

Restructuring the Transition to Middle/Junior High School:
A Strengths-based Approach to the Organization of Schooling

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Are the academic, behavioral, and social problems that occur during adolescence, and those that continue into adulthood, triggered in part by the normative school transition to either middle/junior or senior high school? If so, how do these transitions trigger these problems? As a result, what can be done about the nature of school transitions to reduce these problems and launch larger proportions of youths onto positive trajectories? What is the optimal timing and locus of intervention? The current chapter reviews the knowledge base bearing on each of these questions and its implications for policy and action.

Does the normative (i.e., planned and expected) transition into senior high school, around the time when the rates of educational failure, school dropout, and antisocial behavior peak, initiate this process of disengagement or is this process triggered at an earlier time and place? Recent evidence suggests that an earlier transition, the normative transition to middle or junior high school, may set this process into motion by initiating a trajectory of disengagement from the educational enterprise (Alspaugh, 1998; Roderick, 1995; Seidman & French, 1997). This earlier normative school transition may represent a key

turning point or "risky" transition in the long-term developmental trajectories of adolescents (Price, 1980; Rutter, 1987). If so, does the transition into middle or junior high school represent a more opportune time and locus for preventive intervention, where negative pathways can be redirected to more adaptive trajectories, than does the transition into high school?

This chapter reviews the theory and research on the mutual influence between adolescent development and the organization of schooling prior to and after the transition to both middle/junior and senior high schools. We then examine the variability and efficacy of educational reforms targeted to youths and schools following each of these normative school transitions. Based on this analysis, we recommend a set of policy reforms to maintain adolescents' engagement in the educational enterprise, reduce the number of human casualties, and reduce the ultimate costs to society.

THE IMPACT OF NORMATIVE SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

We will be discussing three different patterns of grade-level organization of schools that have evolved over the course of the 20th century. In the first half of the last century, students often attended an elementary school from first (or kindergarten) through eighth grade (K-8) and, perhaps, then entered high school (9th–12th grade) where physical resources were greater and teachers were specialists in particular disciplines. While this pattern of grade-level and school organization continues to this day, it has been eliminated from most school systems. Junior high schools were developed (7th–9th or 7th–8th grade) to bring the resources and education in particular disciplines into the lives of youths earlier as the demands for a more educated populace accelerated. But the departmental-based pedagogy or philosophy of teaching of junior high schools, similar to that of high schools, was seen as problematic for the psychosocial development of younger students. In both junior and senior high schools, students are tracked by ability. More recently, middle school pedagogy was developed to better suit the needs of the early adolescent. Ideally, a small number of teachers collaboratively teach students a more integrated curriculum; get to know the strengths and weaknesses of each student; and are equally concerned with students' social and emotional learning as with their academic learning. Students also spend more time in classes with the same cohort of peers. Most often, middle school begins in sixth as opposed to seventh grade and ends in eighth as opposed to ninth grade (6-8), though in some districts middle school begins in fifth grade (5-8); there are also less common variations on the theme. Unfortunately, far too often, middle schools simply represent a change in the grade-level organization of the school, the grade at which a new school is entered, without successfully implementing true middle school pedagogy. Thus, in practice many middle schools often function more like junior high schools even though they are organized by different grade-levels (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). This is particularly true in large public school districts.

The transition into middle/junior high school

When children make the transition from elementary school to a middle or junior high school, they often encounter an entirely new system of social connections, rules, and routines. In the local neighborhood elementary school, children spend the bulk of their day with one teacher in one classroom. When changing classrooms for a special class, assembly, or lunch, teachers line up students and guide them to their destination. Elementary school teachers tend to be protective and supportive of their students.

In addition, students unwittingly exchange their high social status -- as one of the oldest students in the elementary school -- for low status in the junior high school. Finally,

academic ability tracking begins or becomes more stratified in an atmosphere where competition and demonstration of ability relative to others is emphasized.

The teachers and classroom environments of middle/junior high schools are more constraining of adolescent development than elementary school classrooms. Junior high school classrooms: a) emphasize teacher control and discipline; b) provide fewer opportunities for student choice and decision-making; and c) are more competitive and use higher standards of comparison (Eccles et al., 1993). Junior high school math teachers, even when they are math specialists, have been found to have less confidence in their teaching ability than elementary school teachers. In addition, students exposed to these teachers, and in particular low achieving students, decline in the confidence in their ability to master math (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). It is not surprising that in these classroom environments students experience less personal and fewer positive teacher-student relationships than in elementary schools.

Early adolescence (10 - 14) is a time of considerable developmental change-- biological, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal. The timing of the onset of puberty is related to some negative outcomes. For example, early-maturing girls are pressured to begin dating by older boys because their bodies appear mature even though their psychological maturity does not match their physical development.

Early adolescents begin to think and feel in new ways, for example, they are more self-conscious, think more abstractly, and see things in relative terms. Not surprisingly, they question more as they strive for autonomy and the opportunity to make their own decisions as well as to search for their own identity.

Interpersonally, while they desire more independence and decision-making in family matters, they also need to maintain the security that the family provides. The struggle to negotiate this balance with their parents is frequently a difficult one. At the same time, they are becoming more peer-oriented.

Individually and collectively, these developmental changes that early adolescents experience lead, on a daily basis, to different patterns of social transactions or social regularities with the adults and peers in youths' life spaces (Seidman, 1988). Thus, early adolescents present teachers with a considerable challenge.

After the transition to middle/junior high school, studies uniformly report decrements in academic performance. The transition to middle/junior high school consistently corresponds with a drop in academic performance (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), Eccles, Lord, & Midgley (1991) also found that **students in K-8 schools were more prepared for class, attended classes more regularly, were less truant, and more engaged** than those making a middle/junior high school transition. In primarily rural and small town school districts of Missouri, Alspaugh (1998) **found that youths who attended a K-8, 9-12 grade-level organization, where they did not make a normative school transition during early adolescence, did not experience a decline in achievement, but an increase. On the other hand, students making a middle school transition at sixth grade, i.e., in a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade-level organization, declined precipitously in academic achievement.**

Decrements in academic performance precipitated by the transition to middle/junior high school are associated with continuing academic difficulties and eventual disengagement from the educational enterprise. In Missouri, Alspaugh (1998) found **a higher average dropout rate in high schools that received students from K-6, 7-8 grade-level pattern schools than those received directly from K-8 schools.** Similarly, in a cohort of urban Massachusetts youth, Roderick (1995) demonstrated that the drop in grades after the transition to middle school increased the probability of later school leaving independent of students' later school performance. Alspaugh (1998) suggests that students who make two normative school transitions during the adolescent years may be placed in double jeopardy, in accordance with the Seidman et al. (1994) speculation.

Quite often, but not always, declines in self-esteem and other dimensions of psychological distress are associated with this early adolescent normative school transition. In middle/junior high schools, declines in self-esteem are consistent among studies of urban and large suburban school districts (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Seidman et al, 1994; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Declines in self-esteem have been less universal in studies conducted among primarily white, suburban middle-class communities or small cities (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenburg, & Ebata, 1989; Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987; Jones & Thornburg, 1985; Nettleman, 1987). Despite the failure to detect declines in self-esteem in the latter group of studies, several studies did uncover appreciable increases in psychological distress or depression across the transition in smaller communities (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). In the instances where declines in self-esteem and/or increases in psychological distress were not found, these studies were usually carried out in middle or junior high schools where "true" middle school pedagogy appeared to be practiced (Ruble & Seidman, 1997).

From a systems' perspective, disengagement from the educational enterprise is triggered by the transition to middle/junior high school. As we have already seen, critical declines in academic performance and psychological functioning commonly occur among children after the transition to middle/junior high school, **but not for grade school children who remain in K-8 structures.** Corresponding with these declines, youths report decreased preparation for class work, decreased involvement in extracurricular activities, less social support from teachers and school personnel and increased daily hassles over academic performance (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Eccles et al, 1993; Seidman, et al., 1994; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). In other words, they begin to disengage from the educational enterprise. Those youths who experience the greatest academic and psychological deterioration after the early adolescent school transition are launched upon a trajectory of disengagement from school, and by the time they are (or should be) in high school, they experience the greatest academic and psychological harm.

The developmental mismatch between the adolescent's needs and the timing of the change in school structure and organization is greater than at any other time during adolescence. The transition and accompanying changes represent a disruption in the adolescents' social relationships with school-affiliated adults and peers (Ruble & Seidman, 1997; Seidman, 1988). That is, the early adolescents' evolving need and motivation for autonomy and challenge are disrupted by the organization of school after the transition to middle/junior high school. Students have moved from a setting in which they deal primarily with one teacher who knows them well and a familiar peer group to an unfamiliar setting in which they change teachers and classmates every 45 minutes. They are confronted with a confusing, demanding, and unsympathetic environment at a time when they need the support and guidance of non-familial adults. It is a time when they begin to explore their own identity or "possible selves." This new environment often

restricts the possible selves youths can explore, both in terms of their possible academic and psychological identity (Clements & Seidman, 2000). This set of circumstances heightens the likelihood that a process of disengagement from the educational enterprise is initiated. Eccles and her colleagues have proposed the most parsimonious explanation of the initiation of this disengagement process, known as the "developmental mismatch" hypothesis (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, et al., 1993). As already indicated, it states that there is a mismatch between the nature of an early adolescent's psychological needs and the nature and timing of the change in school structure that occurs with the transition to junior high school.

As we have seen, not everyone is equally affected by this normative school transition. Some are not affected, while others "bounce back" from the disruption. Those who are the most adversely affected take on negative academic and psychological images of their future selves as they begin to disengage from the educational enterprise. It is these youths who suffer the greatest negative consequences after they make the transition into senior high school.

*The mismatch between the evolving developmental needs of the middle adolescents (15 – 18 years old) and the structure and organization of the new senior high school they enter is not as dramatic as during the previous school transition. While stressful for many students, the transition to high school, per se, does not represent as dramatic a disjuncture with junior high school as did the transition from elementary to middle/junior high school. Moreover, middle adolescents are less likely to be in the midst of their first experience with major hormonal changes, new found emotional and motivational needs or cognitive abilities. For those, however, who did not make a transition to middle/junior high school, i.e., **were in a K-8 school, the transition into high school will confront them with a new organizational structure, though at a less vulnerable time in their development.***

Integrative Summary

Typically, the transition to middle/junior high school for early adolescents, in contrast to the transition to high school for middle adolescents, represents a riskier and more dramatic turning point. **Developmentally, this is the most inopportune time for such a dramatic transition in the daily routines, regularities, and social relationships of adolescents with the peers and significant adults in their lives.** This early adolescent school transition is associated with declines in the adolescent's feelings of self-worth and their academic performance. Some enter upon a trajectory of disengagement that may result in a wide variety of negative developmental outcomes after the second normative school transition into senior high school. These negative outcomes appear to fall disproportionately, but not exclusively, on youths living under the most disadvantaged circumstances.

INTERVENTION AND POLICY RESPONSES TO SCHOOL TRANSITIONS DURING ADOLESCENCE .

Policies to restructure schools are emphasized below because they are more consistent with the data reviewed above that suggest that the normative transition into middle/junior high school is risky and the locus of a developmental mismatch between the changing needs of the adolescent and the organization of schooling. Undergirding policies to restructure schools is the idea that the organization of schooling can be strengthened, thereby enhancing developmental outcomes for students who move through these ecological transitions. In this way, both those students already at-risk on psychological,

social or economic grounds and those placed in jeopardy as a function of the hazardous ecological transition per se can benefit. The probability of engagement in the educational enterprise is enhanced for all.

The transition into middle/junior high school

A little more than a decade ago, the Carnegie Corporation published its seminal report, Turning Points, calling for the reform of middle grades schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). In its comprehensiveness, the report went far beyond the "walls" of schools. Nevertheless, the foundation of the report was based on the developmental mismatch notion, and as a result, the central recommendation of Turning Points was:

Create small communities for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental for intellectual development and personal growth. The key elements of these communities are schools-within-schools or houses, students and teachers grouped together as teams, and small group advisories that ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult. (p. 9)

Since education is a constitutionally mandated responsibility of the states in this country, the recommendations that follow are aimed at educational policy makers and administrators at the state, district, and local levels. Nevertheless, the federal government and the U.S. Department of Education, in particular, need to play a critical role in financially supporting experiments on school restructuring as well as other educational policy initiatives.

Priority # 1: *Educational policy makers at the state and district levels **should maintain and/or create K-8 schools and avoid the perpetuation or creation of middle/junior high school grade-level organizations. Underlying this recommendation is the consistent finding that declines in academic performance and psychological well being characterize youths that do make a normative school transition during early adolescence as compared to those who do not make this school transition and remain in K-8 schools.***

Priority # 2: *When middle/junior high school grade-level organization is an unalterable reality, educators should **restructure these organizations along the lines of the schools-within-schools or "houses" model to minimize the disruptions in the lives of these adolescents at a critical time in their development. Here, the key element is to divide schools into smaller communities of learning that permit a more personalized experience for the children.** There are several requirements. **First, small numbers of students need to be located in the same physical area of the school throughout most of the day. Second, students need to move together as an integral unit through the classrooms of their primary subjects. Third, students need to be taught their primary subjects by a small core of teachers who work closely together. Fourth, teachers need to get to know the strengths and liabilities of each student** through, for example, advisory groups.*

With these changes in the physical structure and social organization of middle/junior high schools, the nature and quality of the pattern of daily transactions among students and teachers can become more personal and facilitative of all parties' functioning and well-

being. **Student and teacher engagement in the educational enterprise is maintained. Early adolescents are less likely to begin to disengage from the educational enterprise at a critical juncture in their lives. The likelihood that students' academic, behavioral, and socioemotional development will not decline is greatly enhanced.** Early adolescents may then be better able to explore a wider range of positive possible selves, enhancing the likelihood that they will be launched upon trajectories of productive and prosocial development. **Optimally, the new school structure should be maintained throughout the middle/junior high school years.**

Priority #3: *Support for full and faithful implementation of such interventions is critical to their success.* Successful implementation requires that teachers and administrators be enabled to "own" the changes and make key pedagogical, organizational, and management decisions. It also requires special training for teachers in understanding, teaching, and motivating early adolescents. **Connections with families and communities to support schools' commitments to its students are important too.**

Priority #4: *Other pedagogical and inoculation programs deemed necessary and useful should be implemented within a schools-within-schools model.* Innovations of any kind are difficult to implement in the chaotic environment of many middle/junior high schools. Cooperative learning or team teaching innovations would be difficult to implement in such a setting. The same holds true for various socioemotional and life skills training programs.

Priority #5: *Even though the transition into high school is not the point at which a trajectory of educational disengagement is initiated, implementation of houses or schools-within-schools are still warranted to maintain the educational engagement of more students.* Educational policy makers and administrators should seek the full implementation of these interventions in the transition year and beyond.

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