School Transitions

By Eric Anderman | Kristen Missall | Robin Hojnoski | Helen Patrick | Brent Drake | Patricia Jarvis

This entry contains the following:

OVERVIEW

School transitions mark the time period when students move from one school environment into another. Transitions occur at a variety of ages and vary greatly across school districts. Students often experience problems adjusting to changes in educational environments; consequently, teachers need to receive professional development training to assist students in making successful school transitions.

MAJOR TRANSITIONS

Although transitions can occur at many different time periods, several periods are typical. The transition into kindergarten is the first major school transition; however, for some children, who already have attended childcare or preschool, the transition into kindergarten may be much easier than for other children, who have stayed at home until just prior to kindergarten. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that most children do experience at least some care before kindergarten from non-parental caretakers; for example, in 2001, only 26.1% of preschool children were cared for solely by parents (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Consequently, for most children, the transition into kindergarten is not the first time they have been out of the home.

The second major transition for most students is the transition from elementary school into middle or junior high school. Much research has been conducted examining the effects of this transition on a variety of outcomes. Research generally indicates that the transition into middle school often is problematic for early adolescents because the instructional practices of many middle schools do not meet the developmental needs of early adolescents (e.g., Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Many students become less motivated and begin to lose interest in school after this transition.

The third transition often is the transition from middle or junior high school into high school. There is less research on this transition than on some of the other school transitions. Nevertheless, a growing body of evidence suggests that this transition often is traumatic and problematic for some students (Eccles, 2008).

For some students, high school represents the final stage of formal education. However, for many students, the transition from high school into college represents another very important school transition. Some students attend two-year community colleges, whereas others attend four-year colleges or universities. The transition into college for many students represents the first time that the student attends school while simultaneously living away from home. Many students do not adapt well to college life and experience academic difficulties during their first year of school, which can eventually lead to dropping out (Tinto, 2006).

EFFECTS OF SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

Transitions are extremely important because they represent major shifts in the daily contexts in which children and adolescents interact. For some students, the transition is smooth and peaceful, whereas for others it is stressful.

School transitions are related to a variety of behavioral and psychological changes. Research indicates that across transitions, students often experience changes in relationships with peers, parents, and teachers. In addition, behavioral problems often become evident after a school transition, which is particularly true when

students interact with new peer groups after the transition. Much research has examined changes in academic variables after transitions; many transitions are related to notable changes in students' motivation to learn, academic performance, and attitudes toward school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

It is very important for educators to be well prepared to assist students during transitional periods. Teachers cannot assume that students will naturally adjust to new learning environments with little difficulty. Educators must attend to the developmental needs of children and work collaboratively with parents, school counselors, and administrators to ease transitions for students of all ages. Programmatic efforts to facilitate such transitions are growing in number.

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

Most educational systems in the United States involve students attending a middle school (traditionally called junior high school) for two to three years, sandwiched between the elementary and high school grades. There is considerable variability in the grades included in middle schools, although sixth through eighth are the most common. Grade configuration is influenced primarily by social, demographic, and space considerations within school districts. Middle schools span elementary schools' focus on providing all students with a breadth of educational experiences and developing core knowledge and skills, and high schools' educational specialization that prepares students for the workforce or post-secondary education. They typically offer new subjects that students can elect to study, different levels of a subject within the same grade, and teachers with subject-specific specialization for academic subjects (resulting in students being taught by multiple teachers).

The transition to middle school coincides with early adolescence—the developmental transition period between childhood and adulthood. Developmental changes associated with adolescence have bearing on all students' experiences.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES COINCIDING WITH THE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

The early adolescent period is a time of dramatic physical, cognitive, social, and psychological growth and development. Not only must adolescents adjust to their own changes, they must also adjust to others treating them differently because of that development.

Physical Development. The onset of puberty usually marks the beginning of adolescence. Females begin puberty approximately eighteen months earlier, on average, than males; however, timing varies widely. Adolescents experience a dramatic growth spurt, with significant gains in height and weight, development of secondary sexual characteristics, and changes in fat and muscle distribution. Sexual interest also develops. Adolescents often appear awkward with their bodies, because of their rapid and irregular growth. Pubertal timing, relative to peers, is related to adolescents' body image and satisfaction with their appearance; late-developing females and early-developing males hold the most positive perceptions.

Cognitive Development. Adolescence is characterized by steady improvement in a range of cognitive abilities, both because of biological maturing and experiences. Adolescents process information faster and more efficiently, and their memory is better than in childhood. They become more meta-cognitive, or able to think about their thoughts and actions. However, they also tend to overestimate their abilities and underestimate their

vulnerabilities. Adolescents become increasingly able to engage in complex and abstract thinking, reasoning, decision making, and problem solving. With their improved cognitive abilities they appreciate others' perspectives better, reflect on themselves more, and become more self-aware. With these changes come greater self-consciousness and a tendency to believe that their experiences and feelings are unique to themselves. Finally, adolescents become better at regulating and coordinating their thinking, emotions, and behavior.

Social Relationships. Another dramatic change associated with adolescence is the increased importance of peer relationships. Young adolescents spend more time with peers, and friendships become more intense, close, and involve more self-disclosure. Distinct peer groups, with different characteristics, reputations, and status hierarchies, appear during early adolescence. With this emergence of cliques and crowds comes concern about social image. The desire to fit in and be like others is also strongest in early adolescence. This desire for acceptance is accompanied by greater use of strategies designed to project a particular image.

Psychological Development. With the development of adult-like characteristics comes a desire for greater independence and autonomy. Changes in young adolescents' physical characteristics, cognitive abilities, and social relationships influence their identity development—perceptions of who they are, what they are good or not good at, what they value or devalue, and what they aspire to or fear becoming. Establishing an identity involves the process of exploring and embarking on commitments (both emotionally, and with time and resources) to particular paths and outcomes. Although identity continues to develop through adulthood, it is especially important during adolescence; choices made at this time can have far-reaching consequences for education, employment, and relationships.

CHANGES WHEN STUDENTS MOVE TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Middle schools typically afford experiences quite different from those students were accustomed to. The school buildings tend to be larger, serving students from multiple elementary schools, and employ subject-specific specialist teachers. Students also experience changes in what and how they are taught, how they are evaluated, their interactions with teachers and peers, and institutional norms and requirements. The nature of these changes has profound implications for young adolescents' academic and emotional thriving.

Middle Grade Schools (1980s). Research during the 1980s by Roberta Simmons and Dale Blyth showed that the transition to junior high school (as it was called then) was typically accompanied by worrying changes. Compared to students in K-8 schools, those in junior high had lower grades, lower self-esteem, and more negative attitudes about school. Other researchers (most notably Jac-quelynne Eccles, Carol Midgley, and their colleagues) identified similar and additional negative outcomes, including lower achievement, perceived ability, and interest in school, less positive and personal student-teacher relationships, and more anxiety and absenteeism. Because the comparison was between students in the same grade, with only the schools' grade configuration differing, prevailing notions that hormones and puberty were responsible for students' difficulties in junior high were shown to be incorrect.

Eccles and Midgley argued that these changes were a result of a mismatch between the school environment and students' development, and they coined the term *stage-environment fit*. They noted that the nature of junior high schools was antithetical to the developmental needs of young adolescents. That is, at a time when social connections and interpersonal relationships become particularly important, students had less opportunity for personal connections because they moved from class to class, with different teachers and different classmates and experienced predominantly whole class instruction. At a time of dramatic and uneven cognitive development, homogenous classes were formed by ability grouping and students received different learning opportunities. It was then extremely difficult for students in lower tracks to learn material necessary for college entry, and this design worked against those with later, but normal, cognitive development. Worksheets and whole class instruction predominated, so students' lessons were less varied and individualized compared to elementary school. Also of concern, junior high school teachers were less confident about teaching their students than were elementary teachers in the same grades.

When students are particularly concerned about fitting in and are sensitive about how they are viewed by others, they experienced more public and socially comparative grading practices and recognition policies. Also, although students are able to view situations more complexly, understand more abstract and nuanced ideas, and

are developing their reasoning and argumentation skills, their lessons were slotted rigidly into short periods. Thus, time constrained the type and complexity of activities they could engage in. When students desire more independence and responsibility, they had fewer choices and opportunities for input. Teachers trusted students less than did elementary teachers of the same grades, and their management and discipline practices were controlling and custodial rather than student-centered.

Middle School Reform (1990s). Concern that junior high schools were not meeting young adolescents' needs led to calls for reform, with the objective of creating middle-level educational environments that are congruent developmentally with their needs. *Turning Points*, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's prominent and influential report, advocated widespread changes to all aspects of the middle grades experience. The National Middle School Association advocated similar changes. Their recommendations included: (1) creating smaller learning environments to promote positive teacher-student relationships and connectedness to school (e.g., interdisciplinary team teaching, advisory programs), (2) teaching more challenging and complex material (e.g., emphasizing critical thinking skills, interdisciplinary curricula, flexible or block scheduling), (3) ensuring all students have common core classes and can be successful (e.g., heterogeneous classes), and (4) preparing teachers for the middle grades (e.g., learning about adolescent development, gaining certification with a middle grade specialty).

Middle Schools between the 1990s and Early 2000s. The middle school reform recommendations were adopted unevenly, according to reviews by the Carnegie Corporation and the RAND Corporation. Organizational changes were adopted more often than recommendations involving instruction. More than half the middle schools introduced home room classes and team teaching, however, often not as intended, thwarting objectives. For example, team teaching was premised on teachers having time together for shared planning and communicating about students, but teachers' planning times were often not coordinated. Flexible scheduling, which allows longer time periods for more complex activities, had been introduced infrequently. Integration across disciplines was difficult because teaching methods and beliefs vary for different subjects. Students continued to be placed in classes by ability groups in most schools. Although there were promising teaching reforms to increase students' conceptual understanding in mathematics and science (advocated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Research Council, respectively), in the early 2000s these efforts had been supplanted by consequences of high-stakes standardized testing, with its emphasis on knowledge that can be assessed quickly and easily.

Research in the 1990s and early 2000s showed that students' attitudes about school and feeling of connectedness no longer declined after the transition to middle school. Thus, the changes that targeted improving student-teacher relationships and creating a positive school climate had positive results for students. However, students did not fare better academically compared to pre-reform levels. Researchers expressed concern with the nature of instruction and the shortage of qualified teachers. Students viewed their classrooms as emphasizing learning and understanding to a lesser extent than their elementary school classrooms did.

FACTORS THAT PREDICT STUDENTS' TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

Students who are confident about themselves and their learning are most likely to experience the transition to middle school positively, whereas those who begin with academic difficulties are at risk for academic and behavioral problems. Participation in school-affiliated extracurricular activities strengthens school commitment and achievement, especially for low-achieving males. Early pubertal development is a risk factor, particularly for girls. They are more likely to experience low self-esteem, to have older friends, be sexually active, and drink alcohol; therefore, their social lives may generate tensions with academic demands before they have developed sound coping strategies.

Friends and peers reinforce each others' actions and, therefore, support and encourage positive or negative behaviors and attitudes, depending on peer group characteristics and the intensity of the relationship. Consequently, strong friendships with peers who value school and achievement are positive predictors of transition experiences, whereas socializing with peers whose norms are counter to those promoted by school predicts future academic and social difficulties.

Students are most likely to make a positive transition to middle school when their classroom and school environments promote both their learning and understanding and supportive interpersonal relationships. This transition outcome involves a classroom emphasis on learning and understanding, not just memorization of facts, where success is viewed as self-improvement or in criterion-referenced terms, students have some autonomy, teachers have high expectations for all students, and learning activities are challenging, valued, and relevant to students. Furthermore, positive outcomes are more likely when students believe their teachers are enthusiastic and committed to helping them learn and are able to do so, feel respected as learners and as people, and view their classmates as encouraging them academically and emotionally. In contrast, competitive learning environments in which students' progress is public and expressed relative to others, and teachers' practices are controlling, inconsistent, or inflexible are likely to elicit less positive transition outcomes.

Characteristics of schools and staff affect the nature of the middle school transition. Having student-teacher advisory teams and a consistent group of classmates ease the transition. Also, having teachers who are confident in teaching their students, knowledgeable about their subject-matter and how to teach it, understand and like young adolescents, have opportunities for their own professional decision making, and feel supported by their principal and school administrators, predict middle school students' achievement and socio-emotional well-being. Conversely, students are less likely to thrive when their teachers experience high teaching demands and stress, low autonomy, and feel pressed to cover content, rather than having flexibility to pace material in response to students' understanding.

POST-TRANSITION INDICTORS OF POTENTIAL DIFFICULTIES

Academic and social aspects of school are closely related; socio-emotional and behavioral difficulties lead easily to academic problems, however academic problems can precipitate poor socio-emotional well-being. In general, "standing out and not fitting in are especially detrimental during the middle school years" (Juvonen et al., 2004, p. 48). Indicators of possible difficulties are increases in absenteeism, tardiness, missed homework assignments, and declining class preparedness, interest, participation in lessons, and grades. Also, repeating a middle grade is a strong predictor of dropping out of school. Depression, with its lethargy, decreased emotionality, and sleep disturbances can lead to academic problems. Displaying problem behaviors, such as aggressiveness, disruptiveness, or impulsivity are warning signs of difficulties, as is having relationships with deviant peers. Being socially isolated increases risk for depression, interpersonal difficulties (including bullying or being bullied), poor school performance, and dropping out of school. Finally, likelihood of difficulties at middle school increases with multiple stressors; these also include stressors outside school, such as illness, financial problems, or conflict within the family, divorce, and students' job commitments.

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