girls at a loss for how to approach formerly pleasant relationships with important adults in their lives.

### *Pushing Boundaries with Adults*

There is a contradiction within the relationships between adolescents and the respective adults in their lives. Girls are torn between the desire to please adults and receive extrinsic validation and the desire to push back on authority and anything that could be closely associated with their childhood selves, like the physical comfort of a parents' hug or kiss (Damour, 2016). High-achieving girls seem often to fixate on pleasing relevant adults, such as teachers or employers, and find great difficulty in confronting or disappointing them. As a result, these girls often find themselves

becoming dependent on how they appear to adults, and who they should be rather than who they are (Damour, 2016; 2009). This type of pleasing behavior often results in extreme fear of failure and a lack of resilience in the face of anything less than excellent. Perception of failure becomes less associated with a particular assignment or performance, and more with who a girl is as a person, and girls often fear that once a failure occurs, perception of them is permanently damaged. These unreasonable expectations of failure prevent girls from accepting and moving forward from mistakes (2009).

Unfortunately, some parents reinforce these fears by refusing to believe that their child could be anything less than excellent and insisting a diagnosis, a treatable problem, or another external cause such as an incompetent teacher could be the reason for their daughter's failure (2009). Based on the work of Hinshaw & Kranz (2009), Liang et al. (2016) discuss that the increase in available opportunities for girls is accompanied by an unfortunate increase in expectations from adults to be *more* ambitious, smart, caring, fit, and accomplished than their peers—in effect, to become “supergirls.” Girls may experimentally push back on these expectations, encountering difficulties interacting with adults, or even intentionally misbehaving to test boundaries. Damour (2016) states that teenagers are aware when they are not punished for misbehaving, and it creates a sense of discomfort when it goes ignored. Girls continue to test boundaries, finding it strange when adults do not respond (Damour, 2016).

### *Coping with Stress, Anxiety, and Depression*

Conflict with parents can also be a factor in how adolescent girls deal with new levels of stress and anxiety. Stress and anxiety have always been a part of life, but

evidence from new studies shows a rise in these issues for young women that cannot be attributed to girls simply being more willing to admit when they are struggling (Damour, 2019). Something appears to have changed that is increasing the levels of stress and anxiety among young women in the United States. In a recent report, the American Psychological Association revealed that adolescence is no longer characterized as simple and care-free as it once was (Damour, 2019). Instead of a time of excitement and experimentation, teens now feel *more* stressed than their parents do, and exhibit physiological symptoms of tension, such as edginess and fatigue, which were formerly only observed in adults (Damour, 2019; Lupien et al., 2013). The lighthearted joy found in childhood can no longer be claimed during adolescence, and it has, instead, been characterized as tumultuous and challenging to navigate. While anxious feelings are certainly on the rise for all adolescents, girls are more likely to report experiencing anxiety than boys are, with a recent report stating “that 31 percent of girls and young women experience symptoms of anxiety compared with only 13 percent of boys and young men” (Damour, 2019, p. xvi). While the increase in anxiety among males is certainly concerning, the dramatic increase in the statistic for females is downright alarming.

In addition to the growing numbers of girls struggling with anxiety, similar trends have been found in levels of depression among adolescents. Damour observes that “between 2005 and 2014, the percentage of teenage girls experiencing depression rose from 13 to 17” and “for boys, that same measure moved from 5 to 6 percent” (Damour, 2019, p.xvii ). While learning to cope with some anxiety and stress is quite healthy, and doing so creates space for emotional growth, feelings of anxiety and stress can create a

vicious cycle. Girls often engage in emotional reasoning, which causes them to believe that if they feel it, it must be true, and do not find ways to deal with symptoms in healthy ways (Damour, 2019; Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Students who are not supported in finding ways to deal with stress and anxiety in healthy ways can develop issues with understanding themselves, their goals, and their priorities, and can develop less stable senses of self, low self-esteem, and symptoms of psychological distress (Liang et al., 2016; Luyckx et al., 2010).

### *Looking into the Future*

It may not be a conscious decision, but girls as young as twelve are already looking ahead and realizing that their time left at home is likely limited and begin making subconscious plans preparing themselves for their future as an adult (Damour, 2016). Questions may loom in the back of a girl's head, such as, "where do I want to go to college? What kind of career do I want to have? What comes next?" Parents might not always agree on their child's post-high school plans, as seen in Greta Gerwig's dramatic comedy, *Lady Bird* (2017). The film features a loving but conflicted relationship between a girl and her parents as she navigates high school and makes plans for college, exemplifying the push and pull relationship between a girl and her parents as she moves through adolescence (Gerwig, 2017).

In schools where college attendance after high school is the expectation, such current issues as the college admissions scandals involving bribery and criminal activity may add pressure to communities where tension already exists regarding preferential treatment, networking, and the exchange of money. While parties involved in the scandal are suffering some consequences for their actions, implications at the high school level

are inevitable, such as increased feelings of competition, inadequacy, and distrust. When one student is accepted, while another is rejected, students' minds wander to places of fairness and comparison.

### *Adolescence in the Time of Social Media Dominance*

Dealing with the pressures of academic success, mental and physical development, social adjustments, evolving relationships with adults, coping with stress and anxiety, and making plans for the future all occur today under the large scope of social media influence. Current high school students are among the first generation of young people who chronicle their lives on social media, and devote hours to editing, captioning, and posting on social media in the hopes of nonintimate approval (Damour, 2019). A recent survey found that when asked if they used social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, nine out of ten teens and young adults indicated that they did, including seventeen percent of participants who admitted to using one or more of these platforms almost constantly. However, there were mixed reactions from participants when it came to feeling positive or negative emotions toward their use of social media (Eva & Wood, 2018).

Unfortunately, dependence on social media comes at a time when girls' bodies are developing, and images of women valued mainly for their sex appeal are constantly appearing on the internet. Marketing campaigns target girls and young women with sexualized images of society's expectations for appearance and body shape (Damour, 2019). Bo Burnham's (2018) dramatic comedy film, *Eighth Grade*, provides a cringe-worthy and relatable narrative of an adolescent girl, Kayla, in her final days of eighth grade as she prepares to enter high school (Burnham, 2018). Kayla is passionately

dedicated to and reliant on social media for connection and simultaneously posts videos instructing viewers on how to be confident with yourself and be who you are, and then turns around to carefully style her hair and makeup to take a selfie posted with the caption, “Ugh, just woke up like this!” (Burnham, 2018; Eva & Wood, 2018; Whittle, 2018). Kayla’s false representation of her reality is an excellent example of social media as a highlight reel of people’s lives, rather than a true glimpse into their real experiences.

Internet-dependent teens like Kayla suffer consequences when it comes to reality. Social media has caused physical, cognitive, emotional, relational, and maturational consequences, and prevents girls from making real-life connections with peers and family members, as well as other activities such as reading, exercising, and navigating challenges in the world (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Studies show that, while it seems that teens are constantly connected with friends, as much as ninety-six percent of this connection is through electronic devices, and the number of teens who saw friends daily dropped by forty percent from 2009 to 2015 (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). This replacement of real interactions results in missed opportunities for the development of social skills, resolution of conflict, and discussion of feelings and experiences. Additionally, girls can signal approval and disapproval toward their peers at any time of day through social media with no social subtleties like facial expression to contextualize. “Studies also suggest that girls are more likely than boys to be cyberbullied but also to dwell on the emotional injuries caused by their peers” (Damour, 2019, p. xvii).

Research demonstrates that constant connections have created larger consequences. The University of Minnesota conducted a review of seventy-two studies from between 1979 and 2009 and concluded that teens are forty percent less empathetic

than they were in 1979 (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Frequent to constant use of social media has been shown to significantly lower attention span, causing impulsive behavior and hyperactivity in adolescents (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). At a time when girls are attempting to mature and get a handle on harnessing their emotions, these statistics are not encouraging.

### *The Uniqueness of the Educational Context*

As discussed in the previous section, the effectiveness of previously implemented programming and the developmental readiness of teenage girls is central to the creation of new transitional curriculum. Also, as a single-sex, boarding, and day institution, Hockaday is socially and academically unique enough to warrant separate research, from coeducational day schools, particularly regarding transition and adjustment. Literature has not arrived at a definitive answer on the merits of single-sex education, and there is a lack of transitional programming that is specific to such a context. Furthermore, the added boarding component further complexifies the educational site.

### *The Debate Over Single-Sex Education*

A significant body of research regarding the merits and disadvantages of single-sex education already exists, but specific attention is not paid to unique issues within single-sex environments, and how boys and girls might handle obstacles differently when faced with them in separated contexts (Bigler & Signorella, 2011; Crosby et al., 1994; Lee & Bryk, 1989; Marsh, 1989; Sadker, 2009). The existing research has not reached a definitive answer on whether or not there is a biological, neural basis for psychological differences between men and women, nor between boys and girls (Eliot, 2009, 2013; McCarthy & Arnold, 2011). Therefore, single-sex education remains a topic of

controversy and debate, as no consensus has been reached as to the preferable gender makeup of schools and classrooms (Bigler & Signorella, 2011).

Debates have sparked among researchers as they argue for the benefits or drawbacks of single-sex education. For example, in the late 1980s, Lee and Byrk (1989) disagreed with Marsh (1989) regarding the effects of gender composition in high school classrooms, as measured by the High School and Beyond Database (Lee & Bryk, 1989; Marsh, 1989). Marsh's research concludes that the degree of improved education in single-sex high schools is modest, while Lee and Byrk maintained continued enthusiasm for single-sex education, particularly for girls (Bigler & Signorella, 2011; Lee & Bryk, 1989; Marsh, 1989). Since the publication of Lee and Byrk and Marsh's articles in 1989, researchers remain torn regarding single-sex education and have yet to reach a consensus (Bigler & Signorella, 2011).

Arguments opposed to single-sex education tend to focus on the inability, as of yet, to replicate research results that indicate a propensity for students to learn better when surrounded only by peers of the same sex. Researchers are often quick to point out that the seeming correlation between an improved educational experience and a single-sex environment might just as easily be explained by an alternative causality. For example, women's colleges are often ardently supported by feminists as environments that allow support of female intellect and emotional development (Bigler & Signorella, 2011; Crosby et al., 1994). Contradicting arguments, however, suggest that high levels of selectivity of women's colleges may be the root cause of elevated educational outcomes for students (Bigler & Signorella, 2011).

Another direct disagreement among researchers pertains to gender bias in the educational environment. Many researchers continue to argue that gender bias persists in affecting student experiences in the classroom (Bigler & Signorella, 2011; Ganley et al., 2013; Sadker, 2009). Sadker (2009) points to sex-segregated schools as a possible countermeasure to gender inequities that have been documented throughout educational history. Sax et al.'s (2013) discussion of Meece et al. (2006) details how gender inequities and stereotypes endure in traditional coed classrooms. While boys are encouraged to be competitive in math and science courses, girls are pushed toward reading-heavy courses, and are expected to be empathetic and nurturing (Meece et al., 2006). Sax et al.'s (2013) analysis of Meece et al. (2006) appears to support that girls continue to suffer from lower expectations and internalized sexism compared to their male counterparts.

Sax et al. (2013) also referred to Carlone's (2004) research to support the argument that girls continue to be conditioned to believe that they are inherently less capable than their male counterparts. Carlone's (2004) research finds that classroom teachers consider male students to be naturally talented, while female students' similar academic success is attributed to hard work rather than natural intelligence. Alongside battling for equal recognition of their academic success, Sax et al. (2013) refer to the girls participating in Meece's (2006) research as having to deal with social pressures that their male peers did not, such as appearance and perceived popularity. Hinshaw and Kranz (2009) refer to such social pressures as a piece of the triple bind that traps adolescent girls, along with academic success and athleticism. Sadker et al. (2009) go on to suggest that this imbalance in social pressures among the sexes results in distraction and inability

to engage in classroom content for females in coeducational circumstances (Sadker, 2009). With added pressures from all sides, female students can dedicate less attention and energy to their studies.

Concerns surrounding gender bias extend beyond elementary and secondary classrooms. Dupre (2010) finds that, upon entry to college, female students struggle more to develop autonomy than their male counterparts, and are seen as a greater risk for being affected by the negative consequences of the gender gap. At their current developmental state, adolescent females are more likely to suffer from self-doubt and lack of intellectual confidence, in addition to heightened levels of anxiety (Chapman, 1989; Damour, 2019; DuPre, 2010). Historically, gender stereotypes in schools “are likely to conjure up images of cooperation, compliance, [and] polite silence,” which continue to have a strong impact on young women today as they strive to reach academic success (DuPre, 2010, p. 69). Pipher and Gilliam (2019) refer to a culture that poisons girls into thinking that they must meet unreasonable expectations to fit a mold set by them for men, and Dupre (2010) maintains that society subconsciously reinforces this idea that girls should do, wear, and say whatever it takes to fit in. This idea is also supported by Hinshaw and Kranz’s previously referenced triple bind (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009). Pipher implies that as a result, when girls reach adolescence, they have a difficult time reconciling this idea of socially pleasing girls who are also autonomous, confident adults (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Girls cannot develop resilience when they are continuously knocked down while trying to reach such unattainable goals.

On the other hand, some researchers suggest that isolating genders may cause an exacerbation of gender gaps within educational opportunities, arguing that single-sex

schools risk reinforcing gender stereotypes (Meece et al., 2006; Sax et al., 2013). These researchers are quick to point out that, in both high school and beyond, women show signs of stronger academic engagement than men, reporting more time spent studying and meeting with teachers than their male counterparts (Sax et al., 2013). High-achieving high school females were also found to be involved with more co-curricular activities than high-achieving high school males, and Cole and Gonyea (2008) believe that increasing female visibility in academics can be attributed to an increase in the number of women pursuing advanced education. Ultimately, however, despite research indicating that women are more engaged in their education, persisting concerns regarding inequalities in educational environments are a source of continued debate among researchers (Carlone, 2004; Sadker, 2009; Sax et al., 2013). Perhaps female students' subconsciously reinforced need for approval and validation is the root cause for higher achievement, co-curricular involvement, and teacher interaction.

Regardless of the data surrounding single-sex schools, there exists a unique opportunity to approach a group that is exclusively made up of adolescent girls, and “to ignore even the possibility of gender inequity is to deter future progress of equality in the classroom” (DuPre, 2010, p. 69). I will take advantage of the opportunity to provide female-centered programming and to do whatever possible to prevent the gender stereotype from dictating their futures, be deeply aware of the developmental obstacles they are facing and do as much as possible to prepare them for the academic rigor they are facing.

### *The Need for Research on Transitional Programs in Single-Sex Education*

Regardless of the debate on single-sex education, since much of the existing research on transition focuses on the student experience in a coeducational environment, new research is needed to fill the gap for high school adjustment in an all-girls context. As comprehensively addressed in previous sections, “the individual or personal transformations that students undergo during puberty and school changes are extensive and frequently disruptive” (Akos & Galassi, 2004a, p. 102). Motivation to participate in academics (Blyth et al., 1983), engagement in cocurricular activities, perceived support from teachers and other school staff (Seidman & Allen, 1994), and self-esteem (Roberta Simmons, 1987) were all noted by researchers as areas of decline during the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004a).

Additionally, some of these effects may be more greatly felt by girls than by boys, with researchers noting that girls’ self-esteem took a greater hit than boys’ (Akos & Galassi, 2004a; Blyth et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1993). Researchers suggest that girls experience greater emotional upheaval and distress due to the transient nature of peer networks during puberty and transition, suggesting that the combination of physical development and school transitions may, therefore, have a more significant effect on girls than boys (Akos & Galassi, 2004a). Akos and Galassi (2004a) studied gender as a psychological variable in school transitions and found that the students’ ability to feel connected to the school was a powerful predictor of a successful transition. These feelings of connectedness likely directly influence academic outcomes of the transition as well (Akos & Galassi, 2004a).

Effective school transitional programming must, therefore, take gender into account as a variable of the transition process. Successful programs must include

preparation for new procedures and organizational differences, but without attention to gender differences, specifically concerning personal and social adjustment to high school, programming misses an important variable (Akos & Galassi, 2004a). New research is needed to investigate the needs of female students as they transition into high school. Akos and Galassi (2004a, p. 108) suggest that “perhaps education professionals can facilitate more effective personal/social adjustment to high school with programs like peer mentoring and systematic efforts to improve female peer cultures so that girls also find other students helpful during the transition.”

#### *The Added Uniqueness of a Boarding and Day Environment*

The Hockaday School is unique in that some students live on campus in the boarding department, while others live at home locally with their parents and commute to campus daily. Research that focuses exclusively on all-boarding or all-day schools demonstrates an incomplete picture of a campus that is combined. There is little to no research that exists concerning an institution that houses both types of students, which is unfortunate because the living situation has become a huge factor in students’ ability to successfully transition into the school. Boarding students’ parents may only live a few miles away, or they may live thousands of miles away, and, therefore, students’ support systems may look very different from a student who lives in town with their parents.

The idea of a boarding school conjures an intensive form of education in which all students live on campus in a highly structured atmosphere. Parents who send their children to such a school hope that they will acquire a new sense of independence and discipline that will prepare them for a life of leadership opportunities (Behaghel et al., 2017; Cookson, 1985). From the student perspective, arriving at a boarding school is

likely a huge life transition, in addition to that of entering high school. A new living situation requires adapting to a completely new environment while adjusting to the academic expectations of the school. This is an added element of transition that day students need not consider. Boarding students must adjust to being away from friends, family, and pets, must relinquish certain freedoms that they enjoyed while living at home, and face the high academic demands of an elite institution (Behaghel et al., 2017). These students encounter an atmosphere that most other students will not experience until they go away to college.

Boarding students, immersed in a new, academically competitive environment, report spending up to four times less television-watching than their day student peers. Their new teachers may be more academically demanding than they are used to, and many students notice a decline in their grades when they first transition to the school (Behaghel et al., 2017). Consequentially, many new boarding students also report lower levels of overall well-being during their first year, and it is not until their second year of boarding that students report higher levels of well-being and motivation, and more time studying and doing homework (Behaghel et al., 2017). Behaghel et al. (2017) suggest that the difference that students experience between their first and second years arises from the likelihood that acclimating to a new school has an impact on well-being, which then affects their learning until they reach a level of comfort in their new environment. These researchers suggest that there is some indication that the negative shock of adjustment is larger for less academically strong students, while stronger students tend to recover and adjust more quickly (Behaghel et al., 2017).

Perhaps, based on this research, academically weaker boarding students require greater assistance and support when transitioning into the new school environment. These students may be at the greatest risk compared to their academically-strong peers within boarding, as well as their day counterparts. Behaghel et al. states that, “once they have managed to adjust to their new environment, strong students make very substantial academic progress,” but that “this type of school does not seem well-suited to weaker students,” as their data indicates that even after two years, many of these students do not show improvement (2017, p. 142). This conclusion suggests that substituting the school environment for the home environment is less effective for lower-performing students than for higher, and may require that additional interventions be put into place for struggling students (Behaghel et al., 2017).

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this literature review was to examine existing research on transitional programming, as well as identify elements that should necessarily be considered when creating new programming. These elements include important developmental factors of teenage girls and the unique context of the research site. The review identified a gap in the literature for single-sex boarding and day environments and their transitional obstacles, which are unique compared to traditional coeducational high schools. Students at these types of institutions face obstacles that are not otherwise addressed in existing programming, and it is becoming increasingly clear that offering transitional programming that does not address these factors is insufficiently effective, and that new programming must be designed.

The goal of this research is to provide a foundation for building new, comprehensive transitional programming for Hockaday freshmen that will integrate support for the greatest areas of need for incoming ninth-grade students. This programming will accommodate each student's educational background, developmental phase, living situation, and other factors that may combine in their unique transitional experience. Ultimately, the programming should provide an individualized experience for each student so that they can overcome the obstacles that are most relevant to them and achieve the best foundational year of high school possible.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### *Introduction: Research Questions*

Often when freshmen enter high school, they are left under-supported through much of the new information, experiences, and challenges they encounter. While this jettison may feel like abandonment, it is not happening for malicious reasons but rather reflects the implicit expectation that students either already know or will be able to figure out how to meet the new expectations that are placed on them. Existing transitional programming is often insufficient to prepare students for the obstacles that may challenge them most based on their unique combination of background and developmental factors.

Unfortunately, students do not always quickly and successfully adapt independently. Freshman students find themselves floundering, trying to calculate how to approach a teacher with questions on their recent assessment, or are baffled when they realize they have not done something they did not know they were supposed to do. Keeping a calendar, making appointments, and conducting effective email communication, among other habits, are not necessarily habits that students have already learned to maintain upon entering high school. An implicit assumption on the part of faculty exists that regardless of the varying educational backgrounds of students, incoming freshman students will achieve these habits quickly, independently, and at the same time as their peers. Struggling to unlock the mysteries of high school, these students suffer from decreased academic performance, increased behavioral issues, and increased

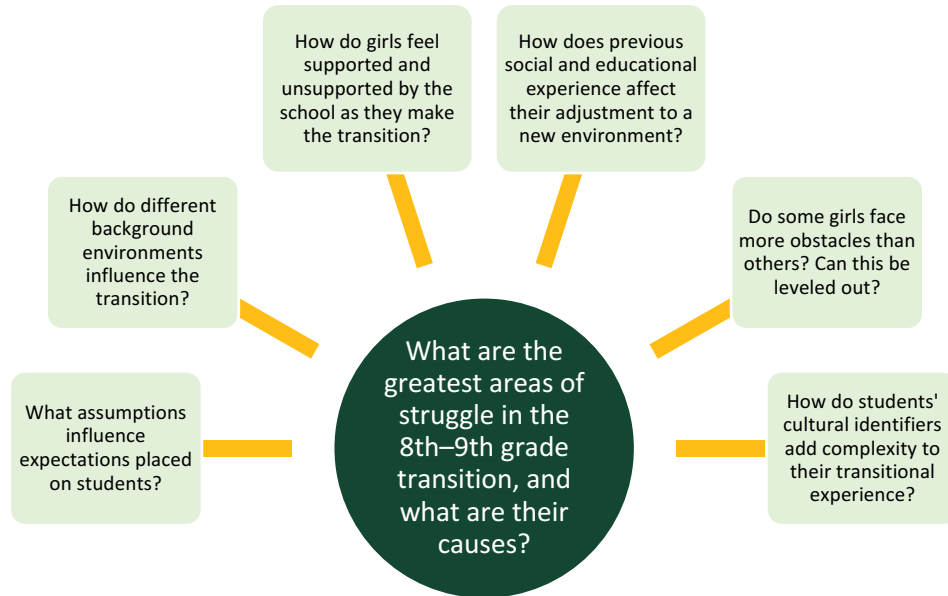
levels of anxiety and depression (Damour, 2016). This leaves parents and teachers wondering where these behaviors may be stemming from.

The combined need for transitional programming in independent schools, the developmental complexities of adolescent girls, and the uniqueness of a single-sex boarding/day institution results in the need for a study that highlights the most significantly observable obstacles in the student transitional experience. This study provided valuable information for teachers and administrators responsible for supporting students through this transition and should be used to inform the creation of transitional programming to effectively prepare students for the inevitable obstacles they face in high school. This programming would then offer the potential for improved academic performance and socioemotional success.

This study collected data in two ways to answer the fundamental research question: What are the greatest areas of struggle in the eighth to ninth-grade transition, and what are their causes? Additional questions included: What assumptions influence expectations placed on students? How do different background environments influence the transition? How do girls feel supported and unsupported by the school as they make the transition? How do the previous social and educational experiences affect student adjustment to a new environment? Do some girls face more obstacles than others? Why? How do students' cultural identifiers add complexity to their transitional experience?

To answer these questions depicted in Figure 2, I conducted a qualitative collective case study that reviewed the student experience of three groups: existing students, new students, and boarding students. Using a questionnaire, focus-group interviews, and existing documentation, I identified overarching themes that arose as

tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-graders reflected on their ninth-grade experience. The resulting findings point to areas in which transitional programming should be improved.



*Figure 2. Research questions.*

### *Researcher Perspective and Positionality*

As the researcher, I related to transition experiences on both a professional and personal level. According to Merriam (2007), it is the nature of qualitative research that the researcher’s position, bias, and assumptions affect the outcomes of the study. A researcher must acknowledge the relationship to the subject to maintain as impartial a view as possible. This self-awareness gives the research the best potential for reliability and validity because it supports the researcher’s ability to remain as consciously impartial as possible, and also offers awareness of any biases that persist. Before conducting my research, I had to first consider my professional and personal stance.

My professional position within this study began with my work at the site as a Form Dean. For each grade level, or “form,” there is a relevant dean who works closely

with the students moving through that grade. As the Form I Dean, I facilitated all freshman-specific gradewide programming, beginning with existing transitional programming and including an off-campus retreat, grade-level meetings, student council elections, and developmental curriculum. Additionally, I worked with students regarding minor conduct issues such as uniform, attendance, and behavioral infractions, and facilitated detention sessions each week.

I also provided secondary support and leadership to thirteen Form I Advisors, each of which was responsible for acting as the point-of-contact for ten or eleven students. Advisors were instructors, administrators, and staff that were assigned groups of students with varying academic and co-curricular interests, learning differences, and socio-emotional needs. These groups met daily for twenty minutes and stayed together throughout high school unless students requested to join a different group (this option was available at the end of each school year). Students generally built close relationships with their advisors and came to them with everyday problems such as bridging communication gaps with teachers or working out problems like balancing interests in co-curricular activities. Advisors turned to the Form Dean with increasingly complex issues such as extended student absences, changes in student affect, and repeated reports of academic issues from teachers. As students matriculated, advisors moved through the grades alongside them, while the Form Dean stayed with their corresponding grade level, welcoming a new group of students each year.

In the final and most specific layer of support, the I also had unique insight into the consequences of an ineffective high school transition for individual cases. Form Deans were members of the Guidance Team, which was a team of administrators that

included counseling, learning support, health services, and the head and assistant head of the Upper School. This student support group allowed relevant adults to collaborate and create support plans for individual students who were struggling academically, emotionally, or physically. For freshmen, the issues that arose seem related to academic immaturity, anxiety and depression, and resultant avoidance. As a point-person or participant in the support of each student, I worked closely with these cases to ensure that situations improved, and students were eventually able to find academic success, socioemotional relief, and support from their teachers.

On a more personal level, my social constructivist worldview emphasized the importance of the entire human experience as the most important learning vehicle. Having dealt with difficult transitions in my life, I saw the struggles of my students as unnecessarily difficult. I felt passionate about finding ways for them to face challenges and receive the necessary learning in ways that built resilience and self-reliance rather than ones that discouraged and traumatized. The mission statement at Hockaday follows similar ideals: “Believing in the limitless potential of girls, Hockaday develops resilient, confident women who are educated and inspired to lead lives of purpose and impact” (*The Hockaday School*, n.d.). I felt strongly that there were ways to achieve the mission that provided more scaffolding and support than were currently in place.

### *Theoretical Framework*

As discussed in Chapter One, Harris and Barnett adapted Nigel Nicholson’s workplace transition model (1984) into one that better applied to the transition into higher education and dubbed this model the Thriving Transition Cycle (Harris, 2013). While Nicholson’s model applied to workplace transitions and included preparation, encounter,

adjustment, and stabilization as its primary phases, Harris and Barnett's cycle encompassed preparation, encounter, adjustment, and reflection, along with descriptive sub-stages of each phase (as seen in Figure 1). True to the repeating nature of a cycle, preparation served as both steps one and five, indicating that traditional front-loading insufficiently prepared students to confidently thrive. Instead, pre-emptive, early intervention support was necessary for students to move through the phases continuously and successfully, and students should habitually reflect on the experience to learn from them (Harris, 2013). Viewing the freshman transition through Harris and Barnett's cycle could offer a better understanding of the areas in which students were struggling.

The study closely examined what prevented students from moving from one phase of the cycle to the next. The patterns identified using coding and cross-case synthesis helped me analyze at which point a student got stuck during their transition cycle: preparation, encounter, adjustment, or reflection? Harris's suggestion that "students who benefit most from transition support and intervention are those less likely to self-identify as needing support or seeking it out," while "high achieving students may help-seek from outside of the [educational] system as accessing internal resources may be seen as failure" (2013, p. 4). Using the Thriving Transition Cycle as a lens through which to view the data, this study offers insight for improving transitional programming to better teach habits and behaviors earlier.

The Thriving Transition Cycle informed the data collection methods of this study. After selecting participants from various educational backgrounds, I collected qualitative descriptions of student experiences. Students' stories were filtered through the cycle to identify at what points the successful transition halted. Coding and cross-case synthesis

offered the ability to examine what factors unsuccessful transitions had in common, in turn pointing to areas of student support that were most insufficient. Ultimately, examining student experiences led to ideas for improved programming to better serves all students. Teaching students to be cognizant of their progress through the cycle would allow them to more confidently guide themselves through transitions throughout their lives beyond high school.

### *Research Design and Rationale*

Qualitative research uses rich, detailed descriptions to describe the examination of phenomena while looking for patterns or explanations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) refer to the qualitative researcher's relationship to the world, and examination of experiences. Qualitative research involves gathering information using such practices as interviews, observations, and recordings to create representations of a phenomenon, and then interpreting into the various meanings which people may attribute that data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) also refer to theoretical frameworks as important in interpreting culturally ascribed meaning. The need to understand the problems that freshmen faced made qualitative research the appropriate choice for this study due to its descriptive, experiential nature.

More specifically, a case study offered an even more thorough explanation for a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). A case study examines some sort of entity—an individual or group of individuals—and “investigate[s] a contemporary phenomenon in depth in its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p. 286). According to Yin (2018, p. 4), a case study approach is appropriate when research questions “require an extensive and ‘in-depth’ description of some social phenomenon.” In this study, the phenomenon was the

freshman transition into high school, and the abundant struggles facing students with varying educational backgrounds indicated the need for case study research. Additionally, Stake (1995) proposes that each case can be better understood when viewed in relation to other unique cases. The data collected from collective case studies are often richer and more persuasive due to its depth and breadth (Yin, 2018). Comparing the experience of the cases would result in a deeper understanding of each one.

A collective case study examines a phenomenon experienced by multiple cases, often interpreting data using comparison (Yin, 2018). This collective case study focused on three bound groups of students as they reflected on their high school transitional experience. Each participant within a case had experienced the transition differently, offering a rich variety of data that was reduced to the most significant areas of struggle and then cross-analyzed based on different student populations (Stake, 1995). The three cases of students included existing students (students who had attended the institution for varying numbers of years), new students (from local/non-local, public/private backgrounds), and boarding students (domestic and international students who lived on-campus in ninth grade).

This collective case study format asked participants to recount their freshman experiences, prompting current tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-graders to review and reflect upon their high school transitional experience. This approach was beneficial in that students were no longer experiencing the tumultuous transition but had already navigated their freshman year. The following section details the sampling of eleventh-graders based on their educational backgrounds and willingness to participate in the study.

### *Site Selection and Participant Sampling*

This study took place at a private, all-female early childhood through twelfth-grade campus in Dallas, Texas. Known as The Hockaday School, the institution began in 1913 by Miss Ela Hockaday, and quickly gained a reputation for rigorous and comprehensive academics. Originally accommodating only ten students, the population grew to over one thousand students over the years, and the school moved locations to adapt to the growing student body (Coggan, 2002). Hockaday is a secular, college-preparatory establishment that continues to operate as a single-sex institution. Additionally, while the campus is located in Dallas, students from all over the United States and the world attend the school, with about one-fifth of Upper School students living in the on-campus residence department.

The variety of student background was a major contributor to the necessity of this study. This collective case study included three separate cases: new students, existing students, and boarding students. The new student case included all new students coming into the ninth grade at Hockaday. These students come from a variety of educational institutions, including local public and private schools. The transition from eighth to ninth grade encompassed the largest amount of growth of any transition at the school, and thirty to thirty-five percent of ninth-graders were new students.

The second case, existing students, was comprised of participants who had attended Hockaday for several years previously to ninth grade. To keep class sizes small, Hockaday's grade-level growth increased as grades advanced, with some grade-levels adding more students than others. The participants within the case had begun to attend the school at a variety of levels, including pre-kindergarten, lower, and middle school.

Students also had a variety of educational backgrounds similar to the first case but were set apart by their experience with the Hockaday community and culture.

The third and final case was comprised solely of students who lived on-campus in the residence department during ninth grade. These students offered a unique perspective of life at Hockaday as individuals who lived there throughout the school year, exercising, using library facilities, and having all meals on-campus. The voices of students who did not live at home with their parents and were potentially from a variety of geographical and cultural backgrounds was necessary to see the full spectrum of the student transition into ninth grade.

To recruit students to build each of the aforementioned cases, a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was distributed via email to tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-grade students. Upper-level students had the advantage of having completed the difficult transition from eighth to ninth grade and could look back at their experience in a less emotionally-charged way. In addition to information about educational background and number of years at Hockaday, the questionnaire included qualitative questions regarding the students' transitional support, advisory experiences, feeling of inclusion and community, and cultural identifiers. All questionnaire responses were included in the data analysis.

This study relied on voluntary response sampling, and therefore included information from all participants. Twenty-one individual participants responded to the questionnaire, and each were invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews depending on their educational background. Inviting participants to interviews on a voluntary basis ensured active engagement in the research process, and an interest in committing to helping future students.

### *Data Collection*

Collected data for case study was intended to provide a thorough picture of the freshman experience, especially considering the various obstacles and difficulties faced by students from differing backgrounds. It was important to investigate why one student might struggle more than another, and what factors affect the increase in difficulty. Cultural identifiers and previous educational experiences were taken into account throughout the data collection and analysis process.

### *Questionnaire*

The data collection process began with the administration of a questionnaire (see Appendix A) that was crafted based on the fundamental and secondary research questions. The questionnaire asked students to discuss their educational experiences, time spent at the school, and relevant cultural identifiers. It also enquired about experiences with various aspects of transitional programming, including advisory support, faculty relations, and programming workshops. Using the content of the questionnaire, I uncovered patterns, trends, and problems that freshmen experienced during their transition into the Hockaday Upper School. The qualitative questionnaire information was collected in the form of open-ended questions that allow students to explain and expand on their answers as needed. Information was then used to assemble cases for the study and is discussed in the results addressed in Chapter Five.

### *Interviews*

After collecting qualitative data from the questionnaire, I invited all participants to attend focus group interviews based on their educational background. This approach applied voluntary response sampling to group individuals into the three distinct cases:

existing students, new students, and boarding students. Once the cases are fully formed, I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). Using the answers from the questionnaire as a baseline, I asked open-ended questions that offered guidance to the conversation but allowed participants to respond naturally. I took notes, and conversations were recorded for my records. Interview recordings were transcribed for data analysis, which is further discussed in the following section.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis began with the careful organization of the raw data collection materials. Questionnaire answers were organized into a password protected document, where information was separated into tables based on case. All interviews were carefully transcribed, and both questionnaires and interview data were sorted and labeled by case. Cases were first analyzed individually to look for codes, and the data was then synthesized across cases to find overarching patterns.

### *Individual Case Analysis*

To begin the individual case analysis, I used descriptive coding, a coding technique that summarized major themes into words or phrases, to carefully review the responses on each questionnaire (Saldana, 2009). To begin descriptive coding, I applied Tesch's Eight Steps in coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I read all responses to gain a general idea of the collective information, taking notes as needed. Next, focusing first on a single document, I carefully reviewed responses and considered the document's fundamental implication, making additional notes in the process. Once I had repeated this process with several of the documents, I created a list including columns of significant, repeated, or unique topics. Using this list of topics as codes, I revisited the data to see if

additional codes become apparent. I then assigned descriptive names to categories of topics, further reducing the lists by identifying relationships and similarities among columns. Once a final name was established for each of the categories, the codes were alphabetized (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The questionnaire data was then sorted according to the appropriate code for analysis.

During the individual case analysis, it became apparent that in order to better understand the student experience, it made sense to both examine the collective data for each case, and then to conduct an in-depth review an individual participant's experience. I selected a participant from each case, revisited their questionnaire responses and their individual participation in the interview, and used this information to put together a complete picture of their unique ninth-grade experience. Each of these participants stories offered unique aspects that would not have arisen without this selected participant analysis, like how previous school experience differed from Hockaday, and how their unique intersection of cultural identifiers affected their experience. This approach gave an explicit review of a single participant's experience within the case.

### *Cross-Case Analysis*

After the completion of descriptive coding, themes were analyzed using cross-case analysis (Yin, 2018). Robert Yin (2018) defines cross-case analysis as a case-based approach to identifying, comparing, and synthesizing patterns within and across cases within a collective-case study. This approach used the identified codes to better understand which factors, such as educational background or cultural identifiers, affected a student's ability to successfully transition into high school for students across all cases. Cross-case synthesis allowed first for the identification of patterns within a case, after

which tentative conclusions were compared to that within the other cases (Yin, 2018). This synthesis technique caused the emergence of similarities and differences between groups of new, existing, and boarding students, and pointed to the idea that particular educational backgrounds may have a more or less negative influence on a student's transitional success.

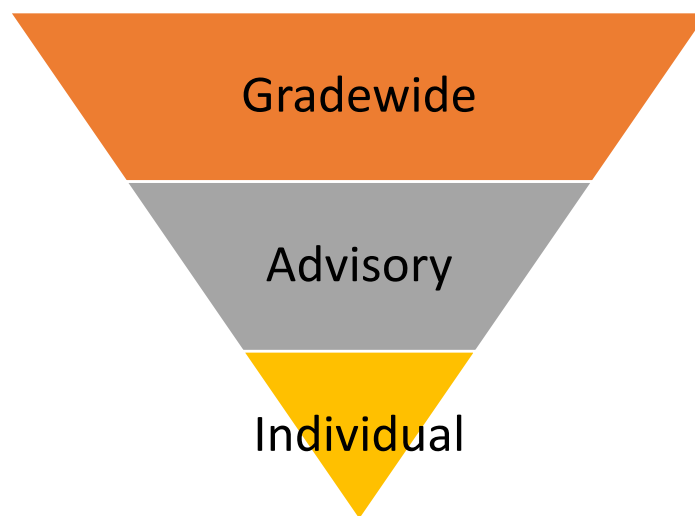
### *Validation*

I used several validation strategies to ensure the accuracy of the data reporting in this study. First, I used member checking, or returning of portions of the findings to participants to ensure accuracy of the information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This process included follow-up conversations with selected participants, in which I confirmed the correctness of descriptions and information. By engaging in a deep analysis of the selected participant, I also ensured that I used thick, rich description to provide readers with a full picture of the participants' background, perspective, and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Following the case analysis with a depiction of an individual student's story offered a more intimate enquiry of their experience as a freshman. Finally, I consistently debriefed with both professional colleagues and graduate peers to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Several ethical considerations were taken into account for this study. These considerations included but were not limited to the influence of researcher authority, participants' eagerness to please adults, the protection of student participants from harm, how study results might affect students, and the unique circumstances of COVID-19 contingency plans.

As evidenced by the student support pyramid (see Figure 3), the Form Dean's involvement in the various levels of student support create a dynamic state of both support and authority, adding complexity to the role. My position of authority was carefully considered as I conducted the study. As the Freshman Dean, I was responsible for minor conduct issues, which might have influenced participants to modify their answers to pertinent questions, altering the validity of the information. I therefore took measures to ensure participants that their honest answers were encouraged, and that there would be no consequences for the information they shared on the questionnaire and during interviews. Additionally, students' desire to please adults, offering complimentary answers to questions, was taken into account (Damour, 2016; Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009). Participants are continuously encouraged to be honest about their experience and were offered as many opportunities for anonymity as possible.



*Figure 3. Student support pyramid.*

The use of pseudonyms provided anonymity to students, and protected participants from harm when data was shared among other faculty and administration,

reducing pressure or stress to students. Further stress may have resulted from the added workload placed on students who agree to participate in focus-group interviews, so it was important to be mindful of the timing of data collection administration. I also collected parental consent and student assent as these individuals are under the legal age of eighteen.

One carefully considered aspect of ethics for this study was the grade level of participant selection. Several factors were involved in this decision, most importantly including separation from the phenomenon under examination and the influence of COVID-19 on the ninth-grade student experience. The possibility of current ninth-graders having difficulty examining their transition experience as it happens was of great concern. Identification of their greatest areas of struggle would likely be difficult for participants *during* the transition. Additionally, the increasing potential of COVID-19's effects on the on-campus experience of 2020–2021 freshmen, the idea of conducting the research retroactively was ideal. In the interest of providing data on as normal a transition experience as possible, data was collected from the current sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Most of these students spent the school year on campus, unaffected by COVID-19, and were able to provide feedback on an arguably normal experience.

### *Limitations and Delimitations*

Some of the greatest limitations affecting this study were the increasing concerns surrounding COVID-19. The data collection for this study took place during a time that was extremely unpredictable in terms of the educational landscape. Social distancing protocols made it difficult for students to attend classes on-campus, and any in-person interaction that took place had to be done at a safe distance, and in careful observance of

the restrictions put in place by the Center for Disease Control. Fortunately, many aspects of the research were easily administered virtually: the questionnaire was sent out via email and collected online. After participants are selected for cases, focus-group interviews were conducted using video chat software, during which transcripts were recorded.

While several aspects of the research design were altered to fit the current health atmosphere, some aspects of the original research design could not. This study was originally intended to be conducted as a phenomenological case study, gathering data from current freshmen in real-time. Unfortunately, due to the implementation of distance learning intermittent during 2020–2021, the potential for distance learning protocols to influence data were too great. As a collective case study, the research was better suited to a group that experienced the transition into freshman year prior to COVID-19.

Another resulting limitation from COVID-19 was the limited questionnaire responses from former boarding students. The lack of capability to safely house students on-campus led to the closure of the boarding department for the 2020–2021 school year. As a result, many former boarding students were forced to move in with host families or had to attend school completely online while living at home with their parents. Several of these students were living in other countries at the time of data collection, often in dramatically different time zones. This led to difficulties finding students with the time and ability to volunteer responses or participate in interviews within the boarding student case, and several follow-up emails had to be sent to this population in order to recruit participants.

Finally, the limitations of this study include a perspective that was narrowed to a specific school campus, and therefore has limited transferability. The findings from the study were used by the Hockaday campus to provide ideas for improving transitional programming and find ways to support students' social development and intersection of cultural identifiers. While the data may be applied similarly to other independent college-preparatory schools, additional research should be done to meet the specific needs of other campuses.

### *Conclusion*

An underdeveloped ability to adapt can cause long-term difficulties due to the frequency of life transitions, such as starting school, beginning a job, and entering a relationship. If the freshman struggle continued to serve as a rite of passage, students would not be set up for success in their future endeavors. The analysis techniques applied to this study offer the opportunity to apply findings to improvements on the transitional experience. In the following chapter, I discuss the major themes that arose from each of the three cases, followed by a cross-case analysis. I then apply the findings to the research questions and predict the implications of these results.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results and Implications

#### *Introduction*

In this study, I applied a collective case study design to examine students' high school transition experience at a private, all-female school. I began by administering an online questionnaire to solicit a voluntary sample of twenty-four students. The Freshman Experience Questionnaire, as seen in Appendix A, asked respondents to self-report about their educational background, number of years attending school at the research site, and experiences with transitional support during their freshman year. The questions on the questionnaire originated from the following central research question:

What are the greatest areas of struggle in the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup>-grade transition, and what are their causes?

As well as the following research sub-questions:

1. What assumptions influence expectations placed on students?
2. How do different background environments influence the transition?
3. How do students feel supported and unsupported by the school as they make the transition?
4. How do previous social and educational experiences affect student adjustment to a new environment?
5. Do some students face more obstacles than others? Can this be leveled out?
6. How do students' cultural identifiers add complexity to their transitional experience?

In the following sections, I provide a description of the research setting and context, followed by an overview of each case. This individual case overview includes

questionnaire, interview, and archival data for all participants within the case, and is followed by specific analysis of a selected participant within the case. A close examination of a single participant within each case offers insight into an individual student experience, allowing the reader to better understand each case's perspective. After the description of each case, I examined themes that arose within the case. This process was then repeated for cases two and three.

Each case was analyzed based on Harris and Barnett's Thriving Transition Cycle, as discussed in chapters one and three (Harris, 2013). The Thriving Transition Cycle suggests a cyclical process of acclimating to a new learning environment in which an individual must overcome certain objectives in order to prosper in various aspects of a transition. I then engaged in cross-case analysis to discover emerging themes within each case better understand the similarities and differences of experience for new, existing, and boarding students entering the ninth grade.

Through this process, I identified themes that cases had in common, as well as themes that were unique to each case, and examined the themes based on the research questions. This allowed me to draw conclusions regarding the sources of freshman struggles, and therefore suggest better methods for preventing them.

### *Description of Setting and Context*

This research study took place at a single-sex private school in Dallas, Texas called The Hockaday School, which was started in 1913. While Dallas is well-populated with private schools, there are many things about Hockaday that make it unique, including the absence of religious affiliation, single-sex educational approach educational, and combined boarding and day components. When considered along with

the school's southwestern geographical location, these attributes create quite a distinctive institutional culture: a fairly liberal approach to education in an often-conservative location. The school is wrought with a combination of progressive education techniques alongside hundred-year-old tradition.

Hockaday serves students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade and is divided into a Lower, Middle, and Upper School. The Upper School houses the ninth through twelfth grades, with each grade containing about 130 students. The average class size at Hockaday is between twelve and eighteen students to one teacher. Each grade-level operates on an advisory structure where nine or ten students are paired with a faculty or staff advisors for all four years of high school with the option to put in a request to change advisors at the end of each year, but with the hope that students will form a trusting bond with an on-campus adult. Advisory takes place in daily twenty minute sessions, which differ from group to group, but might look like a circled-up discussion time, a last-minute study session, a group meditation, or even a vent session.

In addition to daily advisory time, students attend up to four classes a day on a rotating six-day schedule. One cycle of six days is known as one "rotation." Students attend the same classes every odd day, and the same classes every even day. On every day three, students attend a grade-level meeting, and on every day six students attend an Upper School assembly of various topics. Built into each day are also several flexible times in which students work in groups, visit with teachers, attend club meetings, or visit the library. The complex schedule to which students must refer to often in order to know where they should be and when serves as preparation for the often-unpredictable nature of adult life.

The many unique aspects of Hockaday's academic setup, along with the majority-affluent population of students that attend Hockaday result in a Hockaday culture that is very unique to the institution. Rigorous academics, highly competitive reputation, highly anticipated traditions, and a one hundred percent graduation and college acceptance rate combine to create a high-pressured atmosphere that is added to by a highly-influential parent population. Students feel the pressure of high expectations placed upon them by themselves, and their parents, as well as perceived or unspoken expectations from teachers and administration. All-in-all, transitioning into such an atmosphere can come as a shock to the system.

Freshman year at Hockaday begins with transitional programming that is intended to help students get to know one another, acclimate to a new school environment, and identify important individuals who can help them in various ways as they transition into high school. The programming begins with new student orientation for all students completely new to Hockaday and is followed by an off-campus freshman retreat at a camp-like setting several hours outside of Dallas. At the retreat, students spend the majority of the time participating in games and activities with their advisories, with grade-wide activities interspersed throughout the experience.

Upon their return to campus, students begin to attend classes and meet with their advisory in an official capacity. Every rotation, freshman students participate in Camp Daisy sessions during advisory once per rotation to hear from a guest speaker, such as the Upper School Counselors, Learning Support, the Writing Center, the Director of Social Impact, etc. Students also attend Form Meetings (grade-wide meetings) and participate with transitional programming within their advisory groups.

### *Case Descriptions and Thematic Analysis*

For each of the three cases, the number of participants varied greatly due to complications created by COVID-19. Because Boarding Students were not on campus for the 2020–2021 school year (during which the research took place), many of the students were living in home countries across the world with great time differences. As a result of communication difficulties, Case Three had only a few participants answer the questionnaire, and only one student in the interview. Consequently, I decided to analyze the data by providing an overview of each case using the data participants provided in the questionnaire, and then follow this information with a deep dive into the experience of a single student. This approach provides the opportunity to examine overarching themes within cases, as well as a detailed perspective of a single experience. Table 1 provides a summary of each case including individual participant pseudonyms.

Table 1

#### *Case Summary*

Case Description	Selected Participant Pseudonym	Participant Years Attending Hockaday
Case 1: Existing Students Students have been attending Hockaday anywhere between 1–12 years.	Kristen	4
Case 2: New Students Students were new to Hockaday at the beginning of ninth-grade.	Sarah	New to school
Case 3: Boarding Students Students were part of the ~20% of the student population that lived on the Hockaday campus full-time.	Riya	New to school

### *Case One*

The first of the three cases included students who were not new to Hockaday at the beginning of ninth grade. These students' years of attendance at the school ranged from one to eleven years, and they were likely already accustomed to the school's organizational culture, academic expectations, and traditions when they entered the Upper School. The following section provides an overview of the questionnaire responses provided by these students.

#### *Existing Students Case Overview*

I received eleven questionnaire responses from existing students, with the number of years at Hockaday ranging from one to twelve. After reviewing the responses, I decided that I would invite all eleven students to the group interview and wound up with six students who were willing and able to attend. In the interview, I asked questions that I formed based on the questionnaire responses in order to delve further into the experiences that the students had already described. Below are the main themes that arose from the questionnaire responses and interview discussion.

*Programming that worked well.* Students in Case One were particularly fond of the support system they were able to develop in the advisory system as discussed above in the description of the setting and context. Students felt that the freshman retreat provided a "chance to get to know your advisory and your advisor" and helped them get to know students new to the school. Students described the retreat as "a really fun bonding experience," and that allowing students to get to know one another in advance of the start of academic classes took away the awkwardness of meeting new people while trying to navigate classes and school expectations. Other students referred to their success

in the Big Sis Lil Sis program that partners freshman with senior mentors. One student shared that in her experience, while she “didn’t end up being super close with my big sis, I ended up being really close with one of her best friends who I met” during the programming. “She was just a great mentor for me, and somebody who I still look up to and ask for advice.”

*Programming that did not work well.* Other freshman programming elements were perceived as less successful by this group. Camp Daisy, for example, was not something that the existing students found to be helpful during their transition. This programming, also described in the introduction above, was described as repetitive by the students. One student remembered feeling like “we already know all of this stuff. You don’t really need it. And I personally felt like I already knew how to write an email.” The student’s thoughts were echoed by others who felt that time would have been better spent on helping students find their way around campus and referred to the first couple of days of classes as a constant back and forth between referring to schedules and the numbers beside the classroom doors.

*Heteronormativity.* One element brought up by several of the participating students in Case One was the expectation to find partners of the opposite sex with whom to attend mixers and dances. Because Hockaday is a female single-sex institution that does not host its own homecoming celebration, students must be asked to attend at one or more of the other local schools around town, many of which are male single-sex schools. One student remembered the experience as a discouraging experience for a lot of students.” “Homecoming is this exclusive thing that you have to get invited to, but it also

generates a ton of stress for everyone.” For example, one participant recalled “someone freshman year wanting to wear a suit to winter formal” and having a lot of peers question their decision not to wear a dress.

All in all, the students felt that the experience of coed dances was fraught with heteronormative expectations alongside unnecessary public examination of their choices. They referred not feeling “noticed or appreciated” or “like their sexuality isn’t valid and that’s why they kept it hidden.” During such a formative time in adolescent development, the students remembered it being difficult to meet gender and sexuality expectations, emphasizing that “it’s a hard age to be figuring out who you are.”

*Rites of passage.* An overarching theme among the group of participants was the general understanding that freshman year is a difficult time. One student noted, “I think part of being a freshman is that it’s going to be hard.” This notion was supported by other participants during a discussion surrounding unspoken expectations of ninth-grade students. “It’s like an unspoken, known thing that you’re supposed to respect the upper classmen,” said a participant. During athletics, “you’re supposed to be the ones that go and do the equipment and get the basketballs or anything like that,” and another added “we would always set up the tents and take them down...we would clean up after the meets and stuff like that.” Another agreed, stating that doing the grunt work is akin to “paying your dues,” or “paying it forward,” and looking forward to a time when they would expect the same of their own underclass classmates.

However, there were also limits to the friendly and gentle expectations put on ninth-grade students. Participants described times when lines were crossed, feeling like upperclassmen “were going to make fun of [us] and [we] couldn’t say anything about it

because we were freshmen.” There seemed to be unspoken understandings of “you don’t talk in class because that’s what the upperclassmen do,” and “you can’t correct the upper classmen” because they deal with greater levels of stress. Students referred to the “expectation to know your place and fall in line.” Participants remembered feeling “absolutely terrified because I don’t want a senior to get mad at me,” referring to upperclassmen as “scary,” and the social experience of ninth-grade as “overwhelming.” “You don’t want to annoy anybody or make anybody mad,” they recalled. “When you’re a freshman, you’re sort of seen as this thing that should be seen and not heard.” In the hierarchy of the upper school, freshmen were certainly on the bottom.

Many participants reflected on the expectation of respect for upperclassmen, and the desire that it be more of a mutual agreement between all grade levels. Unfortunately, participants also expressed that each incoming ninth-grade class came with a reputation, and along with these reputations came preconceived notions about the character of the students. Participants recalled that “grades have personalities,” and other grades become biased toward them as a result. Each ninth-grade class has a reputation that precedes them, but the resounding sentiment among the participants was that this was an inevitable outcome. “People are always going to want to hate on freshmen.”

*Adjusting to rigorous academics.* A prevalent topic that many participants associated with beginning high school was an increase in academic rigor, expectations for time management, and ability to self-advocate. Progressively difficult coursework caused students to realize that they “didn’t really know how to go to the teacher for help,” despite the explicit expectation from parents, teachers, and advisors to do so. Somehow despite being told that they should talk to their teachers if they did not understand content

or had questions or concerns regarding a class, participants reported they had “never really gone to my teachers in middle school.” Participants stated that “emailing your teacher and asking for help can be very daunting because you’re trying to figure everything else out.” Students recall that asking questions felt like “a little bit of a sign of weakness,” or that it was intimidating, but then report it being much easier after the first time. “I was worried that they would think my paper was bad, but now looking back on it, I know they’re just there to help.” Many participating students remembered fearing that asking for help would be viewed as weakness.

Participants discussed hindsight knowledge, thinking “why didn’t I go and talk to my teacher?” They recalled wondering where to go and how to use the new free time incorporated into the upper school schedule. One student recalled that the flexible time in her schedule was “kind of harmful” due to a lack of motivation, and never having been taught to manage time effectively. In middle school at Hockaday, students must be with their advisories during flexible periods, and participants recalled that without a “dedicated place to focus,” they were unsure of where to go, and how to manage time independently.

Closing the conversation, many participants reflected on feelings of resignation that freshman year was simply a time of obstacles and adjustments. As upper classmen now, students appeared to believe that current freshmen should and would go through similar struggles to their own. The following section is an in-depth exploration into the specific experience of one existing student participant.

### *Selected Participant*

I selected Kristen as an individual participant to examine more in depth due to her number of years at Hockaday, and the fact that she was able to clearly identify areas in which she felt well-supported, and areas where she wished further support was available. Kristen was eager and willing to participate in conversations regarding her freshman experience and seemed empathetic to the experience of future students. She was also attending school on campus at the time of the focus-group interviews and was able to make herself available as a participant.

Kristen arrived at Hockaday in fifth grade from a small, Catholic elementary school in Dallas. With her grade at her old school housing only fourteen students, transitioning into a fifth-grade class of seventy-five felt like quite a leap to her. Kristen was a day student, which allowed her to live at home with her parents, who both lived in the same household, and commute to campus each day, and return home each evening after classes and extracurricular activities were completed.

As a freshman, Kristen also had an older sister beginning eleventh grade at Hockaday who had previously attended the same local Catholic school prior to beginning at Hockaday. Kristen recalled the intimidation factor of older students, particularly seniors, and received advice from her older sister, who was a junior at the time.

When I was a freshman, she was like, ‘you can’t do this, you can’t do this’, and all this other stuff. There were a lot of unspoken rules about being in high school. And some of those things you just learn for yourself and some of those things you learn from your big sis, or just being in classes. But there was definitely a level of fear that kept me from doing things. If I had a friend with me, I could basically do anything. But if I was doing it alone, I was absolutely terrified because I didn’t want a senior to get mad at me. I knew there were nice people, but just in general it was very scary.

Regarding the academic transition into ninth grade, Kristen remarked that “it can

be overwhelming to be thrown into a new schedule with new rules and advisories.” Despite already having spent four years at Hockaday, Kristen noted that “everything works differently in the Upper School” and emphasized the difficulty of finding one’s way around a new area of campus, in addition to meeting roughly thirty new classmates. Kristen remembered not really needing to go see her teachers outside of class for assistance while she was in middle school, stating, “I know I should have, and my parents kept saying ‘go see your teacher’.” But Kristen remembered wondering why she should if it was not mandatory. “So, I didn’t. And I should have.” She was able to reflect on her experience and knew that, moving forward, approaching her teacher was the appropriate way to have her questions answered.

Kristen’s experience was a good representative of many students who attended Hockaday between one and ten years prior to ninth grade. While accustomed to many of the school’s cultural norms, entering the Upper School brought about new obstacles, and students wrestled with social and institutional expectations. While some transitional programming felt helpful to these students, some felt repetitive or arbitrary. Social expectations left some students feeling the pressure of heteronormative expectations and struggled with high academic expectations but low hierarchical status. The following section will focus on the perspective of students who entered into Hockaday as new students in the ninth grade.

### *Case Two*

Case two included students who were new to Hockaday at the beginning of their freshman year. These students participated in a variety of onboarding activities beginning in the spring of their eighth-grade year, and their families were in contact with the

admissions department throughout the summer before the school year began. Some students participated in math classes on the Hockaday campus to fill possibly holes in their curricular knowledge, but most students were brand new to campus at the beginning of the school year.

### *New Students Case Overview*

I received eight questionnaire responses, and after inviting all eight students to the focus group interview, six students participated. I loosely structured the interview using similar questions to those that I asked during the first focus group interview and allowed the conversation to flow organically. Below I review the themes that arose from the questionnaires and during this interview.

*Mixed feelings regarding transitional programming.* Overall, participants felt that some aspects of transitional programming were successful while others were less than ideal. For example, the off-campus freshman retreat, an introduction and team-building event for advisory groups, was seen as a very positive experience for several students as a bonding experience. One participant, however, mentioned that while she liked the retreat, she did not like having to spend so much time with her new advisory group. In fact, she went on to say that “after freshman year, almost everybody left [the advisory] because we didn’t really like each other that much.” She suggested “it would have been nice if we could have branched out a little bit more,” referring to wishing they were able to spend time with other student groups at the retreat.

Other students felt that the retreat gave them intentional time to bond with their advisories. “Just having that group of people that you can be friends with or talk to is really helpful,” said one participant, adding that she “got to click with [her] advisory

really quick.” Another student added that in addition to getting to know students within advisories, the retreat “really helped grow relationships with your advisor.” Other participants agreed, mentioning that it was a helpful way to meet at least some new students and adults in advance of the academic school year, helping the first day of classes feel less intimidating.

Participants also referred to mentorship programming meant to continue throughout the school year. These programs included the pairings of freshmen with seniors known as the big sis/lil sis program. “I think they were a nice thought, but they were not well-distributed,” noted one student. Some freshman/senior matches were successful, and students had something in common to help them bond, while others were paired based on arbitrary answers on a survey. One student recounted her experience: “my big sis really didn’t care about me and she didn’t make much of an effort,” while another described a much closer relationship with her big sis. “We went out to lunch every few weeks and we hung out. I texted her for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday just a few weeks ago.” While some students felt abandoned by their senior pairing, others found an excellent resource and friend.

Students discussed similarly conflicting experiences with the student buddy program, which pairs new students with existing students in the same grade. Participants noted that it is likely the parents that sign up for the program, resulting in low student engagement in assisting their buddy through the transition into Hockaday. “Apparently everyone had one, but not many people would actually talk to their buddy, or even say hi.” On the other hand, another participant noted a very different experience. “I’m still friends with my buddy. She’s a good friend of mine. She was good at reaching out to

me.” All participants noted thinking that the engagement of buddies could be boiled down to how students were prepared or trained for the program. “There’s a lot of individual approaches to how to be a buddy,” one said. The overall feeling among the group was that some students were more interested and invested, while others didn’t even volunteer but were signed up by parents.

*Feelings of inundation and culture shock.* Regardless of their individual experiences with mentorship, all participants agreed on the importance of having guidance when transitioning into freshman year at Hockaday. In one way or another, all participants referred to feeling overwhelmed during the transition due to the immense amount of new language, geography, and routines to learn specific to their new campus. Unfortunately, the transitional programming that is intended to assist in the transition for all freshmen, Camp Daisy, did not seem to be especially helpful.

When asked to discuss if the programing was helpful, most participants remembered the meetings, but simply did not recall the content. “I don’t really remember...the majority of them felt kind of competitive, maybe,” noted one student, while another said, “I feel like the fact that so many of us forgot about it shows how not helpful it was.” Others referred to the shortness of the meetings: “they were a little rushed because you had to get there really quickly, and then they had to talk really quickly, so then even if you had questions you couldn’t really ask them that much.”

One participant noted that it is possible that Camp Daisy content was not memorable was due to the overwhelming number of mandatory meetings freshmen seemed to have on their schedules. “I remember freshman year we would always have these random meetings,” recalled one student. Another agreed, remembering that, despite

open periods built into schedules, “freshman year was structured, and a lot of our free time was taken up by certain freshman activities like Camp Daisy.” Participants noted that the seemingly flexible schedule was often weighed down with meetings and assemblies, and that too many meetings left them feeling like they could not apply any of the new skills and concepts they were meant to learn.

Participants also noted that they were surprised and confused by several aspects of Hockaday hegemony, including terminology, lunchtime catering, and the sprawling campus. One student recalled her peers laughing when she referred to English as ELA (English/Language Arts) as it was referred to at her old school, while another remembered everyone referring to buildings that were all named after people and not knowing where to go on campus. Recalling that the food at her previous school was terrible, one participant described her reaction to Hockaday’s lunch catering service: “And then there’s also the food. I remember everyone saying, ‘oh my god, the food is so bad now!’, and I thought it was delicious!”

*Overcoming academic gaps.* One of the most unanimous pieces of feedback was the experience of academic content gaps. Several students referenced feeling behind in several subjects, and that assumptions were made on their abilities to apply certain skills and concepts. “There was stuff from middle school that I hadn’t learned because Hockaday did math differently,” recalled one student. She remembered feeling like students who had attended Hockaday for longer knew things that the new students did not.

Another student described English class at her previous school as focusing on grammar and vocabulary, while her Hockaday English teachers expected close reading

and analytical writing. At Hockaday, “you actually have to analyze stuff, which was a very new concept to me,” one participant reflected. She remembered her freshman English teacher as “a pretty hard grader” and felt that her self-esteem was affected by the immense amount of feedback she received about her writing. “There was just writing all over my paper, like paragraphs upon paragraphs of ‘this is all wrong’.” All participants were in agreement that they wished teachers had provided more foundational knowledge at the beginning of the year.

Despite suffering numerous academic struggles, participants remembered feeling very hesitant to reach out to their teachers in times of confusion. Most participants described that at their previous schools, approaching teachers outside of class time was not common practice, and was therefore a very difficult obstacle to surmount.

I don’t know if we were told we could talk to our teachers. Maybe we were, I don’t remember. But I really didn’t know it was an option that you could do. If you have any question at all, you can go talk to your teachers and they’re always there for you. And I started to learn that in the middle of the school year. I think it was an expectation that you kind of had to know that you were supposed to talk to them.

Several participants reported not realizing that approaching their teachers was even an option, while others were intimidated at the idea, did not know where to begin, and found it confusing that different teachers preferred different approaches. Some teachers offered office hours, others required students to email them to set up a time, and still more others were perfectly happy for students to just pop in. For students coming in from different schools without these expectations, realizing the option was a difficult feat.

Another noticeable difference regarding Hockaday’s academic demands was the expectations that students manage their time effectively. With the addition of free periods in their schedules, along with a six-day rotation that included various mandatory

meetings, the ability to keep track of one's schedule was, for most participants, completely new compared to their middle school experience.

My time management skills were not good at all as a procrastinator. I didn't have a good work ethic like everyone at Hockaday. They had a really nice work ethic and they had their study time and all of that. If you went to a public school like I did you didn't have to study. It wasn't that hard, especially in middle school because it wasn't that serious. But now that you're in Upper School, you have to really focus and make sure you have all your ducks in a row

Going from a middle school environment with a predictable, structured routine to a much less predictable rotating schedule was difficult for many participants. Several students recalled having to learn the hard way to use a planner and write down assignments so as not to forget.

*Pervasive social difficulties.* Along with academic obstacles to overcome upon entering into the Hockaday Upper School came a myriad of social expectations to learn and contend with. Because Hockaday begins accepting students in pre-kindergarten, some students have known each other their entire school career, which often becomes a barrier to new students. "People who had been there for a while already had their friends. But then all the new girls kind of made their own friendships, and they just hung out with each other constantly because they didn't really get much forced interaction," recalled one student. Forming bonds between new and existing students was one of the most reported difficulties face by participants.

Students also found it difficult to break through these previously formed friendships into a larger community of network schools. Another participant remembered feeling at a disadvantage when it came to making friends at other network schools. "The private schools in Dallas interact and stuff and they have mixers, so they all kind of knew

each other. But I came from a totally different school and I didn't know anybody.”

Because there are social expectations to attend homecoming dances at different schools, meeting new people was crucial but took overwhelming effort for introverted students.

### *Selected Participant*

I selected Sarah to examine more closely as part of the new student case because of her willingness to share about her experience as a freshman, and the breadth of her feedback. While she was willing to share her thoughts on needed improvement in the freshman transition, she also had several positive experiences to share as well.

Sarah started at Hockaday as a freshman after moving with her family to Dallas from Florida. Her old school was Catholic affiliated and coeducational, and Sarah self-reported that the close-knit community at her previous school helped her build good social skills and her outgoing personality. When discussing her experience with Hockaday's student mentoring programs, Sarah remembered a good experience with her senior big sis and still keeps in touch with her. She was also happy with her advisory experience, saying, “I got to click with my advisory really quick freshman year.” Several aspects of Sarah's social transition to Hockaday were fairly easy, while others came as quite a surprise.

Sarah self-identified as multicultural with a father who was Indian, and a mother who was German, Nicaraguan, and Argentinian. To her, the Hockaday transitional programming did not do much to include her cultural identifiers, and she was surprised at the lack of attention to cultural diversity and understanding. She wished for more attention to intersectionality of cultural identifiers, and recalled other students making assumptions about her nationality because she spoke Spanish. When another student

learned she spoke Spanish, she asked, “oh, so where in Mexico is your family from?.” She also recalled having difficulty joining the Asian Student Association because the members assumed she was not, in fact, Asian because she also spoke Spanish. “She said, ‘yeah, we accept people who aren’t Asian’, and I said, ‘but I’m half Asian’, and she said, ‘but I thought you spoke Spanish?’.”

Sarah reflected that, while she did not necessarily feel that negative assumptions were made with her cultural identity, it also was not well represented by the curriculum, the transitional programming, or other aspects of school life. “There wasn’t a lot of representation or talk about the Indian community or what we are, or what our other cultures are. And I think there is a lot of representation or at least talk about it with other ethnicities.” Sarah felt some affinity groups were afforded attention and celebration, while others merely existed in the background.

Like many of her peers, Sarah expressed feeling overwhelmed when she began her first school year at Hockaday, making it difficult to focus on or remember the content covered during transitional programming. New students also reported having difficulty dealing with the new institutional culture along with rigorous academics that brought about feelings of self-doubt and insecurity. The most significantly reported obstacle among new students, however, was the difficulty they had entering the social context of the school. With pre-established social structures in place, making friends and finding a sense of belonging was difficult for new students. In the following section, I will review the experience of boarding students, who lived in the Hockaday residence department during their first year of Upper School.

### *Case Three*

The third and final cause included boarding students, or students who lived on the Hockaday campus full-time during their freshman year. Boarding students live in the dormitories located in the residence department, which is connected to the main school building. These students arrive in late summer just before the beginning of the school year and move out just after classes conclude. Students who live close enough may travel home for occasional weekends, but international students may find it more difficult to visit. Some students remain on campus most of the year, only going home once or twice, or even staying with a local host family during extended holidays.

#### *Boarding Student Case Overview*

Receiving responses from students within this case was significantly more difficult than the other two cases due to complications created by COVID-19. Due to the pandemic, the residence department was closed at the time of data collection, and boarding students were either living locally with a host family or attending school completely online from their homes. As a result, I received five questionnaire responses, and after inviting all five students to the focus group interview, only one participant was able to attend. During the loosely structured interview, I asked similar questions as in previous interview sessions with participants from other cases and allowed the participant to guide the conversation. The following are the most significant themes that arose for boarding students regarding their freshman transition.

*Living away from home.* For most students, living away from home was most certainly a factor that caused much anxious anticipation. At this age, students had spent limited time away from their parents, and this prospect caused a great deal of

anxiousness. During stressful times, students felt the ache of not being able to always turn to their parents for support. Students reflected on the differences they felt from their day student peers, particularly after school hours were over.

I was so jealous when I saw my peers were picked up by their parents after school. Also, as an international student, I could only go back home twice a year and it was always so hard for me to leave my family and come back here. Moreover, being from another country, it was so hard at first to fit in and to adjust to the new environment.

Additionally, students only have a few days on campus to adjust before leaving for the off-campus overnight retreat. “The first one retreat was very chaotic and sad for me” reflected one participant of her experience. “I hurt my knee and missed home.” Students recalled feeling like they barely had time to get settled before leaving again but appreciated the time to get to know their advisory groups in advance of classes beginning. “Since I didn’t know anyone, I was very homesick during the first week of school. But also due to the retreat, I met my first friends at Hockaday. They are the people in my advisory who always cheer me up.”

Once back on campus, students had to deal with prolonged time spent living with other students, sharing kitchens, bathrooms, and dorm rooms. For many, this was an adjustment from having their own room and meals at home with their parents: “Something that’s special to me are homecooked meals from my mom.” Other students had to contend with complex dietary restrictions that were difficult to abide by when all meals were preset by a catering service. “I am allergic to wheat, dairy, and soy” one participant lamented. “There was very little food within the dorms and dining hall that I could eat, and the few things that I could eat were things like plain chips, so I ended up eating a lot of unhealthy food.”

Students also had to make adjustments to living by new house rules that included using technology to check in and out when planning to go off campus and meeting daily study hall requirements set by residence staff. “Boarders are required to complete a mandatory two-hour study hall after school” said one student, recalling that it was difficult to fit in the required hours along with dinner and still make time to get plenty of sleep. “Going to the library makes our schedule hard to arrange, and it does not help people focus anyway since someone always chats in the library,” one student said. On the other hand, other students appreciated this access to campus after school hours: “I got to go to the library whenever I wanted!” another student said. “I would go there during my evening study hall. I got so much done and I felt so productive.”

*Transitional programming.* In addition to all freshman onboarding activities, including the retreat, Camp Daisy sessions, advisory, and gradewide meetings, boarding students also participated in transitional activities sponsored by the residence department. These activities were facilitated by dorm staff including dorm moms, the assistant head of boarding, and the head of boarding. Students were able to bond with their dorm moms, roommates, and other students within their grades. “My dorm mom was a huge support to me because she always listened to me and would encourage and comfort me.”

Out of the freshman-specific programming that was offered, advisory, seemed to be the most significant for the boarding students. One student remembered the time she spent with her advisory group during the retreat, recalling that it “was a great way to get to know each other better,” and feeling lucky to have them thereafter. “My advisory always supported me when I missed home or felt depressed. They chatted with me and cheered me up.” Many students found a sense of family with their advisor and advisory

groups, since they felt it was so hard being away from their own. The advisor served as the adult head of the family: “my advisor would always ask me how my way was, and that really made my day.” Having a supportive adult on campus who could help serve as an advocate when their parents could not was a huge comfort to the majority of participants.

In addition to advisors, participants also spoke in a favorable way regarding most Hockaday faculty. One student recalled the role of the form dean in facilitating freshman activities, saying, “the form dean helped organize form meetings, which was a lot of fun and a great way to meet new people.” Other students remembered their teachers as their greatest source of support throughout transitional struggles: “all of my teachers were really supportive and helpful throughout freshman year. They were always willing to meet with me and conference whenever I needed.” Another student added, “they chatted with me, listened to my ideas, and took care of me. Especially the nurse.” Essentially, students felt comfort in surrounding themselves with supportive adults on campus when they had to be away from their parents.

*Disconnection from day students.* Although students reported feeling well supported by adults, and like they were able to develop close relationships with their peers within boarding, many participants also reflected on often feeling disconnected from the rest of campus. One student observed that “a lot of people that were already here in our grade at been at Hockaday for a long time. They all had their own social circles, and it was really hard to fit into their circle as a new student and a foreigner.” While less than a quarter of the class had actually attended the school for that long, the perception among boarding students was that a barrier existed between boarding and day students

that was extremely difficult to cross. Another student echoed the same sentiment: “the most difficult aspect of moving to Hockaday was the fact that most kids had been at Hockaday since kindergarten, and it was hard to befriend them.”

### *Selected Participant*

I opted to do an in-depth examination into Riya’s experience in large part because she was the student who was able to participate in the focus group interview.

Additionally, Riya had a unique experience with Hockaday boarding in that she decided to leave Hockaday after freshman year and spent her sophomore year back at her previous school. For her junior year, Riya made the decision to reapply to Hockaday and return for the remainder of her school experience.

Riya grew up attending a Catholic school in a small Texas town within driving distance of Hockaday. “I went to an extremely small private school, so it was huge change coming here,” Riya shared. “I had about fifteen people in my entire grade, and I had every single class with them. I did not leave them one time throughout the day.” Riya reflected on the fact that, at Hockaday, there might be fifteen people in a single one of her classes, and that she was shocked to find that we had about 125 people in her freshman grade. “I was very anxious,” she remembered. “I didn’t know how I was going to make friends.” She worried that coming from such a small group would affect her confidence and ability to meet new people.

Fortunately, “Hockaday provided opportunities to get to know people and to make friends. It was so convenient.” Riya was pleasantly surprised at the closeness she was able to quickly find among her boarding peers.

Something that I really, really enjoyed about boarding was that I was able to get close with more people through boarding. I understand that girls who had been at

Hockaday before me had close bonds, but I was able to make those bonds because I live with them.

Riya remembered fondly that boarding helped her make some of her closest friends since they were able to spend so much of their time together.

Riya also shared some of the biggest academic obstacles she faced when she started at Hockaday. “It was a huge change,” she reflected. “I never really had to go meet with teachers at my old school because it was really easy academically.” After beginning classes at Hockaday, however, Riya remember “I was meeting with a teacher every free period that I had.” Luckily, she felt that she had very supportive and accessible teachers and did not feel that asking for help felt intimidating or scary. “They were always willing to meet with me and helped me through whatever it was. They were always carving time out of their schedule to help me.”

Something that Riya also noticed was an atmosphere of intense focus throughout the school. “Every girl is working—every girl is focused on what they want and what they have to do. They’re going to do it,” she observed. She remembered her peers’ ability to manage their own time effectively. “It’s like they took a class on it, they’re so good at it. They’re willing to manage their time correctly in order to get everything done. It’s a mindset that’s completely different from my old school.” Riya had never experienced a schedule similar to Hockaday’s and recalled having to make some major adjustments to her habits.

I had to write down time to time class. I loved my planner. That was the thing that kept me organized. I wrote down class times, I wrote down class names, and I wrote down room numbers. I had to ask people how to figure things out.

Riya suggested that it was her outgoing personality that helped her make these adjustments whereas it might have been more difficult for others. She was not afraid to

stop someone in the hallway or approach adults with questions. Riya speculated that her extroversion contributed largely to the success of her social transition at Hockaday. She reflected that she had a very positive experience with the big sis/lil sis program, and that she and her big sis established a very close relationship.

I think I had the best big sis out of everybody. That was the best match that I could have ever gotten. She was the main person I would go to for advice. She brought me this huge thing of cupcakes with my name on it for my birthday. That was so sweet. She used to bring me random little things. She was so caring and considerate all the time, no matter what. Like, whether she had her own thing to do or if she was busy with something, she was always making sure that I would be ok and that I was comfortable.

Riya's big sis also confidently reached out and communicated with her, bridging her gaps in understanding, and providing advice as needed. Riya was able to fully engage in this relationship, and also reflected that the retreat was a successful experience for her as well. "When we went on the retreat at the beginning of the year, I loved that so much. It was like my favorite thing every. I got so close with my advisor, and that's actually where I made my first friends." Riya was able to become close with her advisor and peers by fully engaging in the retreat experience. "Yeah, it was scary, but now thinking back on it, there really wasn't a reason to be scared because there were plenty of people there for support." Riya also reflected that I, as the form dean, reminded students that I was there for support as well. "You communicated with us a lot, and you were always making it quite clear that you were there for support if we needed it." Although the apprehension of beginning at a new school was certainly present, Riya found comfort in the support of the students and adults around her.

Although she had supportive adults around her, Riya recalled homesickness as a very difficult factor for her. She missed homecooked meals and the comfort of going

home each day after school. However, homesickness did not prevent Riya from appreciating the benefits of living on campus.

I would say being away from home was the most challenging, because my parents would come down quite a bit to visit because they missed me, and I missed them. That made it pretty difficult because I'd always want to go back home with them, and I couldn't. Being able to live with your parents and having that as a support system is so nice, but I got to go to the library whenever I wanted. I loved that I could go there during the day. I got so much done. I felt productive 24/7."

After day students returned home, boarding students remained on campus and continued to have access to resources, including the fitness center and library. "I could also go to my locker. If I forgot something, I could go to my locker and just grab it!"

Riya reflected that, while it had its pros and cons, she was happy to have had the boarding experience as a freshman.

Riya's experience as a boarding student was a positive one overall, but like many of her peers, she struggled with feelings of sadness and homesickness. Similarly, to new day students, boarding students reported feeling overwhelmed with the amount of new information provided by transitional programming, but overall appreciated the social interaction facilitated by the boarding department. On the other hand, boarding students often felt set apart from their day student peers, and at times found it difficult to create relationships with non-boarding students. Overall, many themes overlapped among new and boarding students.

### *Cross-Case Thematic Analysis*

In order to gain a better understanding of the freshman experience as a whole, I conducted a cross-case analysis. Comparing the experiences across each case allowed me to examine what obstacles and experiences were specific to each case, and which were relevant to all incoming freshmen students. As a result of this analysis, I was able to

create a more coherent picture of what needs to be improved for each category of students, and what needs attention for freshman students overall. In the following section, I discussed the most significant themes and subthemes that arose as I compared and contrasted the experience of new, existing, and boarding students. The cross-case synthesis revealed that all students experience significant social stresses, feel most supported by the Upper School faculty, and have a resounding resignation upon entering freshman year that it simply is not going to be good.

*Social stressors.* Despite the differences in living situations and previous educational experiences, all students reported some variation of social stressors contributing to the difficulty of transitioning into high school. First, existing students discussed the heteronormativity of the Hockaday Upper School, specifically referencing the expectations surrounding social events like football games, dances, and other extracurriculars. Students felt expected to meet and socialize with boys and were required to find male dates to events held by other schools in order to attend. Participants noted that this felt like a scramble and put a lot of pressure on their ability to attend events and meet social expectations. Additionally, in my discussion of Kristen, a specific student within the case one, she noted that students felt obligated to dress very femininely in dresses and commented on the social pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations.

The new students also reported feeling stress and anxiety regarding socializing, specifically in terms of breaching barriers between new and existing students. Participants discussed the perception that existing students already had very established social circles that were difficult to infiltrate. While the retreat was of great help in terms

of meeting people, many students reported that even years later they still maintained friendships mostly with other students who were also new at the time. This resounding social disconnect was also compounded for some students, including participant Sarah, by the feeling that their social identifiers were unrepresented or excluded. Sarah specifically discussed feeling that her identity was often misinterpreted and disenfranchised among organizations and events at school.

Feelings of disconnection were reported differently from the boarding student group. While the multicultural aspect of the group was celebrated within boarding, participants also discussed feeling separate from day students in ways that made social integration difficult. While it felt easy to make friends within boarding due to continuous immersion with one another and the residence department's bonding programming, participants from this group felt socially isolated from day students. Whether this was due to isolating themselves to stay close to other boarders with whom they had built trust, or because day students saw them as *other* is inconclusive, but selected participant Riya specifically reported maintaining close relationships with her peers from boarding.

*Faculty support.* A very positive finding regarding supportive faculty from around the Hockaday campus emerged from all groups. In particular, existing students continuously referred to the support they received from their advisors and appreciated the ability to build relationships with these trusted adults during the off-campus retreat. Having a trusted advisor made it easier to seek help when it was needed, including when they were having issues with teachers, when they felt overwhelmed, or when they were having issues at home. The ability to access an adult to help advocate for them and bridge communication gaps was consistently referred to among this group.

Similar to the existing student group, the several of the new student participants reported close relationship with their advisors. Even more evident among this group, however, was the support participants felt from their classroom teachers. While it took them a while to feel confident reaching out to their teachers for help, they discussed because pleasantly surprised at the overwhelming support they received from their teachers when they approached them with questions. Students discussed the faculty as immensely supportive in terms of bridging potential academic gaps and flexibility as students learned to master time management skills. The relationships that were built with teachers helped new students gain confidence in their abilities to self-advocate and ask for help when it was needed.

Boarding students echoed resounding appreciation of the Hockaday faculty's supportive ways, and particularly included the residence staff in their discussion. As interim parent figures, many participants discussed their love and appreciation for the trust they built with these women as they navigated new living situations. Due to the extent of time spent with dorm moms, students were able to build year-long relationships with these women, who checked in on their days, helped them get ready for dances, took them on trips to grocery stores and restaurants, and made sure they got to bed at a decent hour. Boarding students expressed immense gratitude for them, and for the nursing staff that took care of them when they were sick. When their own parents were inaccessible, having loving adults around them was comforting.

*Resignation.* Arguably the most interesting theme to cross all participant groups was the feeling of resignation regarding freshman year. Each of the groups reported anticipating that freshman year was simply going to be difficult, and that there was

nothing to be done about it. Students felt that, even before entering high school, each grade had a preconceived reputation and opinions were already formed regarding the group. They noted feeling that faculty and upperclassmen had already decided who they were and how they were going to act, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy about their grade.

Participants had accepted that they were powerless to change this reputation, and in fact often embraced it. When entering ninth-grade, students expected to have to do the grunt work at sports practice, avoid the senior hallway, and not speak up in classes with upperclassmen. In fact, at the time of data collection many participants were upperclassmen, and even recalling their own freshman experience reflected that current freshmen are still treated similarly. Participants explicitly observed that instead of recalling how they were treated as freshmen and ensuring that future students had a better experience, patterns of condescension to freshmen continued.

At the close of each focus group interview, participants noted that while they wished the freshman transition were easier at the time, perhaps the struggle was necessary in order to learn from experience. Students each recalled stories and experiences and were able to reflect on what they learned from those situations and explain how they impacted the way they approached their education. Many concluded that without overcoming obstacles, it would be difficult to grow from situations. Perhaps some difficulties could be avoided, but there is no such thing as a perfect freshman year.

### *Discussion*

The results of this study confirmed that there are clear differences between the experiences of existing, new, and boarding students, and that there are patterns of complications within each of the cases. New and boarding students experience arguably

more complex transitional problems as they struggle with the newness of the institution and living away from home. On the other hand, existing students who have had time to become comfortable with academic expectations and Hockaday's everyday language and culture may encounter problems with hegemony and deeply-rooted organizational culture. However, there are major findings that overlap all cases and that help answer several of the research questions. Table 2 provides a summary of how the data applies to the primary and secondary research questions. In this section, I will discuss the most significant findings from the data, which are ineffectual programming, inequitable institutional hegemony, significant academic gaps, near-insurmountable social barriers, and a resignation to the freshman bullying cycle.

Table 2

*Answering the Research Questions*

Research Question:	Existing Students:	New Students:	Boarding Students:
What are the greatest areas of struggle in the 8 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> -grade transition, and what are their causes?	Time management Approaching teachers	Time management Making friends Academic rigor	Making friends Homesickness
What assumptions influence expectations placed on students?	All students want to date boys. All students identify as feminine.	All students have learned the same things.	All students have access to the same resources and cultural experiences.
How do different background environments influence the transition?	Experience with Hockaday's school culture has helped prepare them for Upper School academics and culture.	Differing social and academic backgrounds pose challenges.	Varying cultural backgrounds and academic experiences pose challenges.
How do students feel supported and unsupported by the school as they make the transition?	Helpful advisors. Unnecessary, repetitive programming.	Inundation by programming, Supportive faculty, High academic expectations.	Supportive dorm parents and faculty, difficulty with separation from families and homesickness.

Research Question:	Existing Students:	New Students:	Boarding Students:
How do previous social and educational experiences affect student adjustment to a new environment?	Experiences have prepared them for school culture. Reputation of grade precedes them.	An increase or decrease in school size may be unsettling, public or private experience may impact differences in academic rigor.	Experience with international schools may be both helpful and challenging. Difference in culture may be shocking.
Do some students face more obstacles than others? Can this be leveled out?	Yes—differentiation and optional supplemental programming are necessary.	Yes—differentiation and optional supplemental programming are necessary. New students appear to struggle more than existing students overall.	Yes—differentiation and optional supplemental programming are necessary. Boarding students appear to struggle more than new and existing students overall.
How do students' cultural identifiers add complexity to their transitional experience?	Members of the LGBTQ+ community do not feel well-represented.	Not all students feel represented, integration of cultural identifiers into curriculum is necessary.	Families may live in different countries or time zones. Culture shock is difficult for some students.

### *Ineffectual Transitional Programming*

Despite our best efforts to include relevant content, most participants referred to transitional programming as unmemorable. While effective transitional programming should help students feel confident, significant, and prepared, for existing students, the content of Camp Daisy meetings felt repetitive, irrelevant, and even condescending in some cases (Costain, 2017). Due to the time they had already spent attending the educational institution, existing students felt that their time could have been better spent elsewhere and that meetings were too short to be of any value. For new and boarding students, on the other hand, feelings of inundation caused the meetings to feel overly short, rushed, and difficult to remember. The content of the meetings, while potentially useful, was lost among the myriad of other things students felt they needed to remember. The overall opinion of the programming was that it was inauthentic and inconsequential.

### *Inequitable Institutional Hegemony*

As a school that began in 1913, Hockaday is the home of many traditions, practices, and vernacular, which was a popular topic of conversation among the new and boarding student cases. To individuals just joining the community, the culture shock is often unanticipated and startling. Almost every building and room on campus is named after a financial donor and is referred to by this donor's name, which makes them difficult to find for new students and faculty. New and boarding students reported that not only was it difficult to find their way around campus, but there was also quite a bit of jargon to learn and internalize, such as grade levels in the Upper School being referred to as "forms." Additionally, all Hockaday students are expected to abide by uniform guidelines, and codes of conduct and honor that new and boarding students had to learn as they began ninth grade. New students felt at a major disadvantage as they struggled to catch up with institutional knowledge.

Existing students also referred to some of the cultural expectations as potentially problematic. Despite the intention of single-sex institutions to counteract gender inequities, many participants in the existing student case discussed the expectation to find dates and boyfriends from the student bodies of local all-boys or co-ed schools (Sadker, 2009). Without dates, they felt excluded when not able to attend dances and other social gatherings at the boys' schools and felt pressured to meet boys in order to be invited and therefore socially accepted. Additionally, students reported feeling that it was socially unacceptable to bring another girl as their date to Hockaday dances, or to dress in a suit rather than a dress. Hockaday's expectations to wear the uniform skirt or white graduation dress were described by some existing students as uncomfortably heteronormative, but that this felt unlikely to change during their tenure at the school.

### *Academic Gaps*

While literature suggests that the most effective transitional programming prepares students for incoming academic challenges, students from all cases described feeling that teachers and administrators made assumptions about their understanding of various study skills and concepts (Ellerbrock et al., 2015). For example, approaching and talking to teachers with questions or concerns felt insurmountable to new and existing students alike, and students from all three cases reported having difficulty learning to self-advocate. New students also felt at a disadvantage when it came to prerequisite knowledge for various classes, such as creating theses and writing analytically. The students pointed to various curricular gaps and wished there was something in the transitional programming that might have made their integration into Hockaday classes an easier one.

Students across cases discussed the need to become accustomed to having and using free time effectively, visiting with teachers, and doing homework rather than putting it off until later. The semi-structured schedule was new for many incoming freshman students and posed difficulties with balance and time management. Some students recalled developing issues with procrastination, and others discussed having learned the hard way to use their time wisely. Procrastination for these students likely stemmed from avoidance behaviors they exhibited in an effort to assuage anxiety at tackling new habits of mind. According to Damour (2019) avoidance can certainly alleviate anxiety on a short-term basis, but ultimately exacerbates anxiety in the long-term.

### *Social Barriers*

New and boarding students discussed an overarching theme about the difficulty they experienced when it came to socializing and making friends. New students recalled that existing students all seemed to have been at Hockaday their entire lives, and that social circles were firmly established and difficult to infiltrate. At a time when, developmentally, fitting in felt imperative, many remembered only making friends with other new students, and even reported that the majority of their friends now were also new students as freshmen (Pipher & Gilliam, 2019). Along with feeling expected to meet and date boys from other schools, the preestablished friend groups made fitting in feel especially difficult for new students.

Boarding students reported similar issues making friends with existing students, but also emphasized feeling set apart from the day student population. Because they lived on campus, boarding students felt different and isolated from their peers that went home each day with their parents. Difficulty integrating into the day student population combined with almost complete immersion in boarding resulted in isolated social experiences. Boarding students friendships were almost exclusively with other boarding students, and they found it difficult to develop relationships with day students.

### *Resignation to the Freshman Bullying Cycle*

One of the most significant findings was the common sentiment that freshmen are simply expected to struggle and suffer through their ninth-grade experience. While resilience requires overcoming obstacles, the thought seemed to reach well beyond learning from one's mistakes into a hierarchical comparison of upperclassmen to ninth-graders. Students across all cases recalled being expected to avoid senior hallways, stay

silent in classes, and generally display fearfulness in the presence of older students. Freshmen on sports teams were expected to cheerfully handle setup and cleanup work, as well as put up with a fair amount of teasing and ridicule from older students.

Existing student participants reported feeling resigned to the lowly freshman experience, recalling that they anticipated that their grade's reputation would precede them and make them unlikable by older students. What was more surprising, however, was that many students from all cases, now in grades ten through twelve, felt that their difficult experiences as freshmen called for future incoming ninth-graders to have similar experiences. The cyclical nature of the freshman struggle was met with resignation, and even a sense of justice as participants watched younger ninth-graders endeavor to overcome the same obstacles. The resounding sentiment was that if they had to go through it, so should everyone else.

Some literature exists on the psychology of unofficial hazing and initiation practices, and points to factors that maintain such practices in high schools. Lipkins defines hazing as the "process based on a tradition that is used by a group to maintain a hierarchy within the group" (2006, p. 13). Ultimately, freshmen students accept mild hazing practices in the hope of being accepted by older, more experienced members of the community. Pecjak and Pirc refer to mild hazing practices as "subtle hazing, which includes relatively harmless activities that are primarily aimed at making fun of student-novices, humiliating them, or provoking a sense of embarrassment in newcomers. The motive is usually to express power over the newcomers" (2019, p. 195). Based on the results of this study, older students at Hockaday were maintaining practices of subtle hazing because they were the targets of similar activities at the same age.

### *Implications*

The data collected in this study contributes to a limited literature base for this unique single-sex, secular private school context. Within this literature, separate research exists that focuses on freshman transitional programming for large public schools, single-sex institutions, and female adolescent psychological development, but there is limited literature on facilitating effective transitions for freshmen at small, private schools. Furthermore, Hockaday's unique culture adds additional layers of complexity, and any transitions within the school should reflect that. According to the results of this study, transitions should be supported by innovative curriculum, facilitation of social integration, a reevaluation of traditions and practices, and an organizational change in attitudes toward freshman students.

### *Innovative Transitional Curriculum*

Patterns arose in the data that indicated a need for diversifying the approach to transitional programming at Hockaday to better fit students' needs. This conclusion is also supported by Harris and Barnett's Thriving Transition Cycle (see Figure 1.), which suggests that in order to successfully progress through the cycle, each stage must be fully resolved before progressing to the next (Harris, 2013). Unfortunately, many incoming Hockaday ninth-graders have difficulty progressing through each stage of the cycle effectively, and therefore struggle to complete a successful transition. Instead of pointing to a single area where programming needs improvement, the data indicated that each student may struggle with different aspects of the cycle.

Findings from this study can be used to create more holistic, equitable, and individualized transitional programming that differentiates between incoming student

backgrounds. This programming should avoid front-loading and incorporate frequent reflection, according to Harris and Barnett's theory (Harris, 2013). It should also take better advantage of authentic mentorship opportunities, and perhaps incorporate summer bridge components and guided practice to address academic gaps where they exist.

The result of this improvement would be programming that felt less overwhelming, repetitive, or arbitrary for students. Instead, it can be intentionally designed, with various mandatory and optional meetings at different times throughout the year according to student needs. This authentic, differentiated approach would give students the best chance of completing a successful transition cycle, not only into the Hockaday Upper School, but after high school and beyond.

#### *Facilitation of Social Integration*

The data showed that students across cases struggled to some extent to make friends and find a sense of belonging within the school. New students reported finding it difficult to breach enduring social circles to make friends with existing students, while boarding students noted a sense of separation from the entire day student population. These findings imply that more should be done throughout freshman year to encourage students to meet new people and create new relationships.

These social opportunities can be fostered through both new and existing programming. The freshman retreat would be an excellent time in which to build additional bonding opportunities across student populations. As new transitional programming is crafted, these facilitated experiences can also be intentionally integrated into the schedule. By offering school sponsored social occasions throughout the year,

students will have increased access to peers outside their immediate social circles, allowing for increased togetherness and bonding.

### *Reevaluation of Traditions and Practices*

Many participants within this study discussed their experiences with Hockaday's unique culture, including vernacular language, traditions, and social expectations. While Hockaday's rich history includes some positive enduring traditions, participants also spoke about others that reinforce heteronormative expectations within the school. The social pressure to find male dates in order to attend events at partner schools and abide by a feminine dress code felt unappealing and even uncomfortable to several participants.

In order to counteract tendencies toward heteronormativity, it is important that Hockaday perform a self-study of tradition to identify the purpose of, reevaluate, and potentially revise expectations placed upon students. Restrictions on hair length, uniform expectations, and the tradition of all seniors wearing the same white dress to graduation are among the handbook items that students discussed in focus group interviews. Additionally, in lieu of relying on partner schools to host dances, Hockaday could consider adding its own Homecoming events so that students feel less pressured to date.

Furthermore, while this collective case study gathered information on the freshman transitional experience, students would benefit greatly from additional research on the experience of LGBTQ+ students in a female, single-sex context. The questionnaire and focus group interviews brought to light information regarding the single-sex aspect of the school, and how heteronormative expectations affect students' experience in the ninth grade. Future research that identifies and interviews willing LGBTQ+ alumni could help

to understand the student experience for trans, nonbinary, and non-heterosexual students enrolled at an all-girls school.

### *Organizational Change in Attitudes Toward Freshmen*

Finally, throughout the focus-group interviews arose a common feeling that freshmen are simply looked down upon, not only by older students but also by faculty and staff. Negative attitudes toward freshmen include associating incoming classes with preconceived reputations, automatically assigning grunt work to ninth-grade students, and expecting freshmen to be seen and not heard. This unfortunate notion points to a need to push for an overall organizational change to attitudes toward freshman students.

In order to create this change, it is important to start with administration. While working with freshman students is not without challenges, it is important to continuously reiterate that many struggles ninth-graders experience are developmentally appropriate and beyond their control. Furthermore, working with freshmen could be framed as an opportunity to help students overcome potential difficulties, and mature into capable self-advocates.

Attitudes toward freshmen should also be addressed with existing upperclassmen. By strengthening existing mentorship programs between seniors and freshmen, and reiterating the purpose behind guiding freshman students, seniors can be utilized as leaders in changing the organizational attitude toward ninth-graders. Efforts should be made to destigmatize the experience of being a freshman, and the sentiment of rites of passage must be eradicated. Only then will the cycle of freshman bullying end.

### *Summary and Conclusion*

This collective case study was designed to help teachers and administrators better understand the struggles facing incoming ninth grade students of various backgrounds. In order to gain a holistic understanding of the topic, perspectives were solicited from various participant groups. These bounded cases included existing students, new students, and boarding students. I collected data using a questionnaire, and then conducted focus group interviews. I examined the data for each bounded case, and then explored an individual perspective for each case by presenting an in-depth review on a selected participant. Results of the study revealed that students within each case struggle with the freshman transition for various reasons.

For existing students, feelings of social expectations and heteronormativity were expressed by many participants. New students felt inundated by having to cope with the new organizational culture alongside high academic expectations. Boarding students are faced with leaving home at an early age and potentially living within a culture that is not their own. There were also several overarching themes that applied to all groups. These themes included feelings of social pressure, appreciation of faculty support, and sentiments of resignation that ninth grade is simply a difficult year fraught with unavoidable unpleasantness.

While the present study is a qualitatively focused, similar studies using quantitative methods may shine additional light on how students' academic success and score on entrance exams correlates with new and boarding students' experience transitioning into the Hockaday Upper School. Perhaps by doing so it could be possible to identify patterns or risk factors for potential academic difficulty for incoming students, and that these students can be preemptively supported to prevent these issues. Identifying

students' issues early is often the best way to prevent problems from worsening and deepening.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Distribution of Findings

#### *Executive Summary*

Evidence from this study strongly suggests that transitioning into high school inevitably includes overcoming obstacles. This likelihood is further compounded by complications associated with adolescent female psychological and physical development. While programming exists at some educational institutions to support students through the transition into high school, this programming is not applicable to all schools. At Hockaday, a small, private, secular school in Dallas, Texas, transitional programming is further complicated by the combined boarding and day student approach. Additionally, the school's single-sex approach involves further issues associated with the debatable efficacy of an all-female approach, which is still consistently debated about in the literature.

At a school with such unique complexities, it does not make sense to implement programming that seeks to solve problems that Hockaday does not have. For example, Hockaday does not struggle with student retention, low graduation rates, or behavioral problems. Instead, culture-specific issues such as high academic pressure, high levels of expected independence and self-advocacy, and a one hundred percent college acceptance rate are more applicable to the institution. Programming, therefore, needs to be tailored to fit the issues that do exist at an individual institution, and should prepare students to encounter the most significant hegemonical obstacles they may confront.

The present collective case study identifies and explores the most common and significant issues facing incoming Hockaday ninth-graders, and how these students feel best and least supported by the school as they transition into the upper school. The following section will review the data collection and analysis process, discuss resulting recommendations, and how and to whom these results should be distributed.

### *Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedure*

The comparison of how new, existing, and boarding school students' experiences may differ made a qualitative collective case study an appropriate fit for conducting my research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). A collective case study allows the researcher to examine groups of people as unique bound cases as they experience a social phenomenon, and then compare and draw conclusions from the experiences of each unique case (Stake, 1995).

I gathered participants from tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade who were willing to reflect on their ninth-grade experience and offer me feedback on their transition into the upper school. The three cases I studied were new students, existing students, and boarding students. New students entered Hockaday for the first time as they started ninth-grade, existing students had already attended Hockaday for a number of years, and boarding students lived in on-campus housing.

I began by administering a qualitative questionnaire inspired by the primary and secondary research questions for the study. I received twenty-one responses to the questionnaire, and then split the students into their relevant cases. I invited all students who responded to the questionnaire to participate in a focus group interview for their

relevant case. During these semi-structured interviews, I asked questions inspired by the questionnaire, and allowed the students to drive the conversation.

After collecting data, I transcribed the interviews, and then carefully sorted reviewed questionnaire responses and interview data by case. I applied descriptive coding to each separate case to identify significant themes using Tesch's Eight Steps in Coding. Once the cases were analyzed individual, I applied cross-case analysis to compare the cases and identify patterns across all cases (Yin, 2018). This approach allowed me to identify what each of the groups needs individually as they transition into high school and draw conclusions about how onboarding programming may be improved. I discuss these recommendations in the following section.

### *Summary of Findings*

Before conducting the study, I anticipated findings that demonstrated the advantages that existing students had over new and boarding students. However, the results of the study showed that there were several overarching difficulties that crossed each of the three cases. The most significant findings included ineffectual transitional programming, inequitable institutional hegemony, academic gaps, social barriers, and overall resignation to the freshman bullying cycle. Each of the three cases were affected by these outcomes in different ways and addressing them all would benefit the entire incoming ninth-grade population.

First, almost all students reported that the existing transitional programming was ineffectual and unmemorable. New and boarding students had so many other transitional factors occurring simultaneously that the information was overwhelming, while existing students felt many topics were redundant or even condescending. The format of

transitional programming should be reevaluated to address these issues and differentiated to address varying student needs. Perhaps new, existing, and boarding students require different levels of programming, or meetings should be made optional and occur intermittently throughout the school year.

The second major finding, inequitable institutional hegemony, was also felt by all ninth-grade populations. For new and boarding students, adapting to Hockaday's distinct vernacular, navigating campus, and adapting to the unique school culture was reported as extremely challenging for many students. For existing students, abiding by a feminine dress code and meeting heteronormative social expectations was difficult for many participants. An in-depth self-study on Hockaday's traditions and practices would be a logical approach to preventing these issues for all students.

Regarding academic gaps, particularly new students discussed feeling that assumptions were often made regarding their prior knowledge at the beginning of freshman year. While summer bridge programming already existed for math, many students referred to English as a difficult subject to catch up with at the start of ninth grade. The concepts of creating a thesis and conducting close readings were frequently referred to, and additionally bridge programming may be a fitting solution to help new students feel more prepared at the beginning of the school year.

Feelings of social isolation were an issue that pertained mostly to new and boarding students. New students felt that firmly established social circles among existing students were difficult to breach, while boarding students felt most comfortable around other boarding students due to their constant immersion together. Consistent social

opportunities throughout the school year may enhance the students' ability to make bonds across cases, thereby encouraging better social relationships.

Finally, and perhaps most disturbing of the findings, was the idea that the freshmen bullying cycle was fully anticipated and doomed to repetition. Current sophomores, juniors, and seniors across all cases seemed to accept the inevitability of the freshman struggle, and even echoed similar attitudes of condescension that were felt by older students when they were freshmen. Addressing this issue would require in-depth organizational change in the attitude of both students and adults.

### *Informed Recommendations*

Data analysis showed that freshman transitional program needs to be differentiated to fit the needs of students coming from a variety of educational backgrounds and cultural identifiers. To improve the transitional experience for all incoming ninth-graders, onboarding programming needs to be reevaluated and enriched according to the needs of all students. I have several recommendations for improving this programming, including a more structured adjustment to the school's schedule, increased mindfulness about meeting requirements, and potential summer programming for new and boarding students.

*Gradual time management.* All incoming freshmen, regardless of where they went to school in eighth grade and before, come into ninth-grade unaccustomed to a six-day rotating schedule that requires students to manage free blocks independently. Instead of being thrust into this stark change, adjustments should be made to guide students into scheduling independence. I recommend that ninth-grade students start the year spending free blocks with their advisory, and that a structure be put into place to allow advisors the

authority to offer increasing amounts of independence to their students. Students who are managing homework, visiting with teachers, and practicing good self-care will be offered more independence, while students who struggle will continue to visit with their advisor during free blocks. This approach offers students gradual mastery of good time management skills.

*Evaluation of meeting efficacy.* I also recommend a reevaluation of the mandatory meetings that have previously crowded the schedule at the beginning of freshman year. Camp Daisy, Form Meeting, and assembly content should be reviewed to decide where meeting content can be combined or made optional to better suit the needs of the students. Here, advisors can also make recommendations to their individual students as to what meetings they should attend, or if their time could be better spent doing other things. This approach would empower students to make guided decisions about their own needs, and exercise control over their schedule.

*Summer bridge programming.* Finally, I recommend planning and executing summer bridge programming that can better prepare new and boarding students for the environment they are about to enter. Programming should be planned based on the needs of each group. For example, new students in this study brought up concerns over assumptions made about their academic abilities, and this programming could offer overviews of the basic skills students will need for their classes. Boarding students, on the other hand, would benefit from bridge programming that includes life skills such as laundry, basic cooking, and roommate communication.

These recommendations speak directly to the needs and desires students from each case expressed. Additionally, offering these changes would allow students to gradually move from a more structured environment to an independent one, empowering the students to learn self-regulation and build intrinsic motivation. Hockaday's mission statement refers to developing "resilient, confident women who are educated and inspired to lead lives of purpose and impact," and I truly believe these recommendations would speak directly to this mission.

### *Findings Distribution Proposal*

The findings of this study will be presented to relevant individuals on the faculty and staff and applied to thoughtfully improving existing transitional programming at Hockaday. Knowledge of the most significant issues facing incoming freshmen will allow for the programming to take preemptive measures that will prevent the need for crisis management. The following sections provide a discussion of the target audience, proposed distribution method and venue, and distribution materials.

### *Target Audience*

Advisors, teachers, and administrators at the Hockaday Upper School would benefit most from reviewing this study. Advisors act as students first contact on campus, often helping students self-advocate, and assisting the Form Dean in facilitating freshman-specific programming. Advisors see their student daily, and their connection to, experiences with, and opinions regarding freshman students would be valuable input for the designing and implementation of improved programming to help them prepare for and adjust to life in the upper school.

Teachers also have frequent contact with freshman students in that they see them in classes every other day. Teachers will be largely involved with adjusting curriculum to include transitional programming elements and may be recruited to assist with bridge programming that would be implemented over the summer. It would be wise to present this study's findings to teachers to help them understand the need for change and the importance of interleaving transitional programming into their curriculum.

Finally, support from administrators will be key to instituting successful organizational change in terms of the way freshman students are supported. Teachers and advisors would be more likely to invest themselves in change if it is enthusiastically supported by their supervisors. Additionally, and any necessary financial support must be approved by administration before summer bridge programming could be planned and implemented. Administrative support is also key to bringing parents on board with institutional changes to the freshman experience.

#### *Proposed Distribution Method and Venue*

The most appropriate way to present findings to advisors, teachers, and administrators is a layered approach to varying audiences. First, I will present the findings to the school administration. I will need their approval before making and moving forward with any plans. Presenting findings and plans to advisors and teachers will give the impression that we are moving forward with making changes, so it is crucial that administration is involved first.

Following approval by the necessary administration, I will likely present findings to freshman advisors, since they will play the largest part in facilitating students' experiences. Advisors will need training and likely have a lot of questions regarding the

roles they will play and responsibilities they will have in the change process. It is also important that the advisors play a large part in the planning process due to their wealth of knowledge of the freshman experience.

Once I have received administrative approval and worked with freshman advisors to create improved programming, I will present a solid plan to all teachers of freshmen, and likely all upper school teachers. This information will be valuable to all teachers since the hope would be that benefits from the programming would have longevity beyond ninth-grade. A faculty meeting would be an ideal venue to present findings and would allow time for questions.

#### *Distribution Materials*

Findings could be most affectively shared using a presentation format. Using a PowerPoint presentation or similar could offer visual representations including figures and direct quotes from this study. In addition to the presentation, I would offer verbal context for the information being presented and offer opportunities for questions. This presentation could be altered to appropriately fit the audience. The presentation could also be recorded and shared by emailing out a link for relevant individuals to review further.

#### *Conclusion*

In this qualitative, multiple case study, the experiences of twenty-one students helped reveal themes relevant to new, existing, and boarding students transitional experiences at Hockaday. The most significant themes were academic pressure, time management issues, struggles with self-advocation, and overcoming social barriers. Results of the study showed that existing programming does not benefit students from all

cases equitably and indicated the need for differentiation to better fit the needs of all incoming freshmen. Programming should continue to be evaluated on a regular basis to ensure that it evolves and remains relevant, and further research should be conducted on themes such as the effects of heteronormativity on student mental health, and the representation of cultural identifiers within traditions and curriculum.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Freshman Experience Questionnaire

#### *Educational Background*

1. Upon entry into the Upper School, how many years had you attended The Hockaday School? (If you were a new student in ninth-grade, please enter 0.)
2. Please describe your educational background before attending Hockaday. (Examples include Dallas public schools, Dallas private schools, public or private schools in other cities/states/countries, homeschool, etc.)
3. Are there any ways, positive or negative, that you feel your previous educational experience impacted your transition into the Hockaday Upper School? Please discuss.
4. Please indicate if you are a day student or a boarding student. If you are a boarding student, upon entry into the ninth-grade, how many years had you lived on-campus at the Hockaday school?

#### *Cultural Identifiers*

5. What do you self-identify as your cultural identifiers? (Some examples of cultural identifiers include ethnicity, age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and socioeconomic status.)
6. In what ways do you feel that your cultural identifiers were or were not represented in the Camp Daisy programming?

#### *Transitional Programming Experience*

7. In your experience, what were the most difficult aspects of transitioning into the Hockaday Upper School?
8. In what ways did the advisory system support your transition into the Hockaday Upper School?
9. Are there any ways that advisory might have supported your transition into the Upper School that were not addressed? Please discuss.
10. In what ways did the Camp Daisy programming support your transition into the Hockaday Upper School?

11. Are there any ways that Camp Daisy might have supported your transition into the Upper School that were not addressed? Please discuss.
12. In what ways did faculty support your transition into the Hockaday Upper School?
13. Are there any ways that faculty might have supported your transition into the Upper School that were not addressed? Please discuss.

## APPENDIX B

### Research Questions

Table 3

#### *Freshman Experience Interview Questions*

Questions	Follow-up Probes
What experiences do you remember most about your freshman year experience?	How did these experiences impact your transition?
What do you recall as the biggest struggles you experienced during the transition into the Hockaday Upper School?	In what ways did you feel supported? In what ways did you feel unsupported? Were the covered topics useful? What was not addressed that would have been helpful?
What assumptions did you feel that faculty placed on your knowledge and abilities?	What were you expected to know?
Tell me about how your previous educational experiences helped or hindered your transition.	Did you feel well-prepared? Did you feel that others were more or less prepared than you?
How did your cultural identifiers impact your transition?	Did you feel that they were addressed or supported during the transition?

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