Decreasing Anxiety During Middle School Transition by Increasing a Systematic Culture of Belonging and Contributing

A Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By:

Kaylee R. Neubauer

August, 2015
Abstract

Anxiety disorders are of the most prevalent mental health disorders found in adolescents, with the peak onset age occurring when adolescents are making the very difficult transition from elementary to middle school. This paper reviews literature on executive functioning in adolescents to gain a better understanding of the change their body and brain are going through during this transitional phase. It also reviews literature surrounding anxiety disorders in adolescents delving deeper into risk factors, assessments, and prevention methods school counselors may help implement. Furthermore, it contains an Adlerian approach to developing a sense of belonging in the school, and provides interventions school counselors may set in place to reduce the anxiety surrounding the transition from elementary to middle school.
DECREASING ANXIETY DURING SCHOOL TRANSITION

Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Introduction 4

Impact of Transitioning Schools 5

Executive Functioning 7

Adolescent Development 10

Anxiety in Adolescents 11

Risk Factors 13

Factors Impacting Anxiety 15

Assessment 18

Summary 19

An Adlerian Perspective of Belonging 21

Adlerian Approach to School Counseling 22

Tiered Interventions 24

Tier 1 26

Tier 2 29

Tier 3 30

Future Research and Recommendations 32

Conclusion 34

References 36
Decreasing Anxiety During Middle School Transition by Increasing a Systematic Culture of Belonging and Contributing

Transitional phases are difficult to deal with at any point in life, but adolescents can find transitions exponentially harder to cope with since they are dealing with abrupt changes in the early stages of their life. Much like a caterpillar stuck in the confines of it’s cocoon, kids experience these transitional phases that can be awkward, messy, and hard to navigate alone (Walsh, 2014). In particular, the transition between elementary school and middle school presents the unique problem of causing stress and anxiety on a student, while the student has not yet learned or been taught effective strategies to harness the positives that manageable stress and anxiety can offer.

The fact that depression and anxiety are being diagnosed at higher rates than past generations must be taken into account (Amen & Routh, 2003). Anxiety symptoms are visible in 10 to 20% of students ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade (Cooley & Boyce, 2004), making anxiety a primary concern in the school system. If left unchecked, this primary concern can snowball into adulthood with other factors along the way including but not limited to: dissipating academic scores, lack of intrinsic drive, negative self-image, etc. The severity of these symptoms is harmful for the short term, but detrimental for the long term (i.e. adulthood) (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010).

Change is one of many constants in life, but change comes far too frequently for all youth to be capable of handling. Changes can come in the form of family, dating, puberty, location, friendship, and more. The school system presents some unique changes that students are often not readily prepared for. Increased academic demands, different learning environments, and complexity in relationships with their mentors
DECREASING ANXIETY DURING SCHOOL TRANSITION

and/or teachers are all changes that are within the realm of school (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). An anxiety disorder on top of everything else in middle school is not something that can be ignored or overlooked in the educational setting. This is why the work of a school counselor is paramount for the growth and development of students in our schools (Grills et al., 2010). Research has demonstrated that anxiety among adolescents is a societal mental health problem that occurs in 10% to 20% of students in primary or secondary school (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Anxiety connects with other forms of mental health issues (i.e. depression) and it interferes with academic achievement as well as peer functioning all while making the large transition from elementary to middle school (Barrett & Turner, 2001).

**Impact of Transitioning Schools**

The transition to middle school or junior high coincides with a key time in every adolescent’s physical and mental growth. The physical changes are marked by hormonal changes as they enter puberty. This is important to note as research is demonstrating that adolescence is getting longer and puberty is starting earlier; today’s average starts around age 12 (Walsh, 2014). Social acceptance becomes increasingly important as new friend groups are formed during this transition (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Students often engage in negative behavior to be accepted by certain social groups and cliques. The behaviors that become visible during this transition include: teasing, bullying, and gossiping (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Jacobson et al. (2011) points us to a study of poor, urban youths as illustrative of the negative effects on an at-risk population. The study found transitioning to middle school was marked with declining self-esteem, class preparation, social support and involvement in school, lower GPA, and increased daily school hassles. The hassles
create a snowball effect, as hassles increase, student’s academic expectations, preparation, and ultimately GPA, are lowered.

Fino et al. (2014) performed a study to test the impact of rising impulsivity and deficits in inhibitory control. This combination is indicative of negative effects impacting executive function. Fino et al. (2014) uses a general definition of impulsivity as a tendency toward fast, spontaneous, unplanned, and maladaptive response to environmental cues. The study cites research indicating that the prefrontal cortex regulates both impulsivity and inhibition control. It is generally accepted that the prefrontal cortex is one of the last regions of the brain to reach maturation (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). The implication of this for middle school students is readily apparent to understand their development.

Inhibitory control and impulsivity are two factors related to regulation of cognitive activity, emotional response, and overt behaviors that define executive function. Executive functions were tested by placing high school students in situations that require fast cognitive and behavioral adjustments in light of a changing environment (Fino et al., 2014). The approach of the study is a microcosm of the complex requirements discussed above during the transition to middle school. The usefulness of the results is limited for our purposes as high school students aged 16-18 were tested (Fino et al., 2014). It would certainly be interesting to run the test on middle school adolescents between 12-14. In light of the neuropsychological, research shows that executive functioning develops over time, variations in the inhibition control and impulsivity should be expected.
Executive Functioning

One way to understand adolescents’ mental growth is by studying changes in executive functioning skills. Executive functioning skills are critical in cognitive and social functioning (Jacobson, Williford, & Pianta, 2011). The unique set of challenges posed by the middle school transition tests an adolescent’s executive functioning skills, making this point in their development an important time to study.

Crone (2009) characterizes an adolescent’s improving executive functioning as increased ability to control their thoughts and actions to make them consistent with their internal goals. Similar to Crone, Walsh (2014) also brings to light the use-it-or-lose-it phenomenon, which explains how professional school counselors can help students to think before they do. This in turn lays the foundation for neural pathways to become utilized more often by the student because they have been held responsible for being in charge of their impulses, a valuable skill outside of the educational setting. There are many challenges specific to the school transition that creates a demand on an adolescent’s developing executive functioning skills. A child is physically in a new location, and will also experience an increase in the number of teachers and changes in instructional format. Class sizes will be larger, which can give cause to a perceived decrease in teacher support. Expectations for individual responsibility increase while peer networks are evolving and the exposure to potential delinquent behavior also increases (Jacobson, Williford, & Pianta, 2011).

While most students make the transition smoothly, the ones that don’t exhibit negative consequences. These consequences include: an undermined sense of self-worth, increased feeling of psychological distress, disengagement from school, and increased involvement in potentially risky behavior. In particular, the research shows that students
who have already been identified as low achievers are more likely to experience more negative effects, as are children who are already at risk due to socio-economic factors (Jacobson et al., 2011).

Executive functioning develops through childhood, adolescence, and beyond. It has been correlated with how students achieve on the Wisconsin Card Sorting Task (WCST). This test can easily focus on a student’s perseveration which reveals their capability of dealing with principles or rules that were relevant before, but do not maintain relevance as the test progresses (Fino et al., 2014).

As adolescents’ brains grow there are many neural processes that are growing and gaining speed in functioning. Neural speed through the frontal cortex really begins to increase during adolescence and into early adulthood. As neurons and connections increase and grow, new maps are formed in the brain (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

Acting without thinking, reward sensitivity, and novelty seeking all factor into the development of adolescents. Acting without thinking is most easily defined as behavior that is not premeditated, but merely a response to outside stimuli during times of stress. This is easily compared with executive function because it either shows the ability or inability to manage your own responses while hopefully eliminating ones that are no longer acceptable (Fino et al., 2014).

Reward sensitivity focuses in on one’s ability to delay gratification. As humans we either accept a lesser reward that comes more quickly, or we are able to hold off for a more meaningful reward in the long run. An adolescent’s ability to obtain reward sensitivity allows them to have positive productive peer relationships (Shoshani & Slone, 2013).
With respect to the novelty-seeking trait, we know that some adolescents look for above average sensations (experiences that border on complexity and intensity for their senses). A test that is popular when assessing this trait is the Five Factor Model of Personality. Sadly, research discovered that there is little to no correlation between the novelty seeking trait and executive functioning. Ultimately this requires more research and attention on this particular topic (Fino et al., 2014). As a whole these three topics are not considered to be vastly associated with executive functioning. It may be considered that risk-taking behavior exhibited by adolescents may be due to developmental reasons, but is more easily connected with lack of experience than possible structural impairments (Fino et al., 2014).

MRI's show increasing white matter in linear formations, while grey matter is decreasing. As these changes occur, there are changes in adolescents’ attention and memory abilities. An example of this change is selective attention. Selective attention shows changes in decision-making, and in the ability to work on multiple tasks. Another change occurs in perspective memory during the teen years, which refers to the ability to recall doing a specific task at a specific time of day (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). These changes in the brain and the memory are just a few examples in which adolescents are experiencing developmental changes.

**Adolescent Development**

Executive functioning is closely tied to an adolescent’s development of their identity, self-consciousness, and cognitive flexibility. Blakemore and Choudhury (2006) point to the adolescent’s ability to hold in mind more complex concepts and think in a more strategic manner. Wigfield, Lutz, and Wagner (2005) are instructive in breaking down and defining the concepts that coincide with an adolescent’s burgeoning
understanding that childhood is coming to a close and they are now entering their life phase of adulthood. Broadly speaking, adolescence is the time for identity development (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). The school environment is critical to one’s formation of identity. Factors like scholastic achievement, navigation of social relationships with others, as well as early exploration of career options mark the impact school has on a young person’s identity. The adolescent will also become aware of issues like gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation at this stage of the development process. Although one’s self-identity is always evolving, the middle school period is one of supreme importance to the adult that will later form. The onset of personal awareness revolving around physical and mental development often leads to adolescents exhibiting symptoms of anxiety.

**Adolescent Anxiety**

Anxiety disorders are a global issue that affects children, adolescents and adults alike. The term anxiety may be simplified down to feeling nervous, worried, or fearful (Cooley & Boyce, 2004). Feelings of anxiety are present in all people. Anxiety and anxious feelings are not always a negative entity. At times anxiety serves as a protecting factor, alerting a person that danger may be present. Anxious feelings may also push individuals to strive, turning situations into what Alfred Adler would refer to as a felt minus to a perceived plus, or in other words turning what seems like a negative situation into a positive one (Rasmussens & Dover, 2006). When anxiety becomes consistently debilitating, keeping an individual from striving through life, they may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). Keeping this in mind, professional school counselors can use this “window of opportunity” for teens to get extra practice in
calming themselves, considering alternative actions, and adapting to new and sometimes overwhelming situations” (Walsh, 2014, p. 92).

There are various types of anxiety disorders, including: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), separation anxiety disorder (SAD), social anxiety disorder (SAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), specific phobias, panic disorder (PD), acute stress disorder (ASD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). All of these subtypes of anxiety may be found in teenagers and adolescents.

These various types of anxiety disorders are all manifested in the brain, but they show up in three areas in particular: the deep limbic system, the basal ganglia, and the anterior cingulate gyrus. The deep limbic system is a person’s emotional tone; it is how they talk negatively or positively about themselves. In short, our thoughts lead to the release of chemicals in our brain. Negative thoughts lead to our bodies feeling bad, while positive thoughts lead us to being calm and our bodies feeling good. The origination and culmination of these positive and negative responses take place within our deep limbic system (Amen & Routh, 2003). Above the deep limbic system in the brain lie the basal ganglia and the anterior cingulate gyrus, which serve as a catalyst for one another causing people to get stuck in their anxious thoughts. Certain symptoms may help identify if someone is stuck in a chronic state of anxiety: tension headaches, upset stomach, diarrhea, ulcers, and even muscle soreness. All of these symptoms could be present due to the level of activity in the basal ganglia being too concentrated. When you add a high level of negative activity in the basal ganglia with a high level of negative activity in the anterior cingulate gyrus, someone can get stuck in their anxious thoughts. This is because the anterior cingulate gyrus is in charge of people being able to change their focus from one topic to the next. Being fixated on the negative has long-term detrimental
DECREASING ANXIETY DURING SCHOOL TRANSITION

12

effects if left unchecked (Amen & Routh, 2003). This is why professional school counselors can serve as a valuable asset in helping students change from a negative mindset to a positive growth mindset in hopes diminishing the chance of chronic anxiety forming.

Adolescence is a prominent time for the onset and development of anxiety, with 11 years old being the average age for onset (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010). The most prevalent type of anxiety reported in this age group is social anxiety (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Walters, 2005). This seems logical, as this is the age adolescents start middle school and are presented with more opportunities for social interactions with peers. For this reason, it is imperative that school counselors are aware of anxiety disorders and their risk factors, so that they can help students be aware of these symptoms and get the help they need to be successful.

Risk Factors

Anxiety disorders in adolescents make it harder for the youth to function successfully, and they take a large emotional toll on them as well. It was once alleged that adolescents would merely outgrow their anxiety disorders; this is no longer the belief (Hale, Klimstra, Branje, Wijsbroek, & Meeus, 2013). Recent longitudinal studies have found that anxiety is more likely to persist through adulthood than to disappear (Hale et al., 2013). These findings make it evermore compelling to identify the risk factors associated with anxiety. These risk factors include both internal and external indicators.

One internal risk factor that is known to have a large impact on the development of an anxiety disorder is anxiety sensitivity, which is the fear of bodily sensations (Dia & Bradshaw, 2008). Anxiety sensitivity can furthermore be broken down into three fears: physical symptoms, observable symptoms, and cognitive dyscontrol (i.e. the inability to
control their own behavior) (Noël, Lewis, Francis, & Mezo, 2013). Adolescents with high anxiety sensitivity believe that their physical symptoms of feeling anxious (i.e. increased heart rate, sweating, dizziness) can cause disastrous social consequences (Noël et al., 2013). At a time when adolescents place peer interactions as the highest importance, these adolescents with high anxiety sensitivity have a larger chance to develop an anxiety disorder (Dia & Bradshaw, 2008).

There are also external risk factors known to advance the development of anxiety in adolescents. One external risk factor is rejecting and overprotective parenting. Rejecting parents promote low self-worth and competence in their children, leaving their children to question what is wrong with them, which can subsequently cause anxiety. Overprotective parents can also raise extremely anxious children because they become fearful of many outside sources in the world. However, as children transition into preteens, the impact of their parental units decreases and the impression of their fellow peers hold an increasing amount of weight. During this time, adolescents’ susceptibility to being a victim of bullying or having negative peer interactions can cause the formation of an anxiety disorder that has the opportunity to withstand throughout adulthood (van Oort, Greaves-Lord, Ormel, Verhulst, & Huizink, 2011).

One implication of the various forms of anxiety is that they are highly co-morbid diseases. A common disease anxiety is often linked to is depression (McLoone, Hudson, & Rapee, 2006). Certainly not all people that struggle with anxiety are depressed; however, it is an important correlation for school counselors to be aware of to help prevent the formation of depression as best they can (Dia & Bradshaw, 2008). It is also important for school counselors to be aware of all of the risk factors involving anxiety. For instance if a school counselor can identify students with high anxiety
sensitivity throughout the transitioning process from elementary to middle school, they can form small groups of those students and help them acquire coping skills to lessen the impact and reduce the opportunity to develop an anxiety disorder. School counselors also have the unique opportunity to work with students involved with bullying and to help educate and work through the issues at hand, aiding to eliminate the development of anxiety that has the opportunity of following them through adulthood. In addition to these risk factors, there are many other environmental factors that impact the formation of anxiety.

Factors Impacting Anxiety

A large population of adolescents struggle with an anxiety disorder every day (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010). The anxiety disorders that they struggle with are impacted by but not limited to: hormonal influences, diet and exercise, as well as family history (Amen & Routh, 2014). These areas need to be taken into account when assessing a student properly.

As previously stated in this paper, social anxiety disorder is the most common form of anxiety that adolescents suffer with. With a social media and technology driven society, the social pressure put on young people is at an all time high (Nelson, 2005). With the competitive nature of adolescents and the unrealistic expectations of appearance, romantic relationships, and the fear of missing out on peer interaction, it’s important for school counselors to redirect the students’ focus onto academic achievement (Nelson, 2005). However, there is a connection between anxiety and academic achievement as well.

When researching the correlation between social anxiety disorder present in adolescents and academic achievement it became apparent that many variables play key
roles in confounding this relationship. With anxiety disorders becoming more prevalent in adolescents and no clear cut research on best practices for school counselors to implement, it has become even more important to explore the confounding variables to prepare for the many different students that may walk through a counselor’s door on any given day.

Warner, Fisher, Shrout, Rathor, and Klein (2007) created a research study to examine the correlation between dimensions of self-esteem and social anxiety disorder in female adolescents suffering with eating disorders. They found co-morbidity in regards to social anxiety disorder. Their results show a noteworthy correspondence between self-esteem and social anxiety. In addition, the relationship was recorded as staying quite stable throughout adolescence. Keeping in mind that the participants in this study were extreme, in that they were already identified as having an eating disorder. This finding opens the door for researching different treatments and techniques along with their effectiveness in social anxiety, by allowing researchers to examine if the relationship becomes less stable across time.

Bilgiç et al. (2013) researched the relationship between symptoms of conduct disorder (CD) and anxiety in adolescents with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Like the previous study, they also found a correlation with anxiety disorders. Their results show a positive correlation between CD symptoms and severity of anxiety. A limitation to this study is that the researchers only had a small test group all whom were identified as having ADHD. This makes it difficult to generalize findings to the student population at large. However, as a school counselor these findings are beneficial in understanding and aiding several of the behavioral students. With background knowledge that they may be lashing out extra before a test due to elevated...
anxiety levels in combination with their CD symptoms, a counselor will be able to assess the situation and approach it in the most beneficial manner for the individual student.

Parr and Cartwright-Hatton (2009) conducted a research study on teenagers ages 13 to 17 testing the effectiveness of the video feedback approach. Each participant gave two speeches into a video camera. Randomly half of the group was chosen to receive feedback and praise after their first speech. The participants that received the video feedback after the first speech were reported as having lower anxiety levels. They also were reported as being less harsh in criticizing their own performance, leading to higher levels of positive self-perceptions. Video feedback was proven to be a positive technique in lowering anxiety levels in this study. Transforming this finding to the school setting is fairly easy. Identifying the students with anxiety disorders and creating plans with their teachers to allow a practice run through for speeches or an additional practice test prior to testing, will aid in lowering anxiety and improving self-perception. This will benefit the classroom environment and may translate in improving scores. In order for teachers to put such plans in place, one must start with being able to identify and better assess students struggling with anxiety.

Assessment

Anxiety portrays itself in many forms, which may present school counselors and other officials with a difficult task identifying it in individual students. School counselors, teachers, nurses and other building staff may be more likely to receive reports of social isolations, interpersonal difficulties, somatic complaints (i.e. headaches, stomach aches, sleepy), and difficulty adjusting and transitioning (Cooley & Boyce, 2004). Another form anxiety presents itself in is irritability. Irritability is a tendency toward negative affective states. A majority of the time irritability is seen in adolescents
through a combination of anger and outbursts (Stoddard et al., 2014). These anger outbursts provide a challenge because they often overshadow the real underlying issue, anxiety.

There are a multitude of different tools used to measure anxiety in adolescents. A few anxiety longitudinal studies have used tools such as: The Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale (SCAS), the Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS), and Childhood Anxiety Sensitivity Index (CASI). The SCAS is a self-measured report specifically created to target children and adolescents ages 8 to 12, and focused on evaluating particular anxiety symptoms (Barrett & Turner, 2001). The RCMAS is also a self-report instrument designed to evaluate an adolescent’s trait anxiety as well as their social desirability (Barrett & Turner, 2001). The CASI is a short questionnaire with a three-point scale used to measure the degree of anxiety sensitivity an adolescent possesses (Noël et al., 2013).

All of these tools are great resources in identifying and assessing anxiety in adolescents. However, as a school counselor it will be most important to educate the student and parents on the fact that you believe they may be struggling with anxiety. This is a delicate but necessary conversation because as Amen and Routh (2014) point out:

Anxiety affects the whole family and often causes serious problems (p. 261)...

Families with one or more persons with anxiety often have serious communication issues. There is a tendency to misinterpret information, react prematurely, or have emotional outbursts over real or imagined slights. (p. 263)

It is from there that a school counselor must remember the important step to refer out to mental health professionals or their primary care physician if a counselor believes anxious feelings have upgraded into an anxiety disorder.
Summary

The importance of the school counselor hinges on the underlying principle that we want a driven society that can deal with adversity and strive to continue their learning in whatever endeavors they see fit. Without proper coping strategies, without learning opportunities, without needed care, students who struggle with anxiety related disorders would not reach their full potential. They will be held back by a manageable foe that they never learned how to defeat. We cannot just sit back and accept that in life there are winners and losers because with that mentality, we accept that 20% of our students are on the losing end, when in reality, they are not on the losing end but are merely having their needs ignored (Cooley & Boyce, 2004). That is one reason why school counselors understand the importance of Alfred Adler’s social interest, because they work closely with other school personnel in order to help their students succeed during the frightening transitional phases that adolescence presents. School counselors also understand that anxiety can be used in a positive way, and it is up to them to teach students how to harness their anxiety positively when applicable, and how to cope with it when needed.

As a whole, the self-reported studies of executive functioning and adolescent development have left us with a conglomeration of data and figures on impulsivity behaviors. However, this information has not been compared and contrasted effectively with executive functioning. What has been found as a possible useful tool at the middle school is the WCST, which could be used to identify students who may not meet the needed executive functioning for their new setting. If the WCST is capable of being modified for elementary school level, we would be able to use it as a predictor to target students who school counselors believe will not handle the transition well. This would be due to the fact that they were not able to adjust quickly to new rules they experienced
while testing. Once the needed students are targeted, school counselors at the middle school level can set up proper scaffolds for the students in order to create a smooth transition and a positive learning experience. These scaffolds can include: building tours, meetings with the counselor, peer mentors, preemptive teacher meetings, and more, all which aid in reducing anxiety symptoms.

As the research continually shows, anxiety is a highly prevalent and co-morbid disorder. The detection of risk factors is crucial in formulating proper assessment and prevention efforts. For this reason it is important for school counselors to remember to use a multidisciplinary approach that is unique to each student (Hayward, Wilson, Lagel, Kraemer, Killen, & Taylor, 2008). It is also imperative to remember that a little bit of anxiety is a good thing for it enables adolescents to strive towards their life goals. As a school counselor it is crucial to teach students how to use their anxiety effectively when it is useful, and how to cope with it when it has an adverse effect (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). Moving forward, it will be important to stay up to date on research revolving around anxiety disorders in adolescents, for this is a pertinent topic in the school-counseling realm.

**Adlerian Perspective of Belonging**

Alfred Adler was a pioneer in the field of individual psychology and psychotherapy. His work has been studied and used for many years. In Adler’s early years, he hypothesized that children yearn to feel empowered and important. As Adler continued to research and delve deeper into his philosophies, his ideas evolved. He later became well known for his theory of social interest or social embeddedness. This is the relationship between individual and societal well-being. In essence all humans,
adolescents in this case, need to feel a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves (i.e. family, school community, peer groups) (Ferguson, 1989).

Adler believed that all humans were social beings by nature. Meaning that all people are born with a need to communicate and collaborate. When someone feels a sense of belonging they increase their personal sense of worth. Coinciding with this notion, when people feel a part of a community they want to contribute to that community to improve it. In addition, when they feel a sense of belonging they thrive successfully through life, and when they do not feel a sense of belonging they do not function as well. Adler also identified equality as an important component of social interest. He believed that if a community lacked equality it would also lack harmony. It has also been alleged that failure to gain the necessary tools to successfully function within a social context leads to what Adler referred to as ‘feelings of inferiority’ (Ferguson, 2010). In essence people that are having feelings of inferiority are ultimately discouraged, which may cause symptoms of anxiety to arise. These symptoms, if not addressed, may snowball into an anxiety disorder. People handle this onset of anxiety in a variety of ways. Some may tend to engage in what Adler refers to as ‘safeguarding’ themselves, avoiding and placing blame on others instead of taking ownership for what is happening (Ferguson, 2010). Others may become discouraged and withdrawn, lacking a sense of belonging and community. When school counselors notice these issues arising in their students, they have a unique opportunity to address these traits and help the student build a foundation of self-acceptance and value.

**Adlerian Approach to School Counseling**

Like Alfred Adler’s philosophies and theories, the role of a school counselor has also evolved. School counselors have the enriched opportunity to be counselors,
educational leaders, school climate creators, and core pillars in the system wide efforts of change in a school building. With adolescents spending a large portion of their day and lives in the school building, it is important for school counselors and faculty to help students develop positive social interest, and build an inclusive community within the school building where all students feel an equal part of the team. This type of setting may be implemented using Adlerian psychology as a foundation to build upon. In order for this implementation to work, students must know that teachers, counselors, administrators, educational support staff and other peers care about them as individuals, their academic achievement, and their future (Lapan, Wells, Petersen, & McCann, 2014). If a student can trust that they are a part of a supportive community, they will be better connected to their school which in turn will help protect them from risk factors associated with anxiety and other mental health issues (Lapan et al., 2014).

Adler put a large emphasis on understanding adolescents as a whole being. He believed that in order to understand an adolescent one must view all parts of their life including: family and home life, academics, peer groups, and personality. School counselors have the ability to put this idea into practice in the schools. One way counselors can achieve this notion is but investing time in each student by administering self report surveys to students, parents, and teachers to gain a well rounded understanding of an individual student. This notion can also be achieved through asking the right questions and understanding the student’s life overall; these two pieces are key ingredients in a proper assessment, which lead toward effective treatment and healing (Amen & Routh, 2003). Counselors also have the ability to advocate for students by encouraging teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to view each child as
DECREASING ANXIETY DURING SCHOOL TRANSITION

both an individual and as part of a larger community (Ziomek-Daigle, McMahon, & Paisley, 2008).

As previously stated, one of Alfred Adler’s famous contributions to the field of psychotherapy is his idea of social interest. School counselors have the opportunity to endorse social interest in a variety of ways throughout the day and year in a school building. First and foremost it is important for a school counselor to help build the school climate by fostering a supportive community right at the beginning of the school year. In order for positive social interest and belonging to occur, students, support staff, licensed staff, and administrators need to feel as though they all hold equal weight and have equal opportunity to be a part of and contribute to the community. This is a difficult task in today’s competitive society, but one that is crucial to the success of the community. School counselors also have opportunities throughout the school year to foster the sense of belonging in small group settings, classroom settings, staff meetings, and district wide events by collaborating with students and other professionals to promote healthy interactions and academic success (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008).

Another important Adlerian concept is that of encouragement. Adler believed that the best way to promote a healthy lifestyle with adolescents was through encouragement. He also believed that a misbehaving child was a discouraged child (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). This is an important concept for school counselors to share with all adults that interact with adolescents throughout the day. If people can remember to look past the outburst or misbehavior that occurs during the day, they will have the opportunity to see that student as an individual and understand what might be causing the student to act out. By taking the time to see past the behavior, school counselors and other school officials can turn the behavior around by encouraging the adolescent. They
can encourage the adolescent in multiple ways, one of which is giving them responsibility. This act helps the adolescent feel a greater sense of belonging to the school community by allowing them to contribute in a positive way.

**Tiered Interventions**

As the literature review shows interventions are needed to address the prevalence of anxiety in middle school students. Detecting risk factors early and giving elementary students skills pre-transition will help ease the process. Researching prevention and making students and co-workers aware of treatment options are cornerstones in implementing interventions. The US National Comorbidity Survey illustrated that merely one-third of the population struggling with an anxiety disorder correctly perceive the need and get help (Coles & Coleman, 2010). If left untreated, anxiety disorders may result in many life altering and threatening situations, including substance abuse (Cooley & Boyce, 2004). It is important to take the appropriate preventative steps to ensure this does not happen.

Using tiered interventions in an effective manner is a key component in the job of the professional school counselor (Barnett & VanDerHeyden, 2007). It is important for school counselors in a building to first and foremost provide support for all students in order to prevent the onset of anxiety. Interventions that serve all students fall into the Response to Intervention (RtI) tier one. Effective tier one interventions include mentoring programs such as: Where Everyone Belongs (WEB) and FRIENDS. School counselors can support students exhibiting preliminary symptoms of anxiety through tier two interventions, which address students’ anxiety symptoms in a small group setting. While tier one interventions serve all students, tier two interventions serve a smaller group of students with identified needs (Barnett & VanDerHeyden, 2007). An
example of a tier two intervention is The Cool Kids Program, which addresses anxiety through a ten-session small group. Tier three interventions are effective for individual students in need of even more support than could be provided in small group settings. Tier three interventions are more responsive in nature, contrasting with the focus on prevention that tier one and tier two interventions display (Barnett & VanDerHeyden, 2007). Restorative justice circles fit well into tier three interventions, as they respond to more severe behavior of a student experiencing anxiety.

**Tier One**

One way to reach a multitude of students is by creating mentorship programs. Mentorship programs are another way for students to create meaningful relationships that can serve as a protective layer against risky behaviors, and also aid them in finding new and solidifying current strengths (Walsh, 2014). School counselors’ primary role is to advocate for their students. As the ratios of students to counselor are often very high, counselors need to create programs and services that reach the student population at large.

An effective step that may be taken is to provide a tier one prevention program in the schools to all of the students during fifth and sixth grade, which is the peak time adolescents are at risk of developing an onset of an anxiety disorder (Essau, 2005). This is also the time period in which students are transitioning from elementary to middle school, which is a large stressor. Research has proven Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a psychosocial treatment, to be the most effective form of treatment for anxiety disorders in adolescents (Bennett et al., 2013). Therefore, this is a time when all students would benefit from preventative tier one interventions such as the FRIENDS program and the WEB program.
The FRIENDS program is a school-wide curriculum that is implemented in the elementary classroom by a trained teacher or staff member. The curriculum covers multiple topics including: cognitive strategies, relaxation techniques, and exposure exercises. It elicits large amounts of group work, helping to promote positive peer support and interactions. In addition it consists of three-parent information sessions focused around what the adolescents are learning about and presents parents with skills that can be used to reinforce what the students are learning at school at home. The FRIENDS program has been very effective within the schools, especially when serving low-income populations (McLoone, Hudson, & Rapee, 2006).

Another version of mentoring that is commonly used in the middle schools, is transitional mentorship programs. Many middle schools have different names for this type of program including: Link Crew and Where Everybody Belongs (WEB). These programs are often led and overseen by the school counselors in the building. These mentorship opportunities generally have a curriculum that is implemented throughout the school year, with a heavy emphasis focused on the first week of school to welcome the incoming class and form a community atmosphere from the start.

The mentors in a middle school format are eighth graders that were screened and selected by the teachers and counselors in the building. These mentors go through different trainings with the lead adults in the building to properly prepare themselves for their new role. As the previous mentorship program did, this type of program has both an academic and social benefit. It allows students to contribute to their school community and forms a sense of belonging while gaining tools such as organizational techniques that will aide them in their academic endeavors. It is important that adults in the building monitor these sessions to ensure they are beneficial to all parties. If the sessions are not
going smoothly or are not a proper fit, it could have an adverse effect and be detrimental to the individual students involved and the school community that is attempting to be built (McQuillan, Smith, & Strait, 2011). Overall, peer mentoring is a positive intervention as long as it is implemented correctly

There are a number of benefits to the approach of having older students mentor younger students. The first benefit for the mentees in the middle school is that they are expanding their social network. This allows younger middle school students to feel a part of their community and feel more connected to their school. In addition to benefiting the mentee socially, it also benefits their academic achievement as the majority of these programs are centered on educational growth (Karcher, 2009). It is important to remember that the people you surround yourself with matter. When you spend time with happy and uplifting people, you have a healthier brain that releases positive neurotransmitters. On the contrary, when you surround yourself with negative peer influences, you are more apt to experience symptoms of anxiety (Amen & Routh, 2003).

These types of programs also benefit the elder of the adolescents by instilling a sense of responsibility. It also forms connectedness by allowing them to be a contributing member to their community (Karcher, 2009). Adolescents involved in these types of programs also generally report progress in areas such as communication, self-esteem, and organization (Quince & Layman, 2006). An important implication to these types of programs are that the school counselors properly train the elder adolescent and continue to monitor progress to ensure the pairings are a positive match.

Typically, schools and school districts only utilize one mentoring program as a tier one intervention. It would be interesting to research the impact and benefits of creating a partnership between elementary schools and middle schools. School
counselors at both levels could tie the FRIENDS program and the WEB program together to provide a seamless transition from elementary school to middle school, as well as providing continued services for all students. This partnership would allow counselors, teachers, and other school staff to collaborate and more effectively identify students who would benefit from tier two interventions.

**Tier Two**

Tier two interventions address specific audiences who, in this case, have been exposed to risk factors of anxiety. An example of a tier two prevention program that may be executed in the schools is the Cool Kids Program. The Cool Kids Program targets adolescents who demonstrate anxiety symptoms. The program focuses on helping adolescents’ manage their anxiety by integrating exposure techniques, and learning coping strategies. The program is delivered weekly, for ten weeks, in a small group facilitated by the school counselor. The program also consists of two parent meetings to provide a comprehensive preventative program to the students and promote open communication (McLoone et al., 2006).

In addition to this CBT derived program, school counselors may form their own specific support groups for students struggling with specific types of anxiety. An example of this would be forming a friendship group to help students struggling with social interaction practice and model situations that they encounter throughout the day. This type of group would help students improve their self-esteem and aid in the creation of valuable friendships. In addition, these programs and preventative measures encourage adolescents to face their anxiety head on as opposed to avoiding it (McLoone et al., 2006). This elicits resiliency that benefit the adolescent when facing more obstacles in their future because they can now channel their anxious feelings and energy
to use as motivation towards success (Amen & Routh, 2003). Through the tier two small group process, school counselors have the ability to identify struggling students who would benefit from more targeted tier three interventions.

**Tier 3**

A tier three intervention pertinent to the topic of adolescent anxiety and the middle school transition is restorative justice practices. Restorative justice is becoming well known within the school realm. It functions around the mottos of putting things right or fixing the harm. It believes that in order to successfully move past a conflict or behavior issue all parties involved that were affected or harmed in any way must be addressed and have a chance to fix things. Restorative justice can be delivered in the schools in multiple ways including: mediations, conferences, and healing circles (Hopkins, 2002). Restorative justice practices fit well into tier three of the RtI model because they provide a collaborative and safe environment to help individual students with anxiety disorders to develop coping strategies to be successful both socially and academically in the school environment.

The facilitator of the circle is key to the success of the circle. Often times in a school setting it is the school counselor that serves as the facilitator. The facilitator has to be properly trained in restorative justice circles, and must be a compassionate, empathetic listener who remains non-judgmental throughout the process (Hopkins, 2002). They will set the ground rules, atmosphere and tempo of the circle. It is important that the facilitator encourages and politely demands the circle key values that guide the circle be followed, which according to Coates, Umbreit, and Vos (2003) include but are not limited to:

- The circle is a place for respectful listening
● Circle participation is voluntary
● Everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and is equally responsible for the process and outcome
● Everyone enters the circle with an open heart and mind
● Everyone must remember that personal story is the core of conflict resolution
● The circle is a sacred space containing power greater than the sum of individuals
● The circle is inclusive of all interests
● All decisions must be a consensus
● What is said in the circle remains in the circle
● Circle process is about community

Another important piece of restorative justice circles is a talking piece. This is an item that is passed around the circle and the person holding it is the only one with permission to speak at that time. The talking piece is passed around the circle allowing everyone a chance to speak if they so choose. It also eliminates the opportunities for people to talk over another. An additional benefit that the talking piece serves is that it can help reduce anxiety, by having what some may refer to as a “fidget” in their hands (Coates et al., 2003).

A benefit to restorative justice programs is that they create a supportive community in which an individual student can feel safe exploring coping strategies. School counselors and circle facilitators may use this platform to aid students in identifying and building upon their strengths eliciting positive thoughts in their deep limbic system and releasing positive endorphins into the brain (Amen and Routh, 2003). A school performing such practices is choosing to forego punitive punishments and focus more on fixing and overcoming behaviors and conflicts. The circles help build
community and belonging for both staff and students. An implication to restorative justice circles is that they are time consuming. With the fast pace nature of a school day counselors and other school officials may find it unrealistic to edge out enough time to fully create the circle atmosphere that is needed to be successful. However, the benefits of restorative justice circles outweigh the time constraints, and serve as a catalyst for easing students’ transition to middle school. Restorative justice practices, along with the other preventative programs mentioned are a great tool in easing anxious students in the transition to middle school. Considering the pressure on school counselors to use evidence-based interventions, future research can only help to promote the use of these tier one, two and three interventions with students during these crucial years.

**Future Research and Recommendations**

School counselors play a pivotal role within the school context forming a sense of belonging and contributing while creating a positive school climate. At an age where the body and mind are going through incredible growth, coinciding with a difficult life transition, and adding the most optimal time for the onset of an anxiety disorder, adolescents at this age are very vulnerable to their surroundings. This opens the doors for school counselors to set many practices in place that will not only help ease the transition, but also decrease feelings of anxiety.

Prevention programs school counselors and other adults put in place for these adolescents should have a large social interaction component. With social interaction and acceptance on the forefront of adolescents’ agenda it is necessary to help teach the adolescents how to successfully navigate friendships and social interactions. It is also important to form a community where these adolescents feel equal, and have chances to contribute in some way.
With anxiety disorders and symptoms often going undetected and unreported, it is recommended that school counselors promote more knowledge of what anxiety symptoms are, and open up conversation around the topic to parents, students, and school faculty. Counselors can also integrate the teaching of coping strategies for anxiety into their group lessons, and orientation sessions. It is through these small steps and efforts that some students that would have otherwise not sought out help, do get the assistance they need to be successful in school.

Booker (2007) released a study examining African Americans' sense of belonging in the school setting. It found that African American students showed the greatest decline in academic achievement during the transitional period than any other ethnic group, resulting them to disengage from their school community decreasing their sense of belonging. An implication to this study is that the sample size was very small. However, this study proves that more research is needed in the cultural context surrounding the impact of the middle school transition and anxiety.

Overall, what we need specifically at the middle school level is more peer-reviewed longitudinal studies concerning anxiety. As a country, America is becoming more educated and more open to conversations revolving around mental health topics. This is a step in the right direction, and we cannot waste time now that we are making progress. With more longitudinal studies we will be able to find answers to how, in some cases, anxiety carries on through high school and even into adulthood. With these studies we will hopefully be able to come to better conclusions regarding early childhood interventions for anxiety; this in turn will lead to best practice elements that school counselors can pass onto both teachers and families to create a more educated community on the topic of anxiety.
Conclusion

Transitioning from elementary school to middle school is a difficult milestone for many adolescents to overcome. During this time their bodies are going through hormonal changes while their thinking and views of the world are changing as well. It is a time where parental guidance takes a backseat to peer impressions. It is a time where the school counselor becomes a focal point for students struggling through their transition. The school counselor wears many hats throughout their daily interactions such as: the researcher, the mentor, the mediator, the teacher, the listener, the nurturer, etc. They are a researcher because it is imperative that they stay up-to-date on what current research is saying. This is not only important for the sake of their profession, but for the sake of their students. They are the listener because they are always lending their ear towards students who may feel neglect and social anxiety through their transitional period. They are the teacher because once a student is aware of their anxiety, they must consciously work through it and know when to reach out for more help; the school counselor is the one who teaches these life skills.

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the intersection of adolescent development and the onset of anxiety that is being confounded by the difficult transition to middle school. The hope was by using Alfred Adler’s theory of belonging and contributing that school counselors could find and create the necessary buffers to elicit a community feel that promotes a sense of belonging while decreasing the negative effects that a middle school transition contains.

This literature review by no means covers the full breadth of the topic of anxiety and middle school transition; however, it does give comprehensive insight into the adolescent’s mind and experiences during this milestone as well as how a school
counselor can contribute to their overall success and well being of the student during this time. Another reason why this literature review is not wholly inclusive is because further research needs to be conducted on the topic of adolescent anxiety in the middle school transitional phase. Ideally, the school counselor can be the catalyst in the school building to share this correlation between anxiety, the transitional phase, and behaviors exhibited to help all families and faculty seek to understand and view students as equal members of the school community who long to feel a sense of belonging in a new environment.
References

Akos, P. (2002). Student perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school. 
*Professional School Counseling, 5*(5), 339.


Depression & Anxiety (1091-4269), 25(3), 200-206. doi:10.1002/da.20289


