

Transition into Middle School

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In the words of the principal, young Teddy was on the "maintenance plan." After six years in elementary school, he had only a few more hours and he would be finished. Years of work to help him learn to be less disruptive and more focused on this work would be over, at least for the elementary school staff. Teddy worked at the principal's computer for this final day, having exhausted other alternative consequences for misconduct. For the last few hours before dismissal, he was the perfect student; his brilliant mind demonstrating what he could do, when the conditions were right, just before the final bell, he turned to the principal. His project in hand, the computer shutting down, the rough and tumble Teddy had a tear in his eye.

"I don't want to go to middle school," he said to his principal. The principal reassured, "You'll do fine there, Teddy." "But they won't love me like you do," he said. With a tear and a hug, the principal replied, "Sure they will Teddy, but they may love you in a different way." But, she thought, how will he do in middle school?

After five or six years of growing up in an elementary school environment, it is not unusual for adults and students alike to be concerned about the move to middle school. However, is this concern merited? Is there data to support the notion that the transition to middle school is not necessarily a typical bump on the road of life from which the young adolescent will quickly recover? In this article, we summarize some of the research on the effects of the transition from elementary school to middle school on young adolescents and whether this bump is, indeed, one that merits concern.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

As early as the 1960s, researchers attempted to document what practitioners believed was the phenomenon of decreased academic performance during the transition to junior high school. Finger and Silverman (1966), for instance, studied some 489 young adolescents during the transition to middle level schools. The researchers found a decline in achievement for a majority of students which appeared highly related to academic motivation.

More recent studies have also indicated an overall decline in academic performance after the transition to middle level schools. Petersen and Crockett (1985) examined school records of 335 young adolescents. Their data indicated a significant drop in academic performance at seventh grade, which was the transition year for the students in the study, in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Blyth, Simmons, and Carlton-Ford (1983) found a general decline in grade-point average (GPA) for students across grades six through ten. The most dramatic drop in GPA, however, was for students who experienced a school transition between grades six and seven. A portion of the subjects in the study attended the same elementary school through grade eight while the others moved from an elementary school to a junior high after grade six. The students moving to the junior high school had GPAs significantly lower than the cohort at the K-8 school during their seventh grade year, a result similar to the achievement test scores reported by Gronna (1998). Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg, and Ebata (1989) examined the situation in which



young adolescents made two school transitions before reaching high school. When comparing the academic performance of these students to others who had but one transition, the two-transition group's GPAs were consistently lower.

Achievement scores have been shown to be affected by the context of the transition to the middle level. Alspaugh and Harting (1997) found that students who were grouped into interdisciplinary teams during their transition year performed significantly better on standardized achievement tests than students who were in departmentalized schools. Fenzel (1992) reported similar findings, but noted that relatively young students were more vulnerable to declines in GPA than their older classmates. Most at risk for problems at transition were relatively young girls of lower socioeco-nomic status.

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL

Students' perceptions of their school experience provide another avenue for examining the effects of school transition on young adolescents. Mekos (1989) reported that prior to transition, girls were primarily concerned about peer relations at junior high, but these concerns reduced after transition. Boys and girls in the study expressed concerns about academics and the new school setting just after transition. Schulenberg, Asp, and Petersen (1984) reported similar concerns by seventh graders in transition to junior high from an elementary school sixth grade. Among other findings, they noted that during transition, mathematics moved from being among the most favorite to among the least favorite subjects, and students' perception of school was that of an enjoyable social setting. In other studies, researchers (Haladyna & Thomas, 1979; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987) documented declines in school satisfaction, attitudes towards academic and non-academic subjects, and reactions to teachers. Mekos (1989) noted that students who were reported as the most aggressive and disruptive in elementary school recorded more negative attitudes toward their new school, and the responses became more negative as the year progressed.

A consequence of negative views toward school may be truancy. Nielsen and Gerber (1979) studied truancy in junior high students and reported chronic truants as having very negative attitudes towards their school. Truants in their study had academic grades that were consistent from first grade through sixth, then plummeted in grade seven after school transition. At the junior high, the truants reportedly disliked the teachers, most of whom were regarded as unfriendly, authoritarian, and unresponsive to students' needs.

Other researchers (Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991) have reported that young adolescents' liking of mathematics and sports activities declined for the entire first year of junior high school. Liking of English also declined in the fall of the transition year but rebounded somewhat by the end of the year.

SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Several researchers have studied the possible effects of school transition on the self-esteem of young adolescents. Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg (1973) conducted a cross-sectional study of nearly two thousand students in grades three through twelve. The researchers documented the lowest self-esteem ratings and highest self-consciousness ratings from subjects between the ages of twelve and fourteen. The researchers found the greatest decline in self-esteem scores between the



sixth grade elementary school students as compared to the seventh graders in junior high school. Additionally, the researchers reported that many of these seventh graders had come to believe that parents, teachers, and peers were viewing them less favorably than in the past.

Interestingly, there was a difference in self-esteem for age-peers that were in different school contexts. Twelve year olds in junior high had lower self-esteem ratings and greater instability of self-image than the twelve year olds still in elementary school. Other researchers have documented a decline in self-esteem at young adolescents' school transitions (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Eccles, Wigfield, Reuman, & Mac Iver, 1987).

In some studies, girls seemed to exhibit a particular vulnerability to declines in self-esteem whether the transition to a new school took place at sixth or seventh grade while boys did not (Blyth et al., 1983; Blyth, Simmons, & Bush, 1978; Crockett et al., 1989; Simmons, Blyth, VanCleave, & Bush, 1979). Girls who made no school transition during early adolescence, remaining in a K-8 setting, maintained higher self-esteem ratings than girls who had made a school transition. This discrepancy persisted into late high school (Blyth et al., 1983; Crockett et al., 1989). The decline in self-esteem for girls is magnified if other significant life changes are present such as onset of puberty, initiation of dating relations, change of residence, or disruption of parents' marital status (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). If two school transitions occur, the stress on self-esteem may be especially debilitating (Crockett et al., 1989).

Findings of some researchers indicate that self-ratings of academic competence decline after transition (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992; Kowalski, Harter, & Whitesell, 1986). In these studies, the authors reported that students whose self-ratings of academic competence were low prior to transition suffered the greatest declines in perceived competence after school transition. Yet those students with the highest competence ratings were better able to mediate the stress of transition and thus reduce or nullify threats to their self-esteem (Fenzel, 1989). Evidence suggests that, for girls, being relatively older than classmates helps to mediate transition stress and preserve self-esteem (Fenzel, 1992).

Again, context is a variable that must be addressed. Mullins (1997) found that, in general, students who had participated in multiple transition activities and were placed in interdisciplinary teams made a good transition to middle school. These students maintained their sense of scholastic competence across the transition as well as their sense of perceived social acceptance. Only at the end of the year after transition did a troubling decline in subjects' sense of self-worth appear in the data, perhaps indicating a mismatch between the school's programs and practices and the needs of the students.

MISMATCH OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS' DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Until the late 1980s, most researchers examining students' problems with school transition operated from the framework that the coincidence of major life changes were the cause of students' stress, an idea based in cumulative stress theory (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). The physical changes brought on by the onset of puberty, coupled with the resulting cognitive and social-emotional changes of this life phase, in addition to the normative change in school were thought to be too overwhelming for



many young adolescents to cope with successfully. Eccles and Midgley (1989) and Eccles, Midgley, and Lord (1991) suggested that it may be the nature of the change that is critical to understanding the data. Specifically, they argued there must be an examination of the context of the transition in order to understand the effects of school transition on young adolescents.

One context factor is the nature of activities in the classroom. Studies have indicated that students, as they get older, want increasing input into the functioning and structure of their classes (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987). Older students also want more opportunities for self-management in higher grades (Fraser & Fisher, 1983; Lee, Statuto, & Kedar-Voivodas, 1983). These desires are consistent with the developmental needs of young adolescents as they begin the search for their own identity. Researchers' findings in this area, however, indicate that young adolescents may not be allowed the decision-making opportunities they need. Midgley and Feldlaufer (1987) studied student decision-making at the transition to junior high seventh grade. The researchers found that teachers and students differed in their perceptions about the extent to which students were allowed to make decisions in the classroom. Students believed they should be allowed to make more decisions than they were allowed. Students also believed they were allowed more decision-making before the transition to junior high than after. These views were in direct opposition to those of the teachers in the study. It is possible that the decision-making environment of the school affects student transition.

Context factors such as increased school size, departmentalization, ability grouping, increased use of competition as a motivator, increased rigor in grading and focus on relative ability with a decreased opportunity for student autonomy are a part of many middle grades schools environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992). This mismatch may form a causal link between the young adolescents' transition and the previously cited deleterious effects of transition.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, evidence suggests that a mismatch exists between the needs of young adolescents and the environments of some of the schools they attend. Only by examination of local data and context can educators gain a clearer understanding of the nature and cause of the problems associated with transition in their school. Developmentally responsive schools may be the key to alleviating the problems of young adolescents' school transition. In contrast to the middle grades schools cited earlier, developmentally responsive schools might, among other things, *increase* students' opportunities for decision-making and closer contact between students and person-oriented teachers, while *decreasing* the size of peer reference groups and relative ability assessment practices (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997).

At the end of the day, when everyone was gone, Teddy's principal had a moment to reflect upon the year, its challenges and successes. She noticed a new screen saver message on her computer monitor. The words, "I love you, Dr. P.," danced playfully, reminding her of a student she would never forget. How will he do in middle school?



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