School Transitions: Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune?

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Our lives are marked by transitions. These include navigating the move from home to school, from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to college. Beyond college, the world of work and, eventually, retirement await. These transitions, among others, are part of the normative events experienced in the progression to adulthood. They are, typically, major events that are accompanied by some level of stress, anticipation, and anxiety. However, in addition to the stress, transitions usually open doors of opportunity for discovery and positive growth.

As they transition to the middle grades, 88% of public school students experience a transition from an elementary school to a middle school (National Middle School Association & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2002). Writing more than three decades ago about the transition from elementary school to junior high, Hamburg (1974) stated:

> It has been clear for some time that the entry into junior high school probably represents the most abrupt and demanding transition of an individual's entire educational career. This is a crisis period that has important educational as well as personal consequences. (p. 23)

For this column in the What Research Says series, we focus on what is known about school transitions and their effects, both positive and negative, on young adolescents. We start with definitions and characterizations and then review the research. We conclude with some advice to practitioners and policymakers. Readers will notice the references to both middle schools and junior highs. It is not our intent to appear inconsistent or to confuse readers, but much of the research reviewed in this article was conducted at a time when junior highs were still quite popular on the educational landscape and advocates (e.g., Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Turning Points, 1989; National Middle School Association, This We Believe, 1982) of the “new” middle school had not yet authored their position statements.

Definitions and characterizations

The American Heritage Dictionary (1982) defines transition as “the process of changing from one form, state, activity, or place to another.” More specifically, academic transition is defined as “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students' educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (Schiller, 1999, pp. 216–217). It is also defined as the movement from “one state of certainty to another with a period of uncertainty in between” (Schilling, Snow, & Schinke, 1988, p. 2). School transition research began with the pioneering efforts of Blyth, Simmons, and their colleagues in the public schools of Milwaukee in the

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Transitioning is characterized in numerous ways in the literature. It has been called a “time both of opportunity and risk” (Ladd & Price, 1987, p. 1187), “an important life event for early adolescents” (Berndt & Mekos, 1995, p. 123), “inherently stressful” (Berndt & Mekos, p. 124), “a rite of passage” (Elias, 2001, p. 1), and “double jeopardy as students make the transition from elementary to middle school and then experience a second transition to high school” (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994, p. 508). Those who research this topic are acutely aware that transitions expose students to “adaptational challenges that tap their coping skills” (Elias, Gara, & Ubriaco, 1985, p. 112) and that transitions “create flux in children’s social systems” (Ladd & Price, p. 1187), which tend to “destabilize many students” (Elias, p. 1).

**What research says**

Much of the research on transitions has demonstrated that students experience decreases in academic achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and connectedness to the school community. This “risky endeavor” is also associated with increases in behavior problems and psychological distress. Some researchers have offered reasons for the negative effects of school transitioning, such as the mismatch between the ecology of the school and young adolescents’ developmental needs. Eccles, Midgley, and Adler (1984) noted that the nature of the transition is important and extensively examined the quality of the school environment.

Other researchers have argued that the timing of the transition is important and that a similar transition a few years later, “after the individual has developed a more mature sense of who he or she is would be less disruptive” (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983, p. 106). We turn our attention, now, to examine these issues.

**Ecology of school**

For more than three decades, researchers have studied how the social environment contributes to the development of psychosocial, psychiatric, and physical disorders (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). One line of research suggests that the environment of the school and classroom is responsible for the decline in student functioning following a transition. Eccles, Wigfield, and associates (1993) suggested that there is a “mismatch between characteristics of the classroom environment in traditional middle grade schools and early adolescents’ developmental levels” (p. 553). In another article, Eccles, Midgley, and their associates (1993) characterized the middle school as “developmentally regressive in structures and conditions” and noted that these structures and conditions were “directly contradictory to the psychological needs of students progressing through adolescence” (p. 92).

Students experience many changes in their school environment associated with the transition from elementary to middle school, and much concern has been focused on whether the organization of the junior high or middle school exacerbates the difficult adjustments confronting young adolescents. Competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment can be harmful to young adolescents at a time of heightened self-focus. Student perceptions of the quality of school life decline as they progress from elementary to middle schools (Diermert, 1992). The goals of elementary schools tend to be task oriented, whereas the goals of middle schools tend to focus on performance (Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995).

Because middle school teachers tend to have students for shorter periods of time, the student-teacher relationship changes from elementary to middle school (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Miller, 1983; Offer, 1969). This diminished opportunity to establish a meaningful relationship with either teachers or peers may be particularly detrimental since this may also be a time of peak conflict with parents (Miller, 1983; Offer, 1969). Also associated with the change in student-teacher relationships is a change from small-group and individual instruction to whole-class instruction. Middle grades teachers are less likely to believe students are trustworthy and to grant them autonomy (see Brophy & Evertson, 1978; Eccles & Midgley, 1989), are less personal and more controlling (Hoy, 1968), and require lower levels of cognitive skills than students previously were required to demonstrate (Eccles, Midgley, et al., 1993; Rounds & Osaki, 1982; Simmons, Burgerson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987).

**School connectedness/Sense of belonging**

Researchers have documented student reports of feeling alone and having difficulty making friends (Mizelle, 1995; Wells, 1996). A sense of belonging may be particularly valuable at school during times of transition...
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(Steinberg, 1991). Studies of resiliency in childhood identify a strong sense of belonging as key to effective coping and the confidence that changes and disruptions in life will turn out well. This kind of resiliency is in stark contrast to the “learned helplessness” that hampers coping and is present in students experiencing serious psychological and social problems.

Osterman (2000) linked school connectedness to academic achievement, social and personal attitudes, and participation in school. Eccles, Midgley, and their associates (1993) indicated that school engagement might serve as a protective factor against transitional problems. Research demonstrates that extracurricular participation has the potential to influence students’ sense of belonging and promote positive academic and psychosocial outcomes. Engaged students show more positive perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the school (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995). They are also less likely to drop out and be involved in delinquent behavior (Mahoney, 2000).

Issues of disconnectedness may be exacerbated for poor and minority students. Ford (1993) and Steele (1992) noted that school transitions may challenge the academic success of poor and minority students who are more likely to feel unconnected to an environment whose culture seems irreconcilable to their own. Therefore, the need for stable and enduring bonds with caring adults are especially important for these students.

Academic motivation
Eccles (Eccles, Midgley, & associates, 1993; Eccles, Wigfield, & associates, 1993) studied how school and classroom environmental factors in traditional middle schools related to changes in students’ motivation. They noted that for some students, young adolescence marks the beginning of a downward spiral in motivation and school-related behaviors. This downward spiral often leads to academic failure and dropping out of school. Several investigators have found general developmental declines in many of the motivational constructs including interest in school (Epstein & McPartland, 1976), intrinsic motivation (Harter, 1981), self-concepts of ability (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler 1984), and self-esteem (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons, Blyth, VanCleave, & Bush, 1979).

Simmons and her colleagues (Simmons, Blyth, VanCleave, & Bush, 1979; Simmons, Burgerson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987) suggested that the decline in motivation occurs because of the intersection of two major transitions: puberty and changing schools. The belief is that coping with multiple transitions is more difficult than coping with only one. In addressing the issue of motivation, Eccles, Wigfield, and their associates (1993) found that, "Declines in motivation often assumed to be characteristic of the early adolescent period are less a consequence of students' developmental stage than of the mismatch between students’ needs and the opportunities afforded them in traditional middle grade schools" (p. 567).

Academic performance
Alspaugh (1998) explored the nature of achievement loss with school-to-school transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school, and found a statistically significant achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary school to middle school at sixth grade. The transition achievement loss was larger when students from multiple elementary schools were merged into a single middle school (called a “pyramid transition”). Additionally, students who attended middle schools experienced a greater achievement loss when they transitioned to high school (9th grade) than did their K–8 counterparts.

Alspaugh and Harting (1995) found achievement loss due to transitioning at grades five, six, seven, and eight. But they found that the achievement scores in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies tended to recover to their pre-transition levels in the year following the transition. Finally, Simmons, Black, and Zhou (1991) reported that while the grades of all students on average declined after the middle school transition, the grades of African American students "plummeted."
Self-esteem and self-perception
Some researchers have studied the effects of school transitions on the self-esteem of young adolescents. They found declines in student self-perception and self-esteem associated with the transition from elementary to middle school (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Rueman, & Midgley, 1991).

Early studies documented a decline in self-esteem at the time of transitioning to junior high (Piers & Harris, 1964; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). These studies also documented the highest level of self-consciousness among students between the ages of 12 and 14. Simmons, Blyth, VanCleave, and Bush (1979) found that girls who entered junior high school suffered a decline in self-esteem, especially if they had early onset of puberty and dating. Girls who were in K–8 school environments did not report lower self-esteem, suggesting that the decline was an environmental rather than a developmental effect. This decline in self-esteem was limited to white females, while white males and African American males and females all reported increases in self-esteem associated with the transition. Students who receive lower grades or fail tests early after the transition may experience a drop in their academic self-efficacy (Graham, 1997).

Thornburg and Jones (1982) compared students who moved to a new school for sixth grade to those who did not transition. They found that students who moved to a new school had lower self-esteem, but by the seventh grade there were no significant differences between the groups that did or did not make the transition. On the other hand, Nettelmann (1987) found that self-esteem was higher in students who transitioned from grade five to six and six to seven than for those students who did not transition. Petersen, Ebata, and Graber (1987) discovered that students who made two consecutive transitions experienced greater long-term gains in self-esteem than students who made a single transition from fifth to sixth or sixth to seventh grade. Discussing these confounding results, Eccles, Midgley, and their associates (1993) noted that these findings may be the result of using “general” self-esteem as the major dependent variable in these studies. General self-esteem is determined by many factors—some related to school and others related to different aspects of the students’ life, such as family.

Behavior problems
Behavioral issues have also been studied as they relate to school transitioning. According to Hirsch and Rapkin (1987), during the transition to junior high school, girls reported an increase in depression and hostility, while boys reported a decrease in hostile behaviors. Several other lines of inquiry (e.g., Stroufe & Rutter, 1984) suggested that gender differences in depression emerge about this time. Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996), studying the transition from middle to high school, found that educational transitions were associated with increased behavioral problems, measured by suspensions and expulsions, which increased early in the ninth grade year. Finally, Nielsen and Gerber (1979) found that transitioning is connected to increased truancy.

Students’, teachers’, and parents’ perceptions of transitioning
A number of researchers have explored the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding transitions. Teachers have listed specific challenges for students making the transition to middle school. These challenges include (a) changing classes; (b) reduced parent involvement; (c) more teachers; (d) new grading standards and procedures; (e) more peer pressure; (f) developmental differences between boys and girls;
Berndt and Mekos (1995) studied sixth graders who had both positive and negative comments about moving to the junior high, with the positive comments outnumbering the negative. These data suggest that young adolescents expect some aspects of the transition will be stressful, but they view the entire experience as more desirable than stressful. Sixth grade girls were more negative about changes in peer relationships, while sixth grade boys were more negative about victimization by older students. The boys made fewer comments about the academic demands of the junior high. After the boys and girls entered the junior high, their perceptions of their school experience were similar. Of particular interest, Wentzel (1991) discovered that high achieving students in elementary school, fearing they would not continue to be academically successful, worried about moving to the junior high school.

Smith, Feldwisch, and Abell (2006) examined students' and parents' perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school. While students looked forward to making new friends, having a voice in selecting academic courses, and were concerned about too much homework and getting lost; parents were concerned about social and safety issues.

Akos and Galassi (2004) compared students', parents', and teachers' perceptions regarding what they "looked forward to" and what they "worried about." Students looked forward to making new friends, gaining independence, and attending school events. Teachers and parents looked forward to their students or children making new friends and having increased opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. The concerns for students included homework, increased academic difficulty, and getting lost. Parents worried about the amount of homework, pressure to perform, and negative peer pressure.

The effects are not all negative: Wheel of Fortune, not Jeopardy

A number of researchers have concluded that there is more to be considered than just the negative effects of transitioning. For example, Berliner (1993) noted that transitions may be "overlooked as opportunities to help adolescents thrive" (p. 2). Throughout life, transitions can be viewed as potential opportunities to develop and use effective coping skills. These coping skills include (a) redefining roles and expected behaviors, (b) shifting membership in and position within social networks, (c) reorganizing social support resources, (d) restructuring ways of cognitive appraisal, and (e) managing the stress associated with uncertain expectations (Elias, Gara, Ubriaco, 1985, p. 112).

According to Steinberg (1991), transitions during adolescence pose risks and challenges as well as opportunities to intervene and promote a positive life course. Along this same line, Schiller (1999) found that students who struggled academically in eighth grade benefited from attending a high school in which the majority of students did not come from their eighth-grade school. Kinney (1993) noted that students who were unpopular were able to use the transition as an opportunity for increased engagement with peers. Finally, French, Seidman, Allen, and Aber (2000) offered the conclusion that the transition to high school can serve as an event that raises awareness of a student's race and ethnicity, stimulating the formation of his or her own racial and ethnic identity. In short, the transition from one school to another can be seen as an opportunity to create a new reputation—especially for those who have been disruptive, antisocial, and disliked (Ladd & Price, 1987).

Apparently there are benefits for some students who are afforded the chance of a fresh start. This is especially true for students with troubled histories with respect to peer interactions, attachment to school, and prior history of grade retention. Those students who were isolated in eighth grade are significantly less likely to be isolated in ninth grade if they change schools (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Again supporting the possibility of positive outcomes, Weiss and Bearman concluded, "Transitions are of relatively little consequence in comparison with other features of life in school since those students who are in good shape will not suffer and those with more checkered social, academic, and behavioral pasts could benefit" (p. 417).

Barber and Olsen (2004), studying the transition from fifth to sixth grade, found that the "transition to a new school resulted in generally more positive school and personal experiences for students" (p. 15). Sixth graders reported more support from teachers, more hours spent on homework, higher self-esteem, less depression, and less loneliness. Three negative
outcomes were documented including a decline in grades, higher perceived need for school rules to prevent deviant behavior, and a decline in the quality of students’ relationships with their fathers.

**Effective programs**

While this article is primarily focused on research related to educational transitions, we want to take this opportunity to share with readers a little of what has been written about effective transition programs. Weldy (1991) noted that effective transition programs help (a) build a sense of community, (b) respond to the needs and concerns of the students, and (c) provide appropriate, faceted approaches to facilitate the transition process. These programs, according to NMSA and NAESP (2002), also (a) encourage collaboration among elementary and middle school teachers, students, and parents; (b) encourage school leaders to become knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of young adolescents in transition; (c) provide counseling at both the elementary and secondary levels to address transition concerns and assure students of the availability of ongoing support; and (d) assist students in turning their anxieties into positive action by learning about school rules, locker procedures, and other routines and expectations.

Cognizant of what constitutes an effective transition program, much advice exists in the literature for practitioners and policymakers. Weldy (1991) suggested that those considering transition programs (a) provide several activities that involve students, parents, teachers, counselors, and staff from both schools involved in the transition; (b) establish a transition protocol that can be replicated and updated annually; (c) establish a timeline for the transition process; (d) assess the human and financial resources available to support the transition process; and (e) ask students, parents, teachers, counselors, and others to evaluate the transition program.

**Conclusion**

The transitions experienced by young adolescents are important developmental events that have received significant attention by researchers, but more research is needed. According to Weiss and Bearman (2007), the research that currently exists offers more theory and conjecture than rigorous evidence. More studies are needed to document the negative and positive effects of transitions on students (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Likewise, more research is needed regarding the effects of transitions on non-school outcomes, such as delinquency, substance abuse, and other at-risk behaviors.

Garmezy and Rutter (1983) emphasized that learning to cope with stress is elemental to healthy development. This same line of thought is taken by Espeutn (1983) who stressed that we must recognize the effects that disequilibrium and mismatched conditions have on human development. Lerner (1982) also endorsed a life-span view of human development, stating that successful adaptation always involves the appropriate coordination between our changing selves and our changing environments.

For quite some time, we have known what needs to be done to create effective middle schools for young adolescents—schools that would have environments coordinated to the needs of the learners. For various reasons, we have not always been successful in creating those schools. There are many middle schools in name only. Until we can create developmentally appropriate middle schools, there are many students who will be negatively affected by transitioning. It is unfortunate that the clarion call of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) has, in many areas, gone unheard. Almost 20 years ago, the council wrote:

> A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents. Caught in a vortex of changing demands, the engagement of many youth in learning diminishes, and their rates of alienation, substance abuse, absenteeism, and dropping out of school begin to rise. (pp. 8–9)

Simply put, transitioning is about being caught in that vortex of changing demands, and it is time that we move beyond simple acknowledgment of the importance of developmentally appropriate educational environments.
to creating middle schools that can effectively address the academic and psychosocial development of young adolescents—schools that would buffer students, in many ways, from the negative effects of transitioning.

We urge practitioners and policymakers to consider best practices for transitioning. We also caution that best practices must be supported with effective and sufficient professional development and the necessary resources (both financial and personnel) to ensure successful implementation. Instead of dwelling on the negative aspects of transitioning, we should confront this challenge so that our middle schools can become the context for substantial academic and personal development.

References


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